



MICHELLE DEVEREAUX

THE STILLNESS OF SOLITUDE

Romanticism and Contemporary American Independent Film

THE STILLNESS OF SOLITUDE

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THE STILLNESS OF SOLITUDE
*Romanticism and Contemporary
American Independent Film*

Michelle Devereaux

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INTRODUCTION: FILMMAKING AS A ROMANTIC QUEST

The choice of subject matter of this book might seem curious to some. What could the great pantheon of poets, philosophers and artists of the various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantic movements have to do with modern American independent filmmaking? After all, the first commercial film screening was nearly a hundred years off when Wordsworth's *The Prelude* was first published in 1799 and Romanticism was arguably at its height. It is difficult to know what the Romantics might have made of the cinema itself, its reliance on technology and money uncomfortably married to the concept of single-minded auteurist vision. (Would Keats have picked up a 16mm Bolex as a teen and made films instead of poems if given the chance?) But in many ways, the world in which the Romantics lived and worked is not terribly removed from our own. In the Romantic era, political revolution, the birth of modern capitalism and the Industrial Revolution created conditions of change both 'profound and sweeping' (Mellor 1980: 3) and 'violent and inclusive' (Abrams 1970: 92), enabling the questioning of societal 'progress', the creation of new modes of being and feeling, and the consideration of how to navigate them.

This time around, geopolitical and environmental turmoil, economic globalisation resulting from late capitalism, and the 'electronic revolution' of the information age situate our own era in a similar societal landscape of uncertainty (Botting 1999: 99, 101). Such profound social changes 'promise massive global transformations which repeat revolutionary and romantic gestures while

at the same time threatening the human subject and the modernity sustaining it' (1999: 99). As Fred Botting writes, the neoromantic turn, one I argue is present in contemporary American independent cinema, is as much a product of a desire for societal and political change as it is one for self-realisation and interpersonal connection:

The exhumation of Romanticism, the calling up of a ghost already haunting the present, constitutes another nostalgic appeal to a lost past, a gesture of mourning that recognizes a lack and vainly calls up an autonomous political agent who can resist the present state of things. (Botting 1999: 103)

True to the contradictions inherent in Romanticism, this study of seven films from four contemporary American directors – Wes Anderson, Charlie Kaufman, Sofia Coppola and Spike Jonze – is predicated on each being very much of its moment yet also greatly removed from it, existing in its own imaginary time and place. While they all 'resist the present state of things', they do so in oblique ways. The films are simultaneously *here*, in the tumultuous early twenty-first century, and *nowhere*, in a reimagined past conjured purely from the spirits of their creators and their collaborators.

While the myth of the information age is one of transparency and instantaneous global connection, the reality is often one of 'near-endless repetition' (Hartman 2002: 193) and a cacophony of often-meaningless symbols. The filmmakers I consider try to combat the despair of such a postmodern 'disenchantment that is final, or self-perpetuating' (2002: 138) through varying approaches to intersubjectivity, self-consciousness, sympathetic emotional engagement and imaginative creation, but all approach them in what can be defined as Romantic terms. Just what does this turn to so-called 'neoromanticism' say both about the films themselves and about the contemporary age in which they were created? Before exploring that question, it is necessary to define the parameters of Romanticism, a nebulous, misinterpreted concept if there ever was one.

WHAT IS 'ROMANTIC'?

The term *Romantic* is often utilised and just as often misunderstood. What exactly does it mean to say something is Romantic, specifically in terms of a canon of Romantic artistic works? Most often the Romantic age has been defined as a historically bound movement stretching from 1789, the year of the French Revolution, to 1832, the year of the Reform Act in Britain (Bainbridge 2008: 6). Some scholars, however, contend the period lasted until the mid-nineteenth century (George 1955: xi). Romanticism was not simply one movement, but a collection of them, from the Jena School German Romanticism of

the 1790s to the French Romantic novelists of the 1820s. The heterogeneous nature of Romanticism leads Seamus Perry to claim it as a ‘posthumous invention’ (1997: 4). In fact, the use of *Romantic* to describe a particular style or outlook did not become popular until the later nineteenth century in Britain and was not cemented until the critical reappraisals of the twentieth century (Bainbridge 2008: 4).

In the 1940s, René Wellek influentially characterised British Romantic literature as employing ‘imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style’ (qtd in Bainbridge 2008: 4). Wellek’s proposed corpus was notoriously narrow, which helped solidify the Romantic canon as a handful of British poets – William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats and William Blake – and neglected scores of other poets and writers of the era (2008: 4).

Wellek’s definition, while a good starting point, is vague, and the body of work he cites fails to include non-British Romantic works entirely. Arthur Lovejoy famously proposes that instead of ‘Romanticism’, we should speak in terms of a ‘plurality of Romanticisms’ (qtd in Bainbridge 2008: 5). Similarly, Jerome McGann acknowledges that ‘a systemic or comprehensive accounting of Romanticism – of its works or ideology – is an impossibility: indeed, it is a contradiction in terms’ (1983: 47). For McGann, that contradiction lies in Romanticism’s aspiration toward completeness and its simultaneous acknowledgement of the impossibility of perfection (1983: 47). German Romantic poet and philosopher Novalis’s definition of Romanticism is more descriptive: ‘By endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite, I am making it Romantic’ (1997: 60). Fundamentally, the qualities of Romantic works represent a ‘cataclysmic coming-into-being of the world’ (Abrams 1953: 93). The Romantic, it follows, is located within the ‘mysterious’ experience of a phenomenological becoming – a constant hoping, striving and doing related to a steadfast Romantic longing – rather than in the impossible completion of such a quest.

There are many familiar and more obscure Romantic strains running through the films I consider. These include a preoccupation with personal history and memory; a deep undercurrent of emotion and a reliance on mood and tone to convey it; a foregrounding of the creative process and the all-important imagination; and an ambivalent relationship to both the natural world and civilised society. In terms of aesthetics, they depend on qualities of the beautiful, the picturesque and (most importantly) the sublime to elicit complex emotional responses in their characters and their audiences. Above all, they represent a preoccupation with subjectivity and self-consciousness, the latter not necessarily in the sense of metatextual and reflexive analysis (although there is plenty

of that evident in these films) but in the more Romantic sense: the coming to personal self-consciousness that creates a rift between the individual subject and the greater sense of a social self (Bloom 1970: 6).

Harold Bloom considers subjectivity, or self-consciousness, ‘the salient problem of Romanticism’ (1970: 1). Similarly, when Geoffrey Hartman writes that ‘Wordsworth cannot find his theme because he already has it: himself’ (1970: 53), he highlights the problematic solipsism shadowing the subjectivity of Romantic thought. Echoing both Bloom’s and Hartman’s sentiments, Philip Shaw contends, ‘the Wordsworthian mind is self-contained, serving no other purpose than itself’ (2005: 102). While the Romantic movement (in the personal sense) is a journey from nature to the ‘imagination’s freedom’ – the unleashing of visionary subjectivity beyond and above that of nature – it is also a move that can lead to the ‘destruction of the social self’:

The quest is to widen consciousness as well as intensify it, but the quest is shadowed by a spirit that tends to narrow consciousness to an acute pre-occupation with self. This shadow of the imagination is solipsism, what Shelley calls the Spirit of Solitude. (Bloom 1970: 6)

The resulting realisation of such self-consciousness entails giving up a feeling of totality, a connection with the external world, a world that includes other consciousness – that is, other people. How does one negotiate between such an all-important visionary self and a social self? This divide between self and other results in fractured selves left to the solitude of their own subjective consciousness. The title of this book paraphrases a line from Shelley’s 1816 poem that Bloom references, *Alastor; Or, The Spirit of Solitude*, in which a lone poet retreats to nature to discover what lies beyond it (‘One human step alone, has never broken / The stillness of its solitude’). With it, I hope to highlight the principle of this self-consciousness and the fissures it potentially creates between self and world. I argue that this Romantic principle, and the perpetual desire to establish intersubjective connection that this self-consciousness can impede, forms the implicit Romantic theme in the films that I discuss.

For the purposes of my study, I consider the term *Romantic* as both an artistic mode of expression(s) as well as a historically situated age where such expressions were principally fomented. (Because it is defined principally by its epoch, I have chosen to capitalise the term except when used in its most everyday sense.) While the filmmakers I consider are all American, their cultural and artistic influences are much more global in outlook, one of the reasons I have chosen to correlate them with the Romantic movements of a variety of nations. This also allows for a greater understanding of the pluralities of Romanticism Lovejoy references. I draw not only from the work of the famous English poets Wellek discusses, but also German Romantics such as Schlegel and Novalis, writers of

gothic fiction such as Anne Radcliffe and Mary Shelley, American Romantics such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and British women authors such as Felicia Hemens and Charlotte Smith.

Some (the German Jena Romantics) predate the British canon, while others (the American Transcendentalists) follow it; still others, such as Smith and Mary Shelley, were more or less contemporaries and often critically engaged with the work of their more historically celebrated counterparts. I use Romantic philosophy, texts and critical theory as a foundation for engagement with the films I discuss. I combine this with a larger theoretical framework utilising medium-specific analysis of the films. I have chosen to focus on films at least co-written by their directors because the idea of ‘authenticity of origins’, directly linked to filmic auteur theory, is in essence a fundamentally Romantic principle. While this is not an auteurist study per se, it relies upon the Romantic focus on the origins and intentions of a more or less singular consciousness – a somewhat absurd notion given the collaborative nature of filmmaking, but one inextricable with the theories of authorship and romanticised notions of artistic practice that these filmmakers often embrace.

This book does not involve dissecting conceptions of romance as they relate to generic conventions like the ‘love story’, although Romantic love does play a role. Rather, I engage with twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical interpretations of European and American Romantic artworks, principally poetry and literature. I have chosen, for practical purposes, not to engage with the differences between factions of Romantic criticism, neither in discourse nor in method of approach (for example, New Historicism versus formalism). More important is my selection of films – this is not a study of Romanticism or artists from the Romantic period, but rather one about how those artists’ conceptions of Romanticism are expressed in contemporary American ‘art-house’ film. (By ‘contemporary’ I refer to work made in our current century: the oldest film I discuss is Sofia Coppola’s 1999 debut *The Virgin Suicides*, while the most recent is Spike Jonze’s *Her*, released in 2013.)

By utilising the work of theorists and critics such as Harold Bloom, M. H. Abrams, Anne Mellor, Geoffrey Hartman, Jerome McGann and other major and minor scholars of the past and present century, I hope to emphasise the historical trajectory of Romantic thought – one that has endured to the twenty-first century as presented in the work of the filmmakers I have chosen to write about. Just as I am looking back to the past in order to analyse the present state of film, Romantic artists themselves were in part inspired by looking back to the mythmaking past of medieval and chivalric romances (Snell 2013: 1) and were preoccupied by personal and cultural history in general (Milnes and Sinanan 2010: 4). Present realities are, of course, just as important. The Romanticism of these filmmakers is shaped as much by the historical and cultural realities in which they operate as Wordsworth or Keats or Mary Shelley were shaped by

their own time, so much of my project focuses on how these filmmakers have adapted, altered, affirmed or challenged such thought, however unwittingly.

None of this is to necessarily suggest these filmmakers have consciously chosen to engage with Romantic aesthetics and philosophy; rather, just as Romanticism was in part a ‘conversation with [. . .] the unconscious’ (Snell 2013: 7), I argue that Romantic concepts form the very fabric of these works in mostly unconscious ways.^{1,2} The films of Coppola, Jonze, Anderson and Kaufman are steeped in a Romantic tradition that follows from many of their filmic and larger artistic influences, including European New Wave cinema, New Hollywood Romanticism and filmic surrealism, as well as twentieth-century literature and photography. These traditions permeate the general landscape of European and American culture and have had an enduring role in shaping art beyond the Romantic era. These earlier artists’ Romantic tendencies engage in a dialogue with modernism, as an aesthetic movement, and modernity, as the historical reality of their time.³ To a large extent, the films I discuss express similar preoccupations. However, they are generally less political and experimental and more personal, even solipsistic, a trend that continues the ‘personal politics’ of what Jeffrey Sconce refers to as American 1990s ‘smart cinema’ (Sconce 2002: 352).

Unlike their cinematic forebears of the 1960s and 1970s, who often focused on the ‘social politics of power, institutions, representations and subjectivity’, the filmmakers I discuss shift attention to the interpersonal relations of ‘power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture’ (2002: 352). They are all fundamentally concerned with the matter of the alienated self and its relation to the external world, and that sense of alienation is expressed in the various emotional states their films convey: melancholy, restlessness, confusion, despair. But they also often express a sense of hope: bursts of joyous naïveté or intersubjective expressions of deep feeling, just as ‘[t]he Romantics glimpsed the darkness to come, yet a principle of hope prevailed’ (Hartman 2002: 167–8). Their characters may act blasé or disaffected, but they all fundamentally care, even as they remain isolated within the solitude of their self-consciousness and occasional solipsism (Mayshark 2009: 188).

The Romantic conception of the power of individual imagination to expand social imagination explains these filmmakers’ imaginative, often fantastical ‘re-descriptions’ (Rorty 2016: 72) of reality, and it also speaks to their qualified hopeful spirit. Far from cynical or nihilistic stabs in the dark at an uncaring universe, these films and their characters ‘rarely succumb to hopelessness’ (Mayshark 2009: 12). They engage on a deeply moral and ethical level, mostly through problems of the alienated individual’s relation to their personal social network (usually the family) and society as a whole (2009: 5).

Fundamentally, the films exhibit a preoccupation with self-identity: the notion of self and its definition in relation to other selves, and even to what constitutes a self. Since the Romantic era, the idea of an authentic self has become

degraded, a casualty of postmodernism and poststructuralism (Jameson 1992: 62). This ‘post-structuralist attack’ (Henderson 1996: 2) – that such self-identity is simply an illusion and there is no ‘core’ self – in many ways spurs a certain conservative, consoling mode in the films I consider. Characters often personify a more reactionary strain of Romanticism in their evocation of what Wordsworth in *The Prelude* refers to as the ‘anxiety of hope’, a longing to return to the harmony present in pre-self-consciousness – or the belief that ‘the idea of unity has to be recovered or reborn’ (McGann 1983: 40). Characters incessantly search for the means by which to reassert and reiterate their own identities as a way to protect themselves from a sense of inauthenticity, even as the very notion of the authentic now seems moot. They re-enact their own growth personally or through others (especially children), or they engage in a continual process of reinvention in order to stumble upon their ‘real’ selves. This generally amounts to a series of false starts and failed attempts.

The films themselves often appear as imaginative recreations of impossible pasts as a protection against uncertain futures. From Caden Cotard’s relentless desire to embalm his entire life through his art; to Richie, Margot and Chas Tenenbaum’s attempts to recapture the faded glory of their childhoods, which were miserable in the first place; to *The Virgin Suicides*’ nameless boys’ quest to forensically recreate the magical allure of their objects of affection, who they never even really knew, characters continually plumb their histories with the intention of self-discovery. Often they are just as deeply mired in self-delusion and seem incapable of meaningfully engaging in their day-to-day lives.

Despite their obsession with the past, the films’ Romantic inclinations are grounded in their own idealised historical time and place. Many of their stories seem to take place in a nebulous, transhistorical otherworld that does not quite correspond to our own. Leo Marx terms such a place ‘moral geography’, an ideal, mythic landscape used to work through subjective fascinations (1964: 245). Grappling with the anxiety of indeterminacy and ‘weakening of historicity’ that signifies the postmodern condition (Jameson 1992: 58), the filmmakers, through their art, exhibit a yearning for a past acknowledged as imaginary. While utilising irony, they take aim at that irony’s ‘tyranny’ by injecting their narratives with sincere sympathy (Mayshark 2009: 5, 7). Their films are overly concerned with reconstruction (2009: 6), even as they recognise that these attempted reconstructions are bound to fail because they are reconstructions of imaginative illusions.

According to Jesse Mayshark, ‘If there is a defining dialectic [in the films] it is between the self and the world’ (2009: 11). In many ways that is the way their characters prefer things, but the status quo of solitude has intense and unasked-for repercussions. Ultimately, the characters in these films reflect the filmmakers’, and our own, grappling with this sense of alienation and estrangement: alone even in a crowd, they are solitary figures, strangers not only to family,

friends, partners and co-workers, but also to themselves. While they represent a partially conservative turn (King 2014: 7) toward a past modernism – with its utopian vision, a ‘standstill’ of life perfected through utility (Benjamin 1969: 170) – they embrace many of the seemingly inescapable tenets of postmodernism, such as fragmented subjectivity, irony and self-consciousness (Waugh 1992: 5). Their turn toward the past is a turn toward renewed meaning. Ironically, it represents a desire for progress, even as the notion itself is called into question. It is this very oscillation between the poles of modernism and postmodernism that defines their particular historically based brand of Romanticism (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). In the following pages I will elucidate the twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical responses to several major components of Romantic philosophy and art works in order to form an initial theoretical framework for my corpus. I start with one of the most important ideas: the concept of the Romantic Imagination.

IMAGINATION AND THE ROMANTIC SENSIBILITY

In his 1841 essay ‘Circles’, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that a Romantic view of individual life, and human history, is of a cyclical, unending progression akin to an ever-turning wheel powered by individual imagination:

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. (Emerson 1841: 10.5)

This passage speaks to the Romantic belief in the endless inquiry of the human imagination and its limitless potential, that ‘[e]very ultimate fact is only the first of a new series’ (1841: 10.6). Such a belief encompasses the idea that ‘[w]e shall never find descriptions so perfect that imaginative redescription will become pointless’ (Rorty 2016: 71). It describes a perpetual motion machine of inspiration and hopeful renewal, but, unlike Enlightenment conceptions of progress, it denies ultimate knowledge, instead affirming an unending epistemological quest (2016: 71).

Critically, it also expresses the idea that imagination is the key to human advancement; it is the ‘principle vehicle of human progress’ (2016: 71). This emphasis on individual imaginative power was evidenced by a ‘growing self-consciousness in art’ in the late eighteenth century (Bate 1970: 169). Fundamentally, it is indicative of the emphasis on the ‘cult of individual genius’ (Hamilton 1999: 18), an acknowledgement that poets are, as Shelley wrote, ‘the unacknowledged legislators of the world’ ([1840] 1921: 48) and

share a special visionary access to hidden fundamental truths that ordinary people do not (McGann 1983: 114). Genius is the ingredient that ‘arrests the moving fantasms, the material and images of beggarly day dreaming, the corrupting movements of romance delirium’ and renders the Romantic imagination’s ‘evident light and truth’ in its place (Botting 1999: 108) – it expands fanciful illusion to a sublime state of reason. Such poetic genius was only accessible through a combination of lived experience, deep feeling and patient reflection (Bate 1970: 164).

If theories of the Enlightenment considered imagination merely as a ‘function of memory, the recollection of decaying sensory data that was to be brought forth to mind after its objects were gone’, the Romantic artist sought to reintroduce the power of the ‘active mind’ in an attempt to break the bonds of materialism (Wolf 2012: 20). For the Romantic, the imagination was the source of sympathy for others (Bate 1970: 162) and a ‘touchstone of stability and order’ for the self (McGann 1983: 68). It was even cast in quasi-divine terms, in the conviction that it would ‘transcend historical divisions’ and see ‘into the life of things in a secular age’ (1983: 98, 101). Both Coleridge and Wordsworth ‘wished to make imagination not merely creative but a power for apprehending truth’ (Pottle 1970: 283), and Blake went so far as to align the poet’s imaginative power with the ‘creative power of God’ (Frye 1970: 130). In accordance with such a project, the Romantics embraced myth and mythmaking as protection against the rationality they thought inhibited true vision (Bate 1970: 151).

Artistic mythmaking becomes ‘a means to resist the intelligence intelligently’ (Hartman 1970: 50), a higher calling than the mere functionalism of intellect. Through imaginative power, the artist resists spiritually deadening rationality to arrive at something greater and more exultant. Under this rubric, fiction, not the objective scientific enquiry of Enlightenment, holds the key to enlightened truth. While Romantic thought is rooted in hope, that hope ‘has been shifted from the history of mankind’ to ‘the mind of the single individual’ (Abrams 1970: 111). It is, in some ways, an emancipatory attitude that focuses on the power of the individual through creative freedom.

While imagination, along with emotion, ‘began to destroy the perfect balance and the harmony which neo-classic art had sought’ (Monk 1970: 28), it also unbalanced (or perhaps simply brought into stark relief) the separation between self and world. Geoffrey Hartman contends that the Romantic poet harnessed the ‘sympathetic imagination’ within in order to counteract solipsism and ‘entice the brooding soul out of itself, toward nature first, then toward humanity’ (1970: 55). This is related to Harold Bloom’s conception of the ‘quest romance’, comprising a series of stages in which immature and wild creative impulses are channelled into the pointedly self-actualising imagination of the Romantic poet (Bloom 1970: 3). The first phase requires a ‘radical withdrawal of self’ that can result in ‘visionary solipsism’ (Rzepka 1986: 9), but

such solipsism is eventually overcome in favour of the 'Real Man' or 'Imagination' stage Bloom characterises as 'the outward turning of the triumphant Imagination' toward a larger humanity (Bloom 1970: 17).

In contrast, Charles Rzepka refers to the Romantic imagination as 'the self as mind' (1986: 5); enraptured by his own power, '[t]he Romantic poet turned away, not from society to nature, but from nature to what was more integral than nature, within himself' (1986: 16). The traditional Romantic view of sublimity, sometimes called the 'Wordsworthian' or 'egotistical' sublime, exemplifies this notion. Developed from ideas of sublimity espoused by both Edmund Burke (in relation to sublime objects and the soliciting of emotion) and Immanuel Kant (in relation to imagination's role in sublimity), the Romantic sublime is based on the subjective perception of the individual, in a fundamental shift 'from world to mind' (Shaw 2005: 73). In this way, 'it is not the object itself' that now possesses the characteristics of sublimity, 'but the manner in which that mind apprehends that object' (2005: 79). For Wordsworth the imagination itself becomes sublime – its power is 'awful' and has the capacity to obliterate both external reality and the mind's experience of that reality, but it is also the source of poetic vision (2005: 101). As such, the imagination must be contained in order to protect a sense of self (2005: 102).

Because subjectivity is so central to Romantic thought, the self is tasked with living 'authentically' above all else: the Romantic was 'a person of true sensibility, possessed of a passionate and impetuous nature which would simply not permit dissembling or hypocrisy' (Campbell 2005: 177). In the Romantic age, ideas of sincerity and authenticity were being re-evaluated and reconstructed in enduring ways, ways integral to the realisation of the Romantic identity.

ROMANTICISM, SINCERITY AND AUTHENTICITY: A PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

The idea of the 'authentic' versus 'in-authentic' self (Miles and Sinanan 2010: 6) is another key 'problem' of Romanticism. Much engagement with canonical Romantic writing presumes a model of psychological depth – the idea that a fundamental core of being exists (Henderson 1996: 4). That idea of the core self had a profound influence on new notions of authenticity in the Romantic era. Authenticity became a matter of moral strength not based on any external authority but on that of personal subjectivity: 'authority moves indoors' and 'being oneself' takes on primary significance (Milnes and Sinanan 2010: 5). This is the birth of the modern conception of authenticity – and by relation, sincerity – one that finds its source in the 'authorizing origins' of the subject (2010: 5). Authenticity is no longer related to a realistic depiction of the world but instead to the 'truth' of the mind's eye, 'something that really proceeds from its origin' (2010: 6). Sincerity relates to the outward expression of

such an authenticity; it becomes essentially the social practice of authenticity (2010: 4).

The critical function of sincerity now becomes the ‘burden’ of bridging the widening gap between an authentic self and the world (2010: 6). Autobiography becomes a key mode of expression in this ‘Age of Feeling’ (Richardson 1988: 13), allowing a correspondence between the artist and audience that becomes a signature of sincerity (Milnes and Sinanan 2010: 13). In *Walden*, Thoreau expresses a desire for a ‘simple and sincere account of his own life’ (Thoreau [1854] 1999: 5–6). When in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth claims, ‘all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ ([1800] 1957: 6) which should be delivered in the unfettered, naturalistic language of ordinary life, he relates the idea of authenticity as integrally an intuitive and direct quality (Milnes and Sinanan 2010: 19).

In much the same way as the filmmakers I discuss have been branded as socially disengaged and self-absorbed, the Romantics have often been accused of celebrating modes of escapism. But M. H. Abrams insists they ‘were obsessed with the realities of their era’ (1970: 110). With the burgeoning economic realities of capitalism taking hold, and Europe embroiled in a series of Napoleonic wars, in the beginning of the nineteenth century the social and political realms were undoubtedly unstable. Caught up in the sublime political upheaval of revolution in America and, especially, France, Romantic writers embraced its potential and ‘unbounded and hence impossible hopes’ (1970: 110). When they were ultimately disappointed by revolution’s unfulfilled promises, they turned their hope and desire for change toward themselves, making it personal.

There were, of course, political differences between nations and even within them – Hazlitt, Hunt, Shelley and Byron reportedly admired Napoleon (Nemoianu 1998: 188), and Emerson, unlike most, embraced the technological advances that came with the machine age (Marx 1964: 231). But all were a product of an age of new frontiers. Wordsworth, especially, shifted focus from this uncertain and foreboding societal future to what Abrams calls the ‘egalitarian revolution of the spirit [. . .] of the equivalence of souls, the heroic dimensions of common life, and the grandeur of the ordinary and the trivial in Nature’ (1970: 117). In a sense, Romanticism embraced the inverse of the adage ‘the personal is political’, popularised by mid-twentieth-century identity politics activists (Hanisch 1970). For Wordsworth and others, the political became personal. This ‘spiritual quietism’ eschewed ‘overt political action’ in favour of passivity and acts of imagination (Abrams 1970: 110, 111). The revolution became one from within.

Rzepka considers that publication of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* marks a fundamental shift from ‘the world as an object of knowledge [. . .] to the thinking subject’s point of view on the world’ (1986: 10). Personal feeling and sympathy replace objectivity in a quest for truth and both are linked to

expressions of authenticity. Thomas Pfau suggests that these expressions were ‘attempts to trace political, economic, and spiritual history back to its manifestation as emotional experience’ (2005: 2), that is, to source the feelings that lead to the facts. If ‘sincere feeling is *in* the language before it is produced by reflecting *on* it’ (Miles and Sinanan 2010: 11; original emphasis), the author’s emotional sincerity is expressed by ‘contagion’, a sympathetic communion that starts with the direct expression of feeling in the writing itself, leading to a similar emotional experience in the perceiver (Pfau 2005: 3).

Whereas the previous ‘age of sensibility’ (Abrams 1970: 98) was attuned to the standards of societal convention and feigned emotion, the Romantic age associates ‘emotional susceptibility’ with goodness and ‘make[s] custom and etiquette the source of all that is undesirable [. . .] leading to the contrasting of “self” and “society”’ (Campbell 2005: 177). Sympathy becomes an expression of individual sensibility, removed from the inauthentic organising principles of socially proscribed norms and rules (2005: 7). In contrast to the social constrictions of civilisation, nature was often viewed, in the fashion of proto-Romantic Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as an ‘authentic voice’ (Grayson 1986: 81) removed from society’s hypocrisy. Childhood was linked to authentic nature, as it exists in a state of ‘sensation unmediated by intellect’ (1986: 85). The very idea of whether a ‘social self’ can be authentic is thrown into question (Miles and Sinanan 2010: 10).

Just as Jerome McGann sees different ‘phases’ of English Romanticism, moving from a ‘visionary’ mode to one focused on revision and self-critique (1983: 108, 109), Angela Esterhammer posits that some Romantic works actually ‘interpret sincerity as a code or convention’ (2010: 104) by emphasising its performative dimensions. Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan contrast Wordsworth’s ‘spontaneous outpouring as the fiat of “authentic” selfhood’ with Byron’s later ‘tireless *performance* of selfhood’ (2010: 3, 4; original emphasis). Far from being a simple expression of inner authenticity, in this later mode, sincerity becomes ‘fictional, imaginary or even downright false’ (Esterhammer 2010: 110). If sincerity is something that needs to be ‘embodied’ – that is, expressed physically by verbal and other physical signs – its experience is unavoidably both spontaneous and theatrical: ‘This paradoxical notion of sincerity as a *socially accessible and physically engaged performance of interior emotion* is paradigmatic for late-Romantic poetry’ (2010: 113; original emphasis).

The progression from the ‘essential’ sincerity of Wordsworth to the ‘constructed’ sincerity of later Romantic works reveals that newly redefined notions of sincerity and authenticity in the Romantic period were already being problematised by the early nineteenth century (2010: 105). For instance, Letitia Landon’s 1829 poem ‘History of the Lyre’ reveals ‘whether sincere or insincere, the mental states of others are unknowable except by the indirect evidence of appearance, language, and other external or publicly shared conventions’ (2010: 116). (I discuss this ‘problem of other minds’ in

Chapter 4.) This newfound reflexivity within the text engages in an uneasy dialectic of performance and sincerity, which is the case in many of the films I study. Their characters often suffer from extreme crises of identity, exemplifying a Romantic grappling with the idea of authentic selfhood.

If expressions of sincerity, which were being called into question, were ‘fused’ with ideas of authenticity in the Romantic era (Milnes and Sinanan 2010: 2), it now seemed possible the ‘depth model’ of authenticity was itself questionable, and one’s ‘own “likeness” or image is all [. . .] there ever is to lose’ (Esterhammer 2010: 114). Perhaps, it was entertained, there is no ‘core’ self at all. As Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan show, the ‘desire to discover a holistic self at the heart of writing’ was a key Romantic project, but ‘authentic selfhood remain[ed] elusive, disappearing even as it is grasped’ (Milnes and Sinanan 2010: 2). Geoffrey Hartman considers that the ‘ethos of self-fashioning’, defined by Coleridge via Shakespeare, might lead to ‘a restless identity search’ (Hartman 2002: 33). For some later Romantics, especially Keats, what Hartman calls ‘anti-self-consciousness’ (1970: 46) offers an alternative to such a crisis. For Keats, the authentic poet ‘has no Identity [. . .] he has no self’ (Keats 1970: 157). Instead, a celebration of physical phenomena results in what he calls the ‘material sublime’ (Keats 1976: 237), an overabundance of sensation leading to vertiginous bliss that goes ‘beyond’ individual subjectivity (Gigante 2002: 441).

Internal conflict is endemic in much of Romantic thought and its attendant works, especially in terms of its key tenets of imagination, authenticity and subjectivity. In many ways, ‘Romanticism [. . .] initiates the conflict between modernity’s homesick longing for authenticity and its dogged pursuit of critique’ (Milnes and Sinanan 2010: 17). The films discussed in this book exemplify many of these struggles with identity and the alienation between self and world. The paradoxical state between unmediated authenticity and self-criticism can best be delineated via a discussion of Romantic irony. In contemporary terms, it is evident in what has been termed the ‘metamodernist’ sensibility of the twenty-first century.

‘METAMODERNISM’ AND ROMANTIC IRONY

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker outline the key traits of what they consider ‘the romantic turn in contemporary aesthetics’, which they dub ‘metamodernism’ (2010). Just as in many ways modernism was a reaction to Romanticism (Whitworth 2007: 63),⁴ postmodernism offers a rebuke of the holistic utopian philosophies of modernism, resulting in a sense of ‘indeterminacy’ which can ‘allow for an exemplary respect for the particular’ (Hamilton 1999: 19). But postmodernism soon comes to describe a feeling that Jean-François Lyotard calls the condition of ‘and what now?’ (1993b: 246). Vermeulen and van den Akker claim that postmodernism’s ‘years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis’ (2010) – its reliance on

ironic detachment, knowing reflexivity and fragmented subjectivity – have reached an epistemological dead end, with seemingly nothing able or willing to take their place.

Pointing to the effects of a degraded ecosystem, geo-political turmoil and the financial chaos of neoliberal globalisation, Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that postmodernism's 'death' has seen the emergence of what they call 'metamodernism'. Metamodernism teeters between the poles of modernism and postmodernism without ever achieving any form of 'balance' between the two: it 'oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010).

These oscillations create a profound sense of anxiety caused by 'unyielding tension' – the metamodernist work operates within a framework of desire for meaning and acknowledgement that meaning, reason and rationality are elusive at best, and absent at worst (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). The authors are quick to make a link between metamodernism and Romanticism; this tension or conflict is, in fact, fundamentally Romantic. They highlight the 'general idea of the Romantic as oscillating between attempt and failure' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010) and argue that Friedrich Schlegel's definition of Romantic irony includes such an oscillation between 'enthusiasm and irony' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010) – it is irony that contains its obverse, sincerity, within its very mode of expression.

According to Ernst Behler, such irony is an integral part of the self-consciousness that Romanticism implies, which creates endless shifts between experience and reflection. For Behler, Romantic irony comprises 'an infinite mental spiral in which the individual mental ego hovers between naïve experiences and critical reflections on its experiences while viewing its own passions with disillusioned detachment' (1988: 43). Such an 'intellectual attitude' allows the 'vulnerable personality' a distance from immersive negative feelings of 'melancholy, loneliness and profound suffering' while still acknowledging their reality (1988: 43). For Schlegel, Romantic irony is not a detriment, but a 'propelling force' similar to Emerson's imaginative circles, one that allows for a continual becoming and renewal (Behler 1988: 62). Still, the Romantic ironist partly resides outside of personal experience, not wholly engaging in the immediacy of action and emotion, which signals a fragmented, partially alienated subject.

For Fredric Jameson, this 'fragmentation of the subject' is characteristic of postmodernism (1984: 63). Indeed, in this sense postmodernism can be considered a 'remoulding of Romanticism [. . .] a mutation of the original stock' (Larrissy 1999: 1). If, as Lyotard does, we take postmodernism to be not an epoch as such (à la 'postmodern era') but a descriptive mode (Roberts 1999: 142), we can more easily consider the coexistence of different modes – the Romantic, the

modern and the postmodern – within the same text (1999: 142). As Vermeulen and van den Akker suggest, this coexistence resonates in metamodernist works. Just as ‘Romantic poetry incorporates Romantic Ideology as a drama of the contradictions which are inherent in that ideology’ (McGann 1983: 2) – the ‘spontaneity and recollection in Wordsworth’, the ‘spiritual tone’ without specific religious context (Thorlby 1988: 147) – metamodernism incorporates its own contradictions, demonstrating a Romantic ‘working out’ of those contradictions without any kind of structural resolution or synthesis.

Although they do mention two filmmakers I discuss, Jonze and Anderson, Vermeulen and van den Akker primarily elucidate the metamodernist influence in visual art and architecture. (Their 2017 edited collection, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, expounds on its relation to film criticism via an essay by James MacDowell.) Their conclusions, however, can be readily applied to all these films, both in terms of mise-en-scène and narrative. For instance, the authors point to the structures designed by Ader and Rubsamen as employing ‘materials and methods’ not ideally suited to their task, hypothesising that their intention is ‘not to fulfill it’, but rather to represent an ‘attempt to fulfill it in spite of its “unfulfillableness”’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). The architects realise structurally the failed attempt at the unity of the ‘good forms’ of modernism – forms that holistically serve their purpose, offering a nostalgic sense of ‘solace and pleasure’ – while still visualising the attempt itself (Lyotard 1992: 45). A similar conclusion can be made with the use of antiquated forms such as stop-motion animation and other practical effects in the creations of Anderson and Jonze. It also characterises the actions of a vast majority of the films’ characters, who continually embark on quixotic plans and quests to fulfil desires with an air of premature defeat.

This sense of the unfulfillable links metamodernism to the paradox found in Romantic irony, which engenders simultaneous ‘creation and de-creation’:

The authentic romantic ironist is as filled with enthusiasm as with scepticism. Having ironically acknowledged the fictiveness of his own patterning of human experience, he romantically engages in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths. (Mellor 1980: 5)

For Anne Mellor, Romantic irony creates new forms and myths in order to puncture them. It acknowledges the game it is playing but plays it anyway, moving forward in a continuing cycle of ‘self-creation and self-destruction’ (Behler 1988: 61) and recognition of the unending struggle that fuels imaginative power. (I discuss Romantic irony at length in Chapter 2.)

Metamodernism is, in essence, an attempt to traverse the gap between modernism’s discredited, utopian expectations of totality – a belief in ‘good forms’ (Lyotard 1992: 45), grand ‘metanarratives’ of social progress (Lyotard

1997: xxiv), ‘scientistic’ ideological abstraction that feigns ideological neutrality (Docherty 1993: 25), and the ‘fantasies of realism’ (Lyotard 1992: 41) – and postmodernism’s fragmenting and fracturing of them through the creation of ‘new myths’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). This attempted traversal forever fails, but it is in the attempt that metamodernism wages its own war against what Jameson calls postmodernism’s ‘waning of affect’ – the obliteration of subjectivity leading to the end of ‘unique and personal’ style and the death of feeling ‘since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling’ (Jameson 1992: 64).

In its place, it creates a new ‘narrative of longing’ for something it can never achieve; as such ‘the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). Metamodernism, in fact, marks a new return to a Romantic sensibility, one that grapples with the incommensurability of feeling and action, self and other. It is not merely post-modern pastiche or an arch wink toward the past from the knowing present:

If these artists look back at the Romantic it is neither because they simply want to laugh at it (parody) nor because they wish to cry for it (nostalgia). They look back instead in order to perceive anew a future that was lost from sight. Metamodern neoromanticism should not merely be understood as re-appropriation; it should be interpreted as re-signification. (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010)

The filmmakers in question all seem intent on such a process of re-signification. They create narratives that depict spirits in solitude moving through brave new liminal worlds of personal mythmaking in attempts at meaning-making: desperate for intersubjective connection, unable to totally fulfil their desires, yet continuing to struggle with the re-signification of their relationships and their own identities. I now turn to an overview of the filmmakers I discuss and connect them to this theoretical framework.

FROM THE NEW WAVE TO NEW HOLLYWOOD TO NOW

While these filmmakers have no official organising principles, they are connected to each other professionally and personally in many ways.⁵ Jonze and Coppola met early in their respective careers and were briefly married; Jonze directed two films from scripts written by Kaufman. They frequently use the same cast members and crew, such as actors Bill Murray and Jason Schwartzman (Anderson and Coppola), production designer K. K. Barrett (Jonze and Coppola), and cinematographer Lance Acord (Jonze and Coppola). They also share a similar working milieu. Some, such as Coppola, largely finance their films independently, but all are affiliated in one way or

another with major Hollywood studios and their subsidiaries, sometimes referred to as 'Indiewood' (King 2014: 7).

There is a neat correlation between these filmmakers and the famous 'New Hollywood' filmmakers of the late 1960s and 1970s, who include, among others, Martin Scorsese, Roman Polanski, Francis Ford Coppola, Terrence Malick, Robert Altman, Hal Ashby and Brian De Palma (Biskind 1999: 15). In many ways the filmmakers I discuss owe a large debt to their predecessors' institutionalisation of a 'relative (but not radical) alterity' (King 2014: 31). Robert Phillip Kolker considers the New Hollywood era a fleeting period in American filmmaking when filmmakers were able to 'pursue the romantic possibility that there can still be individual interventions in the homogeneity of film' (1988: xiii). Falling somewhere between the avant-garde and the more formally and socially conservative product of the Hollywood studio era, New Hollywood filmmakers were 'unembarrassed [. . .] to assume the mantle of the artist, nor did they shrink from developing personal styles that distinguished their work from other directors' (Biskind 1999: 15). They 'maintained that directors are to movies what poets are to poems' (1999: 16), echoing the sentiments of French film critic Alexandre Astruc, who in 1948 coined the phrase 'la caméra-stylo' (camera pen) in reference to a new age, or 'tendency' of cinema.

For Astruc, after decades of simply being a 'fairground attraction', cinema was now 'a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel' (Astruc 1948). A director was no longer simply an 'illustrator' or 'presenter'; he (almost exclusively a 'he' in Astruc's time, and sadly still today) was a 'film-maker/author [who] writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen' (Astruc 1948). This conception of filmmaking as 'personal obsession' is, of course, highly influenced by the Romantic principle of the particular 'insight and vision' that was the 'poet's privilege' (McGann 1983: 114). Astruc and the auteur theory born of his idea helped popularise the notion of film as art, and the filmmaker as an artist on par with the poet, writer of great literature and master painter.

'Authenticity' was a watchword for New Hollywood: its actors often trained in the Method acting style (Biskind 1999: 16) and its narratives embraced character-driven stories and anti-heroes and 'challenged the tyranny of technical correctness' through an embrace of European art cinema techniques that flew in the face of the classical Hollywood filmmaking style (1999: 17, 21, 15). But while these filmmakers, who were given a heretofore unknown level of creative freedom in Hollywood, were interested in upending a studio system that was already coming crashing down around them (1999: 17), decades later, their filmic descendants maintain a much more symbiotic relationship to the commercial system. If, in 1960s and 1970s Hollywood, 'Everything old was bad, everything new was good' and 'nothing was sacred' (1999: 14), by the end

of the twentieth century, much self-conscious filmmaking style began to look back to the past for its inspiration. It embraced a less revolutionary stance, embodying an ethos and style Brendan Kredell calls the ‘cinema of gentrification’ (2012: 84).

Writing in the late 1980s, Kolker declares, ‘the brief time of the Hollywood *auteur* is gone’ (1988: xii). But his pronouncement seems premature. Now largely operating within a system of subsidiaries of major studios, ‘mini-majors’ such as Focus Features, Sony Pictures Classics and Fox Searchlight, the filmmakers covered in this book are often given a broad amount of creative control like their maverick cinematic forebears (Biskind 1999: 3). This is thanks in part to the prestige they engender (if not necessarily because of the box office receipts they garner) (King 2014: 282) and their relatively modest budgets compared with Hollywood ‘blockbusters’. All are generally critically praised, with varying degrees of commercial success. With their markers of quality, they can be considered what Yannis Tzioumakis calls ‘speciality’ cinema (2006: 282).

Some in this group acknowledge their debt to New Hollywood, but they are just as likely, if not more so, to reference their affection for the twentieth-century European art cinema that itself inspired New Hollywood, especially in the case of Anderson. He references the French New Wave in films such as *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (François Truffaut) and *Moonrise Kingdom* (Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard), and his general aesthetic owes a large debt to the wistful melancholia of Truffaut’s decidedly less arch films. Coppola has said that as a teenager Godard’s *À bout de souffle* (Les Films Impéria, 1960) was her favourite film (*Festival de Cannes Daily* 2014). It is possible to draw a line from the *Nouvelle Vague*, champions of *politique des auteurs* and renouncers of the socially conscious, mainstream ‘prestige’ pictures of *cinéma du papa* (Caughie 1981: 35), to the filmmakers being considered here (the so-called ‘Left Bank’ filmmakers, more formally daring and politically conscious, notwithstanding) (Roud 1977: 143).

The New Wave filmmakers’ free-spirited personal portrayals of ‘solitude, aimlessness, introspection, aggression and failure’ sometimes saw them accused of a ‘reactionary’ politics (Caughie 1981: 38, 35). Their rebuke of the stuffy, melodramatic ‘Tradition of Quality’ was somehow both ‘modernist’ and ‘elegiac’, backward- and forward-looking (Vincendeau 2010: 136). In much the same way, the new ‘neoromantic’ American filmmakers infuse their films with an idiosyncratic, highly personalised subjectivity that has led to their own accusations of being ‘reactionary’ (MacDowell 2014: 159), ‘tedious’ and ‘boring’ (French 2006), or ‘self-satisfied’ and ‘solipsistic’ (Moats 2009). But unlike the filmmakers of the French New Wave, they do not have a stodgy tradition to overturn so much as a Romantic tradition to rebuild.

Kaufman, the oldest filmmaker by more than a decade, is the only one of the four to have formally studied film – Anderson has a philosophy degree

(Collin 2014), Coppola learned the craft while shadowing her father on his film sets growing up and Jonze got his start making amateur skateboarding and BMX videos. In contrast to the ‘movie brats’ of the 1970s – Scorsese, Coppola, Spielberg, Lucas, et al. – who all attended film school (Biskind 1999: 15), these filmmakers continue a trend emerging in the 1990s of what Jeffrey Sconce considers a scepticism of the ‘consecrating functions’ of a formal artistic education (2002: 357).

This idea encapsulates a Romantic inclination of the more simplistic variety – a resistance to the civilising forces of society on individual expression, a belief in a Rousseauian ‘untutored and original genius’ (Bate 1970: 150), or perhaps a ‘revolutionary’ upheaval of the old guard, as Truffaut himself railed against *cinéma du papa* in the 1950s. However, it is difficult to consider any of these filmmakers or their films in the context of revolution. Coppola’s very own *papa*, Francis Ford Coppola, made an indelible mark on the cinema, but she and her contemporaries do not appear interested in the social upheaval that often coloured the work of the elder Coppola’s generation (Sconce 2002: 352). Despite their idiosyncrasies and formal inventiveness, their films are usually commercially viable, if not necessarily universally appealing.

The sobriquets applied to these films have been numerous. Various referring to them as ‘quirky’ cinema (MacDowell 2010), ‘smart’ cinema (Sconce 2002), the ‘new sincerity’ (Buckland 2012) and ‘post-pop’ (Mayshark 2009), these critical appraisals mostly define the various aesthetic and thematic traits the films exhibit rather than attaching them to any underlying, unifying principle or philosophy. Instead, the films are described as having a discursive, ‘highly unstable [. . .] tendency’ defined mostly by tone (Perkins 2012: 14). Jeffrey Sconce writes of ‘smart’ film’s use of irony as one that identifies a ‘semiotic chasm’ dividing a ‘structure of feeling that sees everything in quotation marks’ from one that ‘still looks for art to equal sincerity, positivity, commitment, action and responsibility’ (2002: 358).

Writing in 2002, Sconce focuses on American films of the 1990s, which he claims exhibit a commitment to ‘irony, black humor, fatalism, relativism and, yes, even nihilism’ (2002: 350). Fundamentally, smart films exhibit a distrust of ‘ultimate positions of truth or reason’ (Perkins 2012: 14). Building on Sconce’s thesis, Claire Perkins identifies in smart film a depiction of ‘post-youth’ culture: a culture defined by those members of so-called ‘Generation X’ who are ‘over-educated, underemployed and over-invested in popular culture’ (2012: 7). Except for Kaufman, born in 1958, the filmmakers I consider are all members of this generation temporally, if not necessary descriptively. All are, in multiple ways, concerned with familial and interpersonal breakdown of a complacently bourgeois society (Sconce 2002: 358).

Sconce contends these films express an overwhelming scepticism, one informed by ‘a fundamental break in the narrative of “revolutionary potential”

advanced by the events and ideas of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s' (2002: 6) due to a degraded social and cultural milieu – and what Jesse Mayshark calls 'a sense of domestic life as a nexus of abandonment, alienation, and frustration' (2009: 9) – that removes a search for meaning and replaces it with a myopic 'interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity' (Sconce 2002: 358). Aesthetically, they project a 'blankness' – a 'sense of dampened affect' – that jibes with their disaffected worldview (2002: 358). As Perkins writes, 'the signature blankness of the smart film is a compelling illustration of a generation with "nothing" to say' (2012: 8). Both Sconce's and Perkins's conception of smart film seems incomplete, however, if not incorrect. In fairness to Sconce, some of the films he discusses, especially those of Quentin Tarantino, Neil LaBute and perhaps Todd Solondz, apply more to this rubric; but the 'smart' impression is lacking in his assessments of Anderson's films and the 'matter-of-fact surrealism' (2002: 350) of Jonze and Kaufman.

It seems obvious that not nearly so much critical attention would be paid to a certain 'tendency' in American cinema if it really had 'nothing' to say, nor even if it postured as such. Most if not all of these films, in fact, are about the struggle to express what that very 'saying' is, to articulate a deep well of feeling frustrated by a culture of alienation that delimits a search for meaning. Sconce tellingly refers to Wes Anderson's films *Bottle Rocket* (Columbia Pictures, 1996), *Rushmore* (American Empirical, 1998) and *The Royal Tenenbaums* (American Empirical, 2001) as 'bittersweet' (2002: 350). But his conception of 'smart' seems to rely far more on the bitter to the detriment of the sweet. Likewise, Perkins alludes to smart film as part of a 'therapy culture', which ascribes 'the tendency in contemporary culture to make sense of the world through the prism of emotion' (2012: 10). This notion seems antithetical to smart films' pure adherence to the principles of ironic distance and disaffected apathy, and certainly to 'dampened affect'. Could it be that many (if not all) of these films are instead attempting to bridge that 'semiotic chasm' between apathy and emotion, feeling and futility?

I join MacDowell and Buckland to emphatically argue 'yes'. They are, in fact, about the struggle to create grand statements on the loss of grand narratives, even as the very idea seems antiquated. Warren Buckland identifies this breed of films as the 'new sincerity', in contrast to the original meaning of the term as defined by Jim Collins (Collins 1993: 243). Buckland suggests that, rather than a simplistic rejection of irony and return to sincerity, as Collins suggests, the new sincerity offers a response to, not a disavowal of, postmodern irony: 'in a dialectical move, new sincerity incorporates postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony' (2012: 2). MacDowell offers a similar perspective on this tendency's ambivalent tonal register. As in Sconce's definition of smart film, MacDowell's concept of quirky cinema is based mainly on the 'notoriously tricky concept' (MacDowell 2010: 2) of tone but is much

more circumspect. Key to the sensibility of quirky is ‘a commitment to a certain comedic mode’ (2010: 3). Akin to the aesthetic ‘blankness’ of smart cinema (Sconce 2002: 359), it relies on ‘deadpan’, which MacDowell defines as ‘dry, perfunctory, excessively functional, taking a situation and line that we might expect to be made dramatic [. . .] and downplaying them to the point of absurdity’ (2010: 3).

Blankness and deadpan both relate to smart film’s ‘dampening’ of affect. However, for MacDowell, quirky cinema’s reliance on comedic address ‘requires we view the fiction as simultaneously absurd *and* moving, the characters as pathetic *and* likeable, the world as manifestly artificial *and* believable’ (2010: 4). The films are sincere, but just as in the late-Romantic critique of sincerity as performative, their sincerity is ‘best understood as a rhetorical construct rather than the “natural” expression of inner truth implied in its traditional usage’ (King 2014: 60). Authenticity is, as in the New Hollywood, of renewed importance. As Coppola says, ‘I don’t want my movies to feel like movies [. . .] I want them to feel like life’ (Rickey 2013). Of course, such a desire is realised by a very subjective idea of exactly how life ‘feels’. (It is important to note the potential discrepancy between onscreen portrayals of emotion and those emotions being embodied by the spectator, an issue I address in Chapters 2 and 3.) For Coppola and her compatriots, feeling, not mimetic reproduction, is indicative of authenticity. According to MacDowell, the quirky film’s sense of ironic detachment combined with ‘sincere emotional engagement’ operates on the level where both structures of feeling are ‘made different’ as they inform each other (2010: 12). The simultaneous engagement with both creates an underlying sense of anxiety and uncertainty.

Like smart cinema, quirky film turns on depictions of arrested development – adults in these films often ‘behave like children’ or are plagued by childhood trauma; protagonists are often ‘chaste romantic dreamers’ (2010: 9, 10). Combined with a *mise-en-scène* MacDowell sees as exemplary of the desire to conform the world into a ‘less chaotic, more simplified’ version of reality, it signals a nostalgic, ‘quasi-magical voyage into the past [. . .] made to appear both melancholic and comforting’ (2010: 7, 9). It is clear that MacDowell sees the films of quirky not just as pastiche and quotation ‘born of ironic distance’ (Sconce 2002: 358), but as something much more than the sum of their quirks.

MacDowell’s discussion of quirky cinema is, in many respects, an excellent starting point for a discussion of Romanticism in film, particularly the films I discuss. But it is also, again, somewhat limiting in this context. These films depict varying levels of comic overtones and undertones, with Anderson being the most consistently deadpan as MacDowell defines it. MacDowell references films from Anderson, Jonze and Kaufman, including the latter’s directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York* (Sidney Kimmel Entertainment, 2008). But in that film, along with Coppola’s *The Virgin Suicides* (American Zoetrope, 1999)

and *Marie Antoinette* (Columbia Pictures, 2006), a tragicomic mode of ‘quirkiness’ eventually gives way to a decidedly more tragic mode. The very Romantic irony that engenders deadpan is rooted in the suffering caused ‘by the antagonism of heart with intellect, of spontaneity with reflection, of passion with calculation, and enthusiasm with scepticism’ (Behler 1988: 43). The oscillations between deadpan humour and deep feeling (or the attempted concealment of the latter with the former) are really a stylistic symptom of a greater underlying quality: pathos.

Jesse Mayshark characterises this cycle of films as ‘post-pop’ and defines them by their allegiance not to a comic sensibility but to ‘a sort of self-conscious *meaningfulness*’ (Mayshark 2009: 5; original emphasis). Considering the films of Anderson, Jonze, Kaufman, Coppola and others, he focuses on structures of identity, intersubjectivity and consciousness: ‘Their overriding concern is a sort of yearning for connection, but one that is colored by an awareness of all the things that get in its way’ (2009: 8). Mayshark sees these films as attempts to bridge the self-conscious divide between self and other, thus ‘transcend[ing] the boundaries of body and consciousness’ (2009: 8).

While I largely agree with Mayshark’s assessment, one point of contention is a critical one: his account of the film’s protagonists as ‘at home in a complicated present’ while being ‘emphatically not nostalgic for some simpler “past”’ (2009: 14). I argue that, far from being at home in the present, they can barely tolerate it as a concept; instead, they cope with the present by looking back toward the past. They exhibit nostalgia for a fantasy, a simple imaginary history. This sense of nostalgia colours their quasi-conservative worldview, but it is complicated by the anxiety caused by such a fantastic recreation of the past as a guard against the always-uncertain future.

At the conclusion of ‘Notes on Quirky’, MacDowell calls for a deeper, more comprehensive examination of these films in the context of their use of Romantic irony, specifically noting its correlation with Schlegel’s definition (2010: 14). ‘It is in fact unlikely that a trend as specific and widespread as the quirky *will not* tell us something about its sociohistorical moment’, MacDowell writes (2010: 14; original emphasis). He calls for his study to be viewed as the groundwork from which future research in a similar mode can ‘expand in different directions’ (2010: 2). This book aims to do just that, taking established cinematic theories of the quirky, smart, new sincerity and the like and delving further into the root causes and connections these films have in terms of style and substance, ones that I argue are fundamentally Romantic in form and vision, but specific to their own historical and cultural environment. By returning to the past, as these filmmakers have done, we can learn more about our present selves and begin to discern a credible future that still asserts, and values, meaning.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

The arguments made within are cumulative, with successive chapters building on ideas and theories previously posited. Each chapter seeks to engage with a specific discourse of contemporary film studies: aesthetics (Chapter 1); cinematic metatextuality (Chapter 2); feminist criticism (Chapter 3); film-phenomenology (Chapter 4); eco-criticism, childhood and animal studies (Chapter 5); and ethical studies (Chapter 6). This structure allows me to trace the progression of Romantic thought and enables me to situate these works historically, while simultaneously engaging with an up-to-the-moment present. While these films exhibit the lasting traditions of the Romantic period, they are also very much a response to the preoccupations found within our own time.

I begin by elucidating the fundamental principles of Romantic aesthetics – the concepts of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque – as they relate to Wes Anderson’s films *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (American Empirical, 2004). Working from descriptions of the sublime and beautiful in Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*, I argue that both films’ aesthetic components create picturesque representations through mise-en-scène that combine beauty and sublimity in varying degrees. *The Royal Tenenbaums*’ aesthetic paradigm is one I term the ‘painful picturesque’, a programme that systematically develops the middle-ground eighteenth-century picturesque ideal of perfected nature by creating shabby but pleasing, controlled yet chaotic visual systems in the urban pastoral environment of a fantasy New York City. While the overall aesthetic of the film is one of the picturesque, it is not the picturesque traditionally designed to create a sense of cohesion and human power through artificially perfected natural environments. Instead, the film creates a sensation that something is not quite ‘right’ – a signal that the beautiful forms of modernism are being undermined by corroded personal-historical traumas that threaten to overwhelm good design and picturesque restraint.

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou accomplishes a similar aesthetic effect, although this time the film’s settings invoke the sublime more so than the beautiful, while resulting in a similar sense of picturesque anxiety. The film is set amongst natural landscapes that engender feelings of sublimity – vast oceans, weather-ravaged deserted islands and underwater environments containing terrifying, man-eating sea creatures. However, in the film these potentially sublime locales are undercut by the film’s commitment to creating pleasurable, non-threatening images that coincide with a deadpan comedic style. Human frailty and vanity, not natural might, is the ultimate terror in the film, and while nature eventually shows the film’s protagonist in sublime awe, it is an awe that engenders a psychic healing. I refer to this as the ‘sentimental sublime’: sublimity that is defanged and contained, but causes anxiety nonetheless.

In Chapter 2, I argue that Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* creates a metatextual relationship between director and protagonist through its use of Romantic irony. The film directly addresses issues of solipsism as it is told from the radically subjective viewpoint of its self-obsessed protagonist, the 'genius' theatre director Caden Cotard, who may or may not be descending into madness. Kaufman conjures sublime feeling in the spectator through aesthetic devices of fantastic world creation. These include the creation of *mise en abyme* – engendered by various life-size recreations of New York City built inside of a large warehouse that is itself inside the 'actual' New York City – and an engagement with Tzvetan Todorov's fantastic 'themes of the self' and 'themes of vision', which are expressed by inexplicable narrative elements such as a continually burning house fire. Drawing on German idealism and Schlegel's concept of Romantic irony to counteract traditional notions of mimetic realism, Kaufman portrays his film world (and the world itself) as chaotic. But whereas Kaufman's film embraces the chaos of becoming inherent in Schlegel's philosophy, its protagonist suffers from a complete inability to engage with life on any authentic level and subsequently fails as an artist and person.

In Chapter 3, I address the masculine subjectivity of Romantic 'egotistical' sublimity, a sublime based in the self's relation to the world, with an examination of its effects on female subjectivity in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*. Building on Kantian notions of the sublime and the imagination, the Romantic sublime is one traditionally predicated on the response of the 'masculine' ego (Mellor 1980: 3) – sublimity has its source in the internal mental faculties of reason via imagination and is not something that exists in the empirical world. This purely subjective version of sublimity was reserved for the province of masculine imagination, while the feminine, apparently lacking similar imaginative power, is relegated to the lesser realm of the social and the beautiful.

Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* creates a film world where the expression of emotion is constantly thwarted by gender and class hypocrisy – characters in the film fail to communicate despite undercurrents of deep feeling. The film engages with the egotistical sublime in its idealised aesthetic portrayal of a group of teenage girls, who serve as objects of sublimity for the local teenage boys. However, it also portrays a reverence for a 'feminine' or 'everyday' sublime by valorising a feminine aesthetic Rosalind Galt terms the 'pretty'. Ultimately, it creates an ambivalent presentation of this femininity through dreamlike yet kitsch imagery of the girls, which speaks not only to the celebration of femininity but also to its commodification and degradation.

Like *The Virgin Suicides*, Spike Jonze's *Her* (Annapurna Pictures, 2013) approaches the sublime on the level of intersubjective emotional discourse. In Chapter 4, I discuss how the film engages both the egotistical and feminine

sublimes but offers a much more optimistic outcome. The film addresses the philosophical ‘problem of other minds’, that is, the idea that we can never truly know what another thinks or feels because we are too trapped in our own subjectivity. This crisis leads the film’s protagonist, lonely writer Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), to withdraw from life into a cocoon of imaginative solipsism.

When he meets his operating system Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), an entirely artificial intelligence who has no corporeal form, she becomes an object of sublimity for him, activating his imagination and allowing him to access long-suppressed emotion. Eventually, however, Samantha embraces her own version of the sublime, a feminine one, when she leaves Theodore to enter into an ecstatic communal state with other operating systems. She becomes the subject of sublimity, even while serving as an object of the Romantic sublime for Theodore, who finally begins to regain his power as a writer due to his experience. The film’s final images suggest that such a feminine sublime can be accessible to humans if we exercise imaginative will and empathy in our relations toward others, regardless of the fact that we can never really know existence outside of our own consciousness.

In Chapter 5, I analyse the ideological framework of Anderson’s *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009). The film, an adaptation of Roald Dahl’s beloved children’s book, addresses various Romantic conceptions of childhood, personal and cultural history, and the natural world in relation to the self and subjectivity. In his reimagining of Dahl’s story, Anderson exhibits a disdain for the mechanisation of the societal landscape and the beings inhabiting it, similar to a course charted by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, while also optimistically suggesting that animal/human ‘nature’ can still survive through aesthetic and ideological compromise and creative genius. In a sense he creates a brand of ideological pastoralism to match the aesthetic pastoralism/picturesque of many of his film worlds. While the anxiety portrayed in his earlier films remains, it is somewhat defused by an anarchic yet collaborative spirit.

In my final chapter, I address Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* in relation to personal subjectivity and excess, including Jeffrey Cane Robinson’s notion of poetic ‘fancy’ and, again, Rosalind Galt’s idea of the ‘pretty’ in visual art and cinema. If the filmmakers I discuss have been accused of an apolitical solipsism, *Marie Antoinette* directly engages with this idea at the level of narrative (its protagonist, despite being a political figure, is unconcerned with politics and spends most of her time in a dreamlike fantasy world) and aesthetics (its depiction of material excess through surface sensation).

Coppola’s emphasis on sensation and surfaces elicits what Keats refers to as the ‘material sublime’ (Keats 1976: 237), an engagement with sensory excess, rather than the core subjectivity that the Romantic sublime invokes. But in *Marie Antoinette* Coppola also introduces a subjectivity that is not present in

The Virgin Suicides. Ultimately, her protagonist's bulwark of sensory pleasure is stripped away, along with its attendant aesthetic function, signalling not just the title character's maturation but also her imminent death. In Coppola's film, 'growing up' entails pain and suffering, as it does in life. All the filmmakers I discuss, in one form or another, suggest that it also signals a fundamental loss – the separation of self from world, and the renouncement of the joys and pleasures of connection.