

CROSSTALK
ABSURD RELATIONSHIPS, COMMUNICATION AND
ENTRAPMENT IN THE FILMS OF WES ANDERSON.

Ruchika Gurung

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School of Art, Media and American Studies

University of East Anglia

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to advance a more nuanced understanding of the Absurd in contemporary independent cinema. My research adopts a close textual analysis to deliberate the ways in which contemporary American cinema utilises themes of the Absurd particularly within its independent film cinema. Applying themes from the literature of the Theatre of the Absurd to the filmography of Wes Anderson, my thesis argues that his films demonstrate absurdist themes. I hypothesize that there are thematic parallels can be seen between Wes Anderson's films and the Theatre of the Absurd. Through the portrayal of dysfunctional human relationships and fragmented language particularly, Wes Anderson's films reimagine the Absurd human condition in a contemporary context.

Through the demonstration of absurdist characteristics in Anderson's film, this thesis provides a thematic framework of analysis that can subsequently be applied to other contemporary independent films. As a result, this research makes a unique contribution to the field of independent cinema by demonstrating the contemporary social relevance of the Absurd; themes conventionally associated with a specific literary era. In doing so, this research reconceptualises the ways in which the Absurd can be discussed, demonstrating that the themes can be applied outside of its literary tradition.

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Introduction

Understanding the Absurd in the Context of Contemporary

Independent Film

STÉPHANIE: Why me?

STÉPHANE: Because everyone else is boring. And because you are different.

You don't like me, Stèphanie?

(The Science of Sleep, 2006)

Stéphane's (Gael García Bernal) heartfelt words to Stéphanie (Charlotte Gainsbourg) in Michel Gondry's surreal *The Science of Sleep* (2006) echo a prevailing sentiment in the universe of contemporary independent or indie¹ cinema. Stéphane is unlike any regular man, with his inability to differentiate between his dreams and reality, and Stéphanie is mysterious; being "different" is what brings them together, and being "boring" is a devastating crime in this fantastical universe. Oddly enough, it was after encountering the surreal world of Stéphane that I watched Anderson's unusual coming of age film *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012). In the film Suzy (Kara Hayward) echoes a similar sentiment when she tells Sam (Jared Gilman), an orphan, that all her favourite book characters are orphans and she always wanted to be one, stating "I think your lives are more special." In both films, being "different," "special", and not "boring", are desirable traits, leading the characters into dysfunctional behaviours and dysfunctional relationships. It was this dysfunction that caught my eye, a predominant theme in both films and subsequently, a central theme of this thesis.

¹ I use the terms 'independent' and 'indie' interchangeably with regard to independent film because, along with providing some variety, it is useful to utilise the term 'indie', while referring to phrases such as 'indie authorship', 'indie film culture' and 'indie film scholarship'.

This thesis does not suggest that the aesthetic or narrative styles of both directors are similar. Gondry's inventive and eccentric visual style portrays the harsher realities of romance (Woods, 2014, p.36); while Anderson's films, with their bold colours and deadpan expressiveness, are concerned with innocence and childhood (Kunze, 2014a, pp.2-3). Both films are unashamedly unique, filled with eccentric characters who are far from being "boring". Derek Hill writes that both directors are preoccupied with showcasing 'an adolescent's frenetic energy and wiry imagination mixed with a sense of melancholy and emotional defeatism that only comes with age' (2008, p.135). *Sleep*'s visual and narrative world is different to *Moonrise*, and yet both films centre around love stories, use stop-motion animation, are concerned with child protagonists and address broader issues of arrested development, and dysfunctional relationships.

Stéphane escapes from his unsatisfying mundane reality into the dream world of Stéphane TV², described by Gondry as an 'antechamber of purgatory' (Woods, 2014, p.38); similarly, Sam (*Moonrise*) attempts to escape his lonely life by going on an adventure with Suzy to find their own "land". Numerous other (indie) films share similar themes with Anderson, and while there will be references to a few in this introduction, I will not be discussing them in-depth. Despite my profound love for Gondry's work, Anderson's ability to portray loneliness and dysfunction is where my research interests lie. It is an ability that this thesis proposes is characteristically Absurd in its exposition.

² A dream world he escapes to in his sleep.

Anderson's oeuvre has developed a loyal fan base and has secured his position as an innovative and influential director in the 21st century. His films contain humour seemingly derived from their inability to contain dysfunction and their preoccupation with the stunted emotional growth of their characters; themes that I assert are Absurd. My use of the term 'Absurd' is in association with a larger tradition of theatre, art and subsequently, film that has questioned institutional and social structures through critical and anarchic discourses. I apply Martin Esslin's conceptualisation of the Theatre to the Absurd (TotA) to the works of Anderson asserting that his oeuvre consistently displays absurdist themes; thus, the concept of the Absurd will not be based on its generic use³, which dominates popular discourses surrounding comedy. Subsequently, I use 'Absurd', with a capital 'A', to relate to its philosophical and dramaturgical conceptualisation; I will also be using terms like absurdist and absurdism in relation with the TotA alone. This is to create a distinction with the generic term 'absurd'.

This thesis presents a study of Anderson's aesthetic and thematic style. The central proposition is that his films innovate key stylistics and ideological tendencies associated with the TotA. This introduction serves to justify how Anderson's work can be said to represent absurdist themes. Besides giving an overview of the key aesthetic and thematic qualities that define his films, I will explain the absurdist philosophy that offers an alternative and inimitable analysis of his aesthetic and thematic concerns. This introduction will discuss the function of Anderson's distinct

³ The generic definition of absurd by the *Oxford Dictionary* (online) reads, 'Wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate; Arousing amusement or derision; ridiculous'.

tableau style, which aligns itself with absurdist concerns, portrayed in his films and his position within scholarship on contemporary American indie cinema.

Wes Anderson's world.

Wes or Wesley Wales Anderson⁴ was born on the 1st of May 1969, in Houston, Texas to a father who owned an advertising firm and a mother who was an archaeologist and then went into real estate. A child of divorce with two siblings, the experience of his own fractured and dysfunctional family, appears persistently in his films. Jesse Mayshark, in *Post-Pop Cinema: The Search for Meaning in New America Film*, writes it would be 'glib' to associate themes of familial dysfunction to Anderson's personal life. His interests lie in 'documenting a particular social niche- an eccentric, affluent, precocious slice of America, self-absorbed and often immature, but not, on the whole, badly intentioned' (2007, p.116): a summation of all his characters in every film.

This thesis credits Anderson with the conscious adoption of a distinctive approach to filmmaking, which makes his work instantly recognisable. While the theories on authorship are disputed, there are scholars such as Bordwell (2003) who argue that art-house cinema constitutes a distinctive mode which defines itself against the magnanimous Hollywood style of filmmaking by foregrounding its authors, who usually write and direct their films. Although Anderson's oeuvre does not directly mirror the aesthetics of art-house cinema, his distinctive mode is situated against a conventional Hollywood aesthetic, with every film consistent in its thematic and aesthetic style establishing him as an auteur.

⁴ Henceforth referred to as Anderson.

The auteur theory is attributed to Andrew Sarris, who in his essay 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962', states that the distinguishable personality of the director and his consistency of characteristic style serves as his signature (cited in Ashby, 2013a, p.2). Notably, Anderson's films are overtly stylised, and bear similarities in terms of themes, colour palettes and even tend to have similar actors/actresses in them. While authorship is overtly collective artisanal process of making films, some approaches contend authorship is produced through cultural apparatuses and technologies, such as interview, criticism, publicity and curriculum (King and Miller, p.478) . Anderson has been culturally branded as an auteur due to his unique and extremely controlled approach to filmmaking, however his films also become a collective body of different artists consistently inculcating their aesthetics to the films: like his cinematographer Robert Yeoman.

Arved Ashby writes that by the 20th-century authorship was 'largely defunct as cultural institution and as an intellectual construct' (2013a, p.1). Contemporary approaches to authorship have attempted to shift the definition to refer to the conditions of the marketplace. Scholars like Timothy Corrigan write of the commercialism and marketing of the auteur; this includes utilising the name of the auteur before the film title, in this case *Budapest*, aimed 'to guarantee a relationship between audience and movie whereby an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand name vision', through which contextual meanings predetermine the way a movie is viewed and received (2003, p.97). Thus, the brand name of an Anderson film works to draw audiences based on his auteur brand. The fact that he exerts significant influence in the filmmaking process and given his predilection to

produce unique films and of a certain style, serve the purpose in this thesis of referring to Anderson as the author of the films.

Scholars like Pam Cook deliberate on authorship bringing into discussion the works of Andre Bazin who criticised the idea of a body of work being attributed to an individual auteur. Bazin called for a more sociological approach to film that takes into account that individuals are subject to social and historical constraints, given that his emphasis was on society wherein individuals and social forces are interdependent (2007a, p. 390). This thesis specifically does not approach Anderson's work through an auteurial lens because the focus is on addressing the nature of absurdity in film and put forward the idea of a Cinema of the Absurd. Thus, Anderson's works are being discussed purely through the lens of the Absurd, in order to throw light on other independent film that also portray absurdist themes and might be conceptualised under the Absurd. While for the purpose of demonstrating absurdism in film, I have chosen to analyse his body of work as it consistently addresses absurdist themes, Anderson has been looked at as an auteur due to his meticulous aesthetics, emotionally stagnant characters and his unique approach to storytelling.

Mark Browning, in *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matters*, describes Anderson as a rare example of a contemporary director who has 'significant input in a number of areas of production, resulting in a distinctive style, which links his films together and separates them from the work of others' (2011, p.ix). Anderson wrote and directed his first film with Owen Wilson, titled *Bottle Rocket*; the opening sequences were initially shot as a short film which was screened at the Sundance Festival in 1993. The short was later adapted into a feature film in 1996. Anderson has to date made eight feature-

length films: *Bottle Rocket* (1996), *Rushmore* (1998), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007), *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014)⁵. His short films are *Bottle Rocket* (1994), *Hotel Chevalier* (2007) and *Cousin Ben Troop Screening with Jason Schwartzman* (2012); he has also made several advertising shorts for brands like Prada, American Express and H&M, among others.

Although this thesis is not an auteur study, given that this project looks at Anderson's body of work to date, to provide some context, I will briefly discuss him as an auteur. In this thesis, I credit Anderson with the adoption of a distinctive and consistent approach to filmmaking at the textual level, one that is intended to facilitate authorial autonomy. Specific conceptions of cinematic authorship underpin the position I adopt, and I broadly assume the view that Anderson has agency, implying that he is the author and creative source of his film. This is an inaccurate postulation. Film as a medium is an amalgamation of creative sources that includes the director, actors, cinematographers, editors, art departments, animators, and so on. Anderson writes and directs his films, but most have been in collaboration with Owen Wilson (*Bottle, Rushmore, Tenenbaums*), Noah Baumbach (*Life Aquatic, Fantastic*), Roman Coppola (*Darjeeling, Moonrise*), Jason Schwartzman (*Darjeeling*) and Hugo Guinness (*Budapest*). Additionally, *Fantastic* is adapted from a Roald Dahl's book of the same name and *Budapest* is inspired by the writings of Stefan Zweig.

⁵ Henceforth, for simplicity, the films will be referred to as *Bottle, Rushmore, Tenenbaums, Life Aquatic, Darjeeling, Fantastic, Moonrise* and *Budapest*.

The problem of the auteur theory arrives in terms of the legalities surrounding the medium of film being an entity consisting of numerous parts, both technical and creative. Robert Yeoman, Anderson's cinematographer in every film⁶ along with his consistent band of actors, are all authors of the film in their own right. Some of his films have narrators introducing the characters and, in the case of *Tenenbaums* and *Moonrise*, a narrator is present with the sole purpose of being the narrator. David Bordwell writes the narrational tool works to function as a noticeable external author through whom we gain access to the film (2003, pp.42-43). Anderson employs this tool in *Tenenbaums*, *Moonrise*, *Budapest*, and in *Life Aquatic*, Zissou plays an auteur of his documentary films. Ashby describes Anderson as a 'prime example of the early 21st-century ironist-auteur, effects cluttered and digressive auteurism in his big-budget features' (2013b, p.183). He writes that Anderson's digressive auteurism is word-obsessed and is 'not only narrated but heavily involved with the printed word' (p.190). His use of subtitles and intertitles, mostly in Futura font create an illusion of storytelling, drawing attention to the artifice of his cinematic world. Devin Oregon goes a step further and writes that Anderson is aware of the role of the author and the set of contradictions that are central to this position. His distinctively solipsistic visual and narrative style is unconventional and awkward, and he has used his distinct tableau aesthetic to explore themes of dysfunction, loneliness and belonging. His auteurship with its 'consistencies in approach and theme' (MacDowell, 2014, p.153) are discussed ranging from his use of music (Boschi and McNelis, 2012; Ashby, 2013b), his conscious use of paternal and psychoanalytical themes (Gooch, 2014) and the use of his auteur persona and cinematic signature while promoting his film (Dorey, 2012).

⁶ Excluding *Fantastic* which was shot by Tristan Oliver.

Anderson's film style has been paid homage to and parodied by various fans and television shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, with their mock trailer for a Wes Anderson horror film trailer, aired on October 26, 2013, titled *The Midnight Coterie of Sinister Intruders*, and *Family Guy* in their episode aired on November 5, 2017 titled 'Three Directors'. While the sketches alternate between parodying his style and paying homage to it, solidifying the impression that his style is recognisable and influential (Kunze 2014a, p.2), from his famous doll-house shot to his blank delivery of dialogue and emotion, Anderson has established a style that is unique and can be called his trademark. This has in turn established numerous other parodies of his works online, all of which address his distinctive style.

In Anderson's heavily referential worlds, the viewer is afforded an engaging and empathetic look at characters inspired by his personal life, literature, film and pop-culture. There are overt references to Jacques-Yves Cousteau, and his films contain references from the French and American cinema of the 1960s and 70s. His use of music, invoking 'generic feelings of nostalgia, [and] more personal memories are targeted with songs that inhabit an affectionate space in popular memory' (Boschi and McNelis, 2012, p.31). Derek Hill aptly writes that Anderson's films are 'in love with actors and dialogue, as well as steeped in a conscious appreciation of the relevance of literature, music, painting, and cinema, as they relate to their human counterparts and shape their realities' (2008, p.85).

Anderson's inspirations⁷ for his films come from all over the world, and his most notable influences are by various filmmakers from the French New Wave, with accusations of Anderson being a 'francophile' (McClintock, 2014). Interestingly, the French New Wave directors Anderson's films reference, like François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, were associated with authors of existentialist and absurdist works⁸, influenced by the cultural heritage and invocation of the past that they shared. The characters portrayed in Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à part* (1964), can be seen in the portrayal of Anderson's characters in his *Prada: Candy* series (2013) advertising the Prada Candy L'Eau fragrance (Lendrum, 2013; Pithers, 2013). The shorts directed by Anderson and Roman Coppola includes three short films starring the delightfully chic Candy (Léa Seydoux) being wooed by Julius (Rodolphe Pauly) and Gene (Peter Gadiot). The two friends are seen fighting for Candy's affection, as the three are shown spending time together in a romantic and utopian, sixties-inspired Paris, doused in the usual deadpan straight dialogue synonymous with Anderson's films. The references to *Jules et Jim* are undeniable and in its recreation with Anderson's deadpan aesthetic style, creates a provocative image of desire.

⁷ His incredible list of influences include Jean Renoir, Godard, Louis Malle, Luis Buñuel, Federico Fellini, John Huston, Ernst Lubitsch, Preston Sturges, Peter Bogdanovich, Roman Polanski, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Scholars and critics have also referred to the films of Edmund Goulding, Alfred Hitchcock, Satyajit Ray, Jacques Demy, George Lucas, Richard Lester and Martin Scorsese as being influential to his oeuvre (Mottram, 2006; Browning, 2011; Seitz, 2013). Anderson's childhood was spent watching The Pink Panther and James Bond films. In an interview with The Talks, Anderson claimed, 'John Huston, Orson Welles, Jean Renoir, Roman Polanski, Stanley Kubrick, Fellini, and Bergman – and that's how I was formed as a filmmaker. Those are the biggest influences' (The Talks, 2015).

⁸ After the World War II and with the Algerian War, France was a country rapidly embracing a political, ideological and cultural shift. The French New Novelists and the New Wave sprung into dominance around this period with many filmmakers being associated with them. Lynn A. Higgins writes, these artists joined the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Leiris, André Breton and Tristan Tzara, 'recognized cultural leaders in signing the "Manifesto of the 121": 'a 1960 letter of protest in defense of military conscriptees who refused to serve in Algeria' (1996, p.7).

Another influence that Anderson has stated is *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965) and the works of Bill Melendez. Anderson's short *Bottle Rocket* included Vince Guaraldi's 'Snowflakes' soundtrack from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*; there are numerous references made to Charlie Brown and Snoopy in *Rushmore*, with the protagonist Max sporting characteristics from both: Max's winter outfit resembles Browns (Seitz, 2013, p.101), he writes his plays on a typewriter, just like Snoopy⁹. Anderson's other films can also be seen drawing on the characters of Bill Melendez, with characters finding themselves "arrested in some dream space between childhood and maturity"¹⁰ (Crow, 2015). Orson Welles is another prominent influence; both Welles and Anderson are known to use the same actors in their films, sharing a similar element of control in the film narrative and their preoccupation with showing the fall of characters once considered geniuses¹¹. The various influences to his films create an image complex and multifaceted in its portrayal of characters and relationships; from the fascination with childhood from Melendez's work to the failed geniuses of Welles, Anderson's film internalise these traits creating unique characters and characteristics that are essentially Andersonian.

Indie, smart, new sincerity and quirky.

Anderson's filmography has found a place in the disputed space of American indie cinema or Indiewood. Before moving on to discuss contemporary scholarship on

⁹ Furthermore, Miss Cross's (Olivia Williams) depicting a combination of Charlie's teacher and the unattainable red-haired girl, and Max is a working-class barber's son, and the image of his father directly pays homage to Charles Schulz.

¹⁰ Taken from a video essay written, narrated and directed by Seitz embedded in J. Crow's (2015) article 'Wes Anderson's Cinematic Influences: Video Series Reveals His Roots in Truffaut, Welles, Scorsese & More'.

¹¹ See Anderson's characters Max (*Rushmore*), Zissou (*Life Aquatic*), Royal, Margot, Richie and Chas Tenenbaum (*Tenenbaums*) and Welles' characters Kane (*Citizen Kane*), George (*The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942), Captain Hank (*Touch of Evil*, 1958), Falstaff (*Chimes at Midnight*, 1965), etc.

Anderson and his association with the Absurd, I will briefly refer to his oeuvre as a part of indie cinema. Alexander Payne famously issued in an article for *Variety* magazine, a ‘Declaration of Independents’, writing, ‘I want a cinema that is intelligent, uplifting and human, and that serves... as a mirror, not as an impossible or fraudulent consumer-oriented projection’ (2004, n.p.). Payne’s passionate address calls for filmmakers to create stories that connect people and explore ‘the lives of ordinary citizens, independent by inspiration and patriotic in its social commitment’ (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2016, p.22). Previously referring to cinema seen as an alternative, even controversial, indie films in the 1990s were becoming increasingly commodified and infiltrated by dominant forms of contemporary capitalism (King, 2009, p.9).

Emanuel Levy’s definition supports the concept of indie as ‘a fresh, low-budget movie with a gritty style and off-beat subject matter that expresses the filmmaker’s personal vision’ (1999, p.2). The most basic definition of American independent cinema is on its filmmaking practices which consist of mostly low-budget projects by younger filmmakers with strong personal visions, not influenced or financed by major conglomerates that dominate the mainstream American film industry (Tzioumakis, 2012, p.1). Both these basic definitions fail to encompass the complexity of the indie spectrum and as a result, the complexity of Anderson as an independent director; given that his films, while expressing his ‘personal vision’, are financed by speciality divisions of major conglomerates.

According to Geoff King’s book, *Indie 2.0*, ‘indie’ suggests ‘a particular sensibility or set of sensibilities not just a separation from the production of the major studios, even if its boundaries might often remain somewhat fuzzy and it might include considerable

variety (2014, pp.2-3). In King's analysis indie films are considered in relation to their distance from the conventional mainstream at various interconnected industrial and textual levels; a space that exists between the more conventional mainstream and the more radical avant-garde or underground (King, 2005, p.10).

These discussions of the term 'indie' refer to the growing influence of independent filmmakers who have been producing their films through the commercial channels of Hollywood- referred to as the Indiewood¹² generation. The overlapping line between the independent sector and Hollywood exist in the form of the speciality divisions owned by Hollywood studios, which are seen to have gained control over the sector (King, 2014, p.7). As a result, filmmakers like Anderson come under the Indiewood umbrella, especially given his production and distribution history of working with conglomerates like Fox Searchlight Pictures and Disney subsidiaries, Touchstone Pictures and Buena Vista.

In referring to Anderson as an indie filmmaker in this thesis, I refer to Yannis Tzioumakis' approach to the term. To navigate through the problems of defining American independent cinema, he approaches it as a discourse, suggesting the boundaries of the term 'independent' are 'produced and legitimated', over time, by different 'socially authorised institutions' (2006, p.11). Tzioumakis notes that since the 1990s, one of the biggest contributors to the discourse of independent cinema is

¹² Indiewood was coined, according to King, in the mid-1990s, referring to 'a part of the American film spectrum in which distinctions between Hollywood and the independent sector appeared to have become blurred' (2009, p.3). He addresses the relevance of the online site *IndieWIRE* in creating a reputation for the term, an article on the site written by Hernandez (2006) attributes the coinage of the term to a 1997 article On D.I.Y. filmmaking written by filmmaker Sarah Jacobson (2000). Biskind writes that the term was coined to describe 'the new reality' of the 'convergence between studio movie and indie film', which he writes created an identity and ideological crisis among the independent films (2004, p.194).

the major studios who succeeded in appropriating the term as a marketing feature in the 90s from smaller distributors. This discourse is also shaped by institutions including critics, commentators, industry personnel, academics and filmmakers (ibid., p.13). Thus, by this approach, Anderson's films can be included in the independent sector, having been constructed as indie/independent by various institutions, including critics, academics and commentators on his films.

Scholars such as Donald Lyons (1994), Emanuel Levy (1999), Peter Biskind (2004), Geoff King (2005; 2009; 2014), Derek Hill (2008), Sharon Waxman (2005), Yannis Tzioumakis (2006), James Mottram (2006), Jessica Winter (2006), Jesse Fox Mayshark (2007), Michael Z. Newman (2011), Claire Perkins (2013), Sherry B. Ortner (2013), Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla (2016), and the edited collections of Jim Hillier (2001), Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (2005), and Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (2013), all discuss the changing nature of American independent cinema post-1990s, its industrial heritage, and the categorisation of such films as intelligent, rebellious and averse to normative narrative structures and the clean-closed happy endings that mainstream Hollywood has so zealously embraced.

Much of the literature cited above refers to industrial matters regarding independent cinema. Although such an approach to Anderson's oeuvre would be an insightful project to discuss with relation to wider discourses of industry, this thesis approaches his cinema from a textual perspective, focusing on form, tone, themes and social identity. The main reason for this approach is because of the interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter and my research interests. This thesis draws on arguments from literary and theatre studies to inform its analysis of Anderson's films. In doing so this

thesis aims to provide a unique analysis of the films of Anderson, a thematic framework that can subsequently be applied to other independent films.

The mid-1990s and 2000s witnessed a wave of filmmakers seemingly curious and reflective of the human condition, using their narratives to weave stories of loneliness and outsiders, trapped in dysfunctional spaces and relationships: Anderson belongs to this era of filmmakers. Sharon Waxman briefly mentions Anderson, as part of the 1990s filmmaking generation, who as ‘the rebels of the 1990s shattered the status quo, set new boundaries in the art of moviemaking, and managed to bend the risk-averse studio structure to their will’ (2006, p.x). His filmography is full of contentious, eccentric and rebellious characters. Anderson declares, ‘Usually the characters are inspired by a combination of people and, if they're worth even thinking about as a character, they've got something wrong with them’ (Babb, 2012, n.p.).

Anderson’s cinematic worlds have a distinctive feel, achieved through a mingling of styles and eras: ‘1950s prep-school literature, 1960s rock ‘n’ roll, 1970s television, all filtered through an early twentieth-century fondness for the realms of boys’ adventure stories’ (Mayshark, 2007, p.117). His predominantly American anti-heroes play on their commonplace and ordinarily unattractive qualities, projected in their appearance, behaviour and expression, creating character representations that are ironic, self-conscious and are ‘special by their very non-specialness’ (Thomas, 2012, p.99). While his aesthetic style has developed extensively towards world-making with childish conviction, the reality his world portrays is a ‘vulgarity, a cruelty, and a necessity’ (Washburn, 2015, p.11). In these detailed worlds, characters create illusions to escape

into, and despite his adoration for these meticulous worlds ‘he always allows his beautiful worlds to be shattered’ (ibid.).

This thesis focuses on an analysis of the textual features employed in Anderson’s films to build his elaborate worlds. The features discussed relate to form, tone, genre and social identity. At these levels, his films resemble a large number of indie films. Anderson’s work conforms to the conventions of Jeffrey Sconce’s (2002; 2006) and Claire Perkins’ (2013) ‘smart cinema’. The label applies to a variety of indie films including Todd Solondz’s *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), Alexander Payne’s *Citizen Ruth* (1996) to Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999). Elucidated by Sconce as a sensibility at work in a group of films that are disparate but ideologically sympathetic; these films vary in their production and financing and are marketed in ‘symbolic opposition to the imaginary mass-cult monster of mainstream, commercial, Hollywood cinema’ (2012, p.351). Sconce distinguishes the smart film from the art cinema of Bergman, mainstream Hollywood and DIY indie films, based on the impression of intelligence it establishes: its ‘smartness’ (ibid.).

Anderson incorporates the use of stylistic features associated with the smart convention, these include the use of stocks shots associated with smart cinema; such as the 'awkward couple' shot, which depicts a couple shot in tableau form separated by blank space; and the 'awkward dining' shot, which features long-shots of families trapped in their dining rooms (Sconce, 2002, p.364). These features contribute to: ‘the cultivation of a 'blank' style and incongruous narration; a fascination with 'synchronicity' as a principle of narrative organisation; a related thematic interest in random fate; a focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of

miscommunication and emotional dysfunction; and a recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity' (Sconce, 2002, p.358). Anderson's films subscribe to all these elements, along with the tendency of smart cinema to engage in ironic detachment and take an avid interest in the concept of youth, with interest in a culture where adulthood is not necessarily something achieved with age (Perkins, 2013, pp.9-10). The blank style, widely used by Anderson, is described as 'an attempt to convey a film's story, no matter how sensationalistic, disturbing or bizarre, with a sense of dampened affect' (Sconce, 2002, p.359). In *Rushmore*, Blume (Bill Murray) finds solace and behaves like Max, the Tenenbaum adult siblings frozen in their adolescent years, Zissou's (Bill Murray) irresponsible and erratic persona in *Life Aquatic*. All these characters refuse to actively engage in adulthood, trapped in their emotional stagnancy and dysfunction. Their engagement with a blank style creates a dampening effect that contributes to their apathetic personalities.

Sconce describes smart cinema as 'dark comedy and disturbing drama born of ironic distance; all that is not positive and 'dumb'' (2002. p.358), stating that contemporary smart cinema, for the most part, relies on classical narrative strategies, expressing a tone that is critical of bourgeois taste and culture. Two themes, dominant in the 1990s smart film, which Anderson films continually portray are, 'interpersonal alienation within the white middle class (usually focused on the family) and alienation within contemporary consumer culture' (ibid, p.364). For example in *Darjeeling* the brothers find themselves alienated from their realities and struggling to piece together their lives in a foreign culture. Furthermore, Anderson's use of objects like the Louis Vuitton suitcases and a ridiculous amount of prescription drugs on their spiritual trip provides a sardonic view of spirituality through the eyes of American tourists.

Like other filmmakers associated with the smart film, Anderson is overly conscious of presentation and what objects and clothes signify. Sconce uses the term ‘decade blending’¹³ to describe the way in which Gen-X has a proclivity of indiscriminately combined clothing (styles) from previous decades to create a personal style (or mood) (2002, p.365). For example, Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow), Richie (Luke Wilson) and Ellie’s (Owen Wilson) outfits in *Tenenbaums* are a mismatch of styles, eras and celebrities, creating an inherently distinctive style, while depicting characters going nowhere.

Another term attached to Anderson is the ‘new sincerity’, a term taken from Jim Collins (1993) and appropriated by Mark Olsen (1999) and Warren Buckland (2012) to analyse Anderson’s films. First credited with using the term in understanding genre in film studies, Collins states the term ‘rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity’ that has arisen due to the media-saturated landscape of contemporary American culture (1993, p.243). According to Buckland, Collins sets ‘up an opposition between hyperconscious postmodern irony and the new sincerity’ (2012, p.2); both he argues are responses to the “array”: a term he uses to signify ‘the perpetual circulation and recirculation of signs that form the fabric of postmodern cultural life’ (Collins, 1993, p.246). Instead of mastering this array with irony, films associated with the new sincerity reject it by avoiding this media-saturated environment and instead pursuing sincerity and lost authenticity to recover a lost sense of purity.

¹³ Sconce cites Coupland, D. (1992) *Generation X: Tales for an accelerated culture*. London: Abacus.

Anderson's work does not implicitly subscribe to Collin's definition; Buckland writes it implies 'sincerity' and not 'new sincerity', with the new of the New Sincerity signifying a response to postmodern irony and nihilism; this is not a rejection of irony and not a nostalgic return to a pure old sincerity. Thus, instead of rejecting irony, the new sincerity integrates postmodern irony and cynicism; operating in union with irony (2012, p.2). However, Olsen differs from prevailing opinion that Anderson's films exhibit a dry and ironic style, writing that he 'does not view his characters from some distant Olympus of irony' (1999, p.12).

Anderson's films adhere to specific distinguishing features of the new sincerity, including a move back in time from the corruption and influence of media culture towards a lost authenticity which is defined simultaneously as an uncontaminated 'folk culture of elemental purity' and a site of 'successfully narcissistic projection' (Collins, 1993, p.259). The films of Anderson contain numerous narcissistic characters living in a simpler time and devoid of the effects of media and culture. Their isolated lives portrayed with irony and cynicism in his films. Engaging in an ironic tone, Sconce suggests, cause a split between audiences who 'get it' and those who do not; with the entire purpose of the ironic address being to 'ally oneself with sympathetic peers and to distance oneself from the vast 'other' audience' (2002, p.352). Apart from using an ironic tone to create a divide in his audience, Anderson uses it to distance his characters from emotion and by default distancing his audience from it as well.

Ashby writes, the use of irony in Anderson's films is an 'all-enveloping irony suited to a time when truths are relative and conflicting' (2013b, p.187). Ashby points to scenes from *Life Aquatic* to discuss Anderson's use of irony. For example, the utterly

ridiculous revenge plot and approach to destroying a rare creature, despite Zissou's profession as a celebrated oceanographer. Commenting on Zissou's unexpected action-hero moment when pirates attack his ship, bringing attention to the use of irony, which up until then was 'an irony of inactivity'. Zissou is only ever active and committed when he takes up violence against another creature, a stark ethical choice given his profession (ibid.). Ashby suggests that the scene of Zissou's surprising bravado is one of undirected irony: it does not offer any message and ridicules nothing. King cautions that the concept of the new sincerity may conclude on an 'exaggeration of the extent to which irony was ever a single or dominant note, either in indie film or American culture at large' (2011, p.148). I believe Anderson uses the scene to portray the complexity of Zissou's narcissism his dysfunctional reality; his use of irony exhibits the dysfunctional state of the human condition, cynically and yet unavoidably humorous.

The term 'quirky' (Perren, 2008; Hawkins, 2005; Hirschorn, 2007; Newman, 2011; Thomas, 2012; MacDowell, 2010) is most commonly associated with Anderson's oeuvre, academically, by critics and his audience. James MacDowell describes it as a sensibility¹⁴, he enlists the following conventions: the use of comic styles, such as deadpan, comedy-of-embarrassment and slapstick; a 'self-consciousness' visual style, hinting at artificiality; thematic concern with childhood and innocence; and, a tone that differentiates between ironic distance and sincere engagement (2013, p.54). The employment of different comic styles invites the audience to remain emotionally

¹⁴ MacDowell states he uses the term sensibility 'because it can be identified less reliably by iconographic or structural features than by the more ineffable matters of tone, mood' and (citing Spicer's (2002) work on *Film Noir*) 'a particular way of looking at the world' (2013, p.54).

removed and emotionally engaged with the fiction; creating a fictional word that is both artificial and believable (MacDowell, 2012, p.12).

Anderson illustrates the quirky visual style through his highly self-conscious use of static, flat-looking and planimetric (medium-long) shots, which are perfectly symmetrical, depicting characters looking straight ahead (Bordwell, 2007). Furthermore, Anderson incorporates meta-cinematic techniques associated with the quirky aesthetic (MacDowell, 2012), some of which include using theatrical devices like curtains (*Rushmore*), characters narrating stories in the film (*Life Aquatic*) and the blurring of lines between characters and real-life counterparts (*Darjeeling*).

A significant feature of the quirky that Anderson invests in is the importance of innocence and children (Orgeron, 2007, Piechota; 2006; Sabo, 2010; Lorentzen, 2010; Beck, 2013; MacDowell, 2012; 2014). For instance, his seventh feature *Moonrise*, like his other films, is ‘about youth, by adults, for adults about a period in the past when adults of today were children becoming adolescents’ (Beck, 2013, p.90). Anderson’s narratives occasionally feature quirky traits such as young children or adolescents who represent a ‘tension between youth and its imminent loss’ (Scouts in *Moonrise*); objects associated with childhood (toy soldiers in *Bottle*); and adults longing for their childhood with ‘childhood items fetishistically retained’ (Margot’s book of plays in *Tenenbaums*) (MacDowell, 2012, pp.9-10).

Anderson is ‘less interested in children than with childhood as an abstract concept’ (MacDowell, 2014, p.156). Children behave like adults and adults being unable to transition into adulthood, behave like children. Anderson creates complex worlds that

centre on dysfunction and an innate melancholy with the world. The American smart cinema shares many concerns with both the new sincerity and the quirky sensibility. This cinema has gradually displaced the 'more activist emphasis on the 'social politics' of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s art cinema', replacing it 'by concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture' (Sconce, 2012, p.352).

Albeit, Anderson's cinematic social worlds are limited, tending to explore white privilege and an American (upper) middle-class demographic. Scholars and critics like Derek Hill (2008), Rachel Dean-Ruzicka (2013), Joshua Gooch (2014) and Jonah Weiner (2007) address this portrayal of primarily upper-class protagonists and white privilege in his films. Dean-Ruzicka writes that while Anderson does portray a variety of ethnic characters, the portrayals 'underline and emphasize the unmarked whiteness and white privilege of the primary characters' (2013, p.25). Weiner (2007) offers a biting critique of white privilege in *Slate*, stating that the 'obnoxious element' in Anderson's *Darjeeling* is the 'clumsy, discomfiting way he stages interactions between white protagonists- typically upper-class elites- and nonwhite foils- typically working class and poor' (n.p.). His regular use of Kumar Pallana and Waris Ahluwalia in supporting roles as a criminal gang member, gardener, housekeeper, cameraman, train chief steward and concierge function as background material, accentuating the privilege of the main protagonists.

In *Budapest*, Anderson attempts to correct his racial imbalance by placing Toni Revolori as Zero, one of the protagonists paired with the brilliant Ralph Fiennes as

Monsieur Gustave. Revolori is of Guatemalan descent, born in Anaheim, California and plays a character from a fictional country in the film. Regarding Zero's potentially half-Arab and half-Jew heritage, Anderson states, 'I relate him to different kinds of tribes in different ways. But we were essentially looking for an Arab' (Seitz, 2015, p.42). The ambiguity of Zero and his older counterpart, played by F. Murray Abraham¹⁵, accentuates the dramatically European persona of Gustave. Zero and Gustave's relationship is the central focus of the film, with their friendship and master-apprentice relationship placing the racially ambiguous Zero under the tutelage of the European Gustave: who establishes both his fortune and status.

These concepts discuss similar traits that align with absurdity and provide an exciting opportunity to understand Anderson's placement in indie scholarship. In other aspects, Anderson's films are distinctive within the indie and indiewood scene. On a formal level, his films emphasise on design, symmetry and artificiality; a trait he shares with other indie filmmakers. A significant distinction in Anderson's film from numerous indie films is his employment of a blank style, that along with depicting emotional detachment also showcases the withholding of emotion.

While I use these terms to highlight how Anderson's films have been discussed and utilise the concepts to allude to his work, this thesis will discuss how Anderson thematic aesthetics go beyond these terms, tapping into an Absurd sensibility that is persistent in its depiction of the human condition. Scholarship on Anderson whether associated with 'smart' cinema, new sincerity or the quirky sensibility agree on the employment of deadpan aesthetics and a blank style, ironic disengagement and a

¹⁵ Abraham born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is of mixed Assyrian and Italian American heritage.

preoccupation with innocence and childhood. This thesis argues that absurdist aesthetics incorporate these characteristics, derived from a dramaturgical construction of the Absurd. However, my argument further explores the utilisation of crosstalk and a wider depiction of the human condition in Anderson's oeuvre and suggests a study of the absurdist themes in his work leads to a more nuanced appreciation of his depictions of the human condition, emphasising his unique qualities as an auteur.

Crosstalk: definition and communication in Anderson's films.

Dialogue delivery in Anderson's film is straight, curt and emotionally stunted in manner; often beginning and ending at a point where both interlocutors cannot completely understand each other. The title of my thesis brings to the vanguard, the term 'crosstalk'. Since dysfunction is an integral theme, that I argue links both Anderson and the Absurd, this section discusses the embodiment of the dysfunctional process of communication, through the textual device of crosstalk.

Charles Wolfe writes that the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces two historical trajectories for the use of the term crosstalk- in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The former derived from theatrical stagecraft; here crosstalk has roots in the nineteenth-century minstrel shows, 'which featured a "cross-fire" passage in which an interlocutor... served as the straight man for a rapidly paced series of jokes delivered by the "end man"' (2011, p.300). Critical commentary on later theatrical forms also showcases crosstalk, influenced by comedy acts of the English music hall and the American vaudeville stage (Galassi, 1972). This kind of crosstalk surfaces in numerous plays associated with the TotA. The second definition of crosstalk concerns

processes of electrostatic induction utilised in telegraphy to refer to the unwanted transfer of signals between communication channels. Wolfe writes the likening of electrostatic noise to human speech, in 1910, began to include conversations on a telephone circuit overheard in another telephone circuit (2011, p.300). Hence, the concept of crosstalk relates to a process whereby characters are talking at one another, rather than to each other, with the aim to talk without necessarily being heard. The TotA utilises this technique for comic effect to portray the futility of communication in an Absurd world, where the purpose is often to frustrate rather than communicate.

Eugène Ionesco is a playwright commonly associated with the TotA (Esslin, 2001). His characters communicate at cross purposes, with no one responding to what the other says, even the reversal of any statement, character or, sex does not affect anything (Greshoff, 1961, p.36). The entire premise of his play, *The Bald Prima-Donna* (1971), is crosstalk. The following exchange emphasises how crosstalk functions to frustrate rather than establish meaning:

MRS SMITH: I can buy a pocket-knife for my brother, but you could not buy Ireland for your grandfather.

MR SMITH: One walks on one's feet, but one keeps warm with the aid of coal and electricity.

MR MARTIN: Sell a pig today, eat an egg tomorrow.

MRS SMITH: In real life you've got to look out of the window.

MRS MARTIN: You may sit down on the chair, when the chair hasn't any.

MR SMITH: One can always be in two places at once. (p.115)

The dialogue between the characters in the play is insignificant in providing meaning or form but is significant in affirming the existence of the characters and in creating

comic relief for the audience. It functions to reveal the character's state of mind, rather than their interest in communicating emotion, feeling or experience. Frank S. Galassi writes, the supposed logic of crosstalk comedy suggests a lack of cognitive subtlety and does not mandate the use of intellect. The comedic impact derives from a carefully paced monotony and deadpan seriousness that draws attention to the ridiculousness of the situation and dialogue, simultaneously infusing the entire routine with a sense of futility and absurdity (1972, pp.75-76). Ultimately, crosstalk performs dysfunction, presenting the real motive of communication as unachievable, due to the inability of individuals engaging in crosstalk to understand each other.

Crosstalk is adopted in Anderson's films for comic effect, portraying characters who are disillusioned, oblivious and detached from the outside world. A perfect example of crosstalk is demonstrated in his fourth feature *Life Aquatic*; after being attacked and captured by pirates, a blindfolded Zissou matter-of-factly tells the blindfolded reporter on his boat, Jane (Cate Blanchett):

ZISSOU: What a fucking nightmare. Be cool on this shit, ok, cubby? I mean, at least try to show both sides.

JANE: I need to find a baby for this father.

ZISSOU: Yeah, I think I know what you mean.

In a moment of danger, they fail to comprehend what the other is saying. The cut to medium planimetric shots of Zissou and Jane, with the sea in the background, evokes a flat, deadpan quality entirely in sync with the blank delivery of their exchange. What is perceived to be a life-threatening moment is rendered flat and without emotion, even comic.

Peter C. Kunze writes, Anderson's films have developed into easily identifiable productions due to their distinctive style, 'deadpan expressiveness, and devastating one-liners that, like poetry, find their power in their concentration' (2014a, p.2). Perhaps the most distinctive trait of his films is the dry delivery of dialogue, that according to Kunze echoes a coolness and nonchalance. This thesis argues that the form of dialogue delivery, combined with crosstalk, portrays a pervasive melancholy in his films.

Deborah J Thomas provides a clearer analysis of the use of melancholy in Anderson work, using the term 'melancomico'¹⁶ to describe the tone that Anderson's film style draws on, influenced by 'Brechtian theatrical devices of distancing in relation to performance'. The term describes a tone described as a fusion of the comic and the melancholic, is likely to 'arouse a distinct recognition of the peculiar, developed partly because of the playful use of comic irony, which veers off sharp-edged satire, and also incorporates the whimsical and poignant' (2012, p.104). This involves minimalistic and precise actor movements and gestures 'in relation to the camera's field of vision, deadpan or impassive facial expressions, and a relative sparsity of dialogue enunciated with 'flat' vocal intonations' (ibid., pp.100-101). The result is a play between empathy and distance soliciting, in the spectator, a paradoxical range of emotional responses toward both character and text. Thomas focuses on aesthetics and formal styling in character engagement and aesthetic; while she touches on the sparse dialogue articulated with flat vocal intonations in Anderson's films, the discussion is limited. The use of anticlimactic deadpan humour in the dialogue and visuals presented is what

¹⁶ Thomas writes the "melancomico"; a term possibly derived from the Italian, *melancomico* and supposedly coined by Italian film director Carlo Verdone' (2012, p.104).

establishes Anderson's style and helps understand his characters and their relationships in his films. The use of crosstalk signifies a larger trend of dysfunction that is rampant in Anderson's dollhouse cinematic worlds: an indicator of absurdity.

The Absurd: definition and historical lineage

'Was I ever lovable? Do not misunderstand my question, I am not asking you if you loved me, we know all about that, I am asking you if you found me lovable- at one stage.'

- Winnie

The quote, taken from Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*¹⁷ (1979), addresses an important theme of the Absurd: Winnie cries out to be understood and appreciated by Willie, and make sense of her world. The need to belong is a recurring theme in Absurd literature. On the one hand, *Happy Days* portrays the daily activities of the couple, Winnie and Willie, and it also explores the conundrum faced by individuals trying to make sense of their identities and their desires in a world where they struggle to find meaning. Reminiscent of the confinement of the characters in Beckett's *Endgame*¹⁸ (2009) and the sparse, bleak world of *Waiting for Godot*¹⁹, Winnie is confined in the exact centre of the mound, throughout the play.

¹⁷ Henceforth I will be indicating the original performance and publishing dates for the plays. This also includes the original publishing date of the text I am using. First performed in 1961 in Cherry Lane Theatre, New York and published in 1961 (this version 1963).

¹⁸ First performed in 1957 at the Royal Court Theatre, London and published in 1957 (this version 1958).

¹⁹ First performed in 1952 at the Théâtre de Babylone, Paris and published in 1952 (this version 1956)

The play with its sparse aesthetics ‘embodies a concern with the pain of the past in both its plot/content and in its form/style’ (Weiss, 2010, p.42), centred around Winnie’s erratic monologues about her memories and her entrapment. She indulges in crosstalk with her partner Willie and ponders over the meaning and purpose of life; in her dysfunctional behaviour and relationship, she is unable to escape her life and thus, waiting only to be greeted by the same series of (and lack of) events. In the recreation of sparse worlds, Beckett ‘presents his vision of modernity not by showing us what life is but rather by showing us what it is not’ (Alpaugh, 1966, p.202). With the utilisation of this static, uncluttered environment, the characters become the sole focus of the narrative. This minimalism is not an uncommon scenario in absurdist drama, the scenarios change, but the ambiguity of space and confinement are often present in the plays of the TotA.

The central proposition of this thesis is that Anderson’s films portray key stylistics and ideological tendencies associated with the TotA. Following an initial discussion of the definition of the Absurd and its historical lineage, I will discuss the following absurdist plays²⁰ to demonstrate the key stylistics and ideological tendencies of the Absurd: Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Ionesco’s *Amédée or How to Get Rid of it*²¹ (1965), *The Bald Prima Donna*²² (1971), and *Jacques or Obedience*²³ (1971), Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*²⁴ (1977) and Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*²⁵ (2000).

²⁰ Henceforth, these plays will be referred to (for simplicity) as *Godot*, *Endgame*, *Amédée*, *Prima Donna*, *Jacques*, *Homecoming* and *Rosencrantz*.

²¹ First performed in 1954 at the Théâtre de Babylone, Paris and published in 1956 (this version 1958).

²² First performed in 1950 at the Théâtre des Noctambules, Paris and published in 1950 (this version 1954).

²³ First performed in 1955 at the Théâtre de la Huchette, Paris and published in 1954.

²⁴ First performed in 1965 at the Aldwych Theatre, London and published in 1965.

²⁵ First performed in 1967 at the Royal National Theatre, London and published in 1967.

Ionesco writes, 'Nothing holds together, everything falls apart' (1964, p. 137). He addresses the impermanence and inconsistency of the human condition; a sentiment tantamount to the Absurd. This thesis will refer to the definition of the term 'Absurd' as discussed by Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*²⁶ (2005); the reason for being he is the philosopher Martin Esslin's cites in his seminal text, *The Theatre of the Absurd*²⁷ (2001): a definitive text on the Absurd. The discussion of the Absurd will also be in accordance with Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2005), Neil Cornwell's extensive work in *The Absurd in Literature* (2006) and Michael Y. Bennett's re-examination of the Absurd in *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (2011).

The Absurd is a philosophical concept which arose as a reaction to World War II, portrayed in the works of playwrights associated with the TotA: a school of thought introduced by Esslin. It was seen to reflect the attitude that was predominantly held by the playwrights of that period²⁸; they were writing at a time of decline in religious faith, which after the war was replaced by 'substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies' (Esslin, 2001, p.23). According to Camus, the human condition is deeply tragic when the loss of belief in God and humanity has eliminated the meaning of existence, making human existence purposeless and opposed to reason (Esslin, 1960, p.671). The impact of the war ostensibly shattered all illusions of any faith; thus, the Absurd appeared in the

²⁶ *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* was originally published in 1942 (this translated version was originally published in 1955).

²⁷ The book was first published in 1961.

²⁸ This period, where the Absurd gained significance, also included the Korean war (1950-53), the Vietnam war (which began around 1959), the Suez crisis of 1956, the Arab-Israel crisis that began in the early 20th century and the Algerian War (1952-64).

forefront, with authors like Camus and Beckett contemplating suicide in a world that lacked meaning. This period of political, social and cultural turmoil brought about change in the literature and art of that period.

Among the playwrights Esslin discussed under this broad banner were Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and Stoppard. Careful to explain these playwrights did not associate themselves with this banner, Esslin writes they regard themselves as outsiders 'cut off and isolated' in their private worlds' (2001, p.22). The plays reflect this attitude, with the characters they portray isolated from the outside world and existing in the stifling arenas they have created for themselves.

Citing Ionesco's essay on Franz Kafka, Esslin defines the Absurd as 'that which is devoid of purpose ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless' (2001, p.23). Scholarship on the Absurd has since taken this definition and associated the works of absurdist playwrights as emphasising the senselessness and purposelessness of life. W.I. Oliver, in turn, comments on absurdity as an inescapable assessment of the human condition; paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir, he writes, 'between birth and death there is absurdity, and after absurdity there is only death' (1965, p.196). He refers to absurdity as a human problem reflected in all kinds of action, and not a historical problem, stating that death is the only possibility to be rid of absurdity. This outlook on absurdity treats the Absurd as a consistent factor of the human condition and not just an 'idiosyncratic concern' of a dramatic genre of the 1950s.

Interestingly, Bennett offers an alternative analysis of the Absurd suggesting, that ‘meaning-making, not meaninglessness’, is crucial to absurdist plays (2011, p.8). Given the parabolic nature of the plays, the spectator confronts their worldview to create order out of these plays²⁹. Camus proclaimed that the Absurd is a given, and so human reason is needed to create meaning in this world. Prichard (2010) writes, ‘We will call the view that our lives are absurd, absurdism.’ (p.3). He observes that for the most part, individuals live their lives not associating it as Absurd. They do not consider that there is a general discrepancy between aspiration and reality that would make our lives Absurd. In fact, what these absurdist works are trying to get us to realise, is that this discrepancy is inevitable (p.4).

Absurdity suggests that life may not have inherent meaning; this arises not because of the world but from the paradox between our desires and what the world grants us. The plays of Ionesco, incidentally, illustrate three attributes, ‘they are meaningless, they are flat, and they are funny’ (Greshoff, 1961, p.35). Bennett (2011) states, their lack of meaning does not imply they mean nothing. Instead, the spectator is free to indulge in meaning-making to make sense of absurdity. Thus, the Absurd is as tangible and real as our daily lives (Doubrovsky, 1959, p.5); given our Absurd situation, the agency lies with us, to make life meaningful. According to Camus, the absurdity was a ‘result of discrepancy: life is not absurd itself, it only appears so to man’ (Braun, 1974, p.26). The Absurd condition depends both on humankind and on the world, binding the two ‘as only hatred can weld two creatures together’ (Camus, 2005, p.20). Absurd texts

²⁹ Bennett suggests using a more extensive and structural term ‘parabolic drama’ to discuss the TotA. According to the author would provide more tools to analyse the Absurd, with the ‘parable provides a genre in which to make sense of the absurd’ (2011, p.8).

explored this confrontation of characters negotiating their understanding of what they desire from the world and what they receive from it.

The characteristics of the Absurd, based on the works of absurdist playwrights and the scholarship on them, include: a 'sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition' (Esslin, 2001, pp.23-24); an abandonment of a logical form and dialogue: a 'radical devaluation of language' (ibid., p.26). It draws on comedic tropes and farce to represent the impossibility of finding purpose and meaning (Baldick, 2015, p.1); a portrayal of the absurdity of the human condition and not an argument or judgement on it; and an aesthetic incongruity that represents the philosophical incongruity of life (Bennett, 2011, p.21). These ideas are consistently enacted through themes of dysfunctional relationships, often in pairs: Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot*, Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, Amédée and Madeleine in *Amédée*, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Rosencrantz*. Furthermore, themes of entrapment and loneliness are repeatedly showcased utilising devices such as circular narratives, crosstalk, black humour and minimalist aesthetics: portraying the bewilderment of the characters and the sparse, bleak worlds they occupy.

Beyond theatre, scholars like Helen Weinberg have applied the Absurd to discuss the absurdist novel, arguing that it creates a comic situation by portraying a 'disjunction between the probable and the wonderful' (1970, p.10). She demarcates two varieties of comic absurdity in the modern novel- the 'realistic' and 'stylized'. The absurdist realistic fiction depicts a passive, rationalistic, or hopelessly 'ineffectual victim-hero'. The situation dominates the protagonist, and she/he appears incapable of changing it. The imagined worlds are more or less realistic with somewhat surrealistic elements;

thus, the realism of detail underscores the madness of the world (ibid., p.11). Some examples of absurdist realist novels include Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) and Camus' *The Stranger* (1942)³⁰.

The distinction made by Weinberg was through addressing novels that depicted existentialist themes conveyed through conventional narratives, striving to achieve a more stylized and innovative look at the Absurd human condition. Alternatively, the absurdist stylized novel referred to the Absurd condition through exaggeration and repetitions; 'grotesqueries; unique, exotic, bizarre, or strange symbols'. In these fictions, the depiction of absurdity is through surreal situations that symbolise inexplicable and common situations (Weinberg, 1970, p.11). Novels such as and John Hawkes' *The Cannibal* (1949), John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958) and Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963) are included in this categorisation. Weinberg's attempt to create a clear demarcation of how the Absurd condition can manifest through two different styles provides a superficial categorisation of these Absurd texts. This differentiation does not provide in-depth analysis and leaves these categories frustratingly undeveloped.

Pointing out the exact origins of the TotA is difficult. The roots of TotA are traceable to early symbolist theatre and the philosophical texts of Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Kant. I will briefly discuss the Absurd's direct precursor, existentialism, before discussing some of the TotA plays analysed in my chapters. Anna Balakian writes, Dadaism and surrealism share similarities, both were youth movements with participants being 'committed to the notion of nonnationalism as

³⁰ The dates of the novels given are the original dates that they were published.

opposed to internationalism', and both movements ascended from protest and moral indignation. Dadaism, surrealism, existentialism and the Absurd all worked towards the 'preservation of individual liberty, and that had to contain implications or overtones beyond the context of politics and economics' (1970, pp.13-14).

The impact of existentialism on the Absurd is observed through the writings of existentialist writers such as Kafka, Sartre and Camus. Esslin's (2001) analysis of the Absurd is on Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and Cornwell (2006) references Sartre's writings on death to discuss absurdity. Mutual themes run through the existential and Absurd; these include motifs of ruptured and heightened realities, anxiety with the changing society, obscure language, the question of temporality and a fascination with dysfunction.

Existentialist and absurdist writers were discussing a similar 'sense of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose'. The existentialists presented their 'sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning' (Esslin, 2001, p.24). They advocated that 'man was a lonely creature of anxiety and despair living in a meaningless world, and that he was merely existing until he made a decisive and critical choice about his own future course of action' (Styan, 1981, p.118). Camus work addresses this isolation and anxiety towards death and a sense of helplessness towards the meaningless world, declaring that people are accountable for their lives. A similar sense of helplessness in a world that lacks meaning and purpose exists in absurdist literature; the TotA plays explore individuals afraid of isolation and yet cynical of the outside world. Existentialism offers its characters more agency, holding

them accountable for their lives; absurdism focuses on the lives of individuals unable and unwilling to take agency. Works associated with existentialism and the Absurd share concerns for, and fears of, the individual as opposed to community. Influenced by modernist movements like Dadaism, surrealism and existentialism, I contend that the philosophy of the Absurd continues to affect our understanding of the postmodern world.

The Absurd functions as ‘a system of ideas that explains and makes sense of, society’ (Hayward, 2001, p.192) representing ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser, 2008, p.36). These ideas have translated into mediums beyond theatre and literature. The period of the 1950s, when absurdism at the theatre was at its peak, was when Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art were coming into the forefront. Art from this period no longer imitated life, nature or submitted to conventional structures and moved away from the classical notion of authenticity, towards a more personalised abstract notion of an ideal that the artists of the period encapsulated in their art (Vasconcelos, 2006).

The art movement that gained momentum, during the same time the Absurd was in the forefront, was the post-World War II phenomenon called Abstract Expressionism³¹. Like its predecessor, surrealism, Abstract Expressionism was rooted in automatic or subconscious creation and boasted of literary giants like Virginia Woolf. It found its roots in New York around the 1940s and around the same time an

³¹ Abstract Expressionism also referred to as the New York School consisted of various forms such as Action painting, Gestural painting, Colour Field painting and Hard-Edge painting. Artists associated under this movement were Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Frank Stella among others.

art form or movement called Tachisme³² gained popularity in France. There are other movements like CoBrA³³ and the Gutai group in Japan who share links due to their shared period and abstract perspectives of their art. Art Informel was the French equivalent to the Abstract Expressionist movement, coined by the French sculptor and writer Michel Tapié in 1952³⁴.

Both the literature and art of the period shared a negation of ‘the autonomous status of art and thereby not to accept the disjunction of art and the praxis of life as well as the individual nature of artistic production and reception’ (Vasconcelos, 2006, p.439). The nature of art and literature as an elite medium was rapidly changing, with the advent of Pop Art and the Beat generation. There was a shift towards art and literature for everyone. Though the Absurd found itself constricted to the interests of the intellectual elite, unlike its art contemporaries who aimed to create art that was accessible to everyone. These movements documented the social-political changes society was facing and their concerns with understanding and finding meaning in a changing world.

Theatre of the Absurd: Plays in focus.

Esslin (2001), Bennett (2011) and Enoch Brater (1975) emphasised Beckett’s *Godot* as a point of reference to the TotA gaining prominence, with 1950 becoming the ‘approximate date of the birth’ of the Absurd (Bennett, 2011, p.7). The first play of

³² Tachisme is derived from the French word ‘tache’ which means spot and is ‘characterized by the use of irregular dabs or splotches of colour’. Artists associated with this movement were Jean Fautrier, Georges Mathieu, Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze etc.

³³ CoBrA is derived from the initials of the member countries-Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam-that hosted this avant-garde movement from 1948-51. The term was coined by Christian Dotremont.

³⁴ Refer to Art Encyclopedia (online).

the TotA to gain prominence was *Godot*, written in 1952. The Absurd began to make its mark addressing the state of meaninglessness faced by society. A decade later Ionesco was writing the world has completely lost its actuality and only one thing is present, ‘the constant tearing of the veil of appearances; the constant destruction of everything in construction’ (1964, p137). His plays consistently explore what humankind is capable of and the self-destruction it can cause: be it logical language, narrative structure or relationships. In this section, I briefly contextualise the plays, which are thematically discussed in further detail in the different chapters.

Beckett’s *Godot* (2006) is set in a sparse wasteland, on a country road somewhere, with two protagonists, who are social misfits trapped in a circular narrative. The play ‘does not tell a story; it explores a static situation’ (Esslin, 2001, p.46). They are alienated from the regular world of the sane, existing in a ‘no man’s land which is precisely this perilous zone of contact with reality’ (Dobrez, 1986, p.92). The play challenges the need for a meaningful reality, exploring a key attribute of the Absurd: isolation. The tramp’s isolation from the outside world also becomes a contested battle of isolation from each other. Written as a two-act play, where the tramps wait endlessly for Godot, who never appears. In both acts, the pair encounters the master-slave pair, Pozzo and Lucky. Although the events and dialogue in both acts are different, and they encounter Pozzo and Lucky in different situations, the play emphasises the ‘sameness of the situation’ (Esslin, 2001, p.46). They contemplate suicide, engage in crosstalk and wait for the elusive Godot. They are melancholic and lonely characters, fearful of isolation and despite sharing a dysfunctional relationship, refuse to be separated.

Esslin writes *Endgame* (Beckett, 2009) is a one-act play which takes place ‘in a claustrophobic interior’ (2001, p.62). Like *Godot*, it deals with isolation, circularity and waiting. The play is thematically structured around isolation and imprisonment and presents four characters, all of whom share dysfunctional relationships with each other: Hamm, Clov, and Hamm’s legless parents Nagg and Nell, who live in individual bins. They are co-dependent on each other but unable to exist peacefully together in the same space. While *Godot* discusses ‘the inescapable presence, the impossible fact of being, *Endgame* is, as the title suggests, about the inconceivable end of things’: from being to nothingness (Dobrez, 1986, p.29). Hamm is a blind older man, paralysed and confined to his wheelchair and Clov his servant cannot sit down. They are cut off from the world outside, which is presumably dead. The dominating, selfish and abusive Hamm dominates Clov and shares a turbulent relationship with his father, Nagg. Nell, the only one aware of the absurdity of their situation has a brief role, ending with her death. The plot implies that Hamm brought a starving young Clov to the house; they share a quasi-paternal relationship, which Clov has been trying to escape for a while, unsuccessful every time. The play ends with Clov dressed to leave, but without him making the move

Endgame has been critiqued to be an ‘intrapsychic drama’ (Simon, 1988, p.213) or a monodrama (Esslin, 2001, p.66); each character represents a fragment of Hamm’s psyche. Similarly, Estragon and Vladimir and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have also been noted as portraying two sides of the same coin (Draudt, 1981). Absurd characters share features that complement and complete one another, creating severely dependent relationships. Interestingly, a significant number of key characters depicted in Absurd plays are male and in co-dependent relationships with other male characters: Vladimir

and Estragon (*Godot*), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (*Rosencrantz*), Hamm and Clov (*Endgame*), Max and his sons (*Homecoming*), something that is mirrored in Anderson's film.

Hamm and Clov's dysfunctional and dependent relationship can be understood through their exchange:

HAMM: I'll give you nothing more to eat.

CLOV: Then we'll die.

HAMM: I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time.

CLOV: Then we shan't die. (Beckett, 2009, p.8)

Their blank straight dialogue, and especially Clov's straight curt answers ironically curtails the brutality of Hamm's oppressive behaviour. Hamm is a quasi-father figure to Clov, one who fails to protect or nurture him, just as his father, Nagg, failed to nurture him.

Hamm even asks, 'Why do you stay with me?' which leads to the following exchange between the two:

CLOV: Why do you keep me?

HAMM: There's no one else.

CLOV: There's nowhere else.

HAMM: You're leaving me all the same.

CLOV: I'm trying. (ibid.)

When Hamm asks him if he ever loved him, Clov blankly replies, 'Once!' The play addresses the nature of love and control in a very interesting way, challenging the reader to see the two as interdependent.

Amédée (Ionesco, 1965) is a three-act play and one of the most visually provocative plays of the 20th century. It depicts the lives of a couple, Amédée and Madeline, co-dependent and unable to escape one another. The couple lives in an apartment with a corpse that is growing every day, with mushrooms sprouting on its body. Their anxiety and fear stem from trying to co-exist with the body and eventually trying to get rid of it; the identity of the corpse is never revealed and seems to be inconsequential given the absurdity of the situation. The couple lives cut-off from the outside world; they never leave their apartment and send the shopping basket down the window to receive their supplies. They share a dysfunctional and challenging relationship with each other and the play resorts to flashbacks to depict the change in the couple's circumstances. The play ends with Amédée dragging the corpse through the streets, in an attempt to discard it, but instead is carried away by the corpse that has now become a balloon.

In *Amédée* the play focuses on the illogicality of Amédée and Madeline's relationship centred around the growing corpse which is sprouting mushrooms in their home. This is 'manifested in the collapse of rational action and the loss of effective language' (Kyle, 1976, p.283). They form a symbiotic relationship with the corpse, and their marriage is reduced to a dysfunctional state of paranoia. Amédée's honest observation to Madeline, 'It's no good, we don't understand each other' (Ionesco, 1965, p.61), is chillingly insightful of their situation, and yet they both refuse to grasp the repercussions of it and change their situation truly.

Their strained relationship is further portrayed in Amédée's inability to change Madeline's insensitive attitude towards him. Amédée eventually releases 'the body from his entombment within the flat, the corpse, in turn, extricates Amédée from the shackles of the earth' (ibid. p.284). The root of all their problems, the corpse, helps release Amédée and Madeline from their miserable marriage, and their isolation from the outside world. For Willis D. Jacobs, the central statement of the play is, "*Love dies.*"; the corpse, therefore, represents their dead love (1972, p.33). It also symbolises their growing awareness of death, eventually becoming their only release from one another.

Ionesco's describes his first play, *Prima Donna* (Ionesco, 1971), as an attack on the 'universal petty-bourgeoisie' (cited in Esslin, 2001, p.143). Labelled as an anti-play and the tragedy of language, it portrays two couples, the Smiths and the Martins indulging in an endless chatter of crosstalk and nonsensical repartee. Ionesco states that he wrote the play in an attempt to learn English (1964, p.175). In depicting the everyday mechanical routines of the characters and their endless chatter, their communal nature portrayed in their interchangeable identities, Ionesco makes a statement about individuals so absorbed in social structures that they fail to distinguish their identities. In portraying two couples endlessly talking to and at one another, Ionesco is critiquing existing theatre, the dysfunctions of language and the society to which these couples belong.

Although critics interpreted *Prima Donna* as a critique of bourgeoisie society, Ionesco's defense of the play as 'a satire of a petit bourgeoisie³⁵ mentality that belongs to any particular society' (1964, pp.179-180) is telling of how he has shaped the play. The play critiques the couple's inability to be passionate and personal; the crosstalk displayed in the play is a result of both couples being incapable of independent thought. In an impersonal world, their interchangeability speaks of their sense of loss, as they are no longer themselves and cannot find meaning in their own identities. In this middle (upper) class society, they conform to the ideas around them. Early in the play, Mr Smith pacifies Mrs Smith declaring, 'What a ridiculous couple of old love-birds we are!' (Ionesco, 1977, p.91). The couple knowingly acknowledges their ridiculousness and the conformism of their bourgeoisie lifestyle, which is further elaborated when they meet the Martins: who are so similar, they might as well be them, their social replicant. They are no different to one another and yet cannot understand one another.

Jacques (Ionesco, 1971) portrays the life of Jacques dictated by his family members, and their insistent need to marry him to a woman named Roberta I or Roberta II. The absurdity of the play is evident from the start when Jacques is rebuked for not agreeing to 'love potatoes in their jackets', and the description of Roberta I with her two noses and then Roberta II with her three noses and nine fingers. The family makes demands, which is rendered normal; their relationship is destructive and primarily focused on getting Jacques to conform to their wishes. Jacques initially refuses to marry Roberta I, however, he gradually gives in to the pressure and agrees to marry Roberta II. He is

³⁵ Ionesco defines the petit bourgeoisie as 'a man of fixed ideas and slogans, a ubiquitous conformist: this conformism is, of course, revealed by the *mechanical language* [in the play]' (1964, p.180).

unable to retain his individuality and conforms to the values of his family, it does not even matter who he marries. Jacques' inability to stick to his convictions emphasises the threat his individuality faces; once he begins to chant 'I love potatoes in their jackets', the realisation of his obedience to his family is exposed.

The power of language in the Absurd, to distort and manipulate meaning, can be seen in Roberta II's erratic monologue at the end of the *Jacques*:

Come... don't be afraid... I'm all moist... I've a necklace of ooze, my breasts are melting, my pelvis is soft, I've water in my crevices. I'm getting bogged in. My real name is Blodwen. In my womb there are ponds and swamps... I've a house made of clay, where I always feel cool... where there's foamy loam... and fatty flies, beetles, wood-lice and toads. Beneath dripping blankets we make love... swelling with bliss! My arms enfold you like snakes; and my soft thighs... You plunge deep and dissolve... in the rain of my streaming hair. My mouth is flowing, streaming my legs, streaming my shoulders bare, my hair is flowing, everything flows and streams, the sky's a stream, the stars strow and fleam... (Ionesco, 1971, p.148)

Her language is hyper-sexualised, drawing on images of bodily fluids and arousal, despite the failure of the words to make sense, she seduces Jacques into submitting to marriage. In a play where language displays the hegemonic ideals of family and society, by communicating language eschewed by absurdism, Roberta II's monologue is the final indoctrination needed by Jacques to give away his individuality.

Individuality is a complex theme in Pinter's *Homecoming* (1977). It depicts a story that merges reality, 'wish-fulfilment dream' (Esslin, 1965, p.255) and fantasy to

concoct the homecoming of Teddy and Ruth to Teddy's family. The play tackles an Oedipal narrative of conquest and sexual tension in the depiction of a dysfunctional family. It portrays a family of six individuals: Max the patriarch, his brother Sam and his three sons Teddy, Kenny and Joey and Teddy's wife, Ruth. Pinter depicts a working-class family in North London, consisting of a butcher, a chauffeur, a pimp and a boxer who works in demolition during the day. The outsider in this family is the eldest son Teddy, who is a Philosophy professor working and living in America with his wife Ruth, who at one time used to be a model. The play questions the ideals of masculinity and the language associated with it that asserts dominance and power, depicting a family of men at odds with each other.

The eagerness of finally being reunited with the eldest son takes a dark and sinister tone when Ruth begins to form an erotic relationship with her husband's brothers and plans to earn her living and contribute to the family as a prostitute. Ruth embodies that figure of authority in the play, with her progressing from a submissive and affable wife to a sexually provocative and dominant personality who lays down the rules and asserts her authority over the rest of the family, establishing herself as the matriarchal head. Michael Billington writes the play discusses the 'disruptive effect of a female intruder on a misogynist, oppressively male household' (1996, p.156). Towards the end of *Homecoming* Ruth decides to leave Teddy and remain with his family, encouraging their sexual desires towards her. She goes from 'a blank space onto which the family can project their desires, into something uncanny' (Renton, 2002, p.141). It is at this dramatic moment that the patriarch, Max, realises Ruth is the one who has power and controls their desires, warning the others, 'Listen, I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use us, she'll make use of us' (Ionesco,

1977, p.81). It is a play that lays bare the hypocrisy of societal norms and family values while portraying female resilience.

Normand Berlin (1973) writes *Rosencrantz* (Stoppard, 2000) is a ‘derivative’ play (1973, p.269), feeding off Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*³⁶, Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*³⁷, and *Godot*. The play is based on the lives of two minor characters, courtiers, from *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are trapped in the fictional world of *Hamlet*. They wander this world aimlessly, not aware of their scripted parts and yet a crucial part of it. Helene Keyssar-Franke writes the two courtiers ‘go through the motions of waiting to play their parts in *Hamlet*’ (1975, p.87). Unable to understand their roles or escape it, the play ends with their fated deaths, as depicted in the original play, *Hamlet*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two separate halves of the same coin, similar to Beckett’s tramps (*Godot*); like the tramps, they spend their time waiting and floundering over their purpose, passing their time with playing games and questioning each other.

The Absurd in film and the Cinema of the Absurd

Cinema has long functioned as an ideal apparatus to naturalise ideology, rendering it invisible on-screen (Hayward, 2001), with David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson writing, ‘film combines formal and stylistic elements in such a way as to create an ideological stance’ (2010, p.431). The filmmaker creates a subjective reality, influenced by certain ideologies, establishing a relationship between the film and the

³⁶ Refer to: Shakespeare, W. (2008) *Hamlet*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

³⁷ Refer to: Pirandello, L. (1979) *Six characters in search of an author* (trans. J. Linstrum), London: Eyre Methuen.

cultural context under which it is created. The Absurd in film is discussed, to some capacity with regard to the documentaries of Frederick Wiseman³⁸ (Armstrong, 1988), films of Luis Buñuel³⁹ (Lastra, 1999) and Kira Muratova⁴⁰ (Roberts, 1999), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1976 film *Satan's Brew* (Grossman, 2010), Yorgos Lanthimos'⁴¹ 2009 film *Dogtooth* (Metzidakis, 2014), the films of Elia Suleiman⁴² (Chamarette, 2014), Fernando Arrabal⁴³, Michel Gondry's⁴⁴ 2013 film *Mood Indigo* and Anderson's *Darjeeling* (Bose, 2008). These films have confronted the normative understanding of the individual, community and societal structures, creating cinematic worlds that are alternative, radical and subversive in their content and aesthetics. While these discussions are limited in their analysis of the Absurd and have yet to address a broad spectrum of films, they have briefly engaged with Absurd themes and aesthetics in film.

³⁸ Born in 1930, Wiseman is a renowned documentary filmmaker, some of his works include *Welfare* (1975), *Near Death* (1989), *Domestic Violence* (2001) and more recently, *At Berkeley* (2013) and *In Jackson Heights* (2015).

³⁹ Buñuel (1900- 1983) is a Spanish filmmaker, renowned for films such as *Un Chien Andalou* (1929, short), *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

⁴⁰ Muratova is a Soviet filmmaker, born in 1934 in Romania. In an article in *Senses of Cinema*, 2003, Janumyan writes, 'Of all the great Soviet film directors, Kira Muratova is considered to be the most esoteric... The esoterica comes from the fact that though her films deal with universal themes, Muratova concentrates on the landscapes and characters that are unique products of soviet life, and her films belong exclusively to them', presenting a vision of Soviet reality that 'is ugly, cruel, and absurd – but necessary'. Some of her films include *Our Honest Bread* (1964), *Brief Encounters* (1967), *The Asthenic Syndrome* (1990), *Three Stories* (1997), *Chekhov's Motives* (2002), *The Tuner* (2004) and more recently *Eternal Homecoming* (2012).

⁴¹ Lanthimos is a Greek film and theatre director, born in 1973. His other famous works include, *Kinetta* (2005), *Alps* (2011) and *The Lobster* (2015).

⁴² Suleiman is a Palestinian filmmaker, born in 1960, is a prominent Palestinian filmmaker. In an article for *Sight & Sound*, 2014, Jaafar states, 'In person, he is famously loquacious and mischievous, while on screen he has studiously developed a near-silent persona, his deadpan gaze at events before him a subtle testament to the frequent absurdity of the Palestinians' plight'. Some of his works include, his famous trilogy *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996), *Divine Intervention* (2002) and *The Time That Remains* (2009).

⁴³ Arrabal is a Spanish writer, actor and director, born in 1932. Discussed by Esslin for his absurdist work, he writes 'Arrabal's world derives its absurdity ... from the fact that his characters see the human situation with uncomprehending eyes of childlike simplicity. Like children, they are often cruel because they have failed to understand, or even notice, the existence of a moral law; and, like children, they suffer the cruelty of the world as a meaningless affliction' (2001, pp. 285-286). His filmography includes works such as, *Long Live Death* (1971), *Odyssey of the Pacific* (1982) and *Farewell, Babylon!* (1992).

⁴⁴ Gondry, a French filmmaker born in 1963, adapted Boris Vian's novel *Mood Indigo* into a film of the same name in 2013. Vian has been discussed by Esslin (2001) under the TotA.

One of the few scholars who address the concept of an Absurd film, Dan Armstrong uses the title to refer to the filmography of documentary filmmaker Wiseman. He defines Absurd cinema as politically charged and containing messages with an ‘absurdist melange of irony, parody, black humor, and burlesque-plumbing resources of comedy in the service of pleasure, something generally avoided in social and cultural critique.’ (1988, p.2). Wiseman’s first film, *Titicut Follies* (1967), depicts the daily events of the inmates at Bridgewater State Hospital, a state-run facility for the criminally insane in Massachusetts. According to Armstrong, he creates a cinema of the Absurd by providing a ‘mad spectacle within the larger spectacle of the film’ using a variety of alienation effects to distance the audience from the events represented’ (1989, pp.29-30). The banality of every day in carceral confinement, allowed Wiseman to explore the spectacle of the Absurd condition and portray its alienating effect to his audience.

Fassbinder’s cinema is considered to represent a new Germany, changing the course of German film history with his provocative and ironic cinema, depicting the socio-political world of 1960-70s Germany (Elsaesser, 1996). Andrew Grossman, discussing *Satan’s Brew* (1976), writes that Fassbinder addresses the inability of language to ‘set straight’ desires, presenting an irrational society with dialogue that can stand alone ‘as aphoristic half-truths’. His use of dialogue shares a common post-war theme with Ionesco: ‘when language is corrupted, and meaning made meaningless, fascism replaces the hope of freedom’ (Grossman, 2010, n.p.). Both Wiseman and Fassbinder’s films present the Absurd in different ways, through discussions of every day and manipulation of language. Wiseman’s documentaries

comment on the modern structures of institutions, while Fassbinder's film addresses a sexually rebellious society that confronts the past and critiques the present.

Subsequently, Stamos Metzidakis (2014) classify Lanthimos' third feature *Dogtooth*, as part of the 'Greek Weird Wave', that 'originated as an absurdist reaction to some of Greece's most pressing contemporary socio-economic issues' (Metzidakis, 2014, p.368). The film showcases conformity and rebellion, presenting a jarring image of irony and distrust in society. Mark Fischer states that the film, 'presents in an extreme form the ordinary gestures and habits, the storytelling and tricks of discipline, of so-called normal family life' (2011, p.27). It is the story of a dysfunctional family, controlled and defined by its parental figures who systematically misinform their children about the outside world, creating a disturbing image of obedience and family.

Wiseman, Fassbinder and Lanthimos' cinema, with its Absurd leanings, is inherently political and subversive and different to Andersons. His use of absurdist themes is farcical and superficial, coated in whimsical humour and pop-cultural references. Though these filmmakers differ in their aesthetics and content, they represent a bleak understanding of human relationships and communication; a similarity they share is their implementation of dark humour and their commentary on the nature of human relationships in apathetic societies.

The Cinema of the Absurd (CotA), essentially refers to films that consistently discuss absurdist themes through their narratives and character profiles. Drawing on Wiseman's discussion of Armstrong films, the CotA would include films that are ideologically charged and consistently explore the Absurd human condition.

Subsequently, this cinema would include the prevalence of messages that contain an ‘absurdist melange of irony, parody, black humor ... something generally avoided in social and cultural critique’ (1988, p.2). Essential these films would look at the four overarching themes of dysfunction, entrapment, belonging and communication that are central to TotA. Furthermore, like TotA, these films would rely on parody and black humour to address the gravity of loneliness, isolation and problematic family structures that exist to portray discord more than love and caring. The contemporary understanding of the CotA shifts from an overtly political approach of absurdism to comedy that is meant to reflect the contradictory life the characters lead in an alienating world.

The conceptualisation of the Absurd draws from the playwrights of TotA who consistently portrayed a body of work that tapped into exploring and critiquing the Absurd human condition drawing on devices such as crosstalk and entrapment to do so. However, the CotA does not always follow the aesthetics of the TotA, drawing towards more everyday aesthetics, depicting lives cluttered with mundane objects and circumstances. Interestingly, many independent film from all over the world have built a body of work on themes that are absurdist, tackling individual issues of a life led in alienation or in contradiction to what was expected from their fictional lives.

This thesis does not appropriate the term of CotA or an ‘Absurd film’ to refer to the works of Anderson; instead, I argue that his films portray absurdist characteristics such as ‘absurd masculinity’ (Tait, 2014), the tension surrounding escape and belonging, conformity, crosstalk, dysfunctional communication, and dysfunctional relationships both romantic, and familial. However, Anderson’s portrayal of the Absurd, while not

apolitical, is not as overtly political as the films of Wiseman and Fassbinder. Anderson's oeuvre discusses social identity and the inability of communication to create authentic relationships. His films consistently portray absurdist themes and his discussion of individuals starkly showcases the aspirations of these lives and sometimes the disappointing reality they are faced with: a characteristic deeply rooted in absurdist literature. The four main themes focused on in my chapters are dysfunction, entrapment, belonging and communication.

The characters in Anderson's cinematic worlds are melancholic and filled with a sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of their circumstances. Furthermore, drawing on comedic tropes and irony, Anderson creates imagined worlds where characters find it impossible to find purpose and a sense of belonging. Similar to plays of the TotA, Anderson presents his dysfunctional worlds of artifice, there is no judgement made on them: he merely portrays it. Subsequently, Anderson is also preoccupied with the portrayal of dual-characters or characters in pairs: these pairs often tend to be male characters. For example, in *Bottle*, Dignan (Owen Wilson) and Anthony (Luke Wilson) form a pair, and while Bob (Robert Musgrave) comes and goes, the two of them are the primary focus; in *Rushmore*, Max (Jason Schwartzman) and Blume (Bill Murray) form a pair, *Life Aquatic* consists of Zissou (Bill Murray) and Ned (Owen Wilson); and *Budapest* has Gustave (Ralph Fiennes) and Zero (Tony Revolori).

Bennett argues that the Absurd portrays aesthetic incongruity to represent the philosophical incongruity of life (2011, p.21). Earlier in this introduction, I discuss Anderson's association with numerous concepts from the new sincerity movement to the smart film; in which I refer to the aesthetic stylistics utilised in Anderson's oeuvre.

His distinctive style has seen him labelled as a precocious and meticulous auteur. Anderson's frames are perfect with his consistent use of planimetric shots that are symmetrical and his use of deadpan aesthetic, that renders characters expressionless. In these static shots, in worlds built on artifice, Anderson portrays aesthetic incongruity that represents the philosophical incongruity of life. The perfect symmetry of his shots brings further attention to his flawed characters, desperately seeking purpose and meaning in their lives. In an immaculately ordered world, Anderson's characters and their dysfunctions are further highlighted.

However, this does not imply that Anderson's films perfectly embody absurdist themes and that they entirely sync with the plays of the TotA. While my focus is on discussing the themes that are prevalent in his films, to present Anderson's construction of the Absurd human condition, I am also aware that the films naturally divert from absurdist themes. In each of the chapters, I have attempted to indicate where the differences lie. Associated with the indie scene and Indiewood, some of Anderson's film tend to adopt more traditional narrative structures. For example, in chapter 3, I discuss how he follows a traditionally Hollywood structure for depicting love in *Moonrise*. Similarly, most of his films, while thematically alternative, tend to follow more conventional linear narratives, despite the cyclical mode they end up following. It is in the adoption of more conventional aesthetic and thematic styles that Anderson sharply differs from the TotA. His films employ certain aspects of crosstalk, but never aims to present language as contorted as that in *Jacques* and *Prima Donna*.

In adopting a close textual approach to analysing Anderson's oeuvre and absurdist texts of the TotA, this thesis conducts an aesthetic and thematic analysis of absurdist

themes in Anderson's films. In each chapter, I discuss both the literature of the Absurd and relevant themes from the plays cited above; this is to contextualise the analysis of the themes and apply them to Anderson's oeuvre.

Despite the difference between the two mediums of theatre and cinema, I argue that in a textual reading of the themes of the plays and their application to Anderson, a thematic link can be made. It is evident that Anderson's characters exist in worlds that are vastly different from those of the characters of the TotA. Anderson's stylish characters dressed in designer clothing, accompanied by songs of The Kinks, The Faces and David Bowie, and living in worlds filled with nostalgic possessions and artifice. Characters in the TotA are portrayed in bleak and often minimalist worlds, far removed from Anderson's world of memorabilia, quirkiness and hipster fashion and the worlds of other the other indie filmmakers whose films I suggest depict absurdist themes. Despite the application of these themes in different ways, both Anderson and the Absurd are essentially discussing similar concerns and reflect the same human emotions, albeit in very different ways.

The motivation to primarily focus on textual analysis was to analyse and interpret the absurdist themes utilised by Anderson in his films; I do so by looking at various aspects of his work while also critically analysing literature from TotA. This thesis aims to look at the narrative structure of the film, in that the stories the characters embark on to explore their Absurd situations, the character development, the communication patterns and the mise-en-scene meticulously created by Anderson. The absurdist plays are rich in the language they use, worlds are created and deconstructed in the manner of communication. This thesis focused on the form of

communication used in Anderson's films, focusing primarily on the nature of crosstalk utilised.

Primarily, I do not imply that Anderson's films are entirely Absurd or as adaptations of the plays discussed, and have chosen to discuss absurdist themes informed by a philosophical approach to the Absurd. I believe that creating a thematic link between the Absurd and Anderson's film opens up a more comprehensive understanding of how society and the human condition is portrayed in the works of filmmakers like Anderson. As a result, this research aims to offer an alternative reading of the oeuvre of Anderson, informed by prevailing scholarship on Anderson. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to analyse how dysfunctionality, interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, and entrapment are used as devices to portray the Absurd human condition in Anderson's films, creating a framework of analysis that can be used to consider the central themes that make him so unique as an auteur. With that being said, this thesis has provided me with a framework for analysis that can similarly be applied to other indie directors like Gondry, whose films as suggested in my introduction focus on similar themes of escape, entrapment and the human condition.

Chapter overview

Each chapter looks at different thematical approaches to understand the portrayal of the Absurd in Anderson's films. The case study includes Anderson's eight features, analysing four themes of the Absurd that I argue are crucial to the understanding of the ideology and central discourses of contemporary independent cinema: dysfunction, entrapment, belonging and communication. In every chapter, the analysis

of Anderson's films will be in relation to specific themes taken from the TotA. The aim is to provide a point of reference to understand and critique the relevant aesthetic and thematic style used in Anderson's films.

In chapter 1, which discusses Anderson's fourth feature film, *Life Aquatic*, the main focus is firstly, the textual dimensions of fatherhood and narcissism as portrayed in absurdist texts like *Endgame* and *Homecoming*. Secondly, the chapter will analyse how these themes, particularly different masculinities, are represented in *Life Aquatic* in the aesthetics of the film.

Chapter 2, looking at *Rushmore*, offers an analysis of the nature of dysfunctional relationships and romance. Here I discuss the portrayal of relationships in the absurdist worlds of *Prima-Donna*, *Amédée* and *Homecoming*, before embarking on an analysis of the way in which the themes are presented in the film.

Chapter 3 analyses the role of letter writing and conformity in Anderson's *Moonrise*. In discussing themes of conformity and communication, dysfunction in plays such as *Jacques*, *Homecoming* and *Prima Donna*, I will demonstrate how *Moonrise* depicts the Absurd condition and subsequently attempts to normalise it. This analysis will also include the conceptualisation of romance and the couple in the film, drawing on the prescribed formula utilised in traditionally Hollywood films.

In chapter 4, I look at two films- *Tenenbaums* and *Fantastic*. This chapter addresses explicitly the dysfunctional family and themes of entrapment that have a stronghold in absurdist plays. In demonstrating the role of family and dysfunction in this chapter,

I aim to create a clearer understanding of how dysfunction is conceptualised in Anderson's films. As with chapter 3, I draw upon the same plays to discuss the role that family plays in the Absurd, analysing the complex family dynamics central to both films.

Chapter 5 deliberates on the role of ritual and waiting in *Darjeeling*. In discussing plays like *Godot* and *Amédée*, this chapter aims to provide a thematic structure to analyse the ritualistic structure of the Absurd and the crucial theme of waiting discussed in these plays. This structure will be utilised to offer an alternative reading of the film.

Finally, in chapter 6, I offer a textual analysis of *Bottle* and *Budapest*, bookending Anderson's career as a filmmaker. The plays to be discussed here are *Endgame*, *Godot* and *Rosencrantz*. The Absurd themes of escape and belonging are the focus of my analysis.

These chapters discuss the continuities and developments within Anderson's filmography, positioning the films in relation both to the discussion of 'smart cinema', 'new sincerity' and 'quirky'. The aim of this thesis is to analyse Anderson's films at the levels of form, theme and identity with each chapter analysing how Absurd themes and characteristics are represented in his films, offering a nuanced discussion of his films, that takes the analysis beyond considerations of his work as 'quirky' or 'indiewood'. He has accumulated an almost cult-like status, and his signature style of filmmaking has established him as a cinematic visionary. With his obsession for detail and control in his films, the construction of a cinematic world eluding to absurdist

themes appears to be a conscious decision, but Anderson has never cited the influence of absurdist literature in his interviews. Apart from a reference to Pinter, the allusions to the Absurd are made through his cinematic influences from the French New Wave and filmmakers like Buñuel. This thesis looks to explicate this influence with the following chapters providing clarity on the matter and establishing a thematic framework to discuss the role and significance of Absurd themes in contemporary American indie films.

Chapter 1

Fatherhood, Narcissism and Indulging in the Absurd: *The Life*

Aquatic with Steve Zissou.

“You call yourself my son, but... I just don’t see it. It’s nothing personal.”

- Steve Zissou

Colin Counsell writes, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (2006) and *Endgame* (2009) ‘presents its audience with the spectacle of ordered activity... such activity, such habit, is inscribed into the social order’ (1996, p.120). The dialogues and movements of each character are confined to the social order of these plays and narrative, presenting an isolated society that is not aware or intruded upon by anything from the outside world. Both in *Godot* and *Endgame*, the characters remain confined to their dysfunctional worlds, isolated from the outer universe that may or may not exist beyond their space. Therein an Absurd world is created, where the character’s dialogue is ‘theatrical, comprising tightly timed question-and-answer exchanges, poetic speeches and *stychomythia*⁴⁵’ (ibid). Everything about these plays depicts an unrealistic world, one that the audience is constantly reminded of, and yet these plays discuss the human condition.

⁴⁵ Stychomythia refers to a mode of dramatic dialogue in which two characters speak short lines alternately.

In plays, associated with the TotA, there are numerous familial scenarios presented. Often these scenarios are rife with dysfunction and emotional stagnancy. Joanna Gavins describes the Absurd as ‘an artistic expression of human beings’ inability to find inherent meaning in their existence’ (2013, p.1). The search for meaning is continually addressed throughout the literature on the Absurd. This search for meaning is handled differently in each play; characters are portrayed struggling to understand their purpose, signalling their inability to find any coherent meaning in their lives. The Absurd is explored through these characters: desperately seeking purpose through familial relationships, yet in these plays, there is never a sense of what this meaning might be.

Jean-Paul Sartre famously wrote, “Hell is other people”⁴⁶, insightfully commenting on the nature of humanity, seen as both frustrating and destructive. The Absurd plays that I refer to in my introduction are dominated by characters trapped in destructive relationships, unable to escape. These arduous relationships form the crux of these Absurd plays, explicitly focusing on the use of crosstalk, portraying characters who are too self-involved to look beyond themselves. Sartre articulates this issue when he writes, the hell people imagine in an alternative universe can be experienced around them: in their problematic relationships and dysfunctional behaviour.

Communication plays an important role in depicting these problematic relationships and their dysfunctional existence; for example, Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot* find themselves stuck with each other, unable to communicate constructively or to escape each other; Joseph, Ines, Estelle, and Valet in *No Exit* are trapped in a confined space

⁴⁶ Taken from his play *No Exit*, (1944, p.33).

unable to escape each other, and Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* cannot live with each other emotionally, and yet refuse to leave one another physically. The playwrights use crosstalk as a recurrent device to question the value of forming intimate relationships between the characters. This is a device also consistently utilised by Anderson to explore the relationships his characters are centred around.

Anderson's films have been noted for their penchant towards 'irony, black humour, fatalism and relativism' (Perkins, 2013, p.3), distinctive because of their use of ironic disengagement, a feeling established in *TotA* by the use of crosstalk. The narratives are driven by characters plagued by emotional stagnancy, dysfunctional familial relationships, narcissism and despondency; the ironic disengagement amongst these characters creates a situation of forlorn humour, thinly veiled by a sense of cynical hopefulness. The characters exist in functionally dysfunctional (ibid., p.87) worlds, and continue to remain so through the course of his films: dysfunction does not disrupt or problematise their lives; instead, they thrive on it, driving the narrative again like the *TotA*. Anderson's oeuvre depicts problematic father figures; their relationships with their children are inherently dysfunctional, or in some cases absent altogether (*Bottle and Darjeeling*). In *Tenenbaums*, probably his darkest film to date, Anderson portrays the destructive role that dysfunctional fatherhood can play in the formative years of children: Royal portrays the egotistical father, unable to provide love and care for his children resulting in their emotional stagnancy and disengagement with their lives.

In this chapter, I will focus on analysing the role of fatherhood referring to the construct of 'absurd masculinity' (Tait, 2014) in *Life Aquatic*, considering the impact

of fatherhood on various characters in the film. I will also explore other characteristics of the Absurd that the film draws upon. Anderson's films continually deal with the search and subsequent disappointment of looking for something: whether it is wanting to belong to the ultimate criminal gang in *Bottle*, finding love in *Rushmore*, reconnecting with family in *Darjeeling*, re-discovering the self in *Fantastic*, finding companionship in *Moonrise*, discovering the truth in *Budapest*, and accepting fatherhood and seeking revenge in *Life Aquatic*, themes that I consider in this chapter and develop throughout the thesis.

The disappointment surrounding the father figure and the dissolution of the family is a theme referenced consistently in Anderson's films; it is also a theme central to plays such as *Endgame* (Brink, 1971; Simon, 1988) and Pinter's (1977) *The Homecoming* (Storch, 1967; Prentice, 1980). Although, the film's approach to the subject is relatively more light-hearted, both the Absurd and *Life Aquatic* explore dysfunctional fatherhood. In this chapter, through an analysis of communication and character relationships in the film, I will analyse the film's portrayal of fatherhood, visualised through Anderson's distinctive aesthetic style, focusing on the relationship between Steve Zissou (Bill Murray) and Ned Plimpton (Owen Wilson), and drawing upon the absurdist characteristics the film portrays.

The Absurd father figure.

Beckett's Absurd plays stylistically function to conjure, in the audience, 'a mixture of boredom, numbness, and a kind of nearly continuous frustration. There is an intermittent feeling of hopeful anticipation that is repeatedly disappointed' (Simon,

1988, p.214). The plot in *Endgame* is contrived with characters existing in a state of limbo. Their dialogue and action are carefully crafted to portray frustration diluted with just enough promise to carry the narrative and audience forward (ibid.). The situation that the characters enact propels the narrative forward, only to be met with disappointment when the play ends without a definitive resolution; for instance, Counsell writes that *Godot* 'does not conclude, it simply ends' (1996, p.120). *Godot* never arrives, and the audience is never informed why Estragon and Vladimir wait for him; instead, the pair is committed to existing in an endless cycle of waiting. This cycle of waiting is one that finds itself evident in many Absurd plays and is often constructed through the narrative of the family.

The family, in the Absurd, is an ambiguous construct in which a similar sense of hope and subsequent disappointment is enacted amongst individuals who struggle to manage their familial relationships. Plays such as *Endgame* and *Homecoming* actively discuss dysfunctional familial bonds, while plays such as *Godot* and *Rosencrantz* (Stoppard, 1967) depict quasi-familial bonds. In *Endgame*, both familial and quasi-familial bonds are formed: In the play, Hamm legless parents live in bins, and Clov plays his helper, with whom he has an oppressive quasi-father-son bond. Through *Godot*, the audience is privy to a close bond shared between Vladimir and Estragon, which resembles a tight family unit, with characters like Lucky and Pozzo becoming an extended part of this quasi-family. Additionally, *Homecoming* presents an 'intriguing mixture of plain family drama at the naturalistic level and of obsessive fantasy which takes it out of the realm of the probable' (Storch, 1967, p.711). The family is both the everyday family with their mundane issues and one whose reality is a nightmare, with relationships that reside in emotional stagnancy. Here the family is

a site of contention and dysfunction, a sentiment echoed in Anderson's preoccupation with dysfunctional families, especially problematic father figures.

The paternal figures depicted in Absurd plays are self-indulgent, manipulative and repressed: emotionally and sexually. *Homecoming* throws light on the manipulative and dominating Max, who abuses his authority to 'maintain his patriarchal position' (Prentice, 1980, p.461). He is abusive and ultimately desires his daughter-in-law, Ruth, but is unable to quench his desire for her: eventually, Max is reduced to a whimpering child begging to be desired by Ruth and losing control over his family. There are parallels shared between Max and Zissou, and most of Anderson's father figures. Their self-indulgent and emotionally repressed personalities are constantly on display, portraying the atypical masculinity of Anderson's world.

Interestingly, *Endgame* approaches fatherhood through two kinds of paternal figures: The decrepit Nagg, confined to an ashbin, unable to comfort his wife Nell who is also confined to an ashbin, and the dominating and manipulative patriarch Hamm, who behaves like a father to Clov, his servant. Esslin suggests that the play reverses the situation in James Joyce's *Ulysses*⁴⁷, by depicting a situation where the son is trying to leave his foster father (2001, p.63). Clov makes it clear that he wants to leave Hamm but until the end is unable to do so. They are 'linked by a mutual interdependence, wanting to leave each other, at war with each other, and yet dependent on each other' (Esslin, 2001, p.67). Their relationship is one of necessity and they stay together to

⁴⁷ Esslin refers to the relationship between Leopold Bloom and Stephan Dedalus in Joyces *Ulysses* (1922).

exist; acknowledging that without the other, in an outside world that appears to be a wasteland, they do not stand a chance in their Absurd world.

Paternity and power as social constructs are challenged in absurdist plays; father figures repeatedly fail to establish meaningful relationships leading to superficial relationships that lack understanding and warmth. Characters like Hamm and Clov find themselves 'repeatedly thwarted in their half-hearted attempts to make a "meaningful connection" with other characters, or even between one thought and another' (Simon, 1988, p.214). Furthermore, characters act out their respective roles of oppressor and oppressed unable to break away from it. The paternal figure, often in his inability to assert his masculinity or power, finds himself unable to connect to his children and in a relationship where his authority is negated. Subsequently, fatherhood has been explored in absurdist plays through sparse settings, restricted movements and contrived dialogues. Paternal relationships are portrayed as being repressive, volatile and manipulative with the sons trapped in these dysfunctional relationships, mirroring the behaviour of the father figure.

The fatherhoods explored by Anderson keep in tandem with his 'recurring fascination with family structures and intergenerational bonds and rivalries' (Mayshark, 2007, p.116). Just as his films consistently address the phenomenon of family, he appears besotted by the elusive father figure with films addressing dysfunctional fatherhood in some capacity. Labelled as part of the 'smart sensibility', Sconce comments on these films re-embracing 'classical narrative strategies, instead experimenting with tone as a means of critiquing 'bourgeois' taste and culture' (2002, p.352). Anderson's films repeatedly address the identity crisis faced by the American middle-class family,

the material possessions that define their lives and their narcissism. Through his films the tastes of the middle-class family, their habits and relationships are humorously laid bare for the audience.

Specifically, his films look at the drastic changes to ‘traditional’ masculinity that has occurred throughout the 21st century. Independent films in this millennium, from the disgruntled and narcissistic father in Noah Baumbach’s *The Squid and the Whale* (2005), the motivational speaker and apathetic father in *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), to the dysfunctional, alcoholic and struggling fathers of Todd Solondz’s *Wiener-Dog* (2016), follow this trend explicitly critiquing the image of the traditional father figure. Subsequently, the notion of the ideal father figure is one that is repeatedly addressed and never explicitly demarcated in these or any of Anderson’s films; instead, his films comment on fatherhood by depicting the absence of nurturing fathers.

Tania Modelski⁴⁸ writes that there is a crisis associated with post-war masculinities; arguing that ‘faced with economic, symbolic and political challenges to patriarchal authority ‘men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it’ (cited in Tasker, 2008, p.175); men seeking solace and consolidation in the familiar structure of the family (ibid.). This is represented in the TotA with images of disintegrating family units, surviving on an idyllic illusion of the perfect family⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Refer to: Modelski, T. (1991) *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age*. New York: Routledge.

⁴⁹ Pomerance discusses the family in conservative America of the 1950s and 60s, presenting an interesting take on what the family symbolises, writing, ‘The family, after all, is a tiny ideological commitment, unquestioning devotion to both capitalism and the wage economy, and attachment to ideals of identity patterning, belief, attitude and existential purpose are systematically reproduced in the name of those principles- individualism, freedom, progress, Divine architecture- on the basis of which the ruling class secures its position; and this, generation after generation after generation’ (2008a, p.2). He further writes that it is through our families we learn to obey our elders and authority, and to create our own families.

Anderson's films play upon this crisis in masculinity, with the mother figures often displaying the more 'masculine' character traits: appearing stable, reasonable and more detached⁵⁰. This chapter argues that Anderson's films draw upon themes of the Absurd to represent this crisis in masculinity/fatherhood synonymous with contemporary independent American cinema.

In the discussion of fatherhood, I will be drawing upon R. Colin Tait's concept of 'absurd masculinity'⁵¹, a term the author defines by applying the TotA to the comedic films of Will Ferrell. Tait suggests that the term 'reconciles the explosive and sometimes violent outbursts of machismo or sensitivity' (2014 p.167). He writes that this masculinity is a thinly veiled critique of patriarchy, whiteness and capitalism and the breakdown of language. Furthermore, it evokes a nostalgia for childhood and a childlike fascination with sexuality (ibid.). I contend that the masculinities portrayed in Anderson's work, especially those embodied by Bill Murray, correspond to this absurd masculinity; furthermore, Murray's deadpan mannerism emphasises the absurdity of his persona. His character's absurd masculinity largely centres on his role as a father.

Fatherhood, informed by poststructuralist and phenomenological perspectives, is said to be a concept continually in flux; the social role of being a father is difficult to label and is difficult to acknowledge as a singular identity (Marsiglio, et al., 2000). Anderson's portrayal of fatherhood is similarly complex, his cinematic fathers fail to

⁵⁰ Mother figures presented in *Tenenbaums*, *Life Aquatic*, *Darjeeling* and *Fantastic*.

⁵¹ The term 'absurd masculinity' will henceforth be used to refer only to Tait's definition.

qualify as the more nurturing ‘modern man’, or as the traditional, authoritative father figure, instead his fathers are narcissistic and alienating characters

In keeping with academic literature, the TotA portray masculinity and fatherhood that is deemed to be dysfunctional and in crisis⁵², with the negligent or absent father vital in directing the narrative. Various scholarship on masculinity signal the onset of its crisis from the 1980-90s (Horrocks, 1994; Tincknell & Chambers, 2002; Tincknell, 2005; Tasker, 2008; Franco, 2008; Hamad, 2014). More contemporarily, scholars have discussed the impact of 9/11, leading to an era of ‘protective paternalism’ (Hammad and Godfrey, 2012, p.158). While this is occasionally a feature of Anderson’s work, fatherhood is largely built on the foundation of indifference and absence and has been a dominant theme from his first film.

There are a few instances of Anderson’s father figure showcasing some protective tendencies. In *Bottle*, the quasi-father Mr Henry stands up for Bob (Robert Musgrave) against his abusive brother Future Man (Andrew Wilson); Zissou tries to save Ned and his crew from the pirates; Royal tries to fix his relationship with his children by trying to help with their problems (*Tenenbaums*); Mr Bishop tries to defend his daughter’s honour and even threatens her to stay away from Sam, for her safety (*Moonrise*); while Gustave, another pseudo-father figure fights to defend Zero from the militia (*Budapest*). However, these are brief instances of fathers behaving like responsible fathers, and trying to protect their children in otherwise self-absorbed, dysfunctional performances.

⁵² Referring to the struggling and threatened father figure, Max in *Homecoming*; the fading power of Nagg in *Endgame*; and the authoritative control of Jacques’ father in *Jacques*.

The question of what it means to be an irresponsible parent, especially what it means to be a father, is raised continuously in Anderson's oeuvre. For instance, Royal (Gene Hackman) in *Tenenbaums*, is repeatedly shown to be an indifferent, selfish father who does nothing for his children: he overtly favours Richie, steals bonds from Chas' safety deposit and neglects his adopted daughter, Margot, constantly reinstating that she is adopted. His utter disregard for her feelings eventually leads to her 'adult alienation' (Pomerance, 2008b, p.302) and extreme secrecy. Margot also deals with meeting her biological father; on a secret trip to meet him, where he accidentally chops off her finger with his axe. In a scene sharply displaying the class difference between Margot and her biological family, Joshua Gooch writes, 'the amputation of her finger marks the moment that Margot biological father not only fails to fulfil his role, but also cuts it off altogether' (2007, p.27). With an insensitive and unacceptable father like Royal and a biological father who has failed her, Margot is left cut off and alone. *Tenenbaums* revolves around a family bonded by 'vituperative jealousy, deceit and secrecy, conniving intelligence, distrust, bitter resentment and suppressed rage' (Pomerance, 2008b, pp.301-302). Their familial bond is tethered together by indifference and resentment, stemming mainly from the failures of Royal as a father.

Similarly, in *Fantastic*, Fox fails to acknowledge his son's constant need to impress him; instead, repeatedly putting his family in danger because of his inability to curb his criminal desires. *Moonrise* portrays a disillusioned and self-indulgent father who does not know how to deal with his problem-child, driving her to run away from home twice. In the film, there is also a secondary father figure, the "sad, dumb policeman"⁵³

⁵³ Described by Suzy to her mother, who she confronts about her illicit affair with Sharp.

Captain Sharp; portrayed as a man suffering from a midlife crisis, who finds companionship and purpose through adopting Sam. Anderson's father figures are frequently depicted as seeking redemption, suffering a 'crisis in masculinity' and victims of their own narcissism.

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou and the quasi-family.

Matt Zoller Seitz introduces *Life Aquatic* as a film whose zany aesthetics are anchored to the following basic themes: 'the lived experience of grief, the futility of revenge, the anxiety of entering middle age and wondering if you'll leave a legacy along with your unfinished business' (2013, p.157). He excludes the most explicit theme in the film, parenthood. Zissou's enactment of fatherhood is the foundation over which the other themes play out.

Life Aquatic, released in 2004, is Anderson's fourth feature film and the first film to use stop motion animation in any capacity. The film has a diverse cast of actors, a fantastical spectrum of sea life and a three-legged dog for a limited amount of time. Written by Anderson and Noah Baumbach, the film was shot by cinematographer Robert Yeoman in CinemaScope and accompanied by music composed by Mark Mothersbaugh. The film revolves around the world of Steve Zissou, a legendary underwater explorer, famous for his documentaries about his adventures underwater and on land with his faithful crew on board the *Belafonte*. Anderson's earlier focus on oddball characters like Max (*Rushmore*) and the Tenenbaum children reaches its pinnacle in the character of the narcissistic man-child Zissou.

Zissou's character is based on the celebrated oceanographer, Jacques Cousteau⁵⁴, whose documentaries Anderson watched growing up⁵⁵. Other references that inform Zissou's character are Captain Ahab⁵⁶ and Norwegian adventurer and ethnographer, Thor Heyerdahl (Seitz, 2013). On being interviewed about Cousteau's influence on the character, Anderson acknowledges that 'though Steve Zissou was an invented character, there is only one guy you can point to as an inspiration for this' (Seitz, 2013, p.166). John Gibbs remarks that the entire film can be considered a pastiche of Cousteau's documentaries, especially on seeing 'a series of films within the film that certainly fit that description, meticulously created with appropriately graded stock, framing and titles, accompanied by a vintage score' (2012, p.133). The other references to Cousteau in the film include: Zissou and his crew sport the famous red hats worn by Cousteau and his crew; Zissou's ship *Belafonte* mirrors *Calypso*, with both being recommissioned out of World War II naval ships; both oceanographers have an air balloon and a helicopter accompanying their boats; both have their respective societies under their names; and both oceanographers lose their sons in a plane accident. In the film, there are more overt references made to Cousteau with Zissou mentioning Cousteau's invention of putting walkie-talkies in diving helmets and how his (Zissou) team put "a special rabbit ear on top" of their helmets so they could listen to music.

⁵⁴ Jacques Cousteau (1910-1997) was an oceanographer, photographer, documentary host and is renowned for inventing diving and scuba-diving devices such as the Aqua Lung. He conducted numerous underwater expeditions and produced film, television series and wrote books about his expeditions. His first book was *The Silent World: A Story of Undersea Discovery and Adventure* which was also adapted into his famous documentary *The Silent World*, winning him a Palme d'or at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival (Source: Biography.com website).

⁵⁵ Interviewed about Cousteau, Anderson states that he loved him and has read some of his books (Seitz, 2013, p.163).

⁵⁶ Govender writes that Zissou and Ahab share similar approaches in their revenge plot, intersecting their fictional worlds: 'Zissou's flouting of his scientific purpose as a nature documentary maker, in face of his desire for revenge, is the same as can be found in Ahab's disregard for his economic purpose as a whaler in order to seek his revenge.' (2008, p.61).

Cousteau is eluded to in Anderson's earlier films, *Bottle* and *Rushmore*⁵⁷. Ironically, Cousteau himself was a problematic father figure known to have a difficult relationship with his sons Phillippe and Jean-Michel. Indeed, this intertextuality helps to emphasise Zissou's narcissistic flaws by association. From the onset of the film, the withering and fragile star persona of Zissou is brought to the forefront. The audience is presented with the ageing Zissou, like the familiar story of Cousteau, unable to accept the downward trajectory of his career.

The film begins with a screening of Zissou's latest documentary *Adventure No. 12: "The Jaguar Shark" (Part 1)* at the lavish theatre Loquasto⁵⁸. Charles Affron writes,

The film that makes a fiction of performance tests the medium's approximation of verisimilitude against fictivity; our affect is inflected by our reading activity, our ability to see performance as performance. (1980, p.42)

The frame used of a film within a film functions as a 'clever tactic to call attention to the 'fictivity' of film and also underscores Steve's emotional dysfunction' (Peberdy, 2012, p.53). Through the documentary, a fragile and calculated image of Zissou the explorer is presented. Later in the film, the process of performance plays a significant role in Zissou's inability to differentiate between his real and reel life.

The documentary screening is utilised as an ingenious device to introduce Zissou and his crew to the audience (both of the film *Life Aquatic* and Zissou's documentary); it

⁵⁷ In the *Bottle Rocket*, there is a portrait of Cousteau, photographed by Richard Avedon, hanging on the wall in the scene where Mr. Henry throws a party at his place. In *Rushmore*, Max checks out a book written by Cousteau titled *Diving for Sunken Treasure* which is the book that propels the narrative forward by leading him to Miss Cross, who then becomes the object of his affection (Seitz, 2013).

⁵⁸ The Loquasto is in fact the famous opera house, Teatro di San Carlo in Naples.

portrays the farcical nature of the characters and their performance. Zissou's enigmatic crew of misfits consists of his indifferent wife Eleanor (Anjelica Huston), his confidant and chief diver Esteban du Plantier (Seymour Cassel) whose untimely demise looms over the film, a needy and jealous right-hand man and engineer Klaus (Willem Dafoe), cameraman Vikram Ray (Waris Ahluwalia) who is constantly filming, the peculiarly silent sound man and editor Renzo Pietro (Pawel Wdowczak) and frogman Bobby (Niels Koizumi). The crew also includes the eccentric Vladimir Wolodarsky (Noah Taylor) who is the team's physicist and original sound composer, Anne-Marie Sakowitz (Robyn Cohen) who is the script girl, the only voice of reason on board the ship, topless for most of her scenes, Pelé dos Santos (Seu Jorge) who plays the safety expert and for the length of the film is seen performing David Bowie's songs in Portuguese, seven gullible marine science students from the University of North Alaska as interns, and the dubious producer Oseary Drakoulias (Michael Gambon).

Through the course of the film this quasi-familial unit expands to include Ned Plimpton, an Air Kentucky pilot and the alleged son of Zissou, the bond company stooge assigned to their crew Bill Ubell (Bud Cort), and Jane Winslett-Richardson (Cate Blanchett), a pregnant reporter for the *Oceanographic Reporter* who is writing an article on Zissou. The crew all wear uniforms costumes are signalling their status as quasi-family members. David Nordstorm (2006) connects Anderson's fascination with uniforms to fascist aesthetics, an idea reinforced by the attitude of the leader Zissou. Susan Sontag (1980) in her essay 'Fascinating Fascism'⁵⁹ elicited by the publication of Leni Riefenstahl's collection of photographs, *The Last of the Nuba*,

⁵⁹ Originally published in 1974.

states, the fascist aesthetic includes a ‘preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behaviour, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain: they endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude’ (p.87). Zissou’s control over his loyal crew portrays a cult-like scenario wherein his crew can be seen following him with blind devotion (Nordstrom, 2006). The assertion of his authority, through his petty and irrational behaviour, hides a deep-seated fear of loneliness and unworthiness. For people to be accepted in Zissou’s life they must obey him unquestioningly and wear the uniform; thus, so must Ned don the uniform and become a part of his crew, following their rules of conduct.

The habitual activities of Zissou and his crew portray a close-knit family, controlled by the patriarch, Zissou. They live in a connected ecosystem that is their ship. The ship functions as the ‘home’ that isolates and protects them from the outside world, maintaining a space of self-indulgence, denial and absurdity. Absurdity is viewed as the ‘fulcrum of all self-knowledge; it balances necessary choice, hope and action on the one side against inevitable error, despair and failure on the other’ (Oliver, 1965, p.197). This approach to absurdity progresses beyond its theatrical lineage, discussing the concept not as a definitive dramatic genre but as a factor consistent with the human condition. In *Life Aquatic*, Anderson negotiates this very idea of the human condition through his protagonist Zissou, as we are invited to witness both his world of adventure and increasing self-doubt.

While *Life Aquatic* engages with absurdist masculinity, it distances itself from others. One of the key areas of difference is the mise-en-scène of the film. Absurdist plays are depicted in minimalist settings referring to the vacuous nature of the human

condition. Beckett's plays fixated on the concept of time and waiting. His plays use the *mise-en-scène* to depict time as corrosive, where the character's age, environment and material objects disintegrate, and the basic things 'that make life bearable in Beckett's universe ... run out' (Counsell, 1996, p.124). The passage of time and its path of devastation is depicted through impassive and dark humour in these Absurd plays, with death and decay always in the backdrop.

In *Life Aquatic*, the *mise-en-scène* cannot be more dissimilar, the decadent lifestyle of the protagonist and the clutter of people and equipment is always in the frame. While minimalism is lacking in the film, the deterioration of time on the characters and material possessions is evident. The *Belafonte*, once a beauty, is now badly in need of repair. Similarly, the helicopter which leads to Ned's death lies in disrepair, as does Zissou's career. His reputation and possessions are deteriorating, along with his sense of self, with the condition of the boat mirroring his career. Coping with the death of his friend and a faltering personal and professional life, Zissou goes on a vengeance mission to beat time, age and ultimately death.

The 'confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' is what the Absurd encompasses (Camus, 2005, p.26); the individual encounters frustration in a world that is empty and in constant conflict with a world that lacks substantial meaning. Conflict, in the Absurd, is witnessed through human interaction and dysfunctional familial structures and this is the driving force of *Life Aquatic's* narrative. Zissou's need to be successful in finding the mythical shark to avenge the death of Esteban is met with ridicule; his need to be a successful filmmaker is met with lack of funds and support, and finally, his need to be a heroic father figure is met

with disappointment, when Ned sees through the farce. Zissou is left a frustrated man, unable to realise the meaning he wants from life; instead, he is enveloped by the emptiness of failure, trapped in the confines of Absurd masculinity.

Absurd plays address themes such as isolation, depression, death and familial relationships, utilising comedy to soften the blow. The safety of comedy is utilised to discuss the problems that arise due to dysfunctionality, lack of communication and societal norms in both the film and Absurd texts. Esslin writes, the Absurd ‘does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation’, causing the reader to explore the human condition intensively, rather than merely address its external appearance (1965, p.23). Although *Life Aquatic* adopts absurdist themes to discuss familial dysfunctionality, there are also themes in the film which do not conform to absurdist ideas: the use of a more conventional narrative to show the development and redemption of Zissou as a filmmaker and a father figure, the searches for meaning that allude the characters within the TotA. It would be naive to suggest that the film directly mirrors any of the cited Absurd plays; instead, I argue that the film draws upon a unique interplay of the Absurd and more conventional storytelling practices.

“Because I hate fathers, and I never wanted to be one”: Steve Zissou the father.

Anderson comments that Zissou ‘is one of those guys who was making movies in the sixties and seventies, and the film is about the stage they reached after a certain point, the things they had to deal with in their own lives’ (quoted in Seitz, 2013, p.171). The film is as much a reflection of the process of artistic endeavour as it is about Zissou coping with ageing and failure; having led a relatively successful career as an

oceanographer, filmmaker and celebrity he finds himself facing the responsibility of fatherhood and a failing marriage.

Life Aquatic, according to Mayshark, contains three films:

the seafaring adventure story that Anderson has hinted at throughout his life...
a midlife-crisis drama about a man adrift on both personal and professional fronts; and a movie about the movie business, which clearly draws on Anderson's experience... (2007, p.132)

While Mayshark's comments are true, I maintain that the film is primarily about a dysfunctional family: focused on the strenuous relationship between a father and his newly found son. This dysfunctionality further extends to include Zissou's quasi-family, his crew, forming the basis around which the film develops its narrative.

Anderson's films dwell in the romantic lanes of nostalgia; *Life Aquatic* is no different; he appears to be recreating 'not just the TV shows and movies of his youth, but the experience of watching them' (ibid., p.133). It is this tone of nostalgia for a bygone era that dictates Zissou's life as well, as he yearns for his past fame and his youth. Having not produced a hit documentary in years, his colleagues mock his attachment to youth and his frivolous searches for meaning and adventure, emphasising my reading of his Absurd masculinity. Zissou is a man in need of redemption; the more his career plummets, the more narcissistic and staged his documentaries become.

In a brutally honest scene, while the crew sit and watch one of their old films, in which Zissou and his crew save a wild snow mongoose and her litter, Klaus vacantly remarks, "That's what it used to be like." The camera pans to show an expressionless Zissou

overhearing this and leaving the room. The older documentary shows a more enthusiastic and altruistic crew. Zissou appears more focused on the quality of the film's content with the preservation of wildlife being the focus and motivation of his work. His modern work becomes a vehicle for his narcissism and his preoccupation with his appearance on screen. Something I interpret as his desperate attempts to find meaning and his sense of self again, anchoring himself on film. The documentaries change from a documentary of wildlife to one about himself.

Zissou is the symbolic patriarch of his quasi-family, with Eleanor being the authority that maintains order. She is the vice-president of the Zissou Society, and her family has funded Zissou's expeditions in the past; she is also referred to as "the brains" behind Zissou's underwater operations. Eleanor's efficiency is shown to agitate the egotistical Zissou, who cannot handle that his wife has played a major role in his success and could survive his failing career. For James Mottram, *Life Aquatic* is a film where 'all the characters are lost and looking for something' (2006, p.392). However, as Cynthia Felando (2012) observes, this cannot be said of all the characters in Anderson's film; unlike the lost and searching male characters in his films, the female characters played by Anjelica Huston⁶⁰ 'function rather like anchors around which much flightier male characters circulate ... Huston's characters have found themselves and are apparently content' (p.72). Eleanor is intelligent, collected and honest in her interactions with Zissou, even indifferent. Again, the relative strength of the female protagonist seems to correlate to the 'crisis in masculinity' the sense of loss foundational to Absurd masculine identities.

⁶⁰ She plays the maternal figure in both *Tenenbaums* (Etheline) and *Darjeeling* (Sister Patricia).

The decision to lead a childless existence is brought to light towards the end of the film, when Zissou confesses to Eleanor, “You were probably right all along. We should have had a kid together.” He shifts some blame on her, stating, “Of course, you were kinda already on the edge of being too old. Unless maybe that’s a cop-out.” Until this point, any matters pertaining to parenthood are never raised between the duo. Eleanor blankly replies, “It’s worse than a cop-out. I was 34.” Their matter-of-fact approach and acerbic manner with each other paint an image of a couple who, while not entirely happy with each other, depend on one another: in this case, Zissou relies on Eleanor to maintain order in his life. Her economic and sexual autonomy threaten his masculinity. She is not depicted in the traditional and stereotypical garb of a mother or a wife; neither is she a middle-aged woman portrayed as asexual nor is she obsessed with being young. Eleanor’s powerful character highlights the insecure and incompetent persona of Zissou in the film and his dependence on her.

John Beynon writes masculinity is not something men are born with, but ‘something into which they are accultured ... which they learn to reproduce in culturally appropriate ways’ (2002, p.2). The fragile and destructive masculinity that Zissou displays is never put into context; the audience is never informed about Zissou’s upbringing. The only piece of knowledge about him is provided by Jane when she mentions a quote from his mentor Lord Mandrake that reads, ‘Zissou has an almost magical connection to the life of the sea. He speaks its language fluently. I’ve never met a boy like that in all my life’. On being asked about his relationship with his mentor, Zissou abruptly changes the topic displaying an unease to discuss it. Laura Shackelford argues that the film polarises opinions, recommending ‘we either identify or disidentify with Steve Zissou in light of the troubling legacies of white, patriarchal,

heterosexist, liberal humanist masculinity he both reiterates and, to a lesser degree, redirects' (2014, p.201). Throughout the film, he mentors Ned by exerting this masculinity to control him and to create him in his image, an act again that can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to create meaning and purpose in his life, but as Ned's death suggests a purpose fitting with the Absurd that promises but never materialises.

Estella Tincknell and Deborah Chambers write that the masculinity in crisis at the end of the 20th century occurred due to a 'decline of traditional male manual work and increase in women's economic and sexual autonomy' (2002, p.146). Beynon demarcates four main discursive themes through which American and British masculinity has been presented in the twentieth century: the 'new man' and the 'old man', men running wild, emasculated men and men as victims and aggressors. The first theme of the new man symbolises health and vitality, while the old man represents nostalgia for a bygone era; the second theme of men running wild contains in its remit men as 'bad' fathers, men who display antisocial and violent behaviour; the third theme discusses hollow masculinity, vulnerable and incompetent men; and finally, the fourth theme deals with victimised men and angry men who fight back (2002, pp.123-124). The masculinity of Zissou touches on the latter themes, from the representation of a 'bad' father to his portrayal of incompetence. He uses Ned for his money and attention but is unable to behave in a caring paternal manner. Zissou's behaviour towards his son, wife and team reflects his hollow masculinity; to his very core, Zissou is the epitome of absurd masculinity. His character represents a thinly veiled critique of masculinity and whiteness, explored through the breakdown of language and the breakdown of his relationships.

Zissou is constantly depicted making jibes at Hennessey's sexuality, calling him a "faggot" and a "closet queer" and questioning how Eleanor could be intimate with a "faggot". Commenting on Hennessey's sexuality, also enforces his position as straight and masculine, a more suitable option for Eleanor. Joseph Aisenberg (2008) writes that Zissou's tyrannical attempts to control everyone and everything associated with his film reflects his delusion of his film being 'raw unmediated nature but are really just a violently distorted reflection of his perverted ego' (n.p.). The film explores Zissou's vulnerability, but centres around his revenge mission; he plays the victimised and angry man, seeking to avenge his friend's death and his failing career. The epitome of the Absurd man desperately looking for meaning and purpose in a world he does not recognise.

As suggested the TotA provide a range of examples of both weak fathers and 'lost' male characters; in *Jacques* and *Homecoming*, both Jacques and Teddy experience loss at the hands of their father, while Jacques succumbs to the norms of marriage he struggled to avoid, Teddy loses his wife to his father and brothers. In *Life Aquatic*, Ned similarly experiences loss in his conformity to Zissou's wishes. He willingly invests all his inheritance money into Zissou's new project, taking a break from his job to follow Zissou on his bizarre mission, a mission that leads to his death.

The absurdity of Zissou's paternal dysfunctionality.

Life Aquatic, ironically, builds its narrative on the premise of Zissou's elaborate world and his delusions of grandeur surrounding it. His initiation into fatherhood is shown g

when Klaus introduces him to his young nephew Werner (Leonardo Giovannelli) at the screening of his documentary. Werner gifts Zissou a live crayon ponyfish in a plastic bag filled with water. The camera cuts from a medium close-up of a smiling Werner handing Zissou the fish to a close-up of Zissou's deadpan face, looking at the fish and then zooms in to show a stop-motion animation of a colourful ponyfish (a colourful seahorse). The placement of these point of view shots, sandwiches a dejected Zissou between happy youthfulness and the fantastical and brightly coloured fish. Contrasted with the two, Zissou appears melancholic, deadpan and detached from the wondrous world of the sea around which he has built his life.

Anderson's films depict "failed father figures", and an assortment of eccentric male characters in the midst of some identity crisis' (Felando, 2012, p.69), and yet these films are humorous, heartfelt and sincere in their discussion of family. Zissou is shown as an extremely self-absorbed person coming to terms with their ageing and dying career, yet still functions as the father figure of the crew, despite, to refer to my previous argument, the almost dictatorial role he assumes. The ship embodies the familial space in which he and his crew can function, isolated from the rest of the world. Indeed, it is this world that appeals to Ned, a space that he believes can fill the void he feels of not having a father. As with the Absurd, this offers hope, but little resolution.

Ned, a young pilot, is naïve and in search of a father figure after the death of his mother. His longing to be accepted by Zissou results in him being exploited: Zissou uses his money, puts him and the entire crew in danger, never appreciating the effort that Ned makes to fit into his world, as a son and crewmember. Similarities can be

seen between their relationship and that of Hamm and Clov (*Endgame*): in a similar fashion Zissou fails to appreciate Ned's companionship and loyalty, until it is too late.

One of the key absurdist characteristics that this film embodies is the nature of communication that exists between Zissou and Ned. In absurdist literature, language is manipulated to conceal true emotions and meaning, which in turn loses its function of expressing real content. The film utilises communication not to conceal emotions and meaning, but to distract from it.

Zissou is shown as a man out of his element, on a mission for revenge but like the characters in *Godot*, he too is left without a resolution (Esslin, 2001). While Zissou's narrative comes full circle at the end, his growth as a character is one that is left to speculation. We are left questioning whether, having Ned in his life has encouraged him to grow into a responsible professional, husband and father? Alternatively, has Zissou remained the self-indulgent, narcissistic man he always was? These are speculations and meanings the audience is invited to infer from the closing scene of Zissou, sitting outside the Loquasto with Werner, listening to the audience applaud his new documentary. If this meaning is to be inferred, then we can suggest that despite his attempts at revenge and redemption, Zissou is the same flawed narcissist that we were introduced to at the start of the film. As is the case with *Godot*, the audience is left wondering and waiting.

The first time Ned and Zissou meet is a matter-of-fact introduction on board the *Belafonte*, which cuts straight to the revelation of Zissou's paternity. Analysing this extended single shot, John Gibbs writes:

the uninterrupted take acts as one of a number of mutually reinforcing strategies: the camera is prevented from entering the playing space between the actors, holding the performances at a greater distance as a result, and refusing the rhetorical emphasis of reverse-field cutting to guide our attention to particular details. (2012, p.138)

The tracking shot of Zissou walking on deck changes to a static shot of the two facing each other, highlighting the background of a bourgeoisie crowd onboard the *Belafonte*, at Zissou's reception party. They move closer to the frame, as the camera mirrors the ebb and flow of the boat; Zissou confesses, "I've heard of you. I don't know if it's true or not by the way. Do you?". Both Ned and Zissou's expressionless faces and dry dialogue underplays the impact of this life-changing news. At that moment, Zissou chooses to lie to his newly found son; the reason for his lie is revealed later in the film when Zissou and Ned's relationship begins to disintegrate. It makes it harder for the audience, given that an emotional and dramatic event is unfolding with the revelation of a possible paternity and Zissou's negligence as a potential parent. The absurdity of the situation arises in the handling of this issue; the deadpan delivery of such information, inviting the audience into this moment and yet alienating them through the staged nature of this performance. From the onset, their relationship is wrought with deceit and betrayal. Until the end, there is no concrete evidence presented throughout the film that Zissou is Ned's father; Indeed, Eleanor implies Zissou is impotent to Jane when she reveals that he "shoots blanks".

The conflict between Ned's desire to be accepted as a son and Zissou's inability to look beyond himself is initially appeased with Zissou introducing Ned to Eleanor, inviting him on his ship and to be a part of his crew. In a trademark Anderson

dollhouse shot, Zissou introduces his ship to Ned, like a boy showing off his favourite toy, saying, “Let me tell you about my boat.” The wide-angle planimetric shot of Zissou holding a toy boat is grounded with a large picture of the *Belafonte*⁶¹ on a screen; the artificiality of this is further emphasized when the screen is lifted to reveal a cutaway set of the ship, followed by Anderson’s trademark dollhouse shot: the static, geometrical frames evoke a deadpan comic quality (Bordwell, 2007), keeping in line with Zissou’s flat voice as he describes the ship. The scene’s composition and execution draw attention to both Zissou as a storyteller and the film as a film (Govender, 2008). The artifice of his environment is laid bare, distancing the viewer as a result by including this dollhouse composition.

Sunhee Lee (2016) writes that from early on in his career, Anderson used forward and lateral long tracking shots; from the 2000s his tracking shots become more elaborate, evolving to keep up with the increased artificiality and theatricality of his sets, incorporating his trademark dollhouse or cutaway set. Thus, the ‘most iconic moments of his films are linked to a single-take tracking shot, which continues for a long time in order to show a whole of the main set’ (2016, p.412). This helps reveal crucial information about the character’s lives, and as artificial and doll-like as it may seem, it also reveals the emotional state of these characters. When Zissou introduces his boat, it seems more out of a storybook than reality, as the camera fluidly uses the shot to show the different sections of the ship. The image with the dolphins and divers swimming under the boat make for a surreal feel, creating a clear picture of the closed, fantastical world of Zissou, while helping to emphasise the Absurd space of the boat

⁶¹ The name of the ship is a reference to the American singer, social activist and actor Harry Belafonte (born 1927), he was known for his calypso musical style; incidentally, *Calypso* is also the name of Cousteau’s research vessel (Browning, 2011).

itself. The boat becomes a universe in itself, regulating and controlling the crew members, with Zissou taking charge and maintaining some semblance of control by becoming the father figure for his entire crew.

Tincknell states the culture of reclamation in the 1990s addressed a new kind of fatherhood, which considered it imperative that men are the breadwinners and ‘insisted on the importance of strong emotional bonds between fathers and their children’ (2005, p.65); these bonds were often at the expense of the mother figure. The 2000s opened up debates about masculinity that was vulnerable, self-critical and embodied ‘bad’ father figures. Conveniently, for the narrative to move forward in *Life Aquatic*, Ned’s mother is dead, and this allows for no rivalry of attention between his parents; Ned’s attention is solely on Zissou, while Zissou’s attention is solely on himself.

In a rare moment of reflection, Zissou bares himself to Eleanor raising the question, “What happened to me? Did I lose my talent? Am I ever going to be good again?”. This questioning Zissou, looking out to sea, portrays an insecure man, finally coming to terms with his ailing career. Just before his self-reflection, he confesses to Eleanor, “I mean I know I want him to think of me like a father. But the fact that there’s an outside chance that he could really be my actual... biological son... is very difficult for me”. The close-up of a raw, dejected Zissou cuts to an overhead shot of a colourful stop-motion animated lizard on his hand; he abruptly flicks it away. His sincerity of acknowledging the change fatherhood is bringing to his life is overlooked with a shot of the lizard; almost like a rejection of emotion and attachment of a deeper meaning to the scene: emphasising the absurdity of Zissou’s situation and his refusal to ponder

on the significance of this moment. Zissou's self-reflection and his uncharacteristic clarity in understanding his circumstance are characteristic of the protagonists in absurdist literature, such as Hamm and the tramps; this realisation projects an air of melancholy highlighting Zissou's inner struggles with himself.

Zissou's conflicted sense of self also impacts his relationship with Ned. The two share lighter moments in the film, from their relationship otherwise plagued with miscommunication and insecurity; the scene of them bonding over the dead people in their lives is reminiscent of a scene in *Rushmore* where Max and Cross bond over dead family members. The tragedy and sorrow of death are completely overlooked instead depicting the two characters engaging in a diluted form of crosstalk:

NED: She took her own life. She took sleeping pills.

ZISSOU: Why would she do that?

NED: Well, she was in a great deal of pain, you know.

ZISSOU: Oh. I see, yeah. You know my best friend just got killed. Esteban.

NED: Yeah, I know. The old man.

ZISSOU: Let's go to my island.

Zissou's childish approach to his ex-lover's death is evident in the way that the conversation shifts from a matter-of-fact announcement of Esteban's death to the suggestion that Ned should visit his island. Their crosstalk indicates their inability to comprehend what the other is saying. While this form of crosstalk differs slightly from that employed in absurdist works, it serves a similar purpose. The child-like approach to discussing death lacks depth, creating an absurdly humorous situation which is devoid of real emotion.

When Ned asks Zissou why he had never contacted him before, Zissou blankly replies, “Because I hate fathers, and I never wanted to be one.” He then hands Ned his correspondence stock, which has his name inscribed as ‘Kingsley (Ned) ZISSOU’. This is an assertion of Zissou’s authority as a father, and as the dominant male of the group, he changes Ned’s surname despite Ned’s decision to stick with his own name. The point-blank nature of what would have otherwise been an emotionally wrought conversation brings the focus to the way in which communication is distorted in the film. Gibbs writes that the poignancy of the scene is allowed to last, ‘however, as Steve’s reappearance establishes another tone, the incongruity of the change in his behaviour and tone of voice creating an element of humour’ (2012, p.143). This incongruity in his behaviour is a trait we witness throughout the film. Adhering to an Absurd approach to communication, the deadpan, contradictory nature of this exchange highlights Zissou’s inability to care for much beyond himself and Ned’s inability to the exact nature of Zissou’s paternity.

Tension continues to rise between Zissou and Ned over Jane’s affection, eventually leading to a fistfight when Ned is discovered in bed with Jane. Their argument results in Ned stating, “You don’t know me...you never wanted to know me. I’m just a character in your film” to which Zissou blankly replies, “It’s a documentary. It’s all really happening.” Zissou is unable to ‘determine the parameters between the film being made’ (Peberdy, 2012, p.47); his performance in his documentaries and his ‘real’ life, adding to the sense of meaninglessness to his ‘real life’ that we are invited to witness as the audience. Zissou’s jealousy over the fact that Jane and Ned are together, despite his affections for her cause him to declare, “You call yourself my son, but I just don’t see it. It’s nothing personal.” The dialogue, while dramatic is delivered in a

ludicrously flat manner which again works to disorientate the audience emphasising the tension between the dramatic content with the deadpan style of delivery, emphasised through the use of reverse shots. Lines are delivered in a blunt, matter-of-fact manner, with minimal gestures and movements and impassive facial expressions, to the extent that serious conversation is rendered ordinary, even banal' (Peberdy, 2012, p.47). The Absurd finds itself enacted in these downplayed conversations, devoid of any authentic communication or emotion.

Before the fight over Jane on board the hull one night, listening to the 'jack whales' singing, Zissou asks Ned "Are you finding what you were looking for out here with me?"; only to answer the question himself by stating, "I hope so." Anderson uses reverse angle shots, positioning his characters to deprive the scene of intimacy through the stilted dialogue and blank expressions. Ned informs him that he wrote him a letter 17 years ago as the scene cuts to a standard Anderson God's-eye-view shot of a typed letter from Zissou, with Zissou's voice narrating it. On being handed the letter by Ned, Zissou emotionally states "Yeah, more or less, standard boilerplate I guess" and the shot cuts to the next part of their documentary. While the shots and deadpan delivery of dialogue creates a distancing effect, the background of the frame as the dark sea and sky creates a placeless setting lacking familiarity or emotional attachment to the characters. Lee comments on the numerous devices used in the film to reinforce distance; this reflexive process of filmmaking 'disturbs spectators' emotional immersion towards the main characters' (2016, p.421). The deadpan expressions and awkward posturing of Zissou as a narrator and actor in his documentary distances his audience; this translates into his relationship with Ned and further developed through their fragmented communication.

The impact of fragmented communication in the film is manifested in techniques such as ‘explicitly scripted language, indicated through shots of printed texts and scenes of characters reading on-screen or through voice-over narration’ (Jaecle, 2013, p.157), and the use of static planimetric shots (Bordwell, 2007). The lack of time and attention dedicated to the scene between father and son, that could have resolved issues, is completely glanced over, and the chance to get emotionally attached is taken away. Zissou never fully gets a chance to realise his potential as a father, as an audience, we are given hope that Zissou and Ned might start to build a father-son relationship, but akin to the TotA this is a sense of hope that does not materialise.

Earlier, on being sardonically questioned by Eleanor why Ned was given a place in the crew, Zissou says “Because he looks up to me”. Ned’s importance is weighed according to how he makes Zissou feel, and this is what drives their relationship. During their rescue mission, a dejected Zissou apologises to Ned, stating that he had been thinking of a nickname that would mean something and came up with “Papa Steve”. Zissou finally realises the impact of his behaviour and owns up to his responsibility as a father and the leader of his crew. Unfortunately, father and son do not get to spend much time together after this, with Ned’s unfortunate death in a plane crash.

The narrative gears towards a resolution with Ned gradually being accepted by Zissou and his crew just before his tragic death when the helicopter he and Zissou are on, malfunctions and crashes into the sea. Just moments before their helicopter plummets into the sea, Zissou shows the letter Ned had sent him when he was 12. A question he

asks in that letter was ‘P.s. Do you ever wish you could breathe underwater?’ Ned states “I still wish I could breathe underwater”, almost prophesizing his untimely demise. As the helicopter malfunctions and they hit the water, Ned mumbles about how the mechanism failed and then drifts into a state of unconsciousness, a brief dramatic silence follows with everything slowing down as the ‘loss of ambient sound becomes the aural signifier of Ned’s descent into unconsciousness’(Boschi and McNelis, 2012, p.39), and eventually to his death. The absurdity of Ned’s relationship with Zissou is mirrored in the absurdity of his death; the sudden manner of his death causing an emotional disconnect rather than portraying a distressful event.

Zissou manages to find the mythical jaguar shark; in the final passage of the film on seeing the shark, Eleanor remarks, “It is beautiful Steve”. An overwhelmed Zissou replies, “Yeah, it’s pretty good, isn’t it? I wonder if it remembers me” and begins to cry. He has redeemed himself and found his nemesis, and this is one of the most crucial differences between *Life Aquatic* and absurdist plays. Not only is redemption not a theme addressed in absurdist plays, but characters like Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and Clov never actually get what they are want. While Zissou, experiences loss, uncertainty and personal crisis, the film ends with a type of resolution.

Conclusion

Throughout the chapter, I discuss the nature of fatherhood, suggesting that Anderson’s depiction of fatherhood shares similarities with the TotA. The Absurd largely uses cross-talk as a device to display dysfunctional relationships wherein the partakers of that relationship cannot escape each other. This was analysed through the distinctive

mise-en-scène of *Life Aquatic* and significantly through the relationships of Zissou and Ned, in which I argue that their relationship is reminiscent of absurdist pairs such as Vladimir and Estragon and Hamm and Clov.

I am aware that, while I have demonstrated the film has some dissimilarities with the Absurd, my main focus has been on discussing how absurdist themes can be seen within the film. As stated in my introduction, I am not claiming that Anderson's oeuvre is a perfect example of the Absurd film, the aim of my research is not to establish a separate genre of the Absurd film, but to discuss the prevalence of Absurd themes in the films of Anderson, that could potentially lead to a framework of analysis that could subsequently be applied to contemporary American indie cinema.

Sartre writes, 'the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence' and Halloran further elaborates on this by commenting on the nature of things as '*de trop*-superfluous, gratuitous, wholly without explanation' (1973, p.97). He talks about the concept of the Absurd as being tied in with this need for individuals to make sense of things. The Absurd is just a manner in which to make sense of life and relationships; in *Life Aquatic*, where broken relationships are navigated through, and eventually, small steps of progress are seen by the end of the film, the Absurd provides an interesting thematic structure through which to investigate the father-son relationships. Zissou's world is what he constructs it to be, and in the end, it is his decision to finally resolve the conflict between him and Ned that gives him some closure.

Nearing the end of the film, the scene in which Zissou is lying on the floor after falling down the stairs at the abandoned hotel on Ping Island, is shown using an overhead closeup shot. Lee writes, Zissou is portrayed as deeply despondent. This is the moment ‘Zissou stops pretending and finally accepts reality’ (2016, p.435). He tells his crew: “We’ll give them the reality this time. A washed-up old man with no friends, no distribution deal, wife on the rocks, people laughing at him, feeling sorry for himself”. Zissou finally accepts the absurdity that plagues his life; leading to him achieving a new sense of meaning and unity with his quasi-family, he is ‘less naive and less given to attempts at control than before’ (2012, p.149).

The film adopts the absurdist unresolved circular narrative: Zissou ends up exactly where the film started, at a screening of his documentary, but this time it is implied he might have changed through his experiences with Ned; sitting with Werner, he hands him the Zissou Society ring that belonged to Ned. On hearing the applause of his film, he utters “this is an adventure”. The nature of Zissou’s reformation is never revealed, and we still question if he has changed as a person, the film does not address it. Absurdist playwrights did not attempt to define or solve absurdism, just merely portray it; in *Life Aquatic*, Anderson does look to provide solutions to tales of crisis or provide moral stories of fatherhood, instead, he merely portrays stories of the human condition: portraying a world marked with absurdist traits. The film ends with the assumption that Zissou has grown as a person. Instead of being the centre of attention at his screening, he chooses to sit outside on the steps. However, he does sit there till he hears applause; the fact that he still chooses to wait and hear the outcome of the film, suggests he still feels the need to validate his ego and be the star of the show. Has Zissou changed, or does he remain stunted in his development like the Absurd

characters? While Zissou might find a resolution in his search for the Jaguar shark as an audience, we are still left with unanswered questions.

Chapter 2

“I’ve Never Met Anyone Like You”: Understanding Dysfunctional Relationships and Romance in *Rushmore*

BLUME: She’s my Rushmore, Max.

MAX: Yeah, I know. She was mine too.

Ionesco was accused, by theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, of the London *Observer* in 1958⁶², of becoming the ‘messiah of the enemies of realism in the theatre’ (Esslin, 2001, p.128). This accusation was based on Ionesco’s own stance of being an advocate of *anti-théâtre*, using his work to ‘declare that words were meaningless and that all communication between human beings was impossible’, moving away from theatre rooted in realism but still using characters and events that are observably rooted to life (ibid). Ionesco wanted to break away from the language of society, stating that society itself formed a barrier between human beings and that language needed to be continually re-examined, to ‘find the living sap beneath’ (ibid.). He was aware and critical of the changing nature of meaning, with the constant evolution of communication, and developed on this to depict life as devoid of inherent meaning, a world of dysfunctional relationships and meaningless communication.

The premise of Ionesco’s *Prima Donna* (1971) is simple; there are two married couples ‘solemnly informing each another of things that must have been obvious to all of them all along’ (Esslin, 2001, p.138). A comic situation explored solely in

⁶² Refer to Kenneth Tynan’s 29 June, 1958 article in the *Observer*, ‘Ionesco, man of destiny?’

dialogue, in which he demonstrates the disintegration and emptiness of the spoken word. The Absurd explores spaces of everyday, mundane relationships while subverting the nature of communication. Anderson's films similarly explore ordinary relationships. In *Rushmore* (1998) the life of an American teenage boy, Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman), is presented; he goes to an elite private school, where he falls in love with a teacher. The plot is not a radical one, although its tone sets it apart, with the language use, depicting characters struggling to communicate and to establish meaningful relationships.

As suggested in the previous chapter, the Absurd and Anderson share a central tenant, dysfunctional relationships. The object of the TotA is not to demonise dysfunctionality but instead to acknowledge it. Similarly, Anderson has, through the course of his career, built his narratives around dysfunctionality. His characters are defined, celebrated and entrapped by their dysfunctional behaviour. Max, the protagonist of *Rushmore*, is one such dysfunctional character, functioning perfectly dysfunctionally in a film where a young boy dictates the lives of the adults around him. The dysfunctional replaces normalcy, a trait that Anderson shares with absurdist authors.

The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter is taken from the ending of the film when Max finally admits defeat to Henry Blume (Bill Murray) in the fight for Miss Cross' affection (Olivia Williams); she becomes his sole purpose for most of the film, replacing his first love: his school Rushmore. In this chapter, I will analyse the portrayal of dysfunctional romantic relationships depicted in the film, between Max, Cross and Blume. I propose that the film shares similar characteristics with relationships depicted in absurdist plays. Just as the first chapter looked at Absurd

representations of fatherhood in *Life Aquatic*, this chapter will look to the TotA to analyse the portrayal of romantic dysfunction in Anderson's *Rushmore*.

The dysfunctional romances of the Absurd

Iris Murdoch defines love as an 'extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real' (1959, p.51), commenting on our inability to look beyond our constructed social worlds and acknowledge that the individuals we claim to love are entitled to their independent identities, and are not just extensions of ourselves. Absurdist plays have consistently dissected the nature of romantic relationships; from plays like Ionesco's *Prima Donna* and *Amédée*, (1965), to Pinter's *Homecoming* (1977), the idea of romantic love is refuted and reimaged.

Often Absurd plays depict romantic relationships, like familial relationships, as dysfunctional. From the discussion of love created as desire that does not materialize, to ill-fated marriages such as Ruths where she 'surrenders beyond caring' (Esslin, 1970, p.156) to the sexual demands of her husband's family and eventually replacing romance with power and a disregard for the entrapment of love and marriage. Plays like *Prima Donna* depicts two couples who are portrayed as 'absent from themselves', becoming as 'interchangeable as the lines they speak' (Doubrovsky, 1959, p.5). Their impassioned and lengthy dialogues display familiarity with one another and a 'passionate, diseased urge to "understand"' while demonstrating that the language used, with the constant crosstalk, is essentially capable of nothing but systematically creating a state of delirium.

Romance is central to the TotA and builds upon this state of delirium, discussed in various forms ranging from marital companionship to unfulfilled sexual desire. Playwrights like Pinter, while determined to tackle their characters at the very root of their existence, neglected the less essential aspects of their life and personality (Esslin, 1973, p.34). These less essential aspects included fulfilment of sexual desires or even acknowledgement of them. Pinter's⁶³ portrayal of characters disinterested in sex was because they were often standing at turning points in their lives; he saw his characters at 'the extreme edge of their living', where they essentially isolated and living alone (ibid.). While they might interact with or desire other characters, they must essentially live and cope with themselves. Absurd plays manipulate scenarios and relationships to discuss the individual's root of existence, as understood by the respective playwright. More often than not, desire and romance become the vehicles through which the characters narcissism and personal dysfunctionality are displayed for the audience.

Relationships in Absurd plays, however dysfunctional, are portrayed to be habitual. Through these habits, there is a 'constant reordering of ourselves and the universe to remake them into the person/place we know' (Counsell, 1996, p.119). Lacking a desire to understand one another truly, these relationships are habits linking the characters together in an endless cycle of uniform activity. Characters in these plays find themselves imposing meaning through an existence that fails to portray one. Their habits show no development but merely repetition. Similarly, the relationships exist out of habit rather than desire, with characters existing in isolation, projecting their identities and unfulfilled desires onto their respective partners.

⁶³ Taken from a radio interview with Kenneth Tynan, in 1960

Rinhaug (2008) noted that an understanding of the Absurd could be approached through analysing ‘profound boredom’ or the ultimate figure of boredom that presided in absurdist works. A characteristic of this figure is its sensation of ‘being left-empty’ and becoming indifferent and inactive to this emptiness (p.42). In *Godot* and *Endgame*, all activities depicted are shown to be pointless; the characters are left empty and indifferent to their circumstances, with this process becoming habitual: be it through contrived dialogues or constant activity. The result is a presentation of ‘structured activity’ that lacks purpose, exposing the void that exists in the fictional lives of the characters (p.122). In the TotA romantic relationships are examples of these ‘structured activities,’ that are devoid of intimacy and exist to emphasise the void experienced by the characters (Bennett, 2011). Thus, love becomes a contentious concept with characters existing in isolation, unable to form intimate relationships and unable to break out of these structured activities.

Romantic dysfunctional relationships are abundant in the cinematic universe of Anderson. From *Bottle* to *Budapest*, his films are built on dysfunctional relationships and awkward interactions. The first chapter briefly discusses the relationship between Ned and Jane, along with Zissou’s infatuation with Jane. While Jane is looking for a father for her unborn child, her behaviour towards Ned is almost maternal. Zissou, also attracted to Jane, is married to Eleanor with whom he shares a dysfunctional marriage; Zissou’s masculinity is one in crisis with Eleanor being the one in power. In *Rushmore*, the film’s focus is on the neurotic relationship between Max, Cross and Blume.

Anderson's characters regularly experience loneliness; they are incapable of entering stable and normal relationships, instead they find themselves inadvertently drawn to dysfunctional relationships that they cannot leave. Many of these characters exist in relationships that are devoid of desire and any sexual attraction. In *Tenenbaums*, Richie is desperately in love with his adopted sister Margot and their relationship is depicted in an almost asexual manner: they are intimate, but there is no sexual desire insinuated. Similarly, *Moonrise* depicts two love-struck teenagers Sam and Suzy and in the extra-marital affair between Captain Sharp and Mrs Bishop; their relationships lack sexual attraction. Instead, their relationships are informed by their alienation from the rest of society and in finding solace from their loneliness.

The spectrum of dysfunctional relationships is copious in Anderson's constructed worlds: from absent parent figures in *Tenenbaums*, oppressive friendships in *Bottle* to emotionally abusive romantic relationships in *Darjeeling*. As suggested in the previous chapter Anderson's characters inhabit 'fractured or surrogate families' (Mottram, 2006, p.xxviii). His films look at childhood, 'family and the need, in the face of familial abandonment, to create communities in its place' (Orgeron, 2007, p.42). Often romantic love is overridden by the need to find companionship and belong to a community. Thus, dysfunctional characters find themselves with other dysfunctional characters attempting to find some meaning and companionship in their lives.

One of the main points of difference between Anderson's oeuvre and the Absurd is the depiction of childhood; Anderson's films consistently discuss childhood, symbolically and literally, whereas, absurdist texts focus on the dysfunctions of

adulthood. Both, however, portray characters who are emotionally stunted and narcissistic, and often, the protagonists are male. Anderson's oeuvre depicts a range of dysfunctional masculinities, there are strong female characters, but apart from Suzy (*Moonrise*), they play supporting roles. Similarly, the Absurd frequently charts its territory through the eyes of a male protagonist; there are exceptions like Winnie (*Happy Days*).

Rinhaug suggests that her reading of the Absurd as a male-dominated terrain has aimed to discuss the cultural-historical role it has offered men; absurdism has offered men a chance to escape from their masculinity by challenging the dominant discourse (2008, p.54). Thus, predominantly male authors who were labelled as absurdists portrayed the Absurd human condition as they saw it, through the eyes of male protagonists. They wrote about absurdism because they were unable to govern, or dominate it; their writings claim, 'a fundamental abdication in the face of a meaningless experience of being-in-the-world' (ibid.). As Esslin (2001) suggests, their work aims to present the Absurd to its audience, not define or lay down the rules for its conduct.

Love and unfulfilled romantic desire are consistent themes in Anderson's films: Anthony and Inez's relationship (*Bottle*), Richie and Margot's secret love (*Tenenbaums*), Ned, Jane and Zissou's love triangle (*Life Aquatic*), Jack and his ex-girlfriend's destructive relationship (*Darjeeling*), Mrs Bishop and Captain Sharp's extra-marital affair (*Moonrise*) and Zero and Agatha's short-lived romance (*Budapest*). These stories of whimsical love, awkward relationships and obscure desires are narrated through a naïve and sexless lens. Margot and Richie's love is

sealed with a kiss; no other sexual advances are shown or desired. Sam and Suzy are depicted clinically practising the technique of kissing, even discussing Sam's erection; again, this is depicted through the eyes of children discovering what sexuality is. The exception to Anderson's naïve approach to sex can be seen in *Bottle*; Anthony is instantly attracted to Inez, and the two are shown kissing, with sex eluded to, but their romance is innocent, lacking vigour and passion. Similarly, Gustave's sexual exploits with much older women are humorously depicted in the film. He even proudly refers to them as the tastier "cheap cuts" that he enjoys in his age: instead of being sensual, his exploits are clinical and dutiful in their presentation.

Anderson's proclivity for artifice is depicted in his recurring motifs, meticulous and conscious framing and his references to music and film from the 60s and 70s, with his characters encased in a 'rarefied bubble of whimsy and twee' (Hill, 2008, p.86). This has led to the assumption that Anderson creates synthetic worlds that are gradually showing a shift from talking about the human condition to focusing on his beloved objects that so ornately and immaculately clutter his cinematic worlds. His carefully constructed characters, however egotistical and unrelatable in their depiction, cynically reflect the dysfunctional world around them and the artifice that shrouds all their relationships. Strip back the whimsy, the nostalgic music, hipster traits, film and literature references to famous films, and you find characters dealing with loneliness, depression, dysfunctionality and their need to be wanted, similar traits that characters from the TotA have consistently showcased.

Rushmore

Anderson's first feature, *Bottle*, was still developing his cinematic style with its 'low-budget naturalism' (Mayshark, 2007, p.117), following normal but still eccentric characters, *Rushmore* sees Anderson come into his own, with his distinctive style and precocious young protagonists. The film explores the young life of its anti-hero, Max, and his unlikely ally and nemesis Blume; both characters personify the quirky, blank style that scholars ascribe to smart cinema (Sconce, 2002; Mayshark, 2007; MacDowell, 2010; 2012; Perkins, 2013; King, 2005; 2014). This blank style and precocious protagonists have become staple traits in Anderson's later films and will be analysed through the various chapters in this research.

Rushmore, released in 1998, was co-written by Anderson and Owen Wilson, with cinematography by Robert Yeoman. The film is nostalgic and unapologetic in its narrative of youth and redemption; it documents the adventures of a young and passionate fifteen-year-old Max at his elite private school, Rushmore, his unusual friendship with an older businessman, Henry Blume and his obsessive infatuation with a first-grade teacher at Rushmore, Miss Cross. The film begins to take a sinister turn once Blume and Max begin to fight over Cross's affection, exposing the dysfunctional relationships that they have fostered.

The film challenges the social roles played by adults and children, emphasising the endearing and Absurd interaction between the two. The film's protagonist Max evokes characters from films such as Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (1967), Lindsay Anderson's *If...* (1968),

Louis Malle's *Le Souffle au Coeur* (*Murmur of the Heart*, 1971), Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (1971), François Truffaut's *L'argent de poche* (*Small Change*, 1976), Paul Brickman's *Risky Business* (1983), John Hughes' *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), John Duigan's *Flirting* (1991), as well as being modelled on the character of Antoine Doine⁶⁴ from the films of François Truffaut, Mick Jagger in the 1980s, J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield⁶⁵ and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn⁶⁶ (Mottram, 2006; Hill, 2008; Seitz, 2013).

There are also overt references that the film makes to Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*⁶⁷, such as the end slow-motion dance scene to The Face's "Ooh La La", which pays tribute to the pre-show dance in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965). Similarly, like Schultz and Charlie Brown's father, Max's father is also a barber (Seitz, 2013). One character that stands out from the list of references is Laurent, played by Benoît Ferreux in Malle's *Le Souffle au Coeur*; references to Laurent's character can also be seen in Anderson's later work *Moonrise*. While Laurent belongs to a more pensive, adult world than Max, they share similarities: both boys are fifteen, mature for their age and behave like adults.

Laurent is a product of French bourgeoisie society of the 1950s, while Max is a product of 1990s young America. While Laurent is rushing to be a man and experience the adult world of pleasure and rebellion, Max is rushing to be an adult and is already

⁶⁴ A fictional character played by actor Jean-Pierre Léaud in five of Truffaut's films: *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*, 1959), *Antoine and Colette* (1962), *Baisers volés* (*Stolen Kisses*, 1968), *Domicile conjugal* (*Bed and Board*, 1970) and *L'amour en fuite* (*Love on the Run*, 1979).

⁶⁵ Based on the fictional teenage character in J.D. Salinger's 1951 novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

⁶⁶ Based on the fictional teenage character in Mark Twain's 1884 novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Refer to: Twain, M. (1950) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. London: Cresset Press.

⁶⁷ Comic strip created by Charles Schultz which first appeared in American newspapers, running from 1950 to 2000.

behaving like one; his attraction to Cross, as obsessive as it gets, is still naïve and innocent. The romantic world of Anderson, like the TotA is vacant of sex and lust; whereas Laurent is initiated into the world of sex by his elder brothers, Max is still a young boy unaware of the adult world of sexual longing. Max is portrayed as a romantic, in love with the idea of being in love with the older Cross; he claims to be sexually active, have received handjobs from Dirk's mother but there is no sexual desire he needs fulfilling. Laurent is more intellectually aware and curious about the world, seen exploring the world of philosophy and Camus' notion of suicide, while Max is more interested in retaining control in his small world, organising events and plays at the school. Rushmore is his world through which he looks to find meaning and develop a sense of adult-like control.

Rushmore is shot and centred around Anderson's old private academy, St. John's School which is shown to be the school- Rushmore. The film references his and co-writer Wilson's lives, showcasing the Absurd condition as they experienced it; Wilson was expelled from his private school in Dallas and sent to a public school, a crucial aspect of Max's story in the film is when he is expelled from the elite private school, Rushmore, and sent to join the public school, Grover Cleveland High. Other similarities include the plays that Wes put on for his classmates, 'hyper-energized, TV-derived scenarios such as "The Five Mazeratis," an Autobahn drama, or an enactment of the Battle of Alamo' (Olsen, 1999, p.12). *Rushmore*, more than any other film, is a very intimate

Just as the absurdist playwrights, used their plays to discuss their understanding of the human condition, Anderson, uses the film as a vehicle to explore the dysfunctionality

that he experienced as a young boy in similar situations to his protagonist. While Max can be identified as every problematic teenager in film history who was a rebel, the narrative of *Rushmore* shows Max as a character with more depth, trying to make meaningful relationships and dealing with the dysfunctional situations that stem from them. Like Laurent's world, the youngsters in *Rushmore* are in control while the adults lack simple decision-making skills and do not know how to be figures of authority to these children: in a Salingeresque world of *Rushmore*, the children make the rules, and the adults seemingly follow them.

The film unabashedly tells the story of Max's confrontation with love, his selfish approach to acquiring what he desires and discovering himself, along the way. Olsen writes that the film nostalgically portrays 'the teen years and finds mostly those same emotions of confusion and anxiety, while also celebrating the youthful, exuberant enthusiasm with which Max pursues his dreams (1999, p.14). Max's inability to function as a regular child leads him on a journey of accepting his circumstances in life, mourning his mother and understanding the impact he can have on the people around him. His story is the story of every teenager, and yet it is the story of no one.

Just as Ionesco's *Prima Donna* and Pinter's *Homecoming* present an everyday and familiar setting, one that audiences will have encountered before, a similar and ordinary setting is created, in *Rushmore*. The film is itself structured like a play, beginning with curtains rising on the credits and returning to mark each section of the story with the passing month; the five months depicted mark the five acts of the film (Mayshark, pp.124-125). The opening scene shows the school Rushmore and a math class in progress, filled with male students; this is a dream sequence in which the

protagonist Max, a student at the school, is introduced. In this scene, Max solves the “hardest geometry equation in the world” saving his classmates from having to “to open another math book for the rest of their lives”; it displays an important personality trait of the protagonist, his desire to be celebrated and to be a saviour. The film opens with the familiar idea of an ambitious self-indulgent teenager before taking a turn for the dysfunctional introducing a story of an obsessive love triangle, violence and deceit. *Rushmore* showcases the exploits of a middle-class teenage boy, in an elite private school on a scholarship, aspiring to belong to this elite world. His desire to belong to the bourgeoisie social circles of his school is fuelled by his relationship with his school, wealthy businessman Blume and the Harvard educated, Rushmore primary school teacher, Miss Cross.

“He’s one of the worse students we’ve got.”: Max the outsider.

The trailer of *Rushmore*, released in 1998, introduces the film with a list of names from Leo Tolstoy, Gandhi to Søren Kierkegaard appearing on screen accompanied by a voiceover stating, “These are the names that define our world, the artists who shaped our minds, the rebels who challenged our views but of all these legends there is one that stands above all others...”. The camera pans left to show an image of a boy, sitting in a classroom, smugly stating, “I’m sorry did someone say my name?” The words ‘Max Fisher, Rushmore Academy, Class of ’01’ appear below his smug face, establishing him as the protagonist, the misunderstood boy-genius, before the film takes us on a downward spiral with him, focusing on his failing academic career and the dysfunctional love triangle between him, Cross and Blume.

Max is an outsider: at Rushmore, at Grover Cleveland and in the film. His appearance, inspired by various characters from popular culture establishes him as eccentric and different. ‘His wild eyebrows, heavy-framed glasses and prodigious nose, are somewhat reminiscent of Groucho Marx nose and glasses joke accessories’ (Thomas, 2012, p.105): Max’s quick wit, prominent nose, trademark beret and scenes of him smoking cigarettes further alludes to the iconic image of Marx. Furthermore, the use of unconventional camera framing and angles lends a slight distortion to Max’s visual image, deliberately accentuating his physical features to emphasise the whimsical and unusual aspects of his young persona (ibid.).

Max’s attachment to Rushmore and his aspirations for a bourgeoisie lifestyle associated with most of the students there, begins to take a drastic toll on his studies; his failing grades and intense interest in various extracurricular activities. Being the Rushmore Beekeepers President to the director of Max Fischer Players results in him being put on an ‘academic sudden-death probation’⁶⁸ by the headmaster, Dr Guggenheim (Brian Cox). His attempt to talk his way out of the situation, without actually improving his grades, is for once met with a resounding no and a warning to pull his grades up. When asking Guggenheim about Max, after their first encounter, Blume is dejectedly informed that Max “is one of the worst students we’ve got”. However, Max is far from the typical idiosyncratic outsider portrayed in the film; straying from clichéd representations, his character is fashioned as a ‘kind of anti-heroic rebel (ibid., p.106). Despite his inability to perform well, academically, and his

⁶⁸ Due to Max’s low grades for most of his subjects and his inability to improve on those grades, he gets put on a ‘sudden academic death probation’ wherein if he does not improve his grades he would be expelled from the school.

modest upbringing Max is a popular figure in his elite school and is confident in himself.

It is his stance as an outsider, wanting to succeed at Rushmore, that draws him to Blume: a rich businessman going through an existential mid-life crisis. On being invited to speak at Rushmore, and also being a donor, his disdain for the affluent children at Rushmore is brutally voiced in his speech to the school:

You guys have it real easy. I never had it like this where I grew up. But I send my kids here. Because the fact is: you go to one of the best schools in this country. Rushmore. Now for some of you, it doesn't matter. You were born rich, and you're going to stay rich. But here's my advice to the rest of you: take dead aim on the rich boys. Get them in the crosshairs. And take them down. Just remember: they can buy anything. But they can't buy backbone. Don't let them forget it. Thank you.⁶⁹

His speech, ironically delivered at the school Chapel, strikes a chord with the outsider Max, who is attending Rushmore on a scholarship. The camera cuts from a straight-faced Blume to show a wide-shot of the congregation of students and staff seated, staring expressionlessly at Blume, while Max is on his feet enthusiastically giving Blume a standing ovation. Apart from standing out for his actions, Max is also visually different to the other students: while the rest of the boys are wearing light blue or white shirts, Max is the only student wearing a dark blue blazer and a tie. He is never seen without his uniform, even when he leaves Rushmore; it signals his identity and reinforces a sense of identity, an idea discussed by Sontag (1980) and Nordstorm

⁶⁹ Written as it narrated appears on screen, as a close-up of Blume's typed speech, placed on the podium through which he is addressing the school. His speech has been typed on a piece of paper, presumably from the company notepad, and bears the logo and details of his company, Blume International.

(2006) in relation to fascist aesthetics. Following this notion, Max can be seen as a cult leader; everyone appears to hover around. The idea of a uniform is central to Rushmore, with character's playing a role denoted by her/his uniforms: Blume is dressed continuously in suits while Peter is constantly in OR scrubs.

Max initially shuns his identity as a barber's son, creating a façade of being a neurosurgeon's son; later in the film, he uses his father's barber trade to hide away from the world. His inability to achieve his objectives on his terms and attempt to 'control that which cannot be controlled' (Seitz, 2013, p.95) causes him to break down and return to the solace of the identity he is so eager to shun. He is no ordinary teenager, and this is no ordinary film about teens; the film thematically centres around: Blume dying marriage, Max's deceased mother, Cross' deceased husband, Blume's experience with war, Guggenheim's stroke and the death of Max's carefully fostered identity at Rushmore. The film is geared towards an adult audience while retaining its nostalgia for youth. Max stages a play titled *Serpico* at Rushmore, adapted from the 1973 film of the same title, and a play titled *Heaven and Hell*, at Grover which references the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and films such as *Hell Is for Heroes* (1962), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Top Gun* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) (Seitz, 2013). Geared for an adult audience with reference to narcotics, corruption, death, guns and explosions on stage, the screening of both plays for school students and parents creates an Absurd element to the film, with the true meaning of the plays lost on its audience and purely confined to its playwright.

Max's penchant for staging his dramatic productions is mirrored in the film's 'play-like structure', with the film divided into acts/chapters, categorised into months with

the added theatricality of titles and curtains (Thomas, 2012, p.104). The first month depicted on screen is September, mirrored by the autumnal colours of Guggenheim's office. The next chapter and month, October, coincides with Max's first day at his new school- Grover Cleveland High School. The classroom and students are depicted in shades of grey and black, representing a bleak and cold environment. Cold November shows a depressed and dejected Max, hiding out at his father's barbershop. The festive season of December shows Max rebuilding his friendships, going back to school and getting back to his usual busybody self. Finally, January starts upbeat, with an eager Max's new play *Heaven and Hell* being staged at Grover Cleveland.

Adhering to the conventions of a smart film, *Rushmore* indulges in meticulous set design (both the film set and Max's plays), a self-conscious referral to objects of nostalgia and a blank performance style (Sconce, 2002; Baschiera, 2012; Buckland, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Perkins, 2013). The absurdity of a fifteen-year-old Max's elaborate and adult stage plays challenges the audience to question their understanding of a fifteen-year-old. The film evokes a nostalgic image of childhood, innocent and is ambitious in its portrayal of a protagonist who wants to achieve everything. The references to Jacques Cousteau, *Peanuts*, stamp collections, kites and teenage love evoke nostalgia for an untainted childhood, free from adult supervision.

Joe Moran writes that cultural critics view nostalgia as idealistic and regressive that emphasises a secure past and affirms a non-existent past; these writings of 'nostalgia overlap with a deconstructive reading of childhood, to which many nostalgic narratives turn as the site of an idealized individual or collective past' (2002, p.156). The nostalgic representations of an idealised childhood help construct narratives of

innocence and sexual naivety, along with providing solace from the harsher realities of adulthood. In *Rushmore*, Max is the only active individual who attempts to do something with his life, while the adults are portrayed as disillusioned, broken and empty; in his youthfulness lies the will to take control of his life and in doing so he changes the lives of the dysfunctional adults around him.

Baschiera aptly writes that Anderson's cinema is a 'cinema of objects' (2012, p.118); his frames are cluttered with objects that contribute to the visualisation of his narrative. Much like the lives of children, cluttered with and attached to toys, the film incorporates the placement of objects with childlike innocence and adult precision to bring attention to character interests and quirks. For instance, when Max's extracurricular activities are told through a montage to the music of 'Making Time' by The Creation, it establishes Max's character as an overachiever; told through wide-shots, planimetric shots and God's eye-view shots, focusing on the objects and interests that define Max's life at Rushmore. Anderson's other films are associated with the immaculate presentation of objects in domestic spaces, and in the absence of a clearly defined domestic space *Rushmore* embodies this everyday space for Max; this montage of his activities resembles the objects and hobbies that would be a part of his bedroom.

“I think you just gotta find something you love to do and then do it for the rest of your life. For me, it's going to Rushmore”

The characters in Anderson's films have an innate ability 'to imaginatively construct, or reconstruct, their own reality' (Hancock, 2005, p.2). Max has an idealised fantasy

conjured in his head, about what his life is and should be. Like other characters in Anderson's films, who 'view their lives according to their own desires, seeing things the way they want to see them, which is not always consistent with reality as observed from the outside' (ibid., p. 4), Max's perception of his life is self-destructive and limited to only understand and include his desires: everybody else is viewed an extension of his desires. As a result, Max is always the dominant one in all his relationships, be it his father Bert (Seymour Cassel), Blume, Cross, his only friend Dirk Calloway (Mason Gamble), his classmate Margaret Yang (Sara Tanaka) or his relationship with his first love, Rushmore.

Max controls how his narrative is seen by the people around him; for instance, Bert, a modest barber, is not considered reputable enough to be introduced in his social circles as his father despite the two sharing a close relationship. Bert is thoroughly devoted to his son and never questions his decisions; a precocious child, Max lacks proper supervision from his father and appears to be in control of his own life. Bert is introduced first as a barber and then as Max's father. While he is cutting Max's hair, Max asks to see the back of his head, establishing that he does not completely rely on Bert's opinion. The anamorphic image of Max at the centre, staring straight at the camera with Bert's torso behind him, is indicative of their relationship. The clever framing of the mirror image of Max looking at a mirror image of himself held by Bert introduces the nature of Bert's identity to the audience; his role is purely through the eyes of Max, and he fails to exist without Max in the shot. Only when Max asks him to sign his geometry test score that his role as Max's father is revealed. Bert's "Hmm" on seeing his abysmal mark leads Max to dismally state, "I know. I know... Oh, I don't know what to do anymore." Seeing Max's reaction, Bert encouragingly remarks, "It

could have been worse. You almost got the A.” He then childishly turns the 37 into an 87. The scene establishes Bert as a docile figure, who loves but has no authority over his son; he is useful to Max, but in their relationship, Max is shown as the one with power: Bert needs him.

Blume’s entrance into Max’s life offers him with the perfect successful father figure and role model that he desires and can manipulate; alternatively, Max becomes the adoring, attentive son that Blume does not have. The adult as the rule-setter or as the figure to idolize is ironically depicted and continuously critiqued through the film, be it Blume, Cross, Guggenheim or Bert; ‘in a world where the elders are revealed to be as immature as their juniors, Max yearns to abandon his adolescence to adulthood, a desire fraught with danger and disappointment’ (Mottram, 2006, p.213). The initial humour over the controlling, overzealous Max begins to take a sinister turn to portray the dysfunctionality that causes his life to go off the rails. While absurdist work portrays adults unable to embrace adult life and depicts the individual incapable of emotional growth, *Rushmore* subverts this idea and portrays a child struggling to achieve emotional growth and behaving as an adult.

Max’s love affair with Rushmore begins when he gets in on a scholarship, based on a play he wrote; it is implied that his deceased mother influenced his artistic abilities significantly at a young age and at the end of the film Max dedicates his play to her. He develops a familial affinity towards Rushmore; the quote from the subtitle is directed to Blume, “I think you just gotta find something you love to do and then do it for the rest of your life. For me, it's going to Rushmore.” His restricted worldview

presents Rushmore as his ideal place, yet his dysfunctional behaviour eventually leads to him getting thrown out of the school.

Lacking a strong father figure and a mother, Max turns to find solace in Blume and Miss Cross. Cross becomes his romantic interest for the majority of the film, ironically, also fulfilling a maternal void in his life: her role shifting from the substitute mother to romantic interest and mentor. Max and Cross both have deceased people in their lives whom they cannot replace; his deceased mother and Cross' deceased husband (Edward Appleby) a factor that initially brings them together. Cross, as the influential maternal figure in Max's life, is contrasted to the role played by his father, who is depicted as a passive and unmanly, unable to be a role model to his son.

Love becomes Max's only solace from his collapsing world, and so he obsessively attempts to manipulate it to fix his life. Amédée's stoic remark about love, or the absence of love in his marriage, paint a telling picture of the belief that love can fix everything: 'Do you know, Madeleine, if we loved each other, if we really loved each other, none of this would be important? ... Love puts everything right, you know, it changes life'' (Ionesco, 1965, p.77). His belief that love can fix his decaying marriage, much like the corpse, of fifteen years, while naïve, presents an image of a hopeful man who puts his faith in their dysfunctional and abusive relationship. Max similarly believes love can turn his life around; his need for a parental figure is confused with love, as is his need for support and guidance, having built an elaborate world where he is the ultimate authority, Max is now in dire need of help: help that he ironically gets not from the adults in his life, but from his younger friend Dirk.

In their fight for Cross, both Max and Blume, initially allies, cause their friendship to disintegrate: Max is his own worst enemy and Blume engineers his own destruction. John Andrew Fredrick writes, in the film, Anderson utilises his classic theme and shows us exactly what all of us struggle with, existential hamartia⁷⁰. Max is doomed to fail, it is in his narcissistic nature to do so, and Blume religiously follows. However, in the process of reversing his self-induced misfortune, Max reunites the broken relationship between Cross and Blume: his final act of redemption, as discussed with Zissou in the previous chapter, perhaps finding a sense of redemption and resolution.

The most dysfunctional adults are the males in the film; different versions of Absurd masculinity are represented: the depressed, middle-age crisis of Blume, also seen with Bill Murray in *Life Aquatic* (ch. 1) and *Moonrise* (ch. 3); the youthful, daring and controlling masculinity of Max; the passive and obedient masculinity of Bert; the caring, sensitive masculinity Dirk; and the traditional, authoritarian masculinity of Guggenheim. R. W. Connell's definition of masculinity is associated with constant activity; violence, domination, sports and an interest in sexual conquest while femininity is seen as passive (2005, p.67). Max's, more than Blume's, masculinity conforms to this discussion of masculinity with Max eventually guiding Blume's overtly passive masculinity towards this violent, active and dominating masculinity.

This construct of masculinity as the active and thinking figure is continuously explored in absurdist works like *Godot*, *Jacques* and *Endgame*. While none of the

⁷⁰ Hamartia refers to the tragic flaw in the hero of a tragedy, which leads to his downfall or misfortune (Encyclopædia Britannica). Walter A. Davis refers to existential hamartia as the build-up of interconnected mistakes and actions that need to be addressed and reversed. Refer to: Davis, W.A. (1989) *Inwardness and Existence: Subjectivity in/and Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, p.152 [Available at <https://books.google.co.uk/>]

masculine characters in these plays conform to Connell's concept of masculinity in totality, the male protagonists are seen to be active figures. The male characters are constantly in a state of motion, pacing through their lives, attempting to establish meaning. These characters are continually doing or saying something, the act of doing nothing is as frightful as not existing at all.

However, going by Connell's definition, both in *Rushmore* and the Absurd plays discussed, sexual attraction or even activity is not a concept that is openly broached. The focus, instead, is on the dysfunctional backstories of its main characters. Blume is portrayed as depressed and going through an existential crisis, he is trapped in an unhappy marriage, with two brutish sons he does not relate to. Like Blume's glum personality, Max's hyper-confidence and busybody nature raise problems in his personal life, but this personality trait is what leads him to both Blume and Cross. His resourcefulness, optimism and entrepreneurial skills make Max an extremely exciting person to both characters, who are leading significantly morose and lonely lives. Cross is hiding away from the world since her husband's death, is overqualified and teaching at her husband's old school and living in his family house. This Absurd narrative of adult life, the disappointment with the card life dealt with them, draws them to the youthful and hopeful Max.

Max's whole world is suppressed into his school, and everything outside is inconsequential and irrelevant. It is at this school that he meets Cross; their first meeting is particularly telling about how their relationship develops. The camera lingers on a wide-angle close-up of Cross' face, as she looks in her bag for a lighter. Max's torso enters the frame, and his hands are shown lighting her cigarette as he

greet her. Cross appears visibly perplexed by Max as he sits on the bench behind her and the low angle shot of him, in the background, in a red beret reading *That Powers That Be* (1979) by David Halberstam, about the American media of the 70s and Watergate⁷¹. A mature read to impress Cross who is seen holding Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), a popular novel for children and young adults. The books accompanying both characters appear to symbolise the displaced temperaments of the two individuals, with Max reading an adult book and Cross opting for a children's classic.

The wide-angle shot creates 'a skewed or anamorphic on-screen image and barrel distortion that reinforces Rushmore's odd world and its eccentric inhabitants' (Thomas, 2012, p.108). Cross appears eager to maintain a dialogue with a student, who offered her a light, on school grounds. The close-up helps 'establish intersubjective mimetic links between the spectator and character' (ibid., p.109), in this case, it draws attention to Cross' eagerness and interest in Max, drawing the spectator into the situation as well. The camera cuts between low-angle reverse shots of close-ups of Cross looking up at Max and medium close-ups of Max looking down at her. After a back and forth between the two, Max moves down to sit beside her and introduce himself, asserting his masculinity and invading her personal space with his proximity and confidence.

Just like Laurent reading *Sisyphus*, Anderson uses the placement of an adult book in the hands of an eager teenager to draw on their willingness to think like adults, creating

⁷¹ The placement of *That Powers that Be*, draws on Anderson's fetish with objects and their strategic placement, commenting on the impact of American media on the youth and Anderson's affinity for depicting nostalgia on screen.

a contradictory and Absurd world where children read books on suicide and politics, behaving like adults while adults behave like children. The adults in the film are portrayed as ‘heartsick and in mourning’ (Joseph, 2014, p.52), incapable of moving forward with their lives and as completely irresponsible authority figures: Blume buys Max a whiskey and soda at dinner to celebrate his play *Serpico*; Cross unquestioningly accepts Max lighting up her cigarette, becoming her class assistant and asking her personal questions; and Bert knowingly, on bailing Max out of jail, fails to stop Max from going to blackmail and get Cross fired. Blume, early in the film, asks Max what the secret to him having his life figured out is? The adults in this film aimlessly draw upon a fifteen-year old for advice to reconstruct their lives.

“She’s my Rushmore, Max.”: The dysfunctional love triangle between Max, Cross and Blume.

Bennett (2011), discussing Ionesco’s plays, writes that he first orients his audience and then reorients them. This process of reorientation is ‘self-confrontative’, with the audience initially comfortable with the characters, but as the narrative progresses and events unfold the audience is left to wrestle with the social constructions presented and understand the part they play in it (p.22). These characters are familiar and yet so far removed from how we, as the audience, see ourselves. In their unfamiliarity these characters isolate us, and in their dysfunction, there is often no empathy showed to them. Yet in their isolation a familiarity is perceived.

The characters in *Rushmore* share a similar fate; smart films tend to establish anti-heroic protagonists who are seen as unsympathetic, this is ‘largely due to their moral

perversity and/or an undue emphasis on negative and irritating character traits, which can make them unlikeable' (Thomas, 2012, p.102). While Max, Cross and Blume are initially familiar everyday characters, their narcissisms, quirks and dysfunctions become clearer as the narrative progresses, gradually obscuring the realism being dictated on screen (ibid.). Max's enduring eccentricity is replaced with his dominating and manipulative persona, while Blume's emptiness and inability to recover from the failed image of his ideal self, becomes a reoccurring negative force within the film. Cross' grief for her deceased husband is replaced by her inability to understand or accept Max's romantic intentions. These traits define their characters, driving their relationships into circular patterns of deceit and interdependence. The obsessive relationships of Max with Rushmore, Blume and finally Cross, occur in stages. His fixation with Rushmore dominates the first chapter of the film. Rushmore represents a familial space for Max, one around which he defines himself; it is also the place he meets Blume and the widowed Cross. Subsequently, all three of them use one another to give a sense of purpose to their Absurd conditions and create a community to which they belong and find the love they think they need.

Stephanie Coontz argues that romance is an 'elaborate state of anticipation' where gifts are bestowed on the lover, and the loved based on what is needed, in a romantic relationship 'unlike anywhere else in liberal society, an adult is rewarded for expressing dependence' (1992, p.55). Max believes that love can answer all his issues, seeking Cross' affection, but ironically, it is Cross and Blume who become dependent on Max, using him as a means to grow closer together. He never has an opportunity to depend on anyone, until he realises towards the end of the film how loyal and dependable Dirk has been. This notion of interdependency in romance is one of the

most striking similarities *Rushmore* shares with the Absurd. Romance and more so relationship based on love become a way in which Max makes sense of the chaos unfolding around him, causing his dysfunction and helping him eventually redeem himself.

Max is constantly trying to find and root himself to an identity or place. His self-worth shifts according to the person and place he associates himself with; in *Rushmore* he has multiple identities, and this gives him a sense of importance and pride; attaching himself to Blume gives him financial power and an association with the bourgeoisie life he aspires to lead; and finally, in his affection for Cross, Max attempts to find companionship, love and a responsible, caring version of himself. It is through his attachment to people and places that he constructs his sense of self. It is when his image of himself falls short that absurdity occurs, changing the dynamic and trapping Max in existential hamartia.

The first time Cross confronts Max about his feelings is in a scene at the library; Cross is sitting marking essays and Max is shown sitting opposite to her. The film uses numerous formal features to destabilise spatial relations; various wide-angle, low-angle shots, jump cuts, bird's eye views and montages that disorientate and disassociate the viewer from the diegesis, and mirror the emotions being presented on screen. In the library scene between Cross and Max, the use of long lens creates a flattening effect, mirroring the blank and flat performances of the characters. The scene is rendered 'strangely depthless, with the disaffected performances offering little in the way of demonstrative affective cues that can arouse an empathic response towards characters' (Thomas, 2012, p.109). Their conversation departs from the

typical deadpan blank style that Anderson is famous for with the pair airing their concerns in an honest and meaningful manner.

On being directly questioned by Cross, “Has it ever crossed your mind that you’re far too young for me?”, Max suggests “the truth is, neither one of us has the slightest idea where this relationship is going. We can’t predict the future.” When Cross adamantly replies that they do not have a relationship, Max’s dejectedly answers, “I understand. You’re not attracted to me. *C’est la vie.*” Finally, Cross states the obvious, “Max, you’re fifteen-years-old. Attraction doesn’t enter into it.” While she attempts to establish herself as a reasonable adult in this conversation, setting down the rules for their relationship, Cross never overtly states that she is not attracted to Max. Instead, the line blurs when they both admit that neither has met people like the other.

Rushmore is Max’s haven, one he does not want to leave. When his world at Rushmore begins to fall apart, he shifts his obsession to both Blume and Cross. The motherless Max persistently pursues Cross, with Oedipal undertones, and she, in turn, attempts to fill the void of her dead husband and lack of children by spending time with Max. Cross’ inability to set clear boundaries comes back to haunt her when she brings a male friend, Peter (Luke Wilson), for company to Max’s play, *Serpico*. Kreisel writes that the film explores the power and powerlessness of its young protagonist, making use of its lexical richness to demonstrate this (2005, p.5). The crosstalk and aggression in their conversation emphasise the absurdity of their situations:

CROSS: I want you to meet a friend of mine. Peter Flynn. Max Fischer.

PETER: Hi.

MAX: Who is this guy?

CROSS: Peter.

PETER: I really liked your play. It was really cool.

MAX: Yeah.

CROSS: What happened to your nose?

MAX: I got punched in the face. (Addressing Peter) What's your excuse?

Max's jealousy rears its ugly head on seeing Peter as a potential threat to him and Cross. The crosstalk between the three of them mainly stems from Max not wanting to acknowledge Peter and assert his dominance and tough masculinity over him: rendering the true motive of communication as unachievable. It demonstrates the disillusioned space that both Cross and Max occupy and the Absurd power dynamic between them, alluding to performances of conventional gender roles as discussed above.

The situation is further aggravated when the three of them and Blume go out for dinner, and Max behaves appallingly, trying to humiliate Peter and finally admitting to Cross, that he is in love with her. The scene also highlights the Absurd world Max lives in, where a fifteen-year-old drinks alcohol in the company of adults and demeans them. Further crosstalk between the four, highlights the uncomfortable situation being portrayed:

MAX: So, tell me curly, how do you know Miss Cross?

PETER: We went to Harvard together.

MAX: Oh, that's great. I wrote a hit play and directed it. So, I'm not sweating it either.

Max is only communicating with Peter to assert his sense of self-importance. Peter appears unable to understand Max's motives and insolent behavior; ultimately, they

are both talking at each other, creating a visually uncomfortable moment: they are talking without being necessarily heard. The wide-shot of the four of them sitting at the table places Max and Peter in the foreground at opposite ends of the screen and Blume and Cross, both expressionless, placed in the background in the space between Max and Peter. The deadpan-seriousness of their exchange is accentuated by the deadpan expressions of Blume and Cross. The exchange only drives Cross further away from Max, and straight into the arms of Blume. The open abandonment of rationality and discursive thought (Esslin, 2001, p.24) depicts the absurdity of Max's senselessness and inability to see how his behaviour is affecting the woman he apparently loves: he cannot look beyond his narcissism, and as a result fails to receive the love he craves, reinforcing his own isolation from the people that care about him.

Cross and Blume's secret love affair causes Max to declare war on his old friend Blume. What ensues is a series of childish and aggressive events between the two, resulting in the police arresting Max for sabotaging Blume's car. On being let out on bail by his father, Max enters a world without consequences or morality, a world populated by the teenage cinematic rebels on which Max's character was based; lunged into absurdity he embraces it without question and begins to self-destruct. The eccentric and precocious Max is replaced by a destructive and vindictive version of himself, isolated from the people he cares about and out to seek revenge; Max is lost, and all his actions become, as Ionesco states 'senseless, absurd, useless' (Ionesco, 2001, p.23). His motivation to avenge himself takes a ludicrous turn with both Max and Blume unable to understand the consequences of their actions, given their inability to look beyond themselves.

In the Absurd diegesis of the film, Max's actions do not seem out of place; he attempts to ruin the lives of both his friend and the woman he loves, without a second thought. All his actions appear senseless and devoid of rationality, driven only by his anger of not obtaining what he desired; never considering that the person he loved, does not love him back. He inevitably loses his quasi-home, Rushmore, and his loyal friend, Dirk. Unable to accept the consequences of his actions, Max shifts the blame on Cross and attempts to fill that void with her, declaring desperately, "Rushmore was my life. Now you are." The sheer ridiculousness of his statement is heightened by his inability to understand how he has positioned himself, losing all sense of the world around him that he initially seemed to master.

This jarring confrontational scene between Cross and Max while she, on resigning, is seen packing her boxes. The distorted Dutch angle shows Cross and Max on opposite sides of the frame, representing the psychological and physical chaos unfolding in both their lives. Cross attempts to maintain some distance between her and Max, as he attempts to get closer and the camera tracks Cross as she pushes Max off her when he tries to kiss her. Witnessing Max's advances towards her, Cross finally seems to process the extent of Max's dysfunctional and aggressive behaviour. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of Cross, menacingly moving towards Max; the anamorphic lens further distorting her face as she moves almost threateningly, stating "What do you really think is going to happen between us? You think we're going to have sex?". The soft and caring Cross is finally depicted as having had enough; Anderson presents the spectacle of 'an authoritative adult at the limit of her patience, using every means at her disposal to 'wake up' the obtuse teenager stubbornly pursuing her' (Kreisel, 2005, p.9). Finally fighting back by shattering the notion of romance Max had

concocted in his head between the two, she uses sexuality to fight back: “Or maybe I could give you a handjob, would that put an end to all of this?” This scene shows Max at his most vulnerable, shrinking away from Cross, as the camera zooms to show a scared and misguided boy, out of control and finally coming to terms with his actions.

Despite Cross’ affection for Blume, she shares an intimate relationship with Max and is unable to distance herself from him completely. Blume and Max’s relationship takes a nasty turn depicted through a montage of comical and malicious acts of violence against one another, ‘ironically juxtaposed to the tune of The Who’s ‘You Are Forgiven’’ (Thomas, 2012, p. 107). The music is upbeat, taking a violent scene and turning it into a whimsical, humorous experience. The gravity of the violence is downplayed by Blume’s deadpan approach to his rivalry with Max, his romantic liaison with Cross and his divorce. Blume is struggling to find purpose or meaning in his life. He is the archetypal Absurd character depicted in absurdist plays, floundering for meaning and caught in an endless cycle of habitual activity, without a sense of resolution.

The scene where Max finally accepts that Cross is in love with Blume, depicts a hostile exchange between the two. The alternating use of normal and wide-angle lens presents a vulnerable image of Max sitting in a cemetery, defeated. Blume enters the frame, as the camera cuts to show a bruised Max sitting beside his mother’s grave, yearning for affection. The distorted low-angle wide shot of Blume shows him in a position of uncertain authority, the so-called winner of this gruesome battle. The wide-shot presents a distorted spatial view of the pair as they appear on opposite ends of the frame, distanced from one another and their surroundings. This sequence portrays two

individuals out of sync with the world around them, defeated and crippled with emotional dysfunction.

Aesthetically everything about the frame portrays Max's state of mind: the dull colours of the trees in the frame mirror Max's defeated attitude and the breakdown of his idealistic world. Max points to a tree left, behind Blume, stating "Oh yeah. I was going to try and have that tree fall on you", the camera cuts to a low-angle medium close-up of Blume looking at the tree behind him stating "That would have flattened me like a pancake." The framing of both characters reflect the discomfort and emotional stagnancy that surrounds this conversation; their blank expressions and clipped dialogue is delivered with a dampening effect. Max leaves the frame, stating, "What's the point? She loves you." Blume turns and a close-up with an anamorphic lens creates a distorted image of him as he blankly declares, "She's my Rushmore, Max". The emotional and physical distance between the two grows as Max continues to walk down the hill, replying, "Yeah, I know. She was mine too." Cross is not just a romantic interest in their lives, she becomes their lives, thrusting everything into dysfunctionality and causing their relationships to implode.

The deflated tone of the scene, accompanied by The Rolling Stones song 'I am waiting', is elongated with a self-conscious zoom out of Blume, who pulls a branch from the tree, only for it to fall. This tree is incidentally the one that could have "flattened him like a pancake". The wide shot of the tree falling reads as a visual interpretation of miscommunication and the disintegration of Blume and Max's friendship. The heartfelt conversation between the two is another example of pointless words being spoken by two discontent characters in an Absurd world.

The melancholy that shrouds Blume's character is heightened once his only positive and meaningful relationship with Max ends, causing an eventual breakdown of his relationship with Cross. Max, Blume and Cross are kindred souls, and in each other they find solace. This dry and hilariously detached sequence of the film, accompanied by The Rolling Stone's 'I Am Waiting' represents 'a hiatus' as the visual cuts between a broken Max eating his TV dinner with his father, to Cross eating alone and Blume eating alone in his office. The narrative has moved on, but the three are still interconnected (Browning, 2011, p.26); their interdependence on each other showcasing their inability to accept their circumstances.

On rekindling his relationship with Dirk, Max is informed that Guggenheim suffered a stroke and is at the hospital. While visiting him, he runs into Blume in the elevator. Blume is in a miserable condition, dishevelled with a black eye from one of his kids and drinking from a hipflask with two cigarettes in his mouth. He learns from Blume that Cross and he are over and that "She's in love with a dead guy anyway... You know, she's sweet, but she's fucked up". This conversation between them is expressionless, dry and awkward in its lack of emotion. The tilted frame emphasises the condition Blume is in; he is a man who has lost everything. He embodies Rinhaug's ultimate absurdist figure of boredom, isolated with the sensation of 'being left-empty'; ironically without his unhappy marriage and his dysfunctional relationships with both Cross and Max, Blume has gradually become indifferent to this emptiness. His sincere and profound answer to Max about how he presents him as conscious about his condition but unwilling to change it: "Umm. I'm a little bit lonely these days".

Blume's most significant loss is his friendship with Max, separated from him, he cannot face the absurdity of the loneliness that they both share.

Gradually, the two redeem their friendship, with Max even helping Blume get on his feet and win back Cross' affection. However, not before Max tries one last time to seduce Cross' by faking an accident; unsuccessful in his plan, he points out the obvious to Cross: her husband is dead, and she is living in his house surrounded by his things. She is trapped in the life she had and wishes she still had; Blume is trapped in his misery and Max is their connection to each other. The idea of romance put forth by Anderson in *Rushmore* makes for a peculiar study of human nature, both Max and Blume fight for Cross's affection, their friendship is conveniently sidelined when a common object of desire is placed between them. However, the same desire and shared sense of loneliness reignite their friendship.

Max's relationship with Blume and Cross is problematically familial, with Perkins writing that this family unit becomes the basis of narrative conflict (2013, p.85). The troika are connected in their need for belonging; fearing isolation and loneliness they cling on to one another; finding themselves faced with the Absurd condition of being unable to escape their dysfunctional worlds, they finally begin to understand how to survive and their need for each other. It is never clear if Max ever truly stops loving Cross, despite finding a more suitable and appropriate partner in his equally manipulative and brilliant classmate Margaret Yang (Sara Tanaka), but he appears to have realised when to give up. Instead, he attempts and succeeds at reuniting the equally dysfunctional and sad Blume and Cross together at the screening of his "opus" *Heaven and Hell*, at his new school. Max redeems himself emotionally and artistically,

the climax like of the film as discussed in the previous chapter, perhaps signalling a departure from the Absurd to the point of resolution.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the role that romantic dysfunction plays in the Absurd relationship between Max, Cross and Blume. Life is meaningless and chaotic, death (literal and symbolic) is inevitable, and grief unavoidable. The troika creates a quasi-familial unit, riddled with problems and dysfunctionality; however, the happiest they are portrayed in the film is together, and they are the unhappiest when they are alone and isolated.

The film overtly diverts from the Absurd in its hopeful depictions of childhood and redemption. However, in analysing the absurdist themes evident throughout the film, I argue that *Rushmore* can be read as much more of a self-destructive and absurd text than the quirky, hipster and smart film label that it is given. I discuss absurdist literature in this chapter to create an understanding of how romance and relationships are depicted in the TotA. Bennett writes the Absurd stems from the fact that the world cannot give the individual what they want (2011, p.11). In this contradiction between what we desire and what we ultimately achieve, absurdity is created. Max desires to belong and find love, Blume desires to find the person he could have been and Cross desires her deceased husband; all three cannot get what they desire, but in the process, achieve goals that frustrate and change them. Max finds pride in his upbringing, finally accepting his father and finds a girlfriend in Yang; Blume finds in Max and Cross,

companionship that inspires him; and Cross gradually begins to accept a life where her husband is no more, potentially finding love with Blume.

The chapter indicates that the film shares the Absurd themes of dysfunctional romances and asexual characters that are occupied by their habitual and structured activities, while the communication between the characters is largely fragmented, with cross-talk a recurring feature of the dialogue. The film ends with what seems to be an optimistic note, Max has redeemed himself with the ones he holds dear, and he gets to dance with his beloved Miss Cross. With that being said, Anderson's trademark slow-motion shot of Max and Cross walking to dance floor, gazing at each other while the song "Ooh La La" by The Faces plays in the background makes for a hopeful and equally challenging ending as the characters move beyond their feelings of anger towards each other without really finding what either of them were truly looking for. As the film concludes, we get the impression that the protagonists remain trapped in their Absurd worlds.

Chapter 3

‘Dear Suzy, When?’

Dear Sam, Where?’

Moonrise Kingdom: Letters, Conformity and Relationships.

SAM: Sometimes I stick leaves on my hair. It helps cool your head down.

SUZY: Hmm that’s a good idea. It might also help if you didn’t wear a fur hat.

SAM: Yeah. True.

Camus notably commented, ‘The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.’ (2005, p.119). In his suggestion of viewing Sisyphus as happy, he encourages his reader to actively create meaning for Sisyphus and themselves (Bennett, 2011, p.13). Sisyphus is entrapped in a world where he is doomed to repeat the same task endlessly, his is a bleak world, and yet Camus suggests, we imagine him happy and offer him a sense of agency in his Absurd life. The process of creating and looking for meaning plays a vital role in absurdist worlds that are presented as devoid of meaning.

The dysfunctional nature of white masculinity is central to the films discussed in my first two chapters, *Life Aquatic* and *Rushmore*. In both these films, I argue that Bill Murray’s characters are dysfunctional middle-aged men, struggling to find balance and meaning in his life. Anderson’s seventh feature *Moonrise Kingdom* released in 2012 and like *Rushmore* focuses on romance and dysfunctionality. However, unlike the previous chapters, both protagonists in the film are twelve-year-olds. This chapter

similarly looks at the Absurd representation of the family and romance, analysing the way in which the film focuses on themes of conformity and escape.

This chapter focuses on two sections: the first analyses the relationship between the young protagonists Sam Shakusky (Jared Gilman) and Suzy Bishop (Kara Hayward) and their connection through letters; and the second critically analyses the role that conformity and escape play in the Absurd world that the Sam and Suzy experience. Through the discussion of absurdist literature, the chapter will discuss the inclusion of absurdist themes in the aesthetics and thematic structure of the film, providing an alternative reading to the dollhouse world of *Moonrise*.

It seems only apt that in discussing the child-like character Zissou and the fifteen-going-on-thirty Max, this chapter focuses on preteens. Anderson's nostalgic representations of youngsters aspiring for independence and freedom from adult supervision is both romantic and melancholic in its portrayal of an idealised past. The location is set as the island of New Penzance, the year is 1965, and there is a ferocious storm: we are now in Anderson's world.

To be a child in Anderson's world is to be someone remarkable, with agency and as suggested in the previous chapter, someone with more courage than any adult. These children continually display maturity for their age as showcased by Grace's unflinching questions (*Bottle*), Max and Dirk's characters (*Rushmore*), the overachieving Tenenbaums and Kristofferson's calm and sincere persona (*Fantastic*). The pressure to be self-reliant and independent is imposed on the children as they

navigate their lives in an Absurd world where adults are crippled with dysfunction and self-doubt, and children make their own tough decisions.

In *Moonrise*, physical communication does not function as a means of forming relationships; on the other hand, letters seem to lead to more sincere exchanges. While on the surface, Anderson depicts an idyllic, close-knit community, a closer look showcases the cracks in society; extramarital affairs, juvenile refugees administering electric shock therapies and suicide plots. Building upon J.M Tyree's (2013) discussion of escapism in *Moonrise*, I seek to expand upon this analysis by drawing upon Absurd narratives of escape and conformity.

Conformity and rebellion: The Absurd and Anderson.

In plays like Ionesco's *Jacques*, the protagonist is continually pressured by his family to conform to their demands of marriage; his initial resistance to marriage and his independence begin to get worn down by societal pressures. His alienation from these societal values is an important aspect of the Absurd hero; an individual who sees himself as estranged from his family and community, unable to connect and yet unable to disconnect either. The absurdity of the situation is explored in the assertion of familial pressure against the protagonist's recalcitrance and independence, which oppose the 'succeeding obstacles of duty, reason..., social pressure (represented by the two families) and sex' (Caine, 1969, p.391). The extent of his resistance is even visible in his inability to accept, that like his family, he too loves 'potatoes in their jackets'. Ionesco's view of society is in an 'abstract, absolute way stemming from the nature of man and the basic human reactions which originate largely in the family'

(Edney, 1985, p.377). Despite Ionesco's portrayal of the family as an oppressive force, he illustrates the human need to stay together, viewing the outside world as a threat that can be better faced together.

Ionesco's plays emphasised the threat that individuality faces from familial and societal structures. Thus, his plays were written as parodies of family dramas, functioning as 'a moral play' (1964, p.194). Esslin writes that Ionesco's work serves to warn of the dangers of appropriate family loyalty which cannot tolerate individuality; plays like *Jacques* explicitly discuss 'renunciation of individuality', while works like *Prima Donna* expose the interchangeability of couples and reveal the conformity of their petty-bourgeoisie existence (2001, p.148). These Absurd plays focused on individuals incapable of independent thought, unable to effectively communicate, unable to think independently, in an increasingly impersonal world (Ionesco, 1964, p.180).

Ionesco treated language, 'which till now was only a means, as though it had become an object capable of exhausting by itself the entire substance of the theatre' (Vannier and Pronko, 1963, pp.181-182). Similar to his TotA counterparts, this ingenious use of language merely changes its use; language that was originally used to translate psychological relationships is now being performed as spectacle itself. In other words, by using language that stands on its own and appears nonsensical Ionesco is depicting the failure of language and emphasising the absurdity of language.

Plays like *Homecoming* portray violence enacted through conflict and power; Ionesco declares, "It's about love. And about lack of love" (cited in Prentice, 2001, pp.468-

467). While most absurdist plays navigate spaces of dominance and conformity, they are also texts that critique the social need to belong and love. Like Pinter's declaration of the content of his plays, most Absurd plays address relationships that portray love or lack it. The familial unit that acts as a haven from the destructive abilities of society becomes the oppressive and violent force that it fears (Edney, 1985, p.378): instead of being an institution of care and love, the familial spaces of the Absurd embody the oppression of society.

The family plays a vital role in Anderson's oeuvre; in *Moonrise* the protagonists, Suzy and Sam, find themselves being forced to conform to the social norms prescribed by their families and quasi-families, who shun them for being problem-children. Anderson has an innate ability to create small worlds, 'alternately viewed as oases from upsetting circumstances and as childish retreats by characters who refuse to grow up' (Tyree, 2013, p.24). In the construction of this oasis where characters take shelter from a threatening outside world, he creates a community that is ripe with dysfunction and melancholy, striving to find love and a sense of belonging.

Zissou draws a white line on the deck; the camera tilts up as he lifts himself and stands at an elevated position. The low-angle shot of Zissou's towering figure portrays a formidable man, addressing his traumatised mutinous crew. His words do little to comfort them,

The first thing that goes through a captain's head when he hears there's low morale going around is, what I do? Is it all my fault? Well, he's probably right. Most of us have been together a long time, there are others that were here before that. Do you all not like me anymore? I mean, what am I supposed to

do, I don't know. Look if you're not against me, don't cross this line. If yes, do. I love you all.

Zissou's inability to acknowledge his responsibility of chartering the ship into unprotected waters is ironic; he presumes the mutiny has been caused due to his crew's dislike for him. His declaration of love at the end is an afterthought, to appease them, rather than an honest statement. He does lose some members of his crew except the loyal ones who "love" him and do not abandon him; all that he wants is to be loved unconditionally to a fault as an explorer, husband and father.

In contemporary cinema, the discussion of masculinity is often in association with fatherhood (Franco, 2008, p.47). Anderson's films have focused on father-child relationships, problematising the role of the white, middle-aged father figure incapable of caring for his family: emotionally or physically, a theme that I have considered in the previous chapters. The white masculinities portrayed in Anderson's worlds are narcissistic constructions, tragically alienated and entrapped in their middle-class lives. Rather than providing comfort the previous chapters discuss how the family becomes a site of broader social dysfunction, in correspondence with the TotA.

It is no surprise that the female characters of his films are also predominantly white. There are the exceptions of Lumi Cavazos playing Inez, a hotel cleaner, from Paraguay; and Amara Karan playing Rita, an Indian train attendant, working onboard the Darjeeling Express. Both, while independent and fierce, are depicted as objects of desire to their male counterparts and cease to exist beyond them. On the other hand, his portrayal of white femininity is challenging and subversive: Cross (Olivia Williams) in *Rushmore*; Eleanor, Etheline and Patricia (all played by Anjelica Huston)

in *Life Aquatic*, *Tenenbaums* and *Darjeeling* respectively; Jane (Cate Blanchett) in *Life Aquatic*, Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow) in *Tenenbaums*, Laura (Frances McDormand) in *Moonrise* and Agatha (Saoirse Ronan) in *Budapest*. Huston's characters are especially fascinating in their domineering and tactful portrayal of middle-age femininity; her characters are diverse, and their features include 'professional accomplishment, confidence, resilience and independence' (Felando, 2012, p.68).

Subsequently, the discussion of white femininity is often in association with the theme of motherhood: either through its existence or in its absence. Cross has a quasi-maternal bond with Max; Etheline, Patricia and Laura are mothers; Jane is pregnant. Margot's character eventually ends up in a secret relationship with her stepbrother, probably unable to have children because of the incestual nature of their relationship. Similarly, Agatha, we learn, has a child with Zero, but both die due to an illness. Minor female characters like Alice (Camilla Rutherford) in *Darjeeling*, Child Services (*Moonrise*) and Madame D. (*Budapest*), both played by Tilda Swinton, are all intimately associated with childhood. Alice is pregnant in the film, Child Services professionally deals with children and is depicted as cold, and clinical, and Madame D's uneasiness over her terrible children unfolds with her murder by her son.

The contradiction between the traditional gender roles and the gender roles we witness in Anderson's world are Absurd in their subversion. While the male characters are shown in states of crisis, uncertain and narcissistic, the female portrayed is shown to be robust and in control. Mayshark writes that the more mature and adult characters in Anderson's films are the women (2007, p.136), their personality opposites to the

whimsical, bumbling men. Although Huston's portrayal of motherhood is detached and unconventional, Absurd in their unconventional approach, her characters are steady and capable of taking care of themselves and their families.

Bernard Beck writes, 'To be a child is to be enrolled in a peculiar form of humanity, connected to adults but alien to them' (2013, p.88). In a world where adult characters, particularly the male protagonists, are incapable of authentic emotion, the children in Anderson's oeuvre are extraordinary and more equipped to deal with the absurdity of life than the adults. In *Bottle*, Grace is the only voice of reason telling Anthony to come home and not depend on the erratic Dignan. While Max does eventually redeem himself and is seen to maintain control, Dirk is loyal and the one who brings balance and order into his life. The Tenenbaum siblings, live fantastic and overachieving lives; finding their way to cope with their dysfunctional family situation. Kristofferson in *Fantastic* is calm, collected and calls out the Fantastic family for being reckless, and in *Moonrise*, the children are the ones who are compassionate, embrace change and maintain order in their isolated community.

In these worlds, adults, especially men, behave like children and children behave like adults, a premise I consider in the previous chapter, 'either acting wise beyond their years or else making charming fools of themselves by pretending to be prematurely jaded and world weary' (Tyree, 2013, p.25). They function like adults in their ability to smoke cigarettes and pipes, drink whiskey, manoeuvre guns and explosives and get married. The adults in the film are rendered insecure, immature and completely incapable of managing their own lives, let alone the lives of their children.

While I argue that Anderson's worlds are Absurd, his films still follow the traditional Hollywood formula in its depiction of love: 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl'; a convention Raymond Bellour⁷² called 'the creation of the couple', identifying a pattern that organises classical American cinema (cited in Wexman, 1993, p.4). This formula's application can be seen in *Bottle*, *Rushmore*, *Life Aquatic* and *Moonrise*, in which the child protagonists experience an adult-like affair and stage a wedding. In *Bottle*, Anthony meets Inez at the motel, they fall in love, and she refuses to follow him, so they separate and then at the end of the film they reconcile. Thus, Anthony gets the girl. Similarly, in *Rushmore* Blume gets Cross, she leaves him and at the end of the film they reconnect. In *Life Aquatic* Ned gets Jane, they form a romantic relationship, she decides to leave the boat but returns implying they are together as a couple. In all these cases Anderson follows Bellour's convention of the 'creation of the couple'.

It is through this process of creating a couple where dysfunction occurs. *Moonrise* follows the boy meets girl, loses her and then gets her again formula. Sam meets Suzy at the performance of a musical she features in; the two run away but are discovered and separated from each other. Following this, the Troop 55 scouts help them reunite, and they get symbolically married. They are discovered by their respective families, but this time stay together. In this brief overview of their creation as a couple, the narrative is straightforward; however, it is in their escape from the confines of their family that the Absurd occurs.

⁷² Refer to Bergstrom, J. (1979) 'Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: Interview with Raymond Bellour'. *Camera Obscura*, 1-2(3-1), pp.70-103.

In the previous chapter, I argue that *Rushmore*'s narrative of redemption could be considered as a diversion from the norms of absurdism. *Moonrise* does not celebrate redemption, choosing to focus on a narrative of escape: this film especially portrays its characters stunted in their development, unable to change from their Absurd situation.

Moonrise Kingdom

The 94-minute *Moonrise Kingdom* is written by Anderson and Roman Coppola, released in 2012. The film explores the lives of Suzy and Sam, who decide to run away to live with each other away from their current families, all while an impending storm threatens the entire community. Sam is an orphan under the foster care of the Billingsleys and a member of the Khaki Scouts of North America, Troop 55 at Camp Ivanhoe, which is under the authority of Scout Master Ward (Edward Norton). Depicted as a problem child at his foster home and disliked by the other scouts, Sam escapes the camp and decides to run away with Suzy, the daughter of Walt (Bill Murray) and Laura Bishop (Frances McDormand). Suzy is also described as a problem child; her character, in keeping with Anderson's previously, cite female protagonists by challenging hegemonic representations of femininity. She is depicting as violent and aggressive, while Sam is weaker and timid.

Bordwell writes Suzy's books reinforce the fact that New Penzance, just like Anderson's other storybook worlds, is 'redolent of childhood' (2014a, n.p.). His works represent 'childhood- literal and prolonged' (Orgeron, 2007, p.42), with a sense of nostalgia for an idealised past. Lee Weston Sabo, discussing Anderson's work,

suggests that like Roald Dahl his stories ‘appeal to a child’s inner adult’ (2010, n.p). His memorable young characters range from Max (*Rushmore*) to Zero (*Budapest*), so different in their representations yet both similar in their maturity, while his films are cluttered with adult characters who display childish behaviour and stunted emotional development. Apart from *Moonrise*, ‘actual (preadolescent) children are seldom central characters in Anderson’s films, but suggestively populate the periphery’⁷³ (MacDowell, 2014, p.155); In this sense, *Moonrise* is unique as it proudly places two preadolescents at the forefront of the narrative, with adults playing supporting roles. This emphasises the theme that I highlighted in the previous chapter, in which Anderson’s child and adult characters can frequently be seen to swap personality traits.

Suzy and Sam function in a world of their own, with no appropriate adult figures to guide them. Unlike Anderson’s other protagonists, they do not need assistance understanding each other or their world (Nelson, 2012). They ‘are surrounded by individuals and organizations that “care” about them without truly hearing or seeing them’ (Seitz, 2013, p.273). Unlike the adults in the film, they understand and accept each other for their oddities. In the conversation between them, they display everything that the adults fail to do in the film:

SAM: It’s possible I may wet the bed, by the way. Later I mean.

SUZY: Okay.

SAM: I wish I didn’t have to mention it, but just in case. I don’t want to make you be offended.

SUZY: Of course, I won’t.

⁷³ Characters such as Grace in *Bottle*, Dirk Calloway in *Rushmore*, the young Tenenbaums, Ari and Uzi in *Tenenbaums*, Werner in *Life Aquatic*, Indian children (saved from drowning and present in the missionary) in *Darjeeling* and the numerous animal children in *Fantastic* (MacDowell, 2014, p.155).

The camera focuses on close-ups of their face, intrusively inviting the audience to be a part of this honest conversation. Their relationship disregards convention, and while inexperienced in the workings of love, the pre-teens maintain their innocence and sincerity. Their acceptance of one another both liberates them and causes them to become fugitives, looking to flee from the adults that attempt to control them, yet fail to resolve their own conflicts and genuinely understand each other.

Suzy has self-destructive tendencies; a fact she instinctively informs Sam about, on being asked why she was hurt, "I lost my temper at myself". She also informs him that she steals library books to make herself feel better, confiding in Sam that she is depressed and uses a copy of her parent's book (also stolen) *Coping with the Very Troubled Child: Facts, Opinions and Misconceptions* as evidence. Their refreshing honesty is continuously emphasised in the film, drawing comparisons with the adults who are incommunicable in their misery. Many of the characters are struggling with their dysfunctional and loneliness. Captain Sharp (Bruce Willis) is a melancholic police officer, withdrawn and lonely; the Bishops, who are married and both counsellors, cannot communicate with each other apart from work-related discussions, and Scout Master Ward (Edward Norton) a scout leader unable to adequately communicate with his scouts.

The film focuses on innocence, encouraging a 'detachment from a naïve investment in the fiction *and* a sense of wonder at a childlike aesthetic of the orderly and miniature' (MacDowell, 2014, p.159). The bright orange tonal shades presented in the film, scrutiny of objects, and an over-reliance on symmetry portray Anderson's childlike fixation with the *mise-en-scène* of the film. His famous dollhouse shot, at the

beginning of the film, segregates the different roles of the characters in the film. The active siblings occupying spaces where they can play games and listen to music, the mother occupies spaces where she is shown beautifying herself, and the father occupies spaces where he is seen reading the newspaper. Suzy is always shown occupying a space where she is alone and watching the outside world through her binoculars. The disjointed family is never shown occupying the same room or engaging in any joint family activities. Just like a child playing with a dollhouse, Anderson's opening sequence presents the Bishop family for his audience as alienated from one other, despite their proximity and family status.

Moonrise draws upon teenage characters like Laurent (Benoît Ferreux) in *Le Souffle au Coeur* (Louise Malle, 1971), Harold (Bud Cort) in *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971), Sonny (Timothy Bottoms) in *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971), and Daniel (Mark Lester) and Melody (Tracy Hyde) in *Melody* (Waris Hussain, 1971). The film also references François Truffaut's *Small Change* (1976) and Ken Loach's *Black Jack* (1979) to depict the two rebellious protagonists. The film draws strong parallels with *Melody*, drawing on the adventures of Daniel and Melody as they decide on a life of marriage together, dissuaded by their parents. Similarly, *Moonrise* depicts its two young protagonists getting married, refusing to conform and attempting to live a life without adult influence.

Melody narrates the story of two ten-year-olds, Daniel and Melody who fall in love and decide they want to be with each other. Belonging to different class structures, they decide to get married, despite understanding the repercussions of such a union. Their families and school authorities attempt to intervene, but this further provokes

them to act with the help of a friend. The film challenges expectations of both adulthood and childhood, a sentiment replicated in *Moonrise*. Like Melody, Suzy cannot fathom why anybody would want them to stay apart, given that her relationship with Sam appears to be more authentic than that of the adult protagonists.

In both films, the girls question societal norms, informing their parents that all they want to do is be with their love interests. Melody desperately begs her father, “but why is it so difficult, when all I want to do is be happy”, while Suzy tells her mother, “We’re in love, we just want to be together. What’s wrong with that?”. Both young couples see themselves facing repression from their community, leading both couples to symbolically marry, with the help of their peers. Interestingly, the seaside/beach becomes a place of solace for both Daniel and Melody and Sam and Suzy, with the former choosing a busy seaside town and the latter, an isolated tidal inlet. *Melody* ends with the two youngsters escaping from their families, but *Moonrise* sees the youngsters returning, conforming to the norms of their community and families.

Timothy Shary suggests that all drama inherently thrives on conflict; particularly conflict based on maturity or lack thereof (2002, p.2). However, as suggested the young characters in Anderson’s dysfunctional worlds are portrayed as mature from the onset. Adults, on the other hand, exhibit regressive qualities, creating a scenario both absurd and problematic the narrative. There is a contradiction between our expectations from characters and what they exhibit in Anderson’s worlds, and in this, we witness the Absurd. For instance, Max, with all his failings, still shows more maturity than the adults in *Rushmore*, and the emotionally detached Tenenbaum children showcase more maturity than their devious father.

Max Nelson's (2012) description of Anderson as a 'big kid at heart' examines the aesthetics of his oeuvre that emphasises his attachment to childhood: the use of bright, primary colours, music accentuating the mood, and his fascination in the details of his sets (n.p.). Ironically, his characters do exhibit the same fascination with their life or nostalgia for an idealised past. More than often his adult characters are dysfunctional, melancholic and disenchanting. The children in his films are more audacious and confident in their ability to face the absurdity that surrounds them. Sam and Suzy are twelve-year-old 'social rejects' (MacCabe, 2012, p.9), intelligent and articulate but unable to assimilate into social circles. As outcasts, they are drawn to one another, bonding over the inability to be understood by others.

Shary writes about two divisions in youth stories: the sex story, portraying 'desires for youth to have sex, and occasionally on the consequences of those desires'; and the love story, where 'teens struggle to confirm their romantic feelings' and must overcome an oppressive obstacle 'to either live happily ever after or realize that their union was not meant to be' (2002, p.213). *Moonrise* is a love story; however, the pre-teens never struggle to relay their feelings to one another but do find themselves facing difficult obstacles that aim to separate them from one another.

The film, like Anderson's other films, is rooted in understanding love, love that thrives in a white middle-class community, sheltered from the outside world. It avoids taking the route of sexual awakening, sticking to Anderson's signature of sexual absence, depicting the pre-teens and adults in a world devoid of sexuality. This infantilised portrayal of sexuality speaks of a repressed world, sexually and emotionally. Sam and

Suzy are seen briefly exploring each other's sexuality, with a brief kiss and feeling each other curiously; portrayed as clinical more than sexual. The film even goes so far as to portray the married Bishops sleeping in separate beds in the same room. The storybook structure of the film, with Suzy's books, reinforces the artifice of this world where children take charge and adults are clueless.

The typical use of uniforms, like his other films discussed in the previous chapter, play a critical role in *Moonrise* defining the role of each character and creating a social hierarchy, with their social action regulated by it. It also further works to reinstate the level of artifice and the dollhouse world it evokes. Everyone has their set roles, defined by her/his uniforms, in an ordered world. When Sam first meets Suzy, she is in a raven costume that both disguises her identity and portrays her flawed and aggressive nature. Their first encounter is at the girl's dressing room, during a performance of Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde* held at St. Jack's Church. Her portrayal as the raven that Noah sends out from the ark, emphasises her role as a seeker, she is inquisitive; a feature introduced early in the film through her binoculars.

On spotting her, Sam asks, "What kind of bird are you?" When one of the other girls begins answering for everyone, the planimetric shot of Sam pointing his finger and asking Suzy shows his entire focus is on her: "No, I said what kind of bird are you?" The reverse angle shot to a close-up of Suzy's deadpan face establishes the instant connection between the two. Later a friend of Suzy hands a note to Sam with the words 'Write to me' followed by Suzy's address on it. Thus, begins their correspondence with each other through letters, a central theme that this chapter will discuss.

In the scene, Sam is dressed in a yellow Junior Khaki Scouts uniform and Suzy, in a raven costume. Most characters in the film are always seen wearing a uniform, whether it is Sam wearing his Khaki scout uniform, Sharp wearing his policeman outfit, Ward wearing his scoutmaster uniform, Social Service in her uniform or Suzy wearing the same kind of dress throughout the film. These costumes reinforce Anderson's use of fascist aesthetics⁷⁴ to emphasise order and identity (Sontag, 1980; Nordstrom, 2006). Just as Steve Zissou and his team only wear their uniforms, and Max consistently wears his Rushmore uniform, Sam and Suzy demonstrate their individuality and role as 'outsiders' by the outfits they choose to wear and the way that they wear them.

The film purposefully plays with the idea of definitions throughout the narrative. Sam and Suzy are eager to define their relationship through marriage, while Laura and Sharp are having an affair which is never defined. Even Ward is unable to define what he is: as pointed out when his scouts ask him what his real job is, Ward answers math teacher, only to correct them stating, "this is my real job. Scout Master Troop 55. I'm a math teacher on the side." Sam's identity changes from being a devoted Khaki Scout, defined by his uniform, to the identity of his new adoptive father, Sharp, the island's police officer. Sam and Suzy may be each other's first love, and while they temporarily adopt titles to legitimise their relationship, they conform to 'pre-determined roles everywhere else, but in their rocky seaside hideaway they're able to appreciate each other as specific and irreducible individuals' (Nelson, 2012, n.p.). They choose to accept in one another what their families would want to change, avoiding both definition and conformity.

⁷⁴ Discussed in chapter 2, p.72.

The community of New Penzance has clear social norms and values (Stevens, 2014, p.32). The community and action of the film orientate according to these rules. Sam is encouraged to follow the Khaki Scout code, while Suzy is seen as a ‘problem’ for not conforming to the norms of her family. Both protagonists experience similar societal pressure and letters become a way for the characters to share their predicaments; it binds their worlds together and helps them form an independent system and code of conduct. It is through their letters to one another that they authentically communicate, fall in love and plan their escape: Sam and Suzy want to be together, and their aims propel the action (Bordwell, 2014a, n.p.).

Both protagonists visibly stand out in their environments. They rebel on the most basic level of appearance. From Sam’s blue overalls in his foster home, where the rest of the boys are wearing white t-shirts and dark pants, his racoon skin furry cap and heavily decorated scout uniform to Suzy’s red and blue chequered uniform as opposed to the blue and black chequered uniform the other girls at her school wear. Even the nature of their communication takes an alternative route with the pair intimately connecting through letters instead of direct face-to-face conversation.

Conformity and the drive to escape it is a central theme that drives the narrative of *Moonrise* and is one of the central themes of absurdist texts such as *Homecoming*, *Jacques* and *Prima Donna*. According to Bernard Beck, an essential part of culture is acquiring new members and keeping them in check, ensuring they are trained and motivated to carry out their duties as part of their assimilation into the said culture. The ones who successfully integrate into the said culture are the ones who cooperate

and assist in collective activities by applying the common agreements amassed the traditions and values of the group (2013, p.88). The problems that Sam and Suzy face is because they fail to conform and perform according to the rules of their communities. Sam is disliked by his fellow scouts for being different and is deemed “emotionally disturbed” by his foster father, while Suzy is depicted as sporadically violent and troubled. Their rebellion from these systems causes an uproar in a community that wants them to conform to their codes of conduct.

The Absurd in *Jacques* depicts the pressure of conformity faced by Jacques; language brings the absurdity of the situation to the forefront, with Jacques being forced to ratify his love for jacket potatoes and marriage (Ionesco, 1971, p.128). In *Moonrise*, while the young couple is being forced to return to their guardians, absurdist themes such as dysfunctionality and conformity are portrayed in the relationships the two protagonists share with the other characters. Sam and Suzy both belong to dysfunctional families and are trying to establish their identities in the face of ‘soul crushing authority’ (Kelly, 2012, n.p.). The film challenges the nature of genuine communication with the children more in tune with their emotions than the adults in the film, who seem to exist in a state of emotional stagnancy.

Communication through letters: a medium of intimacy

Language in the film serves a dysfunctional and detached ironic role, unable to generate authentic and meaningful communication between characters. The relationships depicted appear in crisis: Suzy’s parents are shown to hardly ever communicate with each other, and the distance between them is shown literally in the

film. They live with each other but occupy different emotional and physical spaces. They refer to each other as “counsellor”, perhaps an affectionate joke at one time, now representing the formality of their marriage. The film starts as the viewer is taken on a tour through the Bishop house and then the rest of the island is introduced by a ‘gnome-like Narrator whose range of knowledge includes past, present, and future’ (Bordwell, 2014a). In presenting a visual narrative of how the family members go about their daily lives, Anderson manages to establish the detached relationship the family members share, giving visual representation to the emptiness of their language.

At the beginning of the film, Suzy is shown collecting a letter from her mailbox, with a box labelled ‘PRIVATE’ tucked in her arm. The camera cuts to a close-up of the letter, which is addressed to her from Sam. She opens it outside her house, in the bus shelter. The camera tilts from the box and the letter on her lap to her face as she reads it and then stares resolutely at the camera, as it zooms out to show her putting the letter in her box and walking out of the frame. The letter is established as a key prop and one that is private to Suzy. Bordwell (2014a) remarks that the audience is not informed of whom the letter is from, suppressing this detail from the narrative, with Suzy looking up at the camera, insisting that it is private.

The narrative eventually reveals, once they have both run away, that Sam and Suzy have been sending each other letters. The first letter, depicted on screen, is addressed to ‘Suzy Bishop, Summer’s End, New Penzance Island’ and on the top left corner is the address of the sender, ‘Sam Shakusky, in care of: Billingsley Boy’s Home’. The letter is marked with a stamp of the Scout Master-in-Chief and dated 28 August 1965, time 4 pm from Chesterfield Station. Attention to detail, especially in the artefacts

used in the film is another familiar trait in the films of Anderson where every artefact is carefully placed and with a specific purpose, often seen through a God's Eye View shot. These details, not always initially noticed, add value to the narrative after specific events transpire. The letter received by Suzy and the opening sequence with the packed luggage in the attic, only makes sense when Sam and Suzy correspondence and escape plan is uncovered, emphasising the idea that while some of his content may focus on childhood, his content is sophisticated targeting an adult audience.

Letter writing as an act of genuine communication is placed at the heart of the film, connecting the two protagonists and driving the narrative forward. Letters function as an instrument of erotic paradox constructing spaces of desire: simultaneously connective and separative, painful and sweet (Dever, 2012, p.1). *Moonrise* handles the medium of the letter as very intimate, with two teenagers shown bonding through letters. A bond that they fail to share with anyone else in their respective social circles, displaying complete apathy and detachment from their guardians, friends and siblings, with whom they interact face-to-face daily.

Letters become personal platforms of communication; in *Moonrise*, it becomes a haven for Sam and Suzy, used cinematically as a technique to show the development of their relationship. Due to the direct nature of its communication, it is the perfect platform to provide a flexible medium through which relationships and institutional practices can develop (Bazerman, 2000, p.15). In *Moonrise*, the letter offers the young couple an opportunity to explore beyond their social circles, representing a comfortable space through which Sam and Suzy develop their relationship uninterrupted, without the prying eyes of the island. Through their communication

with one another, they also learn how to understand the world around them. Janet Maybin (2000), while studying death-row inmates, argues that letter writing is a primary mode of communication and self-expression, occurring as a result of inmates feeling socially and emotionally isolated. Sam and Suzy find themselves facing social isolation, seen as problematic and weird; their only mode of self-expression are the letters they send each other. The letters become an escape from their dysfunctional realities, which allows them to plan their actual escape. Given that the year is 1965 in Anderson's fictional island, the telephone is shown to be a medium that children do not have ready access to and so the letter is the only private way the protagonists can communicate.

The absurdity of being distanced from the people they live with and close to one another leads Sam and Suzy to plan their escape and live on their terms. The film challenges the nature of communication, with letters seen as being a more intimate and natural means of communication. The social bonds formed through the letters move the relationships from a formal to a more personal one (Bazerman, 2000). The letters the protagonists' exchange are intimate but not burdened with proclamations of love. Instead, they share essential details about their lives, finding solidarity in each other's words and rebelling against their families.

The act of writing serves other purposes through the film: Sam leaves a hand-written letter of resignation for his scoutmaster; the Billingsleys leave an impersonal typed letter for Sam informing him that he is no longer welcome in their home, and Suzy leaves a handwritten letter for her brother stating she has borrowed his record player. The letters between Sam and Suzy also result in the discovery of their escape plan

when Laura discovers Suzy's box containing Sam's letters to her, helping Sharp track their whereabouts.

“Jiminy Cricket, he flew the coop”: Sam and Suzy's escape and conformity.

Escape is a predominant absurdist theme, one that Anderson consistently uses in his films. The escape experienced by the protagonists is enabled through their letters to each other. In Anderson's universe of inauthentic and detached communication, the letter creates a stark contrast to the usual absurdist use of cross-talk and miscommunication. Here the letter causes Sam and Suzy to understand and accept one another, instead of distorting meaning. It acts as a replacement for authentic communication until the two are in close proximity to have real conversations. It serves as a step in establishing their identities and their relationship with each other, laying the initial groundwork for the two to build their relationship. The letters are significant as they serve to emphasises the contrast between the protagonists and the wider community; on the one hand, two preadolescents communicate and understand one another, whereas, adults still exist in an Absurd world where they fail to understand and communicate. Again, this corresponds to the idea I raised in the previous chapters that Anderson draws upon the Absurd notion of a 'crisis' in adulthood to represent adults as more child-like while the children in his films are mature and 'adult' thought.

Sam is as a bright, disciplined and highly skilled scout. He displays his skills while expertly gutting the fish they catch, preparing an immaculate dinner for Suzy, pitching a perfect camp for them- aesthetically pleasing with the placement of wildflowers in

a rusty can. Sam is also an accomplished navigator, directing their way around the wilderness of the Chickchaw path. He is resourceful and knowledgeable, having carried all the necessary equipment needed by them to survive out in nature. In short, he is exceptionally self-sufficient, antithetical to the adults around him.

Through their written correspondence, Sam and Suzy declare their identity and social exclusion, serving as a common bond between them. The discovery of their correspondence triggers a flashback montage, through which Anderson provides the audience with the children's significant backstory paralleling their letters demonstrating their reasons for running away (Bordwell, 2014a). Sam is seen "accidentally" setting the dog kennel on fire, being bullied by his brothers at the foster home. Suzy is seen screaming at her parents and fighting schoolmates. Interestingly, this correspondence montage 'retains a perpendicular framing but decentres the protagonists in mirror-image fashion' (ibid, n.p.) when they are seen writing or reading their letters. This montage implies the similarities between the two protagonists, both misunderstood and with people they cannot be honest.

The letter which plays a pivotal role in establishing the relationship between Sam and Suzy, providing them with a platform of communication separate from the wider community. When the pair finally unites and replace letter writing with face-to-face communication, the danger of being integrated back into society begins to loom over their heads. They are fugitives, running from a community that does not understand them, and wants them to conform to their codes of conduct. Nelson (2012) writes that they refuse to recognize any convention that would reduce their world into anything bland, predictable and unmagical; thus, sealing their isolation from their respective

communities, but somehow their face to face communication seems to signal their shift to more conventional modes of communication almost as if to prepare them for their reintegration back into the community.

The Bishops are particularly apathetic to their troubled daughter, Suzy. The detachment in their approach is comical and disturbing. Walt especially seems detached and defeated when he declares to Sharp, “How can we help her? She’s got so many problems. It’s getting worse.” His preoccupation is with his miserable life rather than the well-being of his troubled daughter. The adults in the film ‘are benighted, hysterical, fanciful, and vulnerable’ (Beck, 2013, p.91). The protagonists are encouraged to be a part of this dysfunctional world, abiding by the same doctrines and dysfunctional structures as the adults, and they do everything in their power to escape.

The film explores white privilege through a cynical lens, with masculinity portrayed as flawed, vulnerable and unhappy (Walt, Sharp and Ward). The female figures are adulterous and self-indulgent (Laura) invisible (Mrs. Billingsley and the telephone operator) or as androgynous, formal and nameless like Social Services (Tilda Swinton). The world Sam and Suzy are being forced to conform to is a world where aspiration is crippled, and communication between characters is detached, devoid of emotion and steeped in traits of the Absurd, empty and meaningless. The purpose of adult communication seems pointless, doomed to crosstalk and while the children embody authority and rationality, while self-indulgently championing bourgeois values and concerns (MacDowell, 2014, p.164).

The adults struggle to communicate, unlike younger children. The only time Laura and Walt genuinely communicate with each other is during a scene where they are both lying in their separate beds. A God's Eye View shot presents a restrained and repressed image of Laura and Walt lying in their separate beds discussing their work and their feelings, staring blankly at the ceiling. The room is shrouded in darkness, and after apologising to Walt, the camera cuts to a mid-shot of Walt declaring, "I hope the roof flies off, and I get sucked up into space. You'll be better off without me." When Laura tells him to stop feeling sorry for himself, stating they are all the children have, he finally looks at her and declares "That's not enough." Unable to look beyond himself, Walt represents the Absurd archetypal character, unwilling and incapable of changing his circumstances, stuck in a melancholy cycle of doubt.

The children in the narrative, claim authorship and power of their lives. Sam and Suzy's escape to claim Mile 3.25 Tidal Inlet, on the original path of the old Chickchaw harvest migration trail, as their own. On reaching their destination, they look out to sea shouting with excitement:

SAM: This is our land.

SUZY: Yes, it is!

The music changes to a cheerful tune, with the vast expanse of sea and open space symbolising freedom for the young pair. Their reclamation of this land as their own seals their rebellion from the structured adult world they have escaped. Despite eventually being discovered by the authorities, the two manage to go further than any Absurd characters: they leave the spaces that trap them and change their circumstances, something the adult characters I have looked at in the previous chapters have failed to do.

The innocence of the youthful characters is challenged by the violence that ensues at the hands of the Khaki Scouts, in the process of bringing both Sam and Suzy back to their guardians. The pair are cornered by heavily armed Khaki scouts who have been “deputised” to bring them in. The entire incident creates a clear distinction between the scouts, accepted by the community, their authority signified by their uniforms, and the two misfits, Sam and Suzy. The resistance staged against the community by the protagonists begins to cause a breakdown in the social structure, exposing the fragility of the adult characters. The stability of the community is also challenged with the use of planimetric shots and compass-point editing, emphasising the artifice and cracks in the veneer of the society through the deliberately staged nature of the shots. Like the diegesis of the Absurd, Anderson does not shy away from presenting a staged, environment for his narratives, and like the Absurd, he does not claim that these worlds are realistic or unreal, they exist for the purpose of the narrative.

Like Jacques (*Jacques*), Suzy is considered a traitor to her family: a label vocalised by her younger brother on being discovered at the Tidal Inlet by her parents, Sharp and Ward. The seeds of communal conformity are deep-seated, and even the youngest members of the community are aware of the repercussions of rebellion. Suzy’s parents are still unable to communicate with Suzy about how they feel when she is brought back home. While bathing Suzy, Laura strikes up a conversation, restrained and self-indulgent in its tone:

LAURA: I do know what you’re feeling, Suzy-bean. I’ve had moments myself where I say, “What am I doing here? Who made this decision? How could I

allow myself to do something so stupid? And why is it still happening?” We women are more emotional...

SUZY: I hate you.

LAURA: Don't say hate.

SUZY: Why not? I mean it.

Laura reveals and questions her own life decisions, Suzy is just an extension of her problems. The wide mid-shot of Suzy at the centre of the frame staring blankly at the camera with Laura on the extreme right cuts to a medium close-up of Suzy glaring at Laura, accusing her of having an affair with the “sad, dumb policeman”. In this rare situation of authentic communication between mother and daughter, Laura finds the copy of *Coping with the Very Troubled Child* in Suzy's bag, remarking,

LAURA: Poor Suzy. Why is everything so hard for you?

SUZY: We're in love. We just want to be together. What's wrong with that?

For the first time, Suzy shows her vulnerability in front of her mother, echoing Melody's character (*Melody*) in her inability to understand why she and Sam are being separated and forced into a world they want to escape.

The children in the film are the voices of reason, authority and rebellion. The magic of *Moonrise*, according to Patricia Crain, lies in the cheerful sympathy it offers to the worrisome adults and the adventurous but pain-dealing children (2013, p.11). The children are the more wholesome and complex characters, dealing with their pain and reaching out to help each other. Initially, the scouts play an active role in capturing Sam and Suzy; this changes when the pair are captured, Sam is put in the care of Sharp until Social Services arrives, and Suzy is back with her family. The scouts represent

the moral and civil order in the film, providing comic relief through their overtly adult-like and responsible behaviour.

The children in the film are capable of incredible feats, fantastical and realistic: some examples are the ridiculously high treehouse built by the scouts and Sam's ability to row his canoe from one side of the island to the other. The absurdity of their existence is highlighted in the ability of the youngsters to build and control their realities, while the adults cannot even sustain their relationships. In a dramatic scene, after the capture of the couple, the scouts huddled in their treehouse playing cards, change their allegiance on witnessing the devotion the pair had for one another:

SKOTAK: This troop has been shabby to Field Mate Sam Shakusky. In fact, we've been a bunch of mean jerks. Why's he so unpopular? I admit, supposedly, he's emotionally disturbed, but he's also a disadvantaged orphan. How would you feel? Nickleby? Deluca? Lazy-Eye? Gadge? He's a fellow khaki scout, and he needs our help. Are we man enough to give that, so part of his brain doesn't get removed out of him? They were prepared to die for each other out there.

The hilarity of the dialogue makes for an intense scene where a group of boys in their nightclothes, playing cards in a treehouse, discuss the fate of Sam. The honesty of Skotak's (Gabriel Rush) passionate speech is delivered straight and with ironic detachment. Moreover, yet another plan is hatched, this time by the resourceful scouts to aid and abet the second escape for the couple.

In renouncing their respective families and getting married in an illegal ceremony, officiated by Falcon Scout Legionnaire Ben⁷⁵ (Jason Schwartzman), Sam and Suzy choose to form their own family. Considering their age, it is a radical initiative, yet at the same time that is very traditional, the coming together of two white heterosexual individuals (Gilson, 2015, p.9). It is ironic that while the pair chose not to conform, they engage in a traditional act and look to conform to a traditional structure.

The storm: chaos and belonging.

The impending storm referred to throughout the film by the narrator, finally, hits the island causing everyone to seek shelter at St. Jack Wood's church, due to its position on higher ground. The fantastical and Absurd meet when Sam and Suzy get married in a makeshift church-tent and are heading to work on a freighter. Suzy accidentally leaves her binoculars behind, in the process of collecting it Sam gets into a fight with Redford (Lucas Hedges) and is struck by lightning while being chased by a group of scouts from Fort Lebanon. All the while the storm is nearing the island. Through the chaos, the group, consisting of Suzy, Sam and Troop 55, manage to reach the shelter and evade the adults, disguised in animal costumes. The ludicrousness of the situation mirror the absurdist elements of fantasy used in *Amédée*: Sam getting struck by lightning and the impact that it has on the narrative is similar sentiment to impact of the growing corpse in *Amédée*; both invoke a sense of artifice and incredulousness in the audience.

⁷⁵ Ben, referred to as cousin Ben, is Skotak's cousin and runs the supply and resource outpost at Fort Lebanon.

This climatic confrontation between the adults is visualised in ‘in reverse-angle depth, moving from one planimetric composition to another, the cutting being either 180-degree reverses or simple axial cuts (zero-degree changes of angle)’ (Bordwell, 2014a, n.p.). In this sequence, the actors even ‘pivot to provide foreground profiles and frontal faces in the distance’ (ibid.). The illusion of movement from one frame to the other, while characters step in and out, portrays the utter loss of power and control amongst the adults as they squabble while the storm rages outside. Sharp steps up to his role as a paternal figure and an officer of the law, by seizing responsibility. The camera cuts to a low angle medium shot of Sharp holding a wooden club-like weapon, covered in metal spikes and blocking Social Service’s way: he becomes the protector.

As the power briefly cuts off in the church, Sam and Suzy escape onto the roof. The narrative of escape is closely intertwined with the narrative of non-conformity, Gilson argues Anderson’s films are narratives of quest. They function to ‘protect one’s subjective agency, one’s power (as a parent, as a lawyer, as scoutmaster, as sheriff) ... but also ... to protect the seemingly complex child lives at stake’ (2015, p.7). While the goal of protecting the two children and saving them is welcomed, it is of note that in being ‘saved’ the children are also being brought back to the community and the social structures that the adults feel is appropriate for them. While Sharp becomes their saviour, protecting them from jumping to their deaths from the roof and by subsequently offering to adopt Sam, he inadvertently becomes their captor, bringing about their reintegration into consensual society.

Till the ends, the theme of love looms strongly over the protagonists. Out on the roof braving the storm, the pair decides to jump, either to their escape or death. Sam

declares to his quasi-wife, “Just in case this is a suicide, or they capture us, and we never see each other again anymore, I just want to say thank you for marrying me. I’m glad I got to know you, Suzy”. After being convinced by Sharp not to jump, lightning strikes the tower and Sharp, Sam and Suzy are left hanging from the tower. Once again Sam escapes death by lightning, but this time he is not alone.

The film ends with Sam and Suzy returning to safe, familiar environments. Sam discards his Khaki scout outfit, his old identity, for an island police outfit, and Suzy has changed from her pink dress to a similar yellow one. The pair is absorbed back into familial structures; they inherently conform to the worlds they were trying so hard to escape. The symbol of their resilience, the Tidal Inlet, is wiped off the map with the storm. Sam’s painting at the end of the film of the Inlet and their briefly claimed kingdom, serves as a gentle reminder of their revolt against the system but also serves to emphasise their integration back into the community.

Conclusion: The calm after the storm.

The adults presented as having no passion for life, share a common thread of loneliness and a sense of disillusionment with the world. While the film attempts to end on a positive note with the adults finding companionship and reclaiming their relationships, the fact remains that they do not change. Sam and Suzy do. After being caught by Sharp, earlier in the film, Sam tells him that they ran away knowing everybody would be worried, but they did not take into account that something would happen to them, that they “changed”. The change that Sam suggests refers to different things: the change in attitude towards the world, the change that comes from resisting dominant

structures of power and the change that comes from understanding another person's perspective on life. Bob Plant writes that for Camus, the knowledge of the world for the individual is limited to what is understood 'only in human terms' and on what 'meaning' the world contains 'outside our all-too-human perspective' (2009, p.117). The change that occurs between Sam and Suzy is the understanding that despite their rebellious attitudes, that to find belonging they have to conform to the norms of their society.

Absurdity for individuals exists in their 'appetite for the absolute and for unity' and in the 'impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle' (Plant, 2009, pp.117-118). Just like Jacques, (*Jacques*) embroiled in ideas about finding purpose in his life, succumbed to the pressure of conformity, Sam and Suzy find themselves absorbed back into the social structure they were escaping. They cannot escape the absurdity of the world they occupy, and in conforming to the social roles imposed on them, accept the impossibility of escape, rational human interaction and rebellion.

In this chapter by analysing the role of letters and the relationship of the young protagonists in *Moonrise*, I have aimed to show a more nuanced understanding of how the different forms of communication, shape the dynamics of the relationships the protagonists share with one another and their community. The letters become a more direct and personal means of conversation, more meaningful and intimate than face-to-face communication: Suzy and Sam share an intimate relationship with letters, a relationship they struggle to form with other members of society. Anderson manages to capture blustery adult emotions in his young characters, as the children are the ones

who are more assertive and mature in the film: from the Khaki scouts running Camp Ivanhoe, children performing in elaborate production of Benjamin Britten operas, scouts carrying weapons to hunt down the runaways, Sam pitching up tent, cooking and smoking a pipe or a group of scouts rescuing Sam and Suzy.

At the end of the film, 'the family as a social institution replaces the desire for connection and escape as Sam trades in his scout's uniform for the black-and-white lines of the Island Police' (Gooch, 2014, p.195). The change that Sam mentions earlier to Sharp is finalised when his identity as a scout is replaced by the identity of his adopted-father: Sam now dresses in an island police outfit. He and Suzy are a couple with the narrative following Bellour's (cited in Wexman 1993) conventional formula of creating a couple. However, their love has been brought back in line, rationalised and accepted by the wider community.

The children in the film have found a way to cope with the Absurd human condition while the clueless adults are unable to address and manage it successfully. Just as Jacques (*Jacques*) becomes the respectable, married man who loves 'potatoes in their jackets' because his family want him to, Sam and Suzy become the conventional teenagers that their families and the community want them to be. While Jacques exists in an Absurd realm of language, which ultimately bamboozles him into conformity, Sam and Suzy also exist in an Absurd world of dysfunctional social structures that entraps them. 'Escapism is the mode as well as the subject of *Moonrise Kingdom*' (Tyree, 2013, p.23), the entire film functions on the premise of escape: escape from conformity. Anderson's protagonists are young and bold, willing to choose escape over conformity, whereas his adult characters are stuck in their dysfunctional worlds.

The integration of the couple back into the community again alludes to the couple's entrapment, unable to escape the Absurd norms of the community and the looming adult world.

Chapter 4

“I Never Understood Any of Us.”

Family Relationships, Entrapment and Individuality in *The Royal*

Tenenbaums and *Fantastic Mr. Fox*.

“I’m the one that failed them. Or, anyway, it’s nobody’s fault.”

- Royal Tenenbaum

“I’m trying to tell you the truth about myself.”

- Foxy

Kim Wilkins writes that Anderson can create pure cinematic characters, who while distinctive, are unidentifiable as representations of real people. These characters do not resolutely relate to lived experiences, but instead are constructed characters with improbable experiences and lives, ‘facilitated by, and imaginatively confined to, one particular film’ (2014, p.25). Despite the recognisably artificial nature of their representation, audiences are still motivated to empathise with these characters. Their eccentric nature promotes temporary emotional investment, and although their experiences appear farcical, they centre on genuine existential issues (ibid., p.26).

Anderson’s emotionally stunted worlds are dominated by characters whose personality traits and improbable experiences call into question the authenticity of their lives. It simultaneously alienates its audience from identifying with the character, their circumstances, and yet invites them to understand the human condition. *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) are two such fictional worlds narrated from storybooks; their strategic introduction at the onset of the film signals

the construction of imagined worlds, with the idiosyncratic families acting as sites of discord and dysfunctionality.

As discussed, the dysfunctional family unit has been the focus of many of Anderson's films; from Dignan's quasi-family (*Bottle*) Zissou's crew (*Zissou*), to the Bishops (*Moonrise*). Indeed, the previous chapters have considered the role of the dysfunctional family in the narrative while focusing on more specific aspects of the texts; fatherhood, love, escape. This chapter focuses on the family specifically in *Tenenbaums* and *Fantastic*, discussing the tension between individuality and entrapment.

The ideal family and its functions are constructs continually alluded to in Anderson's films; yet as discussed in the previous chapters, the films portray the families functioning perfectly in dysfunctionality. His films present a nostalgic view of parenting and families as idealised in contemporary American culture. According to Daniel C. Turner *Tenenbaums* combines family and film, the two principle cultural forms for producing nostalgia in contemporary America (2012, p.159). Although most of Anderson's films portray family units, none of them is as centred around the biological family like *Tenenbaums* and *Fantastic*.

Both films address themes of the Absurd by presenting a tension between entrapment and communal identities that are challenged by the characters in the films, in a similar way to that which is present in the previous chapter. The family units, in these films, cannot function successfully together but rather, appear as units of community occupied by individuals who are frantically looking to belong somewhere or to

someone. This chapter will first discuss the role that family units have played in Absurd plays and, subsequently, the role that dysfunctional family units play in the *Tenenbaums* and *Fantastic* will be discussed, looking particularly at the meticulous mise-en-scène and dialogue.

Families and dysfunctionality: The Absurd and Anderson.

As emphasised in previous chapters, plays such as *Endgame*, *Jacques* and *Homecoming* revolve around the family and the impact this can have on individualism. The family becomes the force around which conformism, tragedy and egocentrism develop throwing light on characters who are flawed, stunted in their emotional growth and incapable of truly communicating their feelings to one another. *Endgame* portrays the family as a site of tragedy and entrapment, containing schizoid characters⁷⁶ and where ‘being conceived, gestated, born, and alive, are terrible’ (Simon, 1988, p.229). Hamm and Clov are trapped, unable to exist without the other. Furthermore, Hamm’s parents Nagg and Nell live in the confinements of their dustbins, physically unable to leave. A.W. Brink suggests the barren, dead world outside reflects Hamm’s deteriorated inner life (1971, p.192). It mirrors Hamm’s self-destructive behaviour and his gradually waning family relations; the barrenness outside prohibits life and Hamm’s obstreperous relations with the other characters forbids any emotional bonds from being nurtured between them.

⁷⁶ Simon (1991) describes schizoid as ‘the character style of a person who has difficulty forming close and emotionally warm bonds with others, seeming in fact to dread such intimacy. Such a person gives the outer impression of being cold and aloof, self-preoccupied, but he or she may be engaged in a great deal of inner struggle about his or her yearnings and dread of intimacy’ (p. 236).

Plays like *Jacques* discuss the family as a site of conformity and refutation of individuality (Esslin, 2001, p.148); the family status takes precedence over individuality, resulting in narratives that are marred by crosstalk and dysfunctional behaviour. David Edney comments that Ionesco's characters, often, tend to treat the family as a haven and their hope for survival in an otherwise terrifying world (1985, p.378). As a result, the characters isolate themselves from their external surroundings as witnessed with Jacques (*Jacques*) and the Buccinioniis cooped up in their apartment, isolated from the outside world in *Amédée* (1965).

There is an opposition between society and family which some of the characters appear to sustain in the plays. It is only an illusion; both are similar institutions functioning with the same interests and values (Edney, 1985, p.378). The same family that is a source of protection from the outside world becomes the cause of violence. Edney describes the two ways that the family functions in Ionesco's plays: 'as a promise of love and protection' for the protagonist, thus attracting her/him and as a 'source of violence', repelling her/him (ibid.). Incidentally, love functions as an aspiration. More than often, it is violence from the family that is portrayed in Ionesco's works. The father figure is often portrayed as 'the initiator of violence' and the mother 'as a source of love' (ibid.).

Other plays such as *Homecoming* are centred around familial drama, where the family is an inherently problematic space, with an outsider threatening the fragile security of the characters and their home (Osterwalder, 1999, p.319). Ruth, the daughter-in-law, shatters the dynamics of her husband's family, ruled by the ruthless patriarch and father, Max. Despite the sexualisation of her character by the members of her

husband's family, she unconventionally strengthens the familial unit by ruling the household and 'gathering the subjugated males of the clan at her feet' (ibid., p.327). Pinter portrays an antagonistic relationship between the family, especially the two younger brothers (Esslin, 1973, p.153), provoked by their father, Max, but eventually, he is reduced to a whimpering, pining shell of a man overcome by his desire for Ruth.

These Absurd plays discuss the family as a dysfunctional and tumultuous space, signified by crosstalk, miscommunication and relationships defined by their obdurate determination. In Ionesco's plays, the primary tenet remains the same: 'violence starts in the family and spreads until it engulfs all of society' (Edney, 1985, p.387). In *Jacques*, the family is a space of oppression and the 'destruction of language ... takes the shape of a terror exercising itself upon the individual identity of beings and objects' (Vannier and Pronko, 1963, p.185). The communal identity of the family overshadows individuality, and language becomes the critical medium to establish this. Similarly, in *Homecoming*, the aggressive relationship between Max and his sons encourages Ruth to assert her sexuality and power over the family. Aggression and language work together to showcase the absurdity of family relationships and the violence and dysfunction it can cause.

The families in absurdist plays struggle with giving and receiving love; this inability to cope with love drives their dysfunctional behaviour and traps them in volatile relationships. The pressure to conform and renounce one's individuality often leads to language disintegrating. Coherent speech collapses and becomes a succession of syllables, cries and sometimes even sounds (Dobrovsky, 1959, p.9). Other plays like *Homecoming* portray familial units as extraordinarily complicated. Esslin describes

them as families ‘which has been living on the fringes of the respectable, normal world’ (1973, p.152); he does so alluding to the presumption of Ruth’s past and possible future as a prostitute and the dubious occupation and behaviours of the men in the family.

The Absurd uses the family to embrace the failure of language to fulfil its communicative purpose. Through exposing the contradiction between the words spoken and emotional action that motivates them (Silverstein, 1993, p.15), the inability of language to impart any emotional feeling or address issues of power is revealed (Mahmoudi, et al., 2013; Tutaş and Azak, 2014). Absurdist plays, such as those written by Pinter, are plagued with sterility and lack consistency. They demonstrate the middle-class family, ‘both as sheltering home longed for and dreamed of, and as many-tentacled monster strangling its victim’ (Storch, 1967, p.703). The individual is at a loss in a world where language betrays her/him, as do the familial relationships that are presumed to provide safety and security. Esslin argues these characters are seen ‘in the process of their essential adjustment to the world’ (2001, p.262), at which point they decide how they will acknowledge their reality. The suffocating nature of the dysfunctional family replaces the aspiration for a caring and nurturing family.

Tom Scanlan⁷⁷ (1998) distinguishes between two kinds of the nuclear family, ‘the family of security’ and ‘the family of freedom’. The family of security is marked by an environment of love and protection, which can depend on sacrifices that are self-destructive and destroys one’s will and independence. This mode of the family tends

⁷⁷ Reference: Scanlan, T. (1978) Family, drama, and American dreams. Westport: Greenwood Press.

towards an idealisation of childhood and the past and opposition to society, focusing instead on itself as a communal unit. Separation from this kind of domestic tyranny allows individuality and self-expression, but this separation is associated with a disregard for others and leads to isolation. The family of freedom is an illusion of hope, which suits the needs of the acquisitive society, consisting of self-sufficient individuals who separate themselves from the family (cited in Osterwalder, 1999, pp.320-321). Absurdist depictions of the family alternate between embodying both tropes, however, the focus is on exposing the failure of families to provide security or freedom. Unable to procure the love desired, family members attempt to garner freedom and are left unsuccessful in their attempts. Hamm is unable to attain the love he desires from his parents and Clov, but he is also unable to leave being co-dependent on Clov (*Endgame*). The same sentiment applies to Jacques. They are neither placed in a family of security nor one of freedom (Jacques).

Pinter's households, referred to as Oedipal in nature, capitalise on the hopes and failures of the familial unit, portraying a family that begins with an understood contract which is not always thoroughly followed: 'parents are responsible for the care of their young' (Bennett, 2011, p.68). Just as a young abandoned Oedipus carries out a violent revolt, caused by the absence of his parents, Pinter's families undergo abandonment, both emotionally and physically, eventually leading to dysfunctional and violent behaviour. Similarly, Beckett addresses emotional abandonment and parental negligence in his work. His characters like Hamm are depicted suffering from emotional neglect at the hands of his parents, especially his father. Hamm is incapable of a civil relationship with his ageing parents or Clov; instead, he viciously mistreats

Clov. It is implied that as a result of his upbringing, his behaviour is aggressive, and relationships are dysfunctional.

The family is a familiar sight in absurdist plays, a trait shared by contemporary American. Many American screen comedies have used families 'as sites of actual or potential disaster and as sanctuaries and reasons for reunion and celebration' (Horton, 2008, p.45). The complex and contradictory nature of the family provides a suitable platform to perform humour through dysfunction, in which audiences recognise the familiarity of the situations. The screen family is 'essentially a dramaturgical construct, in some ways like other constructs reflecting social groupings that must take their place and make their sense in the same venue' (Pomerance, 2008b, p.294). Thus, the screen family, like the real-world family, is judged by its appearances of suitability, given that the family has to be perceived as a unit, for the audience to accept the values it exhibits. Just as the Absurd family is unable to communicate with one another, the onscreen families of Anderson's films are unable to communicate with each other; they are prone to violent behaviour and the individual members a desperate to be loved and to belong.

Samira Sasani and Parvin Ghasemi observation that Pinter's plays reveal diverse forms of entrapment in relationships is insightful, given his proclivity with portraying characters who are entrapped in their relationships, unable to leave or comprehend their situation (2014, p.38). Absurdist plays depict characters who are trapped within relationships and struggle to establish their independent identity away from their relationships. Their entrapment is emotional and physical; despite being free to leave

when they please, they are physically unable to do so, a theme repeated in plays like *Godot*, *Rhinoceros*, *Endgame* and *Prima Donna*.

Incapable of leaving, characters in these plays feel suffocated and smothered by their families. The fear of entrapment inspires them to run away, and the more frightened they are, the more frightening their family becomes (ibid. p.38). The very fear that should encourage them to escape is what leads the characters to cling to the object of their fear, despite understanding the damage it causes them. The Absurd and the works of Anderson embrace this notion, the inability of individuals to leave relationships that frighten them, fearing life beyond the structure and security of their families.

Anderson's onscreen families are far from perfect; they consist of flawed individuals and flawed units. Murray Pomerance (2008b) discusses two kinds of screen families: the perfect and the implicit family. The perfect family is the 'screen family that looks related and in which relationship claims are routinely made', whereas, the implicit family is one where claims of relationships are made, despite the fact that their appearances are not 'suitable,' they do not look like a family (pp.296-297). Anderson's families are implicit families bound together by showcasing their dysfunction. The perfect family is the ideal, a vision of what the world should be (p.299). Not surprisingly, the families presented in Anderson's films are far from perfect, in every sense of the word.

Anderson's families draw upon Scalan's constructs of the 'family of security' and 'the family of freedom'. His families, like the families of the Absurd, alternate between these constructs. They begin with their placement as the family of security, depicting

an illusion of love and protection. However, this love and protection destroying the independence of the individual family members, making them unable of functioning without the other family member (s). The individuals of his family units aspire to live like 'families of freedom,' where they can function self-sufficiently, yet this is often unsuccessful because of their inability to function independently of one another. The closest Anderson comes to portraying a family of freedom is in *Rushmore* and *Moonrise*; Max and Bert (*Rushmore*) almost lead independent lives, with Max desperate to break away and form a family more suited to his ambitions. However, this changes once he understands his failings and accepts his father and his background.

Similarly, the construct applies to Sam and Captain Sharp's relationship (*Moonrise*); however, given they do not start as a family in the film, and both have initially functioned independently of one another, leading lonely but self-sufficient existences, this reading has its limitations. The two, however, do form a family bond that allows a certain degree of freedom yet provides each other with companionship and protection. Indeed, we see Sam's acceptance and admiration of his adopted father, whom he begins to emulate: visualised through Sam's costume change to wearing the police uniform similar to that of Sharps.

The family has continually played a crucial role in Anderson's narratives. Since his first film, *Bottle*, Anderson has flirted with the idea of dysfunctional families, teasing out characters struggling with their identities as individuals and as part of a cohort. *Bottle* portrays the abusive sibling relationship between Bob and his older brother and the quasi-familial criminal unit of Mr Henrys that Dignan is desperate to join.

Rushmore depicts the detached family of Blume; *Life Aquatic* celebrates the narcissistic Zissou and his relationship with his dysfunctional crew. *Darjeeling* illustrates the reunion of three brothers and their attempt to find their elusive mother in the hope of repairing their lives; *Moonrise* presents the dysfunctional and uncommunicative Bishop family, and *Budapest* shows Gustave's rigidly controlled quasi-family of the hotel community.

America witnessed a cycle of films every decade; this included the white families of the mid and late 1970s; tormented and troubled families in the late 1970s and early 1980s'; this was followed by the reappearance of traditional family values and structures in the late 1980s (Levy, 1991, p.190). Anderson's films nostalgically play with the family values of these decades. His films form an amalgamation of the white family of the 70s, the troubled family of the 80s and the traditional family structure of the late 80s, in turn creating the contemporary, hybridised dysfunctional family of the twentieth century. A family of failed marriages, detached parenting, emotionally stunted children and an inability to communicate with one another; a family that fails to offer security or freedom to its members.

The captivating landscape of pastiche is thematised zealously in the objects that Anderson meticulously places in his perfectly symmetrical frames. The strategic placement of these memorabilia emphasises the individual characteristics of each member, creating a space where the communal or familial significance of the object is brought to attention. Subsequently highlighting the struggle characters face in belonging to a cohesive family unit. In *Life Aquatic*, Ned adds his emblem on the ship flag, marking his acceptance into the working family on board the *Belafonte*.

Darjeeling depicts the three brothers fighting over their father's possessions, travelling with his old suitcases and wearing his prescription sunglasses. On a journey to find their mother, their attachment to their father's possessions complicates their relationship, forcing them to confront the lack of intimacy they appear to share. In *Moonrise*, Suzy runs away with a copy of her parent's *Coping with the Very Troubled Child*; an act that causes her to acknowledge her depression and reject her parent's authority. Consequently, in Anderson's oeuvre, the formation of a family is 'an aesthetic event, a stylish coming-together' (Rybin, 2014, p.40). The family units constructed are artistic, sensitive and detached from their realities; they find solace and comfort in the objects that become extensions of their personalities and an expression of their family lineage.

Anderson's portrayal of the middle class white American family emphasises the role that objects and communication play in deciphering the Absurd representation of family in his controlled cinematic universes. While *Tenenbaums* adheres to the structure of a nuclear family, thorough in outlining its three children "geniuses" who dominate the narrative of the film, *Fantastic* focuses on the father figure and the repercussions of his actions on his family. The Tenenbaums are an odd family where 'everyone is supposed to be related, and nobody seems to be' (Pomerance, 2008b, p.298), individuals, who happen to be a biological family. The implicitness of their family is brought into question because the characters 'work hard at *not* relating to one another' (ibid, p.302). The Foxes represent a more traditional family with the son attempting to emulate his idolised father. The films refer to nuclear families, the notion of what a family is meant to represent is challenged throughout.

Family spaces are often constricted where ‘freedom, fun and the essentials of pleasure’ are not to be found (Pomerance, 2008b, p.294); the cinematic families of Anderson stand witness to this. In *Tenenbaums* alone, the misery, depression and stunted emotional growth of the Tenenbaum children, serve as a reminder to the audience of the problems that can stem from a problematic family background. The family in absurdist plays, as suggested, is a site of dysfunction and crisis, far removed from the security and pleasure associated with an ideal family. In both the TotA and Anderson’s films humour emerges from the irony that something like the family, which ideally should provide comfort and happiness actually leads to entrapment and dependency.

Appropriating the term tragicomedy for absurdist plays, Bernard F. Dukore writes, that the layman distinguishes between comedy and tragedy by declaring that tragedy ends with death, makes you sad and shocks you; whereas, comedy ends with marriage, and makes you laugh and smile (1976, pp.2-3). Dukore refers to the ability of absurdist plays to address both tragic and comic traits in their work; traits that are crucial to understanding the works of Anderson. His ability to bring laughter and sadness on screen provides an outlook that challenges the viewer to look beyond comedy onto the social tensions presented in these imagined worlds. Anderson’s films contain carefully crafted worlds where the lines between comedy and tragedy continuously merge, and in *Tenenbaums* and *Fantastic*, the family is central to this tension, the absurdity of family life leading to both comedic and tragic events in his narratives.

The Royal Tenenbaums and Fantastic Mr. Fox

Anderson's third feature *Tenenbaums* was released in 2001, and his sixth feature, *Fantastic* in 2009. The *Tenenbaums* follows the lives of Etheline Tenenbaum (Anjelica Huston) Royal Tenenbaum (Gene Hackman) and their children, Chas⁷⁸ (Ben Stiller), Margot⁷⁹ (Gwyneth Paltrow) and Richie⁸⁰ (Luke Wilson). After ten years of marriage, the couple separated, and the three "genius" children grow up under the care of the matriarch Etheline. Their family unit is extended to include Richie's best friend Eli⁸¹ (Owen Wilson), who is a "regular fixture" in the Tenenbaum household, and their housekeeper Pagoda (Kumar Pallana).

The film is narrated as a storybook by the voice-over of Alec Baldwin who declares, "In fact, virtually all living memory of the brilliance of the young Tenenbaums had been erased by two decades of betrayal, failure, and disaster". The Tenenbaum children are far from ordinary, distant, dysfunctional and emotionally stunted. John A. Fredrick declares that the trio 'are each perverted somehow; they're monsters all' (2017, p.119). Each of the children grown up stunted with their emotional inadequacies, unable to move forward or live completely in the past. Their absent, unreliable father, Royal resurfaces in the film when his finances run out, and he is asked to vacate his hotel due to his inability to pay the expenses. His return home is also further motivated by news of Etheline receiving an offer of marriage from Henry (Danny Glover): her friend and business manager. The film documents the incredulous

⁷⁸ Young Chas is played by Aram Aslanian-Persico.

⁷⁹ Young Margot is played by Irina Gorovaia.

⁸⁰ Young Richie is played by Amedeo Turturro.

⁸¹ Young Eli is played by James Fitzgerald.

lives of the three Tenenbaum children from their success at a young age to their current lives riddled with insecurity, depression, adultery, deceit and paranoia.

“I always wanted to be a Tenenbaum”, a morose Eli admits on being confronted by Royal and Richie about his drug problem. The portrayal of Eli emphasises his status as an outsider and on his desire to be a part of the Tenenbaum family. From spending most of his youth at the Tenenbaum house to being Richie’s best friend, always sending his grades and press clippings to Etheline and eventually going on to have an affair with the married Margot. Eli is desperate to be a member of the family, regardless of their dysfunction. After all, who would not, the prodigious Tenenbaum children are celebrated and appear to be capable of incredible feats, from winning grants for their plays to running multi-million dollar businesses to becoming champion tennis players. The fantastical lives of the children are emphasised throughout the film in reference to their other interests which include, breeding Dalmatian mice. They are all extremely secretive, and we learn that Richie has quasi-incestuous fantasies about his adopted sister, Margot.

The film draws visual and narrative stylistics from Orson Welles’ *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), with a similar narrator⁸² guiding the narrative forward with his voice-over. Anderson acknowledges the influence of the film, stating it is ‘really inspired by *The Magnificent Ambersons* more than anything ... what I probably saw was a house that looked just like the one in *Ambersons*’ (Seitz, 2013, p.120). The Tenenbaum house, which shares a striking resemblance to the Amberson house, is the central motif in the narrative of *Tenenbaums*. It signifies a place that both traps and

⁸² The narrator in *The Magnificent Ambersons* was played by Orson Welles himself.

liberates the family, functioning as an extension of the family itself. At the end of the film when an inebriated Eli drives his car into the front of the house; the physical damage caused to the house is a symbolic rupture, encouraging the Tenenbaum family to address the damage to the house, representative of them as a collective, and to them individually addressing their demons.

Fantastic is adapted from Roald Dahl's book of the same name into a screenplay by Anderson and Noah Baumbach. Along with the animation director for the film, Mark Gustafson, Anderson created a world designed entirely from scratch. Steve Rose (2009) of *The Guardian* writes that every frame of the film is a carefully composed photograph, and the entire film contains 61,920 of them. While Anderson has used stop-motion on a smaller scale in *Life Aquatic*, *Moonrise* and *Budapest*, this film marks his first stop-animation feature film. The film deals with the familiar theme of family, but this time in the world of humanised animals. Jack Halberstam⁸³, referring to Anderson as a charming revolutionary figure, describes the film as 'a simple story about a fox who gets sick of his upwardly mobile lifestyle and goes back to his roots' (2013, n.p.). The simplicity of his life is seen as superficial to the patriarch of the family, Foxy (George Clooney), 'a honey-toned, corduroy-suited rock-star rascal' (Seitz, 2013, p. 237), leading a secret life of a thief at night. He lives a moderately comfortable life with his wife Felicity (Meryl Streep) and their "different" son, Ash

⁸³ Halberstam in her/his essay 'Charming for the Revolution: A Gaga Manifesto', discusses the manifesto 'as an attempt to measure the new genders and sexualities that emerge within subcultural spaces against the new forms of "punk capitalism" ... which seem to reterritorialize such new forms of life almost as soon as they emerge. In the hopes that a few disruptive forms fail to be reabsorbed into the global marketplace, I advocate for an anarchistic relation to being, becoming, and worlding'. This leads to the discussion of the three points in the manifesto: 1) Embrace the Impractical!, 2) Start a Pussy Riot, and 3) Be Fantastic! Charming for the Revolution! Under the third point she/he discusses the encounter between Foxy and *wild* wolf towards the end of the film, discussing the impact and significance of this chance encounter in terms of political action, and understanding this *wild* portrayed as revolutionary.

(Jason Schwartzman), who is trying to convince everyone about his status as an athlete. The simplicity of his life is put in jeopardy when Foxy becomes the uncanny face of revolution against the humans; the same humans he initially stole from, endangering his family and the entire animal community.

The film explores the adventures of Foxy, an ex-poultry thief, who despite living a respectable family life, suffering from disillusion regarding the purpose of his new comfortable existence. Suffering from a midlife, existential crisis, Foxy decides to relive his glory days and steal from three mean farmers, endangering the lives of everyone he knows. Following Anderson's previous cinematic worlds, with their elaborate artificiality, the *Fantastic* cast of 'characters live in dioramas, placeless limbos somewhere between a French New Wave film and a Burberry clothing ad' (Sabo, 2010, n.p.). The film is even more controlled in its aesthetic appeal, with every frame symmetrical and obsessively immaculate in its detail. Time and space work differently here. However, Anderson's aesthetic style, nostalgic fashion and his whimsical characters remain the same. The animated characters are presented with typically understated emotions and deadpan conversations, as discussed features of his oeuvre.

Olsen first linked Anderson to the 'New Sincerity' movement (1999, p.17), defined by its response to postmodern irony and nihilism, writing that the director does not seem too far removed from the characters he portrays, 'as if his deep affection and sympathy for his characters stems from a glimmer of self-recognition' (p.12). Foxy is styled in light coloured corduroy suits, just like the outfits regularly worn by Anderson. Collin writes, the distinguishing features of this 'New Sincerity' include a

move back in time, stepping away from the so-called corruption of media culture that leads to a loss of authenticity and as a site of successful narcissistic projection of the protagonist away from the corrupt (1993, p.259). Anderson's *Fantastic* manages to capture a 'yet-to-be contaminated folk culture of elemental purity' (ibid.), a magical world untouched by the craziness of media culture, nostalgically depicting children who still swim in inflatable pools, play sport, play with train sets. Furthermore, he conjures a cinematic manifestation of sincerity by revisiting a childhood text, a by using, hand-made stop-motion animation techniques, intentionally ignoring from the more contemporary, hyper-realistic computer-generated animations being created (Dorey, 2012, p.171).

The animation adds a layer of artifice to the film, in terms of its visuals and yet the characters are no different to Anderson's other "real" characters. The contradiction between what Foxy aspires towards and the life he leads is more visually achievable in *Fantastic*, given the filmmaker has more creative leeway in visually a dysfunctional world, one that I argue is steeped in absurdity. However, despite the difference in their mode of action, live-action (*Tenenbaums*) and animation (*Fantastic*), both the films have striking similarities. The opening scene of both emphasises that the films depict stories from books, illustrating to the audience that the films refer to fictional worlds. The films are also divided into chapters, to maintain this association. In *Tenenbaums*, the inclusion of close-up shots of the page, with the introduction of each chapter, consistently reminds the viewer of the fictional narrative that the film presents. Similarly, in *Fantastic* the sub-headings reinforce the structure of chapters, marking significant moments in the narrative of the film, e.g. when Foxy pays a visit to Badger to buy the tree, or when Kristofferson (Eric Chas Anderson) enters their lives.

Arved Ashby (2013) remarks *Fantastic* 'is a special case of accentuating the telling over the story told', utilising words and music 'to set the situation in high relief and precipitate the action' (p.191). The aesthetic appeal and absurdity of Anderson's films are located in the emphasis of their storytelling, the whimsy and quirkiness associated with his films focus on how his narrative is told and not on what the content might be. In *Tenenbaums*, behind Richie's nostalgic outfit and hipster persona is a character who suffers from depression and suicidal tendencies. Even the event of his attempted suicide distances the audience from its gory content, through its use of music and entertaining visual clues to his state of mind: Anderson uses blue to point towards his depression and melancholy, starkly contrasted with the violent red of his blood.

Consumed with detail, 'a "saturated" Anderson film vacillates between stark reality and ravingly innocent unreality, between documentary and absurdist romp' (ibid., p.184). It oscillates between commenting on the human condition to the fantastical spectrum of sea life and a profound understanding of melancholy, leaving the audience on tenterhooks as to what is real and what is the hyper-real. *Tenenbaums* and *Fantastic* document dysfunctional behaviour and its impact on the family, at the same time, presenting highly incredulous scenarios of character interactions and behaviour. For instance, throughout the film Foxy is determined to relive his golden days as a thief, placing his family and community in incredible danger at the hands of three deranged farmers, who surrender their lives and businesses to seek revenge on Foxy. Despite all of this Foxy still manages to command respect and redemption from his community, while also escaping the clutches of the farmers. Anderson's films fluctuate between the childish, innocent understanding and curiosity of an Absurd story and the dark

adult acceptance of betrayal and disappointment, a prime example of both the comic and tragic as previously discussed.

The father figures in both films eventually end up on paths of redemption, while, the children show signs of similar dysfunctional and narcissistic traits initially demonstrated by their fathers. The Tenenbaum children are portrayed as child geniuses who have peaked and are struggling to be successful in their adulthood. Ash eventually shines as the hero of the film, but in doing so proves himself to be as narcissistic and headstrong as his father. Both fathers also fail to acknowledge and appreciate their children until the end. During a scene in which Royal is castigating Margot's treatment of Raleigh, the conversation depicts the failure and insecurity that has been accepted by the Tenenbaum children over the past two decades,

ROYAL: You used to be a genius.

MARGOT: No, I didn't.

ROYAL: Anyway, that's what they used to say.

Margot's deep-seated need for acceptance is never fulfilled by Royal, who continues to see her as his stepdaughter. Earlier in the film, she informs Eli that she does not take the term 'genius' lightly, agreeing with Eli's⁸⁴ critics labelling him as "not a genius". The term was once associated with Royal as well, a once prominent litigator who was disbarred, put into prison and now has no finances to support him. The idea of the children being fallen geniuses again helps to align them with Royal emphasising his influence on the family. The family members are all flawed, insecure and alienated from each other, even though they share personality traits and seem to have the same backstory.

⁸⁴ Referring to Eli's newly found success as an author, over his second novel *Old Custer*.

There are various cinematic influences on both films; *Tenenbaums* incorporates various styles from “genius” directors, associated with avant-garde cinema, like Orson Welles, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Luis Bunuel, Louis Malle, and Jean-Pierre Melville (Turner, 2012, pp.170-171). *Fantastic* is influenced explicitly by films like *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), *West Side Story* (1961), including poignant scenes from Sydney Pollack’s *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) and Michael Mann’s *The Last of The Mohicans* (1992)⁸⁵ (Seitz, 2013; Perez, 2014). Anderson’s influences in his films are well documented, but his unique approach to character relations and stilted conversation creates a specific aesthetic style that immediately identifies his work and is explicit in both of these films. The characters share an inability to relate to social norms or to express their feelings. It is what binds these families together despite their ‘vituperative jealousy, deceit and secrecy, conniving intelligence, distrust, bitter resentment and suppressed rage’ (Pomerance, 2008b, p.301) for one another. Their cynical attitudes towards each other ironically keep them together, unable to function in ‘normal’ society. Unable to find meaning in their relationships they struggle to understand the purpose of their existence which, as suggested with the TotA, functions to keep them reliant on each other as a support network, despite their melancholy and feelings of entrapment.

⁸⁵ The scene from *Fantastic*, when Foxy and Felicity share an exceptionally heartfelt conversation, pays homage to the famous waterfall scene from Mann’s 1992 classic between Hawkeye and Cora. In the evocative scene, a disappointed Felicity tells Foxy, “I love you, but I should never have married you”, with the backdrop of a sewer tunnel cascade. The evocative scene of Foxy and the wild wolf’s encounter is inspired by the last scene from *Jeremiah Johnson*.

Where the laughter stops: the family of misfits

Tenenbaums and *Fantastic* are films satiated with individual quirks and oddities. The use of comedy to highlight issues of familial dysfunction in the films often takes a sinister tone, a point where the laughter essentially stops. The individual characters presented in both films are caricatures, created to be whimsical, offbeat and dysfunctional. The Tenenbaum children and Ash (*Fantastic*) are “different”, and this becomes a cause for both celebration and scrutiny. In the *Tenenbaums*, Margot has a distinct look: short, blunt hair, with a clip holding her hair up on the left side of her head. Her outfit, like most of Anderson’s characters, represents a uniform that defines her: she always has black mascara on, a half wood finger, striped Lacoste dress and a light brown fur coat. Her outfit, much like her emotional development, signals the lack of growth she undergoes in the film.

Likewise, Richie is seen wearing a ‘Bjorn Borg-like tennis outfit’ (Turner, 2012, p.161), accompanied by a matching headband over his long hair, and a brown suit, black sweat-bands on both wrists and tinted spectacles. Chas is the only one whose outfit gradually changes: from his suited days as a teenager to wearing a red jumpsuit and eventually a black jumpsuit in his adult years, that signals his mourning. The objects and outfits are given emphasis, with the narrator introducing the young Tenenbaums and their various paraphernalia. Anderson goes a step further using a formal technique including a sequence titled ‘Cast of Characters’; each prominent adult character and the actor’s names are stated, accompanied by a planimetric shot of the expressionless actor directly staring at the screen. Each character is depicted in the

surroundings that define them and are familiar to them, helping to signify their entrapment.

The costumes in Anderson's oeuvre represent who the characters are and aspire to be. When Foxy was a thief he wore a corduroy suit, this was replaced with a regular suit and tie when he became a law-abiding citizen. However, when he reverts to his old thieving ways, he wears his corduroy suit: the corduroy suit is representative of his inner self, who wants to steal and lead a life of adventure. Ash wears a makeshift cape and his pants tucked into his socks, as he spits; portraying his different personality and desire to be special. Felicity wears a yellow dress with apples on them, a brooch of a fox just below her left shoulder and is always seen with her paintbrushes, signifying her role as an artist and creator. Kristofferson yellow shoes and shorts represent his physical prowess, further emphasised through his knowledge of yoga and karate.

The Tenenbaum family is made up of overachieving individuals struggling to find emotional stability in their lives. Chas from a young age has a flair for business and grows up to become a frightened and claustrophobic parent to his sons, Uzi (Jonah Meyerson) and Ari (Grant Rosenmeyer), after his wife's death. The adopted sibling, Margot is exceptionally secretive, melancholic and is a playwright; awarded a Braverman Grant of \$50,000 when she was in the ninth grade. Prone to mysteriously disappearing, Margot is in a detached and dispassionate marriage with Raleigh (Bill Murray): a writer and neurologist. Richie once a successful tennis player, quit competitive tennis after suffering a very public nervous breakdown during one of his games, due to the marriage of Margot and Raleigh. Being despondently in love with

Margot drives him to depression, and he attempts to escape from his life and goes on a cruise around the world alone.

The children are not the only ones who are dysfunctional; Royal once a successful litigator, is a narcissist and finds himself without a home, family or money. He returns to his family after 22 years of being separated from his wife due to reasons seemingly pointing to an illicit affair. Eleanor is, by all definitions, an accomplished mother and professional: she raises the children on her own, is an archaeologist, writes a book about her genius children titled *The Family of Geniuses*, and teaches a bridge class twice a week with her friend and business manager, Henry Sherman (Danny Glover). Royal's lack of involvement with his family is overcompensated by Eleanor's involvement in their lives, a characteristic that results in their inability to function emotionally without her as adults. Her parenting is not perfect, given her overindulgence and lack of authority with her children and her inability to identify their emotional dysfunction and cries for help. The Tenenbaums represent absurdity through their individual characteristics and in their inability to efficiently communicate with each other.

Similarly, the Foxes reside in their dysfunctional worlds. Pressurised to give up his life as a chicken thief by Felicity, when she is pregnant with their son Ash, Foxy never manages to find purpose in his life. The allure of his youth and dangerous life haunt him, and he returns to it, accompanied by an uncanny accomplice Kylie, the opossum (Wallace Wolodarsky). Felicity, the painter, assumes her role as the homemaker, raising their "different" son, she agrees to most of Foxy's whims and is the only rational and calm character in the film. Ash is desperate to prove himself in the eyes of his

father and be like him. A quality never noticed by Foxy, who does not give his son the attention and encouragement he needs. Instead, Foxy begins to pay attention and praise to Ash's cousin, Kristofferson. Foxy is so self-involved dwelling on his desire to act 'heroically' again, that he fails to understand the impact it is having on his son.

Styan writes that absurdist plays fall within the symbolist tradition, having no coherent plot or characterisation, in the conventional tradition, with their characters lacking the motivation found in realistic drama, emphasising their purposeless existence (2004, p.126). Absurdist plays referred to individuals trapped in hostile worlds, enacting their nightmares of isolation and the Absurd condition they could not escape. Their entrapment causes conflicts that are unresolved and damaging to the individuals and communities they belong to; the family often functions as the site of this crisis. Anderson has portrayed this Absurd space in the lives of the Tenenbaums and the Foxes. Their attempts to find purpose and meaning in their familial structures causes and sustains their dysfunctional behaviour. Perkins suggests that Anderson as a director consistently addresses the dynamics between blood relations and their substitutes; the family is employed as a social institution and the very basis for conflict in the narrative (2012, p.76). Scuffling families, both real and symbolic, are the norm in Anderson's cinematic worlds, revealing characters who struggle to accept their situations.

The Tenenbaum family are dysfunctional, an odd family, conforming to Pomerance's (2008b) category of the implicit family. The families comprise of individuals who are narcissistic, unable to function or even comprehend themselves as a unit and who look nothing like each other. Their dysfunction and lack of emotional growth is the only

thing that binds them together as a family. The first time Royal is in the same space as his three children is in the opening sequence of the film:

MARGOT: Are you getting divorced?

ROYAL: At the moment, no, but it doesn't look too good.

RICHIE: Do you still love us?

ROYAL: Of course, I do.

CHAS: Do you still love mom?

ROYAL: Yes, very much, but your mothers asked me to leave and I must respect her position on the matter.

MARGOT: Is it our fault?

ROYAL: No. No. Obviously, we made certain sacrifices as a result of having children, but, uh no, lord no.

Royal's apathetic and hasty behaviour immediately signals the advent of a dysfunctional universe. He is an unconventional father figure, who catapults his family into dysfunction, and is ultimately the driving force that unifies them. His blank style of delivery, accompanied by the stock 'awkward dining' shot (Sconce, 2012), portrays a neurotic family unable to escape their dysfunction.

Foxy and Royal are supremely flawed as individuals and more as father figures. Foxy is more articulate about his identity crisis, which stems from an inherent disregard for family values and a rebellion against the system that presents definitive social roles. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard claim that family values have long been a cherished myth in American culture passed through 'educational, legal, and political systems and, more recently, bastions of popular culture' (2003, p.445). Foxy is unable to accept his responsibility in adhering to these family values, and revolts by reclaiming his

individuality through his identity as a thief. Even in this animated world human values of family and power are predominant. When Foxy fails to uphold these values, he endangers his family and community and finds his world taking an irrational and dangerous turn.

Language in *Fantastic* fails to function as a conducive medium through which a meaningful conversation can be established: communication is mainly used by characters to declare what they feel. Foxy addresses his misgivings about his life, to Kylie, on top of his tree-house. Unable to convey what he feels to Kylie, the camera cuts between medium close-ups of Foxy and Kylie as the pair resort to a conversation perforated with crosstalk:

FOXY: Who am I, Kylie?

KYLIE: Who how? What now?

FOXY: Why a fox? Why not a horse, or a beetle or a bald eagle? I'm saying this more as, like, existentialism, you know. Who am I, and how can a fox ever be happy without a, you'll forgive the expression, a chicken in its teeth?

KYLIE: I don't know what you're talking about, but it sounds illegal.

FOXY: Here, put this bandit hat on. Maybe you're a medium. Take it off for a minute, and don't wear it around the house. And so it begins.

Foxy is declaring his truth, his Absurd existence and in his declaration of his existential crisis and concerns over his unsatisfactory life he turns to an unaware Kylie, who does not want to comprehend his crisis, existing in his little bubble of innocence and loyalty. Foxy understands the life he wants is not the life he is leading and decides, for his own sake, he needs to change it.

Foxy, is cut off from his metaphysical roots and unable to function as a real fox. Unable to do what comes naturally to him, hunting chicken, he feels lost and out of sync with his true sense of self. He addresses a crucial theme of the Absurd hero, an inability to find a purpose or meaning in an Absurd world, in this case where foxes cannot hunt birds and have to be upstanding moral citizens. When Foxy reverts to his old ways and puts his family in danger, Felicity questions his motive for lying to her;

FOX: Because I'm a wild animal.

FELICITY: You are also a husband, and a father!

FOXY: I'm trying to tell you the truth about myself.

FELICITY: I don't care about the truth about yourself. This story is too predictable.

FOXY: Predictable really? What happens in the end?

FELICITY: In the end, we all die. Unless you change.

Both Felicity and Foxy are framed in medium close-up shots, looking at one another. Their postures are straight, and dialogue delivery is flat. Foxy addresses his narcissism as an inability to ignore his true nature as a wild animal; he refuses to conform and revert to his old situation. However, he faces the pressure to conform for the greater good of his family. His individuality is a threat to his family, one built on security and nurturing; his opposition to his family is the ultimate test he must endure in confronting his Absurd situation.

Gus Bofa and Richard George Elliot address the absurdity that presents itself in the form of animation writing that in the process of lending the caricatured and fantastic the dynamism of movement, in cinema, has led to the expansion of our senses and enabled the Absurd to become acceptable. It inculcates a comic value which derives

from its absurdity due to the opposition between our reason and the visual aesthetics of what is presented to us, in animation (2016, p.65). In *Fantastic*, the animal kingdom is humanised and postulated to conform to the norms and civility of the human world; Ironically, I would argue that it is Anderson's most humane film, with its philosophical consideration of the human condition.

In *Tenenbaums* and *Fantastic* the past becomes an ideal that the characters look to, this nostalgia is contrasted to their present feelings of disenchantment and the responsibility that comes with being adults. Aesthetically Anderson creates feelings of nostalgia with his colour palette, the use of stop-motion animation, and the various objects presented in the film indicative of childhood memories. Both films are steeped in this nostalgia for a simpler time, one that the characters attach themselves to and cannot seem to escape. Foxy is unable to settle into his life as a respectable citizen, and the Tenenbaum children find their lives falling apart when they are separated from the remnants of their childhood, a time when they were said to be geniuses.

Thomas Nagel, referring to the Absurd situation writes, a person on finding themselves in an Absurd situation will usually attempt to change it, by altering their aspirations and desires. Another way they can approach the matter is by removing themselves from the situation completely. Remarkably, the individual is not always prepared or able to remove themselves from a situation where absurdity becomes clear to them (1971, p.718). This is the case in *Fantastic* when Foxy finds himself facing an identity crisis, he begins to steal from the farmers in his area and subsequently unleashes their wrath on his family. Unable to accept his reality or change his aspirations, Foxy indulges in his primal urges putting his family in danger. He is aware

that his actions will have consequences, but he cannot resist, and this emphasises the absurdity of the situation.

In the scene that pays homage to *The Last of the Mohicans*, a defeated Foxy confesses his mistakes and feelings to Felicity:

FELICITY: Oh, why did you have to get us into this, Foxy?

FOXY: I don't know, but I have a possible theory. I think I have this thing where I need everybody to think I'm the greatest, the "fantastic" Mr. Fox. And if they aren't completely knocked out, dazzled and kind of intimidated by me, then I don't feel good about myself. Foxes traditionally like to court danger, hunt prey and outsmart predators. And that's what I'm actually good at. I think at the end of the day, I'm just...

FELICITY: I know. We're wild animals.

Foxy acknowledges his need to be "fantastic", despite endangering his entire family. Felicity declares, "I love you too. But I shouldn't have married you", recognising the deeper absurdity in his inability to think beyond himself and understand his role as a father and husband. This becomes the moment of truth when, as a family, they finally communicate with each other and aspire to change the absurdity of the situation they find themselves in.

The extreme wide shot of Foxy standing alone, with the backdrop of the sewer waterfall is both a beautiful image and a poignantly lonely one. Felicity enters the frame, where Foxy apologises for his mistakes, listing them to her like a child caught doing something wrong. The extreme close-up reverse shots between them draw attention to the surprising honesty of their conversation. Foxy is finally seen making

sense of his absurdity; he realises his identity as a “wild animal” does not allow him to change who he is. Foxy is expressing, as Bennett writes, the senselessness of his condition and the inadequacy of rationality by the abandoning discursive thought (2011, p.5). In the face of death, Foxy begins to understand his Absurd condition and the decisions he has made so far regarding it, which have endangered everyone around it.

The Tenenbaum family face a similar Absurd situation, with the children struggling to cope with their adult lives. Etheline meets Margot, to find out she is depressed and spends hours shut in the bathroom, with a television strapped to the radiator near the bathtub. The exchange between mother and daughter is concise and to the point, perhaps the most tender and parental moment in the film. Margot’s reaction to Etheline is very childlike, and she is depicted as a vulnerable and emotionally stunted individual. On being informed by Etheline that her brother Chas and his two sons have moved back into the house, Margot packs up her luggage and moves back to the Tenenbaum house. The camera cuts to a long shot of Margot leaving her marital house with Raleigh following her, bewildered over her decision and unable to understand his wife’s irrational behaviour.

Scalan’s (1998) notion of the family of security is relevant here. The Tenenbaum children as adults move away to live their separate lives, despite their melancholy seeming to stem from their childhood experiences, it is clear that they are unable to function and exist without the structure provided by Etheline in their safe and familiar Tenenbaum house. Both Margot and Chas start their own families; when Chas’ wife dies in an accident, he is unable to cope with her loss and becomes paranoid in keeping

his sons safe. Margot's marriage is unsuccessful leading her to have multiple affairs, while they attempt to leave the Tenenbaum house and start their own families, their departure is merely an illusion. The outside world is isolating and causes them to hide their emotions, neither changing or running away from it but letting it fester around them.

Margot and Raleigh are unable to effectively communicate with one another, their marriage, as a result, is showed to be distant and cold. The nature of love itself in the film is obscure, Raleigh baffled over Margot decision to move back home, questions whether she loves him. Margot's reply, "I do, kind of. I can't explain it right now" starkly reveals the condition of their marriage. Later in the film when step-siblings, Richie and Margot, profess their love to each other, Margot informs him, "I think we're just going to have to be secretly in love with each other and leave it at that, Richie." Their desires cannot be fully realised in a world that may morally judge them, and yet they aspire to love each other. This contradiction between what they desire and what society demands of them relates to the Absurd condition; this tension surrounding individual will and social conformity is a similar issue discussed in the previous chapter.

With all the dysfunctional familial scenarios, especially the absent and apathetic fatherhood of Royal, Chas' sons find companionship and pleasure in the company of their grandfather, who manages to sneak them out and make them do fun, frivolous and moderately dangerous activities which he used to do with Richie when he was younger. Chas' and Margot never received fatherly affection or love from Royal, and eventually in the film, Royal loses the support he had from his favourite son Richie as

well. Margot especially was regarded as an outsider by Royal, who identified her as the adopted daughter. The scenes including father and daughter are exceptionally awkward, with conversation kept to a bare minimum and delivered expressionlessly. The acceptance of their broken relationship creates an indifferent attitude in Margot and Royal, both of whom cannot understand or accept the another.

Sibling rivalry is a crucial aspect explored in both films; in *Tenenbaums*, Chas is envious of the attention Royal showers on Richie while this causes Margot to lead a secret life, accepting the invisibility with which her father treats her. In *Fantastic* Ash is envious of his father praise of Kristofferson. Their identities are in turn trapped within the expectations they levy on themselves to gain their father's affection. Emotional growth is stagnant, and the focus then turns to gaining the father's attention or avoiding it. Ash is unable to embrace his "different" identity, wanting to assume an identity as an athlete like his father; while it is an identity that Kristofferson effortlessly embodies, causing Ash's hostile behaviour towards him. The two connect over a failed rescue mission for Foxy's tail and a second mission to rescue Kristofferson from the humans. In the absurdity of fighting and running for their lives, both the little foxes form a connection, choosing to establish a relationship together rather than be isolated from each other.

There are darker moments in both films, indicative of the films' combination of tragedy and comedy. In *Fantastic*, these themes meet, when the Fox family and shown being ruthlessly hunted by the farmers, as one of them wears Foxy's tail as a tie. A particularly troubling scene in *Tenenbaums* occurs when on hearing about Margot's

secret affairs, Richie attempts suicide. Lying on a hospital bed, recovering from his attempt, Richie is vigorously questioned by his sibling, Chas:

CHAS: Why'd you try and kill yourself?

ETHELIN: Don't press him right now.

RICHIE: I wrote a suicide note.

CHAS: You did?

RICHIE: Yeah. Right after I regained consciousness.

CHAS: Can we read it?

RICHIE: No.

CHAS: Can you paraphrase it for us?

RICHIE: I don't think so.

CHAS: Is it dark?

RICHIE: Of course, it's dark. It's a suicide note.

The frame shows a bedridden Richie, surrounded by Etheline, Raleigh, Chas and his sons, with Margot standing beside the doorway. It is a scene that should be dark and uncomfortable, but instead, the dark and gory subject of suicide is handled in a detached, humorous manner, with Chas' apathetic approach to the matter and Richie's humorous reference to a suicide note, written after he attempted suicide. While the motivation behind Richie's suicide is not known to his family, their reaction to it emphasises the repressed and complicated relationship they share with one another. Etheline reaction is maternal and protective, Margot's silence portraying her grief over the incident and Chas' blunt question demonstrating his inability to empathise with Richie's condition.

The scene that follows of Raleigh confronting Margot is a powerful one. The two-person planimetric shot, shows Margot and Raleigh filling up the shot. Both are placed beside each other, looking blank-faced and straight ahead. Raleigh outs Margot to Etheline, announcing her affair with Eli and her secret smoking habit. As the camera focuses on their faces, Etheline's reactions to the news can be heard. Margot's deadpan reactions to his accusation are both disturbing and harrowing, she denies none of them, accepting the repercussions of her life laid bare for her mother to see. Etheline's only reaction is to her smoking, which she tells Margot she should quit. Everything else is overlooked. The farce of her secrecy and dysfunction is ironically ignored, its significance dimmed over Richie's suicide attempt.

The Tenenbaum family is unable to offer security or independence to its members, yet it is still a construct to which they all return, each trapped in her/his dysfunctional and emotional states. Surprisingly, Royal is the only character in the film, who begins to break away from the group and evolves as a character. He awkwardly attempts a relationship with Margot, even helping Richie with some advice regarding his love for his sister and finally grants Etheline a divorce. At the end of the film, he becomes a hero saving his grandsons from being hit by Eli's car and then finding them a new Dalmatian because their dog is killed in the accident. Chas and Royal's relationship is a particularly hostile one. However, he finally forgives Royal and confides in him:

CHAS: I've had a rough year, Dad.

ROYAL: I know you have, Chassie.

Royal's redemption signifies the redemption of the entire family, with them all seemingly moving forward, returning to the Tenenbaum house and coming together symbolically as a family. Royal's failure as a father, protector and provider is forgiven

at the end with his conveniently quick succession of good deeds seemingly redeeming him in the eyes of his family. Subsequently, there are small changes to the characters with Chas becoming a less paranoid father, Richie surviving his attempted suicide and Etheline remarrying. Kunze argues that the film ‘captures the profound effect of childhood and its culture on the “development” of the characters’ (2014b, p.97). The Tenenbaum children never recover from the impact of their childhood, and this stunts their emotional growth and their physical appearance. They dress and surround themselves with remnants of their childhood. It is this idea that leads the audience to question the ‘positive’ reading of the ending, with the Tenenbaum children particularly turning back to the family in search of the ‘security’ promised by the family that they failed to experience independently.

The end of *Fantastic* finds the Fox family and all the animals living in the sewer system, adapting to their lives in a new environment, while the humans still obsessively wait to capture and kill them above the ground. Like Royal, the patriarch Foxy redeems himself in the eyes of his family and community when he outwits the farmers, successfully saves his nephew and at the end finds a tunnel (path) to the supermarket: providing the trapped and displaced community with a massive human food source. Foxy’s redemption, marks the resilience of his family and community as they manage to escape the brutality of the farmers. Confronted with the absurdity and uncertainty of their displacement, the Fox family adapts by recreating the family space and finding security with the animal community in their new sewer home.

Drawing on Max Fischer’s quote from *Rushmore*, “I’ve been out to sea for a long time”, Rachel Joseph writes, that each of Anderson’s films ‘represents a collection of

characters who have been metaphorically out to sea, lost in their lives, losses, and traumas' (2014, p.62). The characters in *Tenenbaum* and *Fantastic* find themselves floundering for self-validation and sense of self-identity to connect with, especially Royal, Foxy, and their children. The characters draw on each another's dysfunction impacting upon the relationship they form with each other. Their narcissistic personalities limit their ability to develop meaningful relationships with each other, trapping them in the family structures that only serve to make them feel worse, amplify their sense of isolation.

Conclusion.

Steve Rose of *The Guardian*, in an article about *Fantastic*, writes, 'People watch Wes Anderson's movies precisely because they're not about the real world' (2009, n.p.). His sentiment echoes Wilkins' (2014) argument about Anderson's use of pure cinematic characterisation to remind his audience of the constructed worlds he builds. It disengages the audience and yet invites them to understand his view of humanity, to view the absurdities of his characters and the choices they make, which seem unrealistic and yet profoundly resonate with the circumstances we all face.

These are also worlds where families stand in isolation from the outside world. It is a characteristic very apparent in *Tenenbaums*, with the Tenenbaums struggling to function rationally with the outside world cling to each other like life rafts. Absurdist texts explore plots that focused on entrapment. In the *Tenenbaums*, the children are encouraged from an early age to behave like adults, and so they do not emotionally grow beyond their childhood: dressing and behaving the same way they did when they

were younger. The family is also unable to leave the family home and function outside it. For the Fox family, their familial space is obliterated by the farmers. While Foxy looks to recreate that familial space with the help of the entire animal community, like the Tenenbaum family, the Foxes are confined to their home, trapped underground, unable to leave in fear of death.

In this chapter, I have discussed the role that the family plays in absurdist texts and Anderson's two films: *Tenenbaums* and *Fantastic*. I have used Scanlan⁸⁶ (1998) and Pomerance's (2008b) discussion of the different categories of the family to discuss how the family can be analysed in both films, mainly commenting on the Absurd tropes they follow. I have focused on the use of family relationships in both films, analysing the use of communication to chiefly consider the themes of entrapment and 'security' faced by the characters. The dysfunctional families of Anderson are well documented by various scholars (Coontz, 1992; Sconce, 2006; Mayshark, 2007; Pomerance, 2008; Turner, 2012; Wilkins, 2014; Gooch, 2014; MacDowell, 2014) and while I have engaged with their literature, their analysis is limited in its approach to themes of communication and entrapment faced by characters in his films. This chapter aims to address the gap and offer a more nuanced, absurdist approach to understanding the construct of the family in Anderson's films.

The films, like the narratives of the Absurd, do not offer a sense of closure and purpose, the characters are trapped in their relationships with each other and their respective spaces. The characters cling on to what frightens them and what is familiar.

⁸⁶ Drawing on his work cited in Osterwalder's (1999) article 'Madness in the Family in Realistic and Absurd Guise: Miller's *The Last Yankee* and Pinter's *Moonlight*'.

They are cohesive family units, but they are isolated from the outside world. Characters struggle to establish an independent identity, separate to their familial identity, with their narratives being confined to cyclical patterns, they are unable to resolve their issues or move forward. Despite both films ending in an optimistic tone, it does not provide characters with the opportunity to escape their limited worlds: an escape that these characters would probably not even choose. The characters in the film function like the characters in the plays of the Absurd, functioning in dysfunctional worlds they cannot escape.

The question of whether Anderson's characters have changed at all is one we are left guessing; Royal's death brings the family together, but has it changed them or their desire to address their Absurd conditions together? As Esslin (2001) states the playwrights never attempt to define or solve the Absurd condition, they merely portrayed it for their audience. Similarly, Anderson has never claimed to define or resolve the dysfunction of his characters; he merely presents it to his audience to make what sense of it they can.

Chapter 5

“How Can the Train Be Lost? It’s on Rails.”: Discussing Pilgrimage and Waiting in *The Darjeeling Limited*.

RITA: What’s wrong with you?

JACK: Let me think about that. I’ll tell you the next time I see you.

The previous chapters explore themes of entrapment, dysfunctional romances and families in Anderson’s works, analysing sites where the Absurd condition is negotiated, thus, impacting the individual and familial identities of its characters. This chapter develops on those themes by discussing the role of brotherhood and loss in Anderson’s 2007 feature *The Darjeeling Limited*, and exploring the incorporation of absurdist traits by recreating the idea of a pilgrimage: challenging the absurdist concepts of waiting, circularity and acceptance. Kim Wilkins writes that the Whitman brothers undertake an existentialist journey to regain something lost, both on an individual and collective level (2014, p.26). In the course of their journey, they find themselves waiting: waiting to meet their mother, waiting for sincerity and finally, waiting to accept their loss.

The above dialogue between Jack (Jason Schwartzman) and Rita (Amara Khan), occurs when the Whitman brothers are thrown off the train for their belligerent behaviour. Like Anderson’s other characters Jack is lost, dysfunctional and incapable of communicating his feelings and fears. Amara’s face shows that she has been crying, but her tone like Jack’s is delivered in a flat and expressionless manner. Here are two individuals, attracted to each other and being separated and yet their parting words to

each are rendered emotionless while speaking a profound truth about each other. Jack is lost and cannot be found, while Rita knows exactly where and what she is. They both embody opposite ends of the spectrum in their Absurd worlds. Rita is unable to leave the train that entraps her, and so she proficiently leads her life on it; Jack, however, is unable to escape the melancholy and despair that entraps him and goes about his life clueless, aimlessly on a pilgrimage seeking his mother.

The discussion of the recurring motif of dysfunctional individuals continues in this chapter, specifically around the notion of a pilgrimage: both spiritual and emotional. The film's narrative takes on a circular nature, deliberating over the form of a pilgrimage occurring somewhere and everywhere in India. Anderson's characters are often bound to domestic spaces, and for a significant portion of the film, the train represents a temporary domestic space for the brothers. This space restricts them and in a typically absurdist manner traps the brothers, brings them together and drives them, emotionally, further apart. In the film, the process of the pilgrimage creates an absurdist view of the crisis the brothers are facing. The narrative centres around the train, symbolising a domestic space for the brothers, analogous to the confined familial spaces of the Tenenbaum household, the Bishop household and the quasi-familial space of the *Belafonte* and the Grand Budapest Hotel.

To discuss the role of absurdist themes of waiting and ritual I use Beckett's *Godot* (2006) and Ionesco's *Amédée* (1965), to establish how waiting and ritual is depicted in the TotA. Plays like *Godot* reflect on the intrinsic and repetitive nature of ritual and waiting in the TotA. Michael Y. Bennett described it as 'a play where nothing happens' (2011, p.27), a sentiment echoed by one of the protagonists Estragon when

he declares, ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!’ (Beckett, 2006, p.34). The two protagonists, Estragon and Vladimir, are trapped in a narrative where they wait endlessly for Godot, who is consistently absent. Similarly, Amédée and his wife, Madeleine, find themselves waiting for a life free from the corpse that lives in their apartment. Their identity and personality begin to disappear and eventually, so does their purpose for waiting (West, 1966, p.43).

The wait is an integral aspect of these narratives, and both plays address the process in different ways; this does not imply the plays lack movement, it is the situation of the play that remains static. For instance, in *Amédée*, the movement is relentless, with the growing corpse and the havoc it is causing the couple (Esslin, 1965, p.11). Whereas, the tramps in *Godot* explore their static situation where ‘literally *nothing* happens’, signifying that in their version of the world, nothing can ever happen (ibid.) and so, they wait. *Amédée* moves a step away from representations of ‘pure arbitrariness and meaningless towards something less sterile’ (Greshoff, 1961, p.39). Although the couple communicates problematically with one another, they attempt to communicate authentically, in their Absurd world of expanding corpses and inconclusive memories.

How then does *Darjeeling* associate itself with such absurdist plays? While this chapter does not suggest the film is exactly like plays of the TotA, it does focus on discussing how the film incorporates absurdist themes of loss and waiting to explore the pilgrimage undertaken by the Whitman brothers. There are dissimilarities between the film and absurdist texts, which will be addressed in this chapter as well. Inadvertently, an understanding of absurdist themes of waiting and ritual offers a

nuanced and complex reading of *Darjeeling*, establishing how Anderson's work provides a reflective understanding of what the human condition might be.

In this chapter, I argue that the process of the pilgrimage creates an absurdist view of the crisis the brothers face in *Darjeeling*. My analysis will start with a broad discussion of the thematic roles waiting and ritual play in the TotA, towards a close look at how Anderson incorporates these themes in his film. Through an analysis of the aesthetical makeup and language used in the film, I argue that these themes offer a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the Whitman brothers, mirrored in the pilgrimage they embark on to find their mother, to establish meaning and purpose in their lives.

Waiting and ritual in the Absurd and Anderson's world.

Absurdist plays are noted for their lack of a beginning or an end (Quackenbush, 1975; Scott, 2013), and for displaying 'a circularity of dialogue which corresponds to its repetitive nature' (Quackenbush, 1975, p.62). *Godot* features Vladimir and Estragon waiting in a desolate place with a solitary tree, inventing ways to pass their time as they wait for Godot and their waiting becomes a daily ritual with the hope of eventually meeting Godot. On being asked by Estragon what was to happen if Godot does not come, Vladimir's prompt reply is, 'We'll come back tomorrow' (Beckett, 2006, p.6). Their existence is centred around waiting for the unattainable Godot, forming a daily ritual wherein their wait for Godot is never fulfilled, only to be repeated the next day.

Scholars have linked the symbolic figure Godot to the idea of God, death, the meaning of life (Anders, 1965) and sexual potency (Segal, 2001, cited in Cornwell, 2006, p.229). Alain Robbe-Grillet suggests; ‘Godot is God... Godot is death... Godot is silence... Godot is that inaccessible self that Beckett pursues through all his work’ (1965, p.110); while Kenneth Tynan refers to Godot as a ‘spiritual signpost’ (1955, p.96)⁸⁷. The significance of Godot’s existence, however fascinating the theories of his identity are, lies in the wait to see him, and regardless of what he represents, the ritual of waiting for him consumes the fictional lives of Estragon and Vladimir.

While the figure of Godot symbolises everything and nothing, the corpse in *Amédée*, is a mysterious character/idea around which the couple have ritualised their lives. Linda D. Kyle discusses Ionesco’s use of the grotesque to produce a fantastical scenario of a growing corpse and depicting characters as ‘marionettes or automatons, whose actions are frenzied and mechanical’ (1976, p.281). The aim is to ‘expose the absurdity and artifice inherent in language and drama by exploding their structures’ (ibid.). The inclusion of a growing corpse, sprouting mushrooms goes beyond the ordinary and leads to a situation where Amédée flies away with the floating corpse; the sheer implausibility of their circumstances and their interaction with each other and the corpse signals a disintegrating Absurd world.

⁸⁷ Furthermore, Godot has been equated to Honoré Balzac’s ‘Godeau’, referred to Balzac’s Godeau from his play *Le Faiseur* or *Mercadet* (produced in 1851) who is ‘a character much talked about but never seen’ (Cornwell, 2006, pp.229). Alternatively, James Knowlson (1997) referring to the Gaelic *go deo* which means ‘forever’ suggests Godot could be the actual ‘Monsieur Georges Godot’ who in 1969 apologised to Beckett for keeping him waiting. This is noted in an article, by the *Independent*, titled ‘The Poet of Less’ that reads ‘Among the congratulatory letters he received was one from a Mr Georges Godot, in Paris, who wrote to apologise for having kept him waiting; not at all, Beckett replied, thanking him for being so prompt’ (Morrison, 2011, n.p.).

The corpse has been noted to symbolise guilt, with the couple's retreat from the outside world and the presence of American soldiers in the play attributed to the Cold War period, in which the play was created (ibid., p.282). Amédée and Madeleine shun the outside world, regarding the family as 'a haven in the midst of a terrifying world' (Edney, 1985, p.378). Their secret corpse kept away from discovery until it grows and liberates itself and them. Ionesco's theatre is one of caricature and grotesque, 'a theatre that exaggerates life and that becomes larger than life' (Dukore, 1961, p.175). Where else would you find a growing corpse that is absurdly normalised? Ionesco stated that the play 'tells an ordinary story that could have happened to any one of us and must have happened to a great many of us. It is a slice of life, a realistic play'⁸⁸ (1964, p.196). His words ring a certain truth, who has not experienced a disintegrating relationship or guilt.

Both plays conform to a ritualised process of waiting; *Godot* portrays the characters ritualistically waiting for Godot, and *Amédée* depicts the daily rituals of a couple hiding from the outside world and living in fear of being found out. The ritual plays a crucial role in the understanding of these plays, and in this chapter, the use of the terminology goes beyond its religious connotations. I use the term 'ritual', as Felicia Hughes-Freeland defines it. According to her, the pilgrimage refers to forms of human experience and perception that are complicated by the imagination; it makes reality more complex than the more mundane activities of human experience (1998, p.2). Ritual in these terms refers to an activity, a process, or as Barry Stephenson terms it, 'first and foremost, a doing, but it is also imagined' (2011, n.p.). It includes a series of

⁸⁸ Taken from an address delivered in French at the Institut Français in London, at a performance of *Amédée* by Jean-Marie Serreau's Company in December 1958.

acts that repeat in a set manner or an established form associated with a religious ceremony and is inherently a human experience. Indeed, the implication is to understand how absurdist plays narrate ritualistic forms of behaviour that inform the relationships of the characters.

Estragon, Vladimir, Amédée and Madeleine perform rituals of waiting, crosstalk and paranoia, and their relationships are both confined and defined by these processes. In the process of waiting, A. Banerjee writes, Beckett is interested in showing a 'human reaction to a common experience' (1991, p.522). The idea being investigated is what do humans do to occupy themselves when confronted with a situation, or in this case, when they wait. While these characters begin to despair about their situation and are filled with anguish, it also gets them to assert their identity. Whether it includes Estragon attempting to take a nap, to the dismay of a lonely Vladimir, or Amédée and Madeleine squabbling over the corpse in their apartment, viewing the world outside with fear and distrust (Edney, 1985, p.378), they begin to reveal their potential. The wait is crucial and not the purpose of that wait; the process tests their true potential. Their co-dependency on each other and fear of the unknown keeps them waiting, and the waiting becomes a ritualised process.

In *Godot*, the monotonous daily routine of arriving at the same tree, engaging in nonsensical communication to pass the time, result in the protagonists enacting a ritual of waiting for the unattainable Godot. Their exercise takes on the form of a pilgrimage to reach Godot; however, they are both incapable of recognising the repetitive nature of their experiences and conversations (Anders, 1965, p.146). With each day they recapitulate the happenings of the previous days, failing to understand the purpose of

their lives, as well as realise the cyclical nature of their existence. They wait because they accept the absurdity of their situation, without truly understanding it. Similarly, Amédée and Madeleine have not left their apartment in fifteen years and spend their days fretting over the growing corpse. Every day the corpse grows, sprouting mushrooms, and the couple fails to remember what happened and who the corpse is; additionally, Amédée also waits for Madeleine to reciprocate his love.

Plays like *Godot* emphasise on a spiritual understanding of the term ritual, with the play questioning spirituality and morality. The notion of repentance is discussed, despite the characters being unable to understand or articulate the cause or nature of their repentance, instead focusing on the only thing they are sure about, their existence. Their idea of ritual connects to repenting one's mistakes spiritually, with the reward being Godot. The characters in both plays fail to evolve or change, with the rituals they follow further trapping them in their situations. Estragon insightfully remarks to Vladimir, "They all change. Only we can't" (Beckett, 2006, p.41), commenting on their static existence and endless wait. They do not develop as characters and appear to be suffering from an internal crisis, struggling with their identities in a world devoid of meaning. Amédée and Madeleine are incapable of growth, but the corpse is continuously changing and eventually forces Amédée to change his situation.

Beckett's characters suffer from what Bennett Simon (1991) terms an unstable and fragmented self. Referring to the twentieth century as the century of "The Hollow Men", he writes that the "self" of this era is in terrible trouble. Furthermore, he states that 'the self is disintegrated, deconstructed, shadowed, fragmented, submerged, unstable, and scarcely able to tell a coherent story' (1991, p.1). Individuals living with

their fragmented selves exist in a reality where they are unable to confront themselves and share their experience with other individuals. The characters from the TotA are products of this century of “The Hollow Men”, and Anderson has steadily been exploring in his films, the existence of these fragmented and unstable selves in the 21st century.

Godot revolts against the existential stance of life and suggests meaning can be created out of nothingness by ‘using defiance and friendship’ (Bennett, 2011, p.35). Similarly, the Whitman brothers in *Darjeeling* create meaning from an emotional vacuum through pilgrimage and rediscovering their brotherhood. The Whitman brothers confronted with their fragmented selves, find some meaning in their instability through their pilgrimage. The idea is not to define and proclaim the structure and aesthetics of what a ritual is, but to look at how ritualistic patterns of behaviour are significant themes in understanding the nature of pilgrimage in Anderson’s *Darjeeling*.

Absurd works have portrayed characters inhabiting a purposeless and Absurd universe, where no action is meaningful (Banerjee, 1991, p.521). Just as Esslin (2001) based his understanding of the Absurd on the same principle of meaninglessness, scholars like Bennett argue that these texts are moral parables that force the audience to create meaning in them (2011, p.2). By only ever presenting their interpretations of an Absurd world, never claiming to define it (Esslin, 2001; Bennett, 2011), absurdist playwrights provide their audience with the opportunity to ascribe meaning to their texts.

Anderson's characters are always waiting for something, often finding themselves inhabiting relationships devoid of meaningful communication. The characters in *Darjeeling* face a world where spirituality equates to finding purpose. Similarly, Anderson's other films recreate worlds where characters attempt to attach some meaning and purpose to their relationships, finding themselves waiting in narratives where repetitive behaviour or situations become the norm. For instance, *Bottle* begins with Anthony voluntarily checking himself out of a psychiatric facility, and the film ends with Dignan's sacrifice, resulting in him serving time at a criminal facility; *Tenenbaums* begins with Royal leaving his family, and ends with him dying and leaving behind family. *Darjeeling* starts with a businessman running to catch a train and ends with the Whitman brothers running to catch a train as well.

The concept of waiting is explored in different ways by Anderson. In *Rushmore* (1998), it is explored through the precocious teenager, Max, and his dysfunctional relationships. The film starts with Max dreaming about a highly intelligent version of himself being celebrated by his classmates, a fantasy he waits to achieve. The Tenenbaum children are waiting to redeem themselves as geniuses, having lived a life of disappointment and fear as dysfunctional adults. Zissou, in *Life Aquatic*, is waiting to avenge the death of his friend and redeem himself. Foxy, in *Fantastic*, is waiting to come to terms with his mundane life and accept his circumstances. *Moonrise* depicts two idiosyncratic teenagers waiting to escape their dysfunctional communities and build a life, and *Budapest* depicts the concierge Gustave waiting for and seeking justice.

Through the process of waiting, Anderson portrays the dysfunctionality and fragility of his characters. His depiction of ridiculous events and of characters waiting, to find something or someone, serves as a backdrop to display brief moments of emotional lucidity that depict characters struggling with their lives. The irrationality of the process of waiting that Anderson's characters indulge in appears incorrigible, and yet these characters are in a static situation: unable to escape, emotionally or physically, or change their situation.

The circular nature of events adopted by some of Anderson's films, such as *Bottle*, *Darjeeling* and *Budapest*, stray from allowing definitive closure on the relationships and events they depict. *Rushmore* ends with a slow-motion scene of Max and Cross dancing, but their situation is left unresolved. *Darjeeling* especially refuses to offer any closure. The film's distortion of events, temporally through flashbacks is further complicated with visual references at the end to various characters from the film, and the brothers end their journey, just as they started, on a train in India.

The Darjeeling Limited

The Darjeeling Limited was released in 2007, accompanied by a 13-minute short prologue film titled *Hotel Chevalier*⁸⁹ (2007) which the feature references at numerous moments in the feature film. The former is written by Anderson, Roman Coppola and Jason Schwartzman and directed by Anderson and shot in anamorphic widescreen by Robert Yeoman. The latter is written and directed by Anderson, also shot by Yeoman. The 91-minute feature depicts the journey of three pill-popping, dysfunctional

⁸⁹ Referred to as *Chevalier*.

brothers: Francis (Owen Wilson,) Peter (Adrien Brody) and Jack Whitman (Jason Schwartzman). They embark on a spiritual journey in India, a year after the death of their father, on board the train *The Darjeeling Limited*, with the journey leading them to their estranged mother, Patricia (Anjelica Huston).

Darjeeling narrates a familiar story, yet different in its attempt to divagate from the usual America-centric Anderson story. It focuses instead on the brothers immersed in a foreign culture; similar, to *Life Aquatic* where Zissou and his crews live on a fictional island and sailing, somewhere in Italy. *Chevalier* similarly places Jack and his unnamed ex-girlfriend (Natalie Portman) in a Parisian setting. Filmed entirely in an extravagant suite at the Hotel Chevalier in Paris, after the funeral of Jack's father and just before his trip to India. The film continually emphasises its French appeal through Jack speaking in French while ordering room service and his Louis Vuitton luggage. Interestingly, even the drink that Portman's character orders is a Bloody Mary: a drink whose origin has been traced back to the 1920s in a New York styled Parisian bar (Mariani, 2014)⁹⁰.

Chevalier provides a backstory for Jack which is eluded continuously to in the feature film and is described by Nicole Richter as a 'self-contained text' that bears a relationship to the feature but functions independent of it (2014, p.15). The short creates its dysfunctional world, exploring the strange relationship between Jack and his ex-girlfriend, and contains stock Anderson shots, like planimetric shots, awkward couple shots and God's-eye view shot focusing on significant objects belonging to the

⁹⁰ The cocktail is said to have been created at The New York bar (later renamed Harry's New York bar) in Paris owned by Harry MacElhone, by his bartender Ferdinand "Pete" Petiot, in Paris.

protagonist. It offers a scaled-down look at the themes that are addressed in greater detail in the feature (Seitz, 2013, p.233). The short also introduces Jack's attachment to his father's luggage (further established in *Darjeeling*). There is an emphasis on other objects, such as the yellow bathrobe with the hotel's insignia on it, a brown package his ex-girlfriend places in his suitcase (which is discovered to be a Voltaire #6 perfume bottle in *Darjeeling*) and the music box, all of which are present in the feature.

The interlinking between the two films consistently establishes familiarity and intimacy between the two films. The short begins with the viewer put in the middle of a story, the beginning is not essential, and neither is the end. The audience is abruptly introduced to one of the Whitman brothers and, unknowingly to the start of his pilgrimage. Jack's extravagant life in the short, with its constant references to the bourgeoisie intellectual Parisian life. It serves as a precursor to his spiritual journey in India; he goes from living a decadent life to travelling barefoot all over India searching for spirituality and ultimately abandoning his material possessions. His brothers also attempt to be at one with their spiritual surroundings, forsaking the old materialistic, affluent and dysfunctional lives they live.

Anderson lists Louis Malle's documentaries about India, Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya* (1961) and the Apu trilogy (1955-59)⁹¹, Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951) and John Cassavetes' *Husbands* (1970) as influences for *Darjeeling* (Brody, 2010; Seitz, 2013; Wilkins, 2014). The film embraces a nostalgic and sardonic view of experiencing India as tourists, onboard a train drenched in the nostalgia of a post-colonial past. The train

⁹¹ *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (1959).

is reminiscent of the train in the Apu trilogy, one of the most famous portrayals of the train in Indian cinema. Ray's films depicted the changing social landscape of India, and the railway represented the shift the country was undergoing from the rural to the urban: India's change towards modernity (Aguiar, 2011, p.107). Interestingly, the train's name in *Darjeeling* does not indicate the place it takes its name from, or reference the place it is named after, adding a sense of placelessness in the film. The train becomes a domestic space, eventually becoming a site of discord and a vehicle for the brother's pilgrimage. Anderson's image of the train in the film represents the Whitman brothers' cultural shift from Western modernity towards a more oriental and spiritual culture.

Just as the *Belafonte* in *Life Aquatic* and the Tenenbaum house in *Royal Tenenbaums* function as a familial space, the train in *Darjeeling* functions as a mobile home for the Whitman brothers. The head steward (Waris Ahluwalia) portrays a temporary authoritarian parental figure who attempts to curb the demands and behaviour of the entitled brothers. Categorized as a road movie (Duarte, 2007; Stephenson, 2011; Wilkins, 2014), *Darjeeling* explores the significance of mobility in the construction of the characters' identities. It is through their travels within the Indian subcontinent that the brothers 'flow between loss and discovery and slowly renew not only their trust in each other as family, but also as individuals' (Duarte, 2007, p.79). In their pilgrimage, they begin to assert their identities and gradually begin to reconnect: this is symbolically portrayed through Peter's wounds, as they slowly begin to heal, so does his relationships with his brothers. Their time on the train and their involuntary departure from it allow the brothers to challenge and accept each other while re-discovering themselves.

Susan Hayward defines road movies as ‘movies in which protagonists are on the move... The road movie is about a frontiersmanship of sorts given that one of its codes is discovery – usually self-discovery’ (2001, p.313). The brothers start their journey laden with material possessions, many of which belonged to their deceased father, and numerous kinds of medications. Although their backstories lack development, their problematic personal lives are explored through their dependence on medication, their dysfunctional behaviour and their inability to address their problems. They are all running away from their lives, unable to move forward after their father’s death and their mother’s abandonment, and unable to understand each other.

The road story includes a process of transformation that occurs outside familiar territory. José Duarte writes that in travelling to experience a foreign culture the brothers confront their self, as they are exposed to new perspectives they begin embracing the difference around them, including the Other, symbolising Indian culture, and the difference in themselves (2007, p.79). Ironically, their self-discovery on their journey does little for their engagement with Indian culture. They represent parodies of American tourists in India, in awe of the country and yet entirely untouched by it.

Francis plans their entire spiritual journey in India, to fix their estranged relationship, setting the following:

A) I want us to become brothers again, like we used to be and for us to find ourselves and bond with each other... B) I want us to make this trip a spiritual journey where each of us seek the unknown and we learn about it... C) I want

us to be completely open and say yes to everything, even if it's shocking and painful.

The demands are made with a blank-faced Francis addressing his younger brothers while facing the camera and the audience, moving backwards, as he continually asks his brothers if they agree to his demands of how their spiritual journey should progress. Ironically, this shot of him moving forward backwards, without seeing what is in front him, predicts their pilgrimage. They move forward to attain spiritual enlightenment and yet do not genuinely understand the religious culture they are experiencing. As a result, he sets into motion their pilgrimage. Wilkins notes that through this gesture, Anderson ironically acknowledges the audience's expectation from the road film genre. This is internalised with Francis continually functioning as a 'self-referential character performing these expectations while remaining genuinely invested in the pursuit of their emotional fulfilment within the film's diegesis' (2014, p.30). His attempt to fulfil his own and his brother's emotional needs, without consulting them, all the while thrusting his desire of the outcome of the trip on them, makes for a cynical approach to family reunions.

MacDowell writes that the neatness of the medium planimetric shots and the straight dialogue delivery presents a ridiculous image of the characters (2011, p.9). Francis, especially, with the bandages around his head and bruised face strikes a melancholic and comical image. The deadpan nature of dialogue delivery between the brothers refers as much to the 'incapacity of expression as they are the result of ignorance regarding an appropriate response', thus portraying a blocking of emotions rather than a lack of it (Peberdy, 2012, p.59). The Whitman brothers are entrapped in their process of grief, unable to move forward or express their emotions, and are, ironically, on a

train which is moving forward towards their spiritual goal. Their interactions with each other begin to get sincerer and more hostile as their pilgrimage moves forward.

Francis controls their trip, portraying a somewhat Absurd anti-hero at odds in a world he cannot reason with: a factor that drives his unsuccessful suicide attempt. Browning writes that his excessive organising of the intricacies of his brother's lives on the trip suggests an emptiness in him, as he pressurises the others into submission by the weight of his planning, a factor the other two cannot be bothered to resist (2011, p.80). His inability to cope with his injuries and attempted suicide results in his meticulously planned pilgrimage which, like his dysfunctional relationships with his brothers, begins to disintegrate gradually.

Pilgrimage and self-discovery

The Whitman brothers are on a journey to India to reconnect, find themselves and are on a journey to find their mothers. The latter is unknown to Peter and Jack, having been secretly planned by Francis. They are consciously enacting a pilgrimage, with the end goal of meeting their mother: she embodies the object of divinity whose presence they seek. According to Surinder M. Bhardwaj, a pilgrimage is 'accepted as a desirable practice to earn religious merit within a life lived according to *dharma*. It is *one* of the many ways towards self-realization and bliss' (1973, p.3). It provides the individual with an opportunity to travel to sacred places and detach themselves from the obligations of daily life, allowing them to devote their time to prayer, self-inspection, and to listen to the spiritual discourses of holy leaders (ibid.). Through this process of placing oneself in an unfamiliar environment and journey, lies the ability

to transform: the ritual itself has transformative value, with the experience being as significant as the end goal. The process of a pilgrimage includes travelling to significant sites, involving a circular journey rather than trips to singular shrines or even cities (Barber, 1991, p.75); this is what Anderson wholeheartedly incorporates into *Darjeeling*, using the train as the start and endpoint in the circular journey the Whitman brothers undertake.

Rana P. B. Singh defines the pilgrimage in religions like Hinduism as ‘a spiritual quest’ that in the search for wholeness unifies divinity and humanity (2006, p.221). In undertaking this journey and performing sacred rituals, pilgrims attain ‘fruits’ or rewards, and on the completion of the pilgrimage, they transform themselves and their lives. The pilgrimage is a social construct, a performance, and a deliberate effort to represent one’s faith and belief; subsequently, the performance of rituals and the entire pilgrimage is a representation of the pilgrim’s religion, faith and intent of self-actualisation. In *Darjeeling*, the pilgrimage represents the brother’s declaration of a search for wholeness, which is to be achieved on finding their mother and in helping each other face the absurdity in their lives.

Darjeeling’s narrative structures itself around a search for meaning; the brothers find themselves a year after their father’s death, broken, lost and in denial. Francis is in denial over his attempted suicide, Peter is in denial of becoming a father, and Jack literally denies the authenticity of the stories he writes: he continually claims his writing is based on fictitious characters and events, despite replicating their lives. The film paints a portrait of three privileged, eccentric adults trying to find their way in a world devoid of meaning (Stephenson, 2011, n.p.). Just as characters in *Godot* and

Amédée experience a world devoid of meaning, *Darjeeling* embraces this phenomenon, making sense of its changing reality as the brothers discover themselves and each other on their pilgrimage.

Bhardwaj writes, apart from the ideal pilgrim undertaking the journey for purification and redemption from sin, there are two motives that a Hindu pilgrim undertakes the journey: The first involves specific concerns with the pilgrim's mundane existence and the second consists of earning religious merit. The first motive requires making a commitment or vow to a deity, who is sought out for her/his blessings to solve their affliction; the deity is the focus. For the second motive, the undertaking of the pilgrimage allows the pilgrim to collect religious merit, in the event of the pilgrimage being more significant than the deity at the end (1973, p.6). The Whitman brothers' reasons for undertaking the journey, appear to be two-fold; while their estrangement from their mother and each other is what drives them to undertake this journey, their motive changes from attaining spirituality to seeking their mother. Her presence, or blessing, is what they hope will fix their lives. Following a religiously ambiguous pilgrimage they visit numerous religious sites along their journey such as "The Temple of a Thousand Bulls", a *gurudwara*⁹² and a Christian missionary, fashioned out of an old fort, situated on the foothills of the Himalayas. They listen to religious sermons, attempt to perform supposedly sacred rituals with peacock feathers, and even accidentally take part in a Hindu funeral, partaking in the ceremony, of a young Indian boy, resulting from an encounter the brothers have while trying to save some boys from drowning. Far from being spiritual explorations of their inner selves, their trips

⁹² A *gurudwara* a place of worship for people of the Sikh faith.

to these religious places are comical and ironic, with the brothers unable to connect with the so-called spiritual atmosphere of India.

The brothers, especially Francis, are interested in experiencing religion and spiritual awareness, making no distinctions between the two. They blindly accumulate spiritual merit to fulfil the void that exists in their lives. In an attempt to dissociate themselves from their past mistakes and present lives, they wholeheartedly invest in their new environment, comically travelling India in their suits. Brannon M. Hancock writes, in Anderson's world the authentic being or personhood can be found in communion, fundamentally it can be achieved with forming relationships and by participation in a community (2005, p.2). On their journey, the brothers struggle to be truthful with one another and realise their authentic being. Filled with despair, they gradually begin to rely on each other, participating in each other's lives as a family.

In an indicative scene of their gradual reliance on each other, Jack finds his ex-girlfriend's perfume packaged in his suitcase, depicted in *Chevalier*; this prompts him to get off the train at night and check his ex-girlfriend's voicemail, at a local phone shop. The wide shot of Jack, beside the shopkeeper, shows him slumped on a chair, listening intently to the phone. He is wearing his bright yellow robe from *Chevalier*, perfectly synchronised to the yellow interiors of the shop. The shot cuts to a wide-angle planimetric shot of Peter and Francis crouching and peering out from their compartment window at Jack. The perfect symmetry of the shot and their blank faces evokes a comical quality as they spy on their youngest brother.

Francis appears disgruntled on being told by Peter about Jack's plans and not being included. The shot cuts to a distressed Jack heading back to the train, as the camera cuts back to the brothers stating their dislike for his ex-girlfriend, as Peter declares, "Anyway, I never trusted her.". The camera pans to show Kumar Pallana reading in the next compartment and then stops at Rita seducing a disinterested head steward: her boyfriend. Ironically, before this sequence, Rita and Jack are seen having sex in the train restroom. Peter's dialogue seems to directly relate to Rita's infidelity. The camera pans back, following Jack walking down the corridor and entering their compartment. He stands at the centre of the frame, looks straight at the camera and says, "I don't feel good about myself." His tone and face lack expression as he looks at his brothers for help. The reverse angle planimetric shots between Jack and the two brothers, sees Francis setting down a rule, "On this spiritual journey, it's crucial that we don't splinter into factions or not include somebody who has advice and may know better." Jack moves in from an individual frame to enter the frame with his brothers, demonstrating their communion. Francis sets another "agreement", whereby if Jack wants to talk to her or check her messages, he needs to consult it with them. Jack ends up smashing the perfume bottle, on being instructed to destroy it. Individuality is not part of their pilgrimage, Francis continually makes that clear, they are here together to undergo a spiritual transformation, and this scene helps Francis establish his control.

Anderson's films explore his fixation with meticulously constructed environments and nostalgic objects through the creation of a domestic space onboard the train: depicting a snapshot of what India for the Whitmans embodies. Nandana Bose writes that Anderson uses the time-worn "Western" signifiers of Indian-ness, as a way of mocking stereotypical representations of mystique that India has come to symbolise,

to a Western audience (Bose, 2008, n.p.). His portrayal of India includes a bright blue train ornately covered with bright images of elephants and aspects of Indian life; there is a portrait of both Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in the Whitman compartment, both iconic figures in the history of India. The train stewardess, Rita (Amara Khan), greets the brothers with sweet lime drinks, snacks and by placing a red dot, known as a *tikka* or *bindi*, on their foreheads. Jack is infatuated with her, and she symbolises the alluring Indian woman. On their first visit to a holy relic, Peter impulsively buys a poisonous snake, his action is particularly irrational given that he is going to be a father soon. Despite Francis' insistence on their need to undergo a spiritual transformation, their tenacity to partake on this journey 'becomes a complete farce due to how the brothers undermine that very notion, travelling like tourists – in a carriage that only a privileged few can afford' (Duarte, 2015, p.83). They are unable to separate themselves from their privilege and possessions and experience an authentic spiritual experience.

Stefano Baschiera writes, in Anderson's film the objects are pivotal in the development of the narrative and to the meaning of the film, to the extent that his cinema 'overcomes the separation between subjects and objects, the human and the non-human' (2012, p.118). The objects are central elements to the characters and even embody them. For example, their deceased father is seen purely through the objects of his they have retained. Even the flashback to his funeral, shows them squabbling over his broken car. The broken car and Peter's desperation to fix it becomes a metaphor for their deceased father. They carry around his personalised luggage, prescription sunglasses, car-keys and razor. Their fixation on an idealised nostalgic past, with the presence of their father and mother, makes them incapable of moving forward. Similarly, Jack's yellow hotel robe, the music box, and the perfume placed

inside his briefcase, all of which are visible in *Chevalier* and *Darjeeling* create a link between Jack and his ex-girlfriend.

Throughout the film, Jack travels barefoot while wearing the same suit⁹³; his brothers also wear the same suit through the film, signifying a uniform and creating a link to *Chevalier*. Once again, Anderson's use of uniforms and a dominating leader (Francis) signal fascist aesthetics, emphasising on the role of order and identity in the film (Sontag, 1980; Nordstrom, 2006). Singh writes that for many pilgrims the experience of a pilgrimage 'is a way to heal the body and soul by walking and opening the soul to the spirit inherent in Mother Earth' (2006, p.223). Thus, pilgrims choose to walk barefoot to connect with the Earth, spiritually, and to display their devotion to the process by overcoming the hardship of walking barefoot.

Jack appears to have adopted this ritual and through the entire course of the film is shown walking barefoot; the only time he is shown wearing shoes is during the flashback to the day of his father's funeral. Jack's pilgrimage begins in *Chevalier*, where he is seen dressed in the same suit and is barefoot in his hotel suite. The brothers incorporate their understanding of rituals and pilgrimage to form their unique version of a pilgrimage. Although Hindu pilgrimages are known for encountering hardships and their denial of pleasures, the brothers are unable to abstain from drinking and smoking, including Jack's inability to abstain from sexual pleasure. The pilgrimage they embark on gradually morphs into a pilgrimage that is occasionally spiritual and self-reflective, wholly focusing on the narcissism of the brothers.

⁹³ The grey suit, with a black shirt, is the same outfit he is wearing in *Chevalier*, it signals that Jack's conscious preparation for the pilgrimage has already begun in Paris.

Bose writes that *Darjeeling* is a ‘finely-tuned critique of American materialism, emotional vacuity, and lack of spiritualism’ (2008, n.p.), with Anderson commenting on the divide between Eastern and Western indicators of culture and values. In critiquing the representation of the Orient, according to a Western audience, the film parodies the spiritual journey taken by three privileged American brothers, with their singular focus on India as a spiritual country. MacDowell comments on Francis’ ‘culturally clueless attempts at a spiritual journey through India’ (2014, p.162); however, that is what drives the humour, their fascination with India and her spirituality and yet are unable and unwilling to understand or be a part of it. Francis continually refers to the spiritual nature of their journey, while mothering his siblings. Instability, emotional upheaval and death meet his attempts at providing structure and meaning to their journey.

The emphasis of reaching a certain level of spirituality is continuously referred to in the film, with the brothers engaging in stereotypically spiritual experiences to attain spiritual enlightenment and alter their personalities. The following words exchanged at the *gurudwara*, emphasises the superficial level at which they hope to connect with religion and a higher purpose:

JACK: You think it’s working? Can you feel something?

PETER: I hope so.

FRANCIS: It’s got to.

Prostrating in a room filled with Sikhs, clad in their distinguishing headscarves, they visibly stand out, and while everyone is sitting and listening to the scripture reading

by the *Granth*⁹⁴. The brothers are clueless and out-of-sync with their environment desperately trying to feel some flicker of spirituality.

On their first excursions from the train, the brothers find a group of young boys laughing at them from a rooftop, Jack indicates to his brothers, “Those guys are laughing at us.” An oblivious Francis answers, “I love it here. These people are beautiful.” The brother’s unawareness of their presence and their surroundings invokes melancholy that permeates the entire film. Their crosstalk is as deadpan and detached as their engagement with the spiritual culture. In the process of trying to get in touch with their spirituality and their inability to look beyond themselves, there is a cross-connection between what they expect to be and who they are: it reveals their Absurd condition. Their desperation to find themselves results in them unable to see whom they have become; in trying to discover their spirituality and inner peace, the Whitman brothers only discover the dysfunction and damage caused by their father’s death.

The brothers, death and absurdity.

The Whitman brothers embark on a pilgrimage, outwardly experiencing new, strange and dangerous places and inwardly, seeking spiritual improvement and braving physical dangers (Barber, 1991, p.1). They experience physical violence, a dangerous snake, witness the death of a young boy and brave a wild tiger on the loose, to ultimately find their mother: the end point of their pilgrimage. Their relationship is put

⁹⁴ The Granth is a person, of the Sikh religion, who is the ceremonial reader and recites scriptures from the holy book of the Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib. Normally the reader is a man and conducts the daily services at the gurudwara.

to the test as their secrets, lies and distrust for one another is laid bare. The significance of their journey is realised when they finally meet their mother, despite the lack of answers she provides for her absence in their lives.

One day, on board their train, their journey comes to an abrupt halt. On further inquiry, they are told that the train is lost, with Brendan voicing, “We haven’t located us yet.” The ridiculousness of a train lost is furthered with Francis’ realisation that he and his brothers need to “locate” themselves. The film draws on farce and comic elements from the TotA, with Bose commenting on this comic strain which leads Francis to his ironic and epiphanic realisation (2008, n.p.). The situation gets even stranger with Francis insists on conducting the peacock feather ritual, on top of a sandy hilltop; before attempting the ritual, he confesses that they will be meeting their mother at the end of the journey.

The narrative centres around themes of death and birth, dealing in the ‘variations of the ultimate transformation, Life and Death: birth, death, being reborn, dying, killing’ (Stephenson, 2015, n.p.). The brothers address death on numerous levels: Francis has attempted to kill himself, Peter assumes his relationship with his wife would die out, Jack is dealing with coming to terms with the death of his problematic romantic relationship, the death of their father looms over them, and they witness the death of a young boy on their journey. The brothers find themselves thrust into a dangerous situation when they run to the aid of three boys struggling in the rapid currents of a river. While they manage to save two of the boys, the third boy (Mukesh) slips from Peter’s grasp and dies. Mukesh’s funeral becomes a crucial point of reflection and

acceptance for the brothers, causing them to reflect over their father's funeral and come to terms with their loss.

While partaking in Mukesh's funeral, the brothers step into an autorickshaw, and we are privy to a flashback of their father's funeral. The camera cuts from a three-person planimetric wide shot of them sitting side by side wearing light colours, directly facing the camera, with the backdrop of the autorickshaw, to the three of them in a similar frame wearing black, this time with the backdrop of a limousine. Their deadpan expressions reveal little, as the audience is invited to watch them deal with death and grief twice, but entirely different ways. In the flashback of their father's funeral, the brothers are shown getting off at a garage to pick up their father's car, on Peter's insistence. Anxiety, an unwillingness to come to terms with the death and a refusal to acknowledge their feelings at that moment, plague the intimate situation.

Stephenson writes the Hindu funeral has a profound effect on the brothers, their participating in it seems to raise awareness of their hopelessness and incompetence in the garage scene (2011, n.p.). Mukesh's funeral is an entirely different experience for the brothers; they watch from afar as the father performs the ceremony and they join in the bathing ritual after the cremation; reliving and grieving their own father's loss. The act of bathing here symbolises a purification ceremony, with the water or *amrita* believed to give life (Bhardwaj, 1973, p.149). By participating in the funeral rituals and bathing with his family, the brothers symbolically purify themselves and are reborn. They confront their grief and are closer to sharing that experience. Bose adds that their 'bickering and angst is replaced by a sense of sadness and a burgeoning self-awareness that colours the rest of their journey, evoking memories of their father's

funeral a year before' (2008, n.p.). Their sadness stems from their understanding of the absurdity of their lives; in witnessing the dignity of Mukesh's funeral, Anderson draws comparisons with the hysterical way the brothers behave on the day of their father's funeral.

One of the rare moments where any character shows any emotion is when Peter secretly reads Jack's short story in the train toilet, the camera focusing on a close-up of his face showing tears streaming down his face. This scene demonstrates how Peter has not dealt with his father's loss and continues to struggle with it. The story written by Jack is evidently autobiographical, but initially, he insists that all the characters are fictional; depicting Jack's inability to accept the truth in his writing. The process of his storytelling is similar to their pilgrimage; both processes motivate the brothers to confront the truth about their lives and the death of their father.

Death is a familiar theme in absurdist plays like *Godot*, with Estragon suggesting they both hang themselves from the tree. Ionesco, similarly, handles death frequently in his plays, with the comic being inextricably bound to the tragic (Brater, 1974). The entire narrative of *Amédée* revolves around the existence of a growing corpse in the apartment: with death playing a visible and threatening role to the couple's lives. The characters' inability to acknowledge the discrepancy between their aspirations and reality emphasises the absurdity of their situation (Pritchard, 2010, p.4). The tramps exist in a reality where they endlessly wait for Godot, never acknowledging the reality that he might never come to meet them; Amédée and his wife live with a growing corpse, aspiring to live a normal life without being discovered. Both plays find their

characters waiting, waiting for a change and purpose. The waiting exhibits a ritualised process and some order in their otherwise chaotic worlds.

Just as the characters in both plays cope with death and wait to make sense of their role in the narrative, the Whitman brothers also wait: wait to find their mother and accept the loss of their father. They exist in a state of limbo, unable to move forward and trying to find out who they are. Gooch explains that the films of Anderson narrate the story of an ‘outsider or overachiever, someone past his prime or in the process of passing it, often well before it might be even said to have really existed’ (2007, p.28). The Whitman brothers are outsiders, travelling in India. Despite their attempts to embrace the Indian experience and undertaking a spiritual journey, they find themselves looking in from the outside due to their inability to understand who they are and how to acclimatise to a new culture. Their eagerness to be spiritual contrasts by their inability to be genuinely aware and immerse themselves in their travels.

Aspirations and completing the pilgrimage

FRANCIS: That’s it? She got the message? You’re satisfied with that?

BRENDAN: Well, she knows you’re coming.

FRANCIS: Does she wanna see us?

BRENDAN: But she’s your mother.

This exchange occurs between Brendan and Francis earlier in the film and is the first time that Francis’ secret plot to visit their mother, Patricia, is exposed, bringing to light her status as the end goal of the pilgrimage. The entire pilgrimage leads up to finding

her and reclaiming the role of motherhood that she has abandoned. Her assertive manner and individualistic nature make her a more secure and grounded character than her three sons. Challenging traditional stereotypes of what motherhood should represent, her duty as a nun to her faith and the less advantaged children in India drives her; as a result, she abandons her role as a mother to her struggling children. Huston's role as an alternative mother figure is a familiar one in the world of Anderson.

Cynthia Felando writes that Huston's rich acting background and star persona brings to her roles 'a robust array of extratextual meaning, especially as a strong, engaging and often-formidable woman' (2012, p.72). Her previous roles have included the femme fatale in Stephen Frears' *The Grifters* (1990) to the seductive sorceress Morticia Adams in Barry Sonnenfeld's *The Addams Family* (1991). Her characters in Anderson's films are independent, confident in their middle-age and never give into regret (ibid.). In *Darjeeling* her portrayal is fleeting, but she is the most intriguing and complex character in the film; she is the reason for her sons' pilgrimage and is the divine figure at the end who will absolve them of their earthly worries. Ironically Anderson, self-consciously, portrays her as a Catholic nun who, according to Bose (2008) has been placed with the White man's burden to educate the uncivilised natives. Her role as a strong, older woman educating children in a remote place near the Himalayas, contradicts her role as the mother who has abandoned her children.

Patricia represents the divine figure at the end of the pilgrimage. Portrayed as the spiritual figurehead, Patricia is also an emotional figurehead to her sons. The brothers, especially Francis, hope that completing the pilgrimage across India and finding her will bring them together and guide them through their grief. They confront her with

the belief that she has betrayed them by failing to attend their father's funeral and by isolating herself from them. However, Patricia refuses to conform to their expected standards of motherhood, dismissing their accusations, and has accepted her condition and risen above it, unlike her sons who remained rooted in the past:

PATRICIA: You're talking to someone else. You're not talking to me. I don't know the answers to these questions and I don't see myself this way. Listen. I'm sorry we lost your father. We'll never get over it, but it's okay. There are greater forces at work. Yes, the past happened. But it's over, isn't it?

FRANCIS: Not for us.

PATRICIA: I told you not to come here.

Her uncompromising approach to her life results in her leaving the convent to meditate, without saying goodbye to her sons, once again abandoning them. She refuses to be tied down by her obligations, choosing instead to lead the life she wants, isolated and in the service of her religion. The brothers finally begin to accept that their aspirations of their mother and the relationship they should share, is a farce, and begin to recognise their failure to understand the Absurd condition that has dominated their lives since their father's death.

In a poignant scene, mother and sons finally face each other and communicate with one another. The medium planimetric shot of all four portrays closeness with Patricia in the forefront taking control and suggesting "Maybe we could express ourselves more fully if we say it without words. Should we try that?" The camera cuts to a close up of Patricia, following her eye movement pans circularly to include a close up of Francis, Peter, Jack, with the pan finally pausing on a close-up of Patricia. The pan continues from Patricia to capture a dollhouse shot on board the train of people the

brothers have come into contact with in the film: the children praying in the convent, to Rita smoking and going to bed, the train steward with Peter's pet snake, the children in the village, a pregnant Alice reading in bed, Kumar praying, Brendan on board a flight, Portman in the Hotel Chevalier, Murray's character as the businessman onboard a train and finally to a shot of the man-eating tiger in the jungle. The long pan shot finally ends with the camera tilting to Patricia, all the while The Rolling Stones' "Play with Fire" plays in the background. This long shot depicts a karmic connection that the brothers have formed with the people they have met, and through these visuals sums up their entire pilgrimage with a snapshot of the people and events they experienced.

The scene unfolds in silence, in withholding their words and their emotions the implicit family manage to communicate. The situation befits any Absurd play, especially with Patricia ending the silence by taking charge and voicing her rules for the morning, suggesting they spend time together and "stop feeling sorry for ourselves", according to her it is an unattractive quality. That is the last conversation the brothers have with her; she leaves the next morning. Their expectation to spend time with their mother replaced by her abandoning them again. She leaves no excuses and just leaves, living her truth.

The brothers end their journey by finally completing the peacock feather ritual, this time they use their own method; the ritual represents the acceptance of their circumstances and each other. Their pilgrimage ends with Jack writing a story, and finally admitting it is based on their lives. Narrating the story on board a rickshaw, the medium planimetric shot, places Jack in the forefront with the two brothers behind

him listening to his story. Their faces and his tone blank, withholding any emotion: his story ends with him choosing not to meet his ex-girlfriend. The Whitman brothers finally accept their broken, dysfunctional lives and begin to move forward from that. The absurdity of the situation arises in their positive reaction to ending their pilgrimage; they meet their divine object. They board a new train, this time leaving behind their father's baggage: they have finally let go.

Conclusion: circularity and repetition

BUSINESSMAN: That's my train.

FRANCIS: That's our train.

In the planimetric shot framing the three brothers, staring at the mirror in the airport bathroom, Francis opens up his bandages, only to find he has "got some healing to do". This moment of self-reflection provides a rare opportunity in the film to witness what the characters are feeling, behind their deadpan expressions and their spiritual experience. It also marks a significant moment in the film, where the brothers decide to stand together. The three-person shot of the brothers, standing side by side staring at the mirror/camera as they clean themselves, presents a unified front. The camera sets up the three brothers as a unit against the audience, who behave as their reflecting surface.

The film ends, just as it began. While in the beginning, it was a lonely businessman stating at the ticket booth, "That's my train", running to catch *The Darjeeling Limited* and failing to catch it, while Peter runs past him and catches it. This time it is the three

brothers running to catch the *Bengal Lancer*, with Francis stating at the ticket booth, “That’s our train”. They manage to catch the train, only by leaving their father’s luggage pieces. Stephenson writes, ‘Darjeeling is not simply a film about ritual, but rather a highly ritualized film, and ritual can be an efficacious activity’ (2011, n.p.). Rituals dictate the entire film, guiding the Whitman brothers through their misadventures and on their path to find their mother, it is also a ritualised process through which the film comes full circle with the brothers running to catch the train.

A typical Andersonian slow-motion track shot is used showing the brothers running and jumping onto the train; this cuts to a medium close-up shot of all three staring at their porters and the abandoned luggage. They have completed their pilgrimage and discovered themselves, accepting one another without attaching themselves to the memory of their deceased father. The issue of the dysfunctional family is a predominant theme in the films of Anderson and more so in *Darjeeling* depicts three brothers who do not trust each other and cannot even reasonably communicate with each other.

The brothers start their journey, struggling with their lives and their sense of self, and after the death of their father, they appear to have ceased to exist as themselves. They are represented as extensions of their father, hollow men, competing with each other over who gets to keep their father’s belongings. Peter, especially, faced with fatherhood finds himself comforting his fears by adopting his father’s possessions. The brothers are emotionally stunted and feed off each other to present a flawed world, with flawed protagonists, who just like everybody else, are searching for some meaning to attach to their lives. The language breaks down bringing numerous comic

scenes, adopting the ironic brand of humour associated with the TotA. This same language that creates a barrier between the brothers is what ultimately helps them let go and move on.

Just as Estragon and Vladimir find themselves waiting for Godot, through their pilgrimage, the brothers find themselves waiting for closure, brotherhood, acceptance and to finally be reunited with their mother. Unlike in *Godot*, the brothers are showed to end their search and attain their desired goals. However, like the elusive Godot, Patricia disappears with the hope of one day seeing the brothers. The film addresses the issues that are characteristic to the Absurd but in a contemporary, comic and slightly exaggerated manner.

In his review of *Godot*, Silvain Zegel addressing the theatre audience wrote, ‘They saw people being happy and suffering, and they did not understand that they were watching their own lives’ (1979, p.89). Similarly, the Whitman brothers present an everyday scenario that the viewer watches but might not understand is that they might just be watching their lives. The pilgrimage is complete as the brothers come into the presence of their image of divinity and the waiting ends.

The film concludes with an open-ended assumption of circularity, this time the brothers are on board a different train which conforms to a more familiar Andersonian colour palette of red, yellow and orange on board a train that has a portrait of Satyajit Ray in the brother’s compartment. In choosing an Indian landscape and the oriental vision it conjures, Anderson places the brothers’ outside their comfort zone, in an environment where they have to communicate with each other to survive. Duarte

writes that the brothers face the challenge head-on, of embarking on a journey to highlight the value of their brotherhood, family and coerced into expressing their true feelings (2015, p.87). Their pilgrimage opens new beginnings, births and a new understanding of themselves. Onboard a new train, the brothers are free to choose where they want to go and what they want from their Absurd situations, as they start yet another journey.

In this chapter, I have analysed the role pilgrimage plays in asserting an absurdist reading of the film. Through incorporating the significance of ritual and waiting in the film, Anderson opts for a multifaceted discussion of his film. It fails to cover the complexities of Indian culture, as the films he was inspired by did, but that has never been his aim. In reverting to his old themes of dysfunctional families and narcissistic individuals, he allows for a more nuanced discussion of the petty affairs of human beings: his brothers are looking for guidance and love, failing to achieve either on their own, they turn to each other. Anderson mocks and genuinely discusses the Indian experience of three clueless Americans travelling the country in their suits, heavily medicated. The visuals in their usual perfection draw attention to the flaws of his characters and their aspirations, and yet in his blank portrayal of emotion, Anderson manages to address the truth of three adult men, afraid to be alone, afraid to disappoint the people around them and themselves. Trapped in their Absurd worlds, we can only imagine that Jack does eventually find Rita and share his truth.

Chapter 6

“He Got This Whole Escape Thing Worked Out”: Escape and Belonging in *Bottle Rocket* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

“They’ll never catch me, man, cause I’m fucking innocent.”

- Dignan

“I’m innocent.”

- Gustave

Imagine an Anderson film that did not contain dysfunctional individuals and relationships, that was not defined by its relentless use of planimetric shots and perfectly symmetrical frames and did not accentuate the dollhouse world of his eccentric characters. His distinctive style is what makes him such an exciting director, and while his style has developed to verbalise an even more controlled and fantastical world, its core is still rooted in portraying relationships and characters struggling to fend off loneliness. Through my various chapters, I have explored the various characters, relationships and themes that are central to his work. These themes have aligned him with traits from TotA and in turn portray his work through an absurdist lens, which does not confine or limit his work, but instead presents a fresh understanding of his films.

Continuing with the theme of journey and ritual discussed in chapter 5, and the dysfunctional relationships discussed in my earlier chapters, I want to shift the focus onto discussing escape and belonging in this last chapter. Although my emphasis is on discussing parallels maintained with themes in absurdist plays, I specifically want to

discuss the dual nature of dysfunctional relationships that have developed from Anderson's first feature film *Bottle Rocket* (1996) to his latest, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). Both films interestingly, revolve around narratives of escape and belonging, continually reiterating mobility as a crucial aspect in the films.

The chapter will specifically address the themes of escape and belonging depicted in the film and discuss the parallels they maintain with absurdist plays. The use of protagonists functioning in pairs, complementing and completing each other is a significant aspect of both films; this is seen in various plays under the Absurd banner that regularly plays with notions of escape and the fear of it, creating a need to belong in their respective environments and to one another.

The characters in both *Godot* and *Rosencrantz* are always on the move, attempting to escape their mundane realities or to understand the purpose of their existence. Whether they are caught in an endless cycle of waiting (Estragon and Vladimir in *Godot*) or in a pre-defined universe they have no clue about (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Rosencrantz*), the literary characters are relentlessly mobile, to make sense of their tragic worlds. *Endgame*, while focusing on two protagonists portrays the other extreme, with most of its characters immobile and trapped⁹⁵. The emphasis on movement and lack of it signals the desire for freedom that these characters aspire for: be it the freedom to move, from their dysfunctional relationships or the freedom to find meaning in their lives.

⁹⁵ Hamm, is confined to a wheelchair, and Clov is blind; whereas Clov's parents Nagg and Nell exist in jars; each of these characters are dependent on one another due to their circumstances and unable to move freely

Zygmunt Bauman writes, 'All of us are, willy-nilly, by design or by default, on the move. We are on the move even if, physically, we stay put: immobility is not a realistic option in a world of permanent change' (1998, p.2). Anderson's *Bottle* and *Budapest* are testaments to worlds that are permanently changing, with characters constantly on the move, escaping their crimes and escaping to prove themselves. Whereas, Beckett and Stoppard's plays portray controlled worlds that appear to be stagnant, with characters trapped in an endless loop. Their characters unrealistically cling to their stifling worlds, refusing to understand and accept that change is already happening around them. They fail to realise their desire to escape their stagnant worlds, and so their mobility towards freedom is continuously thwarted.

In my earlier chapters, I explore the use of absurdist themes in Anderson's films, focusing on dysfunctional relationships and the fragmentation of communication. Ionesco states that the 'conventional plot in its predictability and resolution is a reassuring distortion of life, whose primary law is unpredictability' (Levenson, 1971, p.435). The Absurd writers depict this unpredictability of the human condition in their work, a feature that Anderson has embraced in his meticulous manner constructing plots that observe dysfunctions in its characters and portray unpredictable events. These worlds emphasise mobility through their use of specific spaces such as hotels and motels. By closely analysing specific scenes and themes from the two films and referring to absurdist texts, I will thematically discuss the role escape and belonging play in Anderson's cinematic world. Furthermore, my discussion will include how both films dissociate themselves from absurdist themes creating a more conventional narrative.

Escape and belonging: Absurdist worlds of Anderson.

According to Nagel, one of the grounds of absurdism is ‘the charge that the "chain of justification" is never resolved satisfactorily. The worry is that our lives are, at root, "an elaborate journey, leading nowhere"' (Pritchard, 2010, p.4); this is a trait that is seen from *Godot*, *Homecoming* to *Rosencrantz*. While these plays end, the chain of justification is never entirely resolved for its audience. The tramps, in *Godot*, continue to wait ‘on a country road that could be anywhere, waiting for someone who the audience, from the start, has a fairly good idea will never show up’ (Scott, 2013, p.449).

In *Homecoming*, Ruth discards her husband and child to stay behind with her in-laws, assuming the role of a dominant mother-substitute, while the men resign to emasculated and infantilised roles (Osherow, 1974, p.423). The courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, meet their end never genuinely understanding what purpose their entire journey has served. Nevertheless, in rewriting *Hamlet*, Stoppard turns the focus from the tragic hero to two superfluous characters, ‘from a historical setting to a barren no-place, from a specific time to no-time’ (Keyssar-Franke, 1975, p.87). The mediocre lives of his protagonists are spent weaving in and out of narratives and time: their brief lives are spent in transit. In each of these narratives, the paths undertaken by the characters are never justified or explained satisfactorily, leaving their journeys unresolved.

The journey undertaken in texts like *Homecoming*, *Endgame* and *Prima Donna* appears to conclude with narratives that are circular, resulting in the characters

existing in a pointless universe, disgruntled with their situation but unable to transform it. Texts like *Godot* are determined as functioning ‘without narrative movement’ (Scott, 2013, p.450). While nothing essentially happens in the play, the meaning centres around feelings, not just those of the playwright, but of the characters. The narrative moves back and forth, without ever changing from the tramps waiting for Godot. For Hamm and Clov, the end is in the beginning’ (Brink, 1971, p.192) with Hamm uttering ‘Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished’. The play ends with Clov poised to leave, but unable to, and an alienated and abusive Hamm declaring ‘You... remain’, indicating Clov’s presence and his own. While in *Rosencrantz*, the protagonists go from playing small to prominent roles, strictly demarcated and tragic; their journey concludes with them finding ‘it increasingly difficult to distinguish themselves from the larger motions that are carrying the play to its inevitable conclusion’ (Freeman, 1996, p.39). They are unable to understand their Absurd conditions that lead to their fated deaths.

The character’s journey through their movement and lack of it plays a crucial role in the plays, with Beckett especially experimenting with the distortion of time and memory. In *Godot*, he portrays his astonishingly active tramps, trapped in a static scenario, coming to terms with their lost history and memories by living ‘moment by moment improvising, as though time didn’t exist’ (Blau, 2012, p.201). In *Endgame*, Hamm and Clov’s world is ‘stationary, or nearly so- process curtailed as human entropy reaches completion’ (Brink, 1971, p.192). Time is limiting and endless in the play. While the world outside, like Hamm’s mind, gradually deteriorates, there is never any indication of time given. The characters are stuck in time and an ahistorical

universe. Beckett uses Nagg and Nell, as they continuously ponder over their memories, to indicate the fluidity and subjectivity of time.

Similarly, the tramps in *Godot* exist in a vacuum where time and existence are of no consequence. According to Anders, Beckett places his characters in a world they do not accept and in a place, that is placeless (1965, p.142). These characters exist irrespective of time, space and history.

Helene Keyssar-Franke writes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go through the motions of waiting to play their parts, unknowingly in *Hamlet*. Thus, they play their roles, while simultaneously evading playing their roles (1975, p.87). Like Beckett's tramps, they wait and struggle over their purpose in the narrative, passing their time through spinning coins and questioning each other. Through spinning their coins, Stoppard alludes to *Godot* by depicting 'the nature of the other world- the circular repetitive experience of Beckettian comedy' (Lee, 1969, p.38). His courtiers wander around, not aware of Hamlet's story and yet physically a part of it, and like Beckett's protagonists, they find themselves trapped within a world that they are unable to escape.

The differences between *Rosencrantz* and *Godot* are also significant in understanding how the Absurd can function. In *Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir repeatedly cry that there is 'Nothing to be done' (p.1, 3, 4, 14), going so far as to state, 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!' (p.34); while in *Rosencrantz* 'a great deal happens very rapidly' (Duncan, 1981, p.59). The courtiers go from tossing coins pointlessly, meeting a troupe of players, weaving in and out of Hamlet's narrative, to their deaths. Secondly, the tramps despondently, but willingly wait for Godot; the

courtiers cannot attain their freedom, their roles, and, consequently cannot escape their death (Keyssar-Franke, 1975, p.87). In their inability to claim their lives and exist independently lies the absurdity and tragedy of their conditions.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are represented as two separate halves of the same coin; they are unable and unwilling to recognise or distinguish their real selves (Draudt, 1981, p.350), just like Estragon and Vladimir and Pozzo and Lucky. Their identities are interchangeable to others, and even themselves and have been referred to by critics as 'an unindividualized pair' (Abbotson, 1998, p.178). They are incapable of living separate lives or making independent choices. While the courtiers are distinguishable to the audience as 'the straight man and the wit', they are also mutually exchangeable, with characters in the play confusing their names (Draudt, 1981, pp.355-356). Their identities are intertwined, and like their Beckettian counterparts, they form co-dependent relationships that govern their fates.

Numerous Absurd plays are centred around protagonists functioning in pairs (*Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, *Prima Donna*, *Amédée* and *Rosencrantz*), which makes for an ironic portrayal of companionship with their dysfunctional communication. While belonging is a key issue, with characters unable to leave despite living miserable lives, it is constantly supported by ideas of escape. Estragon even takes naps to escape Vladimir but is frantically woke up because he 'felt lonely' (Beckett, 2006, p.8). Furthermore, Estragon unsuccessfully suggests, 'Let's hang ourselves immediately!' (p.9) in an innate attempt to escape their mundane life, spent endlessly waiting. Jill Levenson writes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, share affinities with their Beckettian counterparts in their portrayal as melancholic pairs 'held together by the

peculiar love-hate bred of desperation' (1971, p.436), as they stumble across the wider Hamlet narrative trying to figure out their role.

Bennett proclaims that the idea of absurdity is depicted in the incongruity between what is being shown and what is being said (2011, p.6). While the courtiers are depicted in a bustling world of characters with instructions being directed at them, their dialogue showcases confusion and isolation; the tramps exist in a sparse world devoid of meaning, and yet they tirelessly wait for Godot, providing some purpose to their lives and value to their relationship. Characters fear separation yet repetitively seek escape and are never able to commit to either entirely. Despite Estragon's numerous suggestions of suicide (p.9, 46, 86, 87), the pair never succumb to the idea. Esslin writes their 'hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from facing the reality of the human condition' (2001, p.61). Their need to escape is never fulfilled, and so their Absurd condition traps them into a circular, repetitive existence, narrated through their inseparable existence and endless wait.

Like the tramps and courtiers, Hamm and Clov are inseparable. Hamm's dependency on Clov to survive is another factor that prevents their separation, and just like the tramps, they are two sides of the same coin, completing one another and perhaps even representing parts of the same personality approaching death (Brink, 1971, p.194). Clov's escape means a definitive death for Hamm and liberation from an exploitative and abusive relationship, but it could also mean an eventual death for him: death through his separation from Hamm and isolation from a familiar and repressive world. Early in the play, Hamm declares that he'll give Clov nothing more to eat, to which

Clov replies, 'Then we'll die.' (Beckett, 2009, p.8), understanding and accepting that their life and death are bound together. This is perhaps why the play ends with Clov dressed to leave but standing by the door deciding which inevitable death to choose: the outside death (as an individual) as Hamm states or a slow, inevitable death with Hamm.

Just as the tramps and Hamm and Clov cannot escape each other, Amédée and Madeline cannot escape the growing corpse in their apartment: a corpse that Esslin comments is 'the couple's dead love, the victim of their sexual incompatibility' (2001, p.162). Their dysfunctional relationship has concocted this corpse and similarly is caused by it. Amédée unwillingly escapes his dysfunctional attachment to Madeline and is whisked away by the (floating) corpse: his escape from one has led to an attachment to the another. *Rosencrantz* portrays the courtiers fated to die, unlike the troupe of players depicted in the play who do not question and 'represent an effective way of coming to terms with a capricious universe' (Levenson, 1971, p.437) with their declaration: 'Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn' (Stoppard, 2000, p.58). The courtiers' questions amount to no answers and does not allow them to escape their intended death; similarly, the travelling troupe of players cannot escape Hamlet's narrative either, both are trapped in their preordained destinies.

The thematical inclusion of escape and death is significant in the TotA, creating and challenging the notion of an Absurd universe. The characters in their inability to escape their Absurd realities find themselves entrapped in dysfunctional and oppressive relationships. Following the format of my previous chapters, I will analyse

how these themes are discussed in Anderson's films, focusing on *Bottle* and *Budapest*. His protagonists are placed in situations where they lack any control over the outcome of their lives and often in pairs: two sides of a coin like Beckett's tramps and Stoppard's courtiers. Unlike their Beckettian and Stoppardian counterparts, Anderson's characters actively engage with the events dictating their lives and attempt to resist some control over their Absurd lives. In analysing the construction of themes of escape and death, this chapter will discuss how his films portray absurdist tendencies, while also actively adopting more traditional narrative styles to showcase crime and escape.

Kunze claims, 'like every artist, Wes Anderson is derivative and collaborative; his genius lies in his ability to make something new from the wealth of sources he draws from in each film' (2014a, p.2). Be it Truffaut's influence, the constant references to Cousteau and Charlie Brown or the defining sounds of The Kinks, The Rolling Stones, Faces and Nico, Anderson's films are layered with nostalgia and pastiche creating a distinctive visual and aural style. MacDowell labels it quirky, a style that 'courts a fastidious and simplified sense of artificiality; and thematic interest in childhood and innocence' (2014, p.154). The referential quality of his works celebrates a sense of artificiality and detachment that is both ironic and sincere in its tone (Kunze, 2014a). Michael Chabon compares things in Anderson's films to Joseph Cornell's boxes stating, 'that a high degree of artifice is somehow inimical to seriousness, to honest emotion, to so-called authenticity' (2013, p.23). Like Cornell, Anderson is fixated with building delicate and immaculately elaborate worlds and structures that embody themes of innocence and childhood, while presenting colourful worlds of artifice.

Browning claims the ‘only movies Wes Anderson films look like are other Wes Anderson films’ (2011, p.ix), indicating his fixation with employing specific aesthetic styles and his discussion of themes and characterisations that emphasise traits of innocence (Olsen, 1999; Orgeron, 2007; Piechota, 2006; Sabo, 2010; Lorentzen, 2010; MacDowell, 2014) and dysfunction (Perkins, 2013; O’Meara, 2014). Anderson’s films have stayed true to his thematic interests from his very first film to his latest: both *Bottle* and *Budapest* have narratives that are built on friendship, pseudo-father figures, escape and criminal activities.

His films have shown an evolution of his aesthetic style, with his signature dollhouse structure, planimetric and God’s-eye view shot becoming more prominent in his later films. *Bottle* and *Rushmore* adopt a more realistic aesthetical style, playing with colour schemes and visual styles, while his later films like *Fantastic*, *Moonrise* and *Budapest* are extremely stylized, portraying immaculate environments in perfectly matched colour palettes and synchronised deadpan acting styles. While innocence in Anderson’s oeuvre refers to the childish innocence of its characters, this chapter extends that concept to discuss protagonists who retain a childish naivety and innocence but are also claiming their innocence from criminal activities.

Escape has played a crucial role in Anderson’s films, shaping his characters and the narrative style. *Rushmore* tells the story of Max’s desperation to prove his worth and escape his working-class reality. The Tenenbaum siblings are portrayed as ‘sad, individually and collectively’ (Mayshark, 2007, p.129), battling their demons by attempting to escape it or deny its existence. In *Darjeeling*, through the portrayal of ‘unsentimental and realistic treatment of grief’ (Hill, 2008, p.105), Anderson mocks

‘the quest of the idle rich for self-actualization on grand tour in India’ (Tyree, 2013, p.24). The three Whitman brothers are all running away from their problems: from escaping an unbearable existence to parenthood. In *Fantastic*, Foxy cannot escape his past life as a thief and ends up endangering his family as they escape to find shelter from the wrath of the farmers. In *Moonrise*, escapism is the mode, subject and plot (Tyree, 2013, p.23), portraying the young couple escaping their dysfunctional families and lives.

The characters are confronted by absurdity, arising from the character’s befuddlement with their narratives and their inability to control it. Towards the end of *Rosencrantz*, Guildenstern perceptively remarks to Rosencrantz, “Well, we’ll know better next time” (Stoppard, 2000, p.117): illuminating their situation and leading to their inevitable deaths. Anderson’s characters exist in a similar contradiction, living their lives and yet unaware of circumstances around them and the course being taken. They go about their narcissistic lives, escaping from unsatisfactory situations and unable to understand their purpose in the narrative.

His characters are rooted in their privileged worlds they find themselves associated with, escape becomes their ultimate release from these worlds. His characters are plagued with boredom, passing their time in these worlds, with the need to escape, or the need to belong. Their wealthy middle-class identities ground their despair over their lack of an extraordinary lifestyle, encouraging their ideas of escape to find adventures. As Aisenberg insightfully comments, ‘They’re all spoiled children trying to make the world give them the great wonderful thing they think they want that somehow or other keeps slipping out of their grasps’ (2008, n.p.).

The disillusioned and besotted teenagers in *Moonrise* escape their mundane, middle-class lives to seek adventure and re-define their narrative, away from adult supervision and dysfunction. In the first introductory scene of the film, the Bishop family's daily routines are shown with Suzy continually looking through her binoculars at the outside world. Her boredom explored through her yearning for adventure with Sam, visually supported by her binoculars which become an extension of her personality. Walt and Laura are both shown trying to escape the difficulties of their marriage by indulging in alcohol and illicit affairs.

Bottle and *Budapest* are brilliant book-ends to analyse the role that escape and belonging play, supported and reinforced by the broader cinematic universe of Anderson. In his first and most recent feature, Anderson addresses these themes drawing on his familiar themes of dysfunction, family and entrapment. Both films use 'stopping places' (Clarke, Pfannhauser and Doel, 2009) to play crucial roles in the development of the narrative and to emphasise the terms of escape and belonging further.

Bottle Rocket and The Grand Budapest Hotel

Bottle Rocket was released in 1996, following the release of its shorter counterpart under the same title in 1994. Co-written by Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson, it was Anderson's directorial debut and was shot by Robert Yeoman. The 13 minutes black and white short *Bottle Rocket* was shot in 1992 by Bert Guthrie and released in 1994, garnering critical success in various festival circuits including the 1993 Sundance Film

Festival. The black and white phantasmagorias of the short film pays nostalgic homage to the 1960s and 70s film movements, especially the French New Wave and American New Wave with its ‘black-and-white photography, stark credits, droll wit, and jazzy score’ and works such as *À bout de souffle* (1960), *Jules et Jim* (1962) and *Bande à part* (1964) being the most overt references (Seitz, 2013, p.32).

The feature starred newcomers and brothers Owen Wilson as Dignan, Luke Wilson as Anthony and Andrew Wilson as Future Man; Lumi Cavazos plays Inez, Robert Musgrave as Bob, and James Caan as Mr Henry, along with Kumar and Dipak Pallana; most of these actors have since become regulars in Anderson’s films. The film follows the adventures and criminal activities of three friends, Anthony, Dignan and Bob. Mayshark writes that the protagonists, ‘a trio of would-be-thieves, are the first in his [Anderson’s] string of aspirational dreamers’ (2007, p.119). They are the first of ‘Peter Pans, men who will never willingly grow up until circumstances force them out of their prolonged adolescence’ (Hill, 2008, p.91).

The film, shot in widescreen (1.85:1), opens with Anthony checking himself out of a voluntary rehabilitation unit, while Dignan believes that he is helping Anthony escape the facility. From the onset of the film, Dignan’s influence over Anthony is evident, immediately established him as the dominant personality in their relationship. The film centres around the relationship between Anthony and Dignan; Dignan’s impulsive and controlling self as opposed to Anthony’s protective and calm self, will their narrative of escape and belonging forward. Wilkins writes Anderson’s character’s predicaments centre on genuine existential issues, Dignan wants to create his identity as an outlaw, based probably only on knowledge from American Western

myths and popular culture (2014, p.26). Dignan's dream to become a criminal and join Mr Henry's infamous gang of criminals, becomes the dream for his gullible followers, Anthony and Bob.

Fredrick claims the film 'examines the American Dream (or Scam), and is greatly concerned with philosophy, charity and saintliness in particular ... the film is about love-and the lack of it' (2017, p.2). The trio are from middle-class backgrounds, young adults without any ambition and purpose in their suburban lives, allowing Dignan to gain control of their aimlessness. Apart from the comic portrayal of amateur crime, the film comments on issues of belonging, companionship and understanding the self: Dignan's sole purpose in the film, as with many characters in the Absurd, is defined through his projection of self on his companions. The trio's friendship and criminal scheming are put to the test when they hide out at a roadside motel, where Anthony falls in love with one of the motel staff, Inez, jeopardising their plans and his friendship with the insecure Dignan.

Eventually, the trio leaves the escapism provided by the motel. Their dysfunctional lives are one they cannot escape. Bob leaves to help his brother, Dignan gets into a fight, and Inez refuses to leave with the clueless Anthony. Dignan wants to continue running the show and pursuing their life of crime despite Anthony wanting to go home. The car they steal breaks down, and the pair get into a fight over Anthony secretly handing over the burglary money to Inez. The awkward two-person shot framed shows the co-dependent pair at odds with each other and their inability to look beyond themselves and empathise with the other. Anthony has not found himself in their brief journey; he finds love only to realise he does not have any meaning or purpose in his

life. His narcissism ruins Dignan's desperate need to impress Mr Henry, they both fail to achieve what they desire and to accept their Absurd condition.

The role of authority and control is apparent in *Budapest*. Anderson's latest and eighth film is written by Anderson and Hugo Guinness, cinematography by Robert Yeoman, and inspired by the works of Stefan Zweig. Released in 2014. The film examines the adventures of the lobby boy Zero (Tony Revolori) and the hotel concierge Monsieur Gustave H. (Ralph Fiennes) at the Grand Budapest Hotel. It is narrated by the author (Jude Law playing his younger self and Tom Wilkinson playing his older counterpart) as told to him by the ageing Zero (called Mr Moustafa and played by F. Murray Abraham). The story revolves around the murder of Madame D. (Tilda Swinton) by her comically villainous son Dmitri (Adrien Brody) and his henchman, Jopling (Willem Dafoe); they frame Gustave with the murder, and so the film follows the adventures of Gustave and Zero as they clear Gustave's name.

The film along with costuming and production design utilises three different aspect ratios to represent different periods, Bordwell notes,

Boxes within boxes encase the increasingly remote eras ... The ratio is about 1:1.85 for the present frame story and for the 1985 passage, when the Author begins to recount meeting Mr. Moustafa. Their 1968 meeting is enacted in 1:2.40, the anamorphic widescreen aspect ratio. The central story, taking place in the 1930s, is presented in an approximation of classic 1:1.33, or 4:3, imagery. (2015, p.246)

Each era is specified by the ratio that could have been used at that time, with emphasis highlighted on the artifice of Zero and Gustave's world, a world narrated through a

third person: two versions of the third person/author with both narrating the story. The film's Chinese box structure effortlessly shifts between its ratios and colour schemes to depict the changing periods and narratives.

Anne Washburn notes that with *Budapest* Anderson 'has created a confection of curious depth and substance-the lightest, airiest movie about cataclysm, and one of the more moving' (2015, p.9). The film moves and frustrates its audience, willing them to celebrate and mourn a bygone era as the narrative eventually embraces tragedy. The film contains different narratives told by numerous individuals at different time periods, questioning the notion of authentic content and an objective perspective. The only constant is the hotel, marking a space where the authoritative figure Gustave, like Dignan, is entirely preoccupied with himself: his convictions and purpose define his reality along with the reality of the motel. The hotel is also where Zero and Gustave establish their relationship, represented as the most brilliant and bright colour palette of the three periods: this was when the hotel was most prosperous and both Zero and Gustave, the happiest. Similarly, the motel is a safe and happy space for Anthony, where he falls in love and makes new friends. It is a different space for Dignan who loses his control over Anthony and Bob. In both films, the motel and hotel, stopping places, occupy an essential role in the development of the narratives and in establishing the identities of the characters.

Stopping places and their relevance.

The motel and hotel, function as stopping places holding the various characters and storylines together. David B. Clarke, Valeria C. Pfannhauser and Marcus A. Doel, citing Tallack⁹⁶ (2002), describe them as:

Such places, where circulation pauses to recharge itself, are marked by a vertiginous intensity, which expresses itself in a bewildering variety of ways: simultaneously disrupting and securing mobility; halting yet enabling movement; translating passage into the passage of time'. (2009, p.3)

These places catalogue identities and yet are anonymous spaces, where individuals can pause time or lose themselves in it. Thus, paradoxically stopping places are always in motion, their consistency originating from the interminable arrangements of arrivals and departures (ibid.); as a result, individuals temporarily living in these spaces exist in a mode of transience until they move on to another place.

Stopping places like hotels, motels and hostels contain their set qualities and rules of conduct, creating an environment where belonging and being out of place co-exist, the public and private merge (ibid., p.1), functioning as places of sanctuary and hospitality replicating the society it exists in. In the cinema of Anderson, like Sofia Coppola⁹⁷, stopping places are where individuals meet and are confronted with loneliness. In *Tenenbaums*, Royal lives a lonely and lavish life at the Lindbergh Palace Hotel for twenty-two years, until he is asked to leave due to non-payment of his bills but returns to work as an Elevator Operator with the help of staff at the hotel that he befriends.

⁹⁶ Tallack, D. (2002) "'Waiting, Waiting": The Hotel Lobby, in the Modern City', in Leach, N. (ed.) *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*. London: Routledge, pp.139-151,

⁹⁷ See *Lost in Translation*

Similarly, in *Rushmore*, when Blume is being sued for divorce by his wife, he moves into a hotel alone; Max and Blume start a gruelling battle, with both sides committing heinous crimes. In both cases, the hotel marks a transitory space away from family and companionship.

In *Bottle*, the motel plays a crucial role in the development of the criminal lives the three friends want to lead. The three men use it as a base to hide out after robbing a bookstore. A flustered Bob abandons them to go and help his brother, who has been arrested for the marijuana that Bob grows in the backyard of his house. Dignan no longer dictates the rules, especially once Anthony meets Inez. The motel plays two very different social roles in the film. For Anthony, it is not a place of isolation and loneliness but one where he falls in love. However, for Dignan, it is a place where he finds himself isolated, struggling to get the attention of his friend and where his role as the crime leader is threatened.

In *Budapest*, the entire premise of the film is on the Grand Budapest Hotel, with the hotel functioning like a living organism. Here the hotel is a professional and magnificent space, which defines Gustave and gives Zero a place where he can belong; it is also a space where friendships form, and stories are told and retold: Gustave and Zero meet each other, as do the young author and the older Zero. The hotel is also the place that brings Zero and Agatha (Saoirse Ronan) together; Moustafa morosely tells the author his reasons for holding on to the “enchanted, old ruin” is for the love of his life, Agatha: ‘The hotel I keep for Agatha. We were happy here. For a little while.’ Unlike Anderson’s earlier films, the hotel represents a space of love, loyalty and lust

(Gustave's sexual exploits with his customers), as opposed to purely melancholic spaces where individuals find themselves isolated.

Jann Matlock writes, the hotel superficially promises its customers 'discretion and privacy- a haven from the outside world as well as from the moralistic gaze of social standards' (2009, p.74). In *Budapest*, we are privy to Gustave engaging in sexual activities with his elite customers, sworn to secrecy to maintain their trust and affection. He advises Zero during his training, "Our guests know their deepest secrets, some of which are, frankly, rather unseemly, will go with us to our graves. So, keep your mouth shut Zero." The extent of this trust and secrecy is detrimental to the protagonist's safety as well; when Gustave is put in jail falsely, he cannot provide an alibi, given he was having an affair with a high-profile customer, who has left the country on a cruise.

The cinematic hotel, according to Matlock 'does not so much mirror the society that watches its film. It problematizes the very kinds of watching' (2009, p.78). As viewers, we watch as Zero undertakes his professional life, follows Gustave's every word and watches Gustave pleasing his needy and elderly "blonde" clients and lovers. Similarly, in *Bottle*, we watch as Anthony overlooks Dignan, falls in love with Inez. In both films, as audiences, we are invited to look beyond the superficial hospitality, mundane and sanitised versions of these stopping places. Instead, in *Bottle*, Inez is seen cleaning the rooms and doing the hotel laundry; Rocky (Donny Caicedo), who works at the motel and becomes a translator for the couple, is seen taking the garbage out and doing the dishes. *Budapest* sees Zero's training and his living quarters and daily duties, along with the other workers in the hotel doing their duties.

These stopping places become familiar places, creating a façade of a place where characters can belong and can take up the option to become visible in its public spaces or to become invisibility in its private ones (ibid., p.120). As workers Inez and Zero function behind the scenes. While Anthony as a customer uses his privilege to access both the sanitised public spaces and look into the private spaces used by the motel workers; and as a concierge Gustave is at the forefront as the face of the hotel, leading his esteemed customers through both public and private spaces.

In *Budapest*, these stopping places are equally mysterious, housing ‘The Society of Crossed Keys’, a secret network of European hotel concierges who are capable of incredulous feats. Their existence is strictly on a need to know basis between the concierges and their symbol is two crossed keys. Their secret connection is evoked by Gustave when on escaping his prison cell he and Zero find they need help and resources to prove Gustave’s innocence. What follows is an elaborate montage of the locations of the different concierges in their resplendent hotels, tapping into their resources to help their fellow member. The scene is both elaborate and humorous in the deadpan exchange between all the concierges and the similar omnipotent roles they play in their hotels.

Stopping places create personal temporal spaces and erase, on a daily basis, evidence of previous inhabitants, recreating a hospitable space for the new inhabitant (Clarke, Pfannhauser and Doel, 2009). Inez, Zero and Gustave function as a part of that system, recreating a hospitable space, behaving as extensions of the motel/hotel. Inez is never shown leaving the motel, whereas, Gustave and Zero eventually become owners of

the hotel. Interestingly, misfortune appears to fall on them whenever they separate from their beloved hotel. These stopping places, in their ambiguous temporal and moral plane, recreate absurdist universes. Just as *Godot* creates a temporary space that is empty of signifiers and purpose, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continuously shift in and out of *Hamlet*'s narrative, the stopping places in *Bottle* and *Budapest* are spaces of transit where characters create meaning and purpose. In plays of the TotA, the audience views the private lives of its characters who struggle in their dysfunctional worlds, and they perform this dysfunction; thus, inviting the audience to find and create meaning.

Importantly these spaces also confront moral issues of escape and abandonment. While the Absurd offers a more philosophical and abstract view of morality and escape, *Bottle* and *Budapest* cope with the apparent motive of escape. The characters engage in criminal activities and escape from their responsibilities; while struggling with loss (Seitz, 2015), be it the loss of their innocence, justice or their loved ones. Both films sharply differ in certain aspects from its absurdist companions: while the TotA often portrays its protagonist entrapped in their circular worlds, unable to grow, Anderson's *Bottle* and *Budapest*, while conforming to circular narratives, exhibits some growth in their characters. Anderson adopts more complex narrative structures and employs humour to dampen the bleak outlook presented in the protagonists' worlds: such as Dignan's incarceration, the decrepit Budapest hotel and the war-ravaged world of Zero and the author. However, despite these differences, analysing how predominantly absurdist themes of escape and belonging are envisioned in these films, provides a more multifaceted reading of how Anderson aesthetically discusses the human condition.

“You’re one of us now”: belonging and escape.

Before climbing down the window of his room in the rehabilitation facility, Anthony informs his startled doctor, “He [Dignan] got this whole escape thing worked out. He just got so excited about the thing. I didn’t have the heart to tell him... no, that...” The narrative of escape is prevalent from the onset of the film and Dignan is introduced as a dreamer, seeking adventure and thrills while Anthony, his loyal friend goes along with his wishes. An eager Dignan hides behind a bush with his binoculars and a shard of glass waiting for Anthony, aiding his supposed escape from the facility. The dynamics of their relationship is made clear from the start of the film. Dignan appears to be in control, and right until the end, he clings to that illusion.

After setting down the rules of their life, Dignan and Anthony burglarise Anthony’s house as a test run; this is followed by them, along with Bob, robbing a bookshop and supposedly running from the law. Mayshark writes that these three men are afflicted, despite probable mental health issues, by a lack of purpose. Their lives lie suspended between adolescence and adulthood; they have yet to find a way to fit into the world (2007, p.120), and probably never will. The criminal aspirations of the naïve Dignan, especially his devotion to join Mr Henry’s criminal gang, is what keeps the narrative light and forlorn and gives all three of them purpose.

The first time Gustave and Zero meet involves Gustave grilling Zero about his qualifications for the job and receives disappointing answers, Gustave is finally impressed by Zero when on asking him why he wanted to work as a lobby boy, Zero

confidently replies, “Well, who wouldn’t at the Grand Budapest, sir? It’s an institution.” From that moment onwards Gustave takes Zero under his wing, becoming his friend, father and family. The four protagonists embody traits of an Absurd hero, the women in the film have minor if no parts at all, and the focus is on the complex nature of their relationships. They struggle with the boredom that threatens to plague their lives, struggle in the wait to understand the higher purpose of their lives and struggle to accept isolation.

In *Budapest*, Gustave and Zero are seen embarking on a journey to visit the deceased Madame D. The perfectly framed shot of the two sitting in the carriage makes for an interesting analysis, regarding their power dynamics and the onset of the war. The train plays a significant motif of transition with the dark exterior highlighting the danger that is to befall on the two protagonists. The escape from prison is perhaps the most coordinated and staged performance by Anderson to date, downplaying the seriousness of escaping prison, the sequence looks like characters in a dollhouse.

The adventures of Gustave and Zero and their waltz with escape begins when Gustave is accused of murdering his eight four-year-old lover, Madame D., after she leaves him a famed painting, *Boy with Apple*, in her will. Gustave and Zero steal the painting from her mansion, planning to sell it and run away when Gustave is incarcerated for her death. When Inspector Henckels (Edward Norton) comes to arrest Gustave, the scene provides an insightful look into the dollhouse structure of the decadent hotel. The deep focus of this long planimetric shot resembles a portrait, evoking an awkward formality and apparently objective view with the policemen’s back facing the camera as the watch Gustave walking down the stairs. The shot is mesmerisingly static, with

the long lens and characters movement adding a cartoonish depth to it. As Gustave gets closer to the scene, he greets Henckels to find out he is being charged with murder; the conversation between them is a perfect example of crosstalk utilised by Anderson:

GUSTAVE: How may we serve you, gentlemen? Ah, Inspector Henckels.

HENCKELS: By order of the Commissioner of Police, Zubrowka Province I hereby place you under arrest for the murder of Madame Céline Villeneuve Desgoffe und Taxis.

GUSTAVE: I knew there was something fishy. We never got the cause of death. She's been murdered, and you think I did it.

Despite Henckels blatantly charging him for murder, Gustave and he appear to be talking at each other, with Gustave unable to understand the charges on him till he voices it out himself. The scene delivered in a typically expressionless fashion makes for a comic scene. The shot remains static as Gustave attempts to escape the police by running up the stairs. The high-key lighting of the shot, with its pallid pink palette, makes it appear flat, while the deep focus lens used provides depth to this otherwise picturesque frame. The effect is a shot that appears more animated in its quality than live-action.

Both films embrace the style of blank delivery and depict limited emotional growth among characters, a trait visible in all of Anderson's films. Gustave's blank expressions contrast his exceedingly expressive voice and flair for the dramatic. Buckland comments on Anderson's style, as discussed in the previous chapters, stating his portrayal of ironic disengagement is presented through his all too familiar 'awkward two-shots' (2012, p.1). With the dual protagonists presented in both *Bottle* and *Budapest*, the use of awkward two-shots is particularly high. The God's-eye view

shot of Gustave and Zero on the train, in a third-class compartment to Gustave's dismay, portrays the two awkwardly lying on their berth, looking up at the ceiling (camera). Gustave begins to rant about being betrayed by the Desgoffe und Taxis' butler Serge (Mathieu Amalric), who is coerced into testifying that Gustave murdered Madame D.:

GUSTAVE: I'm not angry with Serge. You can't blame someone for their basic lack of moral fibre. He's a frightened little, yellow-bellied coward. It's not his fault, is it?

ZERO: I don't know. It depends.

GUSTAVE: Well, you can say that about most anything, "It depends". Of course, it depends.

ZERO: Of course, it depends. Of course, it depends.

GUSTAVE: Yes, I suppose you're right. Of course, it depends. However, that doesn't mean I'm not going to throttle the little swamp rat.

The crosstalk between them, mostly substantiated by Gustave's rants and Zero's submissive behaviour, diverts attention from a grave and dangerous situation, including the murdering Joplin on the loose and Gustave being hunted by the police. Gustave's tone quickly changes from empathy to rage, while Zero agrees and repeats what Gustave says. The crosstalk and framing portray the absurdist anguish they are in, unable to prove Gustave's innocence and lead on a wild goose chase to find Serge and clear his name.

King likens Anderson's cinema to that of Jim Jarmusch, where the 'narrative obliqueness is part of a broader aesthetic of the minimalist and deadpan' (2005, p.73). The characters cling to their deadpan expression, Dignan and Anthony less so while

Zero perfects the deadpan look; however, Gustave is portrayed as a ‘genuinely appealing character, the epitome of Middle European charm and style. He recites syrupy Rilke-esque poetry while seeing to the needs of the hotel’s well-heeled guests’ (Danielson, 2015, n.p.). His florid nature contrasted with Zero’s blank style and the Absurd world they exist in creates both a nostalgic view of a bygone era and melancholy over the foreseeable future. The war looms in the background, threatening to engulf their eloquent world, and it does just that, taking its chief resident, Gustave, with it.

However, unlike *Bottle* where Anderson was still experimenting with his style and formulating his distinct characterisation and controlled worlds, *Budapest* depicts the style that Anderson has perfected over the course of eight feature films. *Bottle* embraces humour and uses it to mask severe issues like depression, abuse and loneliness; while *Budapest* is more sinister and resigning in its outlook of a war-torn era: Gustave’s death by a firing squad as narrated by Moustafa is particularly gruesome. The film maps a fictional historic period resembling the horrors of the World Wars, but in using comedy to mask murder, greed, power and self-righteousness, Anderson also addresses a cultural shift in the perspectives of people and a nation that has survived the impact war.

Unlike the traditional narrative of resolution, narratives of the Absurd do not conform to the purpose of ‘problem-solving, of things being worked out in some way, of a kind of ratiocinative or emotional teleology’⁹⁸ (Chatman, 1980, p.48). A definitive closure, especially emotional, is never reached at the end of the narrative, often the outcome is

⁹⁸ Roland Barthes used the term “hermeneutic” to define this function (cited in Chatman, 1980, p.48).

a narrative that is circular in nature. With both *Bottle* and *Budapest*, the narrative comes full circle, and the characters find themselves in a similar position as they were at the beginning of the film. In *Bottle* Anthony is in a rehabilitation facility, the film ends with Dignan in a correctional facility. In *Budapest*, the story is introduced through a young girl's novel and ends with the girl and her novel again. The narrative presents the human condition, as perceived by Anderson, in different eras, countries and characters. It refuses to solve the issues it raises or provide any closure. Dignan incarceration is an unfortunate event, he does not regret it and appears at peace when the boys visit him. Gustave's unexpected death is presented, as is Agatha's; there is no higher moral ascribed to it. Anderson's presents it clinically.

Like *Fantastic* and *Tenenbaums*, *Budapest* divides the film into parts resembling chapters and storytelling conceits (Robey, 2014). Each part marks the main event of that sequence; e.g. Part 3: "Check-point 19 Criminal Internment Camp" depicts the Absurd life of Gustave inside the prison as he befriends criminals and smuggles, with the help of Agatha and Zero, digging tools into pretty Mendl treats. The scary prison is portrayed more like a grubby accommodation facility, a stopping place (albeit involuntary), with prisoners bodybuilding and playing cards. The storybook structure of the narrative continually eludes to the artifice and superficiality of Anderson's fictional world, causing a detachment from the narrative and the characters. *Bottle* conforms to, what King terms, a more classical Hollywood narrative which progresses in a linear, forward manner; it necessitates an overreaching structure that includes an evidently marked beginning, middle and end. In this form, an initial state of harmony is disrupted and eventually restored in a different form, after overcoming obstacles (2005, p.60). *Budapest* manipulates its narrative by adopting a Chinese box structure

to narrate events and develop its characters.; the film follows a temporally fluid structure with the narrative going back and forth in time. *Bottle* presents a narrative where the viewer is dropped into the middle of Anthony, leaving the rehabilitation facility, while *Budapest* offers more clarity in introducing characters and plotlines.

Bottle offers a more naturalistic scenario of three friends trying, unsuccessfully, to live a life of crime. Hill describes the film as, 'Part coming-of-age tale, part abbreviated road picture, part love story that simultaneously felt like a wrong turn and the sweetest detour worth your attention, and part absurdist heist picture' (2008, p.93). His description is apt in that it feels like a film figuring out where it wants to belong, the camera work, the themes and the performances all indicate to the beginnings of a director, fixated with portraying a certain kind of condition, involving certain kinds of characters. In contrast, *Budapest* is a piece of work honed with Anderson's accumulated skills, influences and thematic interests. Both films also show the evolution of the relationship shared between Anderson and his cinematographer, Yeoman, and their evolving world of artifice, symmetrical frame and stunted performances. The naturalistic car escape of the trio in *Bottle* resembles the generic style of a road movie; while the chase scenes in *Budapest* are doll-like in their naturalistic detail. Especially with the ski chase between Joplin and Gustave and Zero, the movement and characters look animated than human in their form.

Dignan and Anthony, along with Gustave and Zero form similar dualities and power relations, like the relationships depicted in *Godot*, *Rosencrantz* and *Endgame*. Dignan and Gustave are the controlling and dominant characters, while Anthony and Zero are the loyal and obedient companions. Their fear of isolation drives the dominating

characters, Dignan and Gustave, to become neurotic and controlling. Dignan has a seventy-five-year plan for Anthony and himself, and Gustave maintains absolute control over the hotel, despite being incarcerated. In the incongruity between what they want out of their lives and what is happening to them is where their absurdity lies (Bennett, 2011). The dysfunctionality of Dignan and Anthony's relationship matches that of Gustave and Zero. Despite their differences, the pairs accept and acknowledge each other. Dignan, Anthony and Bob are a crew and find a space of belonging with one another, a factor they attempt to reproduce with Mr Henry and his gang unsuccessfully. Gustave and Zero are inseparable with both of them running and eventually owing the hotel. Both pairs share attributes that resemble those of Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot*, as described by Hoffman, 'they are often naïve, patient, at times intensely practical and selfish, but durably patient' (1964, p.138). They are different and yet similar in their characterisation; they both find themselves facing estrangement and in their desperate attempt to avoid this, find solace and a sense of accomplishment in each other's plan. They are all lonely, exacting and naïve about their worldviews.

The initial escape scene from *Bottle* shows the three ecstatic men drive off in Bob's car, after robbing a bookstore; they believe they are on the run from "Johnny Law". The trio are excited by their escape, with the camera chaotically following them as they buy an assortment of fireworks from a vendor. A wide shot of the car driving off, as fireworks are released cuts to several a medium closeup shots of Dignan from behind as he hangs out of the car window and fires some fireworks, excited and childlike. Their escape from their hometown shows Dignan the most excited and optimistic, while the more privileged Anthony and Bob appear disgruntled, driven to

Dignan's adventures due to their boredom. *Bottle* offers an insightful representation of class and privilege, juxtaposed with the story of Inez's life, a detour from the later White middle-class centric storylines of his film.

Conclusion

Both *Bottle* and *Budapest* create whirlwind adventures with elaborate heists, guns, fireworks, murder, prison breaks, liberally perfumed men, secret societies and dramatic journeys of redemption and justice. The two films are remarkable in their construction of events, *Bottle* presents a profoundly humane treatment of relationships, while the bizarre stop-motion ski chase, in *Budapest*, perfectly embodies Anderson's controlled and playful worlds. The two films mark the two ends of Anderson's professional development; as his characters and worlds become more controlled and performances more stilted, it represents his evolving nature of humanity. His protagonists, much like him, always want to maintain control in their worlds, leading to dysfunction, alienation and sometimes death.

Towards the end of *Budapest*, Zero and Agatha are seated on a train opposite Gustave, on the 21st day of the occupation⁹⁹ headed to Lutz. The colour of the frame is now black and white as opposed to the vibrant colour that the rest of the film had exemplified. Gustave answers a question that Zero had asked him at the beginning of the film about his "humble beginnings in the hotel trade", Gustave informs them,

⁹⁹ Through the voice-over, the audience is informed that Zubrowka now officially ceased to exist as an independent state and had been taken over by the occupation.

I was, perhaps, for a time, considered the best lobby boy we'd ever had at the Grand Budapest. I think I can say that. This one (pointing at Zero) finally surpassed me. Although I must say, he had an exceptional teacher.

The three characters have come a long way in the film, now sharing a familial bond. Tragically there is their last interaction with each other, with the train braking at a barley field, evoking a similar scene that had occurred in the first half of the film. The militia climbs on board and interrogates them, and in trying to save Zero again, Gustave is killed by a firing squad. Portraying the absurdism of the situation, Gustave is unable to understand the preordained nature of the event or see his privilege work against him. Gustave dies leaving everything to Zero, who carries the legacy of the Grand Hotel forward.

Unfortunately, the Grand Hotel is grand no more, as the young author narrating the story informs us. It has succumbed to disrepair and symbolises the obsolete era to which it belonged. In *Bottle and Budapest*, Anderson explores the process of loss: loss of innocence, purpose, an era and the loss of a loved one. In both films, the protagonists are confronted with their Absurd conditions; Dignan becomes a hero only to get incarcerated, Gustave becomes wealthy only to be murdered, and Zero becomes rich and old, only to find himself alone, clinging to his memories.

Anderson's oeuvre has been compared to the New Sincerity movement, and his work embodies traits discussed by Collins (1993); these include a move back to a time that was not corrupted by the sophistication of media culture to explore a lost authenticity and purity. In these two films, Anderson places his protagonists in a world untouched by a so-called destructive media culture. *Bottle* revels in the innocence and naivety of

its characters, while *Budapest* is based in four different time periods connected through the process of storytelling. The girl reading her book is placed in the present, the author whose book she is reading is placed in 1985 narrating the story of his visit to Grand Hotel in 1968, here he meets Moustafa who then narrated his story placed in 1932. The entire process is nostalgic of the nature of storytelling and uses one of Anderson's favourite storytelling conceits, the book.

In this chapter, I analyse the role that escape and belonging play in the complicated worlds of *Bottle* and *Budapest*. Through the discussion of these two themes explored in the TotA, I have aimed to create a link between Anderson and the Absurd, not claiming their similarity but exploring their discussion of the human condition. Anderson has used motifs of travel and stopping places to show the transition his characters continue to make as their identities evolve. Thus, the hotel and motel become significant places where the characters reveal their changing identity and their growing understanding of the outside world and their changing perspectives. The characters always attempt to escape their situations, only to return to the spaces and relationships that are familiar to them, irrespective of how dysfunctional they might be.

The occurrence of Absurd themes in Anderson's films allows a more complex reading of the film, and while many of the characteristics exhibited by Anderson's work have been labelled as part of the new sincerity, quirky, smart and melancomical, they all tend to agree on the similar themes and structures his films utilise. The absurdist analysis of his films addresses these same themes, embodied in the irony used, deadpan conversational styles and the awkward framing of his characters to show unease,

dysfunction and growing understanding of their melancholic conditions. Furthermore, his influences stem from the French New Wave cinema, who were influenced by the works of Camus, Sartre and Beckett and other absurdist writers. Numerous scenes in his films paying homage to these films along with other seminal film texts. While Anderson's characters find themselves waiting, and along the way occupying their time by indulging in crime, adventure, misdemeanours and romance. They find their existence and purpose being questioned and challenged, unable to escape their narrative spaces except through death.

William R. Mueller and Josephine Jacobsen in their discussion of absurdity, write that becoming aware of time's destructiveness and nature's indifference, individuals may turn to themselves, only to find no comfort there. This individual formerly confident of their humanity and freedom to live their life as they please now find themselves in a state of confusion and despair. The individual resigns to function as 'a machine, bound to repetitive and fatuous gestures that deny his human beingness' (1967, p.226). Anderson's cinematic worlds are filled with characters disappointed in their inability to fix their situations, doubting their sense of selves and their freedom to control their chaotic lives. In all his narratives, these characters eventually conform to the life prescribed to them, living in repetitive worlds where they submit to living stunted existences.

No other character embodies this Absurd sentiment as much as Dignan. *Bottle* ends with Dignan telling Anthony, "Isn't it funny how you used to be in the nut house, and now I'm in jail?"; this is followed by Dignan walking in slow motion towards the prison, as the camera zooms into Anthony and Bob hanging on to the fence watching

him leave. Dignan finally manages to be on par with Anthony, be the martyred hero in his story and accept the repetitive nature of his existence. He is the archetypal Absurd hero, unable to escape his world but opportunely trudging on, in a space where his 'human beingness' is denied to him and where his friends await his return, accepting their Absurd conditions.

Conclusion

While I write this conclusion, in early 2018, Anderson's new film *The Isle of Dogs* has just released, and critics are already lauding its quirky sensibility¹⁰⁰. This film is Anderson's second entirely stop-motion animated film. Following the fictional Zubrowka in *Budapest*, it takes place in a fictional Japanese setting. Anderson creates yet another elaborate world, and in using animation, manages to steep them in further artifice in faithful to the aesthetic and thematic guidelines his films follow. His last film, *Budapest* was his most intricate and tightly controlled narrative portraying his penchant for dysfunction and loneliness; it stands to see how Anderson's new film and his upcoming work compare to his existing body of work. Will his style gradually evolve to depict more and more controlled artificial worlds of human marionettes or will Anderson continue to discuss the Absurd human condition?

I have taken the position in this thesis that Anderson is a distinctive filmmaker, who consistently addresses absurdist themes in his impressive body of work. The particulars of his distinctive authorial style and his ability to create fictional worlds that distance his audience and simultaneously draw their attention are visualised in all his films. As I discuss throughout this thesis, Anderson's has a particular aesthetic and thematic style that immediately draws awareness to the fact that you are watching an Anderson film. From his predilection towards portraying innocence and childhood to

¹⁰⁰ *CNN* article by Brain Lowry (23 March, 2018) titled "'Isle of Dogs' scratches quirky itch with animated fantasy'. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/22/entertainment/isle-of-dogs-review/index.html>. *Film School Rejects* article by Tomris Laffly (23 March, 2018) titled 'Isle of Dogs' cast and creators on bringing the world of canines to life'. Available at <https://filmschoolrejects.com/isle-of-dogs-cast-and-creators/>.

his incessant need to show dysfunctional families, he has a definitive style; one on which numerous parodies emerge, he has cultivated his own authorial brand.

This thesis puts forward the conceptualisation of a Cinema of the Absurd, while specifically addressing Anderson's use of unconventional elements like deadpan humour, crosstalk and blank expressions, how they are conveyed through the stock shots he uses: long static shots, planimetric shots, awkward two-person shots and dollhouse shots. The visual techniques he employs creates a distinctive universe of characters embedded in their narcissistic, dysfunctional relationships, which they cannot, or will not leave. The awkward two-person shots in *Budapest* and the awkward three-person shots in *Darjeeling* are iconic in their ability to conjure awkwardness and melancholy, depicting characters struggling to come-to-terms with their conditions. Additionally, his use of the dialogue and crosstalk as highlighted in *Rushmore* and *Life Aquatic* to further emphasise the complicated relationships between the egotistical protagonists that frequent his worlds. Through engaging with scholarship on Anderson's body of work and the TotA, I argue that Anderson consistently draws on absurdist themes in all of his films to depict the human condition, as cynical, melancholic and naive.

I do not label Anderson's work under the CotA as his narratives tend to embrace more linear storytelling and in true Indiewood form have capitilised on their whimsical nature while still eluding to tradtional plotlines. His work shares similarities with absurdist texts but also differes starkly from them in his approach and aesthetics. However, I do believe it is important to look at his work under the Absurd to highlight how absurdism has been addressed in independent film today, to make a case for a

wider understanding of the Absurd and film. To go beyond his work as just an authorship study but as a study of a wider climate of dysfunctionality and alienation addressed in independent film today.

The thesis initially approaches Anderson's work, by analysing the wider discourses of independent cinema, smart cinema, the new sincerity movement and quirky cinema. I argue that these discourses are all relevant to the discussion of Anderson's work. Buckland's (2012) application of the new sincerity and Sconce's (2002) terminology of smart cinema is especially relevant in their discussion of his work, as they draw on the use of irony as a tool to encourage emotional disengagement. Furthermore, the new sincerity movement touches on a sense of 'lost authenticity', which Anderson's work portrays in its exploration of worlds without sophisticated media technology (Collins, 1993, p.259). Thematically each discourse centralises the representation of youth, childhood and innocence and protagonists who are narcissists, while each strand of analysis recognises the family as a site of crisis and dysfunction. As I have illustrated, all of these characteristics are themes that are discussed within the TotA since the 1950s. The narcissism of Absurd characters unable to look beyond their worlds is well documented in the plays of Beckett and Ionesco, and as I have argued Absurd characters like the protagonists of Anderson's films were already existing in the tragicomedy of the '50s where dramatic irony and crosstalk was a staple of their dialogue; the ironic disappointment of characters like Hamm and Clov (*Endgame*) and the courtiers (*Rosencrantz*) who never fully realise their purpose, mirror the melancholy of Anderson's flawed anti-heroes.

Anderson's films provide numerous opportunities to laugh and at the same time to realise how thinly disguised the line between comedy and tragedy is. His characters face an Absurd world that is inescapable and seemingly impenetrable. The world of Anderson¹⁰¹, as this thesis discusses, is not based on a superficial whimsical aesthetic. Instead, his films bring to the forefront pressing issues such as depression, broken families, suicide and destructive narcissism. Sherry B. Ortner writes that given the number of independent films which are dark and disturbing, they appear to be indicative of a generic trend (2013, p.60). She further writes that one variety of darkness addressed is an 'emotional misery and depression, usually related to impossible relationships in which the characters are trapped' (ibid., p.61). I argue that this is a theme Anderson's films portray explicitly; in their discussion of suicide and depression, in worlds of artifice and deadpan performances, Anderson highlights the incongruity between a world that is aesthetically perfect to characters living lives that are not. The characters are trapped in Absurd worlds where what they expect from their existence is never actualised; the disappointment and dysfunctional behaviour they exhibit is in response to this absurdity. Despite the sinister nature of absurdist themes, Anderson's films in their displacement of emotions and tone devalue the severity and tragedy of the situation by drawing on humour to address these uncomfortable issues. Throughout this thesis, I maintain that Anderson's films portray the human condition. In the chapters, I thematically discuss the aesthetics and communication patterns that his films employ, which I argue are absurdist, leading to a more nuanced reading of Anderson's films and the characters he creates.

¹⁰¹ Anderson has been producing a significantly growing body of work, and on the 9th of October 2015, *IndieWire* announced that Anderson is working on a stop-motion animation film about a dog, and possibly on an anthology film inspired by the works of Vittorio De Sica.

In analysing the role absurdist themes play in Anderson's films and the implication it can have on the reading of the film, this thesis aims to create a thematic analysis that can apply to other independent films made from the mid-1990s. Most of these films have been discussed by Sconce (2002), MacDowell (2010), Buckland (2012) and Perkins (2013). They have been discussed in relation to indie discourse, and many have been enlisted as smart, quirky or as part of the new sincerity movement. While they differ from Anderson, they also discuss absurdist themes in varying degrees. For example Paul Thomas Anderson's discussion of dysfunctional relationships and spaces in *Punch Drunk Love* (2002), Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's explorations of individuality and innocence in *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), Gondry's intoxicating and heightened world in *The Science of Sleep* (2006), David O. Russell's dysfunctional individuals in *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), Sofia Coppola's world of isolation in *Lost in Translation* (2003), Spike Jonze's fragmented world in *Being John Malkovich* (1999), Kelly Reichardt's naturalistic and quiet worlds in *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), Noah Baumbach's endearing dysfunctional relationships in *Frances Ha* (2012), Jason Reitman's *Men, Women and Children* (2014) and David Zellner's distorted worlds in *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter* (2014). These films approach the nature of absurdity in different ways, which while different to the artifice and irony that Anderson uses to discuss the human condition; still, recognise the innate dysfunction and tragedy associated with the human condition. Zellner's *Kumiko* is a breathtaking portrayal of the disintegration of Kumiko's mind and self as she journeys to find the treasure buried in the Coen brother's film *Fargo* (1996). Her only release come in death and she dies disillusioned and alone.

These films portray a growing disillusion with society, often portraying thematic and aesthetic styles that I argue are Absurd. A. Sanchez-Escalonilla writes, one of the recurring characteristics of Indiewood filmmakers is a concern towards the cultural, economic and social legacy that will be handed down to later generations. These filmmakers belong to the Generation X which consisted of individuals born in a climate of economic neoliberalism, domestic instability, a high divorce rate and an increasing number of 'so-called 'latchkey' children' (2016, p.31). Their cinema reflects these themes, while also portraying the changing nature of humanity. For instance, Anderson's films repeatedly question family values and comment on the nature of educational and communal structures in America, while portraying a nostalgic image of these structures. His earlier films were more historically situated in their performances, discussing the era in which they were created in; however, his later films have increasingly begun to recline to more nostalgic representations of bygone eras and objects.

In analysing the work of Anderson, I argue that they are concerned with absurdist stylistics. His films embrace, emulate and regurgitate themes that are crucial to absurdist texts and discuss the nature of the human condition that is isolated, alienated and dysfunctional. While, I have analysed his feature films and discussed the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and Stoppard to illustrate how the themes conceived in the Absurd find a significant place in Anderson's filmography, It is not just a phenomenon limited to Anderson's films, in the introduction I outline the impact that the Absurd had on Art, culture and literature and subsequently I argue that it is not only witnessed in the films of Anderson but that its traits can similarly be found in

film under the banners of Indiewood and independent American films in the late 20th and 21st century, as mentioned earlier.

The chapters in this thesis discuss how Anderson's filmography aesthetically and thematically incorporate Absurd themes. The fear and awkwardness that defines the characters in his films are what distances them from audiences, while simultaneously making them relatable. Their inability to escape one another, unless confronted by death, is what binds these characters in their inherent need to belong within a social structure. Anderson's films are defined by their familial (domestic) spaces or by their absence. The family is a consistent theme that he has been addressed from his first feature, *Bottle* (1996) and is a site of dysfunction, emphasising the absurdity of family relationships that are meant to provide security and freedom, but instead, cause dysfunction and isolation.

Anderson's cinematic families come in all shapes and forms, whether in the form of symbolic (pseudo) families or real ones. His preoccupation with the dysfunctional family is contrasted to the nostalgic view of the ideal American family which again is discussed as an impossible ideal throughout his work. Although his families never manage to attain perfection or normalcy, they present a picture of the disillusioned social construct of the family in the 21st century. Anderson's reference to an ideal father figure, or lack of one, is accompanied by a mother figure who is not limited by her ability to nurture and is presented as the anti-mother figure, career driven and cold at times: Patricia in *Darjeeling* and Laura in *Moonrise*. The dysfunctional family is a repetitive theme explored by absurdist playwrights in their work, such as *Endgame*, *Prima Donna*, *Amédée*, and *Homecoming*. Beckett and Ionesco's characters like

Andersons existed in worlds of stunted emotions, destructive relationships and disintegrating communication that fails to communicate anything with real emotion. They challenge the status quo of the era, politically and socially, by challenging the social institutions that define them: marriage, family and gender. I argue that Anderson's film, like his independent contemporaries, are attempting to challenge the social institutions that define them as well, as indicated thinly veiled criticism of contemporary neo-liberal consumer society, a premise supported by Anderson's nostalgic idealisation of the past, and absence of sophisticated media from his diegesis.

Through the course of eight feature films, Anderson addresses a primary concern of the Absurd that is an insular world, a world of quirks, whimsies and peculiar individuals that embrace awkwardness and nostalgia. Ionesco writes, 'A revolution is a change of mentality' (1964, p.102); his plays like many of his TotA contemporaries attempted to address the disillusionment and changing society of the time. While dysfunction and the portrayal of a world that lacks meaning are repeatedly deliberated in their works, it also represents the versatile nature of humour to both make audiences laugh and challenge their understanding of the circumstances being depicted. Fast forward to 50 years on, and a new kind of absurdity has emerged, challenging dominant norms and structures of films. These films represent the change that the late 20th century and 21st century is witnessing regarding social norms, culture, technology and (identity) politics.

In Reitman's *Men, Women and Children* (2014), the narrator in the film ominously declares:

Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. Like it or not, for the moment, the earth is where we make our stand. The narrator addresses, through the analogy of the entire planet, the human condition. In the film Tim Mooney (Ansel Elgort) plays a teenager, who on discovering a video on YouTube of Carl Sagan's *The Pale Blue Dot*¹⁰² is thrown into an existential and Absurd limbo, declaring that everything in this world is meaningless. The notion of external help, being able to address the Absurd void and save individuals, is a concept that contemporary filmmakers have challenged and refuted.

Change is presented as coming from within since outside help leads to further dysfunctionality. Barry Egan's (Adam Sandler) character in P.T Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), is a character with severe psychological problems. He finally seeks his brother-in-law for help, saying, "I wanted to ask you something because you're a doctor... I don't like myself sometimes. Can you help me?" The notion of dysfunctional individuals seeking or denying help is a common motif that runs through these films, Egan's inability to accept himself and his Absurd condition impacts his mental and emotional health. He retreats into his isolated world and finally musters up the nerve, in an absurd series of events, to try a sex hotline to combat his loneliness.

¹⁰² In 1994, Carl Sagan gave a public lecture at Cornell University on the photograph, *Pale Blue Dot*, a photograph of the earth taken from 6 billion kilometres away by the *Voyager 1* space probe, on the 14th of February 1990. Sagan's lecture addressed his reflections on the photograph and the deeper meaning behind this pale blue dot. In the film, he published a book titled *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (1994). Tim's character comes across this concept in a YouTube video and it immediately shapes the way he views his world, throwing him into a conflict between meaning in the everyday and the pointlessness of it, on a universal scale. While, Tim is also dealing with his mother abandoning him and his father, he leaves the school football team despite being the star player causing him to retreat into the world of video games and be taunted by his ex-team players (Wikipedia, 2016).

Discussing Pinter's plays, Bernard F. Dukore writes, 'they begin with comic expectations and then move to a point where laughter stops', providing no real comfort (1976, pp.72-73). The world of Estragon and Vladimir (*Godot*), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (*Rosencrantz*), Hamm and Clov (*Endgame*), and Amédée and Madeleine (*Amédée*) do not provide any comfort. Their dysfunction is chronic and all-consuming. The humour addressing an inherent dysfunction in the humanity, these playwrights were portraying, of the 20th century. This hopelessness is similarly represented by Anderson's characters, who offer no real comfort to the viewer in their dysfunctional, often tragic fates. As discussed in chapter 4 Anderson's worlds skirt the edges of tragedy and comedy, creating an incongruity that is Absurd in itself. For example, Richie's obsessive love for his step-sister Margot leads to him committing suicide (*Tenenbaums*), the moment when Patricia once again abandons her sons (*Darjeeling*), and Sam and Suzy's (*Moonrise Kingdom*) willingness to jump to their deaths to avoid their conformist worlds, or when Gustave is shot dead by a death squad (*The Grand Budapest Hotel*).

These moments and the way in which they unfold challenges the viewer to look beyond the stylization and character interactions to understand that through the perfectly synchronised music, balanced frames and aesthetics, Anderson's films portray characters challenged by a reality that they struggle to accept and the absurdity of trying to do so.

Although this research has confined itself to the work of one contemporary American independent filmmaker, the structure of Absurd films can also be seen in the cinema of Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos (*Dogtooth*, 2009; *The Lobster*, 2015), British

director Richard Ayoade (*Submarine*, 2010; *The Double*, 2013), South African director Roger Michell¹⁰³ (*Le Week-End*, 2013) and Russian director Andrey Zvyagintsev (*The Return*, 2003; *The Banishment*, 2007). Similarly, Swedish director Roy Andersson (*Songs from the Second Floor*, 2000), Australian director Julia Leigh (*Sleeping Beauty*, 2011), Japanese director Yoshihiro Nakamura (*The Foreign Duck, the Native Duck and God in a Coin Locker*, 2007), French director Eugène Green (*Le pont des Arts*, 2004) and Indian filmmakers Anurag Kashyap (*No Smoking*, 2007; *That Girl in Yellow Boots*, 2010), Shoojit Sircar (*Piku*, 2015), Anand Gandhi (*Ship of Theseus*, 2012). These directors are exploring exciting projects that portray absurdist themes in their work, primarily addressing the dysfunction prevalent in the 21st century. However, not all of them adopt humour to challenge and confront the human condition, a trait that largely seems to apply to the American indie directors that I have previously discussed.

Like any study, this one has pursued only a selection of many possible lines of enquiry. As mentioned in the introduction, I have not undertaken an industrial approach or an auteur study of Anderson's work. Given the interdisciplinary nature of my research, my focus has been different from traditional auteur studies that could have been applied to studying Anderson's body of work by demarcating internal textual consistencies at the levels of theme and philosophy. What this thesis has offered is a wide-ranging analysis of the Absurd that is significant to both Anderson's films and the Theatre of the Absurd, from where I draw these themes. I believe it is through a

¹⁰³ While Roger Michell is a South African director, his film like *Notting Hill* (1999), *The Mother* (2003) and *Hyde Park on Hudson* (2012), is based on the lives of English and American individuals.

textual analysis of this kind that a thematic understanding of the Absurd can be discussed in the landscape of independent cinema.

In this thesis, the stand that I have taken is to display how the works of Anderson can be analysed, and similarly help to inform Absurd discourses. It is of note that there is minimal research on cinema and the Absurd and this thesis aims to create a debate around films and filmmakers who in their work significantly address the absurdity of the human condition, adding film in to the discussion of Absurd discourses with the intention of engaging in more of a nuanced analysis of both Anderson's filmography and contemporary debates surrounding the Absurd.

Filmography

- À bout de souffle* (1960) Directed by Jean-Luc Godard [Film]. France: Films Georges de Beauregard, Les Films Impéria.
- A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965) Directed by Bill Melendez [Film]. USA: United Feature Syndicate.
- Antoine and Colette* (1962) Directed by François Truffaut [Film]. France: Les Films du Carrosse
- Aparajito* (1956) Directed by Satyajit Ray [Film]. India: Merchant Ivory Productions.
- Apocalypse Now* (1979) Directed by Francis Ford Coppola [Film]. USA: United Artists.
- Apur Sansar* (1959) Directed by Satyajit Ray [Film]. India: Merchant Ivory Productions.
- Baisers volés* (1968) Directed by François Truffaut [Film]. France: United Artists.
- Bande à part* (1964) Directed by Jean-Luc Godard [Film]. France: Columbia Films.
- Being John Malkovich* (1999) Directed by Spike Jonze [Film]. USA: USA Films.
- Black Jack* (1979) Directed by Ken Loach [Film]. UK: Enterprise.
- Bottle Rocket* (1994) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA. (Short film, screened at Sundance Film Festival 1993)
- Bottle Rocket* (1996) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Sony Pictures Releasing, Columbia Pictures.
- Chimes at Midnight* (1965) Directed by Orson Welles [Film]. USA: Peppercorn-Wormser Film Enterprises.
- Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) Directed by Elia Suleiman [Film]. Palestine, Israel, USA, Germany and France: International Film Circuit, Connaissance du Cinéma, Mongrel Media.
- Citizen Ruth* (1996) Directed by Alexander Payne [Film]. USA: New Films International, Miramax.
- Cousin Ben Troop Screening with Jason Schwartzman* (2012) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Funny or Die.

Diary of a Chambermaid (1964) Directed by Luis Buñuel [Film]. Italy and France: International Classics, Media Home Entertainment, Rialto Pictures.

Divine Intervention (2002) Directed by Elia Suleiman [Film]. France, Morocco, Germany and Palestine: Alamode Film, Artificial Eye, Avatar Films, Bowjapan, Orlando Films, Pyramide Distribution.

Dogtooth (2009) Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos [Film]. Greece: Feelgood Entertainment.

Domestic Violence (2001) Directed by Frederick Wiseman [Film]. USA: Zipporah Films.

Domicile conjugal (1970) Directed by François Truffaut [Film]. France and Italy: Valoria Films, Columbia Pictures.

Eternal Homecoming (2012) Directed by Kira Muratova [Film]. Ukraine: Sota Cinema (Production Company).

Fantastic Mr. Fox (2009) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Farewell, Babylon! (1992) Directed by Fernando Arrabal [Film]. France: Cult Epics.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986) Directed by John Hughes [Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Flirting (1991) Directed by John Duigan [Film]. Australia: Roadshow Film Distributors, Warner Bros. Pictures.

Frances Ha (2012) Directed by Noah Baumbach [Film]. USA: IFC Films.

Full Metal Jacket (1987) Directed by Stanley Kubrick [Film]. UK and USA: Warner Bros., Columbia-Cannon-Warner.

Harold and Maude (1971) Directed by Hal Ashby [Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Hell Is for Heroes (1962) Directed by Don Siegel [Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Hotel Chevalier (2007) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Husbands (1970) Directed by John Cassavetes [Film]. USA: Columbia Pictures.

I Heart Huckabees (2004) Directed by David O. Russell [Film]. USA, UK and Germany: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

If.... (1968) Directed by Lindsay Anderson [Film]. UK: Paramount Pictures.

In Jackson Heights (2015) Directed by Frederick Wiseman [Film]. USA: Zipporah Films.

Jeremiah Johnson (1972) Directed by Sydney Pollack [Film]. USA: Warner Bros.

Jules et Jim (1962) Directed by François Truffaut [Film]. France: Cinédis, Janus Films, Gala Film Distributors.

Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter (2014) Directed by David Zellner [Film]. USA: Amplify.

L'amour en fuite (1979) Directed by François Truffaut [Film]. France: AMLF, New World Pictures, Gala Film Distributors.

L'argent de poche (1976) Directed by François Truffaut [Film]. France: United Artists, New World Pictures, Gala Film Distributors.

Le pont des Arts (2004) Directed by Eugène Green [Film]. France: Roissy Films, Pierre Grise Distribution, Groupement National des Cinémas de Recherche.

Le souffle au coeur (1971) Directed by Louis Malle [Film]. France, Italy and West Germany: Cinema International Corporation, Gala Film Distributors, Palomar Pictures International.

Les quatre cents coups (1959) Directed by François Truffaut [Film]. France: Cocinor, Curzon Film Distributors.

Le Week-End (2013) Directed by Roger Michell [Film]. UK and France: ARP Sélection, Music Box Films.

Little Miss Sunshine (2006) Directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris [Film]. USA: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Long Live Death (1971) Directed by Fernando Arrabal [Film]. France and Tunisia: Max L. Raab Productions, Alliance Releasing Corporation.

Lost in Translation (2003) Directed by Sofia Coppola [Film]. USA and Japan: Focus Features, Tohokushinsha Film Corporation, Momentum Pictures.

Magnolia (1999) Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson [Film]. USA: New Line Cinema.

Melody (1971) Directed by Waris Hussein [Film]. UK: British Lion Film Corporation.

Men, Women and Children (2014) Directed by Jason Reitman [Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Mood Indigo (2013) Directed by Michel Gondry [Film]. France and Belgium: Cinéart, Distribution Company, StudioCanal.

Moonrise Kingdom (2012) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Focus Features.

No Smoking (2007) Directed by Anurag Kashyap [Film]. India: Big Screen Entertainment.

Pather Panchali. 1955. Directed by Satyajit Ray [Film]. India: Aurora Film Corporation, Merchant Ivory Productions.

Piku (2015) Directed by Shoojit Sircar [Film]. India: Yash Raj Films.

Prada: Candy (2013) Directed by Wes Anderson and Roman Coppola [Film]. USA: The Directors Bureau, Prada.

Punch-Drunk Love (2002) Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson [Film]. USA: Sony Pictures Entertainment, Columbia Pictures.

Rebel Without A Cause (1955) Directed by Nicholas Ray [Film]. USA: Warner Bros.

Risky Business (1983) Directed by Paul Brickman [Film]. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Rushmore (1998) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Buena Vista Pictures.

Satan's Brew (1976) Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder [Film]. West Germany: New Yorker Films, Cinegate.

Serpico (1973) Directed by Sidney Lumet [Film]. Italy and USA: Paramount Pictures.

Ship of Theseus (2012) Directed by Anand Gandhi [Film]. India and Netherland: UTV Motion Pictures, Fortissimo Films.

Sleeping Beauty (2011) Directed by Julia Leigh [Film]. Australia: Paramount Pictures, IFC Films.

Songs from the Second Floor (2000) Directed by Roy Andersson [Film]. Swedish, Norway, Denmark: Filmmuseum Distributie, Bitters End, Europafilm AS, Triangelfilm, New Yorker Films.

Submarine (2010) Directed by Richard Ayoade [Film]. UK and USA: Optimum Releasing, The Weinstein Company.

Teen Kanya (1961) Directed by Satyajit Ray [Film]. India: Public Broadcasting Service, Merchant Ivory Productions.

That Girl in Yellow Boots (2010) Directed by Anurag Kashyap [Film]. India: IndiePix Films, Mara Pictures, Digital Media Rights.

That Obscure Object of Desire (1977) Directed by Luis Buñuel [Film]. France and Spain: G.E.F., Compagnie Commerciale Française Cinématographique, First Artists.

The Addams Family (1991) Directed by Barry Sonnenfeld [Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures, Orion Pictures, Columbia Pictures Corporation.

The Asthenic Syndrome (1990) Directed by Kira Muratova [Film]. Soviet Union: Pan Européenne Distribution.

The Banishment (2007) Directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev [Film]. Russia: Artificial Eye, Intercinema XXI Century.

The Darjeeling Limited (2007) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

The Deer Hunter (1978) Directed by Michael Cimino [Film]. USA: Universal Pictures, EMI Films.

The Double (2013) Directed by Richard Ayoade [Film]. UK: Studio Canal, Magnolia Pictures.

The Foreign Duck, the Native Duck and God in a Coin Locker (2007) Directed by Yoshihiro Nakamura [Film]. Japan: Xanadeux, Third Window Films.

The Graduate (1967) Directed by Mike Nichols [Film]. USA: Embassy Pictures.

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Fox Searchlight Pictures, Indian Paintbrush, Studio Babelsberg, American Empirical Pictures, TSG Entertainment, Scott Rudin Productions.

The Grifters (1990) Directed by Stephen Frears [Film]. USA: Cineplex-Odeon Films.

The Last of the Mohicans (1992) Directed by Michael Mann [Film]. USA: Morgan Creek International, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

The Last Picture Show (1971) Directed by Peter Bogdanovich [Film]. USA: Columbia Pictures.

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou (2004) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA:

The Lobster (2015) Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos [Film] Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, UK and France: A24, Feelgood Entertainment, Haut et Court, Picturehouse Entertainment.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1962) Directed by Tony Richardson [Film]. UK: British Lion-Columbia Distributors.

The Magnificent Ambersons (1942) Directed by Orson Welles [Film]. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.

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The Pink Panther (1963-1993) [Film series originally created by Blake Edwards].

The Return (2003) Directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev [Film]. Russia: Kino International, UGC Films.

The River (1951) Directed by Jean Renoir [Film]. France, India, UK, USA: United Artists Corporation.

The Royal Tenenbaums (2001) Directed by Wes Anderson [Film]. USA: Buena Vista Pictures.

The Science of Sleep (2006) Directed by Michel Gondry [Film]. France and Italy: Gaumont International.

The Squid and the Whale (2005) Directed by Noah Baumbach [Film]. USA: Samuel Goldwyn Films.

The Time That Remains (2009) Directed by Elia Suleiman [Film]. UK, Italy, Belgium, France and Palestine: Le Pacte, Cinéart, BIM Distribuzione, IFC Films, New Wave Films.

'Three Directors' (2017) *Family Guy*, Season 16 episode 5. FOX Television, 5 November.

Three Stories (1997) Directed by Kira Muratova [Film]. Russia and Ukraine: NTV-PROFIT.

Titicut Follies (1967) Directed by Frederick Wiseman [Film]. USA: Zipporah Films.

Top Gun (1986) Directed by Tony Scott [Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Touch of Evil (1958) Directed by Orson Welles [Film]. USA: Universal Pictures.

Un Chien Andalou (1929) Directed by Luis Buñuel [Film]. France: Les Grands Films Classiques.

Welcome to the Dollhouse (1995) Directed by Todd Solondz [Film]. USA: Sony Pictures Classics.

Welfare (1975) Directed by Frederick Wiseman [Film]. USA: Public Broadcasting Service.

Wendy and Lucy (2008) Directed by Kelly Reichardt [Film]. USA: Oscilloscope.

West Side Story (1961) Directed by Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise [Film]. USA: United Artists.

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