



FILM: **ASTEROID CITY**

FDG RATING: 2.5 ☹️ 😊 ○ ○ ○ ○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Wes Anderson: *director, writer*
Jason Schwartzman: *actor, Augie Steenbeck*
Scarlett Johansson: *actress, Midge Campbell*

DATE: June 23, 2024

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **ASTEROID CITY**

We have several faithful Wes Anderson fans in our film discussion group but even they couldn't rally behind his 2023 science fiction-comedy-drama-romance movie *Asteroid City*. As always, visual eye candy colorization was superbly delicious. The sets, retro feel, quirky characters, and stellar ensemble cast starring Jason Schwartzman as Augie Steenbeck, Scarlett Johansson as Midge Campbell and other favorites including Tom Hanks, Jeffrey Wright, Tilda Swinton, Bryan Cranston, Edward Norton, Adrien Brody, Liev Schreiber, Steve Carell, Matt Dillon, Willem Dafoe, Margot Robbie, and Jeff Goldblum to name a few, (everyone wants to be in a Wes Anderson movie) promised a magically entertaining experience. But a convoluted story left most discussion participants disappointed.

In a retro-futuristic version of the 1950s, a television host introduces a documentary about the creation and production of *Asteroid City*, a play by the famed playwright Conrad EARP. The play's events are depicted in widescreen and stylized color, while the television special is seen in a smaller screen ratio in black-and-white. At times, characters open a door in the color version and pass into a black and white scene. So it's a film about a TV show about a documentary film about a play about *Asteroid City*. Sounds a bit confusing. A narrator (Bryan Cranston) tells the story of the playwright, Conrad EARP (played by Edward Norton).

Asteroid City is a fictional American desert town where circa 1955, Junior Stargazers and Space Cadets, from across the country assemble for the annual Asteroid Day celebration. Teens fixated on astronomy are anxious to see who will win awards for their inventions. While gathered around the infamous crater, a UFO suddenly appears above them; an alien emerges and steals the remnant of the meteorite that created the crater. Attendees are shocked and deal with the loss in different ways. But the main focus is on a grieving father, Augie, (he is there with his techie son and 3 daughters) and the way he and Midge, (two lonely individuals), come together in the unlikeliest of places.

A published film critic liked the way the dual plots were cleverly woven together with the whole thing broken up into Acts and Scenes, segmented with title cards. Note Jason Schwartzman plays not just Augie Steenbeck, but also actor Jones Hall; Scarlett Johansson, plays Mercedes Ford the actress (in black and white) who plays Midge Campbell (in color) who also happens to be a movie star.

The film's structure is frames: stories held within frames—window frames, camera frames, the frames that hold a stage together, the frames of a scene. One film reviewer explained the point of *Asteroid City* is however much we try to control our stories, they have a life of their own. Towards the end, one character asks, "but what does it all mean?" The reply was, "what does it matter, just keep telling the story."

Some discussion participants couldn't find a speck of life in the film and stopped watching it. Others liked the nostalgia, the purposely inexpressive acting, the sets, colors, the unexpected things characters said, the amusing parody of the 50s. Negative comments criticized the lack of cohesiveness; switching back and forth was distracting. One discussion participant summed up a major theme: We are living in a reality constructed for us. Other themes deal with loss, death, grief.

Votes for *Asteroid City* cratered in a 2.5 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!
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