

Evil Genius

(on Brian Wilson and the films of Wes Anderson)

by Jean-Philippe Tessé

In this article, film critic **Jean-Philippe Tessé** undertakes an analysis that compares singer-songwriter Brian Wilson to the protagonists of the films of Wes Anderson. An ambiguous icon of the 1960s and '70s—sometimes bright and sunny, sometimes dark and tormented—Wilson incarnates, claims Tessé, a figure of failure specific to pop culture, which the author associates with his own study of contemporary burlesque humor. This text is adapted from a lecture given at CAPC in the context of a symposium called *A travers le miroir. La culture pop et au-delà* (CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, December 7–8, 2007). Tessé, born in 1977, is a member of the editorial board of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and editor of the movie section of *Chronic'art* magazine; in 2007 he published *Le burlesque* (Paris: Les Éditions des Cahiers du Cinéma).

"This is why sports and strictly objective criteria have deservedly come to the forefront, displacing such obsolete concepts as genius and human greatness..."

Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities* (trans. Sophie Wilkins), vol. I, ch. 13.

"I don't have any power in this world, but I have spiritual power."

Brian Wilson

Calling Brian Wilson a "genius," as is commonly done, would amaze Ulrich, the protagonist of *The Man without Qualities*, who was startled to discover in the newspapers that a horse could be described as "a racehorse of genius." Brian Wilson's century has buried, or at least completely revamped, the classic concept of genius, namely the Renaissance idea as perfectly incarnated by Leonardo da Vinci. The previous century had laid the groundwork for this shift, notably through the Romantics, by linking biography to oeuvre: following Novalis, the nineteenth century invented the figure of the unfortunate genius, a victim of melancholy or the circumstances of his life, from van Gogh to Nerval via Evariste Gallois. A subsequent mutation occurred when Einstein stuck out his tongue. Brian Wilson is truly a genius of his times because his particular way of dealing with his talent, his unhappiness at being exceptionally gifted, coincided with another key shift: the reunification of high- and low-brow culture through the open door of "pop." Wilson is a "pop genius," that is to say a low-brow genius that his era elevated higher and higher as pop—that passion for the inauthentic (Wilson was brilliant at studio arrangements, at artificial, contrived music)—steadily acquired the respectability of art. He is the kind of genius his century adores: goofy, depressive, and above all someone who never made it to the end of his road, who never finished what the weighty ghost of genius pressed him to finish—the great work.

In short, Wilson is a character straight out of a Wes Anderson film. Anderson is a young American film-maker whose characters are all more or less geniuses, all of whom go awry: the flunking, hyperactive yet highly adult teenager in *Rushmore* (1999), all the family members in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (tennis player, writer, financial wizard), and the Captain Cousteau figure in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004)—all are brilliant losers, gifted but pathetic. The parallels between the lives of the Beach Boys' singer and the Texan film director are all the more suggestive in that Anderson is often described as a "pop film-maker," given his appetite for pop and rock music, and for his story-telling technique that involves skits and vignettes. There is a highly contrived aspect to his movies that makes them seem like record jackets or family photo albums. Wilson is thus an Anderson character. Or at least, the pop singer could have inspired the movie characters—a tennis champion who halts in mid-match, gripped by existential angst, recalls the post-*Pet Sounds* Wilson, unable to carry on, blocked by the beauty of his own music, heading deep into depression. Anderson's characters resemble Wilson because they constitute a

compilation of his traits: wacky, depressive, they tend to blow things, to fail; but in failure they achieve a kind of grandeur, heroism, and majesty that is simultaneously sublime and silly. When the gung-ho world asks them to come up with the goods, Anderson's geniuses go into a melancholy, autistic withdrawal (like the Beach Boys' *In My Room*). They are less concerned to produce what is expected of them than to complete some inner quest, like Steve Zissou, the jaguar-shark hunter in *The Life Aquatic*, in a method of depiction analogous to Phil Spector's "wall of sound." The oeuvre, meanwhile, remains in a fragmentary state. Wilson's most legendary album is not the overly perfect *Pet Sounds* but *Smile*, designed to be better than perfect and therefore condemned to remain almost virtual: its unfinished, incomplete quality created the legend. On the other hand, the value of the experience, of the approach, became crucial (which is a potential definition of modernism, at least as understood by Baudelaire, for example).

Wilson is the type of genius that the twentieth century loved—the one who stumbled and/or fell silent, who turns out to be weird and unhappy, who explodes in mid-flight. This is also the source of the pop romanticism of Anderson's characters, because they, too, are caught halfway between genius and failure—that is their sphere, the sphere of melancholy. They illustrate the evolution in the relationship of genius to oeuvre. It is no longer a vertical relationship of elevation, but a grid or network that meshes together, at variable distances, the artist's ego (which resides on a scale somewhere between autism and total immersion in the work, from a refusal to accept responsibility for the work to its dispossession) and the whole of the oeuvre (which is precisely *not* a whole, but a set of possibilities ranging from fragment to totality, from test to completion).

Genius is that which stands on the threshold of nothingness, the last step before the precipice. So what is it that separates genius from silence or fall? Nothing. Otherwise, it would be pointless to be a genius these days—it is through silence and fall that a genius forges today's heroism.

Translated from the French by Deke Dusinbere