

Andor: Encouraging and reflecting anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian sentiment

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Season two of *Andor*, the science fiction-political thriller set in the *Star Wars* universe, premiered on Disney+ in April. It was created by Tony Gilroy (*Michael Clayton*, *The Bourne* franchise) and stars Mexican actor Diego Luna as Cassian Andor, Stellan Skarsgård as Luthen Rael and Genevieve O'Reilly as Mon Mothma. The series chronicles the years of rebellion and struggle against the tightening grip of the Galactic Empire that provide context for George Lucas's original 1977 film *Star Wars*, later retitled *Episode IV—A New Hope*.

Structured into four three-episode arcs that span the years leading up to *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), the series has garnered critical acclaim for its intelligent storytelling, superb cast and mature themes. *Andor* rose to #1 across major U.S. streaming rankings and was in the top 5 internationally.

The *Star Wars* label is somewhat misleading. Gilroy's series, although it has certain features in common with the earlier films directed by Lucas and others, is a serious effort dealing with repression, totalitarianism and revolt. As a piece of popular entertainment, it emerges undeniably out of the same moods that have burst to the surface in the gigantic protests against Donald Trump and the recent New York City Democratic primary.

What makes *Andor* remarkable is not its visual effects or action sequences, but the extent to which it portrays the ravages of imperialist violence and encroachment. The scenes and characters in *Andor* are not allegorical, they speak to contemporary conditions and processes.

Woven throughout the story of the political awakening of Cassian Andor and the building of the Rebel Alliance are depictions of state-sanctioned mass murder, the environmental and social devastation of resources extraction, the rounding up and incarceration of undocumented workers, prison labor, the forceable relocation of indigenous peoples and the brutal repression and torture of political opponents.

Season one introduces Cassian Andor, a thief trafficking in black market Imperial spare parts and the disillusioned adopted son of the rebel Maarva Andor (Fiona Shaw). Cassian's evolution brings to mind that of Humphrey Bogart in two famed 1940s' films, *Casablanca* and *To Have and Have Not*, from cynical individualist to committed rebel.

Cassian is thrown into the path of Luthen Rael, when he becomes a fugitive after killing two drunken security officers. Luthen, described by Gilroy as a revolutionary "accelerationist," recruits Cassian as a mercenary to assist in the theft of an Imperial

payroll on the planet Aldhani that will fund the growing rebellion.

Though critical to the success of the heist, Cassian remains politically agnostic. He parts ways with Luthen and the rebellion, takes his cut and attempts to disappear. Having begun a new life under a different name, he is soon arrested merely for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cassian is sentenced to six years hard labor under the harsh, new Public Order Resentencing Directive (PORD), passed after the robbery on Aldhani.

It is in the Empire's prison complex on Narkina 5 that Cassian emerges as a rebel leader when he is instrumental in organizing a mass prison break after it is revealed all of the prisoners are doomed to spend the rest of their lives locked up to provide slave labor for the Empire.

Gilroy's rendering of Narkina 5 is chillingly familiar: a sterile, high-tech, forced-labor facility where barefoot inmates in identical white uniforms are subjected to constant surveillance and tortured through electrified floors for the slightest infraction. The guards' command, "On Program!" forcing prisoners to stand in rows with hands locked behind their heads, eerily recalls images from El Salvador's CECOT mega-prison, though season one was written before the latter's construction.

Season two shifts focus from Cassian's personal journey of political enlightenment and exposures of the Empire's escalating repression to the events leading to the development of the infamous Death Star super-weapon.

Gilroy takes the viewer behind the scenes as the Empire plans a false-flag operation on the planet Ghorman to incite a rebellion that will provide the needed justification for the Empire to exterminate the population and enable it to mine the planet for a rare mineral called kalkite necessary for the building of the Death Star.

Plans for genocide on Ghorman unfold at a covert meeting of high-ranking imperial bureaucrats in the first episode of season two. The scene could be a fictionalized version of a meeting between Netanyahu regime officials, the Biden administration and British and European intelligence agencies during which they schemed to stand down the Israeli military on October 7, 2023, establishing the pretext for a long-planned homicidal assault on the people of Gaza.

Director of Advanced Weapons Research Orson Krennic (played by Ben Mendelsohn) informs the attendees that the destruction of the planet is necessary for "access to stable, unlimited power [that] will transform the galactic economy and solidify imperial

authority.”

In a moment of dark comic relief, Krennic turns the meeting over to a team from the Ministry of Enlightenment, clearly an allusion to Joseph Goebbels’ Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, Ministry of Propaganda.

With the energy of Madison Avenue pitchmen, two well-coiffed bureaucrats spring to their feet, grinning with toxic positivity: “Some of what you’re already thinking about Ghorman at this very moment exists because we put it there!”

As the Empire moves forward with its plans to destroy Ghorman for its kalkite, Luthen continues to work behind the scenes to pull together the burgeoning Rebel Alliance.

Central to his efforts is Senator Mon Mothma, future leader of the Rebel Alliance in *Rogue One*, who has secretly been funding Luthen’s work while campaigning in the Senate against the PORD and the Emperor’s “overreach.”

Her climactic speech condemns the Ghorman genocide and denounces the loss of truth as the ultimate victory of evil. In words that address the current climate of falsification manufactured by the ruling elite and its media, she says: “Of all the things at risk, the loss of an objective reality is perhaps the most dangerous ... When truth leaves us, when we let it slip away, when it is ripped from our hands, we become vulnerable to the appetite of whatever monster screams the loudest.”

On the whole, the series sides firmly with political rebellion and paints the authorities as a vile gang of plotters against the people and murderers. Clearly, decades of wars and brazen crimes have not left the population, including certain artists, unaffected. *Andor* shows that when government officials say they are defending “national security,” they are lying; when they claim to be combating “terrorism,” they are lying; when they argue that smaller, weaker countries represent an “imminent threat” and must be invaded, they are lying. In general, when government officials open their mouths, they are lying. This is a series nourished by radicalized moods and that will only encourage them.

The liberal *New Republic* commented recently on the *Andor* phenomenon (“The Anti-Trump Movement Finds Its Rebellious Muse: *Andor*”) in an article by Ana-Marie Cox. The piece is interesting for two reasons: first, it suggests there is a growing mood of opposition to Trump and the status quo and that it has an increasingly serious, angry character. Commenting on a June 14 “No Kings” demonstration in Austin, Texas, Cox notes:

Some of the most colorful and cheerful signs at the rally were limned with threat: the gilded, glittering guillotines; the one that asked, “Can we skip to the part where he shoots himself in the bunker?” I saw someone hand out “Is he dead yet?” stickers to scores of grabbing hands. The metaphor of the day almost demands violence: It’s hard to remove a crown without at least threatening to shed some blood. Democrats and liberals in Washington have been unwilling to grapple with that truth. Elsewhere, the mood seems to be shifting.

Second, the article points to the manner in which lines and slogans from *Andor* appeared at various demonstrations June 14:

The *Andor* community on Reddit collected dozens of examples of the show’s rhetoric from Detroit to Richmond, San Diego to Philadelphia.

The appeal of *Andor* stems in part from the choice showrunner Tony Gilroy made to target an adult audience who are not traditional *Star Wars* fans. He deliberately shifted the focus from royal families, lightsaber battles and the mysticism of the Force to a darker narrative that echoes the real-world descent into authoritarianism.

Gilroy (born 1956) made his career writing and directing political thrillers such as the *Bourne* films and Oscar-nominated *Michael Clayton*. His father was playwright Frank Gilroy (*The Subject Was Roses*, 1965). His brother Dan has directed three valuable films, *Nightcrawler* (2014), *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* (2017) and *Velvet Buzzsaw* (2019).

Tony Gilroy became involved in the *Star Wars* universe when he was called in to resuscitate *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* in 2016, the last widely acclaimed theatrical release of the franchise.

He was initially brought in as a consultant for *Andor* because of his work on *Rogue One*, which bridges the events of *Andor* with those of the film *A New Hope*. Gilroy replaced Stephen Schiff (*The Americans*) after he pitched a storyline centered on the series’ eponymous protagonist Cassian Andor and his evolution from a misanthropic thief to the revolutionary fighter who will go on to become a hero of the Rebel Alliance in *Rogue One*.

A self-described amateur historian, Gilroy framed *Andor* as an opportunity to inject revolutionary narratives into mainstream entertainment. “All of a sudden, here was an opportunity,” he told NPR. “I can cherry-pick through 6,000 years of history... Is it the Roman Revolution? Is it the English Revolution? Is it the Russian Revolution? Is it the American Revolution?... Is it Thomas Paine? Is it Toussaint Louverture? Is it Trotsky?”

The series is much clearer about what it opposes—fascism, dictatorship, government disinformation, colonial war, political repression, torture—then what it advocates as an alternative. This is not surprising. After all, the American population itself, moving to the left, is unclear about that. Masses of people know they oppose *what exists*—the persecution of immigrants, the mass murder in Gaza, the unfettered rule of the billionaires, the systematic sadism and brutality of the powers that be—without being certain about what is needed.

The emergence of a series like *Andor* in today’s conditions is both unusual and a hopeful sign.



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