

Texas Francophile: French Influences in the Films of Wes Anderson

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Wes Anderson is among a handful of young American directors making highly original and personal films. Unlike the films of Anderson's contemporaries like the Coen brothers, those of Wes Anderson reflect a strong French influence. Anderson systematically plants references to and quotes from French culture and cinema throughout his films. This French influence can be divided into three categories: influences from French popular culture, from specific French films and directors, and from the auteur style codified by the French New Wave directors. This article will detail these influences in the films *Rushmore* (1998), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), *The Darjeeling Limited* with its trailer *Hotel Chevalier* (2007), and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009).

Wes Anderson is an ardent francophile. Originally from Houston, he divides his time between New York and Paris. His francophilia is on display in most of his films. In *Rushmore*, the autobiographical beret-topped hero Max Fisher is president of the French Club at his prep school in Houston. (Anderson filmed *Rushmore* at St. John's, his Houston alma mater.) Although he often takes inspiration from American authors, particularly from J. D. Salinger, Anderson rarely quotes French literature or painting. Rather, when not quoting French films, he references iconic images, names, music, and fashion from French popular culture. In *Rushmore*, Max conjures up a vision of the Eiffel Tower in a classroom dream sequence. He later states that he plans to attend either Oxford or the Sorbonne. In *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, the hotel is named the Citroën like the French car company whose rakish DS model is an icon of both French film noir and the New Wave. *Zissou* lives in the mythical city of Port au Patois, which is a nonsensical phrase because *patois*, meaning a pidgin language, would never be combined with "Port au". Nonetheless, it is nicely alliterative and sounds like Port au Prince or numerous other "port au somethings" in francophone geography. He also references French fashion. A complete set of Louis Vuitton luggage that has been detailed with exotic animal designs features prominently in *The Darjeeling Limited*. In *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Gwyneth Paltrow's Margot sports the prized Hermès Birkin purse. Hermès is a family-owned French luxury-goods company that began as, and still is, a manufacturer of equestrian gear. It is better known to the general public for its ties and scarves whose beautiful designs and fabrics are immediately recognizable. Hermès is to French culture what Truman Capote's Tiffany's is to American culture. The extraordinarily expensive Hermès Birkin handbag was named after Jane Birkin, the sixties French pop icon married to Serge Gainsbourg whose distinctive singing style is referenced in the short, *Hotel Chevalier*. As well as including several French phrases and a nod to *crème brûlée* in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (*comme ci, comme ça* [so-so], *pensez-vous que l'hiver sera rude* [do you think winter will be hard]), Anderson makes another insider's reference to French sixties pop by naming the film's detective agency Dutronc. Although known primarily as an actor today, Jacques Dutronc was a clever and irreverent pop singer in the late sixties, who had a number of

hits such as “Et Moi, et moi, et moi” and the colossal “Les Cactus”. Dutronc is also married to Françoise Hardy, who was, with Jane Birkin, the other female heartthrob of French sixties pop. (The detective agency’s sign in the film bears an uncanny resemblance to the Duluc Detective agency’s sign visible off the Rue de Rivoli near the Louvre. Duluc even shares the initial syllable and final consonant with Dutronc.) Anderson’s films also contain more traditional French popular music. *Fantastic Mr. Fox*’s score includes two songs (“Une Petite Ile” and “Le Grand Choral”) by Georges Delerue, who composed for many French directors, including several for François Truffaut and *Le Mépris* for Godard. Anderson’s love of French popular music is highlighted further in *Rushmore* when Max attempts to woo the teacher with whom he is in love by playing a tape of Yves Montand singing Aristide Bruant’s 1911 “Rue St. Vincent”. Joe Dassin’s 1969 “Les Champs-Élysées”, one of the most quintessential songs from French popular culture, plays during the credits of *The Darjeeling Limited*. Although this kind of Brel-Trenet song is the most prominent type of French popular music in his films, Anderson also inserts French jazz in *Rushmore*. The upbeat 1945 “Manoir de mes rêves” by the gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt from the quintet Le Hot Club de France plays at the after party of Max’s play.

His most sustained homage to French culture and to his adopted city is the thirteen-minute short that precedes *The Darjeeling Limited* called *Hotel Chevalier*. It takes place in Paris in an elegant suite in the Hotel Raphael which he renames the Chevalier, like the French crooner Maurice Chevalier. Jack, one of the three brothers in *Darjeeling*, has been holed up there, adrift for more than a month. In a French-English mumbo jumbo, he orders a grilled cheese sandwich and a hot chocolate from room service. When a girlfriend from the past calls unexpectedly from the airport saying she’s on the way, he changes out of his vibrant yellow bathrobe into a suit. He prepares a song on his I-Pod to play when he opens the door to let her in. The wistful song is the 1969 European hit single “Where Do You Go To (My Lovely)” by Peter Sarstedt. When he opens the door, he turns the song on, and she asks in mock horror, “What is that music?” Her question shows that the song is not from their past together. It might be something Jack has picked up since his arrival in Paris which has particular meaning to him and, perhaps, to Anderson himself. After they mess around on his bed for a while, Jack asks her, with some pride, “Wanna see my view of Paris?” Anderson films the two on the suite’s balcony as they silently admire the view over the rooftops of Paris. The short ends as the girlfriend leads Jack by the hand back into their room, and we just see the view of a classic Haussmann apartment building across from the hotel which fades away in the artificial twilight Anderson creates.

Popular music plays a central role in Anderson’s films, and it usually complements the narrative. “Where Do you Go To” is not just background music. Like the Yves Montand song in *Rushmore*, setting up the song and playing it are key elements of the narrative. Although written in English and sung by an Englishman, it sounds like Serge Gainsbourg or Jacques Brel, both of whom were popular when the song was written. The song is an ode to Marie-Claire, who has turned her back on her past, just as we surmise that the girlfriend has done to Jack. The lyrics also reference a wealth of French cultural icons in a single swoop. The song mentions Zizi Jeanmarie, the French ballerina; Balmain, the haute couture house; Juan les Pins, the Riviera resort; the Latin Quarter’s Boulevard Saint Michel and the nearby Sorbonne; and finally Sacha Distel, the singer.

Two Frenchmen who were not primarily directors, the oceanographer Jacques Cousteau and the photographer Jacques-Henri Lartigue, have had particular influence on Anderson. Cousteau, a childhood hero of Anderson, plays an important role in two films. In *Rushmore*, Max checks out the Frenchman's book *Diving for Sunken Treasure* from the school library, into which someone has written a quote that changes Max's life. "When one man, for whatever reason, has the opportunity to lead an extraordinary life, he has no right to keep it to himself." Max's attempt to build a massive aquarium on school grounds reflects his shared interest with Cousteau in marine life. More importantly, Cousteau is an inspiration for the dissipated oceanographer Steve Zizzou in *The Life Aquatic*. Zizzou is the author of *The Fighting Eels of Antibes*, a take off on books like Cousteau's *Diving for Sunken Treasure*. The name of the crew's ship in *The Life Aquatic*, the *Belafonte*, is a more convoluted nod to the Frenchman. Harry Belafonte originally rose to fame by singing calypso, and the *Calypso* was the name of Cousteau's ship. Finally, Anderson dedicates the film to Cousteau in its closing credits.

Anderson also admires the French photographer Jacques-Henri Lartigue (1894-1986), whose photographs are placed in Anderson's films. Steve Zizzou has a picture on his desk of his mentor Lord Mandrake in *The Life Aquatic*, but the photo is really a picture of Lartigue himself, who is mentioned in the credits. Zizzou is the nickname of the photographer's brother who appears in several of his photos. In *Rushmore*, there are four Lartigue photos symmetrically hung on the wall behind Max in his classroom. The yearbook photo of Max as president of the Yankee Racers Go-Kart Club closely resembles one of the photos on the wall with Lartigue's brother Zizzou in a crashed go-kart. Anderson even thanks Lartigue in the closing credits of *Rushmore*.

There are certainly ties between Lartigue's work and Anderson's. The composition of many of Anderson's scenes seems arranged like that of a photograph. Lartigue initially photographed his family and the speed machines of the century: the automobile, the train, and the airplane, all of which also interest Anderson. Lartigue later photographed the beau monde in Paris and on the Riviera as it developed into a society destination. Like Anderson's films, Lartigue's photographs are both stylish and stylized, simultaneously elegant and whimsical. They display meticulous and personal composition, which is also an Anderson trademark.

To what end all these references to popular culture? For the most part, they are playful, and their purpose is to make a few private jokes, to have fun with other francophiles, and to pay homage to what Anderson likes. Anyone with a passing knowledge of French culture will recognize the names Chevalier, Citroën, and Voltaire, the cologne in *Hotel Chevalier*, and smile at their curious and improbable reincarnations. (This author is willing to bet that there is neither a Hotel Chevalier nor a Hotel Citroën in France.) Further, it would be hard not to see the take off on Jacques Cousteau. But Anderson also speaks to the initiated viewer like himself who can pick out more clever and obscure references to French culture. For example, the cologne in *Hotel Chevalier* is not just named "Voltaire" but "Voltaire La Petite Mort". Anderson references the Enlightenment philosopher but also makes an inside joke because "la petite mort" is French slang for the male orgasm. Anderson's viewers are likely to recognize the Riviera resort of Antibes from Steve Zizzou's book, but they might not know that to place fighting eels in this calm Mediterranean port is, like "Voltaire La Petite Mort", ludic invention. Anderson makes a reference that only French serious cinephiles are likely to recognize when he lists Neville Smith-Dorleac as one of Etheline Tenenbaum's former lovers. This name is certainly a nod to Françoise

Dorléac, the beautiful French actress who is not nearly as well known as her younger sister, Catherine Deneuve, because her promising but brief career (*La Peau douce* by Truffaut and *L'Homme de Rio* with Jean-Paul Belmondo) was cut short by her death in a car accident in 1967. The use of the Lartigue photos is so private that it is over the head of everyone except Anderson and those in his inner circle. He is probably doing this as a personal homage to an important influence. Finally, some of the references do have a more serious purpose. One reason for Anderson's use of the Sarstedt tune could be a way for the director to show how he sees himself. This mix of an English-language song done in a French style parallels Anderson himself. He is an American who lives half of the year in Paris and who makes French-style films in English with quotes from French culture.

Anderson is also an ardent cinephile. He speaks openly about the directors and the films he admires. He praises films like *The Graduate* and *Harold and Maud*, *Murmur of the Heart* and *Rules of the Game*, and directors like Hal Ashby, Mike Nichols, Robert Altman, Luis Bunuel, and the Indian Satyajit Ray. He reserves particular admiration for the French directors Jean Renoir, François Truffaut, and Louis Malle. His admiration for all of these directors and their films influences his filmmaking in terms of style, subject, character, and theme. For example, he was inspired to set his train/road trip film *The Darjeeling Limited* in India because he had seen Louis Malle's documentaries about the country; Renoir's *The River*, also filmed there; and Satyajit Ray's Indian masterpieces (Calhoun). Anderson dedicates his film to Ray.

When you have a francophile crossed with a cinephile, the result is a "franco-cinephile" director who draws heavily on and makes references to French cinema. He quotes directly from French films to pay homage to them but also to link the meaning of the quote to his own film. More importantly, his stories and themes parallel those in the films of Malle and Truffaut in particular. Lastly, he adheres to the auteur concept developed in its most doctrinal form by the French New Wave directors in the late fifties and in the sixties.

He does quote directly from French films, and these quotes are esoteric. A scene in *The Life Aquatic* quotes almost word for word from *Jules et Jim*, an early Truffaut's film about a love triangle, a reoccurring theme in Anderson's films. Steve Zizzou and Klaus Daimler are outside the door of a woman with whom they are both infatuated. Zizzou says to his friend, "Not this one, Klaus". This line mimics the one that appears in Truffaut's film. Jules and Jim are best friends, but they are both in love with Catherine. Jim is more experienced and savvy about women than is Jules. Outside of her room, Jules says to his friend, "Not this one, Jim". Anderson has stated that using a narrator who is not a character in *The Royal Tenenbaums* has its roots in the narration of *Jules et Jim* (Lyman). The director has also said that the overhead shot at the beginning of *The Royal Tenenbaums* with a bird's eye view of the books the children have written is a quote from the opening of Truffaut's *Two English Girls* (Lyman). Anderson made an American Express ad during which he parodies an egomaniacal director making an action film. In the magazine *Time Out:London*, Dave Calhoun states that "The music is from George Delerue's score to Truffaut's 1973 film, *La Nuit Américaine*, while the tracking shot, which exposes and mocks the machinery behind filmmaking, is surely a nod to the opening shot of Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963), which shows Raoul Coutard traveling along a dolly". The scene in which the Uzi and Ari Tenenbaum steal bottles of milk outside a store likely references the scene in *The 400 Blows* in which the runaway Antoine Doinel does the same thing. Is it possible that

the sixties-style Dutronc detective agency sign in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is hinting at Truffaut's *Stolen Kisses* from 1968 in which the older Antoine Doinel has a stint as a hapless detective? In a nod to his heroes from the French New Wave, Anderson has the Swiss director/producer Barbet Schroeder, who worked on films with Eric Rohmer and Jean-Luc Godard, make a cameo appearance as the car mechanic in *The Darjeeling Limited*.

It is a lot easier to see that Anderson's characters, themes, and plots parallel those of French directors, again those of Truffaut and Malle in particular. His films share a similar tragicomic sensibility with those of these two directors. *Rushmore* is an autobiographical coming of age tale with clear ties to Truffaut's autobiographical *The 400 Blows*. The school-age heroes in both are wayward loners who do poorly in school and are expelled. The illicit love found most poignantly in Malle's *Murmur of the Heart* has echoes in some of Anderson's films (Slabaugh). The sympathetic depiction of incest between mother and son in *Murmur of the Heart* has a near parallel in the Tenenbaum family in which Ritchie and his adopted sister Margot are in love. Anderson takes up a different kind of taboo love in *Rushmore* where the teenage Max acts upon his love for a young teacher in his school.

Like Renoir, Malle, and Truffaut, Anderson treats the flawed characters that people his films with sympathy. He has said, "I like movies where there is real affection for the characters. In those movies I feel like there aren't any really bad guys. I think Renoir says something to the effect that everyone has their reasons. You just have to make an effort to understand them" (*lostarmadillosinheat*).

Finally, Anderson is an auteur, a term coined for the French New Wave directors who initially theorized about it and then practiced it. An auteur is a director responsible for many facets of the film's production: screenplay, soundtrack, costuming, photography, etc. Further, the films should be personal and treat the same themes repeatedly. Although not part of the doctrine, an auteur tends to use the same personnel for his or her films-not just a stock company of actors but also the same photographers, producers, composers, writers, etc. One can argue that Jean Renoir or John Ford were auteurs, but the New Wave directors codified the doctrine, and they are usually given credit for its most complete expression. Robert Altman, Woody Allen, and Martin Scorsese are among the American directors who embraced this doctrine before Anderson. However, one can argue that Anderson has taken the auteur concept further because of the personal control he maintains over so many aspects of his films. He meticulously chooses and then places the music for the desired effect. He styles offbeat sets and costumes that create a world unto itself, which is an Anderson trademark. For example, he designed the outfit that all of the Zizzou team members wear (Slabaugh). This level of control makes an Anderson film personal and immediately recognizable. The criticism of Anderson has been that the emphasis on personal style hides substance or gets in the way of the film's narrative.

This study has sought to examine the influences from French popular culture and cinema that have inspired Anderson. Yet his films have their own style and worldview. In terms of technique, his shots are elaborate and meticulously planned. The worlds he creates are stylized and consciously artificial. The New Wave directors had a looser style and sought realism. As part of a series for directors, Rick Lyman from *The New York Times* invited Anderson to show and discuss a film of his choice. He chose *Small Change* by Truffaut. He lauds the film's informal style and the naturalness of the amateur actors, neither of which is a characteristic of Anderson's

style. In terms of worldview, Anderson's endings are upbeat because he resolves the conflicts that are central to his plots. Characters reconcile or come to an understanding of their situation. In *Rushmore*, Max sees that his unrequited love for a young teacher is inappropriate and unrealistic and falls for someone his own age. In *Hotel Chevalier*, the misfires and miscommunication between the former lovers disappear after they admire the view of Paris together. The three argumentative brothers reconcile their differences and bond during their trip on *The Darjeeling Limited*. Positive endings like these are rare in most French films. Anderson's *Rushmore* has its roots in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, but Max Fisher's future looks bright while Antoine Doinel reaches a dead end as he looks blankly at an uncertain life ahead. Anderson is, ultimately, an original filmmaker who likes to reference what he admires but does have his own style and worldview that differ from those of the New Wave directors he respects so highly.

Filmography

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