East European Film Bulletin

EDITORIAL

# Editorial

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If one were to make an end-of-the year ranking of the most outrageous conspiracy theories of 2022, it would be as hard to sieve through the sheer amount of plotting, counterplotting, disinformation, and misinformation as it would be to settle on a top candidate. Came spring, Hungary's nationalist leader, Viktor Orbán, spoke at America's Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and shared the idea of the great replacement of genuine (read: Christian) Europeans by Muslims. Came summer, Boris Johnson addressed the House of Commons for a confidence vote and claimed that "the deep state" would haul the UK back into the EU. Came autumn, Giorgia Meloni, shortly before becoming Italy's new prime minister, suggested that the key figure working against her country is the 92-year-old Jewish financier and philanthropist, George Soros. Came winter, a far-right plot to overthrow the state was thwarted in Germany. The coup was driven by members of the so-called "Reichsbürger" scene, who believe that the German state is an artificial construct that illegitimately replaced the "Deutsches Reich" of the Nazi era. And so on and so forth.

Amidst these seasonal swings of conspirational folly, evidence that most people, when asked, do not actually believe in conspiracy theories, was perhaps the most bewildering news. Then again, if scientists are as corrupt as politicians, who would be stupid enough to give truthful answers to a political science questionnaire? All joking aside, as Quassim Cassam has claimed, conspiracy theories may be better understood in politico-ideological rather than epistemological terms. In other words, the question of whether conspiracies are true or not may be less important than what they represent for a given community.

In Cassam's view, most people may not really believe that George Soros is the root of all evil, although they may think that Jews or high finance are. In that way, the conspiracy about Soros helps to promote, qua association, an anti-Semitic or anti-capitalist ideology. Even though the conspiracy is obviously as wrong as it is dangerous, it is not really about Soros at all, but about the political interests of a community which tries to alter in an imaginary and

symbolic manner their experience of exclusion, injustice, and inequality. In order to believe in conspiracies, therefore, one does not need to be a “true” believer. That may explain why fact-checking hardly ever convinces any conspiracy theorist that their theory is wrong. Indeed, the conspirator may be well aware of the gap between the mask of the conspiracy and the social reality, but nonetheless still insist upon that mask. Cassam’s take on conspiracy theories points to a cynical logic: “they know what they are doing is wrong, but still, they are doing it.” It is part of what psychologists call a cognitive bias.

While the middle classes and educated precariat spend an increasing amount of their leisure making sure that others realize how far removed from conspirational beliefs they are (the other side has called this “woke”), they may – unwittingly or not – already share some of the cynicism of those they resent. This is hardly surprising. After all, inequality, pressures to succeed, “burnouts”, etc. also affect them, so why should they be forbidden to join in on the fun of collective *ressentiment*. Luckily, the entertainment industry provides some relief, and a rare window into the Jekyll-and-Hyde-like psyche of the enlightened masses. The success and plethora of dark comedy horror movies in particular seems to coincide all too well with the need to alleviate pent-up feelings of anger and frustration, thereby pushing people into ever more divided and hostile communities.

Released this year alone were *The Menu* (dir. Mark Mylod, 2022), *Fresh* (dir. Mimi Cave, 2022), the second season of *The White Lotus* (dir. Mike White, 2022) and *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (dir. Halina Reijn, 2022), the latter featuring Bulgarian actress Maria Bakalova (presumably to give the working-class identity of her character more credibility). In Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern European cinema the genre has yet to flourish, even though it could be argued that the post-Yugoslavian cinema of the 1990s displayed a fair share of this mixture of horror and cynicism, albeit in a different social and political context. What all of these films and TV-series share is a willingness to satirize the upper classes – with a slash. The cathartic joy resides in poking fun at the base eccentricities of the rich and wealthy, to dehumanize them of sorts, until it is time to say, “Off with their heads!”. And many heads are rolling.

Another kind of joy, one that is perhaps even greater, comes from the fable-like or parabolic storytelling the genre has cultivated. Thus, the microcosms depicted in these films are such that they cannot be described without decoding. What we are seeing – a bunch of rich people going on vacation, a bunch of rich people making fancy dinner plans, etc. – is not what “really” matters, it’s something else, a kind of deep state-of-mind of the wealthy ruled by greed, narcissism, and domination. The ability to see through the “actual” meaning of the events brings its own reward, a sense of complicity that is very similar to the conspirational ideology Cassam has been writing about. It follows the same kind of cynical train of thought, “we know that the rich and wealthy

may not be coming to get us, yet it's fun to believe it anyway." And so: "Off with their heads!".

It may be true that the "golden age" of conspiracy theories is actually only a bronze age and that the era of post-truth has yet to fully materialize. Nevertheless, the entertainment industry, with the success of dark humor horror movies, is already banking on feelings of ressentiment that come close to those exploited by populist and authoritarian leaders. While right-wing conspiracies deflect feelings of grievance and rejection spawned by social and economic inequality into ideologies against migrants, foreigners, and others, the liberal variant redirects them on the rich and wealthy. This is certainly less off topic. After all, for inequality to be a problem some people have to be unjustifiably better off than others. But social and economic inequality are systemic and so attacking (literally) the state of being rich seems to do little in understanding (or attacking) inequality as a totalizing power. In that way, the films undermine their critical potential, sustaining the system that is their source. "Off with their heads!".

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This month, we are publishing our coverage from the 10th Primanima World Festival of First Animations in Budaörs, Hungary (October 5-8). In Hungary, Julia Skala reviewed Signe Baumane's semi-autobiographical *My Love Affair With Marriage*, Réka Bucsi's *Intermission* – a short abstract exercise – as well as Tomek Ducki's *Plantarium* and Sander Joon's *Sierra* – two films that address issues related to the relationship between father and son. In our Interviews section, you will find conversations with both Bucsi and Ducki. We are also publishing Zoe Aiano's discussion of Otilia Babara's *Love is Not an Orange* that retraces a major change in family life caused by Moldova's transition to capitalism, and Colette de Castro's review of Natasha Merkulova and Aleksey Chupov's *Captain Volkonogov Escaped*, an aestheticized take on the Soviet Great Terror (1936-1938).

We hope you enjoy our reads.
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Editors