

Riley Utley
Feature 2, Final Draft
WC: 1,333

Courier is the font used in typewriters. It's classic, reliable and organized, but sometimes unpredictable. Writing a story about Erica Dorn, a graphic designer who has been the lead designer on Wes Anderson's last two films, it felt appropriate to ask what font defined her. Lucile Gauvain, a graphic designer who worked with Dorn on *The French Dispatch* and one of Dorn's good friends, said Courier best defined Dorn.

"It's organized, it's always the same, but sometimes you have a little less ink or you press and the letter goes up and I think that's what Erica is. Really organized with a bit of unexpected magic," Gauvain said.

When I hopped on Zoom to chat with Dorn, it was clear what Gauvain said was true. She was sitting on her couch, a bit slouched, clearly comfortable, in her little London apartment. Behind her a monochrome pink poster with neon green text for the "Louisiana Illumination" exhibition that she went to with her friends in Copenhagen hung on her wall. As Dorn slowly turned her Zoom camera around her room to give me a tour of her living room, she talked about her love for pre-owned furniture, like her retro dining room table. Everything is carefully curated and loaded with meaning, organized with an item here and there that stuck out, like her "Extra Soft" mug on her coffee table.

What you won't catch on Dorn's walls is her own work. She'd rather fill her walls with photos, art and prints made by her friends.

"I'm such a homebody," Dorn said. "I like to curate the space around me to feel comfortable. I think it's all kind of a reaction from coming home from a very hectic and stressful environment."

Dorn adores the spontaneity and randomness that comes with being a graphic designer on films, however, she strives to maintain a work-life balance. At the age of 36, she's not searching for anything and though she's unsure of what's next she's excited about it. When speaking with her, she spoke eloquently and in detail about her job, however, made it clear that her friends, family and self-care take priority for her.

One way she finds this balance is through cooking. Not only does it help her find peace, it brings her closer to her friends. Dumplings are one of her favorite meals to make specifically because she can rope all her friends into helping. "They look a bit wonky but everyone is so proud of themselves," Dorn said. She also loves sushi nights. She said she gets up early in the morning to

go to the market to get fish and then everyone gets together to make the meal. A meal that always turns into a party.

This love of cooking for others also helps her wind down from work. When Gauvain lived with Dorn she said after a long day of work, Dorn would insist on making dinner for the two of them.

“All I remember is that these late nights we’d finish, we’d be exhausted, it would be 9 or 10 p.m. and she would say to wait on the couch and she would make such a good dinner for us,” Gauvain said. “Every time it was amazing. She takes so much pleasure to do it for someone. You feel it in the food.”

When Dorn is working, she finds inspiration in research. Dorn bases her work for Anderson’s films on “buckets of research.” This research creates a complex puzzle of graphics that create an integral part of the films.

“Inspiration is a funny word because I don’t pretend that it’s a really creative job actually,” Dorn said. “You never really invent things. You’re always just piecing together references from real details of real things and trying to combine them in a way that works. That’s interesting. It’s those details that make something feel authentic. I never just make up something from just a creative brain. It’s more forgery than anything in this job.”

She went to university for illustration within a graphic design concentration in the London College of Communication which is part of the University of the Arts. While there she learned how important experimentation and research are in graphic design. After graduating she went on to work at a few different agencies. However, she felt stagnant where she was and decided to go into freelance. Not long after that she started designing for film.

“It happened at a time where I was a bit lost with what I was doing,” Dorn said. “...I found the work quite repetitive. It wasn’t helping me develop as a graphic designer, so I left.”

Anderson was looking for a graphic designer with a Japanese background to join the staff on his 2018 film *Isle of Dogs*. Dorn grew up in Japan — her mother is Japanese and her father is French. She went in for a two-week trial and then had to wait a month to hear if she got the gig.

Dorn worked on *Isle of Dogs* for two years. Dorn loved focusing on one big project and enjoyed the creativity involved with all the different projects her department took on. She explained that one day she would be designing books for children in a library, another day she would be designing a cityscape and the next day she would be working on bottles of Sake and menus for a noodle bar.

“I remember that it was challenging, but I also remember enjoying it,” Dorn said.

After she finished work on *Isle of Dogs*, Anderson hired her again to be the lead designer on his live action film *The French Dispatch*.

“I find it difficult to do interviews about *The French Dispatch* because to be honest there were days where it was really tough. There were really, really long days, late nights, early mornings.”

Gauvain was hired to work in France with Dorn for this film. She looked up to Dorn and loved her work on *Isle of Dogs*. She was impressed and nervous to meet someone she looked up to. Dorn hadn't eaten yet the first time they met and she was frazzled. Gauvain found it funny because they were both so stressed to be there.

“It was my first live-action feature film so I was out of my mind with imposter syndrome and stress,” Dorn said.

The workload for *The French Dispatch* was a lot given the team had six months to accomplish the same amount of work as on *Isle of Dogs*, which was a two year process. Gauvain said it was an intense experience and sometimes the team would work until 2 a.m. because they had so much to prepare for the next day. She said that though the work was a lot, Dorn led the designers magnificently. She knows what Anderson wants and how to execute it while supporting her team and helping them grow.

“She's really calm and she leaves space for everyone to feel like they belong to the team and to the project,” Gauvain said.

The graphic design team on Anderson's movies are significantly larger than on a typical film. On *The French Dispatch* Dorn led a team of six designers and illustrators, normally there is one or two designers on a film. Anderson fills his films with such deep aesthetic detail and original items that the backgrounds of his films are filled to the brim with original graphic design. She had to be organized and careful with all her work to get the final intricate product that Anderson is known for in his films.

“As a person she's really resilient, she never lets things go, she is very courageous. When she does something, she's willing to do anything and she knows she can,” Gauvain said. “She has the strength inside her, that was the first lesson I learned from her. We are capable of doing anything we want to do and she showed that in so many ways to me.”

Sources:

Erica Dorn

Lead graphic designer on *The French Dispatch*

erica.c.dorn@gmail.com

Lucile Gauvain

Graphic designer on *The French Dispatch*, close friend of Erica Dorn

lucileg@live.fr

Secondary Sources

<https://www.motionpictures.org/2018/04/graphic-designer-erica-dorn-sweats-the-details-for-wes-andersons-isle-of-dogs/>

<https://ericadorn.co.uk/>

<https://www.itstnicethat.com/articles/nicer-tuesdays-may-2018-erica-dorn-130618>

<https://www.semipermanent.com/stories/isle-of-dogs>

<https://lwlies.com/articles/isle-of-dogs-wes-anderson-graphic-design/>

<https://essentialjournal.co.uk/wes-anderson-words-peers/>

<https://monocle.com/radio/shows/monocle-on-culture/334/>