

In his movie, The Grand Budapest Hotel, how does Wes Anderson use visual and literary elements to critique the society of the Interwar period?

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The Grand Budapest Hotel is a movie directed by Wes Anderson, which had its premiere and opening ceremony during the Berlinale International Film Festival on February 6, 2014, in Berlin, Germany. The story in the movie takes place in the fictional Republic of Zubrowka, featuring the life events of the hotel concierge, Gustave H, and his lobby boy, Zero Moustafa. The movie is placed during the Interwar period, a period which was marked by significant social changes, mostly noticed in sexual mores, gender roles, and hairstyles. Along this, there were major political changes and economic fluctuations as a consequence of the effects of the First World War and the tensions before the Second World War. Various visual and literary elements create an innovative storyline, successfully implementing the Interwar period on the screen. This is achieved through the enrichment of the movie by employing vivid, pastel colour schemes, whimsical settings, and an engaging plot which all together add to create an appealing effect. The director uses the visual and literary elements in the movie as a way to critique and describe the society of the Interwar period presented in the movie, mainly representing the tensions in politics, society and cultural conflicts.

The mise en scène¹ adds to the effect of making a link between the period and the audience encompassing lighting, colour, movie framing and camera movement as most significant in the movie. The lighting in the movie plays a role in describing the plot and the progress of the Interwar period. Primarily there is high key lighting with bright colours throughout the movie, portraying joyful events of both the Interwar period, which in the beginning was a hopeful after-war period, and at the same time, it describes the life of Zero. The life of Zero Mustafa, the protegee, is used as a metaphor to describe the events of the Interwar period. Backlighting is used as the events progress in Zero's life and in the Interwar period, which enriches the dramatic yet serious tone. This is seen in the scene when the old Zero begins talking to the writer who comes to interrogate him. The suspense in this scene keeps the audience engaged. However, with the use of lighting, the director manipulates how he wants the audience to feel and experience the movie. There are scenes when there are grotesque scenes where fingers are chopped or when a head of a girl is being sent to the police, in those scenes, there was no use of backlighting; instead, the lighting remained the same, using bright colours, which suggests that the scene should not be observed with great seriousness as the aim of the scenes is to be understood at a lighter note. These elements prepare and signal to the audience how the atmosphere is and how it might evolve.

To suggest nostalgia and a bygone period, Anderson uses a muted colour palette of muted pinks, blues, and yellows, which give the impression of a faded and declining world. The symmetrical editing also adds to those effects; "The Grand Budapest Hotel" is a powerful tool which brings a nostalgic sense to its audience and creates the feeling of 'missing the past'. Wes Anderson's very distinct style lies exactly in

¹ Term used to describe the setting of a scene in a play or a film; It refers to everything placed on the stage or in front of the camera—including actors; ("What Is Mise en Scène in Film? - 2023")

the use of symmetry, where the main focus is put on an object or actor depending on the demands of the plot and the scene. Throughout the movie, there is the consistent use of symmetry, which sets the mood in the movie as if everything is in the order it needs to be. The style of Anderson in the movie is seen through the use of whip pan camera movement, where there is 180-degree pan movement between two characters on opposite sides. With the use of this visual element, the audience gets to experience how the Interwar period was rapidly changing and unpredictable. It also creates a sense of urgency and adds a dramatic touch to the movie. Many scenes in the movie are done with the use of whip pans; along with these, there is also straight-on-camera movement, especially in the case of Gustave, which is used in order for the audience to be objective in the judgement of the character. This type of visual element adds a sense of scale to the size of the objects in the movie, such as the “grand hotel” and its surroundings.

While the visual elements in the movie are crucial for showing the Interwar period, none of that would be possible without the literary elements, which present the foundation for the themes and story of the movie. To achieve the story’s impactfulness and set the movie’s tone, elements such as irony, symbolism and humour are used. The story is presented humorously, keeping the audience’s interest while spreading its themes and ideas. The film employs physical comedy, witty one-liners, and satire to great effect. The other elements of irony incorporated with humour appear in the dialogues among the characters, which keeps the audience entertained while fulfilling its purpose of spreading a message about a specific theme. This is seen on multiple occasions, such as the example where M. Gustave H addresses the dead corpse of the old lady Céline, he says: “You’re looking so well, darling, you really are... they’ve done a marvellous job. I don’t know what sort of cream they’ve put on you down at the morgue...”. This line shows how the period was seen as extravagant and decadent, with the idea that a cream applied can make a dead person look good. That symbolises the indulgence of the era and the people, yet that is a sarcastic tone which might suggest futility to hold on to the past, preserving beauty and youth. The observation shows that this is absurd, yet that makes it comical to its audience. Another important symbol in the movie is the stolen painting “Boy with Apple”, which represents the theme of beauty and art being destroyed by war and violence. These elements contribute to the film’s distinctive tone and message, highlighting the absurdity and tragedy of a world in which beauty and culture are threatened by violence and fascism.

Through the use of multiple narrators, multiple perspectives enable the audience to see and reflect upon the life of someone such as the protegee, Zero, who represents the working class of society during the Interwar period. Listening to the story through the lens of Zero makes a stronger connection between the audience and the character. It gives information about the political as well as social distributions which people were facing. While the audience might feel closer to Zero, it does not fully get attached to one character and is able to get a multiple-view perspective precisely because of the multiple narrative structures. The other perspective that the story initially begins with is the author’s perspective. The book’s author, who is never named, serves as the film’s main narrator. He speaks directly to the audience in the opening and closing scenes, and his voiceover provides exposition and commentary throughout the film. The author’s perspective is omniscient, as he knows the story’s outcome and frequently interjects his opinions and observations about the characters and events. Lastly, there is an objective perspective of a third person. In the movie, there are frequent switches to a third-person objective perspective, where the camera serves as an impartial observer of the events. These scenes are usually used to depict action or establish a setting, and they often involve sweeping camera movements or long takes. This perspective

contrasts with the more subjective author and lobby boy perspectives, and it helps create a sense of distance and detachment from the story's more emotional moments.

Overall, the visual and literary elements in "The Grand Budapest Hotel" complement each other in creating a rich and complex depiction of the interwar period, exploring its themes, characters, and cultural context in an engaging manner. The visual elements add to the appealing effect of the movie, attracting more audiences who might have different interests in the movie. At the same time, the literary element gives context to the plot and the story the movie displays, leaving the audience to use imagination for individual interpretation. Multiple themes, ideas and messages can be found in the movie, each adding to the story or critique of the period. The movie's flow keeps the audience eager to see what will happen and wish to see what the movie's outcome might lead to. The movie is light-hearted, and while many emotions might be felt, no one dominates the whole story. The atmosphere of the movie is created by the actors acting along with the elements which show the whole scene and give meaning not just to the acting but to the movie in general.

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