

THE FRONT ROW

# “THE FRENCH DISPATCH,” REVIEWED: WES ANDERSON’S MOST FREEWHEELING FILM

*In this comedic fantasy, based on the history of The New Yorker, Anderson reaches new dimensions of decorative ingenuity and social observation.*

By Richard Brody  
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Even the static elements of “*The French Dispatch*”—including tableaux vivants that freeze scenes of turmoil into contemplative wonders—are set awash. Photograph courtesy Searchlight Pictures



“The French Dispatch” should finally dispel a common misgiving about the movies of Wes Anderson—namely, that there is something enervated, static, or precious about the extremes of the decorative artifice of which his comedy is made. “The French Dispatch” is perhaps Anderson’s best film to date. It is certainly his most accomplished. And, for all its whimsical humor, it is an action film, a great one, although Anderson’s way of displaying action is unlike that of any other filmmaker. His movies often rest upon an apparent paradox between the refinement of his methods and the violence of his subject matter. In “The French Dispatch,” it is all the more central, given his literary focus: the title is also the name of a fictitious magazine that’s explicitly modeled on *The New Yorker* and some of its classic journalistic stars. Anderson sends writers out in search of stories, and what they find turns out to be a world of trouble, a world in which aesthetics and power are inseparable, with all the moral complications and ambivalences that this intersection entails.

Anderson’s fictional publication operates between 1925, the year of its founding by Arthur Howitzer, Jr. (Bill Murray), and 1975, the year of Howitzer’s death and (by his testamentary decree) the magazine’s as well. Unlike *The New Yorker*, *The French Dispatch* is based in France, in the made-up town of Ennui-sur-Blasé, where young Howitzer decided to prolong a vacation more or less forever by transforming the Sunday supplement of the *Liberty*, Kansas *Evening Sun*—a newspaper owned by his father—into a travelogue that soon morphed into a literary sensation. The movie takes the form of the magazine’s final issue, which features Howitzer’s obituary; a brief travelogue by a writer named Hersaint Sazerac (Owen Wilson), which shows, in a thumbnail sketch, how the publication’s tone and substance has evolved; and three long feature articles. The features, each running about a half hour, catch the grand preoccupations and varied subjects of the magazine’s writers, and the combination of style and substance that marks their literary work—and Anderson’s cinema.

“The French Dispatch” contains an overwhelming and sumptuous profusion of details. This is true of its décor and costumes, its variety of narrative forms and techniques (live action, animation, split screens, flashbacks, and leaps ahead, among many others), its playful breaking of the dramatic frame with reflexive gestures and conspicuous stagecraft, its aphoristic and whiz-bang dialogue, and the range of its performances, which veer in a heartbeat from the outlandishly facetious to the painfully candid. Far from being an inert candy box or display case, the movie bursts and leaps with a sense of immediacy and impulsivity; the script (which Anderson co-wrote with Roman Coppola, Hugo Guinness, and Jason Schwartzman) bubbles over with the sense of joy found in discovery and invention. Even its static elements are set awash—actions and dialogue performed straight into the camera, scenes of people sitting at tables joined with rapid and rhythmically off-kilter editing, tableaux vivants that freeze scenes of turmoil into contemplative wonders—and take flight by way of a briskly moving camera.

For all its meticulous preparation, the movie swings, spontaneous, unhinged, and it’s precisely this sensory and intellectual overload that gives rise to the misperception that it is static, fussy, tight. On first viewing, audience members run the risk of having their perceptual circuits shorted. The effort even to make sense of what’s going on—to parse the action into its constituent elements, to assemble its narratives, its moods, and its ideas—leads to inevitable oversimplifications, the reduction of roiling cinematic energy into mere mental snapshots. In my mind, it’s necessary to see “The French Dispatch” twice in order to see it fully even once, which I mean as a high artistic compliment. I felt the same way about “[Fantastic Mr. Fox](#),” in part because of the microcosmic details that each frame of the film exuded, and “The French Dispatch” is by far the richer movie. Anderson’s convergence of multiple narrative frames into a single scene of action, his leaping about in time and space to provide different perspectives, and his nested and frame-breaking modes of storytelling are all so daringly complex that, by comparison, they make Alain Resnais seem like Sidney Lumet.

The simplest of the film’s stories is Sazerac’s introductory sketch of Ennui, in which the roving reporter—speaking his story into the camera while zipping through the town on his bike—dispels the idea of an enticing and picturesque travelogue by considering the town’s pickpockets, sex workers, predatory choirboys, its poor and unfulfilled. His inquisitively unstinting view of the town (involving bodies fished from the river Blasé) also involves his own kinds of trouble, whether it’s falling into a manhole or being pulled off his bike by young miscreants—a pair of gags that Anderson realizes with exquisite comedic minimalism and lead to Sazerac repairing his bike while in story conference with Howitzer.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

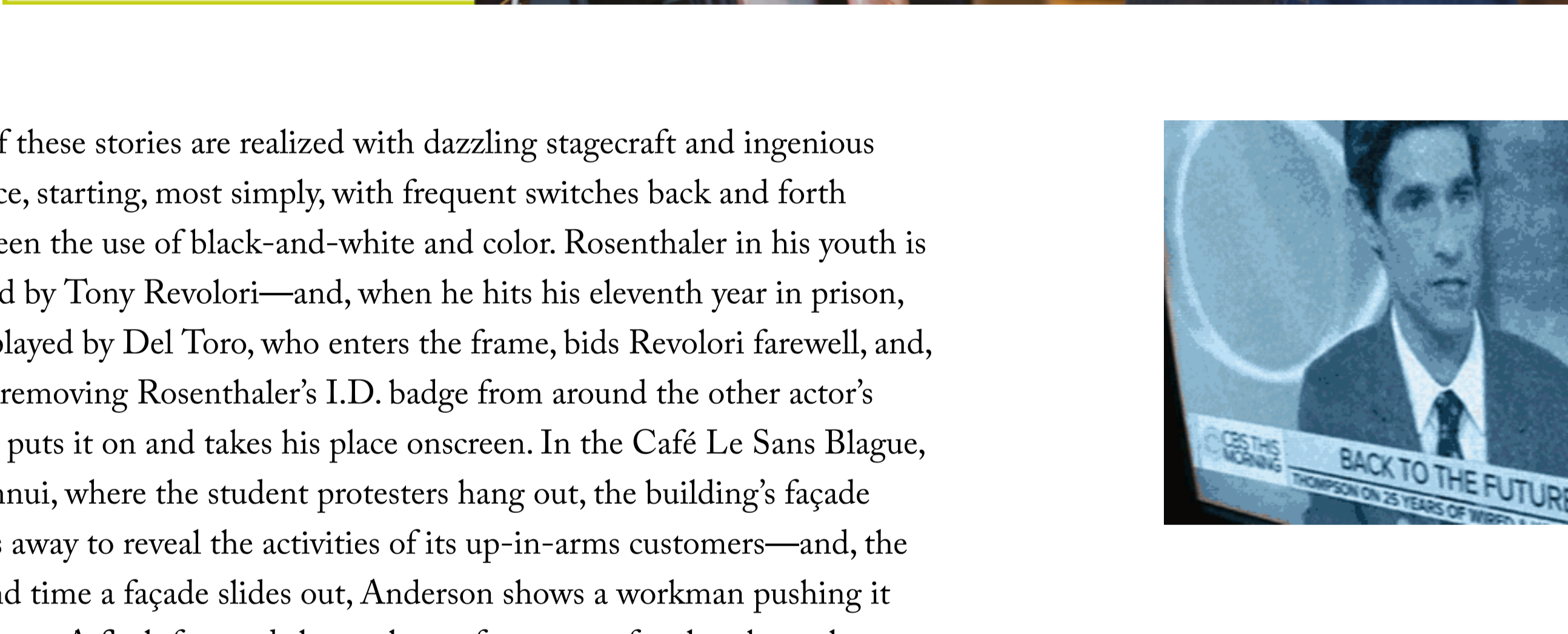
[The Chemo Talk](#)



The art critic and historian J. K. L. Berensen (Tilda Swinton) tells the first feature story, of Moses Rosenthaler (Benicio Del Toro), an artist and a psychopath who becomes world-famous while incarcerated for murder in a high-security prison in Ennui. Rosenthaler owes his career to a prison guard named Simone (Léa Seydoux), who is an unconventional muse: she poses for him and is his lover but is also his virtual boss and actual commander. Upon getting an inkling of his great talent—and feeling the spark of connection between them—she takes him and his career firmly and sternly in hand, for her own long-term purposes. (The relationship is intensely erotic, on terms that Simone strictly dictates.) Rosenthaler also owes his acclaim to an art dealer named Julien Cadazio (Adrien Brody), a fellow-inmate, convicted of tax fraud, who recruits Rosenthaler for his gallery and then manages to bring a major collector—Upshur (Maw) Clamchette (Lois Smith), from Liberty, Kansas, and her entourage (including Berensen, who once worked for her as a consultant)—to the prison for a show that turns mortally chaotic.

Next, the political correspondent Lucinda Kremetz (Frances McDormand) reports on a student uprising in Ennui, undated but clearly modeled on the events in Paris in May, 1968. The leader of the students, Zeffirelli B. (Timothée Chalamet), is at the forefront of a demand that young men be allowed into women’s dormitories. (Something of the sort actually happened as a crucial prelude to the May events.) Kremetz, who dines with Zeffirelli’s parents, finds him in the bathtub writing a manifesto while the police are breaking up demonstrations with tear gas. She helps with his manifesto and they become lovers, but their relationship sparks conflict between the blithe, rock-music-loving Zeffirelli and another student leader, Juliette (Lyna Khoudiri), an intensely earnest hard-core ideologue. (There’s a key debate over the concept of journalistic objectivity that reveals Kremetz’s fluid, participatory sense of journalism.) A standoff with the police that’s being resolved by a chess game between Zeffirelli and the commissioner devolves into a police riot. Ultimately, the students’ cause, as Kremetz reports it, both “obliterated a thousand years of republican authority in less than a fortnight” and gave rise to millions of posters and T-shirts depicting the rebels’ “likeness.”

The last feature, by Roebuck Wright (Jeffrey Wright), is the most hyperbolically artificial of the three, and also the most sharply poignant. Wright is a Black homosexual American author who chose exile in Ennui. He became a food writer, and his report here is centered on Lieutenant Nescaffer (Steve Park), the greatest chef of police cuisine, an idiosyncratic specialty that Wright parses in detail and that plants him at the table of the Commissaire (Mathieu Amalric). The meal is meant to be a delight but turns into a violent nightmare when, days after a horrific gang war, the Commissaire’s young son, Gigi (Winsen Ait Hellal), is kidnapped and the entire department is mobilized to locate and rescue the boy. Wright tells his story from the stage of a TV talk show (the host is played by Liev Schreiber, with a brilliant deadpan reserve), where he proves his “typographic memory” by reciting his article verbatim. It then gets dramatized onscreen, with Wright talking to the camera as the events unfold. Yet the story that Wright tells—about crimes committed by gangsters, about crimes of horrific brutality committed by police officers, about daring rescues at great personal sacrifice—is also a personal one, involving repressions and persecutions endured by homosexuals (on the charge, as he puts it, that they “love the wrong way”), and one of the struggle of exile. It becomes all the more personal when he’s asked by the talk-show host to explain his decision to write about food, and when he discusses with Nescaffer (who’s an immigrant of Asian ethnicity) the political uneasiness of their lives in exile.

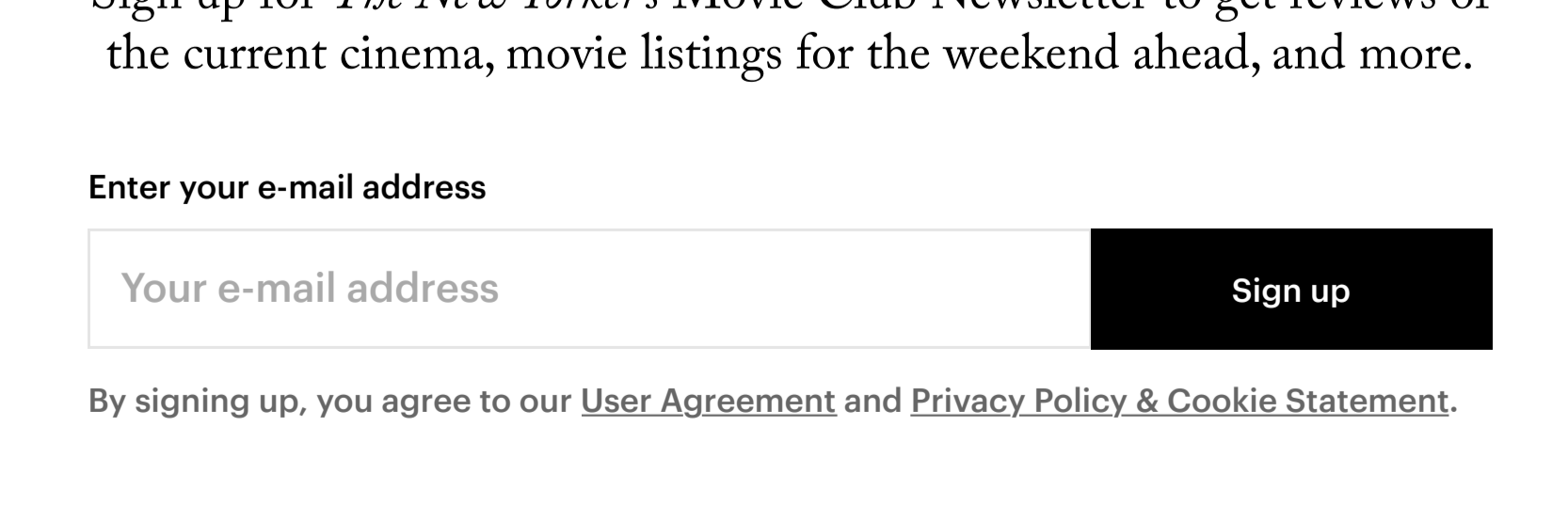


All of these stories are realized with dazzling stagecraft and ingenious artifice, starting, most simply, with frequent switches back and forth between the use of black-and-white and color. Rosenthaler in his youth is played by Tony Revolori—and, when he hits his eleventh year in prison, he’s played by Del Toro, who enters the frame, bids Revolori farewell, and, after removing Rosenthaler’s I.D. badge from around the other actor’s neck, puts it on and takes his place onscreen. In the Café Le Sans Blague, in Ennui, where the student protesters hang out, the building’s façade slides away to reveal the activities of its up-in-arms customers—and, the second time a façade slides out, Anderson shows a workman pushing it offscreen. A flash forward shows the performance of a play about the military service of Zeffirelli’s deserter friend Mitch-Mitch (Mohamed Belhadjine)—a staging that’s both droll and physically impossible. What’s more, Anderson adds effervescent cinephilic winks to the action, high and low: Juliette and Zeffirelli seemingly ride off together into a French sunset on her scooter, in images of an ethereal rhapsodic, abstracted isolation from the setting, reminiscent of those from Leos Carax’s “*Mauvais Sang*.” Howitzer’s first *French Dispatch* office is on the fifth floor of a building matching one from Jacques Tati’s “*Mon Oncle*.” The police hunt for Gigi leads to a colossal chase scene rendered in a starkly vivid animation style reminiscent of the giddily threadbare “*Dick Tracy Show*” cartoons.

Anderson approaches serious matters not by displaying the authentic pain that they entail but, rather, by letting it ricochet off other, related subjects—he arouses emotion more than he displays it, and, in the process, associates ideas to the feelings. His sense of extreme artifice allows him to bring together, into salient relationship, subjects that belong together, whether or not they’re often found together in real life as clearly and blatantly as in his films. His views of society’s turbulence, individuals’ violence, and institutions’ cruelty are inseparable from the sense of style that heroic resistors bring to it—and that group includes both the people who confront crushing power and those who report on it. (They’re sometimes the same people.) “The French Dispatch” is filled with the practical aesthetics of clothing, architecture, furniture, food, design, and discourse; it’s also filled with beautiful deeds and sublime gestures, steadfast love and physical courage, amid hostile conditions. There’s a long-familiar tradition in film of refinement meshing with evil, as with the epicurean sadism of movie Nazis and arch-criminals. It’s a demagogic trope that comforts viewers who presume that, conversely, their ordinary tastes must be a sign of their ordinary decency, too. But Anderson understands that the refinement of style can be a way of outwardly facing down the power of the world with one’s inner personal imperatives. Like such artists as Ernest Hemingway and Howard Hawks, he brings together the beauty of heroism and the heroism of beauty. In a sublime gesture of his own, he celebrates not only unsmug heroes and those who tell their stories but also those who, like Howitzer and his staff of grammarians and illustrators, provide an accompaniment as stylish and as substantial as the adventures and inventions themselves.

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*Richard Brody began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He writes about movies in his blog, [The Front Row](#). He is the author of [Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard](#).*

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