

American authoritarianism in *Anniversary*: It does happen here

David Walsh
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Anniversary is a serious film about a serious matter, the emergence and triumph of a totalitarian political movement in the US. Certain chilling scenes and images remain with the viewer despite the film's too narrow or confused outlook that unfortunately limits its overall impact. *Anniversary* is one of a number of recent films that address—or attempt to address—the burning question of mass state repression and fascism.

Polish-born director Jan Komasa's film is set in the US very much at the present moment. It focuses on the upper middle class Taylor family. Ellen Taylor (Diane Lane) is a liberal-minded professor at Georgetown University, her husband Paul (Kyle Chandler) a restaurateur.

The film opens at their 25th wedding anniversary, with their four children present: Cynthia (Zoey Deutch), an environmental lawyer; Anna (Madeline Brewer), a rebellious, gay stand-up comic; Birdie (McKenna Grace), the youngest daughter and would-be scientist; and Josh (Dylan O'Brien), an unsuccessful science fiction writer. Cynthia is there with her husband, Rob (Daryl McCormack), also a lawyer. Josh has brought his fiancée Liz Nettles (Phoebe Dynevor). We first see the smooth, sinister Liz as she practices greetings to the Taylor family in front of a mirror.

At some point during the anniversary party, Ellen recognizes Liz as a former student, with whom she came into conflict some years earlier. As she tells Paul later that night,

She [Liz] was just ... radical in her ideology. Supportive of acts to subordinate ... to the point of denigrating the Constitution. ... It's all rushing back now. All her draconian assertions in my classroom. I dug up her thesis paper. I found it to be dangerous and inflammatory for its anti-democratic sentiments. "The Change: Birth of a New Nation." It advocates for a single-party system for national unity.

Anniversary advances in one-year or two-year increments. Two years after the opening scene, Liz's book, *The Change*, has become an immense success. The family is now gathered for Thanksgiving. Liz is pregnant with twins. Josh has been transformed, into someone arrogant and overbearing, and evidently wealthy. The atmosphere is tense. Ellen dislikes and distrusts Liz more than ever. The Change movement, we learn, is being financed and backed by the powerful Cumberland Corporation. One of its television ads:

Since the colonization of America, the Cumberland Company has envisioned the ideals of a singular, national harmony. Today, we are proud to partner with visionary author Elizabeth Nettles, whose latest work *The Change* details the path back to American solidarity. Join the nationwide movement that aspires to put United

back in these States of America. We are the Cumberland Company. U.S.A.!

As its symbol, The Change has adopted an American flag with the stars in the center, representing, in one character's words, "a world without political parties that divided us into those on the left or the right, or ultimately those above and below."

Ellen tells her son: "You and your wife are doing very well for yourselves with your new occupation, but you're nothing more than bagmen for the Cumberland Company."

Previously, in a fit of anger, Ellen has grabbed one of the flags outside a neighbor's house and torn it up. This is captured on video, and the latter goes viral. "CNN is running it on a loop." Ellen eventually loses her job and is placed on a "watch list." Paul's restaurant business is also in trouble.

One year later, Anna delivers a stand-up routine criticizing The Change. "They will come for the outspoken and the intellectuals first. That is what history books teach us." She is attacked and beaten on stage.

Birdie, in a voiceover, explains:

She [Anna] suffered 35 stitches, a concussion and five days in the ICU. That was six months ago. She walked out of Lenox Hill Hospital and hasn't been seen since. We didn't hear from Anna again. Everything around us is changing. Acts of violence have erupted all over the country. Fear went mainstream.

The political situation is deteriorating rapidly. Anna, in hiding, sends her mother a video message:

Hey, Mom. It's me. I don't understand. I'm sorry I haven't been able to contact you before now, but those fuckers are trying to charge me with crimes and brand me an enemy of the state. I just can't tell you where I am. I'm sorry.

Another 12 months pass. Birdie again:

There were no birthdays, holidays, anniversaries or celebrations the following year. There's a new census to track Americans. Moses Ho [her Asian-American boy-friend] and his parents fled, just like hundreds of thousands of journalists, scientists, academics, intellectuals, artists and free thinkers.

The final sequence takes place at the Taylors' 30th anniversary, presided over by the now-thoroughgoing-fascist Josh and the Machiavellian Liz. Ellen and Paul grudgingly go through the motions, with the air of those living at gun point under military occupation. All hell breaks loose, as the television news announces a suicide bombing in Washington D.C. and the authorities descend on the Taylor family.

As noted, there are strong moments here. The buildup of repression and fear within a continuously worsening political climate is authentically presented. It reminds one a little of the Frank Borzage films, *Three Comrades* (1938, written in part by F. Scott Fitzgerald) and *The Mortal Storm* (1940), with the latter film sharply depicting the malignant growth and influence of Nazism. *Anniversary*'s final scene in particular is genuinely disturbing, as the full dimensions of a police state come into view. Lane, Chandler and the other performers are convincing. Their hearts are clearly in their work.

Dylan O'Brien offers one of the strongest performances as Josh Taylor, the frustrated, failing novelist swept up by a right-wing political movement that ultimately makes him feel confident and influential, a semi-cultured petty bourgeois with the fierce need to bully and dominate, including family members. He evolves into a repugnant American "Blackshirt" (almost literally) in front of our eyes before falling victim himself to an act of treachery. Again, such a portrait brings to mind another, more highly developed film character, the Italian fascist functionary and central figure in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) played by Jean-Louis Trintignant.

These are all significant strengths.

Anniversary fails to be more compelling than it is, because it lacks almost any historical or social connections and driving forces. Why has "The Change" emerged in the form it does? Why does it gain mass traction? What are the conditions under which the erstwhile "democratic" state turns toward dictatorship? What are the social and economic forces propelling this repressive movement? Aside from a few oblique references to the Cumberland Corporation, about whose operations we learn next to nothing, there is no indication of financial interests involved. The transformation of the US into a police-state dictatorship, not a small global question one hardly needs to add, comes about more or less seamlessly for almost entirely unexplained reasons.

The difficulties lie with the conceptions behind the writing and making of *Anniversary*.

The director Komasa (born in Pozna? in 1981) informed *IndieWire* that his coming "from Central Europe, from Poland" had much to do with his approach to social processes.

We've been through so much in the history that for me, for everybody in Central Europe, we just distrust -isms. We don't trust communism, fascism, whatever -ism is there. Certain groups of people tend to fall for them, but then it's a cycle, we all know it's a cycle and it will change every couple of years.

In another conversation, he remarked that he was fascinated with "what I would call civilizational illnesses. ... My new film *Anniversary* also explores this: It's a dystopian look at the family structure. It's set in a future where your thoughts and your words can be tangible enough to cancel you or even kill you, and what pushes people apart is just the simple fact of what they think and what they believe in."

This is very weak and reveals the severe damage done by Stalinism, falsely viewed as "communism," and the anticommunist conclusions self-servingly drawn by a great many Eastern European artists and intellectuals. In the face of fascist movements or governments, in Europe or America, they have very little to fall back on. Any genuine resistance to

fascist barbarism must inevitably gravitate toward anti-capitalism. But the filmmakers clearly ruled that out.

The screenwriter Lori Rosene-Gambino told an interviewer that Komasa "wanted to contain, like, civil war within a family. He didn't want outside shots and, you know, what happens with the military or the police state or any of that stuff. So it had to be all through dialogue, but it was also, the rule was to also not be a partisan film." (*TV Squad*)

The reference to "non-partisanship" presumably refers to the supposed choice between the Trump government and the official "opposition" in the Democratic Party. Here the element of intimidation comes into play. For a combination of reasons, there was clearly the desire not to provoke or arouse the extreme right. Hence, the highly vague and amorphous presentation of The Change, the absence of any "inflammatory" elements in its program: no reference to anti-immigrant chauvinism (except very loosely) or attacks on social programs, no anticomunism, no warmongering, etc. There is no mention of social inequality or the growth of the billionaire/trillionaire Oligarchy, the firmest backers of extreme right movements and authoritarianism.

This political and ideological hollowing out renders *Anniversary* considerably less potent than it ought to be.

Did intimidation also enter into the lackluster distribution of *Anniversary*? An article on *The Wrap*, headlined "Did Lionsgate Bury the Political Thriller 'Anniversary' Because of Trump?," suggested that was the case. The film, it notes,

was financed and distributed by Lionsgate. But with a storyline that may have felt too close to our political reality, it seems to have been buried by the studio in a political climate where government retaliation against media has become commonplace.

How brave! A film is "too close to our political reality" so naturally ... it deserves to be "buried." What can one say?

A partner in the talent agency that represents Komasa asserted, "The film was buried because it is incendiary ... To me, it's a sign of the world we live in."

The Wrap also pointed out that the film "was not reviewed by The New York Times, Los Angeles Times or Washington Post or many other outlets, highly unusual for a film with a significant theatrical release."

Moreover, "Only two cast members besides [Diane] Lane attended the premiere in October, *discouraged by their agents and publicists to associate with the project*, according to people close to the film. ... Representatives for Lane declined to comment for this story. But individuals close to the actress said she was sharply disappointed at the studio's lack of support for the film." (Emphasis added.)

The Wrap further observed that *Anniversary* was not

the first project to be caught up in Hollywood's fear of Trump—the premiere date of Apple's political thriller series "The Savant" was postponed in September in the wake of Charlie Kirk's death, as the show follows a woman who infiltrates online hate groups to prevent mass shootings. The show has still not been put back on Apple's release calendar, a decision that star/producer Jessica Chastain publicly said she disagreed with.

With "Anniversary," it would hardly be surprising if Lionsgate made a calculated decision to avoid drawing the attention of the Trump and right-wing attack machine.

All in all, the events surrounding the distribution or non-distribution of

even such a blunted work as *Anniversary* point to the need of filmmakers to be far *keener* and politically astute and more aggressive in their work, and to genuinely tackle the very advanced crisis situation. A noncommittal or “non-partisan” (in the true sense of the word) stance is the very last thing we need.



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