

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
April 2018

Isle of Dogs (dir. Wes Anderson, 2018)

Dog Cast

Chief (the main dog): Bryan Cranston: One of the only non-Anderson vets in the U.S. cast
Rex (a semi-leader): Edward Norton: *Moonrise Kingdom* (12); *Grand Budapest Hotel* (14)
Duke (gossip fan): Jeff Goldblum: fantastic in underseen British gem *Le Week-end* (13)
Boss (mascot jersey): Bill Murray: rebooted career by starring in Anderson's *Rushmore* (98)
King (in their crew): Bob Balaban: hilarious in a very different dog movie, *Best in Show* (00)
Spots (Atari's dog): Liev Schreiber: oft-cast as dour antiheroes: *Ray Donovan* (13-18), etc.
Nutmeg (Chief's crush): Scarlett Johansson: controversially appeared in *Ghost in the Shell* (17)
Jupiter (wise hermit): F. Murray Abraham: won Best Actor Oscar as Salieri in *Amadeus* (84)
Oracle (TV prophet): Tilda Swinton: an Anderson regular since *Moonrise Kingdom* (12)
Gondo (lead "cannibal"): Harvey Keitel: untrue rumors of cruelty a riff on his usual typecasting
Peppermint (Spots' girl): Kara Hayward: the young female co-lead of *Moonrise Kingdom* (12)

Human Cast

Atari (young pilot): Koyu Rankin: Japanese-Scottish-Canadian, in his first feature film
Kobayashi (evil mayor): Kunichi Nomura: enlisted as Japanese cultural consultant, then cast
Prof. Watanabe: Akiro Ito: actor/dancer; briefly appears as translator in *Birdman* (14)
Interpreter Nelson: Frances McDormand: another veteran of *Moonrise Kingdom* (12)
Tracy (U.S. student): Greta Gerwig: the Oscar-nominated writer-director of *Lady Bird* (17)
Yoko Ono (scientist): Yoko Ono: 83-year-old avant-garde musician and performance artist
Narrator: Courtney B. Vance: Johnnie Cochran, *The People vs. O.J. Simpson* (16)

Off Camera

Director/Writer: Wes Anderson: making his ninth feature and second stop-motion animation
Co-Writers: Roman Coppola: regularly works with Anderson and with his sister Sofia
Jason Schwartzman: actor who got his start as the lead in *Rushmore* (98)
Kunichi Nomura: wrote several of the Japanese-language scenes himself
Cinematography: Tristan Oliver: animation specialist: *Chicken Run* (00), *Loving Vincent* (17)
Original Score: Alexandre Desplat: just won his second Oscar for *The Shape of Water* (17)
Prod. Design: Adam Stockhausen: range from *12 Years a Slave* (13) to *Ready Player One* (18)
Paul Harrod: principal stop-motion designer, model maker, and sculptor

Also directed by Wes Anderson...

Rushmore (1998) – Anderson’s breakout film about a precocious, obnoxious prep school student with a lonely industrialist as a friend, both of whom wind up attracted to the same teacher

The Royal Tenenbaums (2001) – Sad comedy about a family of eccentric geniuses in New York City, advancing Anderson’s aesthetic of detail-rich sets and stories and large ensemble casts

The Darjeeling Limited (2007) – Story of three misfit American brothers seeking their mother in India; Anderson’s first film set in a somewhat-realistic cultural idiom outside the U.S.

Fantastic Mr. Fox (2009) – Unexpected swerve into stop-motion animation about a suave fox (George Clooney) who cannot help being a thief, to the endangerment of family and friends

Moonrise Kingdom (2012) – Adolescent fable, structured even more as a storybook than previous features, about boy and girl scouts who elope to an island in New England, prompting a search

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) – Unexpectedly Anderson’s biggest commercial hit, adapting stories by Stefan Zweig into a caper about a louche hotel manager in mid-century Europe

If you enjoyed *Isle of Dogs*...

Dodes'ka-den (1970) – Akira Kurosawa film about characters who live in or near a garbage dump

Watership Down (1978) – Animated adaptation of Richard Adams’ novel about imperiled rabbits

Babe: Pig in the City (1998) – Sequel to popular talking-pig fable has darker tones, bigger designs

Spirited Away (2002) – Oscar-winning surrealist drama about a girl’s adventures in a dream land

WALL•E (2008) – Oscar-winning Pixar drama about a trash-compacting robot on a barren planet

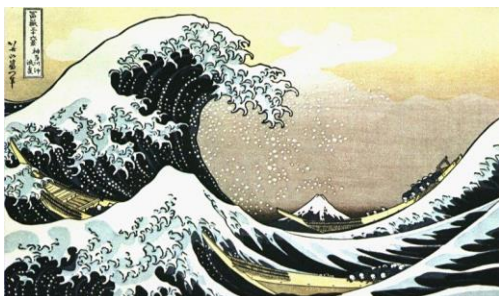
Big Hero 6 (2014) – Oscar-winning, kid-driven Disney film set in an imaginary “San Fransokyo”

White God (2014) – Hungarian hit about a young girl who rallies city’s stray dogs into an army

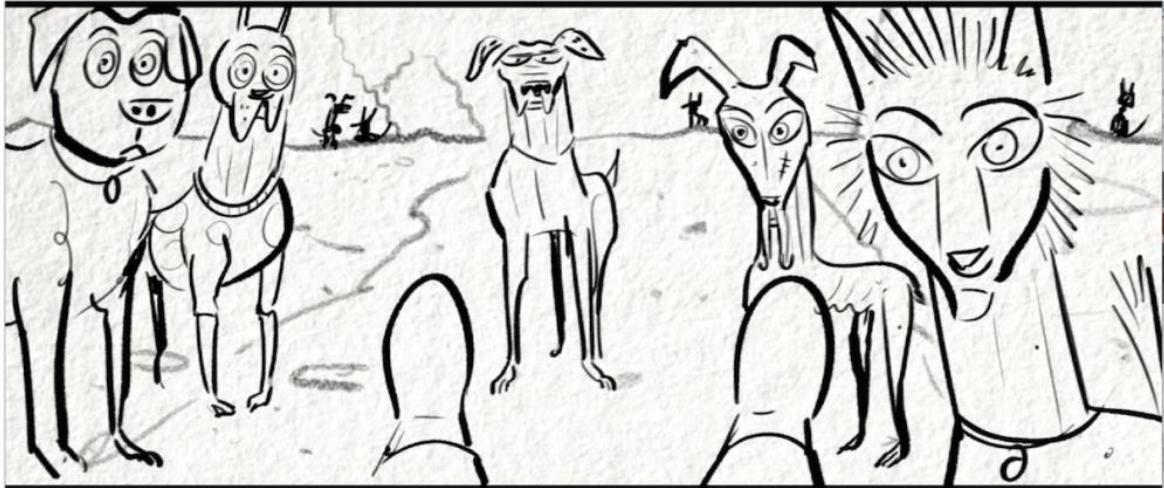
Facts about *Isle of Dogs* you may appreciate...

Anderson began collaborating with Coppola and Schwartzman on the project six years ago, after deciding to combine his idea about a film set in a garbage dump with his ambition of making a feature set in Japan. Shooting transpired in the UK from September 2015 to November 2017.

Visual concepts of the film were inspired by 19th-century Japanese woodblock prints by Katsushika Hokusai (example on the left) and Utagawa Hiroshige (example on the right):



Stop-motion animation requires enormous investments of time and detailed labor, manipulating sculpted figures by minute degrees and taking separate photographs of each tableau, which are then arranged in sequence with the illusion of more fluid movement. Every image is drawn ahead of time in a carefully sequenced “animatic,” which is much more strictly conceived than a live-action script or series of storyboards; there is simply too much time and work involved to improvise, or produce sequences that the filmmaker might ultimately decide not to use. Here are examples, copied from [Filmmaker Magazine](#), of the film evolving from the initial drawing to the finished frame. The shot is from Atari’s perspective as he wakes on the Isle.



Up to 50 different crews worked simultaneously to render and photograph different scenes at any given time during *Isle of Dogs*' process of production, yielding an average of 12 seconds of total screen time per day. Some characters and scenes required especially painstaking efforts. Tracy Walker, the American student, has 279 freckles on her face that each had to be painted onto a series of “Tracy” figures that had different facial expressions. The artist estimates that she eventually painted around 22,000 freckles. Anderson, known for visual minutiae, added to the labor involved. For the two-second scene in Tracy’s room, he wanted every newspaper hanging on her wall to be an actual Japanese-language document that one could really read.

Anderson's detail orientation complicated the process in other ways. Most stop-motion films, for example, would shoot actual footage of "organic" elements like fire, water, rain, or fog and use green-screen or other compositing technology to embed those images into the world of the animated figures. For example, when the characters in the popular *Wallace & Gromit* films light a flame beneath a tea kettle, the flame is real, and inserted into the animation. Anderson challenged his artists to animate even these elements, sculpting and photographing them out of plastic materials. (Think, for example, of those dust clouds that get kicked up whenever the dogs fight or the plane crashes. Rather than use plumes of actual dust, those are complex steel riggings inside tufts of cotton, on which the visible parts of quarreling dogs and other characters—a head here, a foot or paw there—can be mounted to suggest a brawl.)

Given Anderson's reputation for such fussy, even obsessive framing and design, the choice to set a story in a toxic dump represents a real departure—though, not surprisingly, in an Anderson dump, all the garbage is sorted scrupulously by material and color: newspapers, green bottles, etc. Unlike *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, which stayed carefully within a pre-set palette, the set designs of *Isle of Dogs* were much more elaborate and covered a greater range of color and style.

Actors have a much easier time than animators, recording all their lines early so the crew can design the animals match the figures' mouths, expressions, and movements to their vocal deliveries. Scarlett Johansson and Greta Gerwig both recorded their entire roles in single afternoons, two years ago, with no real sense what the final film would look like. Cranston, Norton, Goldblum, Murray, and Balaban recorded together in the studio—which is unusual for animation, where each part usually gets taped separately—but still mostly in four days.

Cinematically, Anderson's homage to Japan was focused on the films of Akira Kurosawa, including stories of noble or crazed samurai as well as a range of other stories, spanning the realistic and the highly stylized; and on the anime features of Hayao Miyazaki, famous not only for their constant visual invention but for their balances of sound, music, and silence.

Throughout filming, Kunichi Nomura, who plays the evil mayor, served as a consultant on Japanese cultural authenticity, and took on such an intensive role in the film—even coaching and writing the Japanese-speaking characters' scenes himself—that he was credited as a co-screenwriter by the end. Nomura has said that he believes in the film's meticulous visual and musical loyalty to Japanese culture but also that he allowed a wide latitude of embellishment or invention, to respect Anderson's unique artistic vision and the movie's imaginary world.

As a separate creative challenge and to make a Japan-set film that an English-speaking audience could easily follow, Anderson and his co-writers continued to devise characters and devices that could translate dialogue in real time, though they also wanted unsubtitled Japanese.

Though cats and their devotees get a slightly hard time in this movie, and though *Isle of Dogs* sounds like a cognate of *I Love Dogs*, Anderson insists he is not a "dog person" per se; his co-writers were a dog person and a cat person, respectively, and Anderson himself owns no animals except for two goats (of course), but he did grow up with a black lab named Chief.

Isle of Dogs premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February, where it won Best Director.

Broad conversation topics...

Complex Time Machine: The “Japan” of *Isle of Dogs* is brazenly imaginary but also derived from a specific set of influences. Though set twenty years in the future from now, a lot of the urban design, interior spaces, fonts, and other graphic elements hail from an early-to-mid-60s moment in Japanese aesthetics. The film thus represents a vision of the future projected from a perspective in the past, just as the “Economic Miracle” of postwar recovery was setting in. Again, the movie is hardly striving for any historical fidelity, but if we imagined this Japan as seeking new levels of prosperity and power, how does that inflect other themes in the film?

Timely Social and Political Issues: Though the film has been in stages of production throughout the current decade, so we cannot responsibly read it as a focused response to our current world, several storylines and ideas resonate with recent or at least not-too-distant memories in Japan and elsewhere. How did you respond to the vision of ascendant dictatorship, a seemingly docile populace, and the banishing of a suddenly “undesirable” population to a remote locale? Why does it matter that all of the dogs, save the show dog Nutmeg, are mutts rather than purebreds? What did you think about the panics regarding epidemics, the ostracism of those who suffer (or are said to suffer), the withholding of available treatments, and the general devaluing of science by political demagogues? What other themes connected to our globe?

Cross-Cultural Animation Styles: The two most robust industries of animated film in the world (though hardly the only ones with commercial and artistic impact) are those of the U.S. and Japan, which may be another reason why the movie links these two cultures in its immediate setting and in its casting of American actors—and its tactical exploitation of words like “Atari” that were fully invented pop-entertainment words, meant to sound Japanese to U.S. consumers. U.S. animation is known primarily for linear stories inspired by various live-action genres, for giving animals human voices and dialogue and humanlike personalities, and increasingly for casting famous actors to render them. Japanese animation is much more given to bending rules of time and space, for concocting sets and images that would be impossible to render in live-action filmmaking, and for exploring complicated themes in an audience imagined as adult. When or how did you see the spirit of U.S. or Japanese animation superseding the other?

Appropriation Debates: The film’s relationship to Japan has not passed without controversy. Some critics and audiences have questioned Anderson’s credentials to make a film set in Japan that relies on several cultural elements that can read as stereotype: sumo wrestling, taiko drumming, cherry blossoms, haikus that often read as punchline, and even the portrayal of a cruel despot ruling a passive population, which have both been figures in a lot of Western-authored storytelling about a simultaneously tyrannical and delicate “East.” [Other critiques](#) have focused specifically on the language issues. Why do all Japanese dogs speak English? Why isn’t the Japanese translated, and why does it sound weirdly muffled and hard to decipher, even for Japanese speakers? Why isn’t more of the cast Japanese? What did you think?

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Tracy?: Several of the above critiques have bemoaned the use of Gerwig’s characters as a kind of “white savior” who has to rouse the Japanese to stand up for themselves? Did you see her that way? Or did choices in costume, hairstyling, speech, or behavior suggest that the film was portraying Tracy as well-intentioned but overzealous?