

The Current War: Director's Cut—About Thomas Edison, electricity and the 1880s

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Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon; written by Michael Mitnick

“At 32, I wrestled nature into a glass”—Thomas Edison on his invention of the light bulb.

Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, a version of *The Current War*—which concentrates on the late 19th-century clash between legendary American inventor-businessmen Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse—was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2017. The film’s fate then became bound up with that of its producer, Harvey Weinstein, who was plunged into a sex scandal the following month and subsequently exiled from Hollywood.

The film, scheduled for release in November 2017 and with Weinstein’s name prominent in the credits, essentially disappeared from public view. *The Current War* was eventually purchased by the successor to The Weinstein Company, which then in turn sold the US distribution rights to another firm. Gomez-Rejon, after a considerable struggle, was able to gain control over the film (with the assistance of executive producer Martin Scorsese), shooting several new scenes and cutting 10 minutes from the 2017 version, whose artistic or structural difficulties he has blamed entirely on Weinstein.

Gomez-Rejon, born and raised in Laredo, Texas, certainly had every right to determine the final state of his work, but making widely publicized use of and benefiting from Weinstein’s evisceration as the means of “saving” his work does not reflect especially well on the director. One has the suspicion that if *The Current War* had something more compelling and socially critical to say about the birth of American industrial capitalism, he would have found a “higher road” by which to defend his film.

In any event, the various changes have not fundamentally altered the film nor affected its overall strengths and weaknesses.

The Current War, as noted above, takes place in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Two electric power transmission systems competed at the time for dominance in

the US. The “War of Currents” involved Edison and Westinghouse, along with Nikola Tesla, the remarkable Serbian-American inventor, to determine whether direct current (DC) or alternating current (AC) would become the standard.

Edison and his Edison Electric Light Company championed the direct-current system, in which electric current flows constantly in one direction, while Westinghouse (Westinghouse Electric Company) and Tesla promoted the alternating-current system, in which the current periodically alternates.

The film’s title plays on the media’s original name (“War of Currents”) for the conflict between the titans. As the film opens in the 1880s, Edison (Benedict Cumberbatch) has already developed the first incandescent light bulb.

Dubbed “The Wizard of Menlo Park,” after his industrial research facility in New Jersey, 25 miles from New York City, Edison secures the financial backing of the bulbous-nosed financier J.P. Morgan (Matthew Macfadyen) to light up five Manhattan blocks. Edison then hires the brilliant mathematician and engineer Tesla (Nicholas Hoult) to help solve the problem of direct current, that is, its loss of energy in transmitting over distances.

Meanwhile, Westinghouse (Michael Shannon), a Pittsburgh industrialist, collaborating with his chief engineer Frank Pope (Stanley Townsend), has begun working successfully with alternating current—the eventual future of most electrical distribution.

It’s not long before Tesla quits Edison, having failed to extract from the latter a promised \$50,000. After an unsuccessful effort to create his own firm, Tesla eventually joins forces with Westinghouse. (In 1883, Nikola Tesla developed the “Tesla coil,” a transformer that changed electricity from low voltage to high voltage.) Soon, Westinghouse has more than half as many generating stations as Edison. The race as to who will take the reins of the burgeoning electricity industry is relentless and fierce.

Attempting to thwart his rival, Edison begins to claim that Westinghouse’s system is lethal. “Just as certain as death,”

Edison announces, “Westinghouse will kill a customer within six months after he puts in a system of any size.” Soon after, Edison receives a letter from a dentist in Buffalo asking for help in creating a more humane instrument for capital punishment: the electric chair! But Edison has notably always insisted “the one device I will never build is that which takes a human life.”

In this case, however, competition trumps principles. Operating underhandedly to discredit Westinghouse, Edison works behind the scenes to associate the electric chair with Westinghouse and the dangers of AC. Death by electrocution, Edison publicly, and falsely, proclaims is the act of being “Westinghoused.”

At a certain point, Morgan, who now controls Edison’s company, merges the latter with Thomson-Houston Electric Company to form General Electric, sidelining Edison. Ultimately, Westinghouse proves successful in the current war, winning the contract for the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, and later, installing hydroelectric power at Niagara Falls—the brainchild of Tesla.

The Current War is instructive and lively, bolstered by the talents of Cumberbatch and Shannon in particular. It offers an intriguing glimpse of the birth of modern American industrial society. The movie argues that Edison developed the first industrial research laboratory—Menlo Park—not primarily for self-glorification or profit, although these were factors, but to advance human progress.

Credit should be given to the film for taking a strong stand against capital punishment. It features the first electrocution, of William Kemmler (Conor MacNeill) in Auburn, New York in August 1890. The execution lasted eight horrifying minutes. Westinghouse would later comment that “they would have done better using an axe.” A reporter who witnessed the event claimed that it was “an awful spectacle, far worse than hanging.”

Supporting actresses, Katherine Waterston as Marguerite Erskine Westinghouse and Tuppence Middleton as Mary Stilwell Edison, pull their weight in enhancing the drama. The engineer Samuel Insull (Tom Holland) is effective as Edison’s managerial counterpart. According to the Institute for Energy Research, Insull became known as the “Henry Ford of the modern electricity industry.” Insull would also become an unscrupulous business magnate and later, interestingly, one of the inspirations for the character of Charles Foster Kane in Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane*.

The collection of personalities in *The Current War* is remarkable—Edison, Westinghouse, Tesla, Insull, Pope and others. These were large figures in an era of large figures, many of them entirely ruthless and predatory. The destruction of slavery in the Civil War opened up a period of massive industrial growth in the US (the steel industry

between 1870 and 1913, for instance, grew at an *annual* rate of 7 percent).

The film’s concentration on the Edison-Westinghouse feud becomes a little tedious, perhaps a little evasive. That particular focus reaches a certain point and does not go much deeper. In general, *The Current War* presents intriguing and suggestive material, but doesn’t entirely know what to make of it. Gomez-Rejon’s ahistorical contention, for example, that the Edison-Westinghouse rivalry “reads like a 19th century version of Steve Jobs versus Bill Gates” is not helpful.

Is the legitimate fascination with this industrial-technological history bound up with a distrust of or disgust with the current crowd of “business leaders” in the US, virtually every one of them a speculator, financier, Wall Street parasite? It’s hard to say, but the filmmakers’ treatment of the 1880s and 1890s does omit the central productive force that emerged in that epoch, the working class. In a film that treats or provides images of many phenomena, from electrification to the railways, from the phonograph to the development of cinema, from capital punishment to the World’s Fair, the social explosiveness of the times (expressed in such events as the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the Haymarket Riot in Chicago in 1886, the Homestead steel strike of 1892 and the Pullman strike of 1894) is left out. Unhappily, this is not astonishing in the work of a filmmaker described as “a Scorsese protégé.”

Nonetheless, while the movie tends to skim the surface of this rich and vital history, *The Current War* is thought-provoking in its presentation of a host of iconic figures who helped usher in, with all its profound contradictions, modern society.

It is worth recalling Tesla’s optimistic speech at the Niagara Falls opening ceremony on January 12, 1897: “*We have many a monument of past ages; we have the palaces and pyramids, the temples of the Greek and the cathedrals of Christendom. In them is exemplified the power of men, the greatness of nations, the love of art and religious devotion. But the monument at Niagara has something of its own, more in accord with our present thoughts and tendencies. It is a monument worthy of our scientific age, a true monument of enlightenment and of peace. It signifies the subjugation of natural forces to the service of man, the discontinuance of barbarous methods, the relieving of millions from want and suffering.*”



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