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EDITORIAL

Editorial

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Hollywood's recent return to the eighties has become a genre of its own. *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) proved that audiences would turn up for practical stunts and period hits, and the industry took note. *The Fall Guy* (2024), *Beverly Hills Cop: Axel F* (2024), and the *Road House* (2024) remake have each tried a version of that formula. A retrospective look at the original films, however, often exposes uncomfortable cultural norms and may explain the drive to develop more sanitized versions. Sexist jokes, for example, are standard banter. In the first *Top Gun*, Iceman insults Maverick and Goose after they finish second in a flight exercise, telling them, "The plaque for the alternates is down in the ladies' room." Contemporary revival films minimally fix such *faux pas*, offering audiences a more comfortable trip down memory lane but stopping short of total deconstruction. They return audiences to a moment when geopolitical enemies, gender roles, and male friendship all felt settled, then attaches a dose of contemporary doubt to that same premise, enough to provide an ideological alibi, but not enough to disrupt the reactionary thrill of nostalgia.

Mayday (2026), directed by John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein, mashes up three eighties' staples: the buddy-cop picture, the Cold War spy thriller, and the fighter-pilot blockbuster in the mold of *Top Gun*. Troy "Assassin" Kelly (Ryan Reynolds), a Navy pilot shot down over the Soviet Union on a black-ops mission in 1987, crash-lands in the backyard of Nikolai Ustinov (Kenneth Branagh), a former KGB agent who has spent years enamored with American culture. As the American is tied to a bed recovering from the fall, Ustinov urges him to wait out the Cold War there. To make him feel at home, he proudly puts a bootlegged VHS copy of *Top Gun* into his Elektronika VM-12. Troy, however, escapes anyway, then is set upon by locals at a nearby bar, and gets pulled out by Ustinov, whose combat skills expose his KGB past. Helping an American marks Ustinov as a target too, and the two head for the U.S. embassy in Moscow together, chased by the KGB operative Alexander Volkov (Marcin Dorociński) and hunted by their own governments.

Critics have read this pairing as a break from the genre's usual good-versus-

evil framing. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, Mary McNamara singled out the film's treatment of "the peril and hypocrisy of attempts to politically paint nations as righteous or evil" as one of its real interests. With U.S. moral supremacy becoming harder to justify, the old Cold War binary no longer gets a free pass. *Red Dawn* (1984), *Rocky IV* (1985), and the mid-eighties Bond entries *Octopussy* (1983), *A View to a Kill* (1985), and *The Living Daylights* (1987) ran on a simple substitution: national identity stood in for moral argument. *Rocky IV* never explains what Ivan Drago has done to deserve defeat beyond fighting for the Soviet team. It thus comes as no small relief that *Mayday* complicates its own substitution: Troy learns, from the KGB agent (Marcin Dorociński) hunting him, that the U.S. Navy knowingly exposed its own shipyard workers, his father among them, to asbestos, and concludes that he "didn't know there were good people here." The revelation resurfaces once more, but never as doubts about the mission or the country asking Troy to risk his life for it. Similarly, the script abandons the traditional damsel in distress trope. Anna (Maria Bakalova) does not serve as a romantic prize for Troy to extract from Moscow. Instead, the film establishes her as a lesbian who fights the system from the inside.

What drives the commercial appeal of corrected nostalgia? The Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič describes the broader psychology behind this mechanism as "fetishistic disavowal." The modern spectator recognizes the political regressions of earlier eras yet demands the emotional comfort those past decades provided. To consume unadulterated nostalgia provokes political guilt. The brief injection of modern critique acts as an ideological alibi. The narrative pays a superficial toll to current cultural expectations. This structural compromise grants the audience immediate absolution. Viewers experience the visceral thrill of absolute binaries free from the reputational costs of reactionary politics. In this view, the eighties revival concedes a fault in the old certainties, only to keep enjoying them unchanged.

The fetishistic nature of this disavowal becomes apparent when revisiting film history. The assumption that *Mayday* dismantles a standard eighties good-versus-evil binary ignores the Mikhail Gorbachev era of *perestroika*. Late-eighties Hollywood had already abandoned that rigid geopolitical framing. *Red Heat* (1988) and *Iron Eagle II* (1988) established the US-Soviet action bromance where political adversaries fight on the same side. *Mayday* openly borrows from the latter. Troy gives his watch to a local Russian family who offer the fugitives shelter. In the 1988 original, Arnold Schwarzenegger, in the role of the Soviet, and Jim Belushi exchange watches at an airport terminal. Schwarzenegger summarizes the ideological truce: "We are police officers not politicians. It's okay to like each other." In that sense, the contemporary blockbuster corrects a historical rigidness that had already dissolved. Today, when very little in the present offers certainty, the desire to imagine a past that felt wholesome may be especially prominent. Wanting the 1980s without its gender roles, or a national pride without the costs of hegemony, is a way of

asking whether the comfort of that era is separable from the harms that sustained it.

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In this month's issue, Daniel Schwartz reports from the Golden Apricot Film Festival in Yerevan, where he saw Tamara Stepanyan's *In the Land of Arto*, a film about grief that leans heavily into its co-production identity, and *Here, Elsewhere* by Comes Chahbazian, which chronicles life in Nagorno-Karabakh with the help of an iPhone. Anna Batori finds a favorite from this year's Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in Martina Buchelová's *Lover, Not a Fighter*, which builds a persuasive whole from seemingly unimportant episodes. Finally, Jaroslav Cibulka returns to Jan Těšitel's 2015 debut feature *David* and reflects on the extent to which it may anticipate the Czech director's subsequent work. The review accompanies an in-depth conversation with Těšitel about the challenges and reality of building a filmmaking career in a small Central European industry.

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