16. James MacDowell writes that the quirky film has 'a tone that exists on a knife-edge of judgement and empathy, detachment and engagement, irony and sincerity' (MacDowell 2010: 13). Discuss his suggestion.

Introduction

This essay is an analysis of the title claim made by academic James MacDowell. I have broken down my study into three clearly labelled sections; in the first I will explore the meaning of tone and what is meant by quirky film in order to contextualise my evaluation of the claim. In the remaining two sections, I will attempt to apply MacDowell's hypothesis regarding tone to two separate films by Wes Anderson, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014, Wes Anderson), and *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012, Wes Anderson), in that order. These sections will inform a reasoned conclusion which will seek to assess the validity of MacDowell's claim.

Section One: Understanding Tone and the Quirky Sensibility

To even begin addressing MacDowell's hypothesis, we need to have a reasonable understanding of what tone is and how it can be achieved on film.

In MacDowell's article, he cites scholar Douglas Pye's essay 'Movies and Tone' in which he addresses what we mean when discussing the tone of a film, and claims that at the time of writing, this aspect of cinema was perhaps too often overlooked. Pye's essay is fairly exhaustive and tackles the idea of tone in multiple steps. At one point Pye explains that the tone of a film can be seen in some ways to mirror the tone of conventional speech, whereby;

> 'Tone is implicit in the speaker's manner, the effect of multiple variants such as timbre, linguistic register, volume, pace, cadence and rhythm, together with facial and bodily expression, and is subject to the interplay of intention, utterance and reception within a specific context.' (Pye 2007: 8).

This comparison is an interesting one, yet seems intuitively accurate. It essentially articulates the idea that a film's tone is created in the methods of delivery, or rather the '*how'* (Pye 2007:

29) of the way a story is being told. Concepts like rhythm and pace translate well into those of average shot length and editing style, whilst manner and linguistic register are mirrored by the delicate milieu of filmic elements like narrative and mise en scène. All of these aspects comprise a general sense of character and feel for a film, which we ultimately refer to as its tone. Pye explains that the tools used by auteurs to create tone can exist in the most minute of details. He writes, 'At the level of detailed realisation, too, the film sets in place networks of decision-making which accumulate meaning in the overall context of sequence and/or film' (Pye 2007: 9). This is an important point to note, as one could easily make the mistake that the idea of tone is merely a broad descriptor taking into account only the broadest of information. Rather, it incorporates both large-scale elements and small-scale elements, and can sometimes undergo changes from scene to scene or even shot to shot.

The relevance of tone in this essay comes from the titular claim from academic James MacDowell that the quirky film has 'a tone that exists on a knife-edge of judgement and empathy, detachment and engagement, irony and sincerity' (MacDowell 2010: 13). Yet this claim itself raises another critical issue; the idea of 'quirky film' and what this entails. MacDowell's words here come from the conclusion of his in-depth essay on this topic, *'Notes on Quirky'* (MacDowell 2010). In this essay, he gathers together a number of films that they 'share a number of conventions, and that these conventions- which may be used in greater or lesser numbers, and with greater or lesser degrees of emphasis – together contribute to what I am choosing to call the quirky *sensibility*' (MacDowell 2010: 2). This establishes his line of argument accurately and succinctly, emphasising that the concept of quirky does not constitute a genre but rather a trend of sorts. What follows is an impressive exploration of films that do seem to share a lot in character and tone, as MacDowell explains that whilst these films can appear to have been set up with a great deal of irony, they manage to also contain varying degrees of sincere emotional catharsis. It is from this strange combining two

opposite effects that the title claim stems, the enigma behind such logic a worthy topic of study.

MacDowell investigates some works by cinematic auteur Wes Anderson in his essay, namely *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001, Wes Anderson) and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004, Wes Anderson). In my study, I will look at two Wes Anderson films that were released after the publication of MacDowell's essay, and attempt to apply his hypothesis in order to ascertain its strength and relevance. Anderson is an apt director to study for this topic, as his quirky films are some of the most critically and commercially successful within those included in MacDowell's sensibility. The scholar Warren Buckland investigates the idea of Anderson's quirky films in the wider context of film in his editorial *'Wes Anderson: a 'smart' director of the new sincerity?'* (Buckland 2012). In this editorial, he discusses that idea that these films can be seen as a pushback against postmodern cinema that reaches the point of nihilistic irony without ever balancing this cynical approach with the aforementioned catharsis afforded to us by the quirky. Yet even within the quirky it is crucial not to confuse balance with cancellation; neither effect renders the other inert. To clarify this he writes, 'New sincerity incorporates postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony' (Buckland 2012: 2). I interpret Buckland's idea as being that of not a clash, but rather a synthesis of irony and sincerity. He continues, '[Anderson's] films incorporate (and thereby transform) the postmodern through a new sincerity that articulates the structure of feeling of the present moment' (Buckland 2012: 4). Buckland highlights here Anderson's use of his sincerity to ground absurd tales in infrequent moments of tender truth. Buckland's stance then, does seem to indicate his belief that Anderson's works fit well into MacDowell's description of quirky tone. Yet of course, this would be the result of a great many moving parts. On Anderson's *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, scholar John Gibbs describes how this film accomplishes such a feat.

> Ironic and empathetic elements clearly temper each other, ebbing and flowing across the movie, and interacting within the moment. Rather than adapting irony as a monolithic mode of address... we can think of the film as having a braided collection of tonal and formal elements, which are fluidly given greater or lesser emphasis, shaping our access to, and at the same time depending on, the dramatic situation.' (Gibbs 2012: 150).

Gibbs' brilliantly worded summary of what it takes to achieve the seemingly paradoxical quirky tone described by MacDowell gives a memorable and nicely detailed example of tone's role within the quirky, and indicates what should be looked out for in further analysis and investigation. Hence this sentiment, along with the rest of the literature studied in this section, shall help to inform my approach in studying the two Anderson films I have chosen as case studies.

Hither comes about the conclusion of this first section. We have established that the tone of a film refers to the manner of its presentation, giving it a particular character. We have also investigated the academic meanings relevant to the title quotation offered by MacDowell, clarifying the idea of a quirky sensibility and his hypothesis of the quasi-paradoxical tonal implications at its core. This has prepared us to tackle two case studies in order to assess the validity of his claim.

Section Two: *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

Wes Anderson's eighth feature film, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, exemplifies a case in which MacDowell's conception of a 'quirky sensibility' seems to be strongly applicable. It is a production where every detail is obsessively fine-tuned to fit a very specific tone, and in particular one that echoes the paradoxes of MacDowell's 'knife-edge' hypothesis (MacDowell 2010: 13). In this section I will seek to break down several elements of the film in order to demonstrate how this is the case.

The first indicator is the way that the film is presented to us as an audience. I believe the film creates a soft barrier between art and audience in the way it is shot. In his article, Warren Buckland describes some of the techniques typically used by Anderson to achieve this, also citing a label for such methods from scholar Jeffrey Sconce.

> Ironic disengagement is manifest in smart films through a 'blank' style of filmmaking, involving the use of long-shots, static composition, awkward two-shots (or family gatherings) and sparse cutting. This style creates an experience of distance in the audience, which Sconce characterises as a form of 'clinical observation'. (Sconce 2002: 360; cited in Buckland 2012: 1).

The Grand Budapest Hotel contains almost all of the specific examples listed by Buckland here, but I would also draw attention to one more method that contributes hugely to this effect and is repeated a dizzying number of times in this particular film. This is the fact that much of the dialogue is spoken to us in a certain pseudo-direct address, dictated front-on by characters monologuing, often from behind a desk or podium. *Figure 1 highlights* six memorable examples of this.

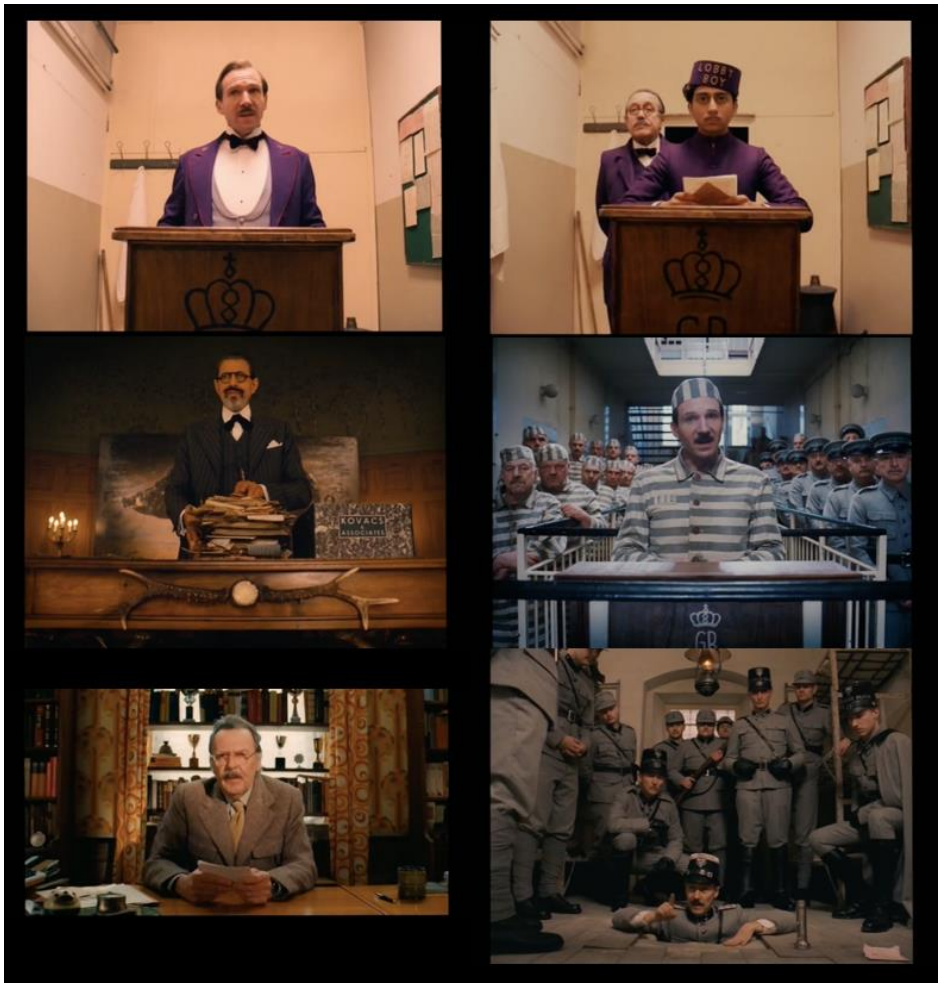


Figure 1- Characters speaking from behind obstacles in The Grand Budapest Hotel

In my opinion, the effect of speech from behind obstacles in the film matches Buckland's idea of 'ironic disengagement'. The directness of these characters and their piercing stares is a feature that could inspire immersive involvement in some films, yet the formality telegraphed both by body language and the physical objects between the characters and the audience halt this effect and instead keep us at an arm's length. Furthermore, this gives the sense that Anderson the auteur is telling the audience a story through these elements. It emphasises the profession of storytelling (quite overtly and literally in the scene visible at the bottom left of *Figure 1*, in which a fictional storyteller is announcing his musings regarding the profession) and with it, all of its accepted implications of embellishment and fantasy. Hence, we engage only loosely, constantly aware that we are receiving a tale that asks not for

strong investments in its characters or plot but instead the interested 'observation' referred to by Sconce.

Methods such as the speech-giving presentation build up to create tonal dissonance throughout the film, numbing and shielding the audience from certain darker events. For example, the images and music create a tone that suggests a traditional happy ending as the film comes to a close, despite the narration casually mentioning that Zero's wife and child would die very soon after the main narrative conclusion. Scholar Whitney Crothers Dilley theorises that this is done in another similar attempt to mute the strength of such a revelation.

> [The] layer of farcical slapstick humor and screwball comedy, however, masks darker themes not only of totalitarianism, Eastern-bloc politics, and war, but of decay, loneliness, and personal loss (reported deaths late in the film). To lessen the intensity, the film does not seek to portray a precise location... nor does it replicate precise periods in history, but only sets out to obliquely evoke three periods of history. (Dilley 2017: 184).

Here Dilley highlights Anderson's somewhat whimsical attitude towards sinister, tragic or just generally conflictual plot points. Yet I would argue that the voice of the film in addressing these issues manages to be softly dismissive rather than bitter or cynical, the audience learning to accept them as part of a story's lightly mismatched emotional tapestry. As alluded to in the quote above, many of MacDowell's tonal paradoxes exist in the use of the film's setting. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is an establishment based in a fictional European country called the Republic of Zubrowka, and the bulk of the plot takes place in the 1930's, a time in real history whereby political tensions were high and World War II was fast approaching with the rise of fascism in Germany. Ed Norton's character leads an army that bears an eerily striking resemblance to the Schutzstaffel (S.S.) right down to their uniform and logo. This group in the film, labelled the Z.Z., march around the setting questioning immigrants and deploying death squads. Such a dark and serious subject matter may be expected to be met with sombreness or gravitas, and yet their presence is remarkably non-menacing, even becoming at times nothing more than a punchline as the character of Gustave

comments derisively, 'I find these black uniforms very drab' (*The Grand Budapest Hotel* 2014). So once again, the potential for shock and upset is largely washed out by the audience's encouraged detachment.

This delicate balancing act of tone fits well into MacDowell's theory of the 'quirky sensibility' at a fairly broad level, but there are also some more specific elements that when placed under a microscope can be seen to not just demonstrate but encapsulate the sensibility. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, this can undoubtedly be read into the character of M. Gustave, played masterfully by Ralph Fiennes. I would opine that Gustave essentially embodies the tonal paradox at the crux of MacDowell's line of argument, acting figuratively as a kind of 'quirky' film in the flesh. Dilley writes of Gustave; 'Anderson's film revolves around Ralph Fiennes' bravura comic performance as Gustave: vain, imperious, and mercurial yet loyal and generous – yet again, as in Anderson's earlier works, a uniquely contradictory personality in a leading role' (Dilley 2017: 183). I find myself agreeing with Dilley's assessment of Gustave as being extremely 'contradictory', yet it is important to note that this comes through not simply via his isolated actions but also in all the intriguing subtleties of his manner. For instance, Fiennes portrays Gustave with a stiff and curt posture as well as a polite and posh British accent, all of which acts in conjunction with costume to ooze professionalism and civility. Yet we know early on that this is but one facet of his character; for he is introduced as somewhat of an egotistical sexual deviant, with an air of almost abrasive cheekiness about him. This side shines through sporadically during his dialogue in the form of sudden expletives and crude insults, infrequently appearing to shatter the illusion of an otherwise perfect gentleman. Words like 'wonderful', 'dear', and 'darling' are used often in Gustave's lavish speech, but intercut with phrases like 'bloody', 'oh fuck it', and in one instance 'ugly mug' (*The Grand Budapest Hotel* 2014) which all counteract the potential quaintness of Gustave's oft pleasant good manners. This complex characterisation, which could have

seemed absurd or grating if acted just a tad differently, somehow flows believably without giving the audience any major whiplash. An impressive feat by Anderson and Fiennes, Gustave's odd charm appears to rub off on other characters and soon seeps into every corner of the film, creating the key ironic-yet-sincere atmosphere described by MacDowell.

As this section draws to a close, I would offer one more piece of evidence which shows explicitly how well *The Grand Budapest Hotel* maps onto MacDowell's article. Under the sub-heading 'Quirky and Comedy' (MacDowell 2010: 2), he goes into detail about a scene in *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002, Paul Thomas Anderson) that demonstrates the role that comedy plays in the quirky sensibility. In the scene, a character has just had an outburst of over-the-top anger at his brother-in-law, and now in an awkward moment of sharing admits that he cries a lot and dislikes himself at times. MacDowell tracks the emotion throughout, as director Paul Thomas Anderson cuts away from the initial fury and to the moment of quiet reflection, which is followed by both discomfort and empathy as the character breaks into silent sobbing and retreats. MacDowell writes;

> 'Barry's apology for the havoc he has just wreaked is an example of an understated style of deadpan that we find across a number of films. It is dry, perfunctory, excessively functional, taking a simulation and line that we might expect to be dramatic (particularly following the hysteria of the previous scene) and downplaying them almost to the point of absurdity.' (MacDowell 2010: 3).

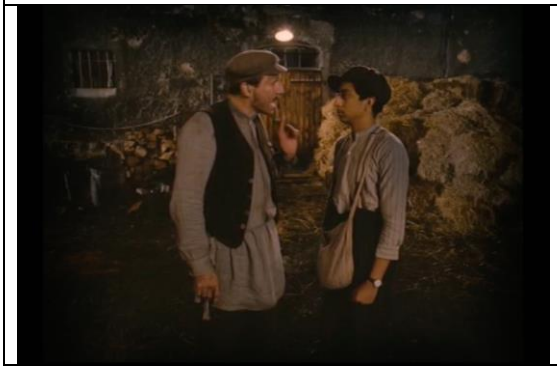
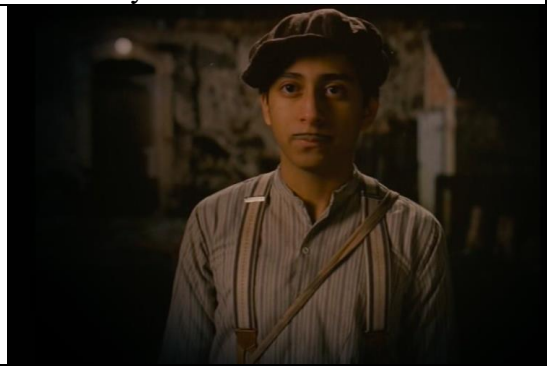
MacDowell's breakdown of the scene and analysis of the tone it evokes is one of the strongest parts of his argument in the article. It gives the reader a clear sense of how the contradictory nature of quirky films and their tone is more viable than it may at first sound, showcasing here an example of a scene that uses this complexity to its advantage in creating an effective and affecting scene. I would argue that *The Grand Budapest Hotel* boasts a similarly strong scene, one which achieves much the same tone MacDowell's example from *Punch-Drunk Love*, despite being unique in its own way also. The scene in question occurs in the wake of M. Gustave's successful escape from prison, and I have broken down the key

shots in *Figure 2*. The rest of the escaped inmates drive off, leaving Gustave with only Zero, his young lobby boy, played by Tony Revolori. He asks him which way is it to the safe house, to which Zero replies he could not find one. Gustave brushes this off but already we can tell he is irked slightly. He asks for their disguises next. Zero says they're already wearing them. Gustave is annoyed at this; they had agreed on something more elaborate. But again, he manages to keep a cool head and asks for a squirt of the perfume, *L'air de Panache*. But Zero admits that he has forgotten the *L'air de Panache.* Gustave finally erupts into anger, waving his arms about stiffly as he begins to berate Zero for being an immigrant.

> 'I suppose this is to be expected back in Aq Salim al-Jabat where one's prized possessions are a stack of filthy carpets and a starving goat, and one sleeps behind a tent-flap and survives on wild dates and scarabs – but it's not how I trained you. What on God's earth possessed you to leave the homeland where you very obviously belong and travel unspeakable distances to become a penniless immigrant in a refined, highly-cultivated society that, quite frankly, could've gotten along very well without you?' (*The Grand Budapest Hotel* 2014).

It is a rant that is relentlessly nasty, extremely offensive, and needlessly elaborate. Despite our awareness of Gustave's self-entitlement and occasional vulgarity, it comes as a surprise for him to be so harsh to his sidekick. And yet, he did struggle to keep polite and calm despite circumstances being so dire, and so once again the dichotomy of his character shines through. Zero replies simply and quietly to this rant with just two words; 'The war' (*The Grand Budapest Hotel* 2014). Gustave immediately realizes his idiocy and his callousness in the moments prior, and quickly works to make amends despite the now very awkward atmosphere. This awkwardness, paired with the sudden reversal of Gustave's attitude from cruel and sneering to panicked, sympathetic apology, give the scene its air of comedy. The conclusion of the scene then gives it its heartfelt sincerity because not only does Gustave apologise, but he also shares a rare moment of bonding with Zero, proclaiming 'You're my dear friend and protégé, and I'm very proud of you. You must know that. I'm so sorry, Zero' (*The Grand Budapest Hotel* 2014). This is touching and completes the tonal paradox of the quirky sensibility, having offered to the audience something both fairly funny and subtly

tender. Like the *Punch-Drunk Love* scene MacDowell dissects, the end result here is something of equal impact in being 'simultaneously pathetic *and* poignant' (MacDowell 2010: 3). The characters do not know each other particularly well at this point in the film, but their shared experiences and prosperous dynamic have led them to feel oddly fond of one another; it is this curious fondness that reflects how audiences may react to so-called quirky films. Despite the arm's length distancing being created by the presentation and various other elements in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the audience is drawn-in just enough to care, somewhat.

<table>
<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>The inmates debrief and part ways.</td><td>M. Gustave asks for a spray of perfume.</td></tr>
<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>Zero says he has forgotten the perfume.</td><td>Gustave's outburst begins with incredulity.</td></tr>
<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
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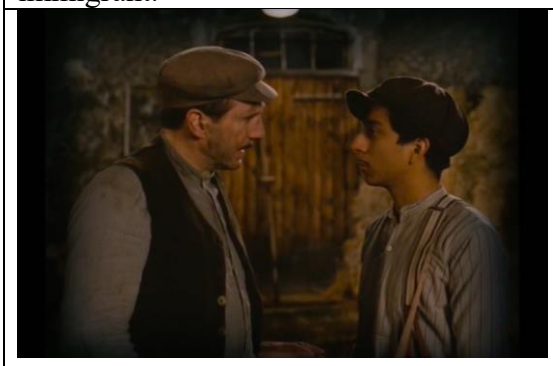
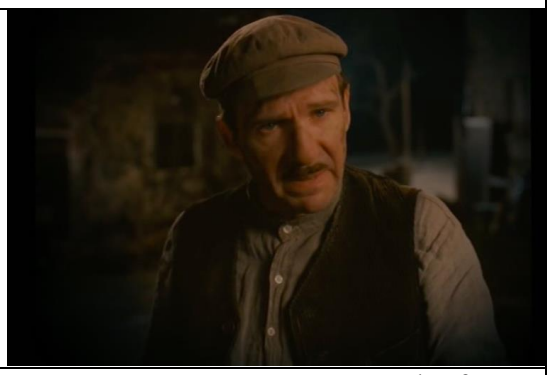
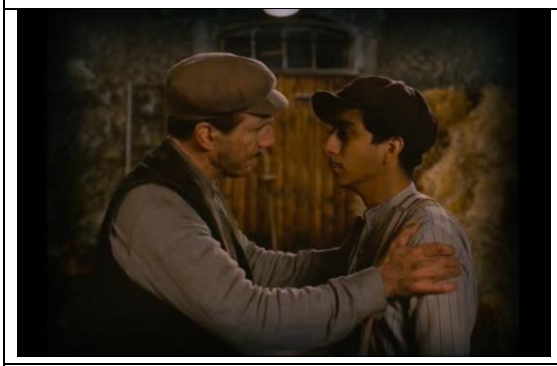
Gustave berates Zero for being an immigrant.	Zero reveals he fled from war.
	
Gustave begins to apologise profusely.	Gustave expresses great sympathy for Zero.
	
Gustave says that they are brothers.	Gustave and Zero share an embrace.

Figure 2- Shot breakdown of the scene where Gustave rants at Zero and then apologises.

To summarise this section, it is my opinion that *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is a stunningly relevant example of what James MacDowell is referring to with his theory of the quirky sensibility. The presentation of the film, with huge swathes of the story told to us directly from behind formal furniture like desks, along with finer elements such as the use of setting and intriguing character traits of M. Gustave, creates a tone of paradoxes as mentioned in the title quotation. We, as an audience, are kept distanced to an extent and yet are invited to harbour a playfully fond interest in the events of the film. Sinister plot ingredients such as tragic endings and Nazi allegory are left without much attention, whilst dramatic scenes of emotional conflict and resolution are played with an air of quaint comedy. This film is likely then, to be the most accurate mapping of Wes Anderson's work onto the framework of 'a tone that exists on a knife-edge of judgement and empathy, detachment and engagement, irony and sincerity' (MacDowell 2010: 13).

Section Three: *Moonrise Kingdom*

Wes Anderson's seventh feature film *Moonrise Kingdom* concerns two children who run away together, twice. Neglected by their respective families and peers, the pair have bonded over a series of letters and claim to have fallen in love with each other. Meanwhile a catastrophic storm both literal and figurative is headed for their island residence, mentioned repeatedly by the narrator as the pair venture further into their escape from the intimidating realities of their day-to-day lives. In this section I will assess to what extent this film matches MacDowell's theory of tone in the quirky, comparing this to the successful prior grafting of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

In an article called *'Unsafe Houses: Moonrise Kingdom and Wes Anderson's Conflicted Comedies of Escape'* (J. M. Tyree 2013) for the journal *Film Quarterly*, the scholar J. M. Tyree investigates the aims of *Moonrise Kingdom*.

> 'Anderson's movie is a tree house of sorts, or... a miniature island like the one that forms the setting of Moonrise Kingdom: New Penzance, which in many ways appears removed from serious harm. Nevertheless, this remains a movie marked by laughter in the teeth of things that are not at all funny – a pleasing trademark of its director's productions.' (J. M. Tyree 2013: 23).

Tyree seeks here to paint a metaphor that encapsulates Anderson's previously discussed ability to create comic moments out of things that are actually sinister or tragic. The metaphor is unnecessary, but the point is well taken. After all, as Tyree himself goes on to list, *Moonrise Kingdom* is chock-full of dark and unpleasant themes; '*Moonrise Kingdom* is replete with jokes about loveless marriages, foster care, self-harm, and uncaring parents' (Tyree 2013: 24). This list of gloom rings reminiscent of Dilley's respective list for *The Grand Budapest Hotel* cited in the previous section, and hence suggests that the two films have a similar method of playing down negativity to retain their tonal balance. This is where I take some issue. In watching *Moonrise Kingdom*, I would argue that the tone emerges as very different in regard to these various tragic elements. Where *The Grand Budapest Hotel* thrives

on a feeling of high energy surrounding its organised chaos, *Moonrise Kingdom* is by comparison a more measured and deliberate piece, where certain scenes are comic but are perhaps less effective in achieving balance with the grim situations of many characters. To understand why this is the case, I will break down some elements of the film and see how they differ to *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Many aesthetic aspects of *Moonrise Kingdom* work to deliver the film with more sobriety and reflection than *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. For instance, even in the colour palettes of each film, very different feelings are evoked. The yellow-green hues seen in *Figure 3* that shroud the world of New Penzance seem almost sickly, just slightly off-kilter from the golden blanket of nostalgia one might expect from a film centred on children. This jarring visual is of course a far cry from the lavishly appealing reds, pink-oranges and whites of Zubrowka, visible in *Figure 4*.

Figure 3- The yellow-green colour palette of Moonrise Kingdom.

Figure 4- The reddish pink-orange colour palette of The Grand Budapest Hotel.

These images, when viewed together, emphasise just how starkly juxtaposed the two different looks of these films are, and begin to hint at how they might evoke slightly different tones. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* bursts with excited pomposity, almost aggressively so, whilst *Moonrise Kingdom*'s look seems somewhat flattened and dark.

These differences between the two films continue with their vastly dissimilar use of music, despite possessing the same composer, Alexandre Desplat. When writing about the musical soundscape of quirky films, James MacDowell writes that, 'The pitch, repetitiveness, and insistent prettiness of much of this music often lends it a sound and feel reminiscent of the tinkling purity of a child's music box' (MacDowell 2010: 8). The jingling bells and whistles of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*'s soundtrack match this description magnificently, especially in the recurring main theme which proudly drips with inquisitive mischief. Yet *Moonrise Kingdom* seems to subvert this. Its scenes are accompanied by awestriking classical pieces, with heavy brass and percussion, and the scout troupe are followed everywhere they go by a stiff looping drum beat. Instead of the 'child's music box' referenced by MacDowell, Suzy, played by Kara Hayward, carries a record player on which she can instigate far more

dramatic, diegetic musical pieces. I would argue that the sum of these parts is a more serious soundtrack that holds back the film's more playful comic potential as part of the quirky sensibility.

Thus, in both sight and sound Moonrise Kingdom appears to fall short of the exact 'knife-edge' (MacDowell 2010: 13) tonal balance that MacDowell claims quirky films possess. However, whilst this does dissolve the aspect of necessity in the title claim, I would argue that it does not invalidate it as rough, more flexible approximation. It is a curious choice of words for MacDowell in any case, as prior to his condensed conclusion, he does allow that quirky films can actually differ in the extent to which they achieve the tonal balance.

> 'I see the quirky as offering a sliding scale of representational possibilities, a spectrum upon which films can be placed closer to one end or another. Though this placement may be dictated by many things, I would suggest that an important question is a film's degree of ironic detachment from its characters' experiences.' (MacDowell 2010: 13).

MacDowell's accounting for variety here offers helpful context to the title quote, suggesting that there are a number of positions surrounding that perfect knife-edge where a quirky film's tone can comfortably sit. If there weren't, the sensibility would likely comprise of films that all felt rigidly similar and hence constrained in their potential.

To summarise this final section, I have compared the elements of Moonrise Kingdom to those of The Grand Budapest Hotel and found that there exists a significant tonal difference between the two. This does not necessarily invalidate MacDowell's claim completely, however, as he explains in his article that quirky films are on a scale which allows for varying degrees of balance between 'judgement and empathy, detachment and engagement, irony and sincerity' (MacDowell 2010: 13).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the title claim made by James MacDowell is generally accurate when applied to quirky films, but with some room for variation in the extent to which it does this. I have discovered this through two case studies of films by Wes Anderson, one of which impressively crafted the perfect precarious synthesis imagined in the claim, the other falling slightly short of a complete balance.

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Filmography

Moonrise Kingdom (2012, Wes Anderson)

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014, Wes Anderson)

Word Count: 4,720