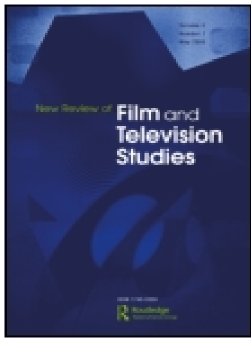

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Wes Anderson, tone and the quirky sensibility

James MacDowell*

This paper situates Wes Anderson within the 'quirky' sensibility of recent American indie cinema, a category encompassing a range of films and filmmakers that emerged in Indiewood during the 1990s and 2000s (e.g. Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, Charlie Kaufman, Jared Hess, etc.). The 'quirky' is often recognisable by its approach to comedy, a visual style that courts a fastidious 'artificiality', a thematic interest in childhood and innocence, and – most pervasively – a tone which balances ironic detachment with sincere engagement. Previously defined largely in terms of its aesthetics, the quirky is here firstly identified as one symptom of broader cultural movements concerned to challenge the reputed hegemony of irony within a postmodern structure of feeling. Focusing particularly on the vexed issue of tone, this piece goes on to argue – via a comparison of several quirky films' tonal strategies – that Wes Anderson's characteristic approach to irony and sincerity constitutes perhaps the purest expression of the impulses underlying the sensibility.

Keywords: Wes Anderson; quirky; tone; sensibility; postmodern; New Sincerity

In the recent book *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter*, Mark Browning suggests that 'the only movies Wes Anderson films look like are other Wes Anderson films' (2011, ix). It has been noted elsewhere, however, that Anderson would appear to be a director whose 'unique manner has infected movie comedies in a big way' (Aisenberg 2008, 1).[1] Encapsulating one recurring strain in the discourses surrounding the filmmaker, Michael Z. Newman's *Indie: An American Film Culture* refers to 'the indie trend of "quirky" cinema, exemplified by Wes Anderson and his many admirers and imitators' (2011, 44). This paper is concerned with the appropriateness of this word 'quirky' for describing Anderson, as well as with Anderson's relationship to other contemporary 'quirky' films and filmmakers.

In both journalistic and academic writing, 'quirky' can often be treated simply as a buzzword. Indeed, it would probably be best to avoid it altogether were it not for the fact that it gets mobilised quite so consistently to refer to certain strains of contemporary American film that do indeed share significant similarities. In addition to Anderson, I am thinking particularly of names like Michel Gondry, Charlie Kaufman, Spike Jonze, Jared Hess, Mike Mills, as well as titles such as

*Email: j.b.macdowell@gmail.com

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Buffalo '66 (1998), *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), *Me, You and Everyone we Know* (2005) and so on. I have proposed elsewhere (MacDowell 2010) that, when associated specifically with films like these, we view the quirky as a category comparable to *film noir*, which critics have long viewed not as a genre but rather as something closer to 'a sensibility, a particular way of looking at the world' (Spicer 2002, 25). While obviously far from interchangeable, it seems to me that these kinds of films and filmmakers share enough in common for us to be able to call them participants in a contemporary cinematic sensibility. Given its common use in connection with such names, quirky seems as good a name as any for that sensibility.

'A sensibility', wrote Susan Sontag, 'is almost, but not quite, ineffable' (1966, 276). Certainly a slippery concept, originally used to describe a human quality rather than an artistic trend (Goring 2005), 'sensibility' nonetheless sometimes seems, as Geoffrey S. Proehl notes in his recent discussion of the term, 'preferable to other words [. . .] to register a bundle of tendencies' (2008, 17).[2] While its looseness is part of its appeal, any category requires limits. Part of the challenge is to walk a line between over- and under-defining. Make the definition too vague and it becomes meaningless; on the other hand, 'any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea' (Sontag 1966, 276). This paper assumes that to responsibly define a sensibility one must pay attention to the parameters of the terms used to describe it, propose identifying tendencies and say something of the contexts in which it emerged. This is what will be attempted in the first half of this piece. However, to prevent excessive 'hardening', it is also necessary to be alive to the variations *within* a sensibility, and to acknowledge that its participants will likely use it in differing ways. I view Wes Anderson as a key player in the quirky, and his body of work as offering perhaps its most potent and consistent expression. As such, our discussion will build towards a comparison of his films' embodiment of the sensibility with those of other quirky texts.

Parameters of a term

When Sontag first wrote of the camp sensibility in 1964, she claimed that her central term had by that point 'hardly broken into print' (1966, 275). 'Quirky', by contrast, suffers rather from a problem of overuse. While the word conveys various general meanings – and is thus theoretically available for describing virtually any kind of cinema – it has most certainly come to enjoy a particularly privileged position in discussions of American indie filmmaking.

In fan communities we find threads on topics such as 'What are some good quirky indie films?' or 'What films paved the way for quirky style?',[3] and bloggers giving posts titles like 'Zooey Deschanel Stars in "Quirk is Killing Indie Movies"' ('Zooey' 2009); in the realm of journalism we come across articles such as Michael Hirschorn's 'Quirked Around', which complains that 'quirk' is 'the ruling sensibility of today's Gen-X indie culture' (2007, 1), prompting

responses such as Phil Hoad's 'In Defence of Quirkiness' (2007). We have seen academics refer to 'The Rise of the Quirky Indie' (Perren 2008, 1) and so on. Every one of these sources cites Anderson as a key figure, and, as Devin Orgeron puts it, Anderson is 'one of a handful of American filmmakers to whom the moniker "quirky" is regularly applied' (Orgeron 2010, 18); indeed, he has been called 'the godfather of the quirky American indie' (Utichi 2009, 1).

It has been said that 'we all know what quirkiness is' (Hoad 2007, 1). Yet, although we may think we recognise it instinctively when we see it, this is different from being able to adequately describe its boundaries. One possibility is to treat it merely as a marker of difference: different from, but not *unrelated* to. Hirschorn describes 'quirk' in part as 'an embrace of the odd against the blandly mainstream' (2007, 1). Similarly, Newman essentially defines the word as meaning 'departs in rather minimal ways from mainstream practice' (2011, 44). Taken in this broad sense, 'quirky' seems to amount to little more than a synonym for a very useful category that has gained increasing traction in recent years: Indiewood – the blurred economic and aesthetic intersection of Hollywood and 'independent' American cinema, in which films often desire to, as Geoff King puts it, 'work both ends' (2009, 93) – be simultaneously within and without of Hollywood. Most of the films definable as quirky in my terms – and certainly those of Wes Anderson – would also be definable as Indiewood. Given this, it would theoretically be possible to analyse them primarily according to the extent to which they either do or do not deviate from a 'norm'.[4] However, while Indiewood is certainly a useful context for the kinds of films with which I am concerned, it seems wise not to let it control the discussion, since it cannot tell us anything significant about what might set the films of Anderson and other comparable filmmakers apart from their Indiewood peers. What defines quirky in the particular sense that this paper understands it, then, is not its differences from Hollywood practice, but rather what similarities it fosters amongst its members. Any broader definition, I think, risks redundancy.

'A bundle of tendencies'

My article 'Notes on Quirky' (MacDowell 2010) has defined the quirky sensibility according to several of what I take to be its key features. Having already made a case for its aesthetic traits elsewhere, I won't do so in detail again here, but it is nonetheless necessary to lay out some of the main points of my definition in a (highly) condensed form.

Quirky films often combine various types of comedy. There's the deadpan: dry, perfunctory, taking moments that we might expect to be made melodramatic and downplaying them for comic effect (see: a deeply dishevelled and drunk Herbert [Bill Murray] in *Rushmore* [1998] announcing coolly, 'Mmm, I'm a little bit lonely these days', while puffing on two cigarettes simultaneously). Yet these same films will often also mine a comedy of embarrassment – a painful humour resulting from a character's emotional discomfort being situated as

simultaneously pathetic and poignant, and thus relying to a significant extent upon appeals to sympathy (cf. Frank [Steve Carrell] in *Little Miss Sunshine* [2006] being surprised in a shop by the appearance of an ex-boyfriend while buying straight pornography). Completing the cocktail of comic strategies is an intermittent use of slapstick, which will often surprise with a suddenness and borderline-surreal incongruity, bringing with it a hint of the absurd (e.g. Lance [Luis Guzmán] having his chair fall unheralded and spectacularly from under him in *Punch-Drunk Love*). Especially when combined with moments that come closer to melodrama, these styles form a comic address that invites us to remain removed from *and* emotionally engaged with the fiction, view the fictional word as both artificial *and* believable. These delicate balances can be tipped one way or another, but the existence of such a balance appears key.

The feeling of slight absurdity in some of the comedy is picked up in aspects of the quirky's style. Perhaps more than anyone, Anderson exemplifies one extreme of the sensibility's visual style, and has perfected a type of shot that we find across many quirky films: a static, flat-looking, medium-long or long 'planimetric' shot (Bordwell 2007) that appears nearly geometrically even, depicting carefully arranged characters, often facing directly forward, who are made to look faintly ridiculous by virtue of a composition's rigidity (seen particularly plainly in Anderson's character introductions). Partly because of their presentational neatness, there is a degree of 'self-consciousness' to such shots, a fact that needs to be linked with other meta-cinematic techniques used by quirky movies: say, films beginning with theatre curtains opening onto the action (*Rushmore*, *Being John Malkovich* [1999]), characters telling stories that are recognisably like the narratives we are watching (*The Brothers Bloom* [2008], *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* [2004]), the blurring of lines between characters and real-life counterparts (Achenback 1994], *American Splendor* [2003]), and so on. However, as well as conveying knowingness, the style also hints towards a kind of *naïveté* – the shots' boldness and simplicity often seeming intentionally purified, bespeaking an effort to remake the world in a less chaotic form. Bright, block colours can be key to this sense too: the yellow and blue uniforms sported by the collectives of *Bottle Rocket* and *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, respectively, the pinks that intrude in *Thumbsucker*'s (2005) dream sequences, Barry's blue suit in *Punch-Drunk Love* and so on. This interest in the simplistic is reflected in the films' music, which regularly favours repeated, sweet figures in a 3/4 time signature, lending it a sound and feel reminiscent of the tinkling purity of a child's music box (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [2004], *Thumbsucker*). This hint of the childlike is picked up in the marketing of such films, which regularly features cartoon drawings (e.g. *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Year of the Dog* [2007], etc.).

This in turn reflects the sensibility's frequent preoccupation with innocence more generally. Narratives occasionally feature young children (*Little Miss Sunshine*, *Bottle Rocket*), but more common are adolescents who represent an uneasy tension between youth and its imminent loss (*Rocket Science*, *Thumbsucker*). Equally, objects with childlike associations can litter the

mise-en-scène (Richie's paintings in *The Royal Tenenbaums* [2001]) or even constitute it (naive objet d'art landscapes in *The Science of Sleep* [2006]), adults express a longing for childhood (Meryl Streep in *Adaptation*: 'I want to be a baby – I want to be new ...'), childhood items are fetishistically retained (Vincent Gallo's locker loaded with ancient bowling trophies in *Buffalo '66*), lovers flirt via play-acting like kids (*Me, You, and Everyone We Know* [2005]) and innocence is even sometimes regained literally, if only momentarily (in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* Joel and Clementine actually return to childhood). That they are told from a position of adulthood, though, means these films also remind us that the pleasures of childishness can be enjoyed nostalgically, but never be retrieved. The influence of America's most famous literary chronicler of childhood nostalgia and its attendant dangers, J.D. Salinger, is clear here: the ex-child geniuses of *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *Magnolia* (1999) are obvious descendants of Salinger's Glass family, while the fetishising of childhood artefacts and innocence more generally is of course central to *The Catcher in the Rye* (Wes Anderson in particular is regularly linked to Salinger).[5] It is significant in this respect that the latest works by two key quirky filmmakers, Anderson and Spike Jonze, should have been adaptations of children's books.

All these aspects of the quirky contribute in different ways to what is perhaps both its most reliably distinctive and most frustratingly intangible feature: its tone. A concept to whose definition we shall return, tone is often key to a sensibility – as distinct from, say, a genre. Paul Schrader wrote that *film noir* is 'not defined [...] by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood' (1996, 53). The same is true of quirky. A film may practice a greater or lesser number of conventions, but the key factor in whether or not it will feel like a participant in the sensibility (for *feeling* is, unfortunately, crucial) is likely to be its tone. The common mixture of comic registers means we can simultaneously regard a film's fictional world as partly unbelievable, laugh at its flat treatment of melodramatic situations and still be invited to be moved by characters' misadventures. Its aesthetic can both seem self-conscious and promote an appreciation of *naïveté*. Evoking innocence allows many films to both recapture some of the enthusiasm that comes with childhood and simultaneously remind us that it must finally remain forever out of reach. Together these elements help create a tone that exists on a knife-edge of comic detachment and emotional engagement – or, put in another, blunter, way: a conflicted tone dealing in tensions between 'irony' and 'sincerity'.

These two terms have become increasingly central in discussions of comedic US indie films. Sometimes a 'post-ironic' (Hoad 2007, 1) movement 'from cynicism to sentimentality' is mentioned specifically in relation to a 'cinema of quirkiness' (Perren 2008, 1), and sometimes it is attributed to particular participants in the sensibility. Lynn Hirschberg, for example, has said of Charlie Kaufman's work that it is 'wildly self-conscious while at the same time inching toward some postironic point of observation' (2000, 1). Mark Olsen has written of Wes Anderson that, he 'does not view his characters from some distant Olympus

of irony. He stands beside them – or rather, just behind them', and uses the phrase 'New Sincerity' (an idea we will return to) to summarise this position (1999, 13). Similarly, Charlotte Taylor associates Anderson with a literary and cinematic trend she calls 'Intellectual Whimsy', which 'places a premium on unabashed sincerity while at the same time treading a fine line of self-parody' (2005, 1). Meanwhile, Jesse Fox Mayshark has recently used the term 'post-pop cinema' to refer to many of the directors of the quirky (though he also includes other figures, such as Richard Linklater and Sofia Coppola), whose work he sees as 'taking aim in a variety of ways at the tyranny of irony' (2007, 5).[6]

Our definition so far, then, addresses the quirky very much as a matter of aesthetic conventions, with tone being perhaps the most significant of all. Yet conventions, as Andrew Britton put it, 'tend to have an obstinately material character', being as they are 'formed under specific historical conditions through the agency of persons who inhabit those conditions' (2009, 496). With this in mind, it seems necessary to begin to situate the quirky sensibility and its tone in a historical context.

Quirky and structure of feeling

A common reason for critics to focus on quirky films' relationship to 'sincerity' is in order to draw a distinction between these movies and another strain of 1990s and 2000s indie film regularly discussed in terms of its irony and cynicism, with figures such as Todd Solondz, Neil Labute and Quentin Tarantino being regularly cast as foils.[7] Such directors were central to what Jeffrey Sconce famously dubbed 'smart film'. Together, he argued, a certain set of millennial directors and films were indicative of a new cinematic sensibility. '"Sensibility"', Sconce rightly notes, 'is an admittedly vague term, but no more so than "structure of feeling" in cultural theory or "tone" in narrative poetics – the two chief components that intersect to produce this "sensibility" in current smart cinema' (2002, 351). As I have said, it seems to me that the tone of the quirky is similarly central to its nature as a sensibility. Moreover, this tone is important to another emerging 'structure of feeling' into which the quirky would seem to fit, and which requires placing in relation to the socio-historical context of the smart film.

Sconce writes that 'smart cinema might be [...] described as dark comedy and disturbing drama born of ironic distance' (2002, 358). The centrality of irony to his account stems from a desire to position this cinema within a historical framework that includes numerous public and political discourses surrounding 'Generation X', as well as a 'larger panic over ironic culture' (354) in the USA during the 1980s onwards.[8] In particular, Sconce singles out postmodernism as 'the "structure of feeling" informing ["smart"] cinema and its audience' (352). It is important to be clear on this point. Rather than necessarily being significantly related to the voluminous field of postmodern philosophy, historiography or cultural theory, the particular importance of postmodernism for the smart film is specifically as a significant 1990s 'structure of feeling'[9] – Raymond Williams'

famous term, whose 'poetry', suggests Sconce, 'resides in the phrase's ability to combine sociological concerns for a cultural formation with the ineffable "feeling" of being in the world at a particular historical moment' (2002, 351). A matter, wrote Williams, 'of feeling much more than of thought – a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones' (1979, 159), one benefit of the notion of structure of feeling is that it suggests the socio-historical specificity of tone. To say that irony is central to the postmodern *as a structure of feeling*, then, is simply to say that in the 1980s and 1990s there did indeed exist a great many public discourses that associated swathes of both popular culture and the younger US public with an attitude of 'pessimism and cynicism' (Gottschalk 1993, 351), characterising them as being 'too full of irony, sarcasm, detachment' and so forth (Achenback 1994, 7).[10] The smart can thus be understood as one cinematic manifestation of the postmodern as one especially prevalent late twentieth-century structure of feeling in the USA[11] – a central characteristic of which is the ironic tone sketched by Sconce.

When contrasting quirky films to the purported irony of 'smart' cinema, then, critics either explicitly or implicitly cast them as reactions against common signifiers of the postmodern. This places such films in dialogue with broader movements in 1990s and 2000s US culture that have also been identified either by creators, commentators or fans as representing a 'post-postmodern' or 'post-ironic' shift away from postmodernism's reputed irony and cynicism, and are in this sense perhaps suggestive of a new structure of feeling (which some have named 'meta-modernism' [Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010]). 'Everywhere you look', argues Sean O'Neal on the *AV Club* website in 2010, 'there seems to be a growing fatigue for irony' (2010, 1). The literary critic Lee Konstantinou would likely agree, writing that 'since the early 1990s [. . .] there have been a range of artistic efforts [. . .] to reformulate the moral logic of earnestness in an ironic world'; yet, importantly, 'they all seem somehow forced to use highly ironized and self-conscious means of doing so' (2005, 1). A great many other recent cultural trends have been characterised as resting upon similar oscillations.[12]

Particularly pertinent to the quirky would seem to be the notion of the 'New Sincerity' – an artistic development visible in 1990s/2000s North American poetry, literature and other cultural forms, and defined repeatedly as a response to postmodern irony and cynicism. Key to most accounts of this phenomenon have been novelists such as David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and the greatly influential McSweeny's publishing house.[13] In his now-famous article 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', Wallace said of his cultural moment that 'sincerity and passion [are] now "out"' (1993, 178), and of his peers that 'irony tyrannizes us' (179), going on to suggest that the next significant movement in American literature might 'dare somehow to [. . .] eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue' (193). It has been suggested that writers such as Wallace and Eggers have mined 'a heretofore unknown strain of smart-ass irony that bonds tightly with sincerity' (Wake 2001, 1). Similarly, young American poets such as Andrew Mister, Joseph Massey and Anthony Robinson have openly aligned themselves

with a New Sincerity in their own field – an approach which views 'irony [as] the main event of modern poetry', and '[drives] toward a kind of sincerity [which] also seems aware it is always already arriving too late' (Morris 2008, 1).

Numerous film scholars (in addition to those already mentioned) have argued that a vacillation between irony and sincerity also appears to be structuring various kinds of recent cinema, with the concept of 'New Sincerity' sometimes explicitly invoked in connection with them.[14] Described in this broad way, 'New Sincerity' is effectively, as Sontag might put it, 'crammed into the mold of a system', 'hardened into an idea'.[15] As a sensibility currently constituting one particular iteration of such broader movements, the quirky requires more delicate treatment. So too do the concepts of tone, 'irony' and 'sincerity' that now lie at the heart of our discussion.

Quirky and tone

In what is sometimes treated as something of a manifesto for the literary New Sincerity, Wallace wrote that, within the ironic logic of postmodern fiction, 'flatness is transcendence of melodrama, numbness transcends sentimentality' (1993, 181). Melodrama here effectively designates – and can designate for our current purposes – fiction predicated upon 'intense emotional appeal' (Mayne 1977, 65). It is not at all certain that postmodern irony in general necessarily requires evacuation of such emotional appeals.[16] Nevertheless, it is undeniable both that it is often taken as given that 'irony, above all, is alien to the sentimental purpose' (Herget 1991, 7) and that postmodernism has been regularly associated with what Jameson called the 'waning of affect' (1991, 10). In his discussion of smart film Sconce is also keen to stress that 'no form of irony is truly disengaged from its material' (2002, 352). However, he does similarly associate smart irony specifically with 'dispassion' (359), 'detachment' (352) and 'disinterest' (359), contrasting it to 'sincerity', 'positivity' (358) and so on. A key notion in his argument is 'blank style', that is: a 'narrational strategy that seems remote from [the characters'] plight' (359), 'not necessarily in some form of Brechtian distanciation' (360), but in an 'attempt to convey a film's story [. . .] with a sense of *dampened affect*' (359). Postmodern irony, then, is represented in such accounts as intimately bound up with the kinds of emotional effects that a fiction appears to invite. While it can also refer to innumerable other things, this provides us with a manageable framework for examining the quirky's own particular approach.

Tone too – though it has even more potential meanings than irony – can also be thought of in a similar way. We encountered earlier Paul Schrader defining *film noir* in terms of tone and mood. Both are also important to the quirky, but it is necessary to distinguish between them. Recent work on emotion by cognitive film theorists such as Greg M. Smith has supplemented oversimplified accounts of spectator 'identification', drawing attention in particular to the importance of mood – a pervasive emotional orientation that can be affected by anything from

the nuances of an actor's performance to aspects of visual style (2003, 8). Still absent in most accounts, however, is an appreciation of tone. Like mood, tone is diffuse and immanent. Affected by every aspect of a film yet reducible to none, it may be thought of as 'the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs' (Pye 2007, 7). It is this matter of implicit *attitude* that distinguishes tone from mood, and which makes it such a determining factor in emotional orientation. Whereas a film's mood relates to feeling alone, tone is closer to a standpoint, an outlook. Thus, where in certain circumstances a film's mood could be dictated by a character's emotions, tone will instead be a matter of the attitude we are encouraged to take *towards* those emotions – which can of course, in turn, affect mood.

One way of discerning what a film's tone is doing, then, is by looking at how we seem to be invited to view characters' emotions. Put in similar terms to the discourses about irony above: to diagnose degrees of 'dispassion' requires in part assessing a film's treatment of its inhabitants' passions. I would thus like to think about Wes Anderson's approach to tone in relation to two issues: the affective difference between tonal *shifts* and tonal *tensions*, and films' attitudes towards their characters' successes. Comparing Anderson's approach with those of some other films should also permit a more nuanced account of the possible balances between 'irony' and 'sincerity' available to the quirky as a whole, and thus the sensibility's significance for contemporary discourses surrounding tone more generally.

'Tonal seesaw' vs. tonal tension

In his aforementioned *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter*, Browning writes, in reference to *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* (henceforth *The Life Aquatic*), that 'it is very difficult to maintain a dominant tone of detached quirky irony and then expect audiences to engage emotionally with characters to the level where tears are expected. This kind of tonal seesaw does not really work' (2011, 62). Not using 'quirky' in my sense of the term, Browning here thus accuses Anderson of enacting sudden shifts between a generally distanced and ironic stance, and individual moments of uncomplicatedly sincere emotional expression. While I don't agree that Anderson's films tend to work in this way, other quirky movies are certainly capable of offering something like a 'tonal seesaw' effect. This might be demonstrated by comparing two moments from *The Life Aquatic* with a scene from another more recent quirky movie, the UK film *Bunny and the Bull* (2009).[17]

Let's begin with the British film before contrasting it to Anderson's. A road movie about two friends' trip around a dreamlike vision of mainland Europe, it is very difficult to believe that *Bunny and the Bull* would exist in the form it does had previous quirky films (particularly those of Anderson, Michel Gondry and Jared Hess) not been made. There are many reasons for saying this,[18] but perhaps

the key one is the film's *mise-en-scène*. Soon after having been introduced to our depressed and shut-in protagonist, Stephen (Edward Hogg), we enter the first of the film's many flashback scenes, this one taking place in a restaurant seemingly made from cardboard, toy theatre-like, and largely black and white. All the film's many sequences set in the past/Stephen's memory (which take up the majority of the film), are rendered as such variously artificial spaces: two-dimensional child's-craft-like locales, stop-motion animation and so on. In their pointed simplicity and hand-made feel, these portions are immediately reminiscent of the textures of the 'dream' sequences in Gondry's *The Science of Sleep*, as well as the animated creature segments of Anderson's *The Life Aquatic*.

In *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*, Carl Plantinga writes of *The Royal Tenenbaums* that 'the film draws attention to its artificiality throughout, all the while attempting to elicit the strongly sympathetic emotions that depend on the spectator granting weight to the fictional characters and the world of the film' (2009, 91). This matter of emotion in an artificial landscape is crucial for thinking about Anderson's work, and the quirky sensibility more generally. Using a familiarly quirky form of artificiality, *Bunny and the Bull* appears largely determined to both undercut the credibility of its world and dissuade us from 'granting weight' to the feelings of its characters. This happens through the numerous intentionally unconvincing sets, but also via an insistent vein of surrealist humour that places us near the anarchic, 'consequenceless' comedic realm of the television series *The Mighty Boosh* (see, for instance, Julian Barratt's cameo as a dog-suckling Russian hobo),[19] as well as a repeated bathetic bawdiness (when our hero finally goes to bed with the girl he has been pining for, the camera pans away and we hear 'Hmm, nice penis!'). One measure of the film's disinterest in creating a sense of passionate involvement with the plights of its characters is that a scene about half-way through depicts the near-drowning of Stephen's best friend Bunny (Simon Farnaby) as a cartoonish underwater sequence that privileges a sense of aesthetic playfulness and naive beauty over any suggestion that it could be a potentially dangerous situation. The film's approach changes, however, in the climatic scene towards the end – which shows, we learn, what led to Stephen's depressed state in the present day: the killing of Bunny by a bull.

This scene begins with the fictional world portrayed in the style of the flashbacks generally. Determined to fight a bull to prove his manliness, Bunny strides out into the middle of a 'field' at night, here represented by a multi-coloured patchwork arrangement of rugs. On the outskirts runs a 'fence' of stacked shoeboxes, from which Stephen watches his friend nervously. The 'bull', meanwhile, is a stop-motion clockwork creation of scrap metal, with bulbs for eyes. After a stately sequence of Bunny playing matador, it eventually seems that he might have calmed the beast. Just then, however, we cut to a close-up of the animal's face, which briefly appears as that of a real, live bull. It begins to charge forward and, as it does, shots of the clockwork model are frantically intercut with a real animal galloping towards Bunny in a real field. This, it seems, is the true traumatic event breaking through Stephen's hitherto fantastically wrought

memories. From the moment Bunny is gored, blood spilling from his lips, we remain exclusively in this 'real world'. Stephen scrambles terrified over the fence, pursued by a handheld camera (a further aesthetic signifier of 'realism'), and arrives stricken at his fallen friend, who lies dead on the field's now-real grass. A brief montage then follows, showing a catatonic Stephen sitting with the body till dawn, arriving back in London, entering his home and collapsing into tears; we push into a close-up as a melancholic 3/4 piano theme plays.

Unlike the earlier underwater sequence, at this dramatic moment the film thus seems to extend a very sudden emotional invitation to the viewer, and, in order to do so, strips away its most obvious layers of artifice along with its 'dominant tone of detached quirky irony' (Browing 2011, 62). The result is a huge tonal lurch: precisely the kind of 'seesaw' effect Browning attributes to Anderson. There are two comparable moments in *The Life Aquatic*, however, which may appear to play similar notes to *Bunny and the Bull*, yet result in rather different – and characteristically Andersonian – music.

Browning has said of *The Life Aquatic* that, although offering something like an adventure narrative, it nonetheless presents 'little sense that lives will really be lost' (2011, 62). This is in large part because (like *Bunny and the Bull*) it takes the quirky's often self-consciously artificial childlike aesthetic further than most, especially in its rendering of sea creatures and underwater worlds in colourful, jerky stop-motion animation. However, while physical danger seems largely absent or irrelevant in the comedic world of *Life Aquatic*,[20] the death of Ned (Owen Wilson) offers an exception. Steve (Bill Murray) and Ned are up in a helicopter when the vehicle malfunctions, causing it to crash into the water. The camera floats with the two men as they bob about in the ocean; Steve asks if Ned is alright, apologises ('I should have scrapped this chopper ten years ago'), then Ned appears to pass out, the water lapping at the bottom of the frame now turning red with blood and trickling down the lens. Ned's last words are about the crash ('… maybe we could've crashed a little softer. Probably wouldn't have made any difference though'). We then cut to an extreme long shot of Steve carrying Ned, who may at this point already be dead, onto a beach. Though we could imagine Steve is distraught here, we are too far away to be able to see his face, and his movements betray little. This tragic event certainly comes unexpectedly, altering both the film's mood and our sense of how dangerous its world can be; aesthetically too, the blood on the camera seems like a slight shift in address, given this is a feature common to documentary. Yet the particular way the moment is handled, with merely functional dialogue being shared between the characters, and Steve's emotions when on shore being beyond our view, guarantees that it seems a significantly less conventional emotional appeal than does the death in King's film. As Kirk Boyle notes, 'the film never stoops to the level of sentimentality by including Steve crying with or over Ned' (2007, 23), and, while it would be wrong to call the film's attitude here dispassionate, it is certainly more complicated by distance than *Bunny and the Bull*'s handheld revelation of Bunny's body, or its slow track-in on Stephen crying.

Another moment from *The Life Aquatic* that provides an interesting counterpoint to the *Bunny and the Bull* sequence is the climatic scene, coming not long after Ned's death, in which Team Zissou encounter the Jaguar Shark: the fish that killed Steve's right-hand man and best friend, Esteban (Seymour Cassel), and against which Steve has sworn revenge. Having finally caught up to the shark, the entire crew of the *Belafonte* cram into the ship's dinky, bright-yellow submarine and head down into the depths. The vessel makes its way through a simplistically but exquisitely rendered underwater realm of otherworldly fish and fauna, until coming to a resting spot on the ocean bed. Eventually, out of the darkness emerges the Jaguar Shark. It is simultaneously grand and toy-like, depicted as being several times the size of the sub, seemingly glowing from within, yet also unmistakably a model; at one point it comes close enough to the camera to allow us to see the rough contours of its prosthetic design. As the shark somewhat judderingly encircles the submarine, and transcendent music from the Icelandic prog/dream-pop band Sigur Rós swells, Steve abandons his plans to 'fight' the creature ('We're out of dynamite anyway'), instead simply watching it, as do the others, in awe. 'I wonder if it remembers me', he says sadly, a reference to the last time he saw the shark, when it was devouring his friend; with this line Steve begins to cry silent, restrained tears. As he does so, the camera slowly pulls back to include all the inhabitants of the sub; one by one, in a very precise and almost ritualistic fashion, every one of them extends a hand and places it on Steve's arms and shoulders.

Similarly to how the 'realistic' treatment of Ned's death is nudged towards a more distanced register by its denial of access to extremes of emotion, so is this far more 'artificial' moment imbued with more emotional weight than we might reasonably expect from an encounter between characters in a cartoonish submarine and a manifestly fake animated creature. Equally, we can both share in and question the awe that the characters feel towards the shark: it is a very beautiful model and at the same time assuredly 'just' a model, thus setting the moment apart very clearly from the aesthetic logic of *Bunny and the Bull*. Likewise, the moment when Steve succumbs to tears is offered as simultaneously poignant and restrained through the highly formalised manner in which his crewmates extend their sympathy; again, we might contrast this with the pull-in on Bunny crying when he arrives home – a far more effusive treatment of a protagonist's welling emotions.

Plantinga is correct to point towards the issue of artificiality vs. emotional affect in Anderson's work, but has not yet gone far enough in considering the affective functions of these tensions. Although he repeatedly mentions that *The Royal Tenenbaums*' narration adopts a 'gently ironic stance' and 'draws attention to the film as artifact' (Plantinga 2009, 90), he nonetheless ultimately argues that its 'emotive success [. . .] depends on [its] ability to elicit spectator sympathy' (88). This is too simplistic a formulation. The 'emotive success' and 'spectator sympathy' of Anderson's films do not simply exist despite the 'gently ironic stance', but rather are intimately bound up with it, and would have a very

different character without it. Whereas a film like *Bunny and the Bull* effectively separates out its emotional appeals into 'ironic' and 'sincere' portions,[21] Anderson tends to allow both to coexist throughout. It seems to me that Anderson is in general less concerned to create (qua Browning) tonal *shifts*, than tonal *tensions*, which allow for a forthrightly mongrel mood even at his films' ostensibly melodramatic moments. So, while *Bunny and the Bull* demonstrates that participants in the sensibility certainly can lurch from 'a dominant tone of detached quirky irony' into moments that encourage 'audiences to engage emotionally with characters to the level where tears are expected' (2011, 62), Anderson's variation on the quirky is usually defined precisely by a continual blurring of the lines separating such oppositions.

This might suggest that, within the quirky, Anderson offers something like a paradigmatic version of the strategies associated with the 'post-ironic' New Sincerity – creating a 'logic of earnestness in an ironic world' yet using 'ironized and self-conscious means of doing so' (Konstantinou 2005, 1). This sense is only reinforced by looking at another aspect of his approach to tone.

Cheering characters on

In the same discussion of *The Royal Tenenbaums* mentioned above, Plantinga suggests that, 'despite his rather questionable behavior' (2009, 88), the 'spectator's emotional responses [. . .] become wholly tied to an acceptance of the goals of Royal' (89). This is indicative of another critical limitation in much discussion of Anderson's work, and requires we examine how the tendency towards tonal tensions manifests itself in films' attitudes towards characters' 'goals'.

Like Plantinga, Brannon M. Hancock has suggested of Anderson's cinema that, 'no matter how ridiculous their actions, characters in [his] films are treated not with [. . .] irony but with respect and admiration' (2005, 1). Similarly, Mark Olsen writes that, 'misguided though their energies occasionally are', Anderson does not 'use an ironic stance to establish [. . .] superiority' over them, but rather seems to be 'cheering them on' (1999, 12). It is worth pointing out, though, that the very fact that these critics feel the need to describe Anderson's protagonists' actions as 'questionable', 'ridiculous' or 'misguided' at all is indicative of the fact that the films do in fact strike at least a *partly* ironic attitude towards them; if they did not, it would not be suspected that characters might be behaving questionably, ridiculously or misguidedly in the first place, since the films would simply deny us this kind of perspective. More accurate would be to say that the tones of Anderson's films often prompt us to view characters' schemes and achievements as perhaps comically absurd or potentially bound for failure – and thus open to a certain amount of ridicule – *at the same time as* they are treated with greater or lesser degrees of sympathy. This is a rather different proposition, and examples litter his filmography: Digby's (Owen Wilson) over-commitment to half-baked heists in *Bottle Rocket*, Max's (Jason Schwartzman) excessive

number of extracurricular activities in *Rushmore*, Royal's (Gene Hackman) machinations for tricking his way into his family's affections in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Francis' (Owen Wilson) suffocatingly timetabled 'spiritual journey' in *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) and so on. The thing to be admired and treated sincerely seems to be less these endeavours themselves than the enthusiasm with which they are attempted; as Digby puts it in *Bottle Rocket* when Anthony (Luke Wilson) refuses to participate in a job: 'If he doesn't have the enthusiasm who needs him?'

Whether it is a matter of Anderson's direct influence or not, such a tonal approach – representing characters' quests as both comically deluded and admirably impassioned – has become common in the quirky more generally.[22] This convention essentially requires that a film be ironically distanced from characters' levels of self-knowledge and emotions (we take as amusing failings which they cannot grasp and do not feel), yet without wholly losing sympathy for their quixotic stabs at greatness. We can be more precise about Anderson's particular approach to this convention by comparing scenes from towards the end of three quirky films, which all see characters stage heartfelt performances in front of audiences: *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Rushmore*.

Near the close of *Napoleon Dynamite*, Napoleon (Jon Heder), an unpopular and 'nerdy' high school student, makes a last-minute decision to dance on stage in front of the entire school to help his friend Pedro (Efren Ramirez) win his bid to become class president. An *AV Club* article about Anderson's influence on his peers argues that, 'while Anderson is generally sympathetic to the oddball characters inhabiting his films, *Napoleon Dynamite* suggests that audiences prefer filmmakers to hold eccentrics at arm's length, [. . .] to mock them' (Hyden 2007, 1). It is certainly true that the comic tone of this film generally turns upon a determinedly detached view of our perpetually monotone and amusingly petulant protagonist (not entirely dissimilar to that associated with smart film).[23] For instance, previous moments when Napoleon has stood in front of an audience – a presentation about the Loch Ness Monster and an extremely earnest sign-movement interpretation of a Bette Midler ballad – have seen him ridiculed by both his peers and the film's tone. Assuredly ironic in the traditional sense of the term, depicting Napoleon as 'inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves' (Frye 1957, 34), such moments also encourage us to laugh at this character's commitment to things about which he seemingly feels very strongly. The climactic dance is slightly different. Here his moves are, comically, far from slick, his hip-thrusts not sexy and the entire effect emphatically not 'cool' – all things we might infer he feels he is achieving. However, his willingness to help his friend is winningly game, the enthusiasm of the dance shows an energy entirely lacking from his previous performances, and the filmmaking itself appears occasionally sympathetic to that energy: familiarly planimetric shots that highlight his absurdity are interspersed with crash-zooms and close-ups of gyrating body parts, tempering the sense of 'blank style'. Yet, when Napoleon notices slightly too late that the music has cut out abruptly, winding down his movements embarrassedly

and fleeing the stage in silence, it seems just possible that this performance too has been presented merely in order to be mocked for our pleasure. That sense is tempered by the unexpected riotous applause which follows, but this nevertheless feels a close tonal call between the smart's 'dampened affect' and quirky's tendency to cheer on regardless.

Towards the other end of the quirky spectrum lies the climax of *Little Miss Sunshine*, which sees seven-year-old Olive (Abigail Breslin) performing her long-practised dance routine in the titular beauty pageant. Her moves, inappropriately sexualised and artlessly executed, offend the pageant's organisers and parents to the extent that they order Olive's father Richard (Greg Kinnear) to remove her from the stage midway through. Rather than do so, Richard sacrificially joins his daughter at this moment of her ridicule, beginning to dance ineptly, soon followed by Olive's mother, brother and uncle, who all also pile on stage to show solidarity, dancing and jumping around in a spontaneous and wholly unskilled display that stands in sharp contrast to the brash but meticulously choreographed routines of the participants we have seen previously. While iconographically similar, the tone here is very different to that of *Napoleon Dynamite*. This (comparatively far more 'realist') film has been dedicated to critiquing the crass view – encapsulated in its first lines of dialogue – that 'there are two kinds of people in this world: winners and losers'. Prior to the climatic dance it is made clear that the pageant – with its regimentally coached children caked in garish makeup for the sake of a prize – represents, for both the characters and the film, an encapsulation of this view; 'Fuck beauty contests', Dwayne (Paul Dano) has said, 'life is one fucking beauty contest after another.' When the family invade the stage with their ungainly bad dancing, both this context and their occasionally mock-serious expressions confirm that they themselves, like us (but unlike Napoleon), are very aware of their performance's limitations. Indeed, that they revel in these limitations is the point: this is joyful self-sabotage of the possibility of being 'winners'.[24] The aforementioned *AV Club* article suggests that '*Sunshine*'s climax is ultimately broader than anything in Anderson's filmography', by which they perhaps mean that it depends upon a more conventional emotional appeal. Like many quirky films, this movie has granted varying degrees of weight to characters' emotions throughout,[25] but in this scene, it invites us to share wholeheartedly in the family's elated mood, and to become co-conspirators in their gleeful subversion of an institution that now bears the brunt of any irony that may remain in the film's tone.

Rushmore sits somewhere between these tonal poles. Towards the end of this film, Max (Jason Schwartzman) stages a Vietnam War play entitled *Heaven and Hell* at his new public school. This lavish production – which would seem to require a Hollywood special effects team in order to render its spectacular *Apocalypse Now*-sequel vision – is the last of many 1970s-inspired gritty cinematic dramas Max stages as school plays. Although gloriously, unbelievably, grand in scale, the play is also absurd in its pretentions and *naïveté*. It is being performed by children, has a hugely portentous title, contains lines in Latin, offers clichés galore (the young soldier from 'Cheyenne, Wyoming', the exclamation of

'Lock and load!', the ritual laying of a playing card on a dead man's chest) and ends with a proposition of marriage from an American G.I. to a female member of the Viet Cong. Given what we know of Max's self-conviction, it is unthinkable that he might believe there is any ridiculousness in his work (indeed, during the interval he dismisses an objection that using ketchup for blood is going to look stupid with, 'no it's not: it's going to look *real*'). This situates the play as having comparable significance for Max as Napoleon's dance has for him – closer to this, at least, than to the family's openly unskilled performance in *Little Miss Sunshine*.

However, the play's design being so extraordinarily accomplished and its subject so ambitious also mean that there is a core seriousness at work here that is absent from *Napoleon Dynamite*. This is a kind of *naïveté* that results from striving for a kind of greatness. Consider in addition, the moment when Max is framed in close-up giving a peace sign, announcing, 'Maybe we'll meet again some day ... when the fighting stops.' Yet another cliché, this shot is followed, however, by a close-up of an audience member, Max's friend Herman (Bill Murray), a Vietnam veteran whom we know was 'in the shit'; he watches with tears in his eyes. Perhaps prompted by memories of both the real war and the metaphorical one waged between Max and Herman over Miss Cross (Olivia Williams), Herman's tears do not mean the film's tone suddenly shifts towards a wholly sincere endorsement of *Heaven and Hell* as brilliant and moving – indeed, they are surprising precisely because the play has thus far been largely presented ironically. The shot of Herman is even accompanied by the diegetic sound of distant bagpipes, another gently mocking gag, this time about Max's use of a Scottish actor for the lead role. Yet this tender emotional display is nonetheless important, and also places the final romantic tableau in a context that makes it appear less *wholly* ridiculous; this play is now one that can make a sympathetic character cry.

When the crowd erupts into a standing ovation at the final curtain, Herman jumps up and gives a reserved but definite raised-fist salute. A gesture also used in both *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), this clenched fist offers something of a microcosm of the tonal approach taken here. Incongruous in appearance but heartfelt for Herman, its slight preposterousness in this context is both key and yet does not empty the gesture of its power. In fact, if both Herman and the film in some sense doubt their ability to pull it off wholly convincingly – it is raised not high in the air but only to the shoulder, and dropped after a few seconds – then this itself contributes to the particularity of its emotional impact: the gesture above all bespeaks commitment *in spite of* doubt.

Quirky, in the sense that this article understands it, is a contemporary comedic sensibility that is intimately bound up with the tonal combination of 'irony' and 'sincerity'. Yet, like 'New Sincerity', this definition offers merely an abstract starting point, and the examples analysed here have demonstrated that this formulation permits a wide range of approaches in practice. A film may shift in an instant from detached artifice to intense emotional invitation; it can allow the faintest glimmer of sympathetic engagement to emerge from beneath an otherwise mocking attitude; it might build towards a sense of allegiance with characters

who knowingly open themselves to mockery and so on. However, to the extent that the tone of his work is predicated so consistently upon *perpetual* oscillation between ironic and sincere attitudes, it is very tempting to dub Wes Anderson the quirky filmmaker par excellence. This in turn potentially casts his films as perfect cinematic expressions of what is increasingly coming to feel like an emergent US structure of feeling which, like the postmodern cultural logic which preceded it, is acutely concerned with the importance of tone.

It is clearly important to be appropriately circumspect in any such claims. In an aside in his recent delineation of different strands of contemporary ‘hipster’ taste, Mark Greif suggests that Anderson often engages in ‘the very old dyad of knowingness and naïveté [. . .] – but with a radical and vertiginous alternation between the two’ (2010, 10–11). It is true that this ‘dyad’ *is* old. The concept of Romantic Irony, for instance, was described by Schlegel in the early nineteenth century as an ‘eternal oscillation of enthusiasm and irony’ (De Mul 1999, 10). Several commentators have recently proposed the current ‘topicality of Romantic desire’ (De Mul 1999, 22) for various movements in ‘post-postmodern’ art and culture (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010); the ‘New Sincerity’ offers one strain, and I would indeed suggest the quirky as another. Yet we must remember that, just as ‘postmodern irony is, at best, a notable cultural microclimate among elite producers and consumers of culture’ (Konstantinou 2009, 14–15), so are any reactions against it bound to be similarly modest in significance – indicating not a new era but, at most, suggestive of a competing, localised, structure of feeling.

These provisos notwithstanding, however, it is finally difficult not to feel that the quirky has the potential to constitute a cinematic fulfilment of David Foster Wallace’s predictions for literature: that there would emerge ‘some weird bunch of “anti-rebels” [. . .] who dare to back away from ironic watching’: ‘the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs’ and ‘accusations of sentimentality, melodrama’ (1993, 193). Yet the films of the quirky will seldom ‘back away’ from irony wholesale (like Wallace’s fiction itself, in fact), and the anxiety that sentimentality is somehow a ‘risk’ is not often merely disregarded, but rather is implicitly embedded in the work itself. This will be either more or less true depending on the film, and depend on innumerable factors, but it seems to stand as a fairly accurate description of Anderson’s characteristic tone in particular. We might say that he is a filmmaker who tends to respond to his characters and worlds with something comparable to Herman’s raised fist: if it suggests commitment in spite of doubt, then the ‘in spite of’ is precisely as crucial to its meaning and effect as the commitment.

Notes

1. See also, for example, Hyden (2007, 1) and Sabo (2010, 1), who cite Anderson’s influence on such films as *Tadpole* (2002), *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), *Juno* (2007), *Rocket Science* (2007), *Be Kind Rewind* (2008), *(500) Days of Summer* (2009) and so on.

2. As Proehl writes, sometimes '*philosophy* and *phenomenology* are too weighty and, like *aesthetics*, too broad; *ethos*, too moralistic; [. . .] all are limiting, even if each plays some role' (2008, 17).
3. See: http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110105083841AARSTts and http://slumz.boxden.com/f218/what-films-paved-way-quirky-style-1463645/, respectively.
4. King, for example, has offered an analysis of Anderson's *Bottle Rocket* (1996) that defines 'quirky' more carefully than most, using it specifically to describe how this film's narrative, visual style and characterisation differ in slight degrees from 'conventions [. . .] with which we are more familiar' (2005, 136).
5. See: Orgeron (2007, 59), Mayshark (2007, 115), Zoller Seitz (2009), Kertzer (2011, 6), Browning (2011, 33), etc.
6. Treading rather similar terrain to myself, Mayshark's book contains some very fine interpretations of individual films; however, despite initially placing his thesis in the context of Wallace's critique of irony, he does not pursue the matter in relation to anything like all the movies he analyses, and the journalistic mode in which he writes also means he is unable to reflect in detail on the nature of such categories.
7. See: Olsen (1999, 12), Gorfinkel (2005, 153), Perren (2008, 1), Hancock (2005, 1), Mayshark (2007, 2), etc.
8. Within this climate Sconce places Patrick Buchanan's famous declaration at the 1992 Republican National Convention that there exists a 'culture war' in the USA between Christian conservative moralists and secular-humanist relativists (2002, 353), predictions of the 'end of the age of irony' following 9/11 (354) and so on.
9. See: Pfeil (1988) on postmodernism as a structure of feeling.
10. Joel Achenback, 'Putting All the X in One Basket'. *The Washington Post*, April 27.
11. Of course, it goes without saying that, as the anthropologist Angela Garcia reminds us, 'at any given time, there are multiple structures of feeling in operation' (2008, 724).
12. See, for example, Seigworth (2005) on 'corn' in indie music, Saltz (2010) on contemporary art in which 'Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out', Greif (2010) on similar approaches in 'hipster' taste economies and so on. Timmer (2010) and Konstantinou (2009) offer helpful overviews of such trends in popular culture.
13. Eggers is often mentioned in the same breath as Wes Anderson (e.g. Greif 2010; Taylor 2005), and regularly attracts the term 'quirky' in his own field (e.g. Konstantinou 2009). He also wrote the scripts for quirky films *Away We Go* (2009) and *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009).
14. For example, Dogma 95 (MacKenzie 2003), 'New Punk Cinema' (Rombes 2005), contemporary 'historical anachronism' (Gorfinkel 2005), the work of Guy Maddin (Beard 2005), etc.
15. It is necessary, incidentally, to distinguish this idea from another use of the term proposed by Jim Collins in his article 'Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity'. In Collins' schema, new sincerity is a 1990s approach to genre which 'rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity' (in contrast to another generic approach which favours 'ironic hybridization') (2002, 276). Where new sincerity for Collins is thus entirely devoid of irony, the New Sincerity in almost all other accounts is specifically viewed as somehow '*post*-ironic', suggesting a perpetual tension *between* irony and sincerity. I would suggest that a hint of such tension, however defined, needs to be seen as a minimum requirement if we are to avoid attaching the phrase 'New Sincerity' to any number of unrelated phenomena.
16. Kimberly Chabot Davis' book *Postmodern Texts and Emotional Audiences*, for instance, dedicates itself entirely to tracing strands of what she calls 'sentimental postmodernism' in literature and popular culture (2007, 1).

17. *Bunny and the Bull* is one of the first British films to be clearly indebted to the quirky; others would arguably include *Son of Rambow* (2007) and most certainly *Submarine* (2011).
18. For example, the movie begins with a playful credit sequence that, like that of *Napoleon Dynamite*, has cast and crew names written neatly in the film's diegesis – on toast, in toothpaste and so on. This is accompanied by a repetitive, melancholic, pizzicato score for piano and guitar that might call to mind the music of Mark Mothersbaugh or Jon Brion. In a manner not dissimilar to the character introductions at the opening of *The Royal Tenenbaums*, a male voice-over with a literary tenor then informs us of a series of Stephen's idiosyncratic habits.
19. The famously bizarre and raucous British comedy series on which *Bunny and the Bull*'s director, Paul King, worked for several years.
20. One of the crew's unpaid interns has his neck hacked by a machete but survives easily; Hennessey (Jeff Goldblum) is shot but recovers within a few minutes of screen time; one of the film's most amusing – because least credible – moments comes when Steve, faced with an entire room of Filipino pirates shooting at him, runs directly *towards* them, gun blazing: we cut away at this moment, but know instinctively to take the cut as humorous rather than suspenseful.
21. Other quirky films are certainly capable of using a similar strategy; we might think of *Juno*, for instance, which Perren (2008) and Newman (2011) have both suggested shifts from an ironic to a more sincere register as it progresses.
22. Projects handled with a comparable tone might include the 'sweding' of films in *Be Kind Rewind*, imagining a real-life relationship with a sex doll in *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), environmental activism in *I Heart Huckabees*, animal rights protesting in *Year of the Dog*, performing at an open mic night whilst being unable to play guitar and sing at the same time in *Winter Passing* (2005), learning to play the harmonium and buying excessive amounts of pudding for the air miles in *Punch-Drunk Love*, writing and enacting a 'clichéd' romantic Hollywood conclusion in *Adaptation*, etc.
23. Such as Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), which focuses on the bullying of an unpopular schoolchild while simultaneously finding dark humour in her mistreatment (e.g. her parents' excessive love for her younger sister), and placing us in a position to judge her harshly ourselves (e.g. Dawn's adoption of the language and manner of her bullies).
24. Though it is unclear to what extent Olive herself is aware of her inadequacy as a beauty queen candidate, which we might wish to call a failing on the film's part.
25. The opening pathetic revelation that Richard is giving a talk on how to be a 'winner' to a paltry and unimpressed audience, for example, is categorically ironic, whereas Dwayne's later discovery of his colour blindness prompts a much more sincerely handled histrionic outburst.

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