

Review by abcdent

Eddington 2025

Rewatched 30 Sep 2025

This review may contain spoilers.

Eddington: America Plays Pokémon

A cursory glance at *Eddington*'s general reception would suggest that, politically, the film must be a disaster. It seems uniquely prone to frustrating and alienating its viewers who come to the theater looking for a clear political message. In trying to discern with which "side" the movie's sympathies lie, the critical and audience responses have wound up in a situation not unlike the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Liberals, reaching out to grope the trunk, feel a disturbing lack of gravity in the film's handling of George Floyd's murder and the ensuing unrest. Conservatives find pandering woke racial commentary, or a cruel mockery of small-town America's struggles in the shadows of the coasts. Covid skeptics roll their eyes when Joe's refusal to wear a mask inevitably results in getting sick, and maskers feel uneasy when the virus is never shown to be more than a fever and cough by the time the credits roll. The conspiratorially-minded recognize a familiar Hollywood ridicule of their concerns, while skeptics find the film's flirtations with a myriad of conspiracy theories irresponsible. Many seem frustrated with what reads like a non-committal or cowardly "both-sidesism" that pervades every social issue's portrayal. From all camps, the general consensus is that the film's messaging is, if anything, scattershot, unfocused, and misguided. Even its biggest defenders are largely delighted by what they see as an intentional inscrutability, or a nihilistic attack of all impassioned sides.

In *Eddington* (the town), under what conditions do we find its citizens living? Beneath the great quilt of early 2020's disorienting panics, from the pandemic to the riots to the nation's ongoing psychological breakdown in the wake of Jeffrey Epstein's arrest and death, *Eddington*

is fraying at the edges. There are constant squabbles over minor questions of legal jurisdiction and uncertain relationships between authorities. The discursive wedge of the culture war has now landed even here in the seclusion of the New Mexico desert. The economy, a far cry from its heyday as a copper mining town, is dwindling, and law is poorly enforced. Everyone in Sevilla County seems haunted by a feeling that something much larger than them is fundamentally wrong.

The way this feeling manifests varies from person to person, in preoccupations with police brutality and institutionalized racism, hidden pedophilic networks among the elite, the rapidly expanding reach of tech companies and surveillance, upcoming economic collapse, globalist control schemes by the Federal Reserve and World Bank, numerological encodings in the news and media, the list goes on. We are shown the characters' phones and computers, their social media feeds and YouTube recommendations, and see the way their algorithms have neatly siloed them each into their own separate media ecologies with diverging explanations for how and why everything is going so wrong. Their actions are invariably shown to be driven by their real, human grievances and desires among each other, but burrowed so far into their niches, these drives can only find expression through the thin veneer of political activity and activism. There is no longer enough shared language to directly accommodate human sociality, much less address this common sense of an unseen darkness. Instead, everything feels dangerous, and everyone else sounds wrong.

On the off chance our poor reviewers still need some assistance, we are all citizens of Eddington. The film's reception is proof enough that our condition in 2025 is one and the same with the hysterical impasse afflicting the town. Something about this movie feels *off*. There is something unnerving present in the film that is clearly affecting its audience, but when the time comes to address what that thing might be, everything fractures along political faultlines and only the most vague and abstract consensus is achieved, if that. For the second time in a row, Ari Aster's work has garnered a critical reception that dovetails marvelously with the film's thematic substance.

Forgive a brief aside: in 1919, exactly 100 years before Covid-19 would emerge, two pairs of men sailed from England—one to the West African island of Príncipe and the other to the Brazilian town of Sobral—and used telescopic lenses to photograph the total solar eclipse that passed over the two locales on May 29th of that year. In the resulting images, the stars immediately surrounding the solar corona did not appear at the positions we know them to occupy. The trajectories of the starlight, beaming from far across the Milky Way, had been curved around the mass of the sun in a phenomenon known as gravitational lensing. It was through those photographs that Einstein's theory of general relativity was observationally proven to be accurate for the first time.

Vision is a uniquely privileged sense among mankind. Objects are known by their images. Classical light is “true” in both senses of the word: as the radiance of The Sun, the transcendent guarantor of absolute solar truth, and as a thing that “flies true” in accurate lines and hard angles. Einstein's theory threatened to upend the independent and invariable natures of Newtonian time and space in one swoop, bringing the ideal, linear perfection of light's trajectory through a vacuum down with it. Its first experimental confirmation came in the form of starlight from other solar systems, warped from a distance by the sheer mass of our sun itself as it hung black in the sky. That test, named for Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington (one of the two astronomers responsible), is now remembered as the Eddington experiment.

Eddington is deliberately constructed as a trial by fire—so long as you remain in your silo, *Eddington* will feel as confusing, offensive, or outright hostile a viewing experience as its world feels to those that live in the town. Its first challenge to the viewer is to take a step back. You are not being asked to drop your moral convictions; the question of which characters have it right or wrong is one that remains largely (*largely*) inessential to the film's project. You are instead being asked to, for but a moment, suspend your discursive investments and look up at the black sun hanging in the sky, the massive body around which all these various political sightlines are bent yet remains just outside their trajectories' view. Despite the popular understanding, *Eddington*'s plot is not ambiguous. There is a clear explanation and, in glimpses, a concrete


answer is provided. An answer that its characters (save for one, perhaps) can not see because they are trapped in the same hermeneutical deadlock as our outraged reviewers.

The black sun hanging over Eddington is named Solidgoldmagikarp.

Part of what makes *Eddington* remarkable is that its actual plot, the motions of the most important causal agent whose effects we see playing out among the characters, occurs almost entirely off-screen and unmentioned. The town knows this agent by name but it lies beyond the scope of what the citizens can fully grasp, and so the audience is left in the same boat. But its presence is felt. The feeling that something is deeply wrong, which weighs on the entire town, radiates from this single source and its neon glow. Ari Aster was not being coy when he said that *Eddington* is a movie about a data center being built. It is.

Beyond the fact that Solidgoldmagikarp is a datacenter, whose logo seems to be a “y” or inverted lambda symbol and outstretched claw-like hand combined into the shape of a wrench, very little else is made readily known to the audience. Everything else must come through close attention and a few reasonable inferences. One thing we can say for sure is that Solidgoldmagikarp, or the thing responsible for it, is nothing if not flexible.

An easily overheard line informs us that Ted Garcia, sitting mayor of Eddington, is a Solidgoldmagikarp plant. He ran for office at their behest in the first place, and is guided by Warren Sandoval, who acts as SGMK’s local public-facing representative and Ted’s handler. His major projects as mayor have been the paving of a road leading to the data center’s proposed site, securing the council votes to approve the construction, and advocating for massive solar energy initiatives, which are later confirmed to be in SGMK’s interests as well.

So, we can imagine Garcia’s death is a setback for SGMK. Joe Cross isn’t in their pocket and it leaves him uncontested in the race to become mayor. Before long we see a business jet bearing a new logo, a hand reaching across a -style globe, shuttling private mercenaries to Sevilla County. Their plane is filled with anti-white signage, and a tactical backpack in the shot is covered in several velcro patches of Antifa slogans and the SDP’s three arrows, though one patch reads “I AM

DUNCAN LEMP,” a martyr of the rightwing boogaloo movement. Tucked away in a corner is a copy of the World Economic Forum’s *Global Risks Report 2020* (the cover image of which should be Googled and kept in mind, for now). These soldiers descend upon Eddington amid the ongoing riots and stage a false-flag terrorist attack on the town, intending to kill Cross and reframe both candidates’ deaths as the work of leftwing extremists.

Instead, Cross survives and is left a silent paralytic. A year later, under his mother-in-law Dawn’s legal care, he has been elected mayor with SGMK’s backing, and the center has been constructed. The Pueblo, well aware that Cross killed Garcia, have remained silent and backed him as well in an obvious deal with SGMK. Borders have even been redrawn and the land on which the datacenter resides is now shared by both Sevilla County and the tribe’s reservation. The Pueblo have new windmill farms and Eddington built its solar panels, and power runs into the datacenter from both. In exchange for letting SGMK rule the town through her son’s image, Dawn is allowed to rant about population control and government surveillance on stage, so long as SGMK’s key points are sprinkled throughout her speeches. Brian, who foiled SGMK’s attempt on Joe’s life by shooting his final attacker dead, is living comfortably as a national hero and internet personality, having pivoted from BLM instagram activism to find his slot in the conservative youth mediasphere.

“ SolidGoldMagikarp” (leading space intentional) is a specific string of text that was once mysteriously capable of breaking several versions of ChatGPT, causing erratic and nonsensical behavior when used in prompts. Far better technical explanations can be found elsewhere, but a very rough one follows: when Language Learning Models are trained, thousands of short strings of text (tokens) are arranged in relationship to one another within a staggeringly high-dimensional mathematical space. For a more intuitive image, one can imagine a big empty cube with various word-segments floating at different points within it. The idea is that, through training, these tokens can be iteratively nudged until their spatial adjacency to each other corresponds with their semantic adjacency—“friend” and “buddy” might be quite close together while

“chihuahua” and “magnetically” could be relatively far apart, say. Many tokens sort themselves into clusters of obviously related words. “SolidGoldMagikarp” was one of several anomalous tokens that formed their own cluster, but this cluster uniquely sat at the entire embedding space’s “center of mass,” the total average position of all the tokens. Those that discovered these tokens hypothesized that these strings were scraped from the internet and tokenized, but never included within the training data, thus the model never figured out what to do with them and breaks down in their presence accordingly. So here we have a vast constellation of tokens in empty space, its coherency of meaning being warped and broken around a dark cluster of foreign, unaccommodated data which sits directly at the center of mass. Connecting this notion to any prior established imagery is left as an exercise to the reader.

Even more interesting, however, is that the term’s presence in the model’s tokenization data can be traced to the username of a specific Reddit account. This account was notably a moderator and active presence in the Twitch Plays Pokémon community, a kind of social experiment in which thousands of Twitch users tried to collaboratively finish a full livestreamed playthrough of *Pokémon Red* by typing individual button inputs into the public chat. Whether or not Aster knew of this deeper origin (your humble correspondents suspect he did), it is surprisingly relevant: when TPP eventually beat the game, who could claim responsibility? Under what agent’s control was the game completed? No single person—if the victory can be ascribed to any single agent, it must be understood as a system that structured itself from the behavior of thousands of individual actors, capable of making intelligent decisions on a level irreducible to any of its constituent parts. We are forced to enter the realm of cybernetics, in which control systems, feedback loops, and flows of information between discrete parts compose a structure which is analyzed as a single intelligent organism. This is the disembodied logic of capital, of social media, and of Solidgoldmagikarp. In one of the windows of Ted’s Zoom meeting, we see a technical drawing of the datacenter’s floor plan, portrayed with a single monolithic tower standing before rows of server racks, a layout reminiscent of a coxswain leading the rowers of an ancient warship (a

stretch within a stretch, but recall the etymology of the word “cybernetics”).

Vernon Jefferson Peak was not wrong to say that evil is sentimental, but Solidgoldmagikarp clearly isn't. There is no loyalty, nor hard feelings, nor ideology nor honor nor malice. You will live, die, suffer, or profit as a node in a graph seeking systemic optimization. What you believe *does not matter*, there is only your utility and the utility of the things that may happen to you. Joe's actions, ostensibly major blows to the Solidgoldmagikarp project, pass as mere ripples within the social/political/technological fabric that SGMK so effectively manipulates. Everything is neatly brought into the fold by the end.

Joe himself, craftier than he initially seems, demonstrates this approach in microcosm. He offers to promote Michael in earnest before being made aware of George Floyd's murder, but makes a note to film and publicize the promotion once he does. Likewise, when a convincing motive falls into his lap, he seamlessly shifts tactics to narrow the target of his framejob from hypothetical BLM rioters to Michael specifically—not out of racism, but because Michael being black aligns perfectly with a narrative he understands the public would latch onto, drawing attention away from himself. What's even more sinister than a pathologically racist system? One that doesn't care, but is nonetheless willing to imprison or kill people for their race when the calculations determine these things to be optimal. SGMK isn't sentimental, sentimentality is merely another bolt its wrench is fit to turn.

Solidgoldmagikarp's scope is left open, and therefore, symbolically, infinite. We don't know who owns it, or how far down a chain of subsidiaries it may lie. We don't know what exactly it does. We don't know how many other datacenters there are. These ambiguities can only gesture upward: whatever SGMK is, or is being planned by, it is unimaginably large. It encompasses everything. It is the harvest of user data for sale. It is mass surveillance. It is algorithmic social influence and control. It is the fascistic collapse of the private and public sectors. It is the thing that calls in PMCs to assassinate politicians and wage domestic Gladio through false flag attacks across the nation (it is revealed that these “Antifa supersoldiers” have been responsible for all

the spectacles of extremist violence that have been playing on news channels throughout the film). It is the entire parapolitical stratum—in more controversial terms, the deep state. Accordingly, the film itself is steeped in references to dozens upon dozens of conspiracy theories. We hear the ones the characters concern themselves with, but there are many other subtle references to notions that the characters are unaware of. The man and woman Vernon brings to dinner are strongly implied to be victims of the very real Dutroux affair in Belgium. Joe falls through a museum roof and into Geronimo's bones—more than a visual pun, Geronimo's skull was allegedly stolen from Fort Still by Prescott Bush and five other members of Yale's Skull and Bones society during WWI. The fact that so many of these references concern things beyond the characters' understandings of the world should tell you that Aster's interest in paranoid logic here goes beyond mere social or psychological commentary. The world of *Eddington* (we make such qualifications here strictly to keep certain readers calm, be assured) is stretched across such a dense tangle of terrible unseen things that even the tinfoil hat types lack the imagination to grasp it. Paranoia, in one shade or another, is only a natural response to living in such a world.

This is precisely why it would be a mistake to consider *Eddington's* satire cruel. There is a deep sympathy for its characters—the citizens of Eddington are lost, paranoid, and in pain. They live stitched into the fabric of something horrible that they can not understand, each provided steady separate diets of partial answers that only further dissolve their ability to communicate with each other. Their desires, impulses, agonies, and grudges are given no organic outlet, only slots through which they can further couple themselves with this technologically mediated surrogate mother. Meaning itself has bent to the point of snapping as mankind has found itself wrapped around its own creation, whose center of mass, its own alternative to the human absolute, concerns one thing only: the construction of Solidgoldmagikarp. Not if, not when, only how.

The film's ending with Michael is its biggest ambiguity. In the film's epilogue, we first see him, disfigured from the blast and promoted to town sheriff, filming Joe from a distance at the Solidgoldmagikarp opening ceremony as a voice off-screen informs him that it's a private

event. The movie closes at dusk with Michael prone on the shooting range, calmly firing rounds into the neck and head of a human target poster, his aim now improved.

There are two conflicting interpretations here: the first would have us infer that Michael is training to assassinate Joe. Cycles of revenge, trauma, and violence are well established themes in Aster's filmography thus far, and this would certainly fit. Michael knows Joe tried to frame him, and may believe that he was more explicitly involved with everything that followed than he was. So the sheriff shoots the mayor, replaces him, and the new sheriff prepares to shoot him: a cycle of anger and revenge continues to play out between toys in a doll-house as Solidgoldmagikarp whirs undisturbed in the background. An appropriately pessimistic close.

The second interpretation, which your correspondents find more compelling, holds that Michael has caught on by the end. Broken free from his cell by white men covered in Antifa patches, bound and taken to the desert where he watched a terrorist spectacle staged around him, he got a glimpse of the machinery at work and managed to work out the role Solidgoldmagikarp has played in his town's misery. He even could have concluded that these soldiers really were responsible for Ted's death, absolving Joe in his mind. Thus, we leave Michael as he prepares to take down SGMK, but this interpretation is by far the bleaker of the two. Here we have the new sheriff, stepping into boots his father never got to fill, determined to defend his town from its actual invader. But out in the desert, he militantly trains to shoot something that bullets can not hurt. No matter what head his bullets enter, two more will take its place, and SGMK will quickly find a way to survive, if not capitalize off of, Michael's actions. Michael successfully solved the riddle, the same one posed to the audience, and it doesn't matter at all. Come morning, the black sun of Solidgoldmagikarp will rise still.

Lodge, the local vagrant, hobbles into town as the film begins. "But you're in your *box*... your precious little *box*," he growls to himself. "You think I'm *locked out*? I'm the one *inside*. And I will *spit* you out. I am the *first* and *last*." He clutches a dead dove as he howls, the smothered remains of the Holy Spirit. "More wicked *boxes*, and I know

who sent ‘em here. I will show my will to *all* of you that smile with the pride of *pigs*, and *all* the pigs will listen when it’s *too late!* The pigs and liars will *burn forever* when it’s too late, and all your boxes will be *sand!*”

God speaks through Lodge as the last remnant of un-siloed human sociality, something now feral and alarming to the citizens of Eddington. The only hope the film provides of an American future beyond Solidgoldmagikarp is found in his prophetic ramblings at the very start: a vision of burning apocalypse in which the silicon that calculates the world returns to the sand from which it came. This fate is sealed the second Joe kills him. The last untamed man is gone, and covid has shut the door behind the rest of us as we are finally herded from the material world and into the virtual American courtyard. Strapped to the engine we created (no doubt replete with copper wiring, and how was Eddington founded?), looking out through livestreamed artificial windows, we each control it one button-press at a time as the whole monstrous assemblage steers itself hurtling into the fiery horizon. *Eddington* ends without any call to action because the only way out is through. Things will get much worse, but everything is brought into the fold by the end.

A lovely stone courtyard

With a lacy iron gate

And a bountiful garden

Where I could wait

Yes, he built me a courtyard

Like he promised he would

And I know that he’d come to my side

He would if he could

Patterns on a courtyard floor

Illusions of all I’m living for

♥ 397 likes

