

When Star Wars is Apolitical

In a 1946 essay, "Why I Write," George Orwell claimed that to deny the political message of a work of art was in itself a political message. "...No book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude."

In December of 2016, Bob Iger, CEO of Disney, one of the largest purveyor of popular media in the world, stated that the film *Rogue One*, the latest entry in the Star Wars series, was a film that was devoid of political meaning. "There are no political statements in it, at all."

Star Wars does have a political statement, has a raft of them, in fact, each and every one of them blandly reactionary to the point of being unnoticeable. Star Wars is a comfort series, and in comfort there can be little that is radical. We understand what is coming at all moments, the beats are anticipated and delivered on schedule. There is action, battles and so on, but there is no shock, only a dull plod towards the inevitable that becomes more wincing with every new iteration. The Rebels will steal the Death Star plans, no matter how precariously the heroes dangle over steep precipices, or how many stormtroopers show up to blast them. There will be some allusion to the vague mysticism of the Force, characters will crack jokes in between moments of intense melodrama, and there will be enough new threads about ships, weapons, stormtrooper ranks, and exotic locales generated to maintain interest for the knowledge-obsessive fanbase that has forever kept the Star Wars product mill going.

The political nature of Star Wars is in its very rejection of politics while taking on the aesthetics of the political. Each trilogy has carried the weight of its military inspiration upon its breast, and war is nothing if not the most politicized act one can be a part of. In basing itself off the moralized struggle of WWII, Star Wars cemented itself as a play of good vs evil. It was the righteous crusade of the rebels against the totalitarianism of the Galactic Empire. It was a throwback to a simplified narrative for a time mired in decidedly unsimplified narratives of politics and character, a fairy tale after an age of dramas. Wars after WWII were messy and complicated, but WWII had been held up as a beacon of all the right reasons to go to war. Snugly fit into a narrative that most of America assumes as the de-facto interpretation, populated by stock characters from old adventure serials, with enough exotic flair in the form of FX spectacle, Star Wars was revolutionary in its ability to take tired, worn out visions and make them feel alive again. The opening statement of each mainline Star Wars film, "A long time ago..", rings truer when you understand that Star Wars is, at its core, about ideas that wouldn't be out of place in a 1950s action serial.

Rogue One, the first of the non-episodic Star Wars movies, is exactly what it sounds like, a rogue element in a struggle between two powers of which the Rebels represent the lesser evil. We continue to know nothing about what the rebels want to do beyond restoring the republic, which we do know from the prequels was an institution that failed in its basic task of maintaining galactic peace. In restoring the Republic they will presumably right all the wrongs done to the galaxy, without ever fully explaining what that means. Even when the Republic was at its height, slavery was apparently common, there was mass corruption, impoverishment, crime, and war broke out over petty economic squabbles. If the Republic's meant to represent some golden age of freedom and liberty in the galaxy, it does a rather poor job of making that age seem like something worth looking back to for the people born in poverty on Tatooine or in the slums of Coruscant.

Ultimately it does not matter, the Empire is a shell for whatever the specific *mauvais du jour* happens to be. Yesterday it was the Nazis and their allies, today it is Trump and his white supremacists. There is nothing wrong with this besides being lazy, people are free to make allusions to whatever they want if they think it will work, but one must bear in mind that there is no nuance here. Evil is cast as titanically evil, but also vacuous enough that any modern ideology can be pushed into its place. It is why today one can go online and read claims that the Right is the Empire, while also reading that the Democrats (though sometimes broadly and wrongly referred to as the “Left”) are the Empire defeated. Within itself, Star Wars has no position on this.

Back in *Rogue One*, our heroine, Jyn Erso, is established as a hardened, brutal partisan fighter, brought into the rebel fold after the death of one parent and the abduction of another. Again, this is in tune with Star Wars’ apolitical narrative. Some could argue that this is parallel to our own wars where the children of slain civilians grow up to be terrorist fighters, but that shows a terrible naïveté in conflating real-world motivations with the fictional motivations shown in Star Wars. In real life the decision to become a part of a militant resistance movement is brought about by a complex series of ideological motivators, outside forces, limited others means of expression, and survivalist desperation. Jyn Erso, on the other hand, devoid of these factors, is a being driven by revenge.

Raised up in war by an ostracized guerrilla leader, she is laconic and elite, the two qualities that now define the praise-worthy soldier in modern film. She is the equivalent of the master operator, the hard-bitten veteran in spite of her age, an outsider to the main resistance organization, who possesses an understanding of the war that is beyond even the high-ranking members of the Rebellion. When she does speak, it is to move others to action, and only the bravest, most dedicated rebels are willing to heed her call. In keeping with the Star Wars motif of drawing upon ancient stories, she is the hero whose vision leads others to glory, possessing the *augenblick*, the ability to see the moment where action, not deliberation, is needed.

Her main comrade-paladins include a reprogrammed Imperial droid and a Rebel assassin named Cassian Andor. Like many war films, Jyn Erso must earn the respect of her fellow fighters by displaying her dedication to the cause and to her own moral compass, of which one pole is unflinching familial loyalty and other a will to sacrifice herself for the good of the Rebellion. In so many words, she is driven by a distinct feeling of martyrdom. There are other comrades, but much like the expendable characters of other war films, they are a bundle of quirks to be projected upon. There is a character who hauls a heavy laser blaster, a blind monk-adherent of the force, a squirrely Imperial turn-coat whose piloting competence endears him to the other rebel commandos. They are otherwise formless, as they must be. Did all of these soldiers join the Rebellion because they were personally touched by the Empire’s tyranny? How many joined because they wanted a new social order, or an end to slavery and drudgery?

While Jyn earns the respect of her comrade-paladins in a fairly rote manner, showing martial excellence, her opposite lead, Cassian, has a mild breakdown from his actions within the rebellion. Portrayed initially as a cold-hearted killer in service of the Rebellion, Jyn’s filial piety (in contrast to Cassian’s own secret orders to kill her father) eventually wins him over, causing him to reflect that he has done “terrible things” for the Rebellion. It’s a conflict that suggests that there is a limit to the actions that can be taken when fighting for freedom (as a member of a liberating resistance movement.)

This position, this very feeling, makes no sense. When a member of the women's defense brigade of Rojava was asked how many ISIS fighters she'd killed, she responded with "None, I do not kill men, I kill animals." To have a character in Star Wars mimic this sentiment when fighting the Empire, knowing that the Empire is willing to kill billions upon billions of people, would be the most rational thing in the world. To suggest otherwise is an attempt at political thought that shrivels up the moment it is exposed to sunlight, an attempt at ambiguity and the "oh, they can be just as bad" sentiment that's meant to signal maturity of thought. Written in a liberal time, in a still quite liberal country, no character in Star Wars can summon up the emotion of what it actually means to live under a spectre of tyranny and to take up arms against it simply because no one allowed to pen a Star Wars script could possibly know that feeling. What would the Rebellion look like if it were penned by a Subcommandante Marcos? Or a member of the PLA? Nothing like what we see on screen.

Jyn, and by extension her comrades, know that the Death Star represents an existential threat to the Rebellion, they have seen it, though all solid proof has been destroyed. Lacking the official support of the Rebel leaders, Jyn and her comrades, self-designated as Rogue One in a fit of panic by their pilot, choose to engage in a mission to an Imperial citadel to steal the plans and, very likely, die in the process. This is a replication of scenes that were fairly common in the early 90s action movies. The heroes would turn to a bureaucratic government for a response and would be told that the best course of action is to do nothing or concede to the demands of the enemy. The hero, knowing that justice cannot be done by going through the normal channels, stocks up on heavy weapons and takes matters into their own hands. This is, of course, very casually addressed. The rebels realize that Jyn and Co. have attacked the citadel and find they have no choice but to help her get the Death Star plans out.

The purpose of Jyn and Co. is twofold. They must serve the narrative timeline of the Star Wars universe by successfully stealing the plans, and they must die in order to avoid any questions of why no one has ever mentioned them before. Presumably they have a small memorial tucked away in some corner of the Rebels' new base.

The deaths in themselves become an extended series of drudgeries. There are long, languishing moments that reminds one of terrible old westerns and films where death has to be embellished as much as possible. Jyn's mentor Saw Gerrera, for no reason other than the remove himself from the plot, allows himself to be killed earlier in the movie by a low-power blast from the Death Star, which sets the tone for every other death. Rogue One is a certain kind of war movie, something in the vein of Lone Survivor or 13 Hours, with the obligatory Saving Private Ryan thrown in and all of it filtered through a Star Wars lens. Combat abates long enough for a character to get a few last words and die in the arms of his comrade, another dies in a drawn out hail of blaster fire holding off a wave of stormtroopers, another from a stray grenade. It's all grim and harkening back to the national appeal of last stands, the Alamo and Bunker Hill, glorifying every lost rebel. What's strange is that this sort of feeling is completely absent from any other Star Wars movie. With the exception of the death of Obi Wan and one shot in Return of the Jedi where one of the Ewoks mourns his dead comrade, death is largely quick and understated. Perhaps it is the scale of warfare in the original trilogy, once again owing to the massive engagements of WWII, the Battle of the Bulge and such, tanks and men and airplanes all smashing against each other, that reduces the impact of any one soldier dying. Rogue One ends up being a hidden, untold story brought to light, the sacrifices of a few brave rebels are revealed, and it is only thanks to that sacrifice that the heroes of the next movies can carry out their righteous war. They die expecting others to continue the fight and, hopefully, win.

But, because this is Star Wars, and all evil in the universe originates with the dark side of the force, there is an intrinsic duality that can never be overcome. Things that strike the audience as blatantly evil are a result of either the corruption of the dark side of the force or an affection specific to the species, like the Hutts' apparent genetic predisposition for crime, an explanation which further separates moral implications from material reality. We are all slaves to what is within us, and to cosmic forces beyond our control. A cosmic balance is forever shifting this way or that, and there is little hope of truly changing anything.

This is systolic apocalypticism, the rhythm of a heart contracting and expanding. Evil rises, then falls, then rises again, mechanically, as a natural way the universe functions. Good and evil meet in titanic, impactful moments. The extermination of the Jedi, the destruction of the first Death Star, the destruction of the Second Death Star and the death of the Emperor, these are epoch-making events that should completely shatter the existing power dynamics. The grimness of the Star Wars universe is that, 40 years later, all of this is revealed to have come to nothing. The Empire still lingers with a new name, its message apparently as strong as it ever was, with an even bigger weapon of mass destruction.

In this way, Iger is partly right. The message of Rogue One is that there is no message, there is no deeper meaning. Rogue One is reality as we now see it on television and on streams. It is war driven without any purpose, infinitely complex thanks to our own lack of understanding, pushed into a form that is meant to accommodate a near biblical interpretation of good and evil. One seeps into the other and atrophies our ability to separate the morality presented to us and the reality of our own situation. It looks like war seen from the side of gunships, war with a filter of washed-out grayness, war that is unending and bureaucratic on one side, hyper-assertive of individualism on the other.

What's most saddening about all this, as someone who was greatly affected by Star Wars as a child, is that there are moments in it where it captured the truest essence of rebellion. In perhaps one of the most visually iconic scenes of Star Wars, Luke Skywalker is looking out at the twin suns of Tatooine setting in the distance. Here is a scene that speaks to people and articulates their desires in a way that makes it profoundly moving. Luke lives a simple life, but one where his friends have left, where he finds no meaning in continuing a life of struggle as a farmer without the hope of advancing. Ignoring the specifics of his situation, what he feels is a universal feeling that should illuminate all rebellion, not to fight, but to dream. There is a similar moment in the autobiography of Frederick Douglass where, as a slave, he can see the white sails of ships in a nearby harbor, and imagines all the places they might go, carrying his own dreams along with them. He imagined that everyone possessed a harbor like that in their own hearts, the idea not only that there were exciting people and places in places beyond what one could see, but a better way of life, one of freedom, self-determination, and of respect. It would be hard to find anything so universal in Star Wars today.

This is also why Rogue One, Star Wars, the Marvel franchise, any major movie cannot ever truly be overtly political, because it would collapse in upon itself. For Star Wars to cease being apolitical would be for it to end the conflict of the light and dark sides of the force, which would be the end of its capacity to continue. An overtly political Star Wars would war against the Force itself, and reject the duality that has kept the galaxy roiled in civil war for as long as it has. The Rebellion would cease to be, as would the Empire, and what comes next would be entirely up to the writers. It would be a vision that no one has ever seen before, and would be profoundly

radical. It would elicit discussion, it would force itself upon the public consciousness in a way that no other media possibly could. But, because our media is terrified of the future, this cannot ever come to pass, the idea that Star Wars could ever end would be to reject everything that they have built so far. The true apocalypse that will eventually sweep everything away cannot ever arrive in Star Wars.

Peter Cushing, who played Grand Moff Tarkin in Star Wars: A New Hope, died in 1992. He was brought back for Rogue One with a fairly critical role, played by an actor with a facial rigging setup to allow cg artists to impose Cushing's face over his. Watching this actor try to mimic Cushing's own stiff manner of carrying himself, I knew then that to be a part of the Star Wars galaxy is to be trapped in a kind of never-ending Hell. You are bound in systolic time, the same beats ascending in spectacle but never altering in fundamental nature. We, by watching and being drawn into Star Wars, subject ourselves to the same punishment. Fate is forever at the mercy of whatever conflict is spun into existence by a set of a evil doers who will inevitably emerge to combat the righteous Jedi. Life is a series of conflicts that, no matter how gray, eventually become broken down into a duality. It will never cease, the conflict will never be resolved, and at worst, when you die, they will make a cgi puppet with your voice act out lines with other dead people from now until, by some miracle, your image stops making money.