

And We Was All on the Cover of *Newsweek* Media Devices in *The Royal Tenenbaums*

Wes Anderson's third film, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, is the story of a family of young geniuses who, after "two decades of betrayal, failure, and disaster" following the divorce of their parents, return to their childhood home on Archer Avenue to overcome their collective past and reconcile with their estranged father, Royal. Director and co-writer Wes Anderson uses a wide variety of media as a means of defining his characters and their relationships. *The Royal Tenenbaums* illustrates the ability of media to define, to connect, and to distance individuals, and to aid or to stall communication.

"Family Isn't a Word... It's a Sentence"

Margot Tenenbaum was an acclaimed playwright in the ninth grade. Now in her thirties, depressed and unable to write, she spends over six hours a day in the bathroom, watching television, furtively smoking, and hiding from her neurologist husband, Raleigh St. Clair. Richie was a champion tennis player as well as an enthusiastic amateur painter. Though "he had never developed as an artist," his childhood studio full of portraits of his adopted sister Margot reveals he was in love with her from an early age. His tennis career ends with a "meltdown" on the tennis court the day after Margot's marriage. Young Chas started a business selling genetically engineered Dalmatian mice in Chinatown and in his early teens managed to expropriate his father's property. Though still a successful businessman, he has a breakdown of his own after the tragic death of his wife. Clinging desperately to his two sons, Ari and Uzi, he obsesses about their safety. Even Eli Cash, the boy who lived with his aunt across the street on Archer Avenue, ends up as conflicted as the Tenenbaum children. Wishing he were himself a genius, he writes a

pretentious novel that wins him brief literary fame but fails to earn the approval of the family he wishes he were a member of. As his affair with Margot (during which he mostly acts as a medium between her and Richie) disintegrates, Eli ruins his career with mescaline abuse and self-indulgence.

Each of the children feels emotionally estranged the rest of the Tenenbaum family. Margot, because Royal treats her as an outsider, constantly calling attention to the fact she is adopted, excluding her from outings and visits to his mother's grave, snubbing her earliest effort to write a play. Chas resents his father for stealing money from his bank account, for shooting him in the hand with a BB during a game of war on Eagle's Island (he and Royal were supposed to be on the same team), and for neglecting him. Richie, the only child who received significant attention from Royal, is estranged from the family by his overwhelming love for his adopted sister. After his humiliating breakdown, he escapes on the *Côte d'Ivoire* and sails around the world for a year.

Chas is the first to go home: neurotically fearing his condo is unsafe, he seeks security in a return to the maternal nest. Margot, learning her mother has allowed Chas to stay, returns as well, hoping to overcome her depression by escaping her marriage. Richie returns upon hearing his father has only six weeks left to live, knowing he will have to resolve his conflicted love for Margot.

Royal's "pretty bad case of cancer" is, of course, a hoax. Having been evicted from his suite at the Lindbergh Palace Hotel and having exhausted his finances, he tricks his family into putting him up for several weeks. He is also motivated to return by the news that his wife, Etheline, may soon be getting remarried (though she and Royal have yet to divorce) to her accountant and bridge partner, Henry Sherman. Like the other characters in the film, Royal feels

threatened by any disturbance of the status quo. Once back in touch with his family, however, he realizes despite himself that he must repair the damage his years of neglect have wrought. The reconciliation of the Tenenbaums ultimately returns them from emotional paralysis to a world in which things happen and relationships develop.

Frames [Within Frames]

The Royal Tenenbaums is rigorously and redundantly framed. The narrative, visuals, music, texts, objects, and characters are all ostentatiously composed by means of self-reflexive devices that both distance and pull in the audience. Our attention is repeatedly drawn to these many frames: the extremely wide aspect ratio, the storybook narrative device, as well as literal frames viewed within the shot (pictures, paintings, TV screens, etc.).

The opening of the film constitutes a miniature frame unto itself—one serving to pull the audience into the narrative in a manner reminiscent of Anderson’s second film, *Rushmore*, which begins with the image of a stage curtain.¹ First, an imaginary book called *The Royal Tenenbaums* is checked out of a library. Next the cover of the book—bearing the title and an illustration of two candles, a Dalmatian mouse, and a formal invitation card on a saucer—tiles the screen, much like a computer desktop “wallpaper.” After a close-up on this wallpaper, the shot then jumps to an actual mouse, real candles, and a now legible card reading “Cordially request the pleasure of your company at home.” The title of the film is superimposed over this image before the shot cuts to a “Prologue” page, supposedly inside the book. Finally, the shot cuts to the encircled “T” on the flag atop the Tenenbaum residence. While this opening prepares

¹ There are many consistencies (of shot composition, color choice, theatricality, attention to detail, and even the font of titles and captions) between the two films, and Anderson seems to be consciously working to develop an auteur style. *The Royal Tenenbaums*, though, brings aesthetic choices made in *Rushmore* to the fore through exaggeration and ostentation, taking Anderson’s tendencies toward artificiality and visual flamboyance to the extreme.

us for the framed story that is to follow, like the Prologue, Cast of Characters, and first chapter, it also defers our entrance into that story.²

This storybook frame is then doubly represented. Once we are “in the book,” voiceover narration provides background details and authorial comment throughout. But the beginning of each chapter is also marked with a page from the book containing a page number and running head, the chapter title, an illustration of a framed portrait of one or more characters, and the first several lines of text from the imaginary novel.³ With the exception of the Prologue, however, the text we see is not the same as that we hear read to us by the narrator (Alec Baldwin). Instead, it is taken directly from the script, even though this style contrasts with that of a novel by describing not a scene but a shot: “Royal’s suite at the Lindbergh Palace Hotel. There are shelves full of law books and hundreds of spy novels in stacks on the floor...” While these pages effectively create the illusion of there being a real book of which the film is an adaptation,

² The Prologue, Cast of Characters, and Chapter One together run sixteen and a half minutes. (Prologue – 6:43; Cast of Characters – 1:08; Chapter One, a continuation of the introduction – 8:39)

³ Below is a reconstruction, based on the pages shown at the start of each chapter, of what the table of contents of this imaginary novel would look like. (Note, the Prologue comes before the Cast of Characters in the film, but the latter has an earlier page number.) The first column contains the name of the title as it appears on the page; the second, the subtitle as given on the Criterion Collection DVD; in parentheses is the name of the character(s) or place whose picture appears in a small frame on the left side of the page, and in quotation marks is any addition text that appears on the page; the final column contains the page number appearing in the upper right hand corner of each page.

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a closer examination of them reveals how they in fact heighten the purely filmic existence of *The Royal Tenenbaums*. That is, in using this framing device, the film subtly underscores the fact that it is a film. (See below for a discussion of other self-reflexive techniques used in the film.) Anderson, in his commentary to the Criterion Collection DVD of the film, explains: “It’s based on a fake book, but the book should only exist kind of as the movie. That’s why the words—Chapter 1 Chapter 2—aren’t written on the pages. They’re superimposed on it [the film], so it can kind of only exist as movie.”

Alongside (or rather within) this textual-verbal framing mechanism are other, more easily overlooked framing devices. Richie’s murals on the walls in the room where Royal stays contain an exhaustive illustrated history of the early years of the family—narrating even events otherwise unmentioned in the film, such as the family’s trip to Belize and Etheline’s archeological work there. Though the moments in which these images can be made out, or read, are few within the film, the fact that the director had them commissioned shows not only his obsession with detail but also his insistence on multifariously framing the story.⁴ Also, the character of Mordecai the falcon functions as a frame for the story. At the beginning of the film he is released (not once, but twice—at the end of the Prologue and again at the end of Chapter One), and he returns to Richie in Chapter Seven as a symbol of trauma and restoration. Finally, at the opening of Chapter Eight, Anderson returns to the initial miniature frame of the film, closing it with a shot of a second invitation card announcing the marriage of Etheline and Henry. The text for Chapter Eight reflects on this return and closure: “An invitation to Etheline and

⁴ The dedication of this imaginary book—“To my family”—and the invitation’s unexplained addresser and addressee make one wonder who is meant to have written them. The answer is never provided. One of the characters, however, does reproduce the story within the story. At the end of the film, Margot breaks through her writer’s block with a new play, “The Levinsons in the Trees,” which nests the family’s history once more in a new medium.

Henry's wedding at the house on Archer Avenue. It is nearly identical to the invitation on the cover of the first edition of *The Royal Tenenbaums*..."

Artifice and Reflexivity

The Royal Tenenbaums assiduously avoids naturalistic representation and calls attention to itself as a (mixed) medium through its artificiality, its use of nested, framed media, and even through references to other films.

The visual artificiality of the film is its most immediately striking aspect. Anderson admits to having set rules for himself in filming: rich reds and voluptuous greens dominate; the screen is saturated with sumptuously warm colors; visual motifs abound. Most shots are fixed or else move in smooth pans⁵; almost without exception a dolly is used in moving shots. The few violations of these rules are used to pointed dramatic effect: when Richie attempts suicide, the colors shift to cool blues; the fire alarm and chase scenes, both of which involve a frantic or angry Chas, are shot handheld.

Almost every form of conventional "old media" is represented in the film. Despite the fact the film is set in 2001 (the date on Royal's tombstone), "new media" are conspicuously absent.⁶ Print is the medium most strikingly foregrounded: each character has either written a book, been the subject of one, or collects them; scenes are punctuated with shots of book jackets, posters, album covers, and so on, which serve as a kind of shorthand for elaborating the back story of the film. But other media are also prominently represented. Richie and Eli both appear on television in their moments of failure. Photography (Richie's camera in the *Cast of*

⁵ Since the aspect ratio of the film is so wide, shots typically capture large groups of characters in a single tableau. However, the vertical narrowness of the frame requires many vertical camera movements.

⁶ The only exception is Chas's room after his return to the house on Archer Ave., which contains a number of flat-screen monitors and modern office equipment. But even these are surrounded by older equipment: Chas's old desk and computer, several adding machines, and the cage in which he bred his Dalmatian mice as a child.

Characters, which according to the mural in his room was given to him by Margot, and Chas's slides of his dead wife), music (almost all of which was recorded before the mid-1980s), and a wide variety of old-media gadgets (record players, antique fans, outmoded TVs, typewriters, clunky rotary phones, etc.) help construct a nostalgic atmosphere of the passé.

When a scene cuts to a shot of a book jacket, album or magazine cover, or other nested media, the object is without exception shot from directly above and either centered on the screen or tiled to fill it. Moreover, the characters themselves are strictly balanced in every shot. In a few cases, tangential characters are even relegated to the status of object by the artificiality of their framing. (Specifically, Etheline's former suitors in Chapter One are mere icons of different exciting professions: Neville Smythe-Dorleac, the explorer; Yasuo Oshima, the architect; Franklin Benedict, the filmmaker.) The level of conspicuousness in the framing of objects and persons again calls attention to the medium.

Even the soundtrack contributes to the film's artificiality and reflexivity. One of the most strikingly "composed" scenes in the film is when Margot walks from the Green Line bus to meet Richie, who awaits her in front of the Royal Arctic Line. The coordination of Nico's "These Days," which begins as Margot steps down from the bus, and Margot's slow-motion glide forward with an inscrutable expression of melancholic joy on her face, makes the shot especially artificial. Her slow advance is intercut with close-ups of Richie statically returning her gaze while behind him a row of white-clad naval officers steps past in perfect synchronization. One is hardly surprised when Anderson reveals in his commentary that the idea for the shot preceded both the writing of the script and the formulation of the characters.⁷ ("The thing I didn't know

⁷ Indeed, this moment is a typical aesthetic choice for Anderson. Though it has a different tenor (largely created by the choice of music) the scene recalls one in *Rushmore*: Max Fischer—having released a host of bees into Herman Blume's hotel room in revenge for Herman's having stolen away Rosemary Cross—coolly strides in slow motion from the freight elevator with his Rushmore Beekeepers box and arrogantly affixes his chewing gum to the

about,” he adds, “was the expression on her face, which I think makes it work.”) Following this moment wherein the film again calls attention to itself as a mixed medium, we see Margot and Richie straddled on opposite sides of a wide shot, separated by a row of off-loaded luggage. A pause, and they approach each other, at last closing the gap that both the literal space and the slow-motion approach has set between them. This compositional formula is used again at the end of the film—but in a tenor of theatrical closure—as the characters walk away from Royal’s grave to the tune of Van Morrison’s “Everyone.”

The many references to other films in dialogue, plot, and shot composition also call attention to the medium. A short list of references includes Welles and Fleck’s *The Magnificent Ambersons* (the Prologue), Leisen’s *Death Takes a Holiday* (the Cast of Characters), Peter Weir’s *Witness* (Royal’s line “I know you asshole!” which Harrison Ford yells after Danny Glover), Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* (Cary Grant walking upstairs with the glass of milk; Danny Glover with Royal’s Tic Tacs), Louis Malle’s *Le Feu follet* (Richie saying, “I’m going to kill myself tomorrow” before immediately trying to kill himself), and Melville’s *Les Enfants terribles* (the brother/sister attraction and Richie’s indoor tent). Anderson even references himself at the end of *The Royal Tenenbaums* with a crane shot that sweeps past each character on the street after Ethel and Henry’s aborted wedding—the same closing technique used in *Rushmore* (which, incidentally, Anderson borrowed from the end of Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon*.)

Just as the use of the storybook framing device ultimately reflects the film’s consciousness of itself “as movie,” so does the construction of its imaginary setting. Not only are the 22 years separating the prodigies’ brilliant childhood from their failures elided, leaving each character frozen in a kind of adolescent crisis, the city in which they live is a place that only

cinderblock wall on his way out, all to the accompaniment of the ironic refrain “You are forgiven” from The Who’s “A Quick One While He’s Away.”

film can construct. These spatial and temporal elisions and distortions defy naturalistic expectations: *The Royal Tenenbaums* calls attention to the fact that it is meant to take place in New York in 2001, then does everything possible to deny its setting with camera tricks and narrative dodges. The most outstanding example of this Céline-esque urban reconstruction is the scene in Chapter One when Pagoda and Royal meet in a park to discuss Etheline and Henry. Royal, seen from Pagoda's perspective, is standing in what is obviously Central Park. But when the shot shifts to Royal's perspective, Pagoda is seen standing at the edge of Battery Park. Moreover, Pagoda's head is blocking the Statue of Liberty, the one landmark that would undeniably place the film in New York. Elsewhere, the irreality of the New York-like setting is achieved through references to the 375th Street Y (the 92nd Street Y in reality), a literal "Gypsy Cab Co.," and the Lindbergh Palace Hotel (the Waldorf-Astoria).

Fetishism

All of the characters are largely defined by the objects surrounding them, most of which are remnants of their former brilliance. In general, Anderson's film evinces his peculiar directorial attention to set and prop detail—as though he expects his audience is like a party guest who scans her host's bookshelves in order to get a sense of who he is when he's at home. Indeed, his characters are *overdetermined* by their collections, hobbies, and tastes. Throughout *The Royal Tenenbaums* fetishism reigns, acting as an indicator of character and sometimes standing in for it. Though the abundant details sometimes overwhelm the viewer (the screen is saturated with text, set dressings, personal items), they also indirectly provide us with a deep history of each person and ultimately allow us to identify with and feel for a characters who are essentially stereotypes and caricatures built up from iconic bits.

That the characters are stuck in a state of arrested development is reflected throughout the Tenenbaum house, which appears just as they had left it years ago. Their collections are still in place. The house still crawls with Chas's Dalmatian mice; Margot's bookshelves still hold her library of plays; Richie's studio is still full of childish depictions of his sister reading different playwrights. The only thing missing is Royal's Javelina, but the mark of where the boar's head once hung remains on the wall of the staircase. (Royal later finds it in the hall closet, which is still full of the children's board games. Its return to the wall by Richie marks a partial restoration of the status quo.) The static atmosphere of the film itself becomes a signifier of the characters' emotion states, and the state of their relationships to one another.

Their arrested development is reflected as well in their "uniforms." Margot wears the same fur coat, hair clip, kohl around her eyes, and similar Polo dresses throughout the film. Chas's early uniform is a business suit (he even has an electronic tie rack full of one kind of tie) while his adult uniform is a red Adidas tracksuit. Ari and Uzi also wear red tracksuits, the half-hearted explanation of the director being that after the plane crash that killed their mother, Chas wants them all to be highly visible for safety reasons. Richie sports a Fila shirt, a headband and sunglasses, a tan jacket, long hair and a beard. Only after his attempted suicide, when he shaves his beard and cuts his hair, does his look change. Other characters' uniforms include Raleigh's signature jacket and turtleneck, Henry's blue coat and checkered tie, Dudley's geeky duds (including a hat that reads "Dudley"), and Etheline's suit-dresses.

Another way in which character is constructed in the film is through references to cultural icons. Eli is a kind of Cormac McCarthy-Jay McInerney hybrid, while Raleigh's character is a spoofy homage to Oliver Sacks. Furthermore, Eli's popularity is presented through mass-media responses: we see him on the cover of *The Sunday Magazine Section* (an imitation of *The New*

York Times Magazine), billed as “The James Joyce of the West,” and in a television show resembling *Charlie Rose*. He is further defined by his apartment, which is filled with the distractingly bizarre artwork of Miguel Calderón and stacks of porn tapes. Raleigh, as Anderson says in his commentary, is the type of character you might have read a profile of in the *New Yorker* before you even knew who he was. His office is a collector’s gallery of outdated recording devices, televisions, and other gadgets. Thus in several ways each character’s identity is a reflection of the media he contributes to, collects, or is associated with.

“I always wanted to be a Tenenbaum, you know?”
“Me, too.”

In his commentary to the Criterion DVD, Anderson notes that the Tenenbaums are too far apart, or perhaps too near. Throughout most of the film, the characters communicate predominantly through the aforementioned media devices: radiogram, telephone, intercom, and so on. The message of Richie’s radiogram eventually gets back to Margot, letting her know he is in love with her. Eli and Margot, Royal and Pagoda, constantly convey messages via telephone. When Royal wants to sneak the boys out of the house, he uses the intercom (used throughout the film to connect the characters within the sprawling house) to talk to them without Chas knowing. Eli sends his clippings and his grades to Etheline because he “likes the encouragement” of her replies. These devices and practices both connect them and keep them at arm’s length by establishing or mediating their communication.

With the exception of a few jumps, Chapter One uses various old media connections to link the main characters, leading up to the point where they will all return to Archer Avenue. From Royal’s eviction from the Lindbergh Palace Hotel, we jump to Richie aboard the *Côte D’Ivoire*. Richie dictates a Ship to Shore Radiogram to Eli (the words appear on the screen:

“Dear Eli, I’m in the middle of the ocean. I haven’t left my room in four days. I’ve never been more lonely in my life, and I think I’m in love with Margot.”), which we see peeking out of Eli’s pocket as he reads from his novel, *Old Custer*. Next Eli, signing a book for a fan, talks to Margot on the phone. Then we jump to the other end of the line, Margot’s bathroom, where she is interrupted by Raleigh speaking to her through the door. She briefly allows him to peek his head in, then from the bathroom we move to Raleigh’s office, where he conducts a test on Dudley Heinzberg. The sequence jumps to a fire drill at Chas’s condo, after which we see Chas looking at slides of his dead wife. With a second jump we are in Etheline’s office. Henry suggests she divorce Royal on the pretense that it would benefit her tax situation. When Henry proposes to her, Pagoda—sitting at a distance outside the window, peeling potatoes and wearing headphones—runs to call Royal to tell him the news. We see him on a rotary phone behind the glass of the phone booth in the downstairs hallway, asking the concierge to relay a message to Royal. Royal is informed by a bellhop that he has a call, and he enters the hotel phone booth containing another rotary phone. Royal and Pagoda meet in the park to discuss what should be done. And finally, after a third jump, we see Chas’s return to the house on Archer Avenue.⁸

Windows are also treated as a medium in the film. While they are consistently used as an isolating frame (each of the children sits in his or her own window at the start of the Prologue; Royal is seen alone in the window of his suite after he receives his eviction notice; Margot and Chas sit alone in their windows while Richie is on an outing with Royal), several important interpersonal scenes take place with the characters on different sides of a window. Pagoda intercepts Henry’s proposal via the window of Etheline’s office; Royal discusses Chas’s neurosis

⁸ This chapter alone contains at least six nested media images: *Sporting Press* magazine (a spoof of *Sports Illustrated*) with the cover story “Meltdown”; Raleigh’s *The Peculiar Neurodegenerative Inhabitants of the Kazawa Atoll*; a fake Desmond Wilson Manchester XI album cover and posters for Margot’s plays *Nakedness Tonight*, *Erotic Transference*, and *Static Electricity*; the slides of Chas’s wife; and Henry’s *Accounting for Everything: A Guide to Personal Finance*.

with her through the same window; and Raleigh knocks on this window while Margot and her mother are sitting in the office. Royal discovers Margot's affair with Eli when he sees Eli exiting the downstairs window; the same window gives Richie access to Margot later on. The window acts as both a barrier and an ingress. Similarly, when Royal meets Ari and Uzi, he introduces himself, telephone in hand (talking to whom?), from the far side of a chain link fence. As the family re-establishes its emotional ties, the barriers break down and become communication media.

“Hell of a damn grave. Wish it were mine.”

Media play so many important roles in *The Royal Tenenbaums* that resisting the temptation to respond to the film's "collector's aesthetic" with a "collector's analysis" is difficult, if not impossible. But hopefully by cataloguing, cross-referencing, and examining several of the ways in which media are represented in the film and used by its characters, we come to a better understanding not only of how this particular film is constructed by media devices but how media define and connect us too. A filmic Georges Perec, Anderson shows us to what extent persons are defined by the things they own and love—including, in the end, not just media and objects but also family. Moreover, he shows that we don't need the new media of computers and fiber optics or Lacanian studies of the ego to realize that "the human" is in some sense outside ourselves. *The Royal Tenenbaums*, with its framed narratives and nested media, is not remarkably different from everyday life—it is merely an exaggerated version of it.

At the end of the film, Royal realizes he enjoys his family and that his interest in maintaining the status quo has something to do with them. His change of heart is based on the sentiment that everyone deserves a second chance at redemption: "Can't somebody be a shit their

whole life and try to repair the damage?” We don’t expect any of the Tenenbaums to change dramatically, even if they do end up a bit healthier in the end. And it is hardly surprising that Royal’s epitaph—after he dies of a heart-attack—should be at once such an extravagant lie and such a telling comment on the film as a whole:

**ROYAL O’REILLY TENENBAUM
1932-2001**

**DIED TRAGICALLY RESCUING HIS FAMILY
FROM THE WRECKAGE OF A DESTROYED SINKING BATTLESHIP**

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