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# La Camera-Crayola: Authorship Comes of Age in the Cinema of Wes Anderson

by Devin Orgeron

*Abstract:* This essay analyzes the fictional authors who populate Wes Anderson's films and his use of DVD technology to promote his own highly self-aware authorial image. Anderson's authorial logic is organized around the concepts of youth and dependence, positioning itself against the still quite powerful myth of the independent and solitary genius.

In a recent *Framework* article entitled "Possessory Credit," critic Adrian Martin makes several provocative claims with regard to the present state of "the author question" within cinema studies.<sup>1</sup> He proposes first that the question as it was posed fifty years ago is no longer relevant since our contemporary culture trains us all to be faithful (albeit unwitting) auteurs.<sup>2</sup> He then suggests that our collective hesitation over cinematic authorship arises from a crisis within world cinema, "an 'emergency' in the most positive sense: literally, a dynamic state from which something new is emerging."<sup>3</sup> And finally, he posits (acknowledging the axiomatic quality of the statement itself) that "auteurism is only useful as a critical tool as long as it generates good, exciting results—helping us to generate new discoveries."<sup>4</sup>

The piece itself, while refreshingly manifesto-like, is troubling in its reliance on a number of intriguing (though unfulfilled) positions. Martin's central idea regards some mysterious "something new" within the cinema itself, something signaling a changed relationship to authorship. Strangely, however, he ends the essay with something old, longing as he does for the nonpublic auteur buried within the enigmatic text: longing for, in his case, Terrence Malick and regretting the systematic inflation of fellow AFI alum David Lynch's auteur status.<sup>5</sup> Déjà vu all over again, a less extreme and, I suspect, ultimately more noble version of the old and highly subjective logic embraced by Andrew Sarris: "my auteur trumps yours because..."<sup>6</sup>

The "something new" in auteurist scholarship that Martin searches for, the "good and exciting results" (some of them at least), can be found in David Gerstner and Janet Staiger's 2003 collection, *Authorship and Film*, which does much in its

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excellent introductory essays to contextualize the history of the debate surrounding cinematic authorship.<sup>7</sup> The collected essays fulfill the introductory promise in their ability to move far beyond the always quite delicate and largely imagined parameters set in classical and qualitative approaches to the debate. This is, in short, not simply a collection of essays on “consistent” directors but a series of article-length questions about cinematic authorship and our presumptions surrounding the issue. While directors are treated, they are anything but the usual suspects and are placed in a context that gives equal consideration to composers, producers, and collectives.

Virginia Wright Wexman’s similarly titled, similarly inspired 2003 anthology *Film and Authorship*, like Gerstner and Staiger’s, devotes much of its space to new, identity-based questions of authorship while continuing to examine the role authorship plays in the legal and commercial realms.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps more a “best of” collection than Gerstner and Staiger’s, Wexman’s anthology pulls together previously published as well as new essays on the topic. Taken collectively, the two books give some indication as to the multiple and productive directions in which research in this area has moved.<sup>9</sup>

It is with a degree of trepidation, then, that I here cast my lot with the “director as auteur” hardliners, and I present, like Martin, what may at first seem to be my very own “something old.” This essay is about “that” kind of authorship. It is, in some respects, about thematic and stylistic consistency, that familiar mantra of auteurist criticism. It is, however, director Wes Anderson’s consistent cinematic and extracinematic confrontation with the very question of authorship that concerns me, pointing as it does to a critical part of the “something new” that Martin invokes but fails to adequately example.

Anderson is aware of, is, in fact, the author of, a set of contradictions that are central to his peculiar authorial position. Populating his films with flawed but ultimately redeemable auteurs who, in the end, orchestrate their elaborate fictions in the name of a community that requires their particular intervention, Anderson’s films imagine the author as an almost inscrutable entity. The risk of narcissistic abandon always lurks in the background, yet Anderson is careful to see his singular visionaries corralled or, to use an aquatic metaphor (Anderson himself is quite fond of them), *anchored* to the community he serves.

These contradictory impulses, this desire to uphold the singular in the name of the plural, spill over into Anderson’s own cleverly crafted public persona as well. To return to Martin’s examples, Anderson’s position is far from the isolated mysticism of, for instance, Terrence Malick, or the canned, impenetrable eccentricity of David Lynch. His own eccentricity and his singularity oddly make him “one of us,” making him, problematically I think, *reachable*. This at least would seem to be the intention. The development of Anderson’s cinematic authorship, in fact, coincides with the birth and refinement of DVD technology, and Anderson’s use of this new technology in the manufacturing of his unusually open and equally self-aware authorial image might be understood as forming the foundation of Martin’s

“something new.” Anderson’s highly visible digital products, inseparable in some ways from Anderson himself, function, like the characters in his films, in the service of an intriguingly constructed collective.

In “The Commerce of Auteurism,” Timothy Corrigan suggests that the interview, in post-Vietnam-era cinema, functions critically in the service of authorship’s commercial aims.<sup>10</sup> Anderson’s authorial maneuvering extends this conceptualization into the digital age. Catherine Grant, pointing to a millennial shift in Corrigan’s prescient formulation in her article “www.auteur.com?” indicates the monumental impact digital technology has had on the formation and stability of fan culture.<sup>11</sup> More than an address to preexisting fans, however, Anderson’s cinematic and extracinematic products also aim to create, via a uniquely revised authorial logic, a very particular, seemingly inclusive fan community.

Anderson’s authorial logic is organized, in part at least, around the concept of youth and ultimately positions itself against the still quite powerful though academically unpopular myth of the solitary genius. This idea manifests itself thematically in *Bottle Rocket* (1996), *Rushmore* (1998), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2000), and *The Life Aquatic* (2005). Perhaps because his films are about childhood—literal and prolonged—they are also about family and the need, in the face of familial abandonment, to create communities in its place. In this way, Anderson’s films stand as theoretical parables for a notion of *collective* authorship in spite of the fact that he has become a poster child for and against “the author” in its more antiquated, singular, and romantic valence.

As important as this thematic strain, however, are the material conditions of Anderson’s authorship. The cinematic creator as construct—of the studio or of the self—is certainly not a new phenomenon. Alfred Hitchcock remains, in many ways, a central and instructive example of the “created creator,” a nuance never lost on François Truffaut. Forecasting the direction auteurist criticism would take in the 1970s (sans the direct invocation of Lévi-Strauss), in the 1960s interviews with Truffaut,<sup>12</sup> Hitchcock is remarkably aware of his films and himself as “structures”; he is aware, in other words, of a category Peter Wollen would have called “Hitchcock.”<sup>13</sup> Truffaut’s own self-mythologization is critical here as well and, as Richard Neupert notes in his history of the French New Wave, has resulted in a staggering number of biographically centered publications demonstrating the unprecedented allure of the post-Hollywood auteur not as “structure” but as subjective and (perhaps) knowable “reality.”<sup>14</sup>

This allure has become all the more *alluring* in the digital age where the cinematic text’s “second-life” on DVD is capable of reassigning, emphasizing, or even creating authority, and giving the illusion of a privileged relationship between author and spectator. More than ever before directors are given an opportunity to “speak to us,” and the impression that we can all become authorities on a film or filmmaker by studying the “supplemental material” on DVDs has become widespread. Anderson is clearly aware of the power dynamic involved in this exchange and has continually sought to disrupt it in his extracinematic pursuits,

deauthorizing himself or creating the illusion of deauthorization by situating himself within a constantly shifting pair of collectives, becoming, intermittently, both crew member and spectator. In a play on Geoffrey Nowell Smith's 1976 formulation in "Six Authors in Pursuit of *The Searchers*," we might usefully suggest that Wes Anderson is *the Author of the Fiction of the Author*.<sup>15</sup> Anderson, like many contemporary directors who help to produce the extrafilmic materials on their own DVDs, projects a carefully authored public image of himself as author, and his largely DVD-mediated image shares many qualities with its fictive counterparts, who, like him, arise as redeemed or redeemable, largely sympathetic authors, functioning, in the end, in the name of community.<sup>16</sup>

Wes Anderson is not alone in his creative work within what I like to term the cinematic aftermarket. He is, however, exemplary in his ability to achieve a degree of continuity between what used to be referred to as supplemental material and the primary text, creating out of that continuity a confused though beguiling specter of Truffaut's cherished author/spectator relationship. Anderson's confrontation with issues of authorship, then, also forms the organizing structure of his DVD supplements that expand upon and draw together several of the filmmaker's key concerns and support this particular author's own pluralized mythology. What follows, then, examines Anderson's fictional authors, the authors within his films, and their typically and troublingly narcissistic journeys toward collective fulfillment. These fictional authors support Anderson's authorial position, a position that ultimately seeks to redeem and protect the author. The second part of this essay examines the complex rhetorical structure of Anderson's elaborate DVD packages (since *Rushmore*) and the degree to which they contribute to Anderson's image as "dependent"—as opposed to *independent*—filmmaker. This question of (in)dependence, so central to his fictional creations, foregrounds and valorizes a romanticized notion of adolescence, a developmental period that has long been at the center of the authorship debate.

### The Adolescence of the Author

The *Auteur* critics are so enthralled with their narcissistic male fantasies (*Movie*: "Because Hawks' films and their heroes are so genuinely mature, they don't need to announce the fact for all to hear") that they seem unable to relinquish their schoolboy notions of human experience. (If there are any female practitioners of *auteur* criticism, I have not yet discovered them). Can we conclude that, in England and the United States, the *auteur* theory is an attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and adolescence—that period when masculinity looked so great and important but art was something talked about by poseurs and phonies and sensitive-feminine types?

Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares" (1963)<sup>17</sup>

As Pauline Kael suggests, the 1960s "critical conversation"—between Andrew Sarris and Kael, it was more like a firefight—on the topic of cinematic

authorship revolved largely around the topics of age, gender, and perceived levels of maturity. At its worst, this exchange took the shape of age-based name-calling, a behavior itself typically associated with adolescence. Auteurism emerged in part out of a half-digested realization that the cinema itself was changing—that it was being created by and appealing to a newly emerging youth culture. Kael's own work, along with the work of Jonas Mekas, self-consciously appealed (albeit very differently) to what they perceived to be the “here and now” of 1960s image culture, claiming access to the youth at its center.<sup>18</sup>

Recognizing the critical role these claims of maturity played both in the Sarris/Kael debates and, ultimately, in structuralist attempts to rethink the question of authorship,<sup>19</sup> James Naremore turns to claims of adolescence in his essay “Authorship and the Cultural Politics of Film Criticism,” as they were hurled at Jean-Luc Godard's own auteurist criticism. Naremore argues that:

We may dismiss (Godard) as “adolescent,” but before we rush to proclaim ourselves adults and scholars, we should remember that adolescence is an important period of human development—a period of cultural resistance, when discoveries are made. If Godard is adolescent, he at least shows us that popular culture can be talked about in a less repressed fashion than high art, and that critical enthusiasms can be channeled into a rebellious, witty energy.<sup>20</sup>

Wes Anderson, it would seem, has adopted a similar position with regard to the importance of adolescence. However, the young director seems to have developed a more acute, almost Godardian awareness of the potential dangers associated with this “period of cultural resistance” than Naremore acknowledges here, a set of dangers from which he takes great pains to protect himself and his creations.

While certain of his contemporaries have subscribed wholeheartedly to Godard's rather famous remark that “one is always alone; on the set as before the blank page,” Anderson has continually sought to problematize this dangerously self-absorbed formulation.<sup>21</sup> The poor, misunderstood, and typically male creator is the center of the Andersonian universe, true; in this respect, his films seem consistent with those oft referred to 1960s and 1970s modernist films that aligned spectatorial sympathies with the represented filmmaker/creator and against the “system” beleaguering the creative process: Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963), Godard's *Contempt* (1963), François Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973), Wim Wenders's *The State of Things* (1982), etc. In Anderson's films, however, the adolescent (either real or behaviorally) creator, while handled sympathetically, is also called out for his (Anderson's key authors are always male) destructive and exclusive behavior and must learn both to adapt and to assimilate, at least partially. The Andersonian author must learn to channel his authorship productively.

While cinema under the influence of Alexandre Astruc's *Camera-Style* structure has typically foregrounded the notion of “independence,” a concept perhaps now even more contentious than the notion of authorship, Anderson's work, which is undertaken within what we today call “the studio system” in its post Golden Era iteration, advances an odd and infrequently discussed notion of “dependence,” an

idea that finds expression in Anderson's characters who, over the course of their travails, must learn to rely upon each other.<sup>22</sup> I refer to Anderson's authorial approach in the title to this essay as *La Camera-Crayola* in part because markers and crayons appear with regularity in Anderson's work. Less frivolously, however, I am interested in illustrating the carefully orchestrated *illusion* of an effortlessly juvenile mode of production at work in Anderson's films, a mode of production that reflects Anderson's own hesitation with regard to the marketing construct we know as "independence" and his somewhat self-protective plea for community. The fact that Anderson's first film is named after a popular Independence Day firework drives the point home.

**Anderson's Authors.** *Bottle Rocket* takes as its subject three apparently aimless twenty-somethings—Dignan, played by Anderson's co-writer and long-time friend Owen Wilson; Anthony, played by Luke Wilson; and Bob, played by Robert Musgrave—and their humorous wanderings down a "criminal" career path. Dignan is the group's unlikely "leader," orchestrating semiclimactic, cinematically derived "scenes" and, more often than not, behaving like the group's oddly ambitious director. He is a kind of social auteur, codifying in his own way the events that mark his and his friends' lives. Self-centered, unrealistic, and irritating, there is also a sad and desperate persistence to Dignan that his friends and the viewer must respond to, a need for community and a desire for approval that find expression in his misguided and seemingly narcissistic stabs at "leadership."

As its title suggests, the film traces a short-lived burst of energy. Critic Mark Olsen phrases Anderson's central theme in the following way: "If...his films seem to be about people spinning their wheels, Anderson is interested less in the lack of forward movement than in the kinetic excitement of energy displaced—life as a colorful pinwheel or, as the title metaphor points to, a beautifully glowing, albeit temporary, roadside firework."<sup>23</sup> Olsen is quite right in pointing to Anderson's delight in the kinetic, a joy each of his four films builds on. The frantic activity in Anderson's films, however, is compensatory, covering significant gaps in the lives of his characters. Bob and Anthony, in other words, need to be "directed" as much as Dignan needs to "direct," an idea that begins to take shape in the film's first several minutes as Dignan orchestrates Anthony's unnecessarily elaborate "escape" (he was free to leave at any time) from a mental institution.

Humorous as it is, however, Dignan's authorship is dangerously self-absorbed, jealous, and immature. Owen Wilson, commenting on the character he plays and helped create, suggests that:

Dignan is kind of a little kid. I don't think he does a lot of soul-searching or is very introspective. He is an instinctive person and constantly reacts to things. He is like a twelve-year-old; his attention span isn't very long, so he can become side-tracked or diverted very easily. He is very tightly wound and gets tremendously enthusiastic about an idea. He likes to have everybody marching along towards this goal he's set.<sup>24</sup>

Conforming to Kael's critique of the auteur theorists, a critique that was always aimed indirectly at the auteurs themselves, Dignan's authorial logic is guided by a desire to "justify staying inside the small range of experience of (his) boyhood and adolescence—that period when masculinity looked so great and important."<sup>25</sup> Dissatisfied with the course of his "actual" life, Dignan's fictive journey is a regression back to a moment when the future still held mystery and possibility; a moment, we suspect, when the family unit was still cohesive enough to contain and direct him. This logic helps explain his highly eccentric burgling choices as well as his plan to create an alternate family for all involved with Mr. Henry (James Caan)—Lawn Wrangler boss by day, petty though imposing, and (as Kael would have it) *greatly masculine* criminal by night—acting as criminal patriarch. Dignan's worship of Mr. Henry, himself a sort of overgrown child, mirrors in every way the blind and problematically patrilinear idolatry Kael fears lies at the base of the auteur policy as it was practiced by Sarris and Truffaut.

After the "escape," Dignan shares with Anthony his meticulously organized notes outlining his seventy-five-year plan, which are written in Crayola markers and exhibit an intellect that is delightfully and seductively juvenile at base. Dignan's plan for the next three quarters of a century attends to practice jobs, goals, professional ambitions, relationships, and economic concerns, and is presented in a series of rapid, slightly disorienting cuts. The cuts themselves are expressive of Dignan's point of view, which tends to remain just at the surface.<sup>26</sup> His is the work of the clinical micromanager, busily organizing the little details as the larger and uncontrollable details (like family) disintegrate around him. This microscopic attention to detail at the expense of the bigger picture, this trees-at-the-cost-of-the-forest logic also governs, as we shall see, Anderson's own developing set of directorial principals.

Shortly after the plan is revealed, Dignan and Anthony embark on their first criminal act. The freneticism of this rapidly cut scene is countered by the absurdity of what draws the perpetrators' attention: a coin collection, a graduation tassel, an alarm clock. Even without the explanation that this is Anthony's own home, their burgling choices appear aimless, childlike. They snatch at bits and pieces of their own youth. This idea is punctuated by Anthony's final moment in the house. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Anthony's face as he gazes slightly below the lens at a neat arrangement of toy soldiers, a fragment of his own childhood. His hand enters the frame to reposition a soldier that is misarranged, turning it to face forward with the rest of the group. The moment resonates through the remainder of the film (and through Anderson's career thus far) as it suggests not only an attempt to reclaim his missing youth but a desire to reposition his own perspective and to find order, however *misdirected*, and community in his life.

A degree of charming immaturity and his friends' desire to be *directed*, then, seems to excuse Dignan's self-absorbed megalomania, his self-imposed centrality in their lives. This figuration of Dignan as "author" is invited, it seems, both by the highly cinematic details of his plan to, under the supposed guidance of Mr. Henry,



rob Hinkley Cold Storage (which includes dynamite, hang gliders, pole vaulting, laughing gas, a set of yellow jumpsuits, and a litany of other impossibly boyish details) and by the trio's first highly self-conscious robbery of, of all places, a university bookstore. Although it would be handled more directly in his subsequent films, the collision here of the cinematic and the literary, this nod to the redemptive powers of creative fantasy and invention and the importance of narrative subtly guides *Bottle Rocket*.

Failed though the final robbery is (Mr. Henry sets the job up only to keep the three boys occupied while he burgles Bob's house), the film ends with a set of images and ideas that the next three films will build upon, images and ideas that speak directly to Anderson's authorial logic. Moments after proclaiming "they'll never catch me 'cause I'm fuckin' innocent," Dignan is caught. The film ends with Dignan, joined by his visiting friends, in prison, a location that defies Dignan's hyper-mobile and collective notions. This film about speed and community ends with the threat of stasis and separation, but not without a fight. As he walks toward his cell, separated from his friends by a fence, Dignan frantically authors his complex, absurdly cinematic escape narrative, catching his friends off guard but extracting from them (and, most likely, the audience) a final gesture of compliance. Satisfied, Dignan makes his way to his cell, and Anderson slows the film down to about half-speed, a formal mechanism that elongates the moment (in a manner that descends from the famous freeze-frame on Antoine Doinel's face at the end of *The 400 Blows*) and, more critically, allows the boys to maintain their gaze upon one another. Cinematic form, authorial control from outside of the narrative, intervenes here not to render Dignan's misdirected acts triumphant, but to remind the viewer of their roots, to remind the viewer that Dignan's behavior stems not from a desire to achieve personal glory, but from a humbler, much sadder, and ultimately admissible desire to be a part (albeit the central part) of *something*. This idea, which runs through the center of Anderson's films, also spills over into the young director's public image.

"The world needs dreamers," Mr. Henry tells Bob's brother Futureman (Andrew Wilson), publicly shaming him for his maltreatment of the boys. And, in fact, dreams form the center of Anderson's second feature, *Rushmore*, feeding the plays that Max (Jason Schwartzman) produces at Rushmore Academy, and serving to alter his delicate self-perception. A literal author, Max, like Dignan, seeks control, appears reckless, and is often dangerously self-absorbed. And, as in the previous film, a bit of formal manipulation gives some indication as to Max's image of himself.

A montage presents a series of staged tableaux of Max's various extracurricular activities, often with Max occupying center frame. The whimsical presentation of these activities indicates Max's winning and heroic view of himself. More than narcissistic, however, Max's self-perception is colored by a desire, similar to Dignan's, to present and preserve himself in a certain light; the fact that the montage begins on an opening yearbook—Max is, not surprisingly,

editor-in-chief—suggests the memorializing effects of Max’s imagination. The canniness of the images—their stillness, their posed rigidity—is juxtaposed with the soundtrack, the anthemic “Making Time” performed by Creation, an occasional action shot (similarly staged), and by an editing pace that lends to their stillness a sense of relentless motion. This is Max’s life as he *wishes* to see it: a rapidly moving series of small but monumental triumphs. In their portrait-like composition, they might also be read as imaginary surrogates for the more traditional (and for Max, painfully incomplete) family portrait; his mother, we learn later in the film, passed away when he was very young.

Max’s souped-up vision of the world guides the film, which begins with his fantasy of solving the world’s hardest math problem; is punctuated by his post-play, post-fist-in-the-nose bow before an audience he imagines howling and cheering with delight at his masterful direction; and ends somewhat more democratically with Max sharing his customized perceptual abilities with the people in his life who need it most: Mr. Blume (Bill Murray) and Ms. Cross (Olivia Williams). These adults, haunted by their own domestic tragedies, will learn from Max how to see differently and, in the process, Max will learn that, contrary to his dangerous self-perception, he is not alone.

When Blume asks Max to come work for him, adding “I could use someone like you,” his invitation, which Max declines along with his invitation to his twins’ birthday party, points to a deeper psychological need to be near someone like Max who has not yet lost the innocence of youth, as he and his own jaded sons have. The birthday party itself is evidence of Blume’s desperate self-perception. Like Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* (1967), with its extended poolside coming-of-age metaphors, Anderson treats the space iconically.<sup>27</sup> Here it symbolizes Blume’s desire to escape his painful routine and to return to a childlike state. As happy birthday partiers watch in puzzlement, Blume tosses golf balls into the pool, chucking one at a young, Speedo-clad child who swipes a bit of food from him. The details of the scene are critical: Anderson’s camera draws uncomfortably close to Blume’s face, spying his anguish as his wife flirtatiously feeds her young male friend cake across the pool from him. There is a cutaway to a shot of the Blume family portrait: Blume, cigarette dangling from his lips, looking perpetually and clinically distraught. The curtains behind the portrait would suggest that this is Blume’s self-image, one diametrically opposed to Max’s fantastic and optimistic vision of himself. His family grins happily behind him, smirking at his defeat. Blume’s post-cannonball fetal crouch at the bottom of the pool’s murky waters, more than anything, underlines his desperate desire to regress.

Ms. Cross is also afflicted. Unable to move beyond the passing of her husband, she is rendered socially immobile. And, in spite of its stark inappropriateness, it is Max’s critique of her that forces her to reevaluate her situation, her place in the universe. Though they recognize and are irritated by Max’s delusions, both of these characters are also drawn to him and his unique perspective. Max, as Kael would have it, is “unable to relinquish (his) schoolboy notions of human

experience”—is, in fact, unable to leave the school itself until he is forcibly removed from it. These schoolboy notions, however, also carry with them a healing effect. Max is treated with delicate humor in the film as he attempts indelicately to insinuate himself into the lives of Mr. Blume and Ms. Cross, but Anderson is also careful to illustrate the dangers of Max's self-absorption, the dangers, in other words, of remaining deluded by the fantasy of the solitary genius.

A deftly placed auteurist warning foregrounds this danger. After Blume unwisely orders Max a whiskey and soda, Max's pain and jealousy begin to surface. "I wrote a hit play," he drunkenly repeats, as he confesses his love for Ms. Cross. Max's vision is here disrupted, his youthful perspective at risk, and he tries desperately to regain his center, to affirm his position within the ad-hoc family he has assembled. Max's loss of equilibrium, however, serves as a catalyst for Ms. Cross and Blume to find their own (they will fall in love with each other), but not without a requisite regression for both Max and Blume into youthful aggression. Max, who bears some resemblance to Anderson creatively, sartorially, maybe even physically, is overtaken here by his own self-absorption and needs to reconsider the significance of his authorship. In the language of child-rearing, Max needs to learn to share and to play well with others.

Art and artifice, Max's chief skills, will serve both as his own and his friends' salvation. Max's epic Vietnam play, *Heaven and Hell*, his most ambitious project, one he could not produce at Rushmore, serves as the backdrop for his real theater: the righting of wrongs for which he is responsible. His audience becomes his real cast of characters, an idea supported by Blume's conversation with Ms. Cross at intermission. Ms. Cross asks what Blume thinks of Max's latest opus, and he responds with a thumb in the air, remarking that they hope that it has a happy ending, clearly aware that the opus in question involves them. Max's authorship, in other words, has moved beyond the veneer of plagiarism and pyrotechnics and has affected the formation of real communities. The celebration after the play—the "Heaven and Hell Cotillion," as it is dubbed—is Max's real communal work, and Anderson slows the images down as the film draws to its conclusion; once again elongating the moment, the camera tracks slowly back, framing this newly discovered extended family and creating of the group a varied and redemptive version of the family portrait.

Anderson's films are all about family structure, its absence, its dissolution, its rebirth, and, above all, its eccentricity. The deeply ironic Blume family portrait, which appears at key moments in the film, is a reminder of that character's domestic disharmony, his need, quite literally, to *regroup*. This idea of the family portrait arises in *The Royal Tenenbaums* as well. Here, however, it becomes a principal organizational motif and one closely tied to the director's notions regarding authorship.

After a lengthy prologue introducing the Tenenbaum family, their complex marital history, their individual eccentricities, and Eli Cash's (here played by James Fitzgerald and later by Owen Wilson) fascination with them, a card designed to



Figure 1. The absence of the literal family unit causes the boys in Wes Anderson's *Bottle Rocket* (Columbia, 1996) to create their own. In Dignan's complex, childlike vision he is at the center, both of this ad-hoc familial community—here gathered around that bygone symbol of familial health, the dinner table—and the frame.

look like a page from a book appears briefly to dedicate the film to Anderson's own family. After this dedication, the film presents its conceptual problem, which is also familial. Introducing his cast of characters one at a time—twenty-two years later, as the card above informs us—Anderson allows *mise-en-scène* to reflect his characters' shared psychoses. Each character is introduced as an adult, preening in front of a mirror (which is replaced to great effect by the camera itself allowing for a degree of comic eye contact), preparing for some unknown event in a location removed from the others. Isolation from each other and from their own feelings is what each member of the Tenenbaum family must struggle against. At the end of this introduction, Richie Tenenbaum (played here by Luke Wilson and by Amedeo Turturro as a child), the former tennis star of the family who lost it all because of his love for his adopted sister, Margot (played by Irene Gorovaia as a child and Gwyneth Paltrow as an adult), snaps a picture of his image, as if to reinforce that character's awareness that a change of perspective is what he and his family require. This change will come and, as this bit of foreshadowing indicates, Richie's role in it will be an active one.

More a series of elaborate vignettes than a cohesive narrative, *The Royal Tenenbaums* feels fractured and dislocated. From the enforced separation of his "Cast of Characters" until the film reaches something of a resolution, image after



Figs. 2 and 3. Family portrait and self-portrait. In *Rushmore* (Touchstone, 1998), Blume and Max, until they learn from each other, operate under the influence of inappropriate, damaging images. The Blume family portrait foregrounds its patriarch's eccentricity and despair. Max's self-image is equally deficient as it perpetuates that character's self-imposed isolation and overly conspicuous difference.

image reinforces both the idea and the problem of the fragmented family unit. The failure of this family of creators is its inability to collaborate. It is a family composed of singular *auteurs* busily and joylessly plugging away at their creations until they and the family they once belonged to disintegrate.

The prime mover in this process of disintegration, it seems, was Royal himself. Royal insinuates his way back into the Tenenbaum household, however, by authoring a fiction. He pretends to be ill—with stomach cancer, no less—and is alarmed at the state in which he finds his family. Of particular concern to him are his grandchildren, Ari (Grant Rosenmeyer) and Uzi (Jonah Meyerson), who, under the influence of their paranoid and recently widowed father, Chas (Ben Stiller), have grown up too quickly, having been forced to forsake a significant chunk of their childhood. Half-sensing the fact that he did something similar to his own children, Royal seeks to reverse the process in his grandchildren. Although they are literal children, Ari and Uzi, like Anthony and Bob, like Blume and Ms. Cross, must learn to perceive and act like children.

Royal's delayed relationship with the boys begins on the roof of the 375th Street Y, a location marked by a cut to a sign rendered in what, as critic Jonathan Romney has noted, has become Anderson's font.<sup>28</sup> In the midst of one of the boys' daily exercise routines, the camera, assuming Royal's point of view, rapidly zooms in on Ari and Uzi, metaphorically suggesting the need for proximity that defines this and many of the film's fractured relationships. Distraught at the boys' rigidity, Royal resolves to, as he tells a heartily disapproving Etheline, "brew some recklessness in them." One of the film's most inspired montage sequences, set to Paul Simon's "Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard," is Royal's attempt to do just that. The boys and their geriatric accomplice engage in a variety of seemingly prohibited juvenile behaviors: running around and into the pool, jaywalking, horseback



Figure 4. Slow motion and a perfectly placed camera allow Anderson, at the end of *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Touchstone, 2001), to create a lasting facsimile of his title family's previously fractured family portrait.

riding, go-carting (the images here playfully recalling Hackman's role in William Friedkin's 1971 film *The French Connection*), water-balloon chucking, shoplifting, trash-truck surfing, and betting on dogfights.<sup>29</sup>

Though the struggle is certainly prolonged in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, it is yet another film in which abandoned characters attempt to compensate through creation: Eli (Owen Wilson) is a hack writer of Western adventures; Margot, the Tenenbaum's adopted daughter, writes (or used to write) plays; Raleigh (Bill Murray), her husband, writes about neurological disorders; Etheline (Angelica Huston) has written about her family of geniuses; Chas's business appears nonexistent, in fact, he seems to feign *busyness*, and this could well be his "invention." Most interesting, however, seems to be Richie (Luke Wilson). Richie, the once-admired-now-fallen tennis star, was once a portrait artist, though as the voice-over narration (spoken by Alec Baldwin) indicates, he "failed to develop." His art—distinctly Crayola and actually produced by Wes Anderson's brother Eric—fills the walls of the Tenenbaum household. Significantly, the art itself is focused on the family: a juvenile and highly fictionalized fantasy of the Tenenbaum's existence *together*; a pathetically cartoonish variation on another fractured family portrait.

At the end of the film, the family is not only reunited, it is extended somewhat to include Eli Cash (who always wanted to be a Tenenbaum), Henry Sherman (now married to Etheline after Royal, in a rare act of generosity, grants her a divorce; played by Danny Glover), Dusty (the elevator operator at The Lindbergh Palace Hotel where Royal had lived; played by Seymour Cassel), Raleigh St. Clair (who, after his foreseeable split with Margot, who is herself now united with her stepbrother Richie, is paired with his patient, Dudley; played by Stephen Lea Sheppard), and Pagoda (a fixture at the Tenenbaum home; played by Kumar Pallana). The group is now defined by its togetherness rather than its



Figure 5. Zissou and his “pack of strays” form a submerged family portrait in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (Touchstone, 2004).

isolation. Royal's own fictionalizing tendencies, which have not always served him or his clan positively, here unites his family. His headstone reads: “ROYAL O'REILLY TENENBAUM / 1932–2001 / DIED TRAGICALLY RESCUING HIS FAMILY FROM THE WRECKAGE OF A / DESTROYED SINKING BATTLESHIP.” Barely audible but steadily rising on the soundtrack is the harp-sichord introduction to Van Morrison's appropriately named tune, “Everyone.”<sup>30</sup> As the music swells, the camera assumes a position just outside the gate of the family plot. Like his characters, Anderson once again intervenes, applying his own cinematic brand of artifice to slow the image down and transform a potentially melancholic image into a triumphant and unified one whose impact extends well past the cut from the closing gate to the credits.

*The Life Aquatic* is similarly concerned with notions of authorship and artifice.<sup>31</sup> Steve Zissou (Bill Murray) and the crew of the *Belafonte* are, ostensibly at least, oceanographers. More importantly, however, they are filmmakers and storytellers; their ship, which is introduced to viewers in an elaborate and breathtaking cross section, is their mobile studio. The curious and highly self-conscious fact that the film itself is shot largely at Italy's Cinecittà studios, where Fellini's *8 1/2* was shot and near Godard's locations for *Contempt*, plays up the film's interest in “the process” and its occasionally numbing effects. This is a film, in other words, about the game of cinematic authorship, the sleight of hand involved, and the desperation it leaves in its wake—themes explored less exhaustively and in literary form in the character of Eli Cash in *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

In the heavy branding of their image, Team Zissou has become a product, a brand-name emblazoned not just on their decrepit ship or their heavily mediated film products, but on their gear, their correspondence stock, their action figures, and even a pinball machine. They are a parody of the stock our culture takes in the author's name and the phenomenon of celebrity. After the Italian premiere of his

latest film, an elderly fan asks Zissou for his autograph. After producing a seemingly endless supply of lobby cards for the auteur to sign, however, he is told to go home and forge the rest. More than a quest for the elusive (perhaps nonexistent?) beast that killed Zissou's partner, Anderson's film is about the search for the (also perhaps nonexistent) *author himself*—an attempt to dig away the layers of artifice to “reveal” some knowable entity, an attempt to find the significance behind the signature. This desire fuels Ned Plimpton's (Owen Wilson) attempt to establish a relationship with this man who might actually be his father; it motivates Jane Winslett-Richardson's (Cate Blanchett) journalistic endeavors for *Oceanographic Explorer*; and it is the real “Deep Search” Zissou himself has unwittingly embarked upon.

Gesturing in the direction of the collective that effectively gave birth to the auteur theory, Anderson has Jane collect “data” on Zissou and company using a tape recorder of only slightly newer vintage than the Grundig portable magnetic tape recorder, the machine the young *Hitchcocko-Hawksiens* used in the 1950s and 1960s to record their interviews. The publication of interviews, in fact, was a small revolution for the *Caheirs du Cinema* group, illustrating the remarkable, often blind faith many in that group had in the “word” of the author. This faith, as I have indicated, has not diminished and, in fact, has increased exponentially in recent years. Jane's interview with Zissou, exposing as it does an author of questionable *authority*, forms an interesting segue into the final section of this essay, which explores Anderson's Criterion DVD packages that themselves feature interviews that both nurture and question the seriousness of cinematic authorship, a crafty sort of ambivalence that allows the filmmaker to have his cake and eat it, to laugh at and protect his unique position.

Jane, who is intrigued by but skeptical of the entire Zissou phenomenon even as that phenomenon is entering the winter of its years, begins with a question that immediately deflates the already half-deflated interviewee. She asks: “Don't you think the public reception of your work has significantly altered in the last five years?” To which Zissou replies, “That's your first question? I thought this was supposed to be a puff piece.” Unscripted and unrehearsed, the interview situation exposes the author, leaves him vulnerable, and cracks the veneer of his already compromised mythology. Ignoring Zissou's request that they begin with “some stock dialogue...you know...Favorite color: blue...Favorite food: sardines,” Jane keeps drilling, asking him his opinion of his latest film. Like a threatened child, he responds by returning the question and her honesty wounds him as she suggests that “aspects of it seemed slightly fake.” Zissou's response is as cinematic as it is idiotic. He pulls a pistol from his leg holster, aims at his interviewer, and asks if it seems fake.

Commenting on the role interviews play in auteurist criticism, Andrew Sarris in “The Auteur Theory Revisited,” argues that:

The interview is an autonomous art form like any other, and it follows that directors who give good interviews do not necessarily make good movies, and directors who



give bad interviews do not necessarily make bad movies. I am, if anything, anti-interview in that I believe that a director's formal utterances (his films) tell us more about his artistic personality than do his informal utterances (his conversations).<sup>32</sup>

The dilemma within *The Life Aquatic* is the proximity between the two, the fuzzy line separating Zissou's formal and informal utterances, which are hyperbolic, melodramatic, and cinematic. To some degree, as shall be examined, this inseparability also characterizes Anderson's relationship to his fictional products.

If all of Anderson's films are about learned perceptual change, Zissou's learning curve is an unusually steep one and one that results in the loss of human life. The film's penultimate scene, however, indicates Zissou's newfound realization that the motley group he has assembled, his "pack of strays" as he calls them, is a needful thing—an idea hinted at, as well, in Ned's new logo design, which keeps the author (represented by the large "Z") central, though surrounded by critical alphabetic satellites. Zissou, in other words, is not alone, a fact he has forgotten over the years. The scene assembles the group together, sans the deceased Ned, within the ridiculous confines of Team Zissou's miniature submarine, *Deep Search*. Peering together collectively in a posture that formed the advertising for the film, the collective is foregrounded, though so is Zissou's visionary effect on the collective's imagination. A series of one-shots followed by their fantastic subjective views establishes the role Zissou's brand of fiction will play in each character's life.

There is a perfect circularity to the film's narrative trajectory, which is also built upon the idea of shared perception. Early in the film, after the lukewarm reception of Zissou's latest film, Klaus Daimler's (Willem Defoe) lederhosen-clad nephew Werner (Leonardo DiCaprio), an uncritical (and thus ideal) admirer of Zissou's, wants to meet him and offer him a gift. The gift itself, while glossed within the narrative, is critically important. In an inelegantly knotted cellophane bag filled with water wiggles what Zissou calls "a crayon pony-fish...interesting specimen." Beautifully and ridiculously artificial, the "animal's" natural habitat is clearly within the child's (or the childlike) imagination. Zissou casually carries the gift with him, transferring it to a wine glass when the bag springs a leak, unaware of the fact that, in truth, this creature and the imaginative vision that conjured it up has been *his* gift to Werner. Zissou's moment of realization, at film's end, also involves an exchange with the young boy. As part two of his film concludes, Zissou smokes on the candlelit steps leading to the venue. He is soon joined by Werner, and the two exchange nautical greetings: "ho," they say to each other. Zissou then reaches deep into his pocket, fishing out a Team Zissou ring, which he hands to young Werner, who immediately places it on his finger. The purpose of Zissou's authorship, the significance behind the signature, has been salvaged.

There is in Anderson's collection of fictional authors a set of contradictions that are difficult to reconcile. Dignan, Max, Royal, and Zissou are problematic auteurs: self-centered, narcissistic, and at times pathological. Anderson's narratives, however, converge to redeem these characters around a pair of changed

perceptions. His authors must learn to acknowledge their “readers,” and their “readers” must learn to read differently. While his films critique the author function spun out of control, then, they ultimately redeem the author himself and his effect on the collective imagination. This sympathetic sleight of hand is detectable, also, in Anderson’s extracinematic endeavors, his supplements, and his self-representation.

### **Material Concerns: Signatures, Name Brands, Art, and Commerce.**

Anderson’s foray into self-representation begins about the time of his sophomore feature and is characteristically canny. Alongside a *New York Times* feature on Anderson called “An Original at Ease in the Studio System” by Laura Winters (a “puff piece” rather like the one Zissou hopes for in *The Life Aquatic*) appeared Anderson’s self-authored piece, “My Private Screening with Pauline Kael” (which later formed the introduction to the Faber and Faber publication of the screenplay for *Rushmore*).<sup>33</sup> The piece perfectly encapsulates the delicate authorial game Anderson plays, a game that casts the director himself as the *not-too-authoritative* author. The brief story begins with an introductory blurb explaining Anderson’s lifelong admiration of Kael and his desire to “track her down” at her home in the Berkshire Mountains to show her his new film. Though significantly less developed, Anderson’s interest in Kael, which is also referenced in the audio commentary on the Criterion Edition of *The Life Aquatic*, is not unlike Truffaut’s relationship with André Bazin.<sup>34</sup> Both filmmakers elaborate on the “surrogate parentage” their critic has given them (though it is more literal in Truffaut’s case), and both select for their surrogate critics those who were notoriously skeptical of the auteurist position.

Recognizing the charm of defeat in the face of embarrassing persistence, a charm his films capitalize on, Anderson sets himself up for a highly sympathetic and brilliantly calculated blow, a blow that, combined with similar moves, contributes to the filmmaker’s intriguing self-image. Though her “position” certainly shifted between 1963 and 1999, and though she was always, even at the time of the “attacks,” interested in filmmakers even if she was concerned about the God-like status Sarris hoped to elevate them to, showing *Rushmore* to the critic who wrote “Circles and Squares” seems risky at best. Several weeks after an awkward phone exchange wherein Anderson narrates his plan to Kael, he makes his way to her home. Their brief introductory remarks contain the core elements of Anderson’s carefully constructed authorial persona. After knocking on her screen door, Kael looks out:

“My God, you’re just a kid,” she said....

“It’s very nice to meet you. How are you?”

“Old,” she said.

She was a few inches under 5 feet tall, and stood shakily with a metal cane that had four legs at the base. We both had on New Balance sneakers.<sup>35</sup>

The centrality of age to Anderson's narration of this encounter calls to mind the critical importance of the topic both to the auteurist debates of the 1960s, within which Kael played a decisive role, and to Anderson's cinematic narratives themselves, which consistently find the problematic value in the youthful perspective. Kael, in spite of her footwear choices that run similar to Anderson's, is puzzled by Anderson and his film. She suggests that he change his name, arguing that "Wes Anderson is a terrible name for a movie director" and says after the screening, "I don't know what you've got here... Did the People who gave you the money read the script?" Anderson admits that he

...was a little disappointed by Ms. Kael's reaction to the movie. I started reading her *New Yorker* reviews in my school library when I was in 10th grade, and her books were always my guide for finding the right movies to watch and learning about filmmakers. I'd gone to great lengths to arrive at this moment. "I genuinely don't know what to make of this movie," she said, and I felt she meant it.<sup>36</sup>

Anderson's tactic, as this brief exchange indicates, relies on a critical foregrounding of what in the 1960s was called "the generation gap," a gap that runs through the center of his films as well. Anderson's treatment of the gap, however, is unusual, as it tries desperately to find the common ground, which is here reduced, crushingly, to a pair of sneakers.<sup>37</sup> Kael's "inability" to see what Anderson had, within the context of Anderson's age-focused films, is rendered a badge of honor, a triumph for the generous author, and a sad state of affairs for the auteur-like critic who is left unsteadily signing a book for Anderson: "For Wes Anderson, With affection and a few queries. Pauline Kael."<sup>38</sup>

Kael's inscription and, in fact, Anderson's generalized "literary" obsessions throughout—his 10th grade journeys to the library, his desire to leave Kael's home with a stack of first editions—indicate the centrality of the author within his personal world view, a power contained in part within the authorial signature. Corrigan, writing about the role the signature played in post-Vietnam notions of authorship, suggests that:

Auteurism offered not just new audiences, retrieved from the modernist art communities, but new cultural sanctions to old audiences, alienated and awash in an indistinguishable spate of media images. Since 1970 especially, the auteurist marketing of movies whose titles often proclaim the filmmaker's name, such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *1900* (1976), David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), or Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980), aim to guarantee a relationship between audience and movie whereby an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision whose contextual meanings are already determined, the way a movie is seen and received.<sup>39</sup>

Corrigan's ideas take on renewed significance in the cinema of Wes Anderson, who is himself a brand, one continually reflecting on the special problems raised by branding. This situation is evidenced most clearly in the heavy branding of the Zissou name in *The Life Aquatic*, a film whose complete title democratically varies the more possessive 1970s formulation: *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*.

Indeed, the titular inclusion of the fictional auteur emerges as a highly conscious *submerging* of the factual author, a submersion the DVD “corrects.”

Some popular and scholarly attention has already been paid to Anderson’s more “literary” approach to filmmaking; the *Royal Tenenbaums* DVD, significantly, is packaged to look like a well-worn book. Olsen relishes the fact that Anderson, a once “self-styled literary-type” is, in interviews, as likely to make literary references as cinematic ones.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, along with several of his contemporaries, Anderson makes films focused on the creative process and on writing in particular, an interest that would seem to align Anderson’s films with, for example, Todd Solondz’s *Storytelling* (2002), Spike Jonze’s *Adaptation* (2003), and Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003). The list of similarly themed American films is rather immense, actually, and mirrors our previous auteur age’s obsession with films about the *cinematic* process, a fascination that DVD technology has nurtured in the contemporary moment. In fact, the self-conscious, authorial overload of contemporary American cinema is often precisely what critics react against.

In his essay “The Unauthorized Auteur Today,” Dudley Andrew, citing the parallel Eric Rohmer has drawn between film viewing and reading books in a library, argues that “The mention of literature calls to mind a cinema that is viewed in private, meditatively, one that is reflected upon and discussed and from which ideas may be taken, in short a cinema to be read rather than consumed.”<sup>41</sup> Andrew’s referencing of Rohmer and his essay’s historical investment in the *Cahiers* group reminds us of the material structure that itself gave rise to the *politique* as it came to be known, Henri Langlois’s Cinematheque Française. In the twenty-first century our homes have been transformed into personal cinematheques, perhaps no more or less idiosyncratically organized than Langlois’s. However, in their removal from the public sphere, these personal collections are a testament to the notion of the spectator’s role in the creation and, in some ways, the study of auteurs.

DVD technology is, in fact, largely responsible for the inauguration of a new age of the cinematic author, returning like all repressed things do, with new vigor and omnipotence. The capacity of those shiny little discs has created a need for material and, more often than not, that need is filled by alternate versions, director’s cuts, director’s commentary, interviews, and the like. Those of us who teach film are perpetually confronted with our students’ unrepentant—if historically unaware—auteurism, fostered largely by the culture of DVD technology and the world of “behind the scenes access.” They often have unparalleled faith in the *authority* of their directors and will occasionally stymie critical analysis with comments like: “but on the DVD commentary track, the director said...”

The extensive Criterion catalogue has been at the forefront of this new auteurist age, and Anderson is part of its ostensibly discerning pantheon. Anderson’s Criterion Editions are “loaded.” They contain tome-like and lionizing essays. Both *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Life Aquatic* contain documentaries by Albert Maysles on Anderson and company at work. They always include

a variety of interviews and are full of “extras,” as they have been designated by the menus. They are, in other words, appealingly packaged books to be judged, purchased, and coveted on the basis of their covers.

Anderson, as his characters must, has learned to share—the more traditionally “authoritative” elements of these DVD packages feature Anderson’s brother’s whimsical, overwhelmingly detailed drawings—and he has participated in a method of self-representation that makes his *dependence* on others a proud thing, the defining feature of his particular brand of authorship. In other words, the reborn auteur as exemplified by Anderson *appears* more prominent than ever; but his centrality—one might say his celebrity, his authority—remains *in spite* of attempts to document the many collaborative layers of the filmmaking enterprise. Where the auteur of Sarris’s era may have been the lone figure making his (he was almost always a he) films despite the system, the auteur in the DVD era can no longer sustain this illusion. With images of overpopulated sets filled with cast and crew, interviews with and commentary by cinematographers, costumers, set designers, and the like, Anderson’s strategy to foreground the collective has, interestingly, buoyed his reputation as auteur. Returning to Adrian Martin, with whom this essay begins, Anderson appears to offer something new.

In the age of the new Auteur, Anderson has used its primary weapon to reflect back less upon the mythic and mythically elusive author himself (Anderson’s acknowledged interest in J.D. Salinger is, in this fashion, also an ironic interest) and has opted, rather, to reflect upon the author’s tenuous fit within a larger community, a community that includes, in fact requires, the viewer him/herself. This post-Barthesian notion of the author casts Barthes himself as something of a prophet in his suggestion that texts are authored, finally, by the reader.<sup>42</sup> Like the European and American films that formed his cinematic grammar, Anderson ultimately appears to be struggling with the subject of loneliness. The viewer of Anderson’s at times quite gentle films about disaffection, isolation, and alienation, however, is by virtue of his/her viewing and, more critically, participation in the post-theatrical spectatorial and textual acts surrounding each film, an integral part of Anderson’s whimsically designed, communal, textual web. Anderson’s collaborative mode of production includes and is utterly reliant upon the viewer/collector.

Like many of Criterion’s auteurist products, Anderson’s come bearing their author’s signature, albeit miniature and lowercased. Anthony Lane, in his review of *The Life Aquatic* for the *New Yorker*, suggests that “it is impossible to imagine an Anderson project with a single, refulgent name gleaming above the title. His movies appear to be modeled on theme parties, with as many performers as possible invited along.”<sup>43</sup> Overlooking the film’s complexly ironic full title, Lane’s comment speaks only to the film’s theatrical life, and even the logic behind Lane’s statement is opaque at best. Critically, however, the film’s life in the home theatre is dependent upon the name above the title and upon the reliability of collectors for whom Anderson’s films and, most likely, his soundtracks are must-haves,

collectors for whom the signature signifies an aesthetic they recognize as concrete even as that aesthetic itself spins self-consciously into the realm of parodic eclecticism. In one of the more compelling if infrequently cited passages of Kael's 1963 article, she attacked precisely this name-brand logic:

A few years ago, a friend who reviewed Jean Renoir's University of California production of his play *Carola*, hailed it as "a work of genius." When I asked my friend how he could so describe this very unfortunate play, he said, "why of course, it's a work of genius. Renoir's a genius, so anything he does is a work of genius." This could almost be a capsule version of the *auteur* theory (just substitute *Hatari!* for *Carola*) and in this *reductio ad absurdum*, viewing a work is superfluous, as the judgment is a *priori*. It's like buying clothes by the label: this is Dior, so it's good. (This is not so far from the way the *auteur* critics work either).<sup>44</sup>

One is here reminded, of course, of the branding overload in *The Life Aquatic*. Aware of the allure of postdigital notions of authorship and its creation of a generation of film-mad, DVD-coveting cinephiles, Anderson both feeds those tendencies in his book-like and highly aestheticized DVD packages and warns against them in his narratives of similarly exclusive and eccentric characters who, in the end, must emerge from their caves and must be resocialized. He also warns against this tendency in the extracinematic material itself.

After subjecting himself, like so many contemporary auteurs do, to appearing on the Charlie Rose show and including that episode on the Criterion Edition of *Rushmore*, Anderson, I suspect, began to worry about his image, about what might be perceived as his pretension. At the conclusion of the audio commentary for *The Life Aquatic*, in fact, Anderson and Baumbach articulate their hope that they do not sound "phony or pretentious," admitting that they spend a good portion of their time talking about themselves; indeed, this is the very nature of DVD commentary. Since the release of *Rushmore*, perhaps to counter this fear, the Criterion Editions of Anderson's films have come packaged with craftily produced *fake* television interviews, a move that creates an at least public spectacle of Anderson's own authorial skepticism. It is also, however, perhaps the most deeply authorial move he might make. As Zissou reminds us, interviews can go awry in part because they are controlled by *another* author. Anderson, in what appears to be a whimsical and comedic gesture, an extension of the childlike aesthetic that governs his cinematic heroes, does not pull a gun but controls the situation in a manner more familiar to him and his collaborators (audience included) with a pen, a camera, and a crew.<sup>45</sup> Anderson's interviews, in other words, are equally signed and authored.

Dudley Andrew, commenting on the role of the authorial signature, employs a series of strangely suited aquatic metaphors: "The signature moors the film image to a submerged reef of values by means of a slender line drawn by camera or pen. It is visible in the credits of films, in the literal appearance in the midst of their films of auteurs like Hitchcock, and after him of Truffaut, Godard, and Rohmer."<sup>46</sup> In Anderson, we find that the values themselves are not so deeply submerged as we might expect or as Anderson himself might wish. The slender line

repeatedly leads to an *apparently* self-effacing author whose value, whose heroism, whose celebrity, lies in his public displays of dependence.

**Post-Script: Advertisements for Themselves.** Anderson is only one of a growing number of contemporary American directors active in the world of advertising, though many of his contemporaries are loathe to admit the fact, much less appear in their own advertisements. Doing commercial work, it would seem, hardly enhances one's auteur status.<sup>47</sup> The American Express "My Life, My Card" campaign is an exception to this rule as it hinges on a veneer of *shamelessness*. Starring a range of well-known American personalities, three of the spots feature filmmakers sending themselves and their own products up while pitching another: Martin Scorsese, the perfectionist, picks up and critiques processed photos from a drugstore; M. Night Shyamalan, the dreamer, attempts to dine at a restaurant where strange things happen; and, equally characteristically, Wes Anderson, the director, addresses the camera on the set of a mock Wes Anderson film, surrounded by the legions of individuals—his supporting cast, we might say—who make a Wes Anderson film a *Wes Anderson film*.

A brief consideration of Anderson's American Express spot is in some ways a fitting coda to this essay's attempts to unravel the intricacies of contemporary authorship. Itself aping the barely controlled collective chaos at the center of Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973) (the spot even features a character named François), Anderson's commercial, like Truffaut's film before it, is "about" cinematic authorship and the ingredients—equal parts sleight-of-hand and chance—that maintain its illusionary presence. Directorial authority is mocked, perhaps, but a romantic notion of the author is maintained precisely because of this gently humorous questioning. Anderson traipses through a mock-up composite of his own cinematic universes in a fashion as determined, as laughably authoritative ("can I get my snack?"), as self-delusional ("you're eating it") as his characters. Stylistically, Anderson's commercial is quite remarkable. A fluid and fairly intricate tracking shot glides through a typically cluttered Andersonian *mise-en-scène*. Also gliding through this landscape, however, is the filmmaker himself, introduced via the recognizable Anderson font as "Wes Anderson, Director."

Like the semicultish but relatively short-lived electronic frenzy to recreate and sell the Team Zissou Adidas sneaker, the clip has taken on a life of its own on the Internet, becoming another potentially coveted and collectible Anderson product, a part of the Anderson fan *lifestyle*, characterized by the director's simultaneous self-deprecation and self-aggrandizement. Critical for our purposes here is, indeed, the centrality of Anderson himself within the Andersonian *mise-en-scène*. Directed by Anderson or not (one suspects that it is, though advertisements are not trailed by credits), the spot, claiming to advertise the recognizable credit card, ends up an advertisement for Anderson himself, his cinematic form, his thematic fascination with the individual, and his network of support. The American Express campaign is about identity and security within the commercial realm.

Anderson's installment is particularly interesting, perhaps, because of its fit within a body of work similarly concerned with the delicate production of personal identity, here reduced to an array of identifiable, imitable, and, as a consequence, even laughable stylistic and thematic characteristics.

## Notes

1. Adrian Martin, "Possessory Credit," *Framework* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 95–99.
2. *Ibid.*, 95.
3. *Ibid.*, 96.
4. *Ibid.*, 97.
5. *Ibid.*, 97–99. Martin also considers "mutations" of the auteur as they have occurred in experimental films, videos, and multimedia installations suggesting that "(t)he auteur is mutating, but auteurism, for the moment, lags behind" (98). The point is a potentially interesting one, especially if these ripples of change might be followed into the "mainstream," outside of the avant-garde where the relationship to notions of authorship has always been more complex.
6. See Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* (New York: De Capo Press, 1996).
7. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger, eds., *Authorship and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
8. Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., *Film and Authorship* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).
9. See also John Caughie, ed., *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), for the most comprehensive collection of authorship theory through the auteur-structuralist years; and Timothy Corrigan, "The Commerce of Auteurism," in *A Cinema without Walls* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), for an analysis of the author's role in postmodern production. Corrigan's argument that auteurism is "a commercial strategy for organizing audience reception" (103), seems all the more relevant in the digital age. Dudley Andrew's "The Unauthorized Auteur Today" in Robert Stam and Toby Miller, *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 20–29, follows and expands on Corrigan's idea and makes an argument for a post-polemical authorial renaissance. Yvonne Tasker, ed., *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers* (London: Routledge, 2002), provides a brief but dead-on introduction to her international compendium of cinematic authorship. Tasker's inclusion of Ros Jennings's insightful essay on independent film producer Christine Vachon (353–361) valuably opens up the discourse on authorship to new and important levels and complicates the notion of independence in a manner consistent with Wes Anderson's thematic complication of the same. Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), and Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin, eds., *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia* (London: BFI, 2003)—the first a collection of Rosenbaum's criticism and the second an international anthology of auteur-based essays—smartly demonstrate the continued relevance of and interest in a slightly altered (especially at the geographical level) though still qualitative approach to the author question within film criticism. The Rosenbaum/Martin collection is particularly fascinating in its attempt to "find the auteur" (functioning, I should add, like the coveted auteurs of the post-Hollywood era) in new regions of the world. The function, in other words, has changed very little in the collection, though the locations have.
10. See Corrigan, "The Commerce of Auteurism," 108–9.



11. Catherine Grant, "www.auteur.com?" *Screen* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 101–8. Grant does much to illustrate digital culture's impact on our concept of authorship but makes her most articulate claims to this effect late in the piece where she writes that "The interactive, intersubjective formulations of contemporary US auteurism have recently been 'commercially enhanced' by the 'infotainment extras' supplied on feature-film DVDs.... In addition, there are large numbers of auteur-based promotional and fan websites, online 'Q&A sessions' with directors, cybercasts, film downloads and other paraphernalia," 107.
12. François Truffaut with the collaboration of Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock: Revised Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).
13. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 168.
14. Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 162–163.
15. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Six Authors in Pursuit of *The Searchers*," *Screen* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 30. Here, Nowell-Smith writes that: "where (Stephen Heath) goes on to state that the author can return as a *fiction*, I would be more cautious. It seems to me rather that the 'fiction' of the author enables us to locate an *author of the fiction* who is by no means dispersed but who in 'his' notional coherence provides the means for us to grasp the text in the moment of its production before us."
16. In this respect, he very closely resembles the Francis Ford Coppola of Corrigan's analysis in *A Cinema without Walls*.
17. Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares," *Film Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1963): 26.
18. Mekas, of course, was one of Kael's targets, practicing as he and his colleagues did, an avant-garde variant of the auteur theory and embracing, in their publication of Sarris and Peter Bogdanovich (in *Film Culture*), its popular form. Their "alliance" in my formulation here is an unholy but important one, and one that Kael and Mekas themselves never perceived.
19. Claims of "scholarliness" formed the heart of the Lévi-Straussian Auteur Structuralist position that demonstrated, among other things, the critic's role in the creation of the "structures" we know as cinematic authors.
20. James Naremore, "Authorship and the Cultural Politics of Film Criticism," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (Fall, 1990): 21.
21. Jean-Luc Godard, "Bergmanorama," *Les Cahiers du cinema*, No. 85 (July 1958). Reprinted in Tom Milne, ed., *Godard on Godard* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 76. Less frequently cited, however, is Godard's more self-aware comment on the page prior, a comment that speaks directly to the issue of age and reflects, however flippantly, upon the author's own rather frequent logical flights. Claiming that to call a film "the most beautiful of films" is "to say everything," Godard imagines a pair of questions and their respective answers: "Why? Because it just is. Only the cinema can permit this sort of childish reasoning without pretending shame. Why? Because it is the cinema. And because the Cinema is sufficient unto itself" (75). Godard, here and elsewhere, defends his childish reasoning *with* childish reasoning.
22. Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra Stylo," in *The New Wave*, ed. Peter Graham (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 17–23. Astruc's highly influential 1948 essay asserted that the cinema allowed the director access to the visual equivalent of the first person singular "I."
23. Mark Olsen, "If I can Dream," *Film Comment* 35, no. 1 (January/February 1999): 13.
24. "Bottle Rocket: Production Information." A gift of Jay Kugelman to The Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences Library, Beverly Hills, California, 4.

25. Kael, "Circles and Squares," 26.
26. In their three films together, Anderson and editor David Moritz have developed a cutting structure perfectly expressive of the youth perspective. Cutting on dialogue and/or action, their editorial techniques suggest hyperactivity and an underdeveloped attention span.
27. Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (1971), another acknowledged influence on Anderson's formal and thematic interests, contains a similar though less extensive aquatically centered scene. Classical music blares as Harold's mother swims laps, totally unfazed by her son's facedown mock suicide.
28. Jonathan Romney, "Family Albums," *Sight and Sound* (March 2002): 13. Romney makes a compelling argument for Anderson's auteurism beginning with the filmmaker's consistent textuality.
29. As do so many of Anderson's cathartic moments, this montage begins aquatically. Anthony's obsession with Inez (a Paraguayan motel worker played by Lumi Cavazos) in *Bottle Rocket* begins and grows in the motel pool. And, along with Blume's cannonball, the seafaring spirit of Jacques-Yves Cousteau lurks throughout *Rushmore*—a spirit that finds its most explicit expression in *The Life Aquatic*.
30. The harpsichord has become an aural trope in Anderson's work.
31. In fact, as his career advances, Anderson's own authorial presence, his own interest in creating highly stylized worlds for his characters to inhabit, has evolved into a wry little joke on the critical importance of *mise-en-scène* to our understanding of the *subjective* auteur. Growing increasingly baroque, increasingly full of detail, the Andersonian frame threatens to consume not just its author but the narrative, the characters involved, and perhaps even the viewer. That Anderson's next scheduled project is a fully animated feature seems to indicate his desire to immerse himself, like his characters, deeper and deeper in the realm of the artificial. Cowritten with Noah Baumbach, Anderson's *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* will feature the animation of Henry Selick and is, according to the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), presently in preproduction.
32. Andrew Sarris, "The Auteur Theory Revisited," in *Film and Authorship*, ed. Virginia Wright Wexman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 24.
33. Wes Anderson, "My Private Screening With Pauline Kael," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1999, Arts and Leisure, 20–21.
34. Here, in an "informally" recorded conversation between Noah Baumbach and Wes Anderson conducted in a rather noisy restaurant, Anderson articulates his admiration for his cowriter, raised as he was by cine-literate parents. Not similarly blessed, Anderson turned to Kael. Interestingly, Anderson also uses the moment to acknowledge his debt to Jean-Luc Godard, a filmmaker who—as Kael made evident to him—like himself, is critically interested in issues of textuality.
35. Wes Anderson, "My Private Screening," 20.
36. *Ibid.*, 21.
37. Sneakers, in fact, are unusually important to Anderson and, apparently, his fans. The Internet is loaded with petitions asking Adidas to market the Team Zissou shoe featured in *The Life Aquatic*, and some especially precocious sneaker fetishists have posted DIY instruction on how to build your own from existing Adidas parts.
38. Wes Anderson, "My Private Screening," 21.
39. Timothy Corrigan, "The Commerce of Auteurism," in *Film and Authorship*, ed. Virginia Wright Wexman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 97. This version of the piece, as opposed to the original in Corrigan's book, *A Cinema without Walls*, downplays the original's vague critique of the countercultural pretension at auteurism's base.

40. Olsen, "If I Can Dream," 12, 17.
41. Dudley Andrew, "The Unauthorized Auteur Today," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 24.
42. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1978).
43. Anthony Lane, "Go Fish," *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2005, 96.
44. Kael, "Circles and Squares," 16.
45. Godard (a favorite subject on the Criterion DVD of *The Life Aquatic*) also repeatedly and ironically explored the role interviews play in the public understanding of the author and continues this day to rhetorically "control" interview situations.
46. Andrew, "The Unauthorized Auteur Today," 25.
47. Josh Horowitz's recently published collection of interviews, *The Mind of the Modern Moviemaker*, contains conversations with numerous semiapologetic filmmakers for whom advertisements and/or rock videos have become a form of film school, a foot in the Hollywood door, and a way to make ends meet. Josh Horowitz, *The Mind of the Modern Moviemaker* (New York: Plume, 2006). Anderson, I should add, is not included in Horowitz's collection.