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Faint Glimmers of Civilization:
Mediated Nostalgia and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

by Jamie Bick

As a tool of an uncritical, backwards-gazing “media-defined past” (Lizardi 137), mediated nostalgia is increasingly concerned with how “persuasion through the pop culture of preceding generations” can be used to integrate an often-unlived past into the modern viewer's identity and worldview (De Revere, par. 5). Mediated nostalgia is akin to the neologism “legislated nostalgia,” coined by Douglas Coupland in his 1991 novel *Generation X*, and described as the process of “forc[ing] a body of people to have memories they do not actually possess” (Coupland 41); corporations likely use this process to market and sell a viewer's nostalgia back to them. While the nostalgic assimilation sought by the viewer is ultimately achieved through the repeated psychological absorption of various media, often with the aid of democratized media technologies like the Internet, the embrace of mediated nostalgia by film is not entirely nefarious and capitalistic. It can also be used positively, to affirm or validate, or in the service of a utopian imaginary.

In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), director Wes Anderson strategically utilizes mediated nostalgia to envision both a prewar Europe and an imagined postwar Europe informed by the anxieties of the present era. One of the major ways in which Anderson literally employs nostalgia as a thematic device is through his use of formal techniques, namely his use of expertly-crafted miniatures to portray large-scale buildings and landscapes. Another major technique is Anderson's use of differing period-accurate aspect ratios for the various eras represented in the film, which create a “material match between the diegetic history *The Grand Budapest Hotel* represents and the cinema's means for representing it” (Sicinski 52). The film's locations, including the “narrow winding streets of Old Europe, faintly misted, [which] seem to bear some portent” of the wickedness to come (Denby 78), and the Grand Budapest itself, “a pink confection, rising against an Alpine backdrop” (Douthat 46), make literal, if also quite surreal, the tension between the prewar nostalgia Anderson portrays and the reality and later effects of the coming war, which will change all of Europe forever.



The Grand Budapest Hotel in its prime.



The Hotel's hometown.

The film's characters are also themselves literal stand-ins for the nostalgia for an Old Europe threatened by the rise of fascism. Monsieur Gustave H., the Grand Budapest's concierge, clings to the orderliness of his post as “though precision and poetry might suffice to hold modernity at bay” (Douthat 46), but is himself increasingly thrust into disorder and conflict. As a much-older man, Zero Moustafa, the hotel's lobby boy, relays the story of the hotel to the younger Author. Zero believes that the world Gustave cherishes “had vanished long before he ever entered it ... [though] he certainly sustained the illusion with a marvelous grace” (Anderson 116). It is this nostalgia for a lost time that ultimately leads to

Gustave's undoing, as "not every conflict can be corrected with elegance and politeness" (Marshall 242); sometimes, it is precisely elegance and politeness that end up getting one killed.

The sense throughout the film of a world fading or lost before its time is made all the more poignant given that Anderson was inspired to create the film after reading the works of Stefan Zweig, an Austrian Jewish writer who committed suicide in 1942, fearing the Europe he knew had been lost to the Nazis forever, and whose "novels and memoirs capture a vanished Europe" (Donadio C1(L)). Anderson has also said to have been inspired by the "Mitteleuropa masters of the interwar years ... Ernst Lubitsch, Max Ophüls, and Rouben Mamoulian," who created "a world characterized by wit, urbanity, cosmopolitanism [and] elegant lubricity" (Allen 302). It is through this clash between the old Europe and the new that the viewer gets the sense that Gustave is a stand-in for both Zweig and Anderson himself. Calling for assistance from The Society of the Crossed Keys, a secret worldwide order of concierges, Gustave "reflects the precise opposite of the Nazi ideology" and reflects Anderson's own commitment to humanism and multiculturalism. This attachment to humanist empathy is seen also in the great sense of shame and regret the otherwise-cultured Gustave experiences after he launches into a dramatic, racist tirade about Zero's refugee origins, in a moment of great despair and against his better nature (Sicinski 52).

Within the larger narrative of the film, the subplot of Zero's relationship with Agatha speaks to another kind of nostalgia, that of young love: she, an assistant to a baker, and he, a lobby boy, have entered into an interracial relationship, and neither has very much money. It would seem that their relationship is doomed to fail, especially with the coming darkness of the looming war. However, as Zero remarks, "We were each completely on our own in the world. And we were deeply in love." Their relationship, though, does not last, as Agatha and the couple's infant son fall ill and die soon after the occupation of Zubrowka. Zero relates this sad tidbit to the Author just before relaying the details of the untimely end of Gustave H.

Zero's wistfulness displays his great reverence for both Agatha and Gustave, even as an old man. It also highlights for Zero and the audience alike the inherent failure or uselessness of nostalgia to prevent great tragedies like war or loss of life from now-easily-preventable illnesses. While the aging Zero oversees the day-to-day



(From left to right)

Gustave H., Agatha, and young Zero.



Old Zero and the Author.

operations of the now-crumbling structure he inherited and the needs of its ever-dwindling clientele, who are "without exception, solitary" (Marshall 242), he cannot necessarily be blamed for falling back into nostalgic reminiscences about the glory days of the hotel where he was a lobby boy as a young man. It is precisely this nostalgia that colors Zero's memories of his dear friend and mentor, and his wife and young child, all of

whom were lost to him within a short time of each other. The greatest tragedy of the film is simultaneously the zenith of its nostalgia, and is only hinted at in its narrative: eventually, the

Grand Budapest closes down for good and is later demolished. Zero departs, and sometime later, passes away, and all the hotel's guests move on with their lives. Consequently, the only memory of the hotel that remains is a book and a shrine to its dead author, located somewhere in Eastern Europe which happen to be the very same relics shown in the opening of the film.

The Grand Budapest Hotel is “filtered through a 1930s cinematic fantasy of Europe ... [Anderson's] 'Europe on the Hollywood back lot,'” itself influenced by the films of the “immigrants who Europeanised [*sic*] US cinema in their own image” (Romney 15). Much like the Mitteleuropa, many of these immigrants were Jewish. Given this literal connection to prewar Europe and the subsequent nostalgia for its milieu, it is telling how Anderson chooses to tell the story of the Grand Budapest, and that he tells it at all. Through this filter, Anderson portrays the elegance of the once-stately hotel as a facade, even in its prime. The hotel is a symbol of the film's narrative itself, its psychological scope being “loneliness concealed within loneliness” (Marshall 242) and “nostalgia for nostalgia [in which] the past, affectionately teased as a repository of antiquated styles, recedes into art” (Denby 78).

The artifice contained in and expressed by Anderson's presentation of his sets, his characters, and his stories is a deliberate move to knowingly situate the audience outside of real time and space. In his recounting of the Grand Budapest's glory and decline, he “mark[s] the recollections to follow as historical fictions, the memories of people who have interests, desires, lapses of courage and pride, and, of course, basic cognitive lapses” (Sicinski 52). Much like Zweig's memoir *The World of Yesterday*, Anderson “favors a tone of anecdote, description, and catalogue over concrete historical fact” (Sicinski 52). Anderson uses the film's artifice and narrative alike to make the audience question its relationship to and stated knowledge of history, in defiance of a recurrence of xenophobia and fascism.

In much the same way that the unfolding occupation of Zubrowka rouses Gustave and Zero both to action and despondence, Anderson utilizes mediated nostalgia to raise awareness of the harsh realities of the world. However, he does this to convince the audience to try to dream of a better world. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* asks what kind of world might exist if people were more worldly, empathetic, and committed to civility like Gustave H., more loyal and determined like Zero, or more resourceful and loving like Agatha, and what the audience is willing to sacrifice and hold onto in pursuit of such a world.



*The memorial to the
Grand Budapest Hotel.*

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