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## Millennial Masculinity

Shary, Timothy

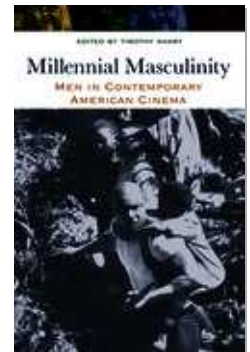
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CHRIS ROBÉ

## “Because I Hate Fathers, and I Never Wanted to Be One”

*Wes Anderson, Entitled Masculinity, and the “Crisis” of the Patriarch*

Within masculinity studies, it has become something of a mantra to proclaim white heterosexual American masculinity in “crisis.” According to Bryce Traister, this “crisis theory” relies upon a two-pronged approach: “One is rooted in a new historiography of American masculinity that locates instability at the base of all masculine identities constructed within American cultural matrices; the second is derived from Judith Butler’s influential theoretical account of gender as always performative and contingent.”<sup>1</sup> Men’s anxieties supposedly result from their unstable identity formation and tentative control of public and private realms. Yet many scholars remain skeptical of the ability of such crises to significantly threaten patriarchal power. In *Feminism without Women*, Tania Modleski warns that in addressing any “crisis” in masculinity, “we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crises and resolution.”<sup>2</sup> Recent U.S. cinema provides a germane example of masculine crisis and consolidation at work through its ambivalent stance toward the traditional authoritarian father operating within films such as *Magnolia* (1999), *American Beauty* (1999), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *The Road* (2009), and, most recently, *Tree of Life* (2011). Stella Bruzzi notes that “Much of 1990s’ Hollywood dispenses with him, but ultimately it seems to protest that the traditional father is what we want.” Along similar lines, this attraction/repulsion toward the authoritarian father pervades recent commercial cinema.<sup>3</sup>

Strangely absent from Bruzzi’s account, however, are the films of Wes Anderson in which ambivalence toward the traditional father plays a central role. In particular, *Rushmore* (1998), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004) share a central tension that

simultaneously venerates the patriarch while also exposing the psychic traumas that result from men's desire to perform what I call entitled masculinity: a form of masculinity that embodies the mandates of social privilege of the white upper-class heterosexual male world.<sup>4</sup> On one level, Anderson's films explore the emotionally debilitating crises that result from the affective foreclosures necessitated by entitled masculinity. Yet on another level, they remain entranced by the patriarch and consolidate his power by making him their narrative focus while marginalizing alternative viewpoints that detract from his centrality. As a result, Anderson provides us with a nuanced body of work to investigate the contradictory ways in which entitled masculinity operates within contemporary Hollywood cinema.

In general, Anderson's films interrogate the central tenets that have defined entitled masculinity since its origins. As Michael Kimmel notes, masculinity gradually replaced the notion of manhood during the fin de siècle:

*Manhood* had been understood to define an inner quality, the capacity for autonomy and responsibility, and had historically been seen as the opposite of *childhood*. . . . At the turn of the century, *manhood* was replaced gradually by the term *masculinity*, which referred to a set of behavioral traits and attitudes that were contrasted now with a new opposite, *femininity*. Masculinity was something that had to be constantly demonstrated—lest the man be undone by a perception of being too feminine.<sup>5</sup>

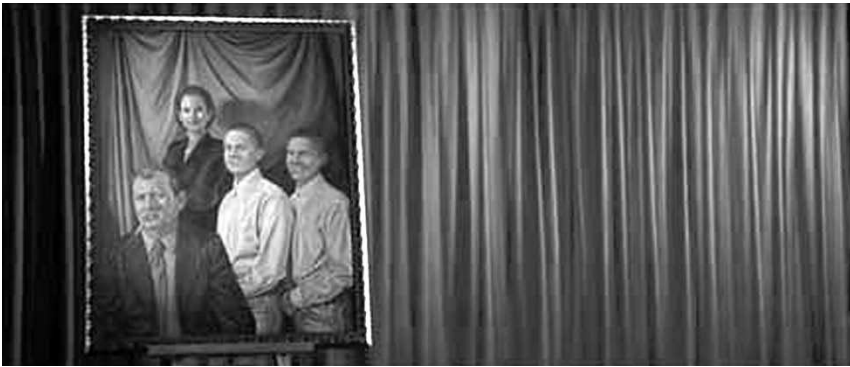
Unlike manhood, which was defined as a stable "inner quality," masculinity must be constantly performed, always threatened by its immediate feminine undoing.<sup>6</sup> As a result, socially privileged white heterosexual men have employed three predominant coping strategies to vainly fortify their masculine psychic security: escape from feminine realms, emotional self-control/repression, and psychic projection onto marginalized groups.<sup>7</sup> Anderson's films highlight these coping mechanisms' inability to compensate for the psychic instabilities produced by entitled masculinity's highly performative nature.

All of Anderson's fathers reveal a profound unease with the domestic, feminine realm. *Rushmore* opens with a family painting that suggests Herman Blume's (Bill Murray) alienation from domestic life. Blume stands in the forefront, located on a different plane from his wife and two children. His off-center body spills out of the frame's left side. A cigarette dangles from his mouth. This is the picture not of a man lauding his control but instead of someone disconnected from his family and trapped in an ill-suited role, grimacing as the frame cuts into his painted flesh. To escape its confines

he moves into a hotel indefinitely. *The Royal Tenenbaums* picks up where *Rushmore* left off. After having lived in a hotel for twenty-two years, Royal (Gene Hackman) decides to reclaim patriarchal sovereignty within the Tenenbaum home. One of his first tasks is to locate his stuffed javelina head that his wife, Etheline (Anjelica Huston), has removed from the wall. This trophy represents Royal's desire to colonize a part of the home as his own masculine space, just as men during the early part of the twentieth century used their dens as a masculine sanctuary.<sup>8</sup> But unlike the enclosed sanctuary of a den, Royal's trophy is dwarfed by the home's feminine surroundings: its ornate moldings and pastel-colored walls. Just as the painting in *Rushmore* suggests Blume's domestic imprisonment, Royal's trophy reveals his marginalized position within the Tenenbaum home. Finally, in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, Steve (Bill Murray) attempts to escape from the domestic altogether by engaging in masculine adventures at sea. His ship, the *Bela-fonte*, a long-range submarine hunter from World War II, emphasizes Steve's desire to connect with a war emblematic of American masculinity at its supposed prime. Yet Anderson undercuts Steve's sense of masculine autonomy by making him well aware that his wife's parents' money made possible two of his adventures and the purchase of his island sanctuary. Likewise, interviewers constantly challenge Steve's masculine authority by suggesting that Eleanor (Anjelica Huston), his wife, is the real brains behind Team Zissou. Overall, Anderson's films reveal men's pervasive fears about the feminine restricting their autonomy both within and outside the home.<sup>9</sup>

#### DISTANCE AND ALIENATION

Underlying this desire to escape lurks a more pervasive psychological issue: men's childhood training to psychologically distance themselves from the feminine through what Nancy Chodorow calls "the division of psychological capacities." According to Chodorow, the physical and psychological absence of men from the fin-de-siècle bourgeois home caused male children to primarily adopt a negative definition of masculinity as a rejection of women's learned nurturing capacities.<sup>10</sup> Although the broad historical sweep of Chodorow's theory can be questioned, it nonetheless offers a valuable interpretive framework to examine how the various models of masculinity found within Anderson's films—Herman Blume as self-made millionaire, Royal Tenenbaum as Victorian patriarch, and Steve Zissou as intrepid explorer—channel men's emotions into socially sanctioned masculine forms such as assertiveness, anger, and pride while repressing their more feminine ones. The patriarchs are locked into stoic roles that alienate them from their families.



The off-center placement of both painting within the frame and Blume within the painting suggests a life out of balance and unhappiness with Blume's domestic arrangement in *Rushmore*.

The pool party sequence in *Rushmore* best exemplifies how Blume's performance as self-made millionaire has stunted his emotional development and alienated him from his family. Blume sits alone, indifferent to his twin sons' birthday while noticing his wife flirting with her tennis instructor. The Blume family painting that opened the film is intercut but this time with a close-up on Blume, symbolizing not only the metaphorical decapitation that his performance entails but also a disconnection between his head and body, his intellect and emotions. Blume's alienation is further reinforced by the scene's allusions to *The Graduate* (1967). The soundtrack plays The Kinks' "Nothin' in This World Can Stop Me Worryin' 'Bout That Girl," a song reminiscent of Simon and Garfunkle's "Mrs. Robinson." After downing his glass of scotch, Blume cannonballs into the pool. An underwater shot follows of him sinking to its bottom still in cannonball/fetal position, a direct homage to Benjamin Braddock's (Dustin Hoffman) similar descent in his parents' pool. Like Braddock, Blume remains locked into emotional arrested development, despite being twenty years Braddock's senior, a grown man who can only indirectly gesture at his alienation from underneath the hidden safety of his pool.

*The Royal Tenenbaums* more pointedly reveals the alienation that results from Royal's performances as Victorian patriarch. We see this in the scene when Royal lies to his children about having cancer. Before entering the house, Royal's performance is highlighted as Pagoda (Kumar Pallana) answers the door. Neither man speaks as they compose themselves for their roles. Royal nods, suggesting that he is in character, with the doorway

serving as a proscenium arch. The Victorian patriarch, with his trustworthy Indian servant by his side, enters, armed with a string of sentimental clichés. The scene's tight framing and relative lack of movement reveal the strained relations between father and offspring. Royal's emotional distance dramatically contrasts Richie's (Luke Wilson) genuine emotive responses. When Richie embraces his father, Royal looks skeptically toward his son as if he cannot understand this breach of masculine protocol and reluctantly responds with a weak embrace and cliché as an emotional buffer: "Thank you, my sweet boy." The scene reveals Royal's performance as emotionally manipulative, more about reasserting patriarchal control than connecting with his children.

Steve Zissou also uses performance to emotionally distance himself from his alleged son, Ned (Owen Wilson). Yet unlike the earlier films, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* emphasizes the mass media's role in influencing men's performances. Steve uses his cinematic role as oceanographic explorer to mediate his relationship with his son. For example, during a filmed dive, Ned asks Steve if he can call him "dad." Steve says "No" but then immediately rethinks his decision by calculating how a nickname might enhance his screen presence: "It's not a bad impulse, though. Some kind of nickname. Not that one. It's too specific. How about 'Steveesy'?" Under the pretense of not having audiences see him in a fatherly role, Steve uses his cinematic role as a weapon to emotionally distance himself from his son and domestic responsibilities, as is indicated by the scene's framing that juxtaposes a three-shot of Steve and his men with a solo shot of Ned.

Furthermore, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* explicitly identifies a central resentment that haunts all of Anderson's fathers. When Ned asks Steve why he never contacted him, Steve replies, "Because I hate fathers, and I never wanted to be one."<sup>11</sup> This underlying truth punctuates the silences of every Anderson father, a buried emotion that informs all of their performances. Lacking the needed emotional resources to deal with the psychic complexities that fatherhood and (family) life entail, Anderson's fathers resent those who make such demands on them.

### MELANCHOLIC FATHER FIGURES AND LOSS

Yet Anderson's films go beyond simply illustrating the emotional distance that entitled masculinity entails. More importantly, they reveal how their protagonists' masculine performances serve as hyperbolic compensatory acts for the loss of a significant loved one they are unable to mourn. According to Freud, mourning can only take place when every "single one of

the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect to it."<sup>12</sup> Yet as Judith Butler notes, because "forms of social power emerge that regulate what losses will and will not be grieved," mourning is not simply a personal issue but instead is a deeply political one.<sup>13</sup> In regard to Anderson's films, we see how entitled masculinity forecloses any possibility for men to adequately grieve loss, since it forces them to repress the very emotions that are required for mourning to take place. As a result, melancholia—the inability to acknowledge the significance of the lost object and psychologically move beyond its trauma—substitutes for mourning. The ego, unable to detach the libido from the lost object, instead unconsciously incorporates it and becomes redefined by that very loss.<sup>14</sup>

Anderson's protagonists incorporate their loss through their hyperbolic performances, which signal how the dead serve as ego ideals for their actions. These performances illustrate a variation of the fort/da game that Freud saw operating in his nephew's actions in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The child was greatly attached to his mother, who occasionally had to leave him. Rather than explicitly expressing his resentment toward his mother's departures, the child invented a game of fort/da whereby he would throw a reel attached to a thread underneath his cot's skirt, thus making it disappear, and saying, "Fort." He would then pull the reel back into view and claim, "Here." For Freud, the child uses this game to sublimate his anger toward his mother: "At the outset he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part. . . . Throwing away the object so that it was 'gone' might satisfy an impulse of the child's, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Anderson's protagonists transform their losses into recuperative, performative actions, a type of endless "game" in which they unconsciously seek revenge on those who have abandoned them. Rather than mourning, they unconsciously incorporate aspects of the deceased into their very being and actions.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the characters' over-the-top personalities reveal an even greater loss that their performances cannot fully efface, hence the emotional and professional stasis that plagues all of their lives despite their seemingly assertive and self-confident attitudes.

However, it is easy to miss the importance of the specific losses that haunt Anderson's films. As Kent Jones observes, Anderson "always gives you just enough to get by, and if you blink you may just miss a gesture or a line of details that imparts a crucial aspect of his characters' emotional lives, the core dilemma that they're hiding for fear of being embarrassed before the world."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, many reviewers have mistaken Anderson's subtlety



as stylistic superficiality. Maximilian Le Cain calls *The Royal Tenenbaums* a “stylized soap opera” that never causes any emotional discomfort.<sup>18</sup> Stanley Kauffmann similarly refers to the film as “too much creaky cuteness.”<sup>19</sup> David Thomson dismissively lists under Anderson’s entry in his biographical dictionary: “Watch this space. What does that mean? That he might be something one day.”<sup>20</sup> Missing from such accounts is how Anderson’s films stylistically emulate the very repression of loss that their protagonists feel. The films embody a melancholic structure whereby loss serves as an absent presence, not often directly addressed but nonetheless significantly influencing both narrative momentum and *mise-en-scène*.

Two important losses affect the male protagonists’ performances in *Rushmore*: Max Fischer’s (Jason Schwartzman) dead mother, Eloise, and some unnameable loss that occurred in Vietnam for Herman Blume. By investigating how loss dictates Max’s performances as patriarch-in-training, we understand how loss informs Blume’s performances too, since the film clearly establishes Max as a younger version of Blume.

A theatrical curtain segments the film’s sections, highlighting how Max’s ill-suited “adult” performances serve as compensatory acts for his mother’s death. The first curtain opens with Max being threatened with expulsion by Dr. Guggenheim (Brian Cox). Max feigns an air of confidence, acting more as a colleague than a student, and claims, “If that means I have to stay on for a postgraduate year, then so be it.” After this tactic fails, he reminds Guggenheim that Rushmore Academy accepted him because of a one-act play he wrote on the Watergate Scandal during the second grade: “My mother read it and felt I should go to Rushmore. And you read it, and you gave me a scholarship, didn’t you? Do you regret it?” Max’s dialogue reveals the encouragement and emotional support provided by his mother, who believed that her working-class son was smart and talented enough to attend one of the most privileged prep schools in the nation. Without her, Max lacks a central nurturing presence in his life and engages in negative behavior under the misguided belief that Guggenheim might serve as an adequate substitute.

Max’s failure to adequately mourn the loss of his mother leads him to seek a surrogate in Rosemary Cross, a new teacher at Rushmore. Max often associates Cross with his mother. For example, he initially becomes enamored with Cross when he reads a quote she inscribed in one of the library’s books: “When one man, for whatever reason, has the opportunity to lead an extraordinary life, he has no right to keep it to himself.” The quote reveals how Cross holds a similar belief in the individual’s innate abilities that Max’s mother held when she enrolled her son in Rushmore. Additionally, just as Max impressed his mother with his play on Watergate, he attempts



to impress Cross by getting Latin reinstated after he learns of her love for the language. Unable to see Cross for who she is, Max force-fits her into an idealized role, which eventually leads her to confront him in her kindergarten classroom. The scene is shot with a shaky handheld camera, suggesting Max's emotional instability at Cross's de-fetishization of herself:

**CROSS:** What do you really think is going to happen between us? Do you think we're going to have sex?

**MAX:** That's a kind of cheap way to put it.

**CROSS:** Not if you ever *fucked* before, it isn't.

**MAX (to himself):** Oh my god.

**CROSS:** How would you describe it to your friends? Would you say that you fingered me? Or maybe I could give you a hand job. Would that put an end to all of this? Please get out of my classroom.

As Cross questions Max, he is pushed back by her words as they pierce his idealized illusions. Cross's sexual descriptions force Max to view her as a living and breathing woman full of carnal desires and experiences like any other person, not some idealized figure for Max to hang his grief upon. The scene is pivotal for Max's realization that no individual can substitute for his mother. We soon afterward observe Max reconciling with Blume by his mother's grave, indicating that Max's ability to address the significance of his mother's death has allowed him to come to better terms with the complexities of his present relationships.

Blume, on the other hand, suffers some unnameable loss during his tour in Vietnam. At best, the film can only imply this loss. During one scene Max asks Blume about his Vietnam experiences, something that Blume had never mentioned on-screen but that seems to hover between his silences: "Were you in the shit?" Blume replies, "Yeah, I was in the shit." Blume's matter-of-fact posture toward the traumas of Vietnam is not unlike Max's own posturing as an adult: their masculine performances repress emotional pains that they both would rather deny.

Yet Max forces Blume, Cross, and himself to deal with the significance of their losses in his final play, *Heaven and Hell*. Max types the play in front of his mother's grave site and dedicates the play to his mother and Edward Appleby, Cross's deceased husband. The play takes place during the Vietnam War, when an American soldier meets and marries a Vietcong woman. Essentially, the play exposes how political trauma is inextricably linked with the personal. The inability of the United States to recognize the loss

of Vietnam directly forestalls Blume from naming and mourning the losses he experienced there. By Max's play reopening the wounds of the war, he forces the school's audience to confront this national trauma. Blume becomes deeply moved as he stands up during the play's end and clenches his fist with tears welling up in his eyes, seeming to want to express more but suddenly catching himself and looking down to hide his vulnerability. He has recognized his own experiences in the play but still hasn't yet found the ability to express them. Vietnam serves as a metaphor to reveal how recognition and mourning one's losses are the preconditions for the development of new intimate relationships, represented both by the transnational romance between American soldier and Vietcong woman and the interaction between Blume and Cross during the play's intermission. After being asked by Cross what he thinks of the play, Blume responds plaintively, "It's good. But let's hope it's got a happy ending." She then touches his hair, brushing it back: a protective gesture that recognizes Blume's emotional vulnerability. By creating the play, Max has provided a collective moment of mourning in which Blume, Cross, and himself can recognize and share their own and each others' traumas so that genuine intimate connections and psychic growth can begin.

Three central losses affect the men's performances in *The Royal Tenenbaums*: Royal's mother, Helen O'Reilly Tenenbaum; his father, never mentioned by name; and Chas's (Ben Stiller) wife, Rachel. Although Helen is only mentioned three times throughout the film, her influence on Royal's actions is immense. We see this in the aforementioned sequence when Royal lies to his children about having cancer. After Royal enters the house, we see a painting of his mother in a World War II Red Cross uniform hanging over the family mantel. The camera tracks in and tilts down to Royal sitting beneath it, linking her influence over Royal and his ensuing performance. Additionally, Helen's association with World War II, an event that normally signifies American masculine valor, further emphasizes her idealized status. Just as the Blume family painting represents an impossible patriarchal ideal for Blume, Helen's image, bathed under a golden light, literally hangs over Royal's head, representative of another impossible ideal that Royal must abandon if he is to ever emotionally reconnect with his family.

Additionally, Helen's visual centrality in the scene and association with World War II draws attention to the glaring absence of Royal's father. Overall, this narrative absence emulates the melancholic state in which Royal regards his father. As Freud explains, "One cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either."<sup>21</sup> The film stylistically



The looming presence of Royal's mother, Helen, in *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

embodies this unconscious melancholic loss that Royal suffers from in its refusal to visualize his father. Nonetheless, the impact of his father's neglectful influence in Royal's own twenty-two-year absence and dysfunctional familial interactions is obvious. The cyclical nature of patriarchal estrangement becomes apparent as we watch Chas, one of Royal's sons, alienate his own two boys. Just as Royal's actions have been affected by the death of his mother and the absence of his father, Chas's actions have been partially affected by the unexpected death of his wife. Afraid of losing his children, Chas becomes an overly protective father, keeping them underneath constant surveillance by making them incessantly crunch numbers for his business and exercise fifteen times a week. Ironically, in his attempts to avoid being physically and emotionally absent in his kids' lives, Chas smothers them with an overbearing presence that alienates them from him just as effectively as his own father did to him. Lurking beneath both Royal's and Chas's grief for the loss of an important woman in their lives is the figure of the father they never had.

Finally, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* addresses loss by providing two opposing models for dealing with it: (1) rejecting mourning for a misguided quest for vengeance, represented by Steve's desire to avenge the death of his best friend, Esteban (Seymour Cassel); and (2) mourning that abandons a facade of masculine stoicism for an ability to speak about the significance of one's losses, represented by Ned's (Owen Wilson) relationship with Jane Winslett-Richardson (Cate Blanchett).



Steve's desire but inability to mourn the death of his friend Esteban in *The Life Aquatic*.

Steve is unable to properly mourn the loss of his friend, since his own life has become a hyperreal masculine performance. This is shown early on in the film. After screening his most recent film that recounts Esteban's death by shark attack, Steve watches an old televised interview with him and Esteban. In the interview Steve is asked, "People say Eleanor is the brains behind Team Zissou. What is Steve?" Steve chuckles yet remains at a loss to explain his purpose. He begins to look despondent, but Esteban then responds, "He's the Zissou," and touches Steve's arm, causing Steve to look back and smile. While watching the interview, Steve is visibly moved by Esteban's support and raises a finger to the television screen to Esteban's face. Static electricity zaps between Steve's flesh and the screen, revealing both an emotional connection between the two men and an incredible distance as Esteban's memory remains locked within these images. Both men's feelings are mediated by their hyperreal performances, restricting their emotions into tiny gestures of affection both on and off the screen.

#### REGENERATION THROUGH VIOLENCE

Because of the stoic mandates of entitled masculinity, Steve must instead use vengeance, the only socially sanctioned way for "real" men to express their feelings, as a substitute for mourning.<sup>22</sup> By hunting down and killing the jaguar shark, Steve thinks that he can purge his pain. But vengeance simply blocks Steve from mourning Esteban's death and coming to terms with its

emotional resonance with the more pervasive fears of declining professional importance and aging that have haunted him since the film's opening. We observe Steve's difficulty acknowledging Esteban's death when Eleanor warns Steve, "Don't go on this voyage right now, Steve. One of you is already dead after all." Steve responds, "Who? Oh, you mean Esteban? Thanks for bringing that up." As Steve answers, the film cuts to a painting of Esteban, a symbol once again of emotional stasis whereby an idealized reified image haunts the thoughts and actions of an Anderson protagonist. The painting suggests the disjunction between Steve's image of Esteban as still alive and the reality of his death, the masculine ideal and the need to mourn.

Furthermore, the film exposes how vengeance blocks Steve's ability to foster a relationship with his son. Locked within a melancholic state, Steve lacks the needed emotional resources to form new bonds. Only by jettisoning his stoic masculine facade can he rectify this impasse, which he finally does near the film's end by sharing his vulnerabilities with his son: "I'm sorry I never acknowledged your existence all those years. It won't happen again. I mean it. See, for me to meet a guy like you at this time in my life . . . I don't know. It's just . . . I want to communicate my feelings to you, but I think I might start to cry." By accessing his repressed emotions, Steve is eventually able to abandon his quest for vengeance. When he finally confronts the jaguar shark, Steve contemplates, "I wonder if it remembers me," and cries. Rather than viewing the shark as a source of anger, Steve recognizes how it symbolizes his last moments with Esteban. All of the crew members place their hands on Steve as he touches Jane's pregnant belly, suggesting a new bond being born at this moment. Steve has finally initiated the mourning process, which provides him with the ability to truly connect with those around him, including the very shark that caused him pain.

Steve learns how to mourn through his son's example. Ned refuses to adopt the masculine ways that Steve embodies and therefore has access to the emotions that allow him to mourn his mother's death. We see this when Ned offers to Jane a detailed description of his mother's death from ovarian cancer, implying his acceptance of it. Her death, he further explains, led him to seek out Steve, showing once again how mourning provides for psychic growth and the ability to foster new relationships.

Furthermore, Ned's ability to access his emotions allows him to connect with Jane and recognize her own emotional impasse. We witness this when he gives Jane a pen and fifty self-addressed envelopes with three blank pages in each one so that she will write him. Ned's gesture reveals his recognition of how Jane's job as a journalist has caused her to adopt some of its stoic masculine ways. For example, when Jane leaves a message for her editor, Ross, the married man who has impregnated her, she says, "I'm

not coming back. It's over. Please don't try to contact me, okay? You'll hear from us sometime. We got attacked by pirates. I feel as if life is . . . Well, you get the idea. Anyway, take care of yourself. Jane." Her short declarative sentences are indicative of journalese terseness, perhaps best represented in Hemingway's writing that never directly states the deep emotional turmoil that underlies his stories. And just when she is about to express her feelings, she stops short. Because Ned identifies this emotional impasse on Jane's part, he uses his gift to encourage the expression of her repressed emotions that her profession, and most likely Ross, dismisses as "unprofessional" and "weak."

### CLASS RESENTMENT AND SUBLIMATION

Yet despite all of the films' complex representations of the psychic traumas that result from entitled masculinity, they become increasingly problematic as they try to address issues outside of a limited racial and sexual scope. The fear of the Other looms large in all of Anderson's films. In particular, *Rushmore* exposes the fear of returning to the lower class, *The Royal Tenenbaums* deals with the fear of African American male sexuality, and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* reveals a fear of queer sexuality. However, these fears become increasingly ill-addressed in each subsequent film, so in contrast with *Rushmore's* incredibly acute representation of class anxiety, *The Royal Tenenbaums* underplays Royal's racist tendencies, and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* fully demonizes its sole queer character, Alistair Hennessey (Jeff Goldblum).

From its opening scenes, *Rushmore* shows how class anxiety structures the masculine performances of Blume and Max, both of whom come from the lower class. The artifice of Blume's upper-class life, represented by the family painting that opens the film, is contrasted with the chapel speech he gives at Rushmore. Blume stands in medium long shot behind a podium on frame left, the exact location of the painting, and expounds: "You guys have it easy. I never had it like this where I grew up. For some of you, it doesn't matter. You were born rich, and you're going to stay rich. But here's my advice for the rest of you: take dead aim on the rich boys. Get them in the crosshairs and take them down. Just remember: they can buy anything, but they can't buy backbone. Don't let them forget that." Ironically, Blume reads this speech from his company's letterhead, suggesting the class resentment that he feels even while at work within the very company he founded. Max listens attentively to Blume, emphasized by shot/reverse-shot structure and increasingly closer framing between Blume and Max. Max parallels Blume's actions by writing in his hymnal:

Rushmore—best school in country

Rich kids—bad?

This guy—best chapel speaker I have ever seen.

Like Blume, Max scribbles his own class anxiety on the symbols of wealth and power. The question mark following “bad” reveals Max’s mixed emotions. Since he strives for wealth and power to escape his own lower-class origins, he is reluctant to admit that the very goal of what he is striving for might be harmful to his well-being.

Wealth is problematic for both Blume and Max because it necessitates the denial of their working-class origins. They must both perform as if they are the rightful inheritors of the socially privileged environments that they inhabit. These performances mandate Blume’s relative silence about his socioeconomic background (it is never mentioned again in the film) and Max’s fabrication of his past by claiming that his father is a neurosurgeon rather than a barber. Because Max lies about his father’s occupation, he must then exclude his father from any of the school’s social functions that might reveal the working-class chink in his armor of a smartly pressed blue blazer. Similarly, Blume so well apes upper-class privilege that Max at times forgets that they share the same background. This is revealed when Blume asks Max to work for him. Max replies, “Look, I may not be rich, Mr. Blume. My father may only be a doctor, but we manage.” By feigning wealth, Max becomes alienated from his father, Bert Fischer (Seymour Cassel), and the surrogate father he seeks in Blume.

Despite the blue-blood performances of Blume and Max, working-class resentment seeps through the film’s soundtrack. Anderson uses the songs of the 1960s’ British Invasion not only to emphasize the youthful rebellion that Max enacts but also to accent the working-class anger that fuels both Max’s and Blume’s attitudes toward the entitled. The British Invasion was comprised of bands mainly from working-class origins, yet their heavily sexualized songs and aggressive sounds overthrew the more suburban friendly songs that once dominated major radio airplay. Notably absent from Anderson’s soundtrack is the most famous working-class band: the Beatles. Yet this absence is understandable, since the early Beatles tamed their sounds for a radio-friendly format that groups such as the Who, the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, and the Animals did not. Also, Anderson only uses songs foreign to contemporary top-forty sensibilities in order to represent to us some of the original rawness and anger that they possessed at the time of their release. The film’s music represents both Blume’s and





Blume's off-center framing mimics the placement of the family painting found at the beginning of *Rushmore*.

Max's repressed desires to claim and express their working-class inheritances that places such as Rushmore and Blume's factory dismiss. Music within the film functions much the same way as excess emotion operates within melodrama: "The undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the [narrative] action . . . is traditionally expressed in the music and, in the case of film, in certain elements of the *mise-en-scène*. That is to say, music and *mise-en-scène* do not just heighten the emotionality of an element of the action: to some extent they substitute for it."<sup>23</sup> Because Rushmore Academy and Blume's factory psychically limit Max's and Blume's ability to express their working-class anger, these emotions are sublimated into the film's soundtrack.

#### LIBERAL HOLLYWOOD RACISM

In *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Royal's desire to move back into the Tenenbaum home is mainly predicated on his racist fears of Henry Sherman (Danny Glover) marrying his wife. Pagoda initially informs Royal about Henry's proposal: "The black man ask her to be his wife." Pagoda's referring to Henry as "the black man" articulates Royal's own stereotypical racist fears. The film takes pains at exposing the disjunction between Royal's conception of Henry as a black stud on the prowl and Henry's polite and intelligent demeanor. We see this most explicitly when Royal speaks to Richie about Henry:

ROYAL: So what do you think of this big old black buck moving in up there?

RICHIE: Who?

ROYAL: Henry Sherman. You know him?

RICHIE: Yeah.

ROYAL: Is he worth a damn?

RICHIE: I believe so.

The dialogue emphasizes how Royal unsuccessfully attempts to foster racial resentment in his son.

The Tenenbaum home as the prime site of racial conflict and Etheline representing white woman as symbolic collateral becomes apparent when Royal flexes his patriarchal privilege against Henry in the kitchen:

ROYAL: Are you trying to steal my woman? You heard me, Coltrane.

HENRY: Did you just call me “Coltrane”?

ROYAL (*acting absent-minded*): No.

HENRY: You didn’t?

ROYAL (*innocently*): No.

HENRY: Okay.

ROYAL: But if I did, you wouldn’t be able to do anything about it, would you?

HENRY: You don’t think so?

ROYAL: No, I don’t.

HENRY: Listen, Royal. If you think you can march in here . . .

ROYAL: You wanna talk some jive? I’ll talk some jive like you never heard.

HENRY: Oh, yeah?

ROYAL: Right on!

Royal’s reference to Henry as “Coltrane” and then trying to outblack him by speaking jive reveals a man whose racist stereotypes are derived from his haphazard gleanings of popular culture. On one level, Anderson critiques Royal as only able to perceive Henry’s presence as nothing more than an affront to his white racist privilege that desires to claim paternalistic protection over a home and a wife he has neglected for more than twenty years.

Yet at the same time, *The Royal Tenenbaums* offers nothing more than racism-lite. Not wanting to alienate Royal too much from (white) audience sympathy, Anderson only addresses Royal's racism in passing. Unlike the class anxiety of *Rushmore* that is rarely explicitly mentioned but nonetheless permeates the film and is integral to the development of its two main male protagonists, racism is mentioned only to be dismissed in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. The film, at its worst, relies on an all-too-typical Hollywood solution to racial problems: a racist white person learns to abandon his or her racism after befriending an African American. What such a solution fails to address is not only how a genuine coming to terms with racism necessitates a dramatic alteration in identity that we never see but also the systemic way in which racism predicates the white privilege that the Tenenbaums hold. Racism, in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, remains only an individual problem in Royal, which he easily overcomes by film's end.<sup>24</sup>

#### FASCIST QUEERS VERSUS THE HETEROSEXUAL WORKING CLASS

*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* is the most problematic of the three films in the way it portrays queer sexuality as Other. Alistair Hennessey—the man who hogs the oceanographic grant money and has slept with Steve's wife, Eleanor—is Steve's nemesis. Rare for an Anderson film that usually shows remarkable sympathy for all of its characters, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* fag bashes Alistair throughout by referring to him as a "slick faggot," a "closet queer," and diminutively as "Allie."

*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* demonizes Hennessey so that the white-collar company man, Bill Ubel (Bud Cort), might be both humanized and masculinized. Ubel, initially introduced as nothing more than a "bond company stooge" who is overseeing the expenses for Zissou's next adventure, embodies the beaten-down white-collar worker: short, balding, pencil mustache, thick brown glasses, calculator in one pocket, pens in the other. Steve, when he first meets Ubel, says, "I hope you're not going to bust our chops, pal." Ubel responds, "Why would I do that?" Steve answers, "Because you're a bond company stooge." Ubel, defending himself, says, "Well, I'm also a human being." And for the rest of the film we watch Ubel prove his humanity, valor, and masculinity. When the *Belafonte* is shanghaied by pirates, Bill speaks with them because he is the only member of Team Zissou who knows Filipino. Subsequently, because of his language skills, he replaces Ned as their hostage. As Steve observes at the end of this episode, "I never saw a bond company stooge stick his neck out like that." By film's end, when Hennessey asks how his stolen espresso machine got aboard the

*Belafonte*, Bill replies, “We fucking stole it, man.” It is fitting that Bill would challenge Hennessey at this moment, since the film implies that Hennessey represents the effete queer rich who are mainly responsible for disempowering the white-collar workforce that Ubel symbolizes. The narrative, in part, concerns the white-collar workforce proving its masculine vitality and no longer taking any shit from people like Hennessey. Essentially, the film rewrites the Left cliché of class warfare of the masculine proletariat against the effeminized bourgeoisie into the individual resistance of the masculine white-collar company man against the effeminized queer wealth of Hennessey, which necessitates all the homophobic baggage that has always accompanied this gendered reading of class divisions.

### THE DIALECTICS OF ENTITLED MASCULINITY

The increasingly problematic nature of Anderson’s films toward issues of race and sexuality can partially be explained by Anderson’s limited perspective. The films suggest Anderson’s intimate familiarity with issues of class but increasing distance to issues of race and incomprehension toward queer sexuality. These deficiencies do not necessarily undercut his films’ insights into the psychic traumas that result from entitled masculinity, but they expose their representational limits in being written from an insider’s viewpoint. Although the claim can certainly be made that all the films provide a recuperative function by making white straight men the center of their narratives at the expense of alternative perspectives, they also offer sophisticated representations of the widespread debilitating psychological effects that result from men’s adoption of entitled masculinity. Yet as Stella Bruzzi has shown in her book *Bringing Up Daddy*, this fundamental ambivalence toward the traditional father is not unique to Anderson’s films but instead is a recurrent theme in many contemporary Hollywood films. What distinguishes Anderson’s films from the rest is their consistent emphasis on this ambiguity without ultimately resolving into a pro or con stance. They identify the complex cultural matrices that surround representations of twenty-first-century entitled masculinity and the traditional father, exposing how even within their critiques an aura of nostalgia often slips through. The final shot of *The Royal Tenenbaums* brings this point home. We read on Royal’s gravestone:

Royal O’Reilly Tenenbaum  
Died tragically rescuing his  
family from the wreckage of a  
destroyed sinking battleship

Although Royal still utilizes a World War II cliché as an epitaph, by film's end we realize the hollowness of such a claim. While he poses as patriarch in death, we know that in life he was an absent father who created incredible psychic pain for his family. But the one redemptive moment on the gravestone is Royal's adoption of his mother's maiden name as his middle name. Bookended by his absent father's last name and his own, his mother's name provides the ballast between the two, covertly admitting the centrality she provided in his life. Not willing to totally abandon the patriarchal pose, the tombstone becomes both a hollow yet appealing gesture of masculine valiancy and a genuine acknowledgment that entitled masculinity alone is not enough to provide for an emotionally rich life. Somewhere between the awe of the pose and the trauma of its pain lie Anderson's films.

## NOTES

1. Bryce Traister, "American Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2000): 276.

2. Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

3. Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 191.

4. Although *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) continue this trend, they do not significantly develop upon the primary elements of the patriarch as established by the three aforementioned films. As a result, these two later films will only be referenced when they provide added insight into the dynamics of the main films under discussion.

5. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 119–20.

6. This does not suggest that manhood was any less performative than masculinity but more so that it was *perceived* as less performative. Therefore, the illusion of stability that provided middle-class white men with a sense of psychic gender security was lost with the emergence of masculinity.

7. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 111.

9. Similarly, in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Mr. Fox (George Clooney) decides to purchase a new home within close proximity to three slaughterhouses, starkly revealing the constant tension between family life and Fox's older desires as poacher.

10. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 176.

11. This rejection is stated in even more naturalistic terms in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. When Fox's wife (Meryl Streep) asks him why he returned to poaching after having promised to abandon his old profession after the birth of their

son, he replies, "Because I'm a wild animal." Mrs. Fox counters, "You also are a father." This shows Anderson's men not simply rejecting fatherhood but more importantly general enculturation, which is associated with women, domesticity, and fatherhood. Needless to say, Anderson is developing upon a dominant masculine anxiety found within U.S. culture, perhaps most notably found with Huckleberry Finn's rejection of Aunt Sally's desire to "sivilize" him by escaping to the West by novel's end.

12. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV (1914–1916)*, translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1957), 245.

13. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 183.

14. *Ibid.*, 183, 169.

15. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 15.

16. Francis (Owen Wilson) in *The Darjeeling Limited* repeats the same line of controlling behavior that his absentee mother (Anjelica Huston) once foisted upon the family.

17. Kent Jones, "Family Romance," *Film Comment* 37, no. 6 (2001): 26.

18. Maximilian Le Cain, "Storytime: *The Royal Tenenbaums*," *Senses of Cinema* 20 (2002), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/feature-articles/tenenbaums/>.

19. Stanley Kauffmann, "On Films—Promises, Promises," *New Republic*, December 31, 2004, 24.

20. David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 18.

21. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.

22. For an excellent account of the long-held cultural belief in the curative powers of vengeance within the United States, see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), *The Fatal Environment: The Myth and Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), and *Gunfighter Nation: Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

23. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 73.

24. Racism becomes even more pronounced within *The Darjeeling Limited* and its Orientalist vision of India. Bathed in soft light and colorful dress, India and its people serve as an exotic backdrop for the three white characters to work out their psychic traumas. This is most dramatically seen when the three characters attend an Indian child's funeral that serves as a catalyst to descend into their own self-absorbed memories concerning missing their own father's

funeral. Eurocentric pain and desires consistently trump that of the Indian characters. Jack (Jason Schwartzman) not only sleeps with an Indian server due to his loneliness from his Western girlfriend having left him, but he also imposes upon her by stating, "I feel like I need someone to talk to, and I feel that you might be really important in my life." Unasked is what might be important to her life. The widowed mother of the three brothers escapes family obligation by becoming a nun and joining an Indian monastery. The train becomes a metaphor for the film's and white characters' touristic vision of India, not a place to learn about but instead to superimpose their wishes and desires.