

## EDITORIAL

### Editorial

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Realism is an odd category for cinema. During the silent and early sound eras of the 1920s and 1930s, cultural critic Ilya Ehrenburg used the term “dream factory” to describe, not without cynicism, how film studios applied industrial methods to manufacture human fantasy and emotion. The phrase crossed into the American lexicon through fan magazines and gossip columns, where it began to take on a new meaning. For a nation trapped in the bleak reality of the Great Depression, the image of Hollywood as a “dream factory” held a double promise. It offered escape from daily hardship through mass-produced fantasy; but it also provided reassurance that the factory, and by extension, the broader American industry, was still functioning as a public utility that promised jobs for the masses just as it promised stardom for the fortunate few. In other words, while the screen supplied the fantasy, the offscreen delivered another one, not entirely unrelated to the first, considering that the broken industries presumably pushed the crowds into the movies in the first place. President Roosevelt famously [remarked](#), “When the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time, it is a splendid thing that for just fifteen cents an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby, and forget his troubles.”

Many critics, of course, saw right through these apparent contradictions. Writing in the *New Freeman* in August 1930, the Marxist film critic Harry Alan Potamkin observed that the American movie systematically falsified working-class life: “Today the worker is either a clown, or a populist swashbuckler who gets the girl. The America that boasted of its creed of labor has the young toiler reveal himself as the son of the millionaire. The building worker, together with the thug, can shout his manhood, but evades the implications of his ‘career.’”<sup>1</sup>

It is stunning how often such attacks at realism leave reality undefined. Of course, a falsification charge such as that workers are usually not sons of millionaires, is as trivial as it does not require a positive account of what workers truly are. Yet, the falsification charge also comes with a cathartic charm that may not be all too different from that of the audiences forgetting their troubles. Having seen through the machinery of spectacle, the critic who

catches Hollywood lying about the worker comes away with the conviction that he, unlike the duped mass, knows how workers truly feel. The exposure of the false image certifies an intimacy with the real one. To this comes a protective gesture toward the worker on whose behalf the exposure is performed, an imagined figure who must be shielded from a false narrative of his plight. The fantasy of the dream factory finds its counterpart here. Where the screen resolves the worker's troubles with an inheritance, the critique resolves them with the certainty of knowing them better, but only the former ever claimed to be a fantasy.

What applied to the "laborer," in Potamkins' account, also applied to the "Negro, Jew, foreigner generally [who] become butts or objects of a quasi-pathos. The terminal of 'the final kiss,' the happy ending, or even its arbitrary reversal in the unhappy ending, is evasion of experience,"<sup>2</sup> he protested. One may add the sex-worker to this list, which Hollywood has traditionally confined to stories of redemption or ruin: the prostitute is rescued into marriage or punished by violence, and the industry has awarded Oscars to both endings, most recently to *Anora*. Recent TV shows like "Margo's Got Money Troubles," and "Euphoria," try to redefine these tropes by giving more agency to the heroines. Nevertheless, the falsification charges kept rumbling in with, e.g., *Variety* [claiming](#) Margo "feels false," and several outlets interviewing real sex-workers on their opinions in this regard ([Dazed](#), [Variety](#)). The *New Yorker's* Inkoo Kang ran a [piece](#) in May 2026, on both shows calling them equally unrealistic. According to the author, the happy ending of *Margo* is a fairy tale that "never lets you forget its agenda"; the unhappy ending of *Euphoria* recycles "hoary tropes"; a truthful narrative of modern sex work, the review concludes, "remains hard to find."

Realism is an odd category for cinema. While Kang's charges are undoubtedly true, the review positions its reader between two duped audiences, the one taking *Euphoria* for a warning and the one taking *Margo* for an act of emancipation, and offers passage to a third position from which both fantasies are visible as fantasies. But, had *Euphoria* ended in reconciliation and *Margo* in ruin, wouldn't the verdict against realism still stand? Would the need to uncover the fantasy not remain? The exposure again certifies intimacy with the real referent: the reviewer, having caught both series lying about the creator economy, writes on behalf of the typical creator. More than plea for less fantasy, then, the realism charge is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in which the reviewer can perform a protective gesture towards the marginalized group they feel the need to protect. That this grants that group more agency is, well, unrealistic.

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In this month's issue, you will find two more reviews from this year's Cannes film festival. Anastasia Eleftheriou critiques the vantage point of Andrey

Zviagintsev's award-winning [Minotaur](#), while Manolis Kranakis links the mainstream form of László Nemes' [Moulin](#) to the trajectory of his filmmaking career. Incidentally, both films were (co-)produced in host country France. Anna Batori launches her coverage of the recent Karlovy Vary Film Festival with a review of [Because I Have To](#) by Jakub Kučera, which dwells on the work of conceptual artist Miloš Šejn without bothering to contextualize it. Zoe Aiano revisits [A Hungarian Village](#), an intimate documentary by Judit Elek about womanhood that is poised between its historical background and timeless relevance. Finally, at the Transilvania Film Festival Cluj, Jack Page saw [No Ghosts on Good Street](#) by Emi Buchwald, a magical realist story of self-destructive tension and mutual support, as well as Pepa Lubojacki's [If Pigeons Turned to Gold](#), a personal film about addiction.

We hope you enjoy our reads.  
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer  
Editors

1. Potamkin, H. A. (1977). *The compound cinema: The film writings of Harry Alan Potamkin* (L. Jacobs, Ed.). Teachers College Press, p. 153. [↩](#)
2. Potamkin, 1977, p. 155. [↩](#)