

THE RETURN OF THE AESTHETIC IN AMERICAN STUDIES

Eugenie Brinkema in conversation with Ruth Mayer: “Colors Without Bodies”

*This e-mail interview takes off from the talk “Colors Without Bodies: Wes Anderson’s Drab Ethics,” delivered by Eugenie Brinkema at the international conference “The Return of the Aesthetic in American Studies” at Goethe-University Frankfurt, Nov. 29 to Dec 1, 2018. **Eugenie Brinkema** is Associate Professor of Contemporary Literature and Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is currently a visiting scholar in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, working on her book about radical formalism, horror, and love. **Ruth Mayer** is Professor of American Studies at the University of Hannover. Her research focuses on intersections of modernity and modernism, and the agency of early 20th-century mass culture.*

Ruth Mayer: The problem of our format is that we are talking about a presentation that our readers do not know. So let’s try to perhaps establish some key aspects of your talk, which will allow us then to engage with some of the concerns you raised. As your subject matter you took *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, and you address the formal aesthetics of color and light in this film. You approached the film not by pitting form against feeling or style against sincerity, as critical reviewers of Wes Anderson’s work tend to do. You thus turn against the trend of either criticizing Anderson

for a 'shallow' aestheticism or of praising his skillful redemption of this aesthetic shallowness. In either case, you argue, aesthetic and form are seen as qualities that are deficient in their own right. Conversely, you now aim to totalize the film's form, 'radicalizing' formalism, as you call it in *The Forms of the Affects* (2014). You do not read form as a sign *of something* deeper, more general or overarching, but you approach the film's form as a plane rather than layered structure of reference. This then, you see as a particularly apt form of rendering trauma. I found this wonderfully plausible. But it took me a while to understand. Could you explain this a bit further?

Eugenie Brinkema: Hi Ruth. I fear that I might be a slightly difficult interlocutor today, but I'll explain why and hope it is at least conceptually consistent. As someone who is invested in the critical, speculative potential of formalism, one of the foundations for my scholarship is a resistance to paraphrase: this is something that all those who care about form share, from New Critics to those vested in deconstructive reading methods. And for that reason, I also find it very difficult to paraphrase my own interventions, in part because the specific details of readings unfold in real time, with detours and etymologies and language games, surprising juxtapositions, rhythms of thought, and ideally surprises as the previously unthought comes to the fore.

So instead of paraphrasing the argument, let me at least begin by describing the form of my argument: in my reading of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, I begin with a structuring critical opposition, and then I disqualify the alternative that that opposition presents; in its place, I argue that a tertiary option for reading presents itself, one that equally exists and enables new critical interventions. And then I do that new, third reading of the film. As a formal gesture, then, my argument was one of simultaneous critical negation and affirmation, one that moves both towards undoing a history of the reception of Anderson's film and offers a new, different way of reading it: and in doing so, in looking forwards and backwards, it mirrors in some ways the central problematic of that film, which is about how to think the multiplicity of the past from an unfolding present that is continually shifting.

Less abstractly now, to restate the previous paragraph (repetition always, however, marked by difference), I began my paper in Frankfurt with the dominant opposition that governs the reception of Anderson: as either empty aesthete (someone who engages nothing but “form for form’s sake) or as someone who deploys aesthetic rigor (in art direction, color palettes, long tracking and symmetrical, planimetric tableau shots) in order to mediate “sincere” “deep” ethical commitments. I then move away from both stances by noting that neither allows aesthetic language to bear the burden of sincere ethical engagement on its own (as even the latter deploys an external, prior understanding of what we mean when we talk about “sincere” ethical commitments). My speculative gesture—in other words, what is new, what intervenes and offers a third path—is that radical formalism, reading for form with priority (as in what comes first and what is most important) allows aesthetic language to bear the sole burden of a serious thinking of ethics, history, politics, etc.

And then I do that reading, which in my paper turns on the terms and qualities of drab and glimmer. I won’t paraphrase that reading, but I can say where the argument ends up: although it might seem as though qualities of light are far from a way of thinking historical trauma, the claim that comes out of my reading is that the film itself is thinking about a general account of a scale of historical loss that it itself formalizes, and therefore only a radical formalism can attest to different yet co-present forms of loss, ones that range over the totality of 20th century war and catastrophe to the minor details of infant mortality from illness. The film, I conclude, does not do something *despite* its aesthetic language: its aesthetic language formalizes a way of thinking about history as nothing but a grand accumulation of loss.

RM: You summarize Anderson’s film as “set in a fictional formal empire in middle Europe, Zubrowka (a stand-in for the Czech lands), in which there is an invented war, collapsing the First and Second World Wars, pointing to the Nazi invasion, but also pointing ahead to the suffering of the Czechs under the Soviets.” This storyworld is imbued with affective qualities: violence, terror, brutality, but also desire and tenderness. All of these affects are laid

out next to each other in the film, you argue. They are presented as ‘differences’ or tonalities (in the sense of shades of color or light) or ‘nuances,’ not organized into patterns or hierarchies. The film’s ‘historicity’ is a deliberately cinematic one – generated by way of color schemes, frames, mediation. In the Q&A you quoted Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*: “a little formalism turns one away from History, but [...] a lot brings one back to it.” Could you elaborate on this – particularly with regard to the ways in which Anderson’s film correlates history and trauma? Doesn’t this inevitably also result in the loss of historical specificity and acuity? When introducing your talk in Frankfurt you apologized, tongue-in-cheek, for talking to a bunch of Americanists mainly about Europe. But the film is not *about* Europe, as you would probably be the first to acknowledge. How do you make sense of its very concrete regional and cultural references—its evocation of period styles and aesthetic traditions—in the context of your larger—affect-oriented—reading?



EB: One of the things that really interests me about *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is that it juxtaposes rigorous structures (the nesting structure of the historical time periods; the repeated color palettes and shot types) with problems that evade (or nuance) structure (drab; glimmer; as you noted, things that resist pattern and hierarchy). Both of those are problems of form and can be read as

such (so it's not an opposition between form and formlessness) but they pose different vocabularies and questions about affectivity, historicity, violence, and so on. I'm less interested in the affects of the narrative (love, fidelity, rage, grief, etc.) and far more interested in how the form of the film bears out tensions between its own formal language and formal figures mediated by that language (so, for example, the way that black and white film stock itself interprets Gustave's claim that he finds the death squad uniforms "drab"). In that case, it is not that the critic is reading the film's form, so much as the film's form is interpreting a thinking of form from within the film itself.



My argument—here, but also across my work—is that we don't arrive at a thinking of the seriousness of historical violence, trauma, workings by moving away from these moments in which form mutually encounters form, but by going deeper into those moments. By taking them *more* seriously. And yes, you lose one type of claim for historical specificity: my argument does not begin with any premise that Anderson's film comes out of a historical episteme (say, a 21st century moment interpreting early 20th century catastrophes), nor does it deploy a prior understanding of

capital-H History to then see how that is reflected or allegorized or deployed in the film. Rather, the film is a thinking of a *problem* of history: a problem of how to think historical difference, scales of unthinkable loss, how to relate European trauma to that of the Levant, etc.

The film proposes a new way of thinking history and doesn't merely reflect it. And for me that is the exciting thing about the aesthetic in the first place: if it weren't a site of philosophizing, by which I follow Deleuze in meaning that which generates concepts—or, put another way, if all art about history were doing the same thing with history—then there'd be no need to create or engage creative works or think with them. The reason to closely read form is not to reveal something we already knew (about trauma or history or whatever) but to have a surprising and disturbing encounter with what we did not already know.



RM: Also in a response to a question, I believe, you called your own technique of approaching the film a “close reading.” It’s not really a hermeneutical close reading, though, or is it? Or how would you conceptualize hermeneutics without the desire to probe deeper, lay bare, disclose or dig out?

EB: This is a big question, but I'll just say that for me, a close reading begins with a serious, rigorous, careful interpretation of textual specificity: that can be an isolated minor detail but it can also be a large-form structure or a pattern, a rhythm or even a relation to formlessness. It brackets entirely things like production history and context; is indifferent to the long and many forms of reception theory; and it emphasizes the particular, different, contingent, unique details of textual construction and how they unfold. Were those different, the reading would be different. It eschews paraphrase of themes. So that's close reading in general. In film, that means attending to framing, montage, mise-en-scene, color and light, rhythm, texture, sound, and a thousand other things.

"Radical formalism" goes a bit further: it does all that, but it also insists on giving form *priority* in the sense of reading it as prior to the ethical or political or other terms we might employ to instrumentalize form for the sake of demonstrating something else, and it also situates form as prior as in given privilege to be the grounds of speculative claims about those things.

RM: Is Wes Anderson unique or characteristic of a trend? Does his film interest you as a symptom of contemporary cinema? Or because it clashes with what we see elsewhere? Could one do what you do with *The Grand Budapest Hotel* with a whole lot of other films?

EB: I'll take your last question first: "Could one do what you do with *The Grand Budapest Hotel* with a whole lot of other films?" Of course. Yes. Entirely. And one *should* in my opinion. By which I mean: my polemic for form—encapsulated in the last line of my first book, "We do not yet know all it is that form can do"—means that to engage the interventions we care about in the theoretical humanities (about ethics, politics, history, affect, bodies, environment, anything) those moves will have no grounding without the specificity that close reading makes available. And those readings are not closed or final, neither fixed nor determined, but are ongoing, infinite, open, speculative, surprising.

So now to your other question: I'm deeply uninterested in turning Anderson's film into something else (a cultural symptom; an

example of a genre or trend or mode; another moment in a study of his career or biography; an allegory for a prior theory of history or trauma; or just a pretty color palette on the various instagram pages devoted to his aesthetic look)... I'm interested in taking it seriously on its own as an aesthetic act of thinking that is active, generative, and important in its own right. To me, the problem is not that the humanities keeps getting distracted by aesthetics and keeps losing the real thread of serious concern—the problem is that we have never in fact been formalist enough.

RM: Thanks, Eugenie! It was great talking to you!



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