

Spoiler Alert: Ari Aster and *Eddington*

Hills Snyder, July 2025

*Eddington* is a fictional town in New Mexico. It is May 2020. A pandemic is daily fare as Black Lives Matter protests, rumors of antifa, stolen Tribal land, abundant Covid misinformation, and the easy availability of guns play out before the backdrop of concern about a proposed Data Center burdening the town's power and water supplies. Donald Trump lurks off screen parlaying his lies. Chaos and contradiction leak into every scene.

Evidence of political division is given clear expression in the characters of the town's Mayor, Ted Garcia (Pedro Pascal) and the Sheriff, Joe Cross (Joaquin Phoenix). The whataboutism that loudly plagued the discourse of the time finds its way into the story even though the mask-refusing Sheriff eventually seems to contract the virus, but this is ambiguous as he is asthmatic. Any real or imagined false equivalences aside, *Eddington* is a compelling neo-western full of farcical humor, especially of the variety that satirizes various character's misplaced and inflated self-regard.

Vernon (Austin Butler) is especially affective as a self-styled revolutionary whose studied guru-calm morphs into evangelical hucksterism in the denouement. The Sheriff's mother-in-law, conspiracy fantasist Dawn (Deirdre O'Connell), is eventually seen to be a brazen opportunist whose embrace of the Data Center yields a life-style upgrade. The Sheriff's wife Louise (Emma Stone) serves as a wedge between the sheriff and the mayor revealing that the conflict of the two men is about more than disagreements over Covid restrictions and the Data Center. She ends the film as partner to Vernon. In a large cast of supporting characters, the most uncompromising figure is dedicated Pueblo tribal officer Jimenez Butterfly (William Belleau).

Director Ari Aster's debut feature, *Hereditary* (2018), one of the very best horror films made since Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), was quickly followed with the promising genre piece *Midsommar* (2019), a Folk Horror story leaning into Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973) and is ably "psychedelic" in the way of Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* (2013). After two feature-length films, Aster seemed to be a new wunderkind on the rise similar in promise to that of M. Night Shyamalan when he released *The Sixth Sense* in 1999.

Aster's *Beau Is Afraid* (2023), signaled a Shyamalan-like plummet. A three-hour Oedipal mess ending with Beau (Joaquin Phoenix) disappearing in the explosion of a capsized motorboat in the center of a stadium-sized guilt-panopticon, *Beau Is Afraid* is largely bogged down in an exhausting malaise of tedium, even though occasionally saved in moments by humor. The best line is delivered by Beau's former girlfriend Elaine Bray (Parker Posey), "You're the same too, except for your body and your face."

Given what I'd felt about *Beau Is Afraid* after my excitement for his first two films, I was skeptical, though hopeful, when I went to see *Eddington*. Upon viewing the film, I felt overwhelmed by what in prosecutorial parlance is called "throwing sand in the face of the jury." I was flattened by a barely digestible sense of apathy and left the theatre in a languorous cloud in which the phrase seen on a sign in the film, "silence is complicity," (a real thing in a country threatened by authoritarian leaders) seemed conflated with the emptiness of "make America great again." My initial reaction was that the movie is not what the director thinks it is, and

seems to play-out adjacent to what it was hoping to be. Six days later, still processing what I'd seen, I went again.

After my second viewing I left the theatre in a state that I recognized as the feeling I go to the movies to receive: the elation that comes with being gifted by an engaging story well told, with extra delight on top in appreciation for the specific ways of its telling. It may be relevant that my first viewing was from the second row, the only seat available. Seeking a wider perspective, I chose a seat in the next to last row when I went to see it the second time.

*Eddington* has been favorably compared to *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), but Scorsese's other examination of ill-gotten celebrity, *The King of Comedy* (1982), also comes to mind as the character Brian (Cameron Mann), a BLM protester who "saves" the sheriff, finds online celebrity in the way of a Kyle Rittenhouse, who was acclaimed by far-right voices after shooting protesters in August 2020. The sheriff's final destiny unfolds in a scene which points to Michelangelo's *Pietà*, further mining Aster's themes of family trauma.

An interesting detail in *Eddington* is Louise's hobby of making freakish dolls to sell online, an activity which bears a resemblance to the preoccupation of the daughter Charlie (Milly Shapiro) in *Hereditary*, who is constantly assembling little figures out of detritus. This thematic recurrence supports the notion that Aster uses film making to process aspects of his experience known only to him. It might be said that this is what any artist does, whether exorcising personal phobias, examining serious social issues, or more formal kinds of problem solving, but after reading Anna Peele's profile of him in the New York Times Magazine, a new level of understanding of Aster may be gained. So, it is no surprise that it took a week bookended by two viewings of *Eddington* for me to process that the movie is a post-*Beau* return to form for the director.

Some of the published comments on Peele's profile are judgmental in tone, in contrast to her generous, empathetic, and complex portrait of Aster, suggesting that to enjoy his films, knowing what it feels like to hurt with a heart full of gravel and squid ink might be just the extra insight one needs.

Anna Peele's profile of Ari Aster:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/16/magazine/ari-aster-eddington-film.html>