

The French Dispatch: Filmmaker's Wes Anderson's latest confection

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Written and directed by Wes Anderson; from a story by Anderson, Roman Coppola, Hugo Guinness and Jacob Schwartzman

The French Dispatch of the Liberty, Kansas Evening Sun (commonly known as *The French Dispatch*) is a comedy-fantasy-satire from American filmmaker Wes Anderson. Scripted by Anderson, from a story by the director, Roman Coppola, Hugo Guinness and Jason Schwartzman, the movie pays tribute to an imaginary publication put out by American expatriates in France, loosely inspired by the *New Yorker* magazine or portions of it.

In his distinctive and imaginative manner, Anderson's film takes a look, among other things, at modern art and its marketing, police and crime, and the 1968 French general strike. "Distinctive and imaginative," but how much more than that? The movie too often threatens to succumb, or actually does succumb, under the weight of its own cleverness. The latter tends to divert attention from the lack of substance.

As a rule, there is something affecting and even liberating about Anderson's visually, dramatically energetic works, which include, among others, *Rushmore* (1998), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). One of his best, *Isle of Dogs* (2018), as we wrote, "is an unsettling film, pointedly critical of political demagogues and the treatment of society's outcasts, the marginalized, immigrants, refugees."

The new movie opens with the longtime editor of *The French Dispatch*, Arthur Howitzer Jr. (Bill Murray) dying suddenly of a heart attack. In his youth, Howitzer had convinced his father (proprietor of the *Liberty* [Kansas] *Evening Sun*) to finance a series of travelogue columns from France to be published in the Sunday "Picnic" section of the Kansas newspaper.

A voiceover—Anjelica Huston provides the overall narration—explains that the *Dispatch* became "a factual weekly report on the subjects of world politics, the arts (high and low), fashion, fancy cuisine/fine drink, and diverse stories of human-interest set in faraway *quartiers*. He [Howitzer] brought the world to Kansas." Fixed above the matter-of-fact, Middle American editor's office door is the motto "No Crying."

The fictional periodical, published from 1925 (the year the actual *New Yorker* was launched by editor Harold Ross and others) to 1975, will put out one last edition, in which three articles from past editions will be featured.

In a prologue, "The Cycling Reporter" by Herbsaint Sazerac (Owen Wilson), Sazerac pedals around the *Dispatch*'s location, the French town of Ennui-sur-Blasé ("Boredom on the Blasé River"). He informs us that Ennui has an average rainfall of 750 mm and an average snowfall of "190,000 flakes." He goes on, "After receiving the Host,

marauding choirboys (half-drunk on the Blood of Christ) stalk unwary pensioners and seek havoc." In addition, "8.25 bodies are pulled from the Blasé river each week (a figure which remains consistent despite advances in health and hygiene)."

The first story, "**The Concrete Masterpiece**," comes from the pen of **J.K.L. Berensen** (wonderfully portrayed by Tilda Swinton). Berensen is pompously lecturing on the renowned painter of the French Splatter-school Action-group, Moses Rosenthaler (Benicio del Toro), a homicidal lunatic incarcerated in the Ennui Prison/Asylum. She explains that the school is "a dynamic, talented, lusty, slovenly, alcoholic, violent pack of creative savages. They inspired and, often, personally attacked each other for two decades and more."

Rosenthaler's muse is the prison guard, and later his strong-willed manager, Simone (Léa Seydoux), who "was Olympian in her ability to hold extremely challenging positions [nude model poses] for extended periods of time." Fellow convict and art dealer Julien Cadazio (Adrien Brody) offers to represent the prisoner/artist. He thinks the decidedly nonrepresentational works will attract interest.

Berensen's former employer is a patron of the avant-garde, Upshur "Maw" Clampette (Lois Smith), a wealthy art collector from Liberty. Upon observing Rosenthaler's abstract-chaotic prison frescoes, Clampette proclaims that "he mines the same vein as Piperno Pierluigi when he illuminated the Christ before God's heavenly altar in 1565!" In the aftermath of a prison riot, "72 prisoners and six members of the French Splatter-school lay dead or mortally wounded."

"**Revisions to a Manifesto**" by Lucinda Krementz (Frances McDormand), is a report on student protests in Ennui. In a voiceover, Krementz-McDormand explains that "the protest (which ended in a stalemate) gave the superficial appearance of a vanity exercise for the pimple-cream and wet-dream contingent; but, in fact, the sexes were equally represented, and all participants emphasized the basis of their frustration: a desire (more: a biological need) for freedom." Meanwhile, the local news reports that "fascist law students, loitering at the university gates with intent to harass left-wing demonstrators (their natural enemies), instead, brawl in their defense when police forces move to break up the demonstration."

The leader of the student protest is the cigarillo-smoking Zeffirelli B. (Timothée Chalamet). Krementz, a reputed wordsmith, helps him draft the protest's manifesto. Unaccountably, a game of chess ensues between the student leader and the riot-police commander. "City services at a halt, one week and counting. Public transportation: suspended. Piles of garbage: uncollected. Schools on strike. No mail, no milk," reports Krementz. Claiming "journalistic neutrality," she asserts that the students "obliterated a thousand years of republican authority in less than a fortnight."

Of Mitch-mitch (Mohamed Belhadjine), a protester and army deserter, another student revolutionary, Juliette (Lyna Khoudri), asks: “Where were his principles when he agreed to fight on behalf of an imperialist army in an unjust war of totalitarian aggression?” Zeffirelli explains that “Mitch-mitch was arrested for Desertion and Desecration, and the Sans Blague [café] became headquarters for the Movement of Young Idealists for the Revolutionary Overthrow of Reactionary Neo-liberal Society.”

The last story is “**The Private Dining Room of the Police Commissioner**” by Roebuck Wright (movingly portrayed by Jeffrey Wright), who was “the uncontested crackerjack of grammatical expertise.” The gay, black writer corrects an interviewer and television host (Liev Schreiber): he has a “typographic” memory, not a “photographic” one. “I recollect the written word with considerable accuracy and detail—but in other spheres my powers of retention are distinctly impressionistic. I am known to my intimates as a most forgetful man.”

Now writing about “police cooking,” of all things, Roebuck explains that it “began with the stake-out picnic and paddy-wagon snack.” His subject matter at *The French Dispatch* has included the “American Negro, the French intellectual, the Southern romantic; scripture, mythology, folklore; true crime, false crime; the ghost story, the picaresque, the *bildungsroman*.” Wright thereupon recounts the story of attending a private dinner with the Commissaire of the Ennui police force (Mathieu Amalric), prepared by legendary police “officer-slash-chef,” Lt. Nescaffier (Stephen Park).

The Commissaire’s son is soon kidnapped by the Chauffeur (Edward Norton). In this segment, Willem Dafoe plays Albert the Abacus, a prisoner and underworld accountant, while Saoirse Ronan has a cameo as Principal Showgirl, a member of the kidnapping gang.

In a “Postscript,” the saddened *Dispatch* staff assembles in the presence of their former chief’s corpse, which can’t be removed because “There’s a strike at the morgue.”

All in all, Anderson’s *The French Dispatch* is realized with a dazzling but breezy sensuousness. The carefully constructed frames, each with a host of details, including innumerable visual and verbal pranks (the signage leads a life of its own!), are accented and punctuated by rapid-fire dialogue.

The score by Alexandre Desplat embellishes the overall artifice, while costume designer Milena Canonero and cinematographer Robert Yeoman add their skillful touches.

The plethora of actors, besides those mentioned above, includes Elisabeth Moss, Jason Schwartzman, Henry Winkler, Griffin Dunne, Bob Balaban, Christoph Waltz, Cécile de France and many others. Performers are clearly attracted to Anderson’s unusual creativity and artistry.

Anderson has created something of a utopia with his imaginary magazine, perhaps along the lines, for example, of how he would like to see a film studio operated. When confronted with time constraints and the need to “kill” an article, the editor barks, “Shrink the masthead, cut some ads, and tell the foreman to buy more paper. I’m not killing anybody.” Anderson told an interviewer that his film was “more a portrait of this man, of this journalist who fights to write what he wants to write.”

Every film is a polemic. Whether he cares to admit it publicly or not, by his manner of doing things, Anderson is arguing against the vulgarity, stupidity, illiteracy and backwardness of the present cinema climate. Obviously, the *New Yorker* itself is meant as a cultural Valhalla, as the emblem of decency and civilized writing and

behavior.

The filmmaker is also expressing his high opinion of French sophistication and *savoir faire*. He explained to an interviewer that the new film is a tribute to what he loved in French films: “France, more or less, is where the cinema starts. Other than America, the country whose movies have meant the most to me is France. There are so many directors and so many stars and so many styles of French cinema.”

The concerns are literate and sometimes intriguing but limited. The present state of filmmaking is largely toxic but holding up the example of the liberal-minded *New Yorker* of another era, with Ross, William Shawn, A. J. Liebling, James Thurber, Mavis Gallant, Janet Flanner and the rest, will not prove especially fruitful. By having his publication disappear in 1975, Anderson tacitly acknowledges that the current *New Yorker* is a “shadow of its former self.” The equivalent intellectual milieu has moved sharply to the right.

The notion too that France exists in a more sophisticated and advanced cultural-political realm from the US is simply wrongheaded. The problems are more or less the same everywhere. When Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Pound, Elliott, Stein and others made their way to Europe in the 1910s and ‘20s, it was a somewhat justifiable or at least understandable reaction to the lingering provincialism and prudery of American life. That is a bygone era.

And when Anderson turns to big issues, what does he have to say about them? Presumably, in the first section he is taking certain deserved shots at the world of modern art. As for the “police cooking” episode, it is anyone’s guess. Is there some significance to a gay, black writer sitting down with the police chief?

The section on the French strike movement is the weakest. It is inexcusably flippant. Anderson can make legitimate points perhaps at the expense of the dilettantism and unseriousness of some of the middle class students in 1968, but the walkout and protests eventually reached into the working class in the millions and threatened the de Gaulle regime and French capitalism itself. Speaking of the events, Anderson told an interviewer, “By the end, no one can even say what the protests are about anymore.” He should speak for himself. By reducing the monumental episode to facetious adolescent pranks, Anderson is making a concession to retrograde trends.

For all its technical and visual fireworks, *The French Dispatch* remains largely an exercise in spinning one’s wheels. Along with everything else, the “knowing,” private-joke quality of the film is not exactly the way to the hearts and minds of great numbers of people.

Anderson is one of today’s most gifted filmmakers. But in *The French Dispatch*, for whatever reason, he seems oriented in the wrong direction.



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