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On Nemik

Thoughts on Andor

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I have no love for Disney. I have soured on most big franchise properties, including the juggernaut space fantasy that is *Star Wars*. I am exhausted, like many, by stories that mirror and revolve around US-based discourse and history, by US cultural imperialism lording over popular culture, and by its most overt operative, The Mouse. It feels like nothing can happen outside of the US without something happening within the US that everyone in mainstream media latches onto, and that spills into cinema, television, and several other cultural industries.

And then, in 2022, along came *Andor: A Star Wars Story*. A prequel series to a prequel film – *Rogue One* – with a troubled production and release. A series steeped in the Star Wars universe, and yet so unlike anything Star Wars has produced since its shaky allusions to the Vietnam war during George Lucas' first trilogy.

I loved it. Many people did. Some, inevitably, got very angry about what it had to say. Now, with a second season due for release in April 2025, and with the creeping encroachment of fascism across the world, I decided to watch it again. For comfort, perhaps, or solace.

‘Remember this. Try.’ The final words of the first season of *Andor* come from Karis Nemik (Alex Lawther), who is busy writing an actual manifesto the first time we meet him in episode 4. Nemik is part of an incursion team of grassroots rebels, planning to sabotage and infiltrate an Imperial garrison in order to steal the wages for a sizeable chunk of the Imperial forces. The mission is intended as a display of power, a confirmation that there is indeed a movement against Imperial rule – but moreover as an attempt to secure more funding for the rebel cause.

Rebellions may be built on hope – certainly that is the message of *Rogue One* – but showrunner Tony Gilroy shows us the unfortunate truth that they also need money. Rebellions are forced to use the tools of their oppressor, be it actual tools, weapons, or the crux of it all: capital. The visual metaphor of Nemik literally being crushed by the money they stole, causing his death later in the episode, is almost too on the nose.

Capital, and the necessity of accessing it to fund activities across the galaxy-spanning Rebellion, is an overt constant made explicit throughout *Andor*. Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård) secures funding for the budding rebel movement disguised as an art collector; Mon Mothma (Genevieve O’Reilly) funnels personal funds to Luthen while continuing to try and do good in the Imperial Senate; the titular Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) starts out as a thief, then becomes a mercenary looking to score big so he can finally retire with his ageing mother.

Even in a galaxy far, far away, capital forces everyone to work alone, to sacrifice their wellbeing and connections, to sever themselves from community as a result of the alienation that capitalism creates and reinforces. On the working-class planet of Ferrix, virtually everyone is ‘employed’ by a single corporation under Imperial control. In the panopticon prison complexes of Narkina 5, prisoners are pitted against their peers to compete for the promise of more taste in their food and one fewer chance of electrocution.

But rebelling against that alienation, leads to its own form of alienation – if you work alone. In episode 10 Luthen gives us one of the series' best monologues, proof of the failure of the firebrand/solo revolutionary model: 'I wake up every day to an equation I wrote fifteen years ago for which there is only one conclusion: I am damned for what I do. [...] I yearn to be a saviour against injustice without contemplating the cost and by the time I look down, there's no longer any ground beneath my feet.'

The realisation of personal sacrifice of the main male 'mentor' figure reveals how the nascent Rebellion is much bigger than just one iconic character. How much he has lost and will lose by operating as a solitary agent across the various cells (including the wonderfully anarcho-terrorist one led by Forest Whitaker's Saw Gerrera). How much he still feels he needs to do alone. Nemik, by contrast, has already realised the truth: 'the frontier of the Rebellion is everywhere. And even the smallest act of insurrection pushes our lines forward.'

I write during the anniversary of the death of Lorenzo Orsetti, an Italian anarchist who was killed in 2019 while fighting with the Syrian Democratic Forces in Rojava. In his last letter back home, he wrote (*my translation*): 'I know that times are hard, but don't give in to resignation, don't lose hope, ever! [...] Remember that every storm starts with a single drop. Be that drop.' Collective action is the only way to liberation; community is the only antidote to the alienation of capitalism and the re-emergence of fascism.

In this moment, I rewatch this series and hope that the last vestige of something I was so involved in for most of my life can stick its landing. I rewatch this series in the full knowledge of having the privilege to do so amid deportations, trade wars, illegal detentions, upsetting elections, and the regurgitation of fascism in at least two countries I have called my home. I rewatch this series and I am reminded that it's not the actions of the single individual – no matter what classic fantasy, Hollywood, and Western media has trained us to believe – that lead to revolution, to liberation.

Most of the main characters – Cassian, Luthen, Mon Mothma, even Maarva – eventually learn the value, the necessity of relying on other people, of building a community, of being part of that community. Again, Nemik’s words make the message explicit: ‘Authority is brittle. Oppression is the mask of fear. Remember that. And know this: the day will come when all these skirmishes and battles, these moments of defiance will have flooded the banks of the Empire’s authority and then there will be one too many. One single thing will break the siege.’

It feels like anything we do, *everything* we do is futile, too small, not enough to effect any form of meaningful change. I know I feel it, daily, as I bring myself to type words while several genocides are being carried out by the countries where I live and where I pay taxes, funding those very same acts. It becomes exhausting, trying to keep up to date with everything happening on the macro-level, while dealing with the micro-realities of everyday resistance and sometimes pure survival. ‘It’s easier to hide behind forty atrocities than a single incident.’ Nemik, again, being very on the nose at this moment in time for many in the West who have just realised they are no longer safe, and probably never have been.

It feels like we’re alone, complicit witnesses to massacres and the rise of authoritarian despots. That is the system working as intended. Oppression requires constant effort. Authority is brittle. It can be broken. In fact, it will be broken. Small drops of resistance, random acts of insurrection, out of need. Communities reaching a breaking point. If nothing else, a series like *Andor* shows the power and potential of art as a vehicle for a radical message, one that isn’t even that subtle.

We’ve seen this type of comfort come from the most disparate films and series in the past: most notable to my interests, the recent South Korean protests featured a symbol and plot point from *Transformers One*; back in 2016, *Rogue One* sparked a similar use of the Rebellion symbol, though in a much more virtue-signalling

form than actual protest. Likewise, popular media regularly draws from political tensions, however simplified; *Star Wars* specifically has also been used as a recruitment tool for nazi-adjacent spaces, at least in the US. *Andor* pushes back and goes one step further than its predecessors, perhaps, in showing the different sides that revolution can take, and what is necessary for true change to happen. It does so by showing us the romanticised, idealised trope of the lonely revolutionary, the firebrand, the schemer, and then reminding us that working alone, being a single drop, cannot achieve those goals. Drop after drop, coordinated efforts, establishing networks and communities beyond our individual egos – that is what true resistance looks like. The system is designed to make us feel alone, but it doesn’t have to be that way. If nothing else, remember this: try.