
Oh, Inventiveness! Oh,
Imaginativeness! Precious Cinema
and Its Discontents



A Rant

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Without something to hate, we should lose the very
spring of thought and action.

—William Hazlitt, “On the Pleasures of Hating”

In his biography of the fictitious early nineteenth-century British art theorist Sir Andrew Marbot—a pastiche as brilliant as it is unknown in the English-speaking world—German novelist Wolfgang Hildesheimer lends the following words to his protagonist: “Just like the painter is not always in the condition to give his best, we are not always in the condition to receive the best, even when it offers itself to us. The true beholder of art knows certain moments of illumination in which an artwork seems to reveal itself completely, the mystery of which he was unable to solve in moments of unreceptivity.”¹ Unreceptivity: I often think of this intriguing term when I am watching a certain type of film dear to countless viewers. Filled with derision and at the brink of misanthropy, I sit in the cinema and ask myself if this is merely a momentary phase in my cineaste biography that will ultimately turn into true appreciation (as



Still from *The Science of Sleep*.

happened, for instance, in the case of Abbas Kiarostami or Jacques Tati, filmmakers I couldn't relate to as a teenager) or if I will always be unable to find value in what is so beloved by others. What is it about these films, I wonder, that makes me so unreceptive that I am barely able to watch them and, in fact, watch them only for professional reasons?

Before I attempt to answer this question let me first—at the risk of alienating some of my readers—identify the kind of films that annoy me so deeply: foregrounding an overly “quirky” directorial sensibility, these include some of Wes Anderson's films, Michel Gondry's post-Charlie Kaufman films, the more mediocre of Tim Burton's films, most films by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and the second feature film by Miranda July. Now, there seems to be no established aesthetic category that unites such films as *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), *Be Kind Rewind* (2008), *Big Fish* (2003), *Amélie* (2001), and *The Future* (2011). To some degree they might be described as what Sianne Ngai calls “the cute”: works characterized as unthreatening and vulnerable that evoke tenderness, a desire to be sensuously close and to respond in an infantilized and diminutive language, works that can also induce a sense of being manipulated or exploited and (in my case) feelings of contempt and aggression.² Certainly, in the films I find unwatchable many of the characters have strong elements of cuteness, epitomized by the wide-eyed, small-mouthed Amélie (Audrey Tautou) and *Moonrise Kingdom*'s Sam Shaskusky (Jared

Gilman). However, more than “cute” these films ask for adjectives like “twee,” “whimsical,” “quirky,” or “precious.” Trying to find an umbrella term, I toyed with “magical quirkyism,” but eventually decided that “precious cinema,” in all its ambiguity, seemed most appropriate.

What is it, then, that I find deplorable about precious cinema? Primarily, it is how relentlessly these films harass me with their makers’ sense of their own creativity, originality, and imaginativeness. Hiding behind a cute harmlessness, they nastily force their inventiveness upon me. Since every frame is a painting (of sorts), filled with visual puns and lovely arrangements and funny little things to discover, I feel like I am standing in front of crammed wall in the Louvre, Uffizi, or Hermitage, dizzy with cinematic Stendhal syndrome. All I can do is watch, with wide eyes, the relentless and overstimulating visual gimmicky flow. Of course, I am not implying that feeling overwhelmed by mental overload cannot be a form of pleasure. The foregrounding of twee details in precious cinema is quite different from the overload Daniel Yacavone discusses with regard to films like Tati’s *Playtime* or Mike Figgis’ *Timecode*: “Here the sheer quantities of visual information and the multiplication of perceptual and imaginative elements verges on a kind of cinematic sublimity, in the basic Kantian sense.”³ Precious cinema, instead, leaves nothing for me to fill in, as everything is already given to me down to the very last detail on the screen. Watching precious cinema, I cannot but sense the directors—as nerdy, eccentric, or quirky their public personas might be—shouting at me with full force: “Oh, my glorious inventiveness! Oh, my impressive imaginativeness! Look, oh viewer, how nicely I have arranged the colors, how unusually I have placed the camera, how lovingly original and detailed are my sets.” Yet I’m not alone in this impression. Manohla Dargis, for instance, writing for *LA Weekly*, discovers in *Amélie* “a sensibility too in love with its own cleverness,” and Anthony Lane, in the *New Yorker*, writes negatively of *Be Kind Rewind* because, among other things, “Gondry was too busy giggling over his own script.”⁴

As every Kantian knows, aesthetic judgments strive for intersubjective recognition: paradoxically, they are not only an assertion of distinction (“I am the one who feels like this—and not you!”), but also a cry for confirmation (“Is it only me who feels like this? Please not!”). I therefore cannot deny a certain distrust of those who love these films: I

feel excluded and left behind by a group of devotees whose admiration is conspicuous to me. Here the much-maligned website *Rotten Tomatoes* offers relief and confirmation. Clicking on the green splattered-tomato icon that indicates a negative review, I seek textual remedies from major film critics. Consider the almost physical reaction of Jonathan Rosenbaum, who finds it “hard not to gag on the cuteness” of *Be Kind Rewind*.⁵ Maybe most relieving was reading a passage in an otherwise positive portrait of Miranda July in the *New York Times Magazine*: “To her detractors (‘haters’ doesn’t seem like too strong a word) July has come to personify everything infuriating about the Etsy-shopping, Wes Anderson-quoting, McSweeney’s-reading, coastal-living category of upscale urban bohemia that flourished in the aughts. Her very existence is enough to inspire, for example, an I Hate Miranda July blog, which purports to detest her ‘insufferable precious nonsense.’”⁶

Anderson, Gondry, Burton, Jeunet, July: Whether young or not, these are wunderkind filmmakers glowingly proud of their idiosyncratic creations, like narcissistic children showing off their handicraft fabricated in kindergarten: Please, ADMIRE me, viewer! And it’s not that I cannot appreciate some of their grandstanding: *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Mars Attacks!* (1996), *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005) come to mind as films that are edgier, more socially aware, satirical, or simply less show-offy. But once these directors seem to start humming, to the melody of the Pointer Sisters, “I’m so creative, I just can’t hide it,” my patience quickly wears thin. *The Future* contains nothing less than a creeping T-shirt, a speaking moon, and a narrating cat called Paw Paw, whose “mew-over” (Anthony Lane) is voiced by Miranda July herself.⁷ *Moonlight Kingdom* not only fashions Anderson’s (in)famous signature style—no need to resort to the oft-repeated verdict that “symmetry is the aesthetics of fools” here—but also presents us with a dollhouse stuffed with eccentric characters donning strange clothes, glasses, and haircuts, who call each other to dinner with a megaphone or take off a shoe to throw at the person they are angry with.

Part of my contempt also derives from the overly proud fashioning of the handmade in much precious cinema, from the papier-mâché oddities in Gondry’s *The Science of Sleep* (2006) and *Be Kind Rewind* and the dollhouse sets in many of Anderson’s films to the “cute” paws of

Paw Paw in *The Future*. Then again, the proud display of handmade artifice does not get on my nerves in Jan Švankmajer's work. Nor do I find Roy Andersson's films unwatchable. Quite the contrary. The extremely stylized work of the Swedish director also foregrounds its meticulously handmade sets, but what distinguishes Andersson from Anderson and other precious filmmakers is his engagé auteurism and critical reference to a really real world beyond the hermetic confines of his studio sets.⁸

Much more damning for precious cinema is the fact that it traps itself in the cute world of its own imaginative eccentricities. Todd McCarthy, for one, rejected *The Future* as "irrelevant to anything connected to real life."⁹ That's why many critics were so positively surprised by *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, where Wes Anderson showed the first signs of critical-historical consciousness. Precious cinema's nice and harmless films show no social or political urgency: if only they had something more important on the agenda than their self-aggrandizing inventiveness! Sianne Ngai points out that the cute excites a contradictory desire to protect and to cuddle, on the one hand, and to dominate, to be sadistic or contemptuous, on the other hand.¹⁰ However, my response to precious cinema is slightly different, as my contempt is directed at what wishes to *elevate* itself above me and my fellow detractors. As historian of emotion Tiffany Watt Smith characterizes contempt, "Whether smirking and sneering, peering down our noses or turning away in cold indifference, being filled with contempt is an aristocratic emotion. It inflates us with a sense of superiority, curled at the edges with derision or disgust."¹¹ In the end, then, my contempt for precious films is nothing less than vengeful: assuming an air of superiority myself, I look down on them in a perpetual state of unreceptivity.

Notes

- 1 Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Marbot* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 201. The translation is mine, but the word "unreceptivity" appears in English in brackets in Hildesheimer's text.
- 2 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- 3 Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 106.

- 4 Manohla Dargis, "Sleepless in Montmartre," *LA Weekly*, October 31, 2001, www.laweekly.com/film/sleepless-in-montmartre-2133987; Anthony Lane, "Beamed Down," *New Yorker*, February 25, 2008, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/02/25/beamed-down.
- 5 Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Be Kind Rewind," *Chicago Reader*, n.d., www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/be-kind-rewind/Film?oid=1066669.
- 6 Katrina Onstad, "Miranda July Is Totally Not Kidding," *New York Times*, July 14, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/magazine/the-make-believer.html.
- 7 Anthony Lane, "Distant Shores," *New Yorker*, August 8, 2011, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/08/distant-shores.
- 8 For a more detailed account of my position on Roy Andersson, see Julian Hanich, "Complex Staging: The Hidden Dimensions of Roy Andersson's Aesthetics," *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* 5 (2014): 37–50.
- 9 Todd McCarthy, "The Future: Sundance Review," *Hollywood Reporter*, January 22, 2011, www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/future-sundance-review-74658.
- 10 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 65.
- 11 Tiffany Watt Smith, *The Book of Human Emotions: An Encyclopedia of Feeling from Anger to Wanderlust* (London: Profile Books, 2015), 59.