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Doom Scrolling Smartphones in Ari Aster's Eddington Von: Tom Allen

Scrolling through one's phone is a complicated pleasure. Reliant on a variety of minerals sourced under frequently brutal conditions and assembled in factories whose attention to the flourishing of their labor-force is best expressed by the anti-suicide nets erected ten years ago around Foxconn's China-based assembly plants, smartphones can feel like an ultra-compressed composite of the very worst elements of global capital. They are, of course, also prime testimony to a capacity to sublimate these elements into a deeply enjoyable, and now more or less necessary, commodity. The original iPhone was supposed to be so good at performing this sublimation that in the mind of its chief salesman, Steve Jobs, its interface should feel like an organic extension of the "ultimate pointing device", the human finger.[1] Leaving aside the ethics of consumption, in my experience, my smartphone seems almost designed to inculcate a continuous oscillation between pleasure and disappointment, as the desire to spend 'less time on social media' inculcates a masochistic – and therefore obviously enjoyable – cycle of resolution and failure which renews itself with all the regularity of a (self-imposed) divine punishment. Nonetheless, while these objects are the product and the cause of immense fragmentation, there is surely no better example of integration into global networks of information and communication than the smartphone user. The widespread optimism that greeted the mass use of Facebook and Twitter by mass-movements for democracy in the first years of the 2010s may now seem naïve, not least given the unprecedented lining up of so-called "big-tech" behind the current American administration, but to say that something has proved to be naïve it not to say that it was always empty. Smartphones, one might say, are ambivalent devices.

I started thinking about phones after watching Ari Aster's *Eddington* at London's ICA in August of this year. Incidentally, I was motivated to see this film at the cinema in part because this is one of the only spaces in which a sufficiently strong normative sanction against scrolling will keep me focused for up to two to three hours. The title refers to its setting, a New Mexico town once known for copper mining and now at the harsh end of North American deindustrialization. Aster represents his location as an anachronistic, fragmented place, and, in doing so, casts an eye on the subjectivity of the so-called MAGA right, as well as the social geography of what Philip A. Neele refers to as the postindustrial American 'hinterland.'[2] It is by no means a great film: I found it over-long, frustrating and at points quite boring. Still, a friend suggested to me that some of its incoherencies are forgivable if one considers its narrative to be a species of nightmare,

or at least to follow the logic of one. If *Eddington* is a nightmare, then it is one in which smartphones loom large, and in which they mediate, and intensify the corrosion of an already fractured reality.

The film opens in May 2020 during the first wave of Covid 19 in the U.S.A. In its first scene we see a homeless man muttering jagged and violent non-sequiturs as he walks down a desert road towards the town, passing a sign advertising a new data center that promises, somewhat disingenuously, to bring a bright future to Eddington. This opening puts side by side two symptoms of what historian and economist Robert Brenner has termed the “long downturn” in the global economy: distant, shiny tech companies and desperate, surplus individuals.[3] At the same time, the man’s speech patterns position him as an indifferent medium for disconnected fragments of hatred, beauty and ressentiment that come out of his mouth. He could, in effect, be transmitting the content of the internet. That tech and mental illness might be connected by more than coincidence is even clearer when we learn in passing that the proposed datacentre will be used to contribute to generative AI. This is, after all, software that is trained on any and all available text, including the darkest corners of the internet. Some of this material is very dark indeed, and the data-annotators paid poverty wages to ensure that the AI in question does not produce the vilest imaginable content have been known to suffer permanent psychological damage from what they are forced to read.[4]

Eddington continues Aster’s previous preoccupation with the rich potential for horror contained in the fact of having a family.[5] The man at the centre of the story is Joe Cross, the town’s local sheriff. Joe lives in a small house dominated by an uncertain and dysfunctional inheritance. The son in law of a now deceased former police sheriff whose portrait hang ominously in his home, Joe is married to Louise, who suffers from an unexplained past trauma and will end the film fully absorbed into a Q-Anon adjacent cult led by a deeply charismatic manipulator. At the start, the two share their home with Louise’s mother, Dierdre, whose unplanned stay has been extended by Covid and who apparently blames Joe for whatever is afflicting her daughter. Phones and screens permeate this house, acting as a source of information and as a port of call in situations of failed communication. The first time we see them, Joe returns home late, greets his wife with genuine affection, gets into bed, and responds to Louise’s nervousness regarding physical intimacy by rolling over and opening his phone. We then cut to a morning scene in which Joe and Louise’s breakfast is soundtracked by Dierdre’s ‘plandemic’ style conspiracy theory podcasts.

Phones and computers are portals through which corrosive fragments of a conspiracy and rumour enter and circulate. These same devices, however, provide the opportunity for attempts at self-actualization. We see this when Joe launches a mayoral campaign via a recording made in his car and uploaded to Facebook. The decision to do this follows an intense ethical shock at the treatment of an unmasked elderly shopper, a shock intensified by incumbent mayor Ted Garcia’s comfort with enforcing what to Joe seem like an arbitrary lockdown mandate. Despite Joe’s apparently public-spirited motivations – he insists in his video that the residents of Eddington must ‘free each other’s hearts’ – we soon learn that a rapidly intensifying hatred of Ted is motivated by a

previous relationship between him and Louise. Joe's iPhone is a treacherous object. It enables him to communicate quickly and effectively, allowing him to launch his political campaign more or less instantaneously. This same campaign, however, results in the destruction of Joe's fragile family life when at a live streamed rally in a local restaurant he discloses that Ted has previously assaulted Louise and forced her into having an abortion. Louise publicly repudiates Joe's accusations, the couple never speak again, and Joe, in the first of two narrative curve balls that make up the second half of the film, murders Ted and his son with a long-range rifle. Prior to his death, we see Ted emphatically deny any wrongdoing in relation to Louise, and what 'really' happened remains opaque. During Aster's final act swerve into violent absurdity, we see the strong implication that Joe has himself done more damage to his wife than he could ever bring himself admit. Throughout all of this, the iPhone itself reads increasingly as a metonym for a general incapacity to distinguish agency from symptom.

That said, I don't think that *Eddington* is a film 'about' phones, so much as it is a film that is interested in the ways in which history plays out in specific kinds of location. While the film is inseparable from the specifics of its setting, one can nonetheless place it within a long tradition of representations of provincial life. Any number of 19th century narratives have at their centre a disconnect between modernity, its accompanying passions and potentials, and what happens to these ideas, and to the people who hold them, within a rural or semi-rural setting. Flaubert's Emma Bovary and the doomed, ridiculous conspirators of Dostoevsky's *Demons* are paradigmatic examples of characters who become the conduit of both tragedy and comedy because of the gap between the metropolitan source of their passions and the space in which they are doomed to try to make them real. George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, in which Dorothea must learn to accept limits in order to devote herself to quotidian acts of 'unhistoric' virtue, is the positive flipside of this kind of narrative.[6] We can, I think, understand *Eddington* in this lineage: it enacts the consequences of the failed translation between idea, passion and location, and it does so in relation to the specific medium through which these ideas are transmitted. Outside of Joe's own domestic life, Aster shows how phones and social media cause the titular town to enact echoes of social movements happening elsewhere. These echoes become ever louder and more absurd in the hollowed-out agoras of the pandemic: 'What are you doing? There's nobody here' laughs Ted's teenage son at Joe as the latter drives around empty streets trash-talking his rival through a megaphone.

For the 19th century novelist some actual contact with the urban center was necessary to exploit the tragi-comic quality of the provinces, and such contact requires time and conversation. A smartphone, however, gives instant access. For T. J. Clark, this fact is itself a mode of disruption:

> Screen capitalism is dissolving the very structure of private (public) being-together. It is wrecking the quiet simultaneity of clock-time. Atrocity happens NOW. The 'now' that language inevitably conjures away into repeatability and abstraction, the image preserves forever in what seems to be its mere being.[7]

Eddington is not very funny, but part of what could be called its comedy emerges when images of Black Lives Matter protests reach the town and well-meaning young people attempt to join the struggle in a way that makes little to no sense given their context. We can, I think, read this absurdism, which Aster dials up to eleven in the film's final act, as one way of showing the unfolding of the failed attempt to render into language and action the "now" that Clark sees as transmitted by the smartphone. The need to try to make this "now" collective and political results in twenty or so teenagers blocking traffic on a road that is already almost abandoned, and in a middle-class white highschooler frantically explaining critical race theory to her African American ex-boyfriend, who also happens to be a cop.

The film's epilogue shows Joe paralyzed and non-verbal following a climactic attack by mysterious government agents posing as so-called "anti-fa" activists. Inexplicably, this has not stopped him becoming mayor, and we see him attending the opening ceremony of the datacentre. Following this, Diedre, now Joe's primary carer, shows him footage of a pregnant Louise at a meeting of the cult she has joined, to which he reacts with mute anguish. If this epilogue is intended to provide a feeling of either narrative or aesthetic coherence, then it fails. It is enough, however, to allow to convince me that the nightmare that is *Eddington* is a nightmare of immediacy. One could imagine that the experience of combined paralysis and aphasia is, in part, the experience of an eternal present in which there is little to no hope of sharing, and therefore diluting, this experience in language. I do not think that it is too much to say that such an experience of time and language has something in common with the acquired compulsion to scroll through a smartphone.

References

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