

Warren Buckland

Wes Anderson's Symbolic Storyworld. A Semiotic Analysis

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In this volume, Warren Buckland applies a method of analysis derived from the structural anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss to the corpus of Wes Anderson's films. A curious and daring choice, of which it is crucial to understand both the reasons and the limits.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the method of analysis. Following Lévi-Strauss, myths should be interpreted by identifying certain major, underlying content categories: raw/cooked, life/death, water/fire, etc. These categories appear as binary oppositions because the cultural function of myths is that of mediating, in symbolic terms, between two irreconcilable categories. In any case, the French anthropologist indicates the opportunity to overcome a linear and syntagmatic analysis to access the achronic paradigms underlying the story. The reconstruction of the symbolic system of a single myth can then be compared to that of other myths, to obtain an 'archi-mythical' matrix of invariants belonging to a specific cultural environment (type level), of which the single myths would have many variants (token level). In applying Lévi-Strauss's paradigmatic method of analysis to Wes Anderson's films, Buckland proposes replacing the concept of archi-myth with that of the author's specific 'narrative world': this should not be seen as a single, mimetic, diegetic world, but precisely as the system of invariants in Anderson's cinema that the analyst must reconstruct. The second chapter is devoted to a review of the previous application of the structural method to the filmic text: Buckland favours those authors who, between the Sixties and Seventies, attempted the structural analysis of the content universes of specific film directors: G. Nowell-Smith, A. Lowell, Jim Kitses, R. Abel, B. Houson and Marsha Kinder, but above all P. Wollen, to whom we will return. Other approaches to textual analysis, more focused on single sequences (such as those of R. Bellour) are considered less functional to the methodological structure of the volume.

Chapters from 3 through to 10 are devoted to the analysis of one of Anderson's films (the director's filmography is covered in full, except for *Isle of Dogs*, released too recently). For each film, Buckland offers a plot synopsis divided in sequences, and analyses the core meanings organized in paradigmatic oppositions. Finally, chapter 11 reconstructs 'The Symbolic Storyworld of Wes Anderson' as a whole. According to Buckland, this universe is dominated by 'three types of kinship structures?' ('death/the absence of parents or spouses');

'intergenerational relationships'; 'interethnic relationships'; 'death/life (funerals and pregnancies)'; 'exchange and gifts'; 'mediation'; 'relative worlds'; 'water and drowning'; plus 'verticality, movement and water' (p. 169). In a summary table (p. 184) Buckland examines the recurrences and displacements of these categories from one Anderson film to another.

As I mentioned in the first few lines, it is useful to reflect on both the reasons and limits of such an intentionally 'outdated' methodological experiment. Let's start with the reasons. Buckland claims to refer to the 'auteur structuralism' proposed by Peter Wollen in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (first edition, 1969). If we reread the fifth and definitive edition of Wollen's book, which brings together all the materials accumulated in previous editions, we can read that it is 'a book that constantly reimagines itself and gains new powers by responding to new contexts'¹. Indeed, Wollen, after having started a modernist and structuralist theory of cinema, re-thinks it repeatedly in a post-structuralist key; in this sense, the 'auteur structuralism' is later deeply criticized by the author himself. It is therefore symptomatic that Buckland chooses to rely on the 1972 edition of Wollen's book: in this way, he explicitly states his intention to 'freeze' the development of cinema theory just before the advent of both Grand Theory and Post Theory. Starting from this point, I would argue that Buckland is proposing a peculiar way of doing film theory, *by re-enacting specific theories and methods of analysis of the past*. In other words, after carrying out a critical reconstruction/deconstruction of some film theories², Buckland reverses the operational direction and experiments with their 'rebooting'. In short, Buckland's theoretical gesture recalls the work of a media archaeologist, who recovers machines and appliances from the past and puts them back into use; only, Buckland moves this project from media devices history to film theory.

Finally, the limits of such an operation are profoundly linked to its premises. I will quickly highlight two. First, by dismantling the diachronic dimension, Buckland becomes unable to analyse how, in Anderson's cinema, paradigmatic core-meanings are translated into syntagmatic narrative architectures. In this respect, Buckland's analysis is more prone to an anthropological approach than a truly semiotic one: the question of the transition from basic semantic nuclei to 'surface' narrative forms, which is at the centre of Greimas' model, is not considered here. Secondly, the conscious dismantling of the film-specific and formal dimension (a critical point also in Wollen's discussion) emerges with particular emphasis in the analysis of Anderson's cinema, which finds a strong mark of authorial recognition precisely in the repetition of a group of formal stylistic patterns.

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¹ David N. Rodovick, 'Foreword', in Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 5th Edition (London – Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan – BFI, 2013), p. xiv.

² Warren Buckland, *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions* (London – New York: Routledge, 2012)