

DVD reviews

Rogue One: A Star Wars Story (Gareth Edwards US 2016). Walt Disney Studios 2017. Region 1. 2.39:1 widescreen. US\$23.

Sean Guynes-Vishniac

After the release of *Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas US 2005), the third film in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy in 2005, George Lucas and Lucasfilm had no plans to add further feature films to the multi-billion-dollar franchise. This was in part because fans of the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977–83) hated the prequels, and because Lucas was now interested in television, starting with the animated series *The Clone Wars* (2008–14, 2019). When Disney bought Lucasfilm, they announced a new trilogy extending the saga of the Skywalker family, and several standalone non-saga ‘anthology’ films to fill narrative gaps in the universe; *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* is the first of these anthology films. Its position raises important questions about the contemporary state of the transmedia sf franchise, while its narrative looks at the limits and possibilities of sf blockbusters’ political work.

To provide an easy entry into the franchise’s storyworld, *Rogue One* offers a cast of new characters that fit (and slightly modify) well-known franchise types: protagonist Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones), for example, pairs the scruffiness of Han Solo with the paternal drama of Luke Skywalker; Chirrut Îmwe (Donnie Yen) takes on the Jedi mystique and mentor role of Obi-Wan Kenobi; K-2SO (Alan Tudyk) is the non-human, comedy-relief sidekick, a cynical update of C-3PO. Cassian Andor (Diego Luna), however, stands out thematically, mixing the scoundrel qualities of Solo with the risky charm of Lando Calrissian, and bringing a moral ambiguity to the normally black-and-white world of Jedi and Sith; perhaps these qualities have led to Andor’s being named as the protagonist of one of the upcoming *Star Wars* series on the new streaming service Disney+.

Rogue One exists to solve a narrative problem: namely, the convenience of the Death Star’s too-good-to-be-true design flaw: a small hole large enough for a single proton torpedo to detonate the entire moon-sized space station. *Rogue One* is thus a two-hour exercise in retconning. It begins with a prologue that establishes Jyn as a tragic figure whose mother is murdered by stormtroopers at the order of Orson Krennic (Ben Mendelsohn), director of the Death Star build, and whose father, Galen (Mads Mikkelsen), is forced to return to work as a designer of the Empire’s superweapon. The family, we later learn, had been

ensconced in the Imperial technoscience bureaucracy, but fled the Empire for political reasons, building ties in the process with what became the Rebel Alliance. The prologue stresses the tight bond between father and daughter, a heartstring on which the entire plot plucks. Her parents gone, Jyn is left with Saw Gerrera (Forest Whitaker), who raises Jyn as a Rebel before discarding her; her parentage is a liability.

Following the prologue, a breakneck first act flits back and forth between characters and scenarios to familiarise the political stakes of the film's present. Jyn is rescued from a work camp by the Rebels and joined with Cassian to search for Bodhi (merely a MacGuffin), who bears a secret message from her father, and is in the hands of Gerrera's Rebels on Jedha. The act nicely summarises the fallout of *Rogue One's* well-documented production woes. Lucasfilm chose indie director Gareth Edwards, previously responsible for the sf feature *Monsters* (UK 2010) and the successful franchise reboot *Godzilla* (US/Japan 2014), to helm *Rogue One*, aiming to revitalise *Star Wars's* auteurist credits while also hedging with a director already versed in franchise filmmaking. But Edwards delivered a film that required extensive reconceptualisation; the original cut was rearranged, key scenes shown in early publicity were reduced or dropped, and significant portions were newly written or reshot, mostly by credited co-writer Tony Gilroy. The first act is a microcosm of the chaotic result, a slapdash attempt to make sense of ill-fitting puzzle pieces, strung together to induce narrative whiplash and flatten potentially interesting characters into boring cogs.

The second act is set on Jedha, a Jedi holy site and home to superlaser-powering kyber crystals. Jyn and Cassian arrive just in time for the Imperial withdrawal from Jedha (set as a test site for the new superlaser) and find themselves in the midst of Gerrera's attacks on the remaining Imperial presence. The simplicity of the *Star Wars* franchise's politics – the cautious Rebels and their conservative Jedi supporters, good; the Empire and its expansive tyranny, bad – has long been at issue with contemporary global politics. As Roy Scranton notes in a July 2016 essay for the *New York Times*, "'Star Wars' and the Fantasy of American Violence', it is increasingly obvious in the post-9/11 era of American military incursions into the Middle East, ostensibly to maintain world order, that the US is the Empire, and the insurgents the Rebellion. Edwards's Jedha and Gerrera's Rebels read as a direct response to Scranton's epiphany. For one, Jedha is an isolated desert city under Imperial occupation, with stormtroopers and tanks patrolling the main city and spouting propagandistic claims via loudspeaker that 'Truth and Justice are tools of the Empire.' Jedha's design, from costuming and architecture to sound, suggests diverse non-Western influences, especially

Arabic and Buddhist. Radical Islam (terrorists, freedom fighters, or otherwise) seems to be the intended analogue of Gerrera and his faction, which Mothma labels 'extremist', a word with clear significations today. Indeed, with the exception of a few creature-shop aliens, the attack on the stormtroopers that Jyn and Cassian join is led by Rebels primarily dressed in red and black robes, turbans and face coverings. They are outgunned insurgents sticking a thorn in the side of Imperial occupation, expansion and resource acquisition. When Jyn and Cassian do meet with Gerrera in his desert fortress, they find a paranoid, broken fighter barking about 'the cause' and 'the dream', a far cry from the stately composure of Mothma's Rebel Alliance. It is Gerrera's 'extremist' impulse to 'Save the dream!' that becomes the politico-affective impetus for Jyn's mission to get her father's secret message of a weakness in the Death Star to the Rebellion (the topic of the penultimate act), and that leads (in the final act) to her heading a mission to infiltrate the Imperial database archive on Scariff despite a council of Rebel Alliance leaders nixing it.

In a strange and shocking twist for an American blockbuster, the ideological enemy of the US state, and the primary target of its hyperviolent foreign policy for decades, is here barely disguised as the good guys, a more just faction within the Rebellion that, through the temporally unbounded logics of franchise world-building, ultimately allows the victory of *Star Wars* (1977) to come about. In this way, Edwards acknowledges the shifting political meanings of the *Star Wars* saga and reinvests them with a subversive critique of American imperialism in the age of terrorism. Now *we* are Reagan's Evil Empire. But *Rogue One's* political vision goes beyond a reframing (and complicating) of good and bad in the *Star Wars* storyworld to also raise important questions about the state of political life under neoliberalism.

This is perhaps best demonstrated in the scene just prior to Jyn's AWOL mission to Scariff, where she attempts to convince Rebellion leaders that Galen's message of a critical weakness in the Imperial superweapon is sincere. Here, various factions of the Rebel Alliance offer input on how to proceed. The speakers are largely aristocratic in dress and speech, standing before and representing a room of bureaucratic underlings and soldiers: the Rebellion's labourers. Absent are extremists like Gerrera, now dead. If these Rebels indeed fit the picture of the Left facing the fascist, tyrannical forces of empire (and what could have more resonance following Donald Trump's election?), they do so because they highlight the squabbling among Leftists (and liberals) to choose a course of action, organise for change, and mobilise in the face of political defeat. Jyn's call for a direct and immediate strike at Scariff cuts through the puffery of those Rebel leaders cautioning against too-rash moves.

One wishes in the Age of Trump, arrayed against this Empire, that our own political sions were as forthcoming as Jyn (if not armed with better dialogue).

As the site of the film's climax, Scariff is invested with enormous symbolic power. Following the theme of violent insurgents versus an empire, Scariff might productively be read as a colonial infrastructural centre far removed from the metropolises of governance and order, and thus hardly able to respond to an insurgent threat. Much like the Death Star and the building project that Galen sabotaged, Scariff is an example of poor colonial infrastructural maintenance, common in the far-flung reaches of imperial colonies. That's really what is at the heart of *Rogue One*, after all: the question of infrastructure under neoliberalism and, as Scariff's far-flung, Maldives-shot setting suggests, neocolonialism. While many critics and viewers joked that a space-opera Empire governing thousands of star systems would not rely on such an easily penetrable analogue file storage system, these responses gesture to a contradiction in the current state of records keeping, management and security in the US, reflecting fears about government agencies' poor storage of critical information or about information leaks leading to disastrous results for American foreign policy or political campaigns. The lengthy battle on Scariff that brings about the deaths of Jyn and her crew thus dramatises the state of information security in the US, privileging the leakage of such information for the benefit of toppling its protectors.

That *Rogue One* sacrifices nearly its entire cast to bring compromising information to the Rebellion underlines the fact that it is a multi-million-dollar fuss over the realism of the Death Star's 1977 design flaw. The premise highlights the fundamental instability and contingency of a technologically mediated life, of the massive systems of infrastructure upon which post-industrial life – and the futures promised by sf – are balanced. *Rogue One* seeks to rationalise infrastructural flaws through what the film and the Lucasfilm Story Group imagine as a neatly closed narrative system, flawless and purposeful. But in doing so the film reminds audiences that the fatal flaws are built purposefully (or accidentally, or through oversight as a result of pressures caused by the systems themselves) into the machines of contemporary life. They always have been. And just as the original Death Star ripped through the wealth, prosperity and royal privilege of a planet central to the Galactic Empire's administration – Alderaan – so too do the fundamental gaps in infrastructure and the contradictions of neoliberalism ravage the elites praising the systems of power. While infrastructural failure is certainly much more common where the disenfranchised are likely to be most affected, occasions such as the fall of a bridge or the meltdown of a nuclear power plant demonstrate the potential of such systems

to threaten all life. *Rogue One* is in some ways, then, an allegory that casts itself broadly, netting where it can the real and projected costs of global warming, nuclear holocaust, terrorism and the failure of government, federal and local, to invest seriously in infrastructure. At the same time, we must not forget, it is one more billion-dollar seller for the Disney–*Star Wars* union.

To be sure, *Rogue One* is a frustrating film. From the thin plot, however, a surprisingly acute politics emerges. It is a timely example of how the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism manifest not just in the nooks and crannies of popular culture, but also in its main attractions, in billion-dollar box-office smashes. Moreover, *Rogue One*'s links between the Empire and post-9/11 American foreign and domestic policy are now networking across the franchise as the film encourages new collaborations between individual creators and *Star Wars*' licensors, resulting, for example, in Christie Golden's novel *Star Wars: Battlefront II: Inferno Squadron*, which details the Empire's military response to lax infrastructure security. *Rogue One* and its many dilemmas suggest that, even in the midst of unprecedented, unchecked transmedia expansion, the sf franchise's blockbusters retain the possibility for critical interventions in the social, political, economic and aesthetic discourses of the contemporary [AQ1] – however tenuous, however 'by design'.



Star Trek Beyond (Justin Lin US 2016). Paramount Pictures DVD 2016. Region 1. 1.85:1 widescreen. US\$12.56.

Cait Coker

To say the recent trilogy of *Star Trek* reboot films – or 'Kelvin Timeline' in the licensed parlance – had a mixed reception by franchise fans is a severe understatement. In rewriting a timeline, they effectively rewrote characterisations, technology and ideology; Pike's description of Starfleet as a 'humanitarian and peacekeeping armada' in the 2009 J.J. Abrams film never ceases to astonish me. If the first film was fun (as long as you did not think about it too hard), and the second was a mess, the third film, surprisingly, creates intellectual coherence and a return to form for the franchise. (That no female crew members had to strip down to their underwear for no apparent reason was a happy bonus.) Indeed, in the post-Trump world, *Star Trek Beyond* is an incredible political parable that I do not think was adequately appreciated when it came out during the summer of 2016. The plot of the third instalment is this: it is about a reactionary, xenophobic old man who hates the new world