

# I

## Introduction

A freight train full of many different goods and people pierces through railroad tracks in the western desert under a pure sun, nor warm, nor cold. In the next shot, we see this same freight train filmed from the side, crossing our screen from left to right. When it disappears, it reveals that we are at the exact place of a perfectly perpendicular crossroads between these railroad tracks and another road which seems to continue endlessly in the horizon. We are shown that a city is built right before this crossroads, a fictional town called Asteroid City, which gives its name to the eponymous Wes Anderson movie.

That space, first described by the playwright Conrad Earp as being the main scenery of a fictional play called *Asteroid City*, is far from arbitrary. What it tells us immediately is that the fictional place that gives its name to the movie is a place of *crossroads*. In other terms, it means that the movie will take place where we are literally stopped in our travels, in our movements, so that we can take the time to live on another mode than *on constant departure*, as we, humans, always are. In a way, we could say that this movie is the opposite of a *road movie*; it tells the exact opposite story than what Jack Kerouac told us in his infamous *On the Road*, in which the real experience of life always takes place on the move, anywhere but where we are right now.

(“The whole mad swirl of everything that was to come began then; it would mix up my friends and all I had of my family in a big dust cloud over the American Night. [...] And this was really the way that my whole road experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell”, *On the Road*, ch. I.)

On the other end of the spectrum, *Asteroid City* depicts the crucial moment when the individual, any individual, has no road left to discover, has nowhere to go, which forces him to stop for a while, at the same time forcing him to understand the extent to which his own life is always itself *at a crossroads*. It begs the question: at a crossroads between what and what? As a general rule of thumb that will be justified all throughout these videos, we can say that *Asteroid City* shows us that we are always at a crossroads between our idiosyncrasy, which means our individual hopes, dreams, emotions, thoughts and wounds, all of which try to exteriorize themselves and manifest themselves in the world, and our shared experience of time and space, in the context of which our lives all move in the world – the only common world we know, to our great distress – at the same pace.

But if we take into consideration the complex narrative structure of Wes Anderson’s movie, why would a TV broadcast host judge it important, and even crucial, to show us this entirely fictional story of the creation then attempt to stage and then perform a fictional play written by a just as fictional playwright named Conrad Earp? Furthermore, why is it so important that the stage of the play, which, for the viewer, identifies with the content of the screen we are watching, has to be constructed in *this* particular manner, as the playwright describes with great lengths at the beginning of the movie? If, as some have suggested, the quarantine imposed on the characters is to be interpreted as a reference to the situation we have known during the world pandemic of Covid-19, can it be taken seriously when we know that the broadcast is supposed to be shot and broadcasted in the 1950s? – And if the movie is actually about Covid-19 and its consequences on our contemporary human condition, then *why* does Wes Anderson end up making a movie about an alien coming on Earth to steal a 5000 year old asteroid? *What does the alien mean?* Is it really a “metaphor”, as the actor who plays the alien in the play says, and if it is actually the case, the metaphor of what?

Moreover, the narrative structure of the movie led many viewers to think that it was fundamentally a movie about metafiction. More precisely, some say it is a movie that is supposed to be a way for Wes Anderson to interpret his own career as a filmmaker as he stages

a complex *mise en abyme* of his own process of creation, production, directing and performing of a movie. If it is the case, then we should logically find in this movie some sort of theory of cinema and of its artistic possibilities, one that should give us viewers clues about the retrospective and prospective takes that Wes Anderson draw on his own filmography. But is it really the case?

*Asteroid City* is indeed a movie that says very important things about the reasons why we tell each other stories in many forms. More specifically, I think that what Wes Anderson is most interested in with this movie is the way we *embody* and *personify* others instead of our own selves, and the profound, philosophical reasons why we do so. In other words, *why* does the humanity in its vast diversity has felt it was so important to wears *masks*, to play other people in various performances? In philosophical terms, this movie poses the question of the reasons why we, as humans, have been fascinated by the powers of *persona*, of representation, of images of others that we could embody for a while to better understand ourselves.

If we think about the *meta* elements of this movie, we have to admit that the question of *cinema* in particular is rarely mentioned, except through the character of Midge Campbell as far as she is rehearsing lines for a role she will have to play in a future movie – but it could have very well been a role for a play, the reference to cinema, here, is not meaningful. If we watch and understand the movie as it is, we see that drama as part of theatrical performance is at the core of the movie, and not cinema and filmmaking. I think this should be some sort of warning for us: we tend to, as an interpretative reflex, always see the complex narrative structures of films as an instrument for the filmmaker to interrogate his own artistic medium, even though it is not necessarily the case.

As a matter of fact, as we allow ourselves to step away from these interpretative reflexes that lead us to interpret everything as metacinema, or metaliterature, and so on and so forth, I think it gives us the ability to view the film as it is really *shown* to us, through what it says and what it means in the experience we have of the screening. Every outside information that is not specifically relevant to interpret *this* movie in particular should then be regarded as a potential scarecrow, that might, if we are not careful, draw us away from the point of the movie. Hence why I will try to propose a sort of immanent critique of the movie for itself and by its own means of expression.

Since it is a huge task and I am so far so unthorough to say what I have to say about *Asteroid City*, it may take me 2 or maybe 3 full videos of analysis and interpretation. Moreover it is a task that I intend to see through for many other movies, TV shows and other works or art on this brand new YouTube channel, so feel free to subscribe if you think I'm doing a good job so far. I'd like to hear all your thoughts about the movie in the comments. Now lets get back to *Asteroid City*.

## II

### The complex narrative structure of the film

Let's start by trying to produce a full description – or at least as precise as necessary for the sake of this video – of the narrative structure of the film. Indeed, the narrative structure of *Asteroid City* takes precedence over the dramatic content of the play itself as it is what determines the way this “Asteroid City” play is to appear on the screen of the viewer. And, depending on the level of the so-called narrative structure we are in, this play will take different values for different characters. Let's be more schematic: the “Asteroid City” play can be perceived (a) as a pure fiction created for the needs of a TV broadcast and its host; (b) as a *work-in-progress* or to-be-written play in the scenes with the playmaker; (c) as a real play that will soon be played by tangible actors in the scenes with the fictional actors; (d) as a play to stage in the scenes with the director played by Adrian Brody; (e) as a play effectively played, or at least played as a general rehearsal, in the main scenes of the movie.

With that in mind, we can then consider, in a schematic manner, that we have three main narrative levels, that could all be respectively complexified. These narrative levels are in order or hierarchized, which means that the lower level is always dependent on the upper level, the ladder being the condition of possibility of the former. Each level of narration can also be understood as a level of reality inside of the world of *Asteroid City* as a whole, as a movie.

- (1) The TV broadcast led by Bryan Cranston's host, which is the reason why all the rest – the playmaker, the play itself, the actors, and so on and so forth – is invented. Of course, the TV broadcast is itself a fiction inside an external reality that has to be presupposed, but that is never part of the movie. In the absence of this lever of reality in the movie, we have to consider that it doesn't exist, or that it exists simply as a useless background that has to be there but that is irrelevant to understand the stakes of the story. With that in mind, it means that the TV broadcast is the superior level of narration, in which all the others are grounded.
- (2) Everything that concerns what I propose to gather under the idea of the **process of the play's production**, with (2a) first the writing & the production of the play, (2b) and on the other hand the staging of the play. The most important part of this level of narration is what I propose to call the “*actorialization*” (\**this word is used in literary semiotics but to refer to something different*), that is to say the process in which the actors try to make the roles their own. I might talk about the “**performance**” of the play in general to refer the activity of the director and the embodiment of the characters of the play by actors in a theatrical performance. At this level of narration we shouldn't forget that the “actors”, called like that because they have each been chosen to play a specific role in the play called “Asteroid City”, are actors *themselves* in the presupposed “background reality” of the world we are presented, as they have been chosen by the TV channel, Channel 8, to play these roles.
- (3) **The play as it is performed or rehearsed**, as it is shown to the viewer, and in which all the actors of level (2) play their respective roles. These are, to put it simply, and the scenes in color of the movie. On the contrary, the black & white scenes are either set in the level (1) or in the level (2), because, as we will see, we have to consider that the reality of level (1) will continuously merge with the level (2) reality through the character of the host, who plays the function of a junction point between the two levels of narration. Indeed, it is only when he inadvertently shows up in the level (3) reality that we are told that something is wrong: “*I am not supposed to be here, am I?*” says the host when he is spotted in a scene of the play. By the way it is through some scenes like that that we envision that we are only in a *rehearsal* of the play, and not in an official *performance* of the play in front of an audience. The end of the movie makes

it clear that such a performance before an audience is never to occur since the play was canceled due to the premature death of its playwright, Conrad Earp, in a car accident.

- (4) For the purpose of this interpretation we have to add a fourth level of reality, which is originally a subproduct of the events of the play itself, in which Midge Campbell, the star actress, rehearses for a role she got in an incoming movie.

Now that we have in our possession this rather objective description of the narrative structure of the movie, we have to answer this simple question: *why* did Wes Anderson choose to orchestrate a narration of this sort, which makes every scene of the movie feel like a meta-tale? One simple way of finding an answer to that question consists in understanding that a structure so rigid can only have an interest in a contemporary film if, at one point, the rigidity and order between the different levels is subverted in any way. Then it's in the precise way these structures are subverted that we will be able to understand why the director felt the need to tell the story he envisioned in such way from the get-go.

On this matter it is very clear that Wes Anderson's interest lies in the way some levels of reality contaminate each other: sometimes it's an upper level of reality that contaminates a lower level of reality, sometimes it's the other way around, which is always more surprising. There is something postmodern in this way of treating the narrative structure of the film, but also something that one may call "metamodern". *Postmodern* because the movie is portrayed in a way that we have the impression of witnessing some sort of arbitrary equalization or levelling out of the different types of discourse, as if lines of a movie rehearsed by a character from a fictional play that was itself invented by a fictional playwright created for the sole purposes of a fictional TV broadcast should have the same *impact* in our lives (in terms of intensity, of importance, of significance and of affectivity) than the "background" reality that is never shown in the movie. But we're also on the verge of what some commentators call "metamodernism" or sometimes "post-postmodernism" in the sense that the levelling out of the different types of discourse is not determined by a general *negation* of their respective capability of saying something of significance, of greater importance for our individual lives. On the contrary, it's more like the deeper we get inside the narrative structure, the deeper we dive into layers of mediations and discourses, the more we could effectively *return* to the immediate significance of our existences. Of course one cannot settle on Wes Anderson being more postmodern than metamodern or the other way around, because these types of meta-concepts are always too broad, too general to fully grasp the singularity of a work of art.

To take a significative example of a contamination of the levels of narration in the movie, let's think about the movie's wants us to think, as it is implicitly suggested, that the death of the playwright, Conrad Earp, in a tragic car accident, could have something to do with the events of the play he himself wrote. Do we have to imagine that he died in one of the high-speed car chase that we witness twice in the film, at the beginning and at the end, when the quarantine is not forbidding the passage of cars? Or maybe the movie wants us to think that his car just stopped obeying him because one of the weird car parts thought it was high time to claim its autonomy, just like it happened for the Steenbeck family in one of the first scenes? We are led to think that Conrad Earp died because he sort of dove into his own play, because it has been prepared since we saw him make out with the actor playing Auggie in the play after he saw him embody "perfectly" the character, as if the playwright had had the need to lose himself in his own creation, "*he immerses himself in it; he enters that work – as legend tells us happened to a Chinese painter on once catching sight of his finished painting*" (Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*). In other words, we are led to think that, in this world exists an interpenetration of the lower levels of the narration into the higher levels, especially between the levels (2) & (4).

It's what we will see way more clearly with the characters of Auggie & Midge Campbell: the former, as a character in the "Asteroid City" play, ends up being deeply transformed due to his acting contact with the character he briefly embodies every time he helps Midge rehearse for her role in a future film. But the reason it happens is because it is already the case of Midge herself, in a very explicit way: when she talks about herself to Auggie, right after one of their rehearsals, she tells him that she is pretty sure she will someday be found dead in her bathtub due to a pill overdose. But later in the movie we realize that it is in reality the ultimate incident that marks the end ambiguous end of the character she is bound to play in the movie. Moreover, the actor who plays Auggie is the character who, inside the movie as a whole, keeps transgressing the frontiers between the different narrative levels. Even though he has been intimate both emotionally and sexually with the playwright, one may believe that he knows and understands the deepest meanings of the play he is in; but the paradox is that he is the one that will lose touch with the *meaning* of the play the more. At the beginning we are under the impression that the actor succeeds in his acting so brilliantly that he forgets his own identity as an actor, but this vision is soon to be inverted when we realize that it's more Auggie as a character in the play that is transformed by the fact that the cognitive confusion of the actor who plays the role regarding the meaning of the play ends up contaminating Auggie himself. For example, the end of the movie makes it very clear that Auggie as a character, in the original play as written by the playwright as we can imagine it, was supposed to know about the quarantine being lifted off. But because the actor, in the meanwhile, was having a conversation with the director, then with the actress who was supposed to play his late wife, he comes back in the play as if he had slept the whole night: an understudy had his hand bandaged instead of him, and learned about the quarantine being lifted off. The character should have known about it, but the play seems to be transformed by the way the actors know or don't know about what is happening to them and the meaning of it all.

In the end it's the reality of third degree (3), the one created by the play being performed by actors, that ends up winning over the reality of second degree (2b), because the movie as a whole wants us to consider that what is willingly happening in the "Asteroid City" play is *truer*, more liberating, and more *important* for the actors as their "lives" as actors. The intention of all of this is to make us think about the way a completely *fictional* and, most of all, *ludicrous* play can *say* more things about the actor than their own lives *outside* of the play.

### *Transition* Meaning

But if we take Auggie's questions seriously, then *what is the meaning of all this?* I think that Wes Anderson wants to show us *visually*, through variations of masks, *persona* and performance by actors, that what we can call the "human condition", whether it is historical or ontological, has something to do with the sphere of *representation*: with the human activity consisting in receding our existential and ethical problems in layers of *mediations* to find a point of view from which we can better apprehend them. The underlying condition of that situation is that the immediate access to oneself and to others, through communication of introspection, is tendentially failing. What Wes Anderson is telling us, is that it is always through the representation into something like a "work of art", especially because it allows us to embody a *persona*, a mask, someone else's mask, that we can hope to know *ourselves* better. Deep down, it is a solution to a radical problem of self-knowledge, of knowledge about others and of the world. To put it in Stanley Cavell's words, we can say that, in very general philosophical terms, *Asteroid City's* theme, like a lot of other modern and contemporary works of art, is the **skeptical doubt** about the possibility of knowing the world, by extension of knowing and understanding others, and, by extension, of knowing and understand oneself, these three dimensions of the

skeptical doubt being inextricably connected in our ordinary experience of the world and of our psychology.

The *alien* is literally, etymologically, the *Other: alienus* in latin means “which belongs to someone else”, and is derived from *alius*, other. One of the ways to interpret Anderson’s recourse to the arrival of an alien is by considering that he is telling us that it is always when we try to scrutinize *the other that we are* that we are able to understand each other and ourselves. It’s basically what we do every time we go to the movies or seeing a play. In this way it is true to think that Anderson uses his film, and maybe all of his films, to convey a practical theory about the importance of art as the best way of representing oneself as someone else, and someone else as oneself, if we bear to understand our shared human condition. The actors in the movie feel the *need* to present and represent themselves as others so they can fully grasp who they are, what they are. It’s why *Asteroid City* is probably the first Wes Anderson movie to give us so explicitly and in plain sight what Cavell calls “*views on skepticism*”.

« Film is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes. » Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, “More of The World Viewed”, p.189.

If you liked this general interpretation of Wes Anderson’s *Asteroid City*, let me know in the comments what you think about the movie, if you think my interpretation has valid points, and feel free to subscribe to the channel so you won’t miss the other videos that are in preparation for this movie and for other movies and TV shows. This was just the part 1 of a probably 3 part series of videos on *Asteroid City*.