



# REIMAGINING ROALD DAHL'S FANTASTIC *MR FOX* (1970) IN THE 21ST CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

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**R**oald Dahl's writings are known for presenting a world where "most people are inherently greedy, selfish, ignorant and deserving of punishment" (Jordan 2015). For decades, these particular features have implied several challenges when adapting these stories into films fit for children. Although some of Dahl's best-sellers, like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) or *The Witches* (1983) were eventually released as films, this did not occur with *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970).

It was not until 2009 when the filmmaker Wes Anderson directed the first film adaptation of this book. In his productions it is frequent to find topics such as existentialism, class or feminism. Some scholars even argue that his films "seem to be in constant discourse with the 'real' world outside the cinema" (Scott 2014, 76). Thus, his version of *Fantastic Mr Fox* provides an alternative and more updated view of Dahl's story as it explores and deconstructs many stereotypes found in children stories, from the lack of female characters to different masculinities. For this reason, this paper aims to identify these changes and deliver an analysis of them in order to

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offer an insight into the ways in which the adaptation may enhance the content of the original book, approaching it to contemporary audiences, both children and adults.

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## 1. Introducing Roald Dahl and Wes Anderson: Beyond the Boundaries of Children Stories

*Fantastic Mr Fox* was written and published by the British author Roald Dahl in 1970. At that time, Dahl was already a well-known author since, almost thirty years before, he had been commissioned by Walt Disney to write *The Gremlins* (1943), and six years prior to the release of *Fantastic Mr Fox*, he had published one of his most popular books, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Moreover, despite being known for children literature, he also wrote adult fiction and worked writing scripts for films and series such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Besides, he also participated in the first adaptation of his book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which was released in 1971. Nevertheless, he would cease to allow any adaptation of his writings after having an incident with the 1990 adaptation of his book *The Witches* (Parker 2020). This adaptation was problematic since the directors, Jim Henson and Nicolas Roeg, decided to change the end in order to avoid the presence of explicit violence in the film, something common in Dahl's children stories (Jordan 2015). However, both Dahl and Henson would die this same year, so this film was finally released as most of the adaptations of his books would do in the years which succeeded the author's death. Examples of these adaptations are *Matilda* (1996) and Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), along with the film analysed in this essay, Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr Fox* released in 2009.

Nevertheless, it is also important to mention that, as happened with his previous books, *Fantastic Mr Fox* had also been adapted previously but merely into live performances. Among these

adaptations, we can find different formats such as David Wood's play in 2001 or Tobias Picker's opera in 1998. Considering this, Anderson's film would be the first and only filmic approach to this book.

Focusing on this film, it is important to take into consideration certain aspects concerning Wes Anderson. Having started his career as a director in 1996 with the film *Bottle Rocket*, this American filmmaker has been highly awarded being acknowledged several times with nominations in the BAFTA, The Golden Globes and the Academy Awards thanks to films such as *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), *Isle of Dogs* (2018) and the analysed film, *Fantastic Mr Fox*. (2009). It is worth mentioning that, among these nominations, he received the Golden Globe and the BAFTA awards for *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and *The Grand Hotel Budapest* (2014).

Going back to the current film, which was his seventh long production and his first stop-motion film, it is important to note that its script was co-written with Noah Baumbach, known for *The Meyerowitz Stories* (2017) and *Marriage Story* (2019). Despite the fact that it is difficult to consider if their script is either an adaptation or a version, it is important to mention that some scholars do not explicitly consider this film an adaptation but merely a work which uses Dahl's book as "a primary basis" in order to introduce a completely new approach (Kunze 2014, 96). Moreover, in the film credits it is noted that the plot is based on the book. Nevertheless, since it is complex to offer a specific classification before having analysed further elements in the film, this idea would be fully explored in the next section, where I will analyse and compare different aspects in both, the film and the book.

## 2. A Comparative Analysis of *Fantastic Mr Fox*. Approaching a Children's Book in the 21st Century

In Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970), the main character is an anthropomorphic fox who steals food from three farmers in order to feed his starving four children and wife. In his incursion into the

farms, he encounters other animals, some of them villains, like a rat he must defeat in order to get cider from one of the farmers' houses. Despite these kinds of challenges and problems—for instance, he loses his tail—he manages to steal the food and share it with his family and the other animals in the forest. It is worth noting how, in this way, Mr Fox is the main agent in the action of saving the other animals, since despite having certain help from his children, in the end, they stay at home with Mrs Fox, who, like most of the animals, do not take part in the action and merely encourage and praise Mr Fox for his abilities.

With regard to the film, the first feature praised by critics after its release was that, like in Dahl's stories, Anderson's *Fantastic Mr Fox* provides mature and even philosophical concerns about life, something omitted in other adaptations of Dahl's books in order to be fit for children. This was highly praised by the film critic Roger Ebert who, after mentioning that some elements in this film may be too deep and crude for children, states that "a good story for children should suggest a hidden dimension, and that dimension of course is the lifetime still ahead of them" (2009). Wes Anderson's film uses the same central plot mentioned above but introduces new scenes and elements which add new themes and values to the story.

Taking this into consideration, the following sections will be devoted to the comparative analysis of these works. In order to provide a clearer understanding, this part is going to be divided presenting the main characters coupled with the themes they embody in both the book and the film. In the process, the changes between both are going to be analysed and discussed by taking into account the opinion of experts and by textual analysis.

## 2.1. Mr Fox, the Intended Hero in a Modern and Consumerist World

One of the most significant differences that viewers may find when approaching the filmic adaptation is the different use of the statement which entitled both this film and the book. In the case of the latter, it is Mrs Fox the one who calls her husband "a fantastic fox" when at the end of the book he has succeeded in stealing all the food and sharing it with the other animals (Dahl 2017, 50).

Consequently, he is considered a hero and the meaning of ‘fantastic’ in the book is literal. Nevertheless, in the film, this statement is highly ironical as she calls him “kind of quote-unquote ‘fantastic’ fox” (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 1:17:48). The reason behind Mrs Fox utterance may be that her husband is a kind of hero, but not a traditional one, provided that in the plot of the film he reaches his goal of stealing the food thanks to the help of the rest of the animals, including their son and Mrs Fox herself. Moreover, this ironic use would be in tune with the style of Anderson and many coetaneous filmmakers who are “between the irony ascribed to their Generation X group and a reactionary sentimentality” (Dorey 2012, 172). Besides, there are also negative implications in the social pressure that being a “fantastic fox” implies. In fact, when the safety of their son is compromised—since in an attempt of being a hero too he escapes to fight the farmers—Mr Fox states that the problem was that he wanted everyone to think he was “the greatest, the ‘fantastic’ Mr Fox” (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 51:42).

Further differences concerning this character are that in the film he is a journalist who is not satisfied with his life, as he recalls his exciting past as a stealer: “I used to steal birds but now I am a newspaperman” (7:40). This discontent with daily and normal life is also very frequent in Anderson’s films (Kunze 2014, 77). Besides, this unhappiness would introduce new topics to the plot of this story such as existentialism and class mobility since he aspires to become more than just a journalist, e. g. acquiring a bigger house. Taking this into consideration, the desire of being a stealer again may be more grounded on Mr Fox’s will to escape from a monotonous lifestyle and even on a consumeristic desire, as in this case, he does not actually need what he is stealing. In fact, Matt Duncan mentions how there is a very powerful message concerning consumerism in the film since “Mr Fox was once preoccupied with buying the right products, owning the right tree, and engaging in the right sort of consumer activities” and at the end of the film he turns “more aware of others, Mr Fox expresses a sort of indifference or detachment from these goods and activities” (Duncan 2015, 166). This approach may give a new dimension to Mr Fox’s loss of his tail and the fact that he made it ‘detachable’ in the film.

## 2.2. Felicity or Mr Fox: Towards Female Representation

If in the book Mrs Fox does not own a proper name, in the film she is called Felicity, something which may allude to Felicity Dahl, the author's widow, who also supervised this film as she had done previously in other adaptations of her husband's book such as *Matilda* (1996) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005).

Mrs Fox having her own name in the film could be understood as an anticipation of her more active role in this adaptation. Moreover, this is enhanced by the fact that, in the first scene seen in the film, both Mrs and Mr Fox are stealers, in contrast to the Mrs Fox depicted in the book, who stays at home during all the adventure and as Adrienne Kertzer remarks, even their small children are depicted as more able to fight and steal with their father than Mrs Fox (Kertzer 2011, 16). Indeed, she claims that in Dahl's books these traditional gender roles abound and that many of them were maintained in adaptations of other of his books. Nevertheless, in the case of *Fantastic Mr Fox*, this film "functions as both a tribute and a critique, differing significantly from previous filmic adaptations that never consider challenging Dahl's depiction of adult women" (17).

Moreover, further scenes show Felicity prone to fight when protecting her son or being suspicious when her husband lies to her in order to go stealing (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 23:40). These moments stand as proof of her depiction as an active character, as important and intelligent as her husband in the development of the story.

## 2.3. Children: Self-acceptance and New Masculinities

In Anderson's adaptation, the four children of Mr and Mrs Fox are substituted by their only son Ash and their nephew Kristofferson Silverfox. Both would have a more crucial role in the plot than that of the children in the book, who behave as a collective character and no other details on their names and personality are provided.

With these two teenage foxes, the film will explore several topics completely ignored in the book. In the case of Ash, he

introduces ideas such as the lack of self-esteem, the complexity of teenage years and problems such as bullying and frustration. All these feelings lead him to feel inferior and unable to be a hero like the one he observes in the comics he loves. On the other hand, Kristofferson is intelligent, sensitive, sportive and modern. Both attend the same high school, where we can observe their relationship with other teenage animals. With regard to this, it is worth mentioning how Wes Anderson states that these two characters are based on his relationship with his older brothers, who made him feel overshadowed (Browning 2011, 161). In fact, it is one of Anderson's brothers the one who voiced Kristofferson (161). The fact that it is a biographical reference makes the relationship between the cousins more realistic, introducing topics such as the negative effects of having bad standards, the importance of self-acceptance, self-esteem and new masculinities. This last one can be seen especially in Kristofferson, since he breaks many traditional gender stereotypes, for instance, he normalises being sensitive, expressing his feelings and crying when necessary. Besides, he offers a deeper glance at actual problems, since he is adopted because his father is ill with pneumonia.

The fact that children must face problems more proper of adults and be sensible and philosophical is also a distinctive feature in Anderson's production, where adults have irresponsible and childish behaviour (Kunze 2014, 12). Therefore, this film does not just explore the contrast between human and animal behaviour but also among adults and children as it "rejects the binaries of childhood and innocence versus adulthood and experience" (Mendez Troutman 2019, 190). This same pattern can be observed in other of Anderson's films such as *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) or *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), where it can be found another recurrent element also seen in this adaptation: the figure of the child prodigy represented by Kristofferson, since it is mentioned several times that he is good at many arts and a professional Olympic athlete.

Back to Ash, the fact that he feels unable to fit within the model of traditional hero he aspires to be may resemble his father's problems when pretending to be a 'fantastic fox'. In fact, due to his actions to impress his father, Kristofferson is captured. Moreover,

through this character, Anderson introduces several dialogues where black humour abounds. For instance, when Mr Fox loses his tail, instead of just saying that it would grow soon — as the foxes in the book do — Ash states that “it is not half as bad as double pneumonia” alluding to his cousin’s father (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 31:04). Due to the presence of elements like the former quotation, opinions on the targeted audience of this film are divided and reviews are described as a “dense web of allusions grounds for wavering between praise of the film and uncertainty about children getting the jokes” (Kertzer 2011, 8).

#### 2.4. Anthropomorphic Animals and Humans: Nature and Civilisation

In the book, the animals’ role is merely that of blaming Mr Fox for the fact that “half of the wood has disappeared” because the farmers’ are using digging machines to capture him (Dahl 2017, 30). Consequently, the anthropomorphic fox mends this by sharing his stolen food, being this action the one that grants him the role of a hero among animals. Nevertheless, in the film, Anderson provides a collective hero instead of an individual one. In this more democratic approach, after having attempted to be a standard hero or an actual “fantastic Mr Fox”, the main character realizes that he is not able to defeat the humans alone. Therefore, in this case, Mr Fox is not the individual hero seen in the book, since they all achieve the victory together by using their own and different abilities.

Concerning the dimension of the conflict, in this case, it is not just Mr Fox against the farmers but all the animals against all the humans. The differences between these two groups are also enhanced by subtle details. Todd McCarthy claims how “the film maintains a linguistic divide between British-accented humans and American-accented animals” (McCarthy 2009, 25). This may be due to Anderson’s tendency to always works with the same cast. Therefore, it is not striking to consider that he used this recurrent American cast to voice the main characters, while, on the other hand, he counted on British actors to allude to the actual setting and nationality of the author of the book.



Moreover, it is also worth highlighting that, contrary to what occurs in the book, there do not seem to be actual villains among animals, especially concerning the rat which appears in the book and fights them to not share the cider of one of the farmers. In the film, he seems to have values and further reasons to behave like this, as his arguments for fighting are that he prefers to die before betraying the humans who allow him to drink their cider. In fact, Mr Fox himself praises his loyalty and honour stating that he was another “victim of the system” (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 58:00).

Besides, in general, animals in the film are more anthropomorphic than those described in the book as they wear human clothes and have human habits. Nevertheless, there are few exceptions for non-anthropomorphic animals in the film. Some of them are the humans’ dogs and hens who live on the farm. The fact that these characters are depicted as domestic animals, not able to speak, is significant since they are the only ones who fight on the side of humans. Moreover, this non-anthropomorphic depiction may enhance the differences between the animals who live in nature and those kept and used by humans in a civilised world. Further proofs that animals embodied the natural world and humans represent civilisation is the fact that the final victory of the animals in the film is not the dinner they have in the book, but the conquest of a human state-of-the-art supermarket.

With regard to the presence of consumerism in animals mentioned in previous sections, Matt Duncan highlights how this ending may epitomise its important role in the film and hence in current society, since the ending is “the point at which his [Mr Fox's] pessimism about his situation finally turns into hope and optimism” as “his escape into the supermarket with his family and friends is the fulfillment of that hope” (2015, 266). Nevertheless, like Mr Fox, this time, all animals seem to have learnt a lesson, as they are encouraged to consume just what they needed in order “to share with everybody” (Anderson & Baumbach 2009, 1:22:03). With this action, they may reject the consumerism found in human behaviour. Moreover, the fact that in this last scene Mrs Fox announces to be pregnant again—like at the beginning of the film—stands as a cyclical structure and suggests that the Fox family is going to return to their former life in a burrow, outside human civilisation.

### 3. Final Comments and Conclusions

Considering all this information, it can be said that if Dahl's books for children are known for his innovative style which often portrays a reality "where horrible things can happen at any moment" and where "most people are inherently greedy, selfish, ignorant and deserving of punishment" (Jordan 2015), Anderson's approach seems to maintain the same dark and mature tone. Moreover, at the same time, it is innovative as well in breaking with traditional stereotypes and introducing new topics and values to the viewers.

In the film adaptation there are more topics related to adults' problems, however, they are portrayed in a childish way. This is also more common in the period in which this film was produced following a postmodernist approach, since this version is, above all, a postmodernist adaptation which adds to the story of the book elements such as irony, black humour, consumerism, authenticity and the struggle for having an identity and a better life. Moreover, it introduces deeper and philosophical ideas, like all the previously exposed: diversity, in the fact that all the animals are equally useful; and gender equality, in the important role and presence of Mrs Fox, something omitted in the book.

Besides, this version also provides hints of intellectualism, contemporary concerns such as bullying in schools and even biographical elements, like the problems between Anderson and his actual brother, reflected in Ash and Kristofferson. Nevertheless, despite the fact that this is a stop-motion film, a genre commonly associated with children's films, it is important to bear in mind that under a postmodernist view, it does not have to imply this idea. As the scholar Michael Bracewell supports, cartoons and this kind of childish style ceased to be just a children's genre especially after the 1990s, where we can find other examples of cartoons targeted to an adult audience such as *The Simpsons* or *South Park* (2002, 128). The fact that this film may be targeted at this kind of audience would support the common use of dark humour, which sometimes may seem inappropriate for some children.

Therefore, to conclude it is important to highlight that, despite including almost all the elements present in the book in terms of plot

and characters, this adaptation stands as a more contemporary example of the values of the book, as it reapproaches certain concepts and standards deconstructing any stereotype. In the case of Mr Fox, he is not portrayed as the perfect and only hero, and he is as brave as his wife. Moreover, it can be seen how Kristofferson is not ashamed of his feelings proving that heroes can be sensitive. For all these reasons, I am inclined to think that this film may enhance many aspects of the book, as it depicts diversity and provides new values over the same base. Hence, this renovation of the main story introduces this book to a younger audience who may not be familiarised with this author and this book.

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