



[Bruce Jackson & Diane Christian video introduction to this week's film](#) (with occasional not-very-cooperative participation from their dog, Willow)

[Click here to find the film online.](#) (UB students received instructions how to view the film through UB's library services.)

Videos:

[Wes Anderson and Frederick Wiseman in a fascinating Skype conversation about how they do their work](#) (Zipporah Films, 21:18)

[Isle of Dogs Voice Actors and Characters](#) (8:05)

[The making of Isle of Dogs](#) (9:30)

[Isle of Dogs: Discover how the puppets were made](#) (4:31)

[Weather and Elements](#) (3:18)

DIRECTOR Wes Anderson

WRITING Wes Anderson wrote the screenplay based on a story he developed with Roman Coppola, Kunichi Nomura, and Jason Schwartzman.

PRODUCERS Wes Anderson, Jeremy Dawson, Steven Rales, and Scott Rudin; Simon Quinn (animation producer)

CINEMATOGRAPHER Tristan Oliver

EDITOR Edward Bursch and Ralph Foster; Andrew Weisblum (supervising editor)

MUSIC Alexandre Desplat



The film was nominated for Oscars for Best Animated Feature and Best Original Score at the 2019 Academy Awards.

CAST

Starting with *The Royal Tenenbaums* in 2001, Wes Anderson has become a master of directing high-profile ensemble casts. *Isle of Dogs* is no exception. Led by **Bryan Cranston** (of *Breaking Bad* fame, as well as *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Seinfeld*), voicing Chief, the cast, who have appeared in many Anderson films, includes: Oscar nominee **Edward Norton** (*Primal Fear*, 1996, *American History X*, 1998, *Fight Club*, 1999, *The Illusionist*, 2006, *Birdman*, 2014); **Bob Balaban** (*Midnight Cowboy*, 1969, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, 1977, *Altered States*, 1980, *Gosford Park*, 2001, Christopher Guest comedies, such as *Waiting for Guffman*, 1996, and *A Mighty Wind*, 2003); **Jeff Goldblum** (*The Fly*, 1986, *Jurassic Park*, 1993, *Independence Day*, 1996, *Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017); **Bill Murray** (*Groundhog Day*, 1993, *Lost in Translation*, 2003); **Frances**

McDormand (*Raising Arizona*, 1987, *Fargo*, 1996, for which she won an Oscar for best actress, *Almost Famous*, 2000, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, 2017, for which she won an Oscar for best actress); Oscar nominee **Scarlett Johansson** (*Ghost World*, 2001, *Lost in Translation*, 2003, *Match Point*, 2005, *The Prestige*, 2006, *Under the Skin*, 2013, *Jojo Rabbit* and *Marriage Story*, 2019); **Harvey Keitel** (*Mean Streets*, 1973, *Taxi Driver*, 1976, *Reservoir Dogs*, 1992, *Pulp Fiction*, 1994, *The Irishman*, 2019); **Yoko Ono** (artist and musician); **Tilda Swinton** (*Orlando*, 1992, *Adaptation*, 2002, *Michael Clayton*, 2007, for which she won an Oscar for best supporting actress, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, 2011, *The Only Lovers Left Alive*, 2013); **F. Murray Abraham** (*All the President's Men*, 1976, *Scarface*, 1983, *Amadeus*, 1984, *The Name of the Rose*, 1986, *Finding Forrester*, 2000, *Inside Llewyn Davis*, 2013); **Ken Watanabe** (*The Last Samurai*, 2003, for which he was nominated for the Oscar for best supporting actor, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, 2006, *Memories of Tomorrow*, 2006, *Batman Begins*, 2005, *Inception*, 2010); **Liev Schreiber** (*Big Night*, 1996, *Scream*, 1996, *The Sum of All Fears*, 2002, *Spotlight*, 2015, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, 2018); **Anjelica Huston** (*Prizzi's Honor*, 1985, for which she won an Oscar for supporting actress, *The Dead*, 1987, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, 1989, *Enemies: A Love Story*, 1989, for which she was nominated for an Oscar for best supporting actress, *The Grifters*, 1990, for which she was nominated for an Oscar for best actress, *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, 1993, *Buffalo '66*, 1998).

WES ANDERSON (b. May 1, 1969 in Houston, Texas) has written and directed ten feature films and three shorts associated with the features, as well as four other shorts. Anderson started making silent films, as a child, using his father's Super 8 camera, and, as a philosophy student at the University of Texas at Austin, he worked as a cinema projectionist. He met his frequent collaborator, Owen Wilson, while studying at UT. His first feature, 1996's *Bottle Rocket*, was an elaboration of a short film, of the same name, made with Wilson and his brother Luke in 1992. Though the film drew positive critical attention, it, mostly, remained obscure outside the world of independent film. Martin Scorsese later named *Bottle Rocket* one of his top-ten favorite movies of the 1990s. More immediately and crucial to Wilson's developing career, an executive producer with Disney,

Joe Roth, saw it and wanted to make Anderson's next film possible. That next film would cement Anderson as an auteur with a distinct visual style and a signature use of classic rock and pop and contemporary indie rock as well as classical pieces in subsequent films. *Rushmore* (1998) would also, effectively, reorient comedian Bill Murray's career, from star of goofy, well-made comedies (*Groundhog Day*, *What About Bob?*) to damaged lead in bittersweet tragicomedies (Sophia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, Roger Mitchell's *Hyde Park on Hudson*), as well as a staple in Anderson's films, to this date. The film, also, seems to have made possible a whole genre of tragicomic films with bright color palettes that made generous use of similar styles of bygone pop music throughout the 2000s (Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton's *Little Miss Sunshine*, Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale*, David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees*, Rian Johnson's *The Brothers Bloom*). Perhaps, in a fit of



late 1990s nostalgia for the 1960s, the film, and particularly, then unknown, Jason Schwartzman, also garnered comparisons to the young Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* (this comparison may have also been fostered, again, by Anderson's use of 1960s pop to accompany scenes). His anticipated follow-up to *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), a family story inspired by J.D. Salinger's family of geniuses, the Glasses, sported a high-profile cast—Gene Hackman, Angelica Huston, Bill Murray, Danny Glover, Ben Stiller, and Gwyneth Paltrow—as well as Wilson's frequent collaborators and rising stars Owen and Luke Wilson. It also earned Wilson his first Oscar nomination, for best screenplay. He would subsequently be nominated in the same category for *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and *The Grand Budapest*

Hotel (2014), which also gave him his first nominations for best director and best picture. His two forays into feature animation—*Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) and *Isle of Dogs* (2018)—also reaped Oscar nominations. His other features are *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007), and the highly anticipated first live-action feature since *Grand Budapest*, *The French Dispatch* (2020), inspired by the early days of *The New Yorker*.

TRISTAN OLIVER is a British cinematographer (16 credits) best known for his work with Wes Anderson (*Fantastic Mr. Fox*, 2009, and *Isle of Dogs*, 2018) and Nick Park (*Chicken Run*, 2000) in the field of stop frame animated feature films. His work has also covered live action and mixed media commercials, shorts and feature films. His early collaborations with fellow cinematographer and long-term friend and mentor Dave Alex Riddett resulted in Academy Awards for the Nick Park helmed shorts, *The Wrong Trousers* and *A Close Shave* and the feature film, *Curse of the Wererabbit* (2005). He also worked on the 2017 animated film on Vincent Van Gogh *Loving Vincent*, and his upcoming projects are: *Where is Anne Frank* and *Coppelia*.

ALEXANDRE DESPLAT (b. 23 August 1961 (age 58), Paris, France) is a French film composer. He has won two Oscars for scores for *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) and *The Shape of Water* (2017) and has received nine additional nominations. He has composed for over 100 films, including *Lapse of Memory* (1992), *Family Express* (1992), *Regarde Les Hommes Tomber* (1994), *Les Péchés Mortels* (1995), *Un Héros Très Discret* (1996), *Une Minute de Silence* (1998), *Sweet Revenge* (1998), *Le Château des Singes* (1999), *Reines d'un Jour* (2001), *Sur mes lèvres* (2002), *Rire et Châtiment* (2003), *Syriana* (2005), *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* (2005), and Stephen Frears's *The Queen* (2006). In 2008, his score for David Fincher's *Curious Case of Benjamin Button* was nominated for an Oscar, and in 2009, he composed for Robert Guédiguian's *L'Armée du Crime*, Frears's *Cheri*, Nora Ephron's *Julie & Julia*, and Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), for which he was nominated for an Oscar. In 2010, he scored *The King's Speech*, which earned another Oscar nomination. He scored *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 1* (2010) and Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* (2010). Desplat's 2011 projects included

Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*, *A Better Life*, Polanski's *Carnage*, George Clooney's *Ides of March*, *La Fille du Puisatier*, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2*. Desplat started 2012 with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the Florent Emilio Siri-directed biopic *Cloclo*, and DreamWorks Animation's *Rise of the Guardians*. His other scores of 2012 included *Rust and Bone*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *Argo*, the latter of which earned another Oscar nomination. His 2013 collaboration with Frears *Philomena* earned him another Oscar nomination. He wrote five major scores during 2014, with *The Grand Budapest Hotel* winning him his first Academy Award. His score for *The Imitation Game* was also nominated, and his win therefore marked the first time a composer had won against another of their own scores since John Williams won for *Star Wars* (beating *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) in 1978, and only the seventh time overall (Alfred Newman, Bernard Herrmann, Max Steiner, Miklos Rozsa and Johnny Green are the only other composers to achieve this). He was nominated, again, for an Oscar for Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019), and he is scoring the upcoming Guillermo del Toro adaptation of *Pinocchio*.



Richard Brody: “‘Isle of Dogs’ is a Stylish Revolt Against (American) Political Madness” (New Yorker, 23 March 2018)

Wes Anderson's new film “Isle of Dogs,” a comedic drama realized with stop-motion animation (like his film “Fantastic Mr. Fox,” from 2009) is both a persuasive argument for big-screen viewing and for watching at home via streaming or a disk (preferably Blu-ray). The movie is overwhelming, in the very best sense: the pointillistic profusion of the movie's visual details—décor, action, and the gestures of the characters (all of which are puppets, deftly

manipulated, frame by frame)—and, for that matter, its drolly nuanced sound mix, make a big-screen viewing a prime necessity. But that very profusion of visual details, plus the speed with which the movie’s intricate story is told, the flashes forward and back, and the quick introduction of a wide array of characters and subplots, make a first viewing merely a rough draft of an experience and invite savoring, in private, in slow motion and in freeze-frame.

“Isle of Dogs” is the third film in a virtual trilogy, following “[Moonrise Kingdom](#)” and “[The Grand Budapest Hotel](#)”—a trilogy of revolt. “Moonrise Kingdom” shows two teen-agers overturning narrow mores and narrow legalism while displaying their own inspired fusion of new and old styles (helped by a *deus ex machina* who is none other than God himself). In “The Grand Budapest Hotel,” a true sense of style, restraint, and pleasure functions in two ways: as both a mark of and a weapon against the depravities of a tyrannical and racist regime. With “Isle of Dogs,” Anderson looks even more closely at the victims of a radically exterminationist ruler, and, in effect, inverts the terms of “The Grand Budapest Hotel.” Thrust into situations of utter degradation, places of utter ruin, and fates of utter despair, these victims unite in resisting the forces that would destroy them and, in the process, tap into a latent sensibility and forge a sublime style of their own.

The victims in “Isle of Dogs,” of course, happen to be canines. In the fictitious Japanese city of Megasaki, twenty years in the future, they are deported en masse to a fictitious offshore garbage dump, known as Trash Island, under orders from the city’s tyrannical Mayor Kobayashi (voiced by Kunichi Nomura, who co-wrote the story with Anderson, Jason Schwartzman, and Roman Coppola). (There’s a mythic backstory of the Kobayashi clan’s ancient hatred for dogs.) The pretext for that deportation is public health: the city’s canine population is widely infected with dog flu, which can be transmitted to humans, as well as with snout fever. But at the rigorously orchestrated rally at which the mayor declares his intentions, he allows, *pro forma*, a

speaker in opposition—the scientist Watanabe, from the Science Party, who’s there with his colleague, named (and voiced by) Yoko Ono. Watanabe (voiced by Akira Ito) announces that he has nearly completed a cure for dog flu and a treatment for snout fever, but the pro-Kobayashi public filling the hall shout him down and pelt him with produce and garbage. From its basic setup, “Isle of Dogs” is a fantasy that reflects no aspect of Japanese current events but, rather, the xenophobic, racist, and demagogic strains of contemporary American politics.

The dogs on Trash Island are being left to die from malignant neglect. They’re all afflicted with dog flu, and they have nothing to eat but the garbage scraps that they scavenge, and there’s little clean water to drink. The action is centered on five of them: Rex (voiced by Edward Norton), Duke (Jeff Goldblum), King (Bob Balaban), Boss (Bill Murray), and Chief (Bryan Cranston). What distinguishes Chief is that, unlike the other four, all former house pets, he is a stray—and, as a stray, who has led a tough life, he has no patience for his cohorts’ nostalgia for creature comforts. He girds them for a fight to survive.



Their sense of battle, however, is galvanized by the arrival of a human: the twelve-year-old Atari Kobayashi (voiced by Koyu Rankin), the mayor’s ward and distant relative, whose parents were killed in a train accident years earlier. When Atari was brought into the mayor’s home, he was given a guard dog named Spots (Liev Schreiber). To launch the anti-dog campaign, Mayor Kobayashi makes Spots the first deportee to Trash Island; but Atari secretly commandeers a small plane in the hope of rescuing Spots. The plane crash-lands, and the band of five dogs vote not to eat Atari but to rescue him—and to help him find Spots, in a mission that they know to be all but hopeless but that reaffirms their dignity and engages their righteous outrage at their persecutors.

The Japanese characters speak Japanese; their dialogue isn’t subtitled, but, rather, is frequently translated by onscreen simultaneous translators (one is voiced by Frances McDormand); the one American character speaks English; the dogs speak English. The

decision not to subtitle the Japanese speakers has been criticized, as by [Justin Chang in the Los Angeles Times](#), for diminishing the prominence of the movie's Japanese characters; yet the bulk of the dialogue is translated, and the most conspicuous non-translations, when Atari speaks to the dogs, replicates the mutual incomprehension of the species—there's even a winking yet, in context, touching aside by one of the dogs, who, upon rescuing Atari, says, "I wish someone spoke his language." The center of the movie is neither the Japanese characters nor the American one; it's the canine ones. The movie looks closely at deportation, internment in a prison camp, and the threat of extermination—all from the perspective of the victims.

No contemporary director delights like Anderson does in depicting military or quasi-military organization, its somewhat ludicrous yet deeply earnest and potentially very effective rituals and hierarchies. In that regard, "Isle of Dogs" is something like Anderson's first John Ford movie—filled with the emotionalism of respect and principle, embodied in the dogs' own organization and in their relationships with humans. A flashback to the first encounter of Atari and Spots is an extraordinarily tender scene that's undergirded by a self-aware, steadfast canine devotion—the very root of the action that follows. Chief is a wild dog who's aware of his own recklessness, which presents a danger to others (and to himself—he lost his one chance at becoming a house pet when he bit a child). When he is thrust into Atari's company, he confronts his lifelong conflict between impulses toward obedience and disobedience. When Anderson films the ruins of Trash Island, he aestheticizes and stylizes them without beautifying them, and he does the same thing with the disciplined and symmetrical order of Mayor Kobayashi's public rallies (a Riefenstahlian twist on a contemporary American malady). Andersonian beauty is principled, passionate, liberating, and the contrast between mere order and beauty is presented nowhere more clearly in his oeuvre than in "Isle of Dogs." (For that matter, it's

a mistake to consider Anderson's work in animation a pursuit of total control: the director's work with his animators involves vast amounts of back-and-forth, of attempts and suggestions, variations and surprises; their personal and physical involvement, even if offscreen, is no less vital to the film than the presence of actors in a live-action movie.)

There's another character who's crucial to the resistance to Mayor Kobayashi's reign of terror: an American foreign-exchange student named Tracy Walker (Greta Gerwig), who is the only white student in her class in Megasaki Senior High. I was at first surprised that Anderson would cast a white foreigner as the central figure in the political liberation of Megasaki City, but Tracy's presence—virtually inviting the xenophobic wrath of the demagogic ruler—meshes with the parallels that Anderson develops with current American politics. The connection becomes even clearer when—not to give away too much—Mayor Kobayashi is revealed to be a kleptocrat whose policies are driven by his business interests. What's more, the climactic line that unleashes the movie's dénouement is Tracy's interruption of Mayor Kobayashi's campaign rally with the cry, "He's stealing the reelection!" (The

suggestion that citizens of the future Megasaki City seem passive in the face of tyranny could, to an outside observer, hold quite as well here, now.)

For Anderson, Japan is a sort of mirror-America, a country that has as prominent, as rich, and as inspiring a cinematic



image, due to its movie industry and to the artists whom it sustained; the Japan of "Isle of Dogs" is a movie-made place. "Isle of Dogs" doesn't draw upon Japanese history, doesn't delve into Japanese politics, doesn't consider the present-day specifics of Japanese society. The movie's future-Japan (a future that is decoratively imbued, Anderson-style, with industrial styles and technological devices of the fifties and sixties) is akin to the fictitious Central European country of Zubrowka in "Grand Budapest," which is as much a movie creation—a reference to films by Ernst Lubitsch and other nineteen-thirties

filmmakers—as is the futuristic-dystopian Japan of “Isle of Dogs.” Even the geography of Japan is fictitious (it includes the so-called Middle Finger Islands which the dogs must cross in order to reach the distant Cuticles). The film’s political references have nothing to do with real-life Japan, either; they’re heralded very early on, in the voice-over narration (by Courtney B. Vance) that refers to “the Japanese archipelago,” a word that instantly resounds not with Japanese history but with exposés of Soviet prison camps.

The movie’s Japan resembles Zubrowka in another way: like Lubitsch’s comedies of manners, the movies of Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Ozu, and others show a society in which the expression of

emotion is modulated through conventional hints, deflections, and indirections. The iconography of Japan, as represented copiously in Japanese movies, art, and architecture reflects a culture of shared formalities. The demagogy of Mayor Kobayashi (like the ultimate villainy of his henchman, the Major-Domo Hatchet-Man, voiced by Akira Takayama) stands out all the more for saying and doing, with disruptive ferocity, what few in his position would be likely to express publicly. (Here, too, Japan is a stand-in for current-day America.) But the virtues of mutually respected formalities emerge in a sort of epilogue, when Mayor Kobayashi publicly admits (in a gesture virtually unimaginable in American public life), “I have no honor,” and makes a vast offering in repentance. (No spoilers; it’s not seppuku but a brilliantly conceived, humanistic, life-giving substitute.)

As ever in Anderson’s work, there’s a powerful strain of romanticism in “Isle of Dogs,” both in the portrayal of the uprising (the lonely three-tone whistle that serves as the dogs’ sign of recognition, the abandoned Spots’s Chaplinesque stare into camera) and in matters of actual romance (two involving dogs and one involving a teen or tween crush). I confess that I was surprised by the gender separation of dogs on Trash Island—the only

prominent female dogs, Nutmeg (Scarlett Johansson) and Peppermint (Kara Hayward), aren’t fighters. Nutmeg is a former show dog (though she tells Chief, “That’s what I do, it’s not my identity”), deft and dainty. Peppermint, a survivor of a distant, woeful camp of experimentation on animals, is also slender and domestic. The martial masculinity of the movie’s band of fighting dogs is an aesthetic holdover—a reference to a cinematic and literary heritage that is receiving long-overdue critiques in Hollywood today, but Anderson seems to replicate it unquestioningly.

Given the central place of misogyny in the current American strain of political madness, and the clarity and force of the movie’s allegory of rage at that madness, that absence is all the more gaping.



Jacob Knight: “ISLE OF DOGS Is Wes Anderson’s Puppy Kaiju Picture”

Before *Isle of Dogs*, the notion of Wes Anderson helming a *Godzilla* picture was unfathomable. Now, it’s all this writer can think about. Anderson’s stop motion animated adventure – set in the near future fictional Japanese metropolis of Megasaki – is a visual feast, steeped in the country’s cinema and showcasing obvious influences that range from the epics of Akira Kurosawa (particularly *High and Low*), to the kaiju stomping diversions Toho’s been churning out for the last six decades. In short, *Isle of Dogs* isn’t an act of appropriation, but rather one of pure celebration.

Co-written by Kunichi Nomura – along with Anderson and his usual array of conspirators (both Roman Coppola and Jason Schwartzman own a “story by” credit) – the end result could’ve easily come across as shameless cultural tourism. Yet there’s an immersive element to the numerous allusions to Japanese art that couples well with *Isle of Dogs*’ refusal to give in to Western linguistics. As stated in a title card upfront, much of the Japanese dialogue – voiced by actual Japanese actors (believe it or not) – goes untranslated, placing us inside this invented locale but never letting us forget that this is indeed a story that belongs to hyper-specific ethnic

touchstones. When amalgamated with Anderson's own signature "*doll house*" style, *Isle of Dogs* becomes a true gift to cinephiles, exploding with color and texture while barely masking a political statement regarding the corruption of systems through dubiously conceived policy and sinister mass propaganda.

Isle of Dogs' central conflict is one that stretches back centuries, as the Kobayashi clan once waged war on a pack of stray dogs, their allegiance to the country's cats fueling an aggression they ultimately lost. Cut to some time in the 2030s, and Mayor Kobayashi (looking like Toshirô Mifune and voiced by Nomura) – a six term incumbent on the eve of re-election – must address widespread outbreaks of "*dog flu*" and "*snout fever*" that are threatening to mutate and infect the human population. While his Science Party opponents claim to be on the brink of discovering an antidote for the epidemics, Kobayashi instead calls an emergency vote to quarantine all the city's dogs on Trash Island (which is exactly what it sounds like, complete with an abandoned amusement park), and outlaw any canine within the limits of Megasaki. As an act of "*self-sacrifice*", Kobayashi offers up Spots (Liev Schreiber) – the guardian pooch of his orphaned nephew Atari (Koyu Rankin) – to show potential voters just how committed he is to this drastic measure.

Cut to six months later and Trash Island is now essentially the puppy version of *All Monsters Attack's* Monster Island, where packs of wild pups roam free amongst the mountains of garbage, fighting one another for scraps (their barks translated so we know what the hell they're saying to one another, because no human speaks "*woof woof*", after all). This new family is comprised of Chief (Bryan Cranston) – a mangy stray who often slips into a noirish Bogie cadence when addressing his own potential Bacall, Nutmeg (Scarlett Johansson) – and a gaggle of formerly domesticated beasts (who look down on this tough dog's Nagasaki homelessness). There's the rather verbose Rex (Edward Norton), the

former baseball bar mascot Boss (Bill Murray), gossip monger Duke (Jeff Goldblum), and meek, cautious King (Bob Balaban). Together, Chief tells them they're a pack of "*indestructible alpha dogs*", but we definitely recognize them as another familiar troupe of Anderson eccentrics, all looking to define themselves in this crazy, messed up universe.

Along comes Atari, flying a tiny hijacked biplane in search of his forwent pooch, crash landing on Trash Island and becoming the fascination of these talking doggos. Their quixotic quest leads them across the entirety of the isle, where Atari (being the twelve-year-old boy that he is) stops to slide down the theme park peaks and marvel at an underground structure comprised of kaleidoscopic sake bottles. During this sojourn, Anderson pulls out nearly every visual trick from his rather deep bag, making us feel the fabric of this fantasy, packing every single frame with his usual knack for wondrous detail. *Fantastic Mr. Fox* cinematographer Tristan Oliver and *Grand Budapest Hotel* production designer Adam Stockhausen (along with animation architect Paul Harrod) are working in sync to bring this microcosmic universe to life, letting the distinct surface of it all wash over us in a euphoric haze of fanciful delight, without ever succumbing to the Japanese cutesiness of kawaii.

Perhaps most fascinating is the fact that what's happening on the mainland may actually be more engaging than the Trash Island hijinks. Exchange student Tracy Walker (Greta Gerwig) leads a Pro-Dog protest movement, while seeking out Professor Watanabe (Akira Ito) and his assistant (Yoko Ono) to confirm that they've indeed cemented the particulars of "*dog flu*" and "*snout fever*" cures. This ostensible B-Plot contains the real thematic meat of *Isle of Dogs*, as Anderson is slyly weaving in threads regarding political corruption, the suppression of information, and how those clampdowns lead to state-controlled propaganda broadcasts. There's even a full-blown assassination via poisoned sushi, just for good measure.



In fact, to label *Isle of Dogs* a “political picture” doesn’t seem too far out of line. For all the quirky laughs and overly expressive dog eyes – the designers/animators really outdo themselves in getting these stop motion canines to show emotion – there are serious messages being relayed in these 100 minutes. While our real world continues to crumble around us, that strife is mirrored even in Anderson’s most fantastical storytelling, as *Isle of Dogs* is hitting on the same societal barbarism that M. Gustave (Ralph Fiennes) was constantly complaining about in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Scoring it all is a procession of Japanese war drums and playful orchestration provided by Alexandre Desplat, who seems to perfectly understand this delicate balance between escapism and awareness. Meanwhile, The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band’s “I Won’t Hurt You” acts as a sort of Greek Chorus during Atari’s journey with the dogs, crooning a comforting mantra for these wandering animals to follow.

However, the main takeaway from *Isle of Dogs* is what a pure fête of Japanese art and culture Anderson has constructed on a series of tiny stages (which were built and filmed in both the UK and Berlin). Everyone from Seijun Suzuki to MechaGodzilla gets a gold star placement from the *Tenenbaums* auteur – wait until you see the robot dogs built to combat their flesh and blood counterparts – all while he retains the thumbprint his most fervent admirers will defend until their deaths. Though some of the usual Anderson daddy issues remain (as they probably always will), *Isle of Dogs* joins both *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* as another mature work from the writer/director, who continues to grow and flex his creative muscles in new and exciting ways. All in all, *Isle of Dogs* is a stunning achievement, growing upon the tremendous experiment of *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* to deliver one of Anderson’s most handsomely realized visions yet.



Moeko Fuii: “What ‘Isle of Dogs’ Gets Right About Japan” (New Yorker, 13 April 2018)

A week ago, I saw Wes Anderson’s “[Isle of Dogs](#),” or “Inu-ga-shima.” I saw it as someone who, upon hearing that name, is forcibly reminded of Oni-ga-shima, the isle of demons where Peach Boy, a hero of Japanese folklore, fights evil with his canine band of brothers. In the first grade, I was cast in a school production, in Tokyo, as one of the demons. The role required red face paint and Sharpie horns and growl-prancing, and I was as terrifying as a four-foot Japanese Caliban could be. This is all to say that I watched “Isle of Dogs” as a Japanese person—as someone who was born in Japan, who spent my childhood and adolescence there, and who looks and speaks and reads and eats like a native.

I saw the movie in New York. I arrived early. As I waited, I read critiques of the film, which is set in the fictional city of Megasaki, and which follows a group of dogs, and one or two humans, after the mayor banishes all canines to nearby Trash Island. The dogs speak English; the humans, for the most part, speak Japanese, which is often but not always translated. Reading the reviews, I found that there were some familiar gripes: the film Orientalized, it Othered, it had a white-savior narrative, it rendered Japanese people flat and mysterious and inscrutable, and it was part of a grand old Euro-American tradition of white men plundering Japanese aesthetics for their art. I put on my headphones and listened to a Slate interview in which a critic, Inkoo Kang, responded to the movie with a “first reaction: Yuck. Second reaction: Yawn.”

The movie began. The Japanese characters started speaking, without subtitles, and suddenly, in a Loews in Lincoln Square, surrounded by a sea of Americans inhaling corgi-sized tubs of popcorn, I was hearing voices from home. They were neither inscrutable nor flat. They were Japanese, in various

shades of age and talent and fame. I heard Mari Natsuki—better known Stateside as the voice of Yubaba, from “Spirited Away”—in the host mother who dresses down an overexcited white girl: “Be quiet, go to sleep, I don’t care about your newspaper, just go to sleep.” I strained to place a TV-news anchor’s voice until, yes: it was the lead singer of the teen-rock band Radwimps, who’d starred in a mixtape that my first boyfriend had given me, in a brown paper bag, in front of Shibuya Station, more than a decade ago.

Even when the voices weren’t familiar, they were distinct. Someone—if not Anderson, then perhaps the actor Kunichi Nomura, who co-wrote the film—cared enough to insure that the voices sounded pitch-perfect as types. A scientist, presenting her findings on snout flu, spoke with the bored, clipped tone of every ponytailed researcher on Japanese daytime TV. In a scene that must’ve seemed an incoherent buzz to non-Japanese viewers, a doctor interrupts another’s hushed importance during surgery with an equally serious “Gauze!”—a deadpan, bull’s-eye rendition of “Iryu,” the Japanese version of “ER.” No one else in the theatre got it, but I couldn’t contain my laughter.

As the film progressed, I picked up cues hidden from the rest of the audience. At one point, the dogs leapt on a trolley that read “Trash: For Compression and Crushing” in faint white kanji. Mayor Kobayashi’s propaganda poster—“For the Greater Good of Megasaki City”—was a playful riff on “For the Greater Good of Children,” a principle upheld in Japanese courts to protect kids against negligent parents. (That it was being used as a campaign slogan was, of course, ironic, given that Kobayashi was deporting his ward’s pet.) And then there were the gags: Atari, the ward in question, washes the dog Chief in a tub-sized can labelled “Hokusai Beer.” When the credits rolled, the staggering number of kanji characters—of Japanese people involved in making the film—lit the screen brightly for seconds and seconds.



As I walked out of the theatre, Anderson’s decision not to subtitle the Japanese speakers struck me as a carefully considered artistic choice. “Isle of Dogs” is profoundly interested in the humor and fallibility of translation. This is established early, by the title card: “The humans in this film speak only in their native tongue (occasionally translated by bilingual interpreter, foreign exchange student, and electronic device). The dogs’ barks are translated into English.” From the start, Anderson points to the various and suspect ways in which translation occurs. Official Interpreter Nelson, voiced by Frances McDormand, works for the government, but her reliability is thrown into doubt when she starts inserting her own comments—“Holy Moses!”, “Boy, what a night!”—while on the job. In one scene, she’s casually replaced by a little boy. The simul-talk devices, meanwhile, are shown to be operated by shadowy men in white starched shirts. This is the beating heart of the film: there is no such thing as “true” translation. Everything is interpreted. Translation is malleable and implicated, always, by systems of power.

This theme persists throughout the film, especially in the character of Tracy Walker, the foreign-exchange student who’s been deemed, in some reviews, as a white savior of sorts. Tracy has a hunch that the government is covering up a mass conspiracy. During a rally she cries, “Not fair!” and stamps up to Kobayashi, demanding that her voice be heard. Kobayashi blinks, then revokes her immigration visa, leaving her in tears. (Notably, the children who provide more than just bluster are Atari and the Japanese hacker from Tracy’s newspaper club, both of whom end up saving the day.) If Tracy is a

white savior, her role is immediately neutered. What *is* interesting about the scene is that she speaks to the crowd in English. Both Kobayashi and the crowd understand her words, but respond in Japanese. This was a revelation: in the world of Megasaki City, the Japanese can speak and understand English

but *choose* to speak in their native tongue. They demand fluency on their own terms. At a climactic moment, the movie rejects the notion of universal

legibility, placing the onus of interpretation solely upon the American audience.

This is a sly subversion, in which the Japanese evince an agency independent of foreign validation. Indeed, to say that the scene dehumanizes the Japanese is to assume the primacy of an English-speaking audience. Such logic replicates the very tyranny of language that “Isle of Dogs” attempts to erode. Anderson is a white, non-Japanese director, but had he not been interested in the power dynamics behind translation, and instead made a twee fever dream imitating Japanese aesthetics, “Isle of Dogs” would have looked and sounded a lot different. His commitment to showing the daily rhythms of a living, breathing Japanese people reveals itself not only in his cast of twenty-three Japanese actors but in his depictions of how exactly a Japanese TV-news anchor transitions to a new topic (“This is the next news”), what milk cartons for elementary schools look like (labelled “extra-thick”), or how a couple of scientists might celebrate—with a clink, “Yo—oh!,” and a clap. The film invites a kinship with a viewer who will find these banalities familiar, and lets these moments flow by, unnoticed, for those who do not.

This is not to assert the primacy of my own experience with the film. Whenever an Asian-American controversy flares up, whether in regard to whitewashing or appropriation, there’s usually a move, in the media, to ask those in the homeland what they thought—whether *they* were offended, say, by Scarlett Johansson playing a Japanese character. That move implies that being Japanese, and the corresponding right to take offense, are innately tied

to growing up there. That the Japanese person usually responds in the negative—of course we’re fine with Scarlett!—speaks only to the fact that Japan is a country with neither ethnic diversity nor a substantial critical race discourse. To be Asian-American, meanwhile, is to develop a brutal familiarity with seeing Asia, and Asian characters, distorted, passivized, and flattened by white hands.

But we might note, when considering “Isle of Dogs,” that the tradition of white men “appropriating” Japanese art was, in large part, aided and abetted by the Japanese. The history of Japonism—of the West’s obsession with Japanese aesthetics—can’t be unwoven from the fact that said obsession served as an efficient, effective distraction as Japanese troops invaded Manchuria, Taiwan, and the Korean Peninsula. Kabuki, haiku, woodblock prints by Hiroshige and Hokusai—the very forms that are supposedly arrogated by Anderson—were, in some respects, cultural ambassadors that ushered forth imperial expansion. And Japan, too, used language as an oppressing force; in Korea, the imperial government banned the study of Korean and enforced a Japanese-only policy.

Language is power. “Isle of Dogs” knows this. It shows the seams of translation, and demarcates a space that is accessible—and funny—only to Japanese viewers. One of the most potent shots in the film is of graffiti on gray cement. A large black scrawl asks, “*Douyatte bokura wo korosu tsumori?*” How on earth do you plan on killing us? For most viewers, it’s a mark on the wall. For Japanese ones, it’s a battle cry.

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The puppets were often only six inches from the camera:



