

Eddington: Lost in the desert

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Writer-director Ari Aster's new film *Eddington* is a political drama set in the fictional town of Eddington, New Mexico during the tumultuous events of May 2020. It follows a right-wing sheriff's crusade against a self-serving liberal mayor and the town's subsequent descent into chaos.

2020 was a year of explosive social, economic and political turmoil. It encompassed the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginnings of the ruling elite's criminal policy of malign neglect and mass infection, the multi-trillion dollar Wall Street bailout, the global protest movement against police violence in response to the murder of George Floyd and the Trump-Republican conspiracy to overturn the 2020 US presidential election and establish a presidential dictatorship, culminating in the fascist coup of January 6, 2021.

A filmmaker seeking to dramatize the explosive political climate would be faced with significant artistic challenges, but also major opportunities. A serious examination of 2020's interconnected crises would present the chance to cut through many falsehoods and set out the truth as honestly as possible. But, surely, to dramatize the complex situation in the US at the time meaningfully would involve *some attempt* to grasp the overall social dynamics at work—or to offer an artist's intuitive feeling for them.

Unfortunately, *Eddington* has no such approach. It is chiefly characterized by confusion, cynicism and a misanthropic attitude toward society at large.

The film follows Joe Cross (Joaquin Phoenix), the sheriff of the small town of Eddington, New Mexico (loosely based on Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, where much of the film was shot). Cross is an outspoken opponent of face masks, social distancing and other measures implemented to mitigate the spread of COVID.

Cross comes into conflict with Mayor Ted Garcia (Pedro Pascal), a self-promoting liberal who routinely lectures others about COVID restrictions while flouting them himself. Garcia is working to drum up support for the construction of a massive data center by tech company "Solidgoldmagikarp." Despite serious environmental and social impact concerns, Garcia presses forward with his "tech positive" campaign, receiving support from the

company's representative in town.

Cross struggles to connect with his wife, Louise (Emma Stone), who suffers from chronic mental and physical maladies, possibly related to traumatic experiences early in life.

An altercation over masking convinces Cross to run for mayor on a right-wing, anti-mask platform. With the help of officers Guy (Luke Grimes) and Michael (Michael Cooke), Cross posts anti-mask political signs and drives around town giving speeches in opposition to the data center project.

Meanwhile, the police murder of George Floyd touches off global protests that spread to Eddington. Garcia's teenage son Eric (Matt Gomez Hidaka), as conceited as his father, participates in the protests largely to project a superficial "socially conscious" image. His friend Brian (Cameron Mann) is politically confused, but joins the protests in the hope of getting closer to Sarah (Amélie Hoeferle), a young activist obsessed with racial identity politics. Sarah insists, "Right now, we're playing at maybe being, like, white critical. Maybe we're white traitors. But the goal is to be white abolitionists."

Brian initially receives a hostile response for stating that "Not all white kids are all that privileged. There's different sorts of privilege, like race and class." He quickly learns to parrot the racialist political line, declaring, absurdly, "I'm just another privileged white kid, and my job is to sit down and listen, which is what I plan to do after making this speech, which I have no right to make."

Louise begins meeting with cult leader Vernon Jefferson Peak (Austin Butler), a manipulator whose incoherent Christian-fascist sermons are peppered with improbable stories of being sold into an elite child abuse network. Cross, meanwhile, makes a statement accusing Garcia of sexually assaulting Louise, as the two had a relationship decades prior. Louise denies the allegations, humiliating Cross and sending him into a tailspin.

Cross, overcome with impotent rage (and beginning to show signs of COVID symptoms), takes reckless action, then manipulates or invents facts to demonize the protest movement and turn public opinion against, in his words, "the Antifa terrorist group."

Meanwhile, a mysterious group of heavily armed operatives dressed as protesters flies into Eddington on a private jet and begins staging bombings and acts of bloody violence. Various unexpected twists and turns occur.

Writer-director Aster, whose previous works included the very limited psychological horror films *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* as well as the bizarre and solipsistic psychodrama *Beau is Afraid*, indicated that the film was inspired by his own time spent scrolling social media during the spring and summer of 2020, telling an interviewer that, “[Eddington] is the movie that Twitter built.”

He continued:

I wanted to make a film about the landscape and about what it feels like to live in a world where nobody agrees on what's happening and everybody distrusts everybody else. ... I wrote this film in a state of anxiety and worry and fear. And I feel like that's a place that most of us are living in now. I feel totally powerless, and everything feels impossibly corrupt and compromised.

A period of political crisis, of course, presents dangers that should not be glossed over. But an artist in a state of “fear” and “powerlessness” is not working on particularly firm footing. *Eddington* meanders from one ugly encounter to the next without making any effort to probe the roots of the crisis that has suddenly befallen the small town. Why has the latter been brought to a state of convulsive political warfare? The film seems to have no answer other than that the residents spend too much time on their phones.

Moreover, some clarification is in order: the strongest support for public health measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19 did not primarily come from pompous middle class liberals, as the film suggests. In reality, the initial shutdowns in production in the US were the result of wildcat strikes launched by workers, which forced the ruling class to implement the initial limited measures to contain the spread of the virus. Throughout 2020, numerous polls showed widespread support for efforts to prevent the spread of COVID, despite efforts by both the fascist right and “liberal” outlets like the *New York Times* to downplay the virus. It was the *Times*, in a column by the inimitable Thomas Friedman, that insisted that “the cure cannot be worse than the disease,” or in other words, that any efforts to prevent COVID deaths could not be allowed to negatively impact profits and share prices.

The global George Floyd protests are also

mischaracterized here, presented as being entirely dominated by vapid racialism and performative activism. Of course, that element was present. But the initial wave of protests—certainly during the late spring/early summer 2020 period in which the film is set—had a profoundly democratic, multi-racial and international character. Millions of people took to the streets in opposition to police violence, and in many cases, much more than that; protesters opposed social inequality, war, the bipartisan assault on democratic rights, the callous attitude of the oligarchy toward mass death from COVID, etc. For this, they faced brutal violence from police and fascist thugs under Trump’s direction. The Trump White House was so shaken by the protests that it very nearly invoked the Insurrection Act.

Because the George Floyd protest movement drew such widespread support, pseudo-left organizations and individuals connected to the Democratic Party were marshaled to inject racial-communalist politics into the demonstrations. Aster mocks the stupidity of race-obsessed activism, but takes it no further than that.

Instead, Aster depicts the protesters as privileged, self-righteous children screaming about “dismantling whiteness,” which is one of many concessions *Eddington* makes to the far right. Cross, the fascistic sheriff, is portrayed in a quasi-sympathetic light. Dramatic elements that could potentially form the basis of substantial critique either go nowhere or remain hazy and undeveloped.

The filmmakers do not appear sufficiently interested in making sense of the political crisis, or even conceding that there is any sense to be made. “Everyone,” they seem to be saying, “both ‘left’ and ‘right,’ is trapped in his or her own bubble of misinformation and outrage. Whatever happened to civility? To compromise? To loving thy neighbor?” Such a perspective doesn’t lead to particularly probing insights.

More to the point, the postmodern notion that “nobody agrees on what’s happening” is being refuted by events. This past weekend, millions took to the streets in thousands of “No Kings” protests (including in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico!) against fascism and dictatorship. Masses of people can, in fact, perceive that they are under threat, even if the roots of the danger are not yet fully clear to them.



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