

The Chromophilic Chromophobe: Transference of Racial Otherness in Wes Anderson's
The Royal Tenenbaums

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In *Chromophobia*, author David Batchelor, an artist and writer, categorizes a fear of colorful aesthetic in the designs and art of the Western world, saying “colour has been the object of extreme prejudice in the Western world” (Batchelor 22) While defining this chromophobia, Batchelor notes that the phobia of color also manifests itself in isolation and fear of contamination, which begs a comparison to a viral entity which needs to be quarantined. This construction of color as a manifestation of otherness means that all forms of the other; femininity, queerness, blackness, “the oriental”, the infantile, and the disabled, have been defined by more *chromophilic* expression. Creating a binary between the colorful and the colorless has allowed the dominant groups in society to establish their dominance through chromatic methods, without being traced or exposed. Their whiteness is not allowed to be seen, as Richard Dyer notes, as strange. These identities, such as white, heterosexual, and male are invisible, and only fixated upon when confronted with their oppressed counterparts, such as black, queer, and feminine. This level of oppression and discrimination is seen as merely stylistic and artistic, and is not usually considered to be a political technique of reinforcing systemic modes of oppression such as racism and sexism. However, analyzing film and its use of color can help to illuminate the ways in which these discriminatory binaries are established chromatically, and how the movement and transference of color negotiates racial power dynamics. A filmmaker whose chromophilic approach will provide exemplary scenes for analyzing these chromatic negotiations of otherness is Wes Anderson, whose use of primarily white bodies and vivid colorful set design and costuming will be useful for examining this transference of otherness. The Royal

Tenenbaums will thus allow us to see what the contamination of chromophilic otherness looks like on white bodies, and examine the spatial and racial politics in sequences featuring white bodies, black and brown bodies, and chromophilic sets and costumes.

One of cinema's most compelling advancements, both technologically and aesthetically, was the shift from black and white films to color, which occurred roughly around the late 1930s and early 40s. One of the first films to achieve a chromatic aesthetic is the *Wizard of Oz*, which is famous for its shift from neutral to bright, vivid colors when Dorothy teleports from tornado-ridden Kansas to the magical land of Oz. Not only did this present chromatic cinema as a narrative technique, but also as a method of establishing realism in film. Previously, this was achieved through narrative and plot design, and camera work, which brought the audience closer to the filmic world, believing it was a pathway into a reality they had experienced before, but bigger and enhanced. However, after the introduction of color, audiences began to read realism through a chromatic lens, the cinematic world was translated by the audience through color. This meant that their emotions, whether it was happiness, melancholy, anger, fear, anxiety, or disorientation was driven by the color schemes. As color in film progressed, it became less about spectacle and more about phenomenology and affectivity. Fans of Woody Allen may remember his 1979 film *Manhattan*, which was completely monochromatic for the entire length of the film, bringing a somber and melodramatic tone. Or the flashbacks in numerous films that have been displayed monochromatically, in order to differentiate themselves from the filmic present. *Pleasantville* and *The Giver* have recently used the splitting of monochromatic and multi-chromatic frames to alter the audience's sense of realism and emotion in the different cinematic worlds. Zhang Yimou is a filmmaker who uses vivid and distinct color schemes to express emotions and make political statements after the Cultural Revolution in communist China, in

films such as *Hero*. All of these examples took chromatic techniques and applied them to their films to garner an affective response from their audiences. However, these chromatic techniques can also be applied to demonstrate to the audience the negotiation of racial power hierarchies, through the use of the characters, set design, and costumes. The narrative, realism, and emotional response that color allows in films also helps to identify how color affects the characters, and more importantly, which characters. The coagulation of white bodies, black and brown bodies, and different sets of color choices provides the proper space for analyzing the differences in their aesthetics, and what these differences represent politically and racially.

When examining the white bodies in the *Royal Tenenbaums*, one important aspect to analyze is the relationship between bodies and space, and how racial hierarchies can inhibit some bodies and promote others. This racial spatial incongruity is examined in Sara Ahmed's "A Phenomenology of Whiteness", in which she examines the ways in which white bodies move through time and space, and how this differs from black bodies. Although it might not seem like white bodies physically move faster or stronger than black bodies, this is more of an affective argument, which argues that white bodies do move more effortlessly. Ahmed says "whiteness may function as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in;" (Ahmed 6) This describes the ability for whiteness and white bodies to comfortably move in spaces that were designed for them, and optimized for their movement. This can include colonial states and hegemonic institutions, which are built on hierarchies of race and skin color. In other words, a square block that fits into a square hole perfectly, without extra exertion needed. A body of color or otherness is the circle block, which can never exactly fit into the square hole. As Ahmed notes "spaces extend bodies and bodies extend spaces" (Ahmed 6) This also makes the

task of exposing the other simple, because a body which is not meant to naturally fit into the space and extend it is going to be noticeable, and disorientation will usually be felt by the person of color in this space. This relationship between white and black bodies and space is important, because the spaces in Anderson's *Royal Tenenbaums* do not seem to be designed for white bodies, nor do the color schemes of the clothing. This spatial incongruity exposes otherness in white characters who typically enjoy the privilege of seamless spatial corporeal assimilation. In a colorful world of chromatic otherness, it is the white bodies that become the contamination.

Additionally, the orientations and disorientations between white and black bodies in space allow for an invisibility of white bodies that prevents them from experiencing the level of strangeness that bodies of color experience. As Richard Dyer discusses in his book *White*, white bodies have the privilege of representing humanity, not a color "There is not more powerful position than that of being just human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that." (Dyer 18) Dyer expresses a need in his book to analyze whiteness as strange, and examine the ways in which white bodies have avoided the fixation of skin color, and acted as a default in society's racial hierarchy. One of the ways in which white bodies have avoided this categorization of otherness is through the political construction of spaces that allow for their race to be hidden, or understated. Batchelor analyzes this spatial construction as a chromophobic one, in which certain color schemes have represented power and dominance, while chromophilic spaces have been designated for the Other, specifically the racial other: "color has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished, and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians and cultural historians of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed, and groomed. (Batchelor 22). Through the mechanism of spatial discrimination, bodies have found it difficult to escape these

racial binaries, and have used assimilationist methods to immerse themselves within the spaces of whiteness. This has hindered the proliferation of bodies of color and chromophilic modes of expression, and has created a world which strives for monochrome rather than multi-chrome and chromatic diversity. Instead of assimilating, an aesthetic mode of resistance to this chromophobic construction of race can be seen through the corruption of these spaces of whiteness by color, and the reversal of the process of disorientation. During these sequences in the *Royal Tenenbaums*, the racial and spatial continuities are disrupted, and the result is a reconfiguration of racial power and spatial dominance.

The Royal Tenenbaums places the central character, Royal, as a fallen hero, someone who has plummeted from his positions of privilege and fights for a rekindling of the familial relationships he lost. Initially, flashback sequences position Royal as the leader of the family, someone who wears traditionally colored suits, works for the government, and is financially stable. His racial, gender, and class privilege allow him freedoms that marginalized people do not, and his nuclear familial structure and opulent way of living are examples of these freedoms being exercised. In one particular flashback sequence, Royal is seated at the end of a long brown table in an elegant dining room, with shining brown wood and low lighting. His butler or assistant Pagoda hands him a drink and retreats, wearing a white shirt and visibly bright pink pants. Royal is dressed in a suit with a brown coat, neutral clothing (gray, brown, and tan) underneath, dark brown glasses, and brown hair. His position at the end of the table solidifies his position his status as the dominant in the situation, especially since he sits across from his kids, who are wearing red and pink as well. Royal proceeds to tell the children that he is getting a divorce from his wife, Etheline, and endures the questioning that ensues from the children.

Through chromatic, cinematographic, and narrative devices, Anderson has established a racial power structure based around color, space, and bodies. Royal's neutral clothing and traditionally colored suit positions him as the chromatic dominant that is representative of the Western world, as Batchelor notes. The camerawork not only gives Royal space in the frame to move freely, but also displays the opulent households which allows him the ability to move freely and exercise his privilege of being in a white body. Cinematography also allow us to see the spatial distinctions between the bodies of color and Royal, as Pagoda, his assistant, is only allowed a brief second or two in the frame before retreating back into off screen space. This represents the power and control that Royal wields over the space, and the brief invasion of a body with noticeably bright pink pants represents a chromatic contamination in the space of whiteness. Pagoda is also a body of color in the political sense, because of his skin color and ethnicity, and the differences between he and the white body of Royal further reinforce these racial hierarchies. However, another reason why this is sequence is essential to the construction of chromatic otherness is the fact that Royal is divorcing Etheline, and thus leaving the family. His departure from the familial structure which served to cement his dominant racial identity places him in a state of racial limbo, an ambiguous state which leaves him susceptible to racial and spatial disorientation. Numerous flashbacks sequences find Royal in neutral clothing or black and white, while the Tenenbaum house is always seen with bright colored walls, usually pink. This furthers the racial limbo that Royal is in, because while he is establishing racial dominance through monochrome clothing, he is a spatial other because of the chromatic dissonance between his monochromatic expression and the bright pink walls. This narrative arc of Royal as a fallen dominant entity and familial Other continues throughout sequences in the film, as he struggles to win back Etheline and his children years after they have grown up and

moved on without him. His struggle can be seen through the changes in the color of his clothing, and his relationship between Henry, a love interest of his ex-wife's and a barrier between Royal and his familial reclamation and assimilation.

Henry, an accountant, is identified most noticeably through his suit, which consists of a blue jacket, white and blue striped buttoned down shirt, blue bow tie, and blue pants. In comparison to Royal's suits in the flashbacks, it is very nontraditional and aesthetically foreign. Henry's suit often distinguishes him from the rest of the characters in the frame, as there is very little blue in any of the frames of *Royal Tenenbaums* besides this suit. Additionally, Henry is often framed against neutral backgrounds, such as white walls or tan, such as in a scene where he and Etheline walk through dirt and sand together. What makes Henry's movement throughout the frames truly strange is the fact that he is also in a black body, another sign of racial otherness. When the chromatic otherness and racial otherness of skin color are combined, it creates a sense of disorientation in the film that positions Henry as overtly racialized other, along with Pagoda. However, his romantic advances on Etheline position him not only as the racial other, but also as the threat to normalcy and whiteness, a potential contamination to Royal's nuclear family and the pristine image of whiteness. This makes the clash between Royal and Henry even more intriguing, because as Henry functions as the chromatic and black invasion in the white bodies, Royal also functions as someone who is using color to attempt to assimilate back into the Tenenbaum family. He begins to wear pink and red under his gray or brown coat, and uses chromatic shifts as a mode of assimilation. This method of assimilation is only made possible because of the pink pants of Pagoda and the pink and red Tenenbaum house. This chromophilic setting places the chromophobic expressions of Royal as the other, and he uses chromophilic

changes to appear less foreign in this new setting. The resulting confrontation between Henry and Royal is a chromophilic encounter of otherness and transference.

In this sequence, Royal is sitting down in a chair at the table, apparently drinking coffee in a robe that is multi colored with green, yellow, and the pink that has become associated with him since his return to the family. Unlike the pink walls of the Tenenbaum household, these walls are closer to neutral colored, and Royal's clothing stands out as a result. Henry walks in wearing his blue suit, with a yellow striped shirt, and blue bow tie. The camerawork and blocking of the scene places Royal below Henry, as a shot over the shoulder of Henry makes him look taller than Royal. Also, Royal is sitting down and Henry is standing up, establishing a power dynamic through space. Royal then asks Henry if he is trying to steal his woman, the woman being his ex-wife Etheline, who has become romantically involved with Henry. Royal continues the confrontation by calling Henry Coltrane, in reference to popular tenor saxophone player John Coltrane, and refers to Henry's speech as "jive". These are clearly oppressive techniques based on stereotypes and prejudice language, and seems to be a defense mechanism for Royal, as he senses himself losing the racial and spatial power in this relationship, and thus the romantic and familial connection to the Tenenbaums. Royal briefly stands up to attempt to equalize this spatial dissonance, but the use of the walking stick, and Henry's intelligent response places him in a more powerful position. Royal even runs from his comments at one point, saying "maybe I did say Coltrane?" when clearly he did. Etheline walks in, Royal sits down and forgets the argument, and the confrontation is quickly diffused. The use of blocking Royal in the chair, the over the shoulder shot of Henry, and the writing complements the chromatic transference of otherness from characters such as Henry and Pagoda to Royal, as the pink, greens, yellows, and reds become associated with him towards the end of the film.

Ultimately, the chromatic transference of otherness from bodies of color to white bodies is depicted in the *Royal Tenenbaums* as a process, something that occurs gradually throughout various sequences in the film. In the beginning, Royal is presented as a dominant white, heterosexual male body, someone who establishes control of the space, and uses monochromatic clothing to express this control. His black and white tuxedos, brown, gray, and dark colored coats and shirts position him as the chromatic dominant entity. In contrast, characters such as Pagoda and Henry are presented as chromatic others, bodies of color which also have chromophilic clothing designs which further positions them as the racial Other. How *Royal Tenenbaums* depicts the transference of racial otherness is through the changes in Royal's clothing as his narrative changes: when he becomes the familial outsider, the white body suddenly begins donning more chromophilic styles of clothing, such as pink undershirts, pink pants, and finally, multi colored robes with pink pants. Using Batchelor's analysis of chromophobia, and the studies of space and bodies by Ahmed, Royal has become the Other through chromatic shifts and spatial discontinuity. As the space becomes foreign due to his absence and the growth in the relationship between the family and Henry, Royal's clothing becomes chromophilic, and creates a unique effect in film, a white body becoming the invader in the cinematic space. Through this examination of the transference of racial otherness through chromatic expression, we can analyze the ways in which film style and color can negotiate racial politics seamlessly, and position otherness without referring to skin color explicitly. Examining these invisible methods of reinforcing racial hierarchies can stop the flow of racism and violence, because once race becomes less about bodies and more about style and color, it will lose a place to hide and lose its privilege of discretion under the guise of style.

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