

## David Kahane on Wes Anderson

Wes Anderson is a film director who has truly shaped a generation. In 1996, he directed his break-out film "Bottle Rocket" and, ever since, has created a series of cultish hits including "Rushmore" (1998), "The Royal Tenenbaum's" (2001) and "Fantastic Mr. Fox" (2009).

His fame is not short of controversy, though, and his persona is often wildly polarizing. On one side, the enthusiasts, who equate his talent to that of Woody Allen and Fellini. He has been deemed, by no less than Martin Scorsese himself in a 2000 interview as "the next Scorsese." In that article, Scorsese notes "Wes Anderson... has a very special kind of talent: he knows how to convey the simple joys and interactions between people so well and with such richness. This kind of sensibility is rare in movies."

On the other side, the skeptics, who point to the weak financial outcomes of his films (his films have, on average, reportedly lost \$9 million per film in the US) and lambast him as representing the worst of hipsterism. In response to one of his films, "Life Aquatic," Matthew Wilder, writing in City Pages, described the film as "a silo stuffed with a haut-bourgeois 12-year-old kid's fetish objects."

I am firmly on the side of the enthusiastic and believe that his life and work embody many of the key values of Total Leadership. I have chosen to profile him primarily as a result of four key features of his life. Firstly, the magnitude of his impact and the fact that he, on his own, has shaped a new, entirely unique aesthetic. Second, the authenticity he displays in the manner in which he lives and works as well as the admirable intensity in which he goes about his pursuits. Third, his resilience despite many setbacks where his films have not been well received by the general public and critics alike. Lastly, he has succeeded in integrating several important elements of his home and close circle of friends in a seamless manner into his professional self. He is a man of many three and four-way wins.

First, on his impact. He has been nominated for the Oscars on a few occasions and several of his movies are cult classics. What is most impressive, however, is the aesthetic language he has shaped. In the words of New Yorker reviewer, Richard Brody, "The action takes place amid eye-catching decors and anachronistic furnishings. The scripts offer a winking catalogue of inside movie references, and the soundtracks are replete with a carefully curated collection of recordings, heavy on British Invasion classics. Anderson frames his images simply; their straightforward precision betrays a skeptical, comic edge and a zone of reserve." One detects a Wes Anderson aesthetic from the very first minutes of any of his films. The consistency is incredible and it has clearly influenced a whole genre of films that followed his early works, including "Juno," "Napoleon Dynamite," and "Garden State." In a 2009 Slate article, Elbert Ventura, noted that "these days, the Tarantino imitators have been replaced by the Wes wannabes. A popular strain in recent American indie cinema has been the Andersonian quirkfest." Anderson's impact is truly remarkable.

In addition to his sheer impact, it's amazing how authentic Wes Anderson is in his artistic pursuits. His movies are true extensions of his self. In a New Yorker interview, Anderson explains: "In the course of doing these first few movies, I found a way that felt instinctively right for me, and I didn't feel constrained... the end result is that they're very personal movies in a way that some people really connect with." I find it very admirable that his life's work is such a mirror of who he is, his values, and his eye on life. It is not easy work. He immerses himself in the complexity and one of his most defining traits is his extreme meticulousness. In the same interview, a friend notes: "When I was with him in Paris, he wasn't even leaving his apartment. I was joking that it would be like the middle of 'Shine,' where the kid plays Rachmaninoff and then collapses... It seemed like his work was never over, because he could control the whole universe of the movie." He is said by his confidantes to be one of the hardest working directors of all-time.

Not only does Wes Anderson work unbelievably hard to achieve his “perfect” vision, but he has persevered in being his true, authentic self and continuing to create the movies so beloved by his fan base despite some very significant setbacks in several his projects. His last three films have all been seriously loss making. The downside of appealing to a niche sensibility is that he is often shut out of the mass market. In each of these loss-making pursuits, he has been severely criticized and has often found himself pressured to alter his style in order to appeal to a wider audience. Despite this, he has seldom broken with the defining traits of his art and is about to launch a highly anticipated new feature in true Wes Anderson style.

Lastly, a remarkable feature of Anderson’s success has been his ability draw in his family and close friends into his work. Many sub-plots of his films represent small homages to members of his family, e.g. Angelica Houston’s character in “The Royal Tenenbaums.” His younger brother, Eric, actually worked very closely with him in that film and did most of the set designs. Equally, most of his movies feature Owen Wilson, who was actually his college roommate. A true “Wes Anderson” actors’ group, including Bill Murray and Jason Schwartzman, has taken hold. His work seems such a close extension of the relationships he values in life. There are other ways in which art and life have bridged for him. Originally from Texas, he moved to Paris in 2005 – a city that far more closely resembles his set designs. This integrative, “multiple win” approach make him a fascinating case study for the class and a role model for anyone seeking passion and authenticity in their lives.