

## Reflecting New Sincerity: Aesthetic and Effect in Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014)

### Introduction

Wes Anderson's filmography is well known for its distinctive style. The visual language of his films is rather different when compared to the works of other directors. Meanwhile, one can easily recognize his films because of the similar visual language that shared in each of his films. Film scholar Mark Browning underlines the unique and subtle style of Anderson's films in his book *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter*. He states "The only movies Wes Anderson's films look like are other Wes Anderson films" (4). Wes Anderson is considered to be an auteur given the fact that he strictly controls the creative process of his films and insists in a particular aesthetic outcome in all his works (Santas 18). However, the public opinions towards Wes Anderson's authorship are polarized. On one hand, some scholar respect Anderson's consistent visual style for its 'aesthetic precision' (Rybin 42); On the other hand, other film scholars consider his recognizable film style as 'creative stagnation' (Browning 4). Furthermore, in contrast to the extensive debates on social media and online film communities, mainstream print media and academia responded to Anderson's work in a slow manner. Anderson's first film *Bottle Rocket* was released in 1996 while the first book that features a particular study on him and his filmography were only published in 2011. Before that, Wes Anderson was mostly descriptively mentioned by scholars in lists or as an example of a group (Browning 6). In my opinion, the late recognition of Anderson and his works in the scholarly filed is for two reasons. First,

because his film style is too different from other existing films, therefore scholars need some time to decide his works are worth- researching or just a postmodern collage of wow effects. Secondly, because his style is unprecedented, hence it is rather difficult for scholars to compare his works with others. However, it is precise because of such uniqueness, the filmography of Wes Anderson's deserves our attention, perhaps even in an earlier time. In a word, because of Anderson's important position in contemporary cinema and the lack of in-depth studies on his filmography, the research of his works appear to be highly relevant.

Among current academic debates on Wes Anderson's oeuvre, 'smart film' and 'new sincerity' are the two major camps of interests. Cultural historian Jeffrey Sconce first classified Anderson's work as 'smart film' in 2002. As identified by Sconce, 'smart film' is a film category in between art house, independent films and commercial-driven Hollywood films. It serves as an alternative choice for filmmakers who want to distinguish themselves from the mainstream filmmakers and for the audience who are "younger, more educated and bohemian" (351). 'Smart film', as a new term that emerged in the 1990s in the American film industry, sets out a statement of cynicism and irony of the X-generation in the postmodern social and cultural context (Sconce 355).

Unlike Sconce, many other scholars categorized Wes Anderson's work as a representation of the 'new sincerity' tendency that appeared in American popular culture from the mid-1980s onwards. The term 'new sincerity' is developed from the term 'sincerity', which is introduced by film scholar Jim Collins as a total decline of

postmodern irony and a longing of nostalgia. As Collins states, the new sincerity films have a purpose to escape from “the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity”. Such a purpose can be only achieved by “the sincerity that avoids any sort of irony or eclecticism” (257). The notion of new sincerity is further developed by cultural critic Steven Shaviro in 2010. As opposed to Collins’ notion that focusing on the importance of sincerity, Shaviro’s notion clarifies what is ‘new’ in ‘new sincerity’. He argues, ‘new sincerity’ is dialectically related to postmodern irony, it is not a complete rejection but an embodiment (Shaviro 91,176). For example, scholars like Mark Olsen comments that Wes Anderson builds up an alliance with his childlike characters by engaging empathy with an ironic mocking attitude in *Bottle Rocket* (1996) and *Rushmore*(1998) (12). In this case, new sincerity is anchored as a sincere belief in childlike innocence that is conveyed by an ironic expression. In 2012, film scholar James MacDowell contributes to this discussion by indicating a specific quirky sensibility that is from American indie cinema since the 1990s. In his article *Wes Anderson, Tone and the Quirky Sensibility*, MacDowell argues that ‘irony’ and ‘sincerity’ is combined in Wes Anderson’s films, and they are conveyed by a quirky style. As MacDowell states, “The ‘quirky’ is often recognizable by its approach to comedy, a visual style that courts a fastidious ‘artificiality’ , a thematic interest in childhood and innocence, and - most pervasively - a tone which balances ironic detachment with sincere engagement” (6). MacDowell situates quirkiness in a postmodern social and cultural context in which he believes that quirky films react against common signifiers of the postmodern irony. These films suggest a

new structure of feeling on cultural forms by “reformulating the moral logic of earnestness” (12). This new structure of feeling has been defined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as ‘meta-modernism’<sup>1</sup> in their article “Notes on Metamodernism”. Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that meta-modernism is another modernism that arises after post-modernism. It is a status of between that unites ‘modern commitment’ and ‘postmodern detachment’ (2). Meta-modernism occurs under the pressure of rapid social changes, and it reflects an urge for an alternative direction that involves hope and engagement in cultural and artistic practices (4).

Carrying on the aforementioned discussions, this thesis aims to extend the discussion of ‘new sincerity’ in Wes Anderson’s films by analyzing the aesthetics and effect of his visual style. In addition to being the most recent work of Anderson’s, I chose *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) as the case study for its visual complexities that is contributed by extensive use of different film techniques. With the complication of the film provides more layers and dimensions for my analysis. Among various visual practices, I predominantly focus on framing, colour and performance. I pay extra attention to the topic of colour given it has not been profoundly discussed by academia. The research question of my study is “how does the visual style of Wes Anderson’s film *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) illustrate new sincerity with both modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony”. To approach the answers of my main question, two following sub-questions are formed:

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<sup>1</sup> “Meta”, as originated from Greek “μετά” means “between” or “beyond”.

1. What are the current debates on new sincerity and how to situate it in a postmodern condition?
2. How is new sincerity conveyed through the framing, colour and performance in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014)?

My study regarding 'new sincerity' in Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) is a close reading on the film. My analysis is based on film studies, especially the studies on formal film techniques and in which way these techniques produce a certain effect and establish a particular film style, in addition, I apply cultural theories to my analysis. Recent scholarly research on the oeuvre and specific cases of Wes Anderson's serves as my primary sources, and related discussions on mainstream online platforms are used as secondary information to support my arguments. The applied methodology in this thesis is visual analysis, precisely, from the compositional and technological modalities of film images. Despite that my analysis is grounded in a postmodern social and cultural context, it is important to acknowledge its subjectivity given the fact that film effects are formed by cognitive and imaginative capabilities of audience. When connecting film aesthetics and effects with new sincerity, I use Raymond Williams' notion, namely 'structure of feeling' as the theoretical framework of my analysis, as to transform the emotional effects of the film to aesthetic sensibilities. However, the notion of 'structure of feeling' has not been clearly defined in the thesis. The reason is that 'structure of feeling' is a vague term itself given it can only be viewed as a trajectory. 'Structure of feeling' refers to the different ways of thinking at a specific time. Similar to 'discourse', it is encouraged to

be read between the lines (oxfordreference.com). In my case study, the term is used to represent a feeling, a sensibility, or a movement that is catalyzed by a social, cultural and philosophical context. Moreover, I aim to achieve the following research objectives through my analysis. Firstly, I intend to make my contribution to the current debates of new sincerity in films which in relation to the appeal of a new structure of feeling after postmodernism. And secondly, I aim to affirm that Anderson's visual style is consistent with new sincerity sensibilities by dissecting the symbiosis between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). Last but not least, I aspire to confirm my belief in Wes Anderson's auteur position by pinpoint the high artistry in the film. In the following, I divide my arguments into four chapters. In the first chapter "New Sincerity in a Postmodern Condition", I discuss the meaning of new sincerity in relation to the economic, social and political environments in a postmodern context, as well as how sincerity is represented in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014); In the second chapter "Framing and Ironic Distance", I analysis how irony is constructed through a sense of distance that is created by the framing technique in the film; In the third chapter "Colour and Childlike Innocence", I explain the relations between the simplification of colour in the film and the sensibility of childlike innocence; In the fourth chapter "Performance and Quirky Sensibilities", I argue that the quirky performance in the film balance modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony.

## **1. New Sincerity in a Postmodern Condition**

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker view 'new sincerity' as an aesthetic strategy of an emerging new structure of feeling called meta-modernism as opposed to post-modernism. Meta-modernism, as clarified, is historically beyond post-modernism given it appears at a later time; It is as well considered to be ontologically between postmodernism because it swings between modernism and postmodernism; Moreover, It is viewed epistemologically with (post) modernism for its combination of modern commitment and postmodern detachment (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker 2). Meta-modernism is an on-going process that demonstrates a status of "we are once both here and there and nowhere", as German philosopher Eric Voegelin demonstrates (6). As a matter of fact, more and more cultural motifs that are sourced back to the Romantic era, such as 'full moon', 'ethereal cityscapes' and 'sublime landscapes' are recalled and represented in current cultural practices, examples include Stephenie Meyer's novel *Twilight* (2005), Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's photography series *The Ruins Of Detroit* (2005-2010), and David Lynch's film *Lost Highway* (1997) to name a few. Judging from this emerging phenomenon, Vermeulen and Van Den Akker believe that there is a clear tendency of returning to romanticism or emerging a sensibility of neo-romanticism in cultural industries (8). In addition, Vermeulen and Van Den Akker assert that the catalyst for meta-modernism is the rapid social changes in the postmodern era. Because the ecosystem is becoming disordered, the financial system is out of control and the global geopolitical situation is wobbly, all the existing challenges we are facing require we act differently or at least, start with having an alternative perspective, a switch

from the universal gaze of the west, to a variety of 'glocalized perceptions' (4). As a responding strategy to these postmodern challenges, 'new sincerity' then can be taken as an alternative approach that introduces different perspectives, aesthetics and techniques to postmodern cultural products.

Vermeulen and Van Den Akker's argument on meta-modernism is essayistic and open-ended. As I see, rather than offering a clear definition about this new structure of feeling, it is more important that Vermeulen and Van Den Akker capture the tension between the opposite stands of modernism and postmodernism in cultural and artistic practices. Because such tension is unexpected, unnatural yet unavoidable, it is deemed to be addressed to achieve a sense-making creative expression. A great example of this tension-solving approach is our case study of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). To begin with, I argue that Wes Anderson's approach achieving a harmonious state in meta-modernism is to naturalize the unmatched sensibilities or tones of modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony. Situating my arguments with new sincerity, Wes Anderson's approach of naturalization is to shift audience's attention from the narrative development of the film to the film itself. By doing so, the audience can separate themselves from the unmatched tones thus the tension evokes by the tone conflicts are dismissed. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), Anderson's approach is exhaustive and deliberate.

In her article about Wes Anderson's filmography, Anne Washburn argues that similarity among all Anderson's films is a craft of world-making (9). No matter which aspect of the film, from mise-en-scene, the cinematography and characters,



everything is purposefully designed and arranged to create a themed world. Likewise, in her article “The Anderson Touch”, Isabel Stevens exemplifies the myth of world-making in Wes Anderson’s films. She says “Like the prestigious Rushmore Academy, the animal world in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* or scout life in *Moonrise Kingdom*, the *Grand Budapest Hotel* is a universe of strict rules and secret codes that contrast starkly with the gleeful mayhem that ensues” (31). My interpretation on Stevens’ statements is that the charm of Wes Anderson’s films does not only come from the world that he depicts but also the way he depicts it. In my opinions, Wes Anderson distinguishes himself from his peers by shifting from recreating or mimicking realism, as what films are traditionally expected to do, to emphasize the artistic expression of his own style (Turvey 87). To clarify further, more than a medium for storytelling, Wes Anderson’s films are beautiful, expressive, and well-crafted visual arts. In order to prove my arguments, I will uncover Anderson’s approach of film-art making by dissecting the framing, colour and performance techniques in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), and investigate the narrative, visual and emotional effects that are evoked by these sensibilities.

## **2. Framing and Ironic Distance**

When discussing new American ‘smart’ film from the 1990s, Jeffery Sconce argues that a shared sensibility of “irony, black humor, fatalism, relativism and even nihilism” (350) is manifested in the result of the non-participation to a certain belief, politics and social commitment from the Generation X, meaning the post-boomers in

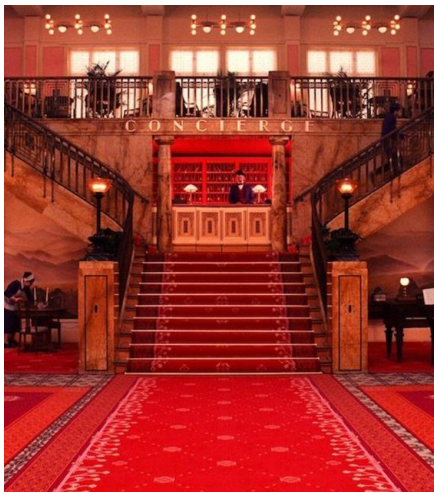
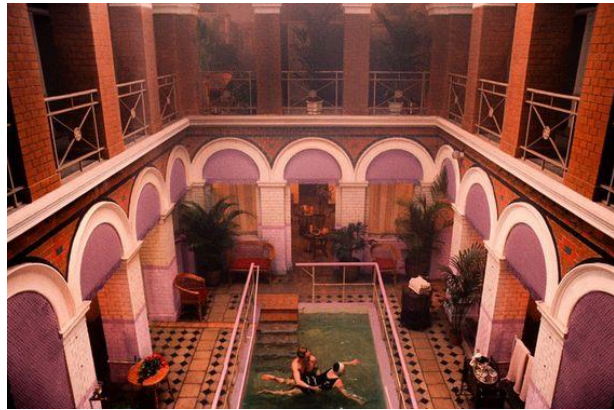
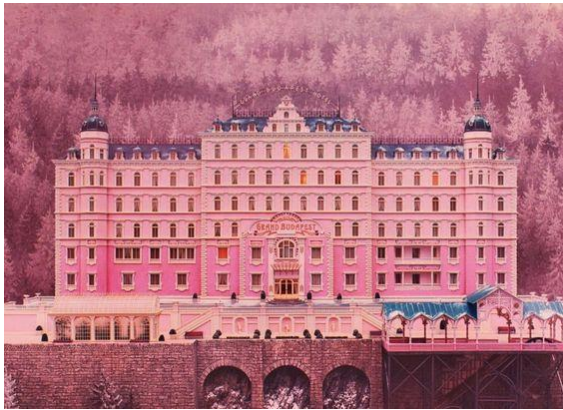
America. Such a dampened sensibility signifies “dispassion, disengagement and disinterest” (359) and it is accomplished by certain stylistic choices. Sconce names this strategy of the smart film ‘blank’ style, which is basically implemented through framing and editing technique that includes the use of “long-shots, static composition and sparse cutting” (359). Sconce believes that by applying the ‘blank styles’, a film encourages a way of “clinical observation” (360) to the viewing experience and fosters a sense of distance between audience and the story world. Extending from Sconce’s theories, David Bordwell claims the ironic characteristic in Anderson’s films. He concludes the visual pattern of Anderson’s films from a cinematographic point of view and as he specifies, these patterns include “a static, at-looking, medium-long or long ‘planimetric’ shot” (davidbordwell.net). Following Sconce and Bordwell, I will focus on framing in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) in this chapter, especially from the aspects of camera position and distance of framing. I will argue that symmetry, long and extreme long shots, and bird-eye view shots result in a tableau aesthetic presentation in the film. Moreover, I will explain to what extent such a static framing style conveys the sensibility of irony in the film and what precisely are the effects evoked by the style.

Before dissecting into the analysis of framing, it is important to know what is framing and why it matters. According to David Bordwell et al., “Cinematography (literally, ‘writing in movement’) depends to a large extent on photography (‘writing in light’)” (159). Creative decisions that made by cinematographers are a combination of selecting the range of tonalities, controlling the speed of motion, transforming

perspective, and, last but not the least, composing the visual contents through the frame. Framing is complicated because it concerns coordination and balance with various visual elements, and meanwhile, it is important because in point of fact it decides what audience sees from the film.

As argued by many film critics, Wes Anderson, along with Paul Thomas Anderson and Stanley Kubrick, are the very few film directors in history that are recognized for the extensive use of symmetric framing in their works (premiumbeat.com). Filmmakers hold a cautious attitude to symmetry because of its' extreme visual power. Film scholar Louis Thonsgaard defines the meaning of symmetry in films as “material being organized in such a way that it conveys a sense of unity through the repetition of one or more” (209). Because repetitive forms in pictures generate a sense of order that easily catch audience’s attention, so symmetry is considered to be visually powerful. However, the use of symmetry is not generally encouraged by film theorists given that if symmetry was not used skillfully, it can also make a picture too artificial or even fake. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), symmetric framing is extensively employed for different scenarios. One of the most impressive scenarios is the hotel introduction scene at the beginning. When the Grand Budapest Hotel makes its first appearance to audience, a series of symmetrical shots are presented, featuring the architecture, the space and the interior details of the building (see fig.1-4).

Fig. 1-4. Symmetrical shots of the Grand Budapest Hotel.



Not incidentally, these shots are suited to axial symmetric, as they provide two mirroring parts that counter-balancing each other and their compositions are statically in balance (Thonsgaard 212). At the visual level, these symmetrical shots are powerful. Firstly, the emphasis of lines and orders in the shots echoes the historical and institutional image of the hotel; Secondly, by transferring the tridimensional architectural space into a flat and artificial picture, the symmetrical shots offer a forceful visual twist to audience; Thirdly, when repetitively using shots with symmetrical framing, the film visualizes a distinctive and overall aesthetic style. Furthermore, the symmetrical visual style assists the narrative development of the film. By forming an unnatural artificiality and flatness with the repetitive forms of symmetry, the film creates an unreal ambiance to the hotel, and it makes audience

perceive the hotel as a fantasy. Because fantasy is beautiful but unreal, it hints that the magnificence of the hotel is not going to last. By doing so, the symmetrical shots in the film plant a seed for the final descent of the hotel and the tragic change of the protagonists, particularly the legendary Monsieur Gustave H (Ralph Fiennes). Moreover, given the symmetric shots in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) is sophisticatedly arranged, the cinematography itself signifies a sense of crafting and beauty which makes the film more appreciable. As such, the visual effects of the film is increased.

Wes Anderson's static visual style functions as a framework structure that other cinematographic techniques can rely on and derivate from. And the application of other cinematographic techniques, such as the use of long shots and extreme long shots add dynamics into the film by breaking the consistency of such a static style. In order to dissect these dynamic, it is important to first clarify that these shots concern a particular aspect of framing which is 'camera distance', meaning how far the camera stays close to the subjects when it captures the subjects (Bordwell et al. 189). In my following analysis, I chose one long short (see fig.5) and one extreme long shot (see fig. 6) from the sequence where Mr. Gustave H escapes from the prison and goes on a journey with Zero (Tony Revolori) to meet Serge X (Mathieu Amalric), the butler of Madame D (Tilda Swinton) in order to prove himself innocent.

As demonstrated in the extreme long shot, the camera is rather far away from its shooting subjects, the human figures in the shot appear to be extremely tiny. They integrate with the landscape and become nearly invisible to audience. In the long shot,

figures are bigger and more outstanding. However, audience can still recognize that the backdrop of the shot is more dominant in scale. It is clear that they are visually more powerful than human figures. The result is that the human figures and the environmental background in the shots have been virtually flattened into abstract paintings with simple forms. The abstraction and objectified process of the shots offer a chance of detachment to audience, and in succession, it arouses a sense of emotional distance from audience. In addition, what worth our attention is that the transition of these long or extreme long shot is often implemented with a sudden zoom or cut. The sudden change of perspective in framing not only interrupts audience's visual experience but also, it makes the storytelling of the film fragmented and causes narrative incoherence. By interacting with each other, the long distance of the camera and the sudden transitions between shots, separate the audience with the narrative world. This distant and fragmented narrative style that against the standardized 'intensified continuity' (360) generates what Jeffery Sconce names a 'clinical observation' (360).

Fig.5-6. Long short and extreme long shot in the *Grand Budapest Hotel*.



In addition to long shots and extreme long shots, the unique camera angle that the cinematography applies is another vibrant factor that is added on to the static visual style of the *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). As mentioned previously, David Bordwell pinpoints the characteristic at-looking shots in Wes Anderson's films ([davidbordwell.net](http://davidbordwell.net)). And such an effect of at-looking is often contributed by the straight-on camera angle produced by wide-angle lenses. However, the straight-on shots are not the only way that Anderson varies his images. The opposite of the straight-on shot, namely the bird's-eye view shots that produced by a straight-down angel camera (see fig.7 and fig.8) also has the same function.

Fig.7-8. Bird-eye view shots in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).



As its literal meaning, a 'bird's-eye view' shot gives audience a bird's

perspective, as if they were looking down at the subjects. The bird's-eye view shots draw my attention because it is made by a camera angle that often employed in Wes Anderson's film yet has not been discussed sufficiently. In addition, the bird's-eye view shots are rarely seen in other directors' works (davidboardwell.net). In my opinion, similar to the long shots and extreme long shots, the 'at-looking' bird's-eye view shots "cultivate a sense of distance in audience" (Sconce 360). Moreover, it produces a comic effect that can be regarded as an intention of irony. The first evidence is that the bird's-eye view angle itself is not a natural human perspective, therefore, it is intentional and playful. The second evident is that Anderson often applies bird's-eye view angle for mundane events or objects in the film, such as the way the characters look at each other, or the way that an object is showed. In such circumstances, these bird's-eye view shots are unnecessary yet funny and visually memorable. By imposing a comic effect on the film's visual style, the film conveys an ironic attitude that is distant and cynical.

The sensibility of irony is embraced in 'new sincerity' as the 'new'. And 'sincerity', as another component of the notion, as I see is largely contributed by the recovery of child-like innocence in the case of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). As such, my discussion will move forward to the aspect of colour, a formal technique in the film that advocates nostalgia and a feeling of child-like innocence.

### **3. Colour and Childlike Innocence**

When discussing 'new sincerity' in 1990s American cinema, Jim Collins



mentions that filmmakers in the new sincerity camp attempt “to recover a lost purity” (245) as to express the sense of nostalgia in their aesthetic practice. With regard to the specific case of Wes Anderson, the vibrant mood of nostalgia is conveyed by various signifiers in his films. In her book, *The Cinema of Wes Anderson: Bringing Nostalgia to Life*, Whitney Dilley points out Wes Anderson’s iconoclastic attitude in filmic choices. She suggests Anderson tends to return to old-fashion film techniques and borrowing mise-en-scene from pre-existed subcultural film traditions, such as the French New Wave and the Italian Neorealism (3). Also, as James MacDowell argues, Wes Anderson tries to recapture a childlike innocence by featuring young children, childlike adults, or bringing childhood items and playing with childhood association in his works. He tries to convey a sense of nostalgia by recalling “the pleasures of childishness” (10). However, he keeps reminding us such pleasure will never be regained. Inspired by MacDowell’s opinion, I believe that Wes Anderson extends the nostalgic sensibility to a child-like innocence in his films.

When it comes to the discussion of childlike innocence in Anderson’s films, scholars focus on characterization, particularly the performance of his characters. Vintage and simplified music in his films has also been mentioned as a convention to achieve childlike innocence. However, as an important tool that interacts with different formal film techniques including mise-en-scene, cinematography and editing, colour’s contribution to the feeling of childlike innocence has been touched upon yet not discussed in depth. However, scholars commonly agree the colour palette in Anderson’s film is a reflection of nostalgia. Dilley specifically associates Anderson’s

distinctive colour palette with the interior design style in the 70s (2). In order to find out how colours reflect nostalgia and childlike innocence in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), I will first analyse the colour patterns in the film, subsequently, I will discuss how innocence is constructed by colour and its effect.

Before dissecting the details of colour palette in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), it is necessary to aware that colour has been always a topic that is overlooked in film history. As Joshua Yumibe concludes in his book *Moving color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* that applied colours were not encouraged in early cinema before the 19<sup>th</sup> century because filmmakers often over tined a film with unrefined or exaggerated colours in the aim of an eye-catching effect. In the later cinema, colours in the film are taken for granted because modest colours are reproduced by a fixed color scoring system by 'technicolor production' (Yumibe 190; Bottonmore 441). In addition, film colours are not interested in film critics because most of the time they are simply presented as they are in reality to achieve realism in films. Only when artistic film directors, such as Wes Anderson, enter on the stage and start to manipulate colours to set up certain tonalities in films, scholars start to pay more attention to the effective powers of colours.

According to Dilley, Anderson's films have sophisticated colour schemes, blues, yellows, reds and oranges are often carefully chosen as prominent colours (5). Likewise, MacDowell mentions that Anderson has a tendency to use 'bright block colours' in his films (9). In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), dominant colours are pink, purple, blue and yellow which are saturated and complementary. The film

displays primary bright colours contractedly through settings and costumes, resulting in an intensive visual pattern that easily catches viewers' attention. In addition to creating a stronger visual impression, the juxtaposition of primary chromatic colours in the film as well contribute to the progression of the story. For example, in its prime period, a glowing pink façade and ruby red interior decorations are designated for the Grand Budapest Hotel (see fig.1-4). In contrast, in its later recession time, the main colours of the hotel, no matter interior or exterior are changed to yellow and greenish, which are still bright, contrasted yet less saturated (see fig.12-14). On one hand, by associating the brighter pink, red colours with the hotel's prosperity, and lighter yellow, green colours with the hotel's downfall, the film manipulates colours and imposes symbolic meanings for them. On the other hand, the changing of colour schemes here supports a narrative development that shows the downhill transformation of the Grand Budapest Hotel. Similar to other digital tools, the manipulation of colour in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) has made the film more "expressive, pervasive and immersive" (4), as underlined by Stephen Prince. The colour effect of the *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) does not only come from the contrast display of bright colours, but it also comes from the limited choice of the colour palette in the film. David Bordwell et al. define a 'limited palette' as employing a few colours in the same range of the spectrum (145). A contrasting colour becomes even more powerful in a limited colour palette since it strongly violates the coherence of an image. In the *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), only a few colours are intentionally selected to represent the narrative world of the film, in a way, such a limited colour palette can be understood

as a form of simplification, given the fact that in reality, the world is filled in with much more and complicated colours, and the display of colours there is arbitrary and random.

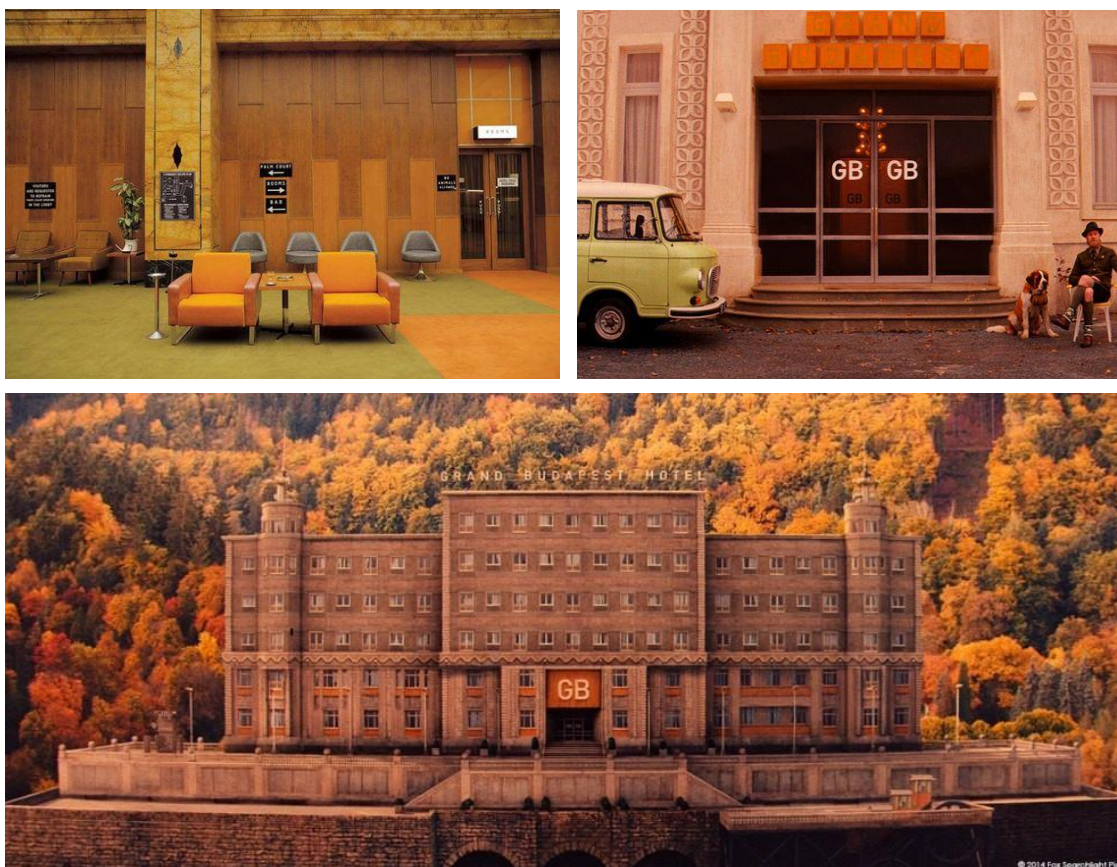
When discussing the use of colours in films, Luke McKernan states “the ways in which color can be altered, distorted, or reimagined—by ourselves as much as by suppliers in a traditional sense indicates that colour on our screen is not ‘a reflection of reality’ but ‘a product of choice’ that reflects the ‘subjective nature of colour’ ”(112). In other word, the choice of colours in films is like a system of signs, it is subjective and performative. In the specific case of the *Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)*, the bright and simplified colour scheme are aim to recreate a reality that is more positive and simpler (Walton 33). Such reality, as opposed to the frustrating and complicated adult world, reflects the ‘elemental simplicity’ (Collins 261) of childhood delights that is unachievable for adults. By recovering this childhood elemental simplicity with colours, the *Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)* purifies the adult world and advocates a belief in childhood, a celebration of child-like innocence (see fig.9-11).

My explanation so far, is that in the *Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)*, colour is a nostalgic convention to recover innocence in an adult world. Because the childlike innocence is ‘wanted’ but it is ‘lost’ in reality, there is a tension in between. In order to demonstrate such tension, the film introduces a state that allows two conflicted situations co-exist and interact. At the center of such a mystic state, it is the aesthetic of quirkiness which I will dissect into in the following chapter of my analysis.

Fig.9-11.The simplified pink and blue reality in *The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)*.



Fig.12-14. The colour palette is changed to yellow and green in the repression period of the Grand Budapest Hotel to connote progress of decay.



#### 4. Performance and Quirky Sensibilities

When defining “quirky” in contemporary cinema, MacDowell compares it to film Noir. He argues that the quirky should be viewed as a sensibility rather than a genre. It should be considered as a perspective the film stands on, “a particular way of looking at the world” (MacDowell 7; Spice 25) as he quotes Andrew Spice. The key of

quirkiness is the existence of a comedy of embarrassment, a way of humor that caused by portraying a character's emotional discomforts as "pathetic but poignant" (9). According to MacDowell, Wes Anderson is considered to be an important figure that plays with quirkiness given the fact that his works potently and consistently expresses the quirky sensibility (7). There are several visual practices corresponding to quirkiness in Anderson's films. Examples include the 'static, flat-looking shot', the 'bright block colour', which both I touched upon on the previous chapters, and in addition, a 'ridiculous and rigid presentation of characters' (MacDowell 9), which I plan to discuss in this chapter.

The characterization of a film brings in the discussion of how the characters in the film express themselves. Such expression is accomplished by performance, which identified by David Bordwell et al. as an explicit series of acting signs that "consist of visual elements (appearance, gestures, facial expressions) and sound" (131). I will take the performance of Mr. Gustave H. as an example to explain how quirkiness is conveyed through different aspects of performance. Firstly, Gustave is suitable for our discussion because the character itself is an existence of polarized factors, which similar to a state of confliction that the quirky sensibility implies. For instance, he is working as the concierge in the Grand Budapest Hotel, however, he appears to be highly respected by all the hotel staffs and the guests as the most powerful man in such a prestigious institution; He is entitled to a full accessibility of the hotel and live luxuriously, nevertheless, he stays in a timeworn and tiny room that he once lived as the lobby boy; He has close personal relationships with many guests

but he insists to dine alone. The setting of the character builds up a conflicted and intensive tone before the character starts to act. Secondly, the quirky sensibility is conveyed by the unexpected mismanagement of language from the character. The character Gustave is prearranged as a noble and refined figure. As we can see at the beginning of the movie, he is presented as a civilized and authorized man with elegant and decent speech. However, throughout the film, one can find out swear words come out from his mouth when he is out the control. The outburst of Gustave is unexpected because the level of maturity and restraint that is conveyed from the character makes us believe that he has more discipline to control his manner. Similarly, in the scene that he pays his respect to dead Madam D before her coffin, instead of mourning, he oddly comments the cream on her face and her nail colours with a sensible manner, as if it was the appropriate thing to do in a funeral. His discursive speech creates a sense of humor which is absurd to audience according to the context. Moreover, the misbehaviors of the character as well contribute to the actualization of the quirky sensibility. For instance, when the police come to the hotel and arrest him as a suspect for murdering Madam D, he first denies his crime with a dignified attitude then out of a sudden, he runs away like a guilty criminal; In another sequence, when he meets with Zero after a prison break with numerous difficulties and dangers, on top of everything, the first thing he asks from Zero is his L'Air du Panache perfume. He keeps on justifies his urgent need for the perfume after Zero said he doesn't have it as if it was necessary for their run. In these circumstances, Gustave obtains a weird manner for the reason that he either acts against what he

says or he messes up with priorities. Last but not least, when conducting mentioned absurd speech or act, the facial expression of Gustave is persistently restrained or even indifferent. As Deborah Thomas preciously mentions, such facial expression is “largely rendered in a deadpan, disaffected fashion” (108) (see fig.15-16.). Some criticisms comment about such performance as “over-stylized, abstract and emotional crippled” (Le Cain). In a word, the deadpan performance of Anderson’s characters’ makes it difficult for audience to emotionally engage in the film. Thomas disputes this opinion by suggesting the stylized performance in Anderson’s films is consistent with the self-struggled emotional interiority of his characters (108). By demonstrating an understanding of the characters, Anderson builds up a relation of an alliance between his characters and the film aesthetics. Furthermore, he argues that the emotionless performance in Anderson’s films is reasonable because it creates a lack of expressiveness that matches the flatten aesthetics of his films (109). I agree with Thomas’ opinion, and to extend his argument, I further claim that the quirky performance of Anderson’s characters evokes a reflective distance among audience. Being simultaneously reflective and distant seems contradicted. However, they are balanced out in the quirky performance in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). My argument is that in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), odd performance is often situated in the circumstances that except for the character’s intensive emotions. On one hand, by introducing embarrassment in emotionally intensive moments, it creates a spatial and temporal distance between the film and the audience that invites audience to detach from the story world and purely view the characters’ performance



as a form of movement. In this level, audience experiences the film as a form of abstract arts. On the other hand, by justifying the tension between unnatural embarrassment and intensive emotions, the film provides an alternative approach for audience to understand and even empathy the conflicted behaviors of the characters. Eventually, such an approach may result in audience's further engagement in the film rather than distancing them from the film as it seems. Projecting the single case of the *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) to the big picture of post-modern art practice, it is because of this reflective distance that demonstrates the in-between state of new sincerity that centers in the discussion of the thesis.

Fig. 15-16. The deadpan performance in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).



## Conclusion

This thesis discusses the meaning of new sincerity and explores the role of new sincerity in current artistic practices through the visual analysis of Wes Anderson's recent film *the Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). Based on the current academic discussions about Wes Anderson's works, the thesis choose framing, colour and performance as the research objects of Anderson's film aesthetics and explain their

relations with new sincerity. New sincerity is a tendency arises from post-1990s in America. As opposed to and 'smart' film that only focuses on irony and cynicism, new sincerity in film develops from sincerity and it is a reflection of nostalgia and value of earnestness that presented with but not without irony. Situating new sincerity in a postmodern context, the thesis argues that new sincerity is an aesthetic strategy in cultural practices that respond to the social challenges in postmodern society, and it provides an alternative perspective to look at the world. In the case study of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), Wes Anderson captures and soothes the tension in new sincerity by simultaneously demonstrating a modernism enthusiasm and a postmodernism irony in the film. He is considered to be an auteur considering his deliberate and exhaustive approach to create painting-like film pictures which remind audience that the film itself is a form of art. Wes Anderson's craftsmanship in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) is contributed by formal film techniques including framing, colour and performance. The static framing in the film is accomplished by adopting symmetric composition, long shots and extreme long shots as well as bird's-eye view shots. These conventions contribute to the sensibility of irony because they create a distance between the film and audience by offering a chance of "clinical observation"; Colour, as an aspect not yet extensively researched by scholars, has been associated with the main factor that contributes to a feeling of nostalgia in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*(2014). The bright color palette and the simplification of colours in the film interact as signs to signify a better and simpler reality that celebrates a childlike innocence; the sensibility of quirkiness, as popular in post-1990s indie films

in America, is the ideal state that integrates and balances the tones of modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony. In the case of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), quirkiness is deemed to be largely demonstrated by the deadpan and restrained performance of the characters. The effect of such performance is creating a reflective distance that not only encourages audience to experience and engage with the form of film but also separates them from the story world yet helps them empathize with the characters.

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