The Short Films of Wes Anderson

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Wes Anderson’s feature-length filmmaking has largely been met with critical acclaim, with widespread consensus among critics that, at the very least, Anderson is a modern-day auteur with a distinct directorial style. Critical studies of Anderson’s work range from large-authorship analyses, like Mark Browning’s 2011 book-length work, *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter*, Tod Lippy’s “Wes Anderson,” or Devin Orgeron’s director study, to scholarship about more specific themes in Anderson’s filmmaking, such as Cynthia Felando’s work on women and aging, James MacDowell’s essay on tone and quirky sensibility, or Joshua Gooch’s discussion of fatherhood. While these works each have something important to offer readers, what is missing from the current scholarship surrounding Anderson is an analysis of his short films.

Criticism about Anderson’s work is heavily skewed toward his feature filmmaking. At first glance this may seem appropriate, but even a cursory numerical accounting of Anderson’s films shows a blind spot in Anderson scholarship. To date Anderson has directed seven feature films and three (arguably four) short films. This problem with scholarship is not unique in relation to Anderson’s work, specifically, but rather reflects a critical bias against the short film in general. Richard Raskin, in his pioneering book, *The Art of the Short Fiction Film*, argues that short fiction films have “received little attention within the university community with regard to teaching and research . . . At many film schools today, students are implicitly encouraged to think of [them] . . . as though they were miniature feature films, rather than as works belonging to an art form in its own right” (1). In his analysis of the short-fiction form, “The Art of Reduction,” Matthias Brütsch agrees with Raskin, explaining that, although short films
are popular, “film studies has displayed a persistent lack of interest for the short format,” which is often marginalized because short films are thought of “only as an exercise for beginners, as a ‘calling card’ that may help on the path towards making ‘real,’ i.e. feature films” (1).

Consistent with the continual lack of attention paid to the short-film genre by critics, Anderson’s short films—Bottle Rocket (1994), Hotel Chevalier (2007), Cousin Ben Troop Screening with Jason Schwartzman (2012), and Moonrise Kingdom Animated Short (2012)—have had relatively little written about them. Anderson’s continued engagement with the short-film format points to his alternative perspective on the form. His choice to release his features films alongside related shorts separates him from traditional approaches to filmmaking. An analysis of Anderson’s short films expands our understanding of his worldview because his short-film work approaches narrative and pacing differently than his feature work.

Based on Raskin’s criteria, I argue that Hotel Chevalier belongs in the pantheon of the history of great short films—alongside Jean Rouch’s Gare du Nord (1964), Jean-Luc Godard’s Montparnasse et Levallois (1965), Tom Tykwer’s Faubourg Saint-Denis (2006), and Jim Jarmusch’s Coffee and Cigarettes (1986). Hotel Chevalier stands alone on its own merits and is as successful as, if not more than, the feature it was released as a prologue to, The Darjeeling Limited (2007). In applying Raskin’s conceptual short-film model to Anderson’s shorts, I attempt to explain how Anderson’s storytelling in the short film differs from his feature-length presentations. The format of the short film allows stories to be told differently, and Anderson’s Hotel Chevalier breaks new ground in narrative possibilities, while Bottle Rocket is only partially successful as a short. The two shorts released with Moonrise Kingdom are consistent with Anderson’s feature-filmmaking approach whereby “the concept of ‘story’ and ‘storytelling’ is self-consciously foregrounded in Anderson’s work” (Thomas 104). However, it is with Hotel Chevalier that we come to know Anderson more intimately as a filmmaker, as the emotional core of his art comes through with full force.

While most academics writing about Anderson’s work avoid a discussion of his short films altogether, there are a few critics who at least give passing acknowledgment to his shorts. Joseph Aisenberg assesses Anderson’s career as a whole, with only two passing references to Hotel Chevalier and no references to Bottle Rocket. Aisenberg references Hotel Chevalier as “the short film pre-ambulating Darjeeling,” and later in the article he mentions his disgust at the thinness of Natalie Portman’s body in the short. This terse reference to Hotel Chevalier can hardly be called a review of the film. In Aisenberg’s study, the film exists, but it does not deserve space for serious analysis in his assessment of the director. Mark Browning commits several pages of his book Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter to analysis