

***American Eccentric Cinema*, by Kim Wilkins. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 214 pp.**

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Ever since Jeffrey Sconce discovered the “smart film”—a late twentieth/early twenty-first century sensibility surfacing in the American cinema geared toward the Gen-X indie spectator—numerous studies have appeared to further delineate the typological and taxonomical contours of this recently emergent cinematic trend that markedly functions in “counterdistinction to mainstream Hollywood” (350). Sconce’s notion of the smart film has been directly expanded by Claire Perkins in her 2012 study *American Smart Cinema*, where she elucidates the larger ramifications of the reception side of smart cinema in order to focus on its “affective force” (4). Revising Jim Collins’s misnomer, the “New Sincerity”, Warren Buckland has, in turn, essentially articulated a new Sincerity, one which is not severed from post-modern irony. In various works, James MacDowell has utilised the epithet “quirky” to describe a similar set of films and filmmakers; Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker have likewise posited their notion of metamodern cinema, and Jesse Fox Mayshark uses the term “post-pop” to articulate the same trend of post-irony in contemporary American “indie” cinema. With some variation, the filmmakers covered in these studies are the usual subjects: Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson, Noah Baumbach, Sophia Coppola, Hal Hartley, Spike Jonze, Charlie Kaufman, Neil LaBute, Alexander Payne, David O. Russell, Todd Solondz, etc.

It is within this larger critical context that Kim Wilkins situates her recent study *American Eccentric Cinema*. She derives her alternative appellation “eccentric” from Armond White’s review of David O. Russell’s *I Heart Huckabees* (2004) and intends her label to function as a thematic mode, operating across genres and “deploying a sincere-ironic tone to express existential thematic concerns” (9). Even though there is some crossover, Wilkins separates eccentric cinema from Sconce’s smart films and some of the other articulations listed above by pointing out how eccentric cinema uses irony not primarily for its tonal qualities but, rather, for dramatic and thematic functions: “American eccentric films use irony as a means of mediating existential anxiety” (101). This focus on existential anxiety allows Wilkins to inventively relate contemporary eccentric cinema to the New Hollywood movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as both movements thematically demonstrate a “yearning for human connection that is immediately conscious of the many obstacles and boundaries that ensure its lack of fulfilment” (10). In this manner, the author envisions the new eccentric cinema as a reimagining of New Hollywood’s challenge to mainstream Hollywood. Essentially, eccentric cinema is for our contemporary neoliberal era what New Hollywood was for the Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam War era.

Both film movements revolve around their specific contemporary mode of existential anxiety, embodied in an anti-Hollywood unmotivated hero. What makes eccentric cinema different

is that this thematic existential anxiety “is not depicted as fixed or articulated through tangible cultural concerns” (12), as was the case with New Hollywood Cinema, but rather as isolated, isolating, and personal. The New Hollywood films dealt with a generational crisis in traditional institutions, cultural norms, and national mythology. True to neoliberalism’s emphasis on the individual as an isolated consuming monad, the existential crises that are depicted in eccentric cinema, conversely, appear ahistorical and inauthentic, diegetically and, possibly, extra-diegetically. Because of this lack of authenticity, existential sincerity is always mediated in eccentric films through different methods of ironic distancing, ranging from obvious intertextuality and the use of unconventional formal devices to overt and heightened cinematic construction. This mediation allows the eccentric film to strike a balance between the emotional suturing associated with sincerity and the intellectual engagement that is promoted by irony. In the end, however, “irony and reflexivity are employed to mediate, rather than disable emotional engagement” (30). But this ironic mediation also tends to put the existential anxiety associated with neoliberalism into enormous quotation marks. Wilkins sees this as a particularly masculine strategy by mostly male filmmakers and protagonists determined to repackage uncomfortable feelings as “intellectual gameplay” (39), thereby exposing and avoiding simultaneously. Irony, in eccentric films, Wilkins emphasises, is not a “hip affectation”, as it is in films like *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007). Rather, irony “is employed as a narrative, formal, and aesthetic strategy to mediate negative emotions associated with existential concerns that are too big [...] to be approached directly” (182).

Wilkins explicitly lays out the general thematic features and formal characteristics of eccentric cinema. First, there is the presence of “allusion, parody, and intertextuality”. Second, sincere dramatic incidences are “presented at a distance”. Third, a film’s irony is both “reflexive and sincere”. Fourth, the films contain characters that encourage spectator alignment despite being clearly artificial constructions. And, most importantly, eccentric films promote “affective and intellectual engagement with an experience of existential anxiety” (53). More specifically, the author also outlines the four key textual features that repeat across American eccentric films: subversion of genre, overly cinematic characters, hyper-dialogue to mediate sincerity, and eccentric film worlds. These four features are each addressed through their own chapter and tied to one or two specific eccentric films and suitable examples from New Hollywood cinema for comparison.

Chapter Two, “Road Films and National Identity”, addresses eccentric cinema’s relation to genre through the road film as a prime example. Wilkins compares Dennis Hopper’s 1969 *Easy Rider*, a quintessential road film from the New Hollywood era, with Wes Anderson’s *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) and, to a lesser extent, Spike Jonze’s *Being John Malkovich* (1999). These comparisons function as a means of illustrating the lengths eccentric cinema must go to play with spectator expectation after the genre had already been demythologised by the New Hollywood movement thirty years earlier. New Hollywood utilised the road movie to explore the counterculture’s dissatisfaction with bourgeois society and to depict an outlaw aesthetic. However, as the author points out, its attempted search for meaning somewhere beyond the compromises associated with the mainstream often results in a bursting of this very fantasy. Even the films’ own attempts to create meandering and unconfined narratives ultimately don’t stray too far from classical Hollywood practices, epitomised in the numerous nostalgic intertextual references to classical cinema presented throughout *Easy Rider*. This failure displays the existential anxiety

connected to the New Hollywood ethos. There appears to be too much homage in New Hollywood's demythologisation.

The eccentric cinema road film takes off where New Hollywood leaves off. The main characters in *The Darjeeling Limited* knowingly take a road trip with cinema's promise in mind. But Anderson adds an ironic twist to his road film by setting it in India (the clichéd setting for spiritual journeys) rather than the badlands of America and by placing his characters on a train that pursues a predetermined course, providing a direct telos for his "nomadic" protagonists. Even though Anderson's film combines this kind of "reflexive, ironic, and allusory subversions of generic conventions" (67), Wilkins argues that the film still deals with the genre sincerely. The three Whitman brothers depicted in *The Darjeeling Limited* consciously stage and pattern their own "spiritual journey" after *Easy Rider* (complete with a 1960s soundtrack (71), prescription pharmaceuticals substituting for illicit drugs, and the failure of the family unit substituting for the failure of American society). Rather than following "the invocation of the countercultural zeitgeist" (67), however, the brothers' existential quest amounts to little more than a reunion with their lost mother, hoping said reunion will provide some relief for each brother's underlying anxiety issues. Even though the scenario is, on the surface, quite comical, and the issues are personal and idiosyncratic rather than social and collective, there nevertheless, remains an underlying affective pathos surrounding the characters' pursuit. In *Being John Malkovich*, Jonze's play on the road genre revolves around a narrative of an internal journey for personal identity as a substitution for the external journey in search of national identity depicted in *Easy Rider*. The promise of those who get the opportunity to spend fifteen minutes as John Malkovich always ends in failure, just like the journeys of *Easy Rider*'s Wyatt and Billy or the eponymous protagonists of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), only here the failure merely results in further loneliness and not death, as there is not much really at stake in the eccentric film narrative.

Chapter Three, "Overtly Cinematic Characterization", examines eccentric cinema's self-reflexive meta-characters by once again focusing on the exceedingly contrived and unnatural characters featured in the films of Wes Anderson. According to Wilkins, Anderson is a master at creating "characters that are at once eccentric, reflexive constructions yet simultaneously designed to be emotionally appealing" (92). Extending the comparison with New Hollywood, Wilkins cites Thomas Elsaesser's study showing that the New Hollywood protagonist was often incapable of assuming the symbolic mandate of the classical Hollywood hero. This, of course, was part and parcel of the demythologisation process and the root of the New Hollywood protagonist's existential anxiety. While the New Hollywood protagonist was conceived as a direct reflection of the pervasive, generational anxieties of the immediate historical context and depicted in a relatively naturalistic manner, the characters of eccentric cinema, even though sympathetic in their peculiarity, are deliberately artificial and, following neoliberal "self-improving and self-regulating values", are mere denizens of their respective cinematic diegesis (96). There is no attempt in eccentric cinema to directly reflect contemporary societal concerns, as it comfortably and not so comfortably inhabits its own virtual space. However, unlike the smart cinema's blank mode of narration, eccentric cinema "does not promote audience disengagement from uneasy cringe-worthy characters", as most notably seen in Todd Solondz's films. Rather, eccentric characters fluctuate between "normative believability and eccentric possibility" (103), essentially eliciting spectator sympathy for a bunch of offbeat characters dressed in carefully chosen, overdetermined clothing and inhabiting highly designed sets, all wrapped in over-the-top production design.

Nowhere is this fluctuation more pervasive than *The Royal Tenenbaums*. As Wilkins points out, in the film, Anderson “often maintain[s] a whimsical tone despite the sincere anxiety of his central characters” (114).

Chapters Four and Five enact a similar examination of eccentric cinema’s utilisation of what Wilkins calls “hyper-dialogue” and “eccentric worlds” to mediate its underlying narrative and thematic sincerity. Comparing eccentric cinema’s dialogue to the lack of dialogue that constitutes most New Hollywood fare, Wilkins claims, “the naturalistic silences that pervaded, and indeed characterised, many of the New Hollywood films, have, in the American eccentric mode, been filled with intense and fluctuating ironic dialogue as the site of narrative and character progression in the place of action” (126). This claim might actually go a long way to explaining the annoying nature of many of the films within the eccentric mode; although, this is not necessarily the author’s point of view. By comparing David O. Russell’s *I Heart Huckabees* to Bob Rafelson’s *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), Wilkins examines precisely how the loquacious and quirky character dialogue associated with the eccentric mode functions as more than a stylistic feature and actually emerges as a defence mechanism of sorts for characters suffering anxious moments within the diegesis itself. Following her overriding focus, Wilkins also describes the eccentric cinematic diegeses often created in the eccentric mode as “consciously fictional yet deeply affecting spaces” (145). She illustrates this argument through an examination of the ahistorical and unnatural worlds featured in the eccentric biopic, focusing specifically on Sophia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and Todd Haynes’ *I’m Not There* (2007). Both films illustrate the eccentric mode’s “unstable relationship to verisimilitude” and its contrariness to the verité tactics that were often found in New Hollywood productions (150). Wilkins also examines Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999) as the eccentric film that best illustrates the artificial, self-enclosed, hermetic cinematic box that still manages to exude affective appeal. I will add that Wilkins’ close scrutiny of Haynes’ film is probably the strongest analysis in the book, partly because of the richness and quality of the film. However, I feel that lumping Haynes in with these other filmmakers might do him a disservice.

Overall, the book is a good read filled with interesting insights. It also adds to the continuing topography of American Independent Cinema and is recommended to any student of the smart film in the indie sector. There are several typos scattered throughout the text, most notably the reference to “Howard Hughes’s Molly Ringwald films” (190), and Wilkins too often restates the book’s main argument concerning irony’s mediating function. But these slight imperfections may not even be noticed by all readers. Additionally, Wilkins explains that the term eccentric implies deviation from the norm but not opposition, and she suitably situates the eccentric between Hollywood and independent categories. The eccentric cinema, therefore, should be viewed as one mode within the indie sector. Also, eccentric films do not focus on “marginalized or underrepresented demographics” but on neoliberal elites that stem from the same social milieu as the eccentric filmmakers themselves (26). Wilkins does conclude her study by implying that the decrease in eccentric film productions over the last decade might be a good sign, demographically speaking. Wilkins’s attitude toward these eccentric works’ relation to neoliberalism often seems ambiguous and ambivalent, fluctuating between contempt and admiration. At one point, however, she concedes that eccentricity comes with privilege, an argument that perhaps poetically excuses the Howard Hughes typo. It is often difficult to tell, however, whether the films reviewed are seen

by the author herself as critical of, apologetic for, or eccentrically indifferent toward our neoliberal condition. Are these films a symptom or a sublimation of the inherent limits of neoliberalism?

Wilkins does not ultimately provide an examination of eccentric cinema's relation to our neoliberal moment. She mostly takes this connection for granted. There are some fleeting references to consumer identity, isolated individualism, and therapy culture, but the underlying anxiety thematised in the films examined is not really connected to the larger context and limitations of neoliberalism. This is where I feel Wilkins' study could use a small injection of psychoanalysis. For instance, in her psychoanalytic study of contemporary anxiety, Renata Salacl maintains that contemporary consumer society thrives on feelings of inadequacy. Since traditional forms of authority have been all but demolished by hyper-capitalism, "the subject has lost the 'security' that the struggle with old authorities brought about" (55). This explains the difference between the antihero of New Hollywood and the merely quirky protagonists of eccentric cinema. The sense of community that Wilkins claims was established in the New Hollywood through protagonists that directly reflected the public's counter-cultural concerns is impossible in today's cinema because community has been reduced for the neoliberal subject to little more than being a subscriber, member, or client. Salacl argues that, in the contemporary era of hyper-capital, "what actually provokes anxiety in the subject is not the failure to be someone else, but an inability to be oneself" (57). Furthermore, she foresees that in the era of hyper-capital "people will purchase their very existence in small commercial segments, since their lives will be modelled on the movies so that each consumer's life experience will be commodified and transformed into an unending series of theatrical moments, dramatic events, and personal transformations" (59). Through this we can begin to see the existential anxiety of the consumer subject reflected in eccentric cinema's reliance on overtly cinematic characters, hyper dialogue, and excessively theatrical diegeses. The heavy reliance on intertextuality and simulation in eccentric cinema indicates that these films seem to have an anxious time trying to be and are inadequate at being themselves. The question remains: have these films succumbed to this neoliberal existential condition or are they a critical reflection on it?

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