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In the wake of the season finale of *Andor*, a YouTuber by the name of Star Wars Theory opined that while the "acting was great, cinematography was great, [and] the writing was good" the show itself was, ultimately, "forgettable".[1] The reason for this, as he put it, was owing to small details, such as the presence of "screws in the wall" in the prior episode, and architecture that is "just bricks" rather than smooth stone. To his mind, details such as these were sufficiently different to prior Star Wars media that the series did not sell the illusion of taking place in a galaxy far, far away. It therefore failed as a new entry into the franchise.

Naturally, the fanbase clowned on him. The clip of his livestream was quote-tweeted to hell and back, memes mocking him were circulated around social media, and the full force of Wookieepedia was brought to bear against him, as fans dredged up the many images from previous entries

[1] RedTeamReview, "Explaining the Bricks and Screws Meme from Star Wars Theory", YouTube, 2023: youtube.com/watch?v=2AwYRgeYonM.

which contained bricks and screws. The phrase 'bricks and screws' became a meme unto itself, representing the lacklustre critiques that are often brought up when people try to explain why they don't like *Andor*.

However, I'd like to contend that Star Wars Theory was correct. Neither in the literal nor intended meaning of any of his words, but I believe there is a charitable reading of what he said that does indeed identify what makes *Andor* different to other instalments in the franchise. Now, I don't consider *Andor* forgettable. I consider it some of the best science fiction to have come out on television in the last decade, and I think this is precisely because of "bricks and screws". It is because of its interest in materiality.

Before we get there, let's back up a little. Is *Andor* really all that different? Perhaps the mere existence of this special collection should act as sufficient evidence, but we should go a bit further. Common analyses of the show make note of its political nature, of how it draws on real-world stories of revolution and resistance to build its plot, but politics, even direct political allegories, are nothing new to Star Wars. While the Aldhani heist finds its parallel in the 1907 Tiflis bank robbery conducted by Stalin, so too did Palpatine's assumption of emergency powers mirror the 2001 PATRIOT act, and the rebels and Ewoks of the original trilogy were explicitly modelled on the Vietcong, making America the evil Empire. Star Wars has always been political, and *Andor* fits neatly into that model.

We might turn to the show's use of moral ambiguity, or its darker tone, to contrast it with the simplistic binaries of earlier Star Wars. I think there is some validity to this argument, but it is easily overstated. The original trilogy offered Han Solo and Lando Calrissian as main characters of questionable moral fibre, while the prequels condemned the Jedi, the archetypal good guys of the series, and both trilogies offered main characters struggling with their moral development. This is even more apparent once one goes beyond the main films and en-

counters, e.g., Grey Jedi, wonderfully exemplified by Kreia in Knights of the Old Republic II. Yes, *Andor* offers us recordings of dying children as a torture device, but we've had torture droids and the slaughter of younglings before. We might argue *Andor* is different here by virtue of how well it executed these themes, but I do not think statements of quality alone can provide a particularly interesting or useful form of analysis. Assessments of literary quality are deeply subjective, and thus only beg further questions.

A better tack is offered by Jon Michaud, in their 2022 New Yorker article on the show. Titled *The Force Is AWOL in Star Wars,*[2] the article notes that the mystical aspects of Star Wars have been scrubbed from the show, with nary a mention of either the Force or the Jedi even where it would be typical of the series to bring them up. I think this touches on the heart of the matter. In addition to this though, Michaud also points out other elements that have been downplayed or removed:

There are hardly any cute comic-relief characters speaking in bleeps, grunts, or cringey patois. Despite one quirky, lovable robot, the series is notably short on aliens and droids. All the major characters are human, and none hide their face behind a mask à la Darth Vader… the only real romance is low-key and lesbian. And there is a decided lack of interest in paternity, which is as essential to much of "Star Wars" as it is to daytime talk shows.

The absence of these elements is taken to be a kind of critique on Star Wars as a whole — a demonstration of their superfluity if not outright obstruction in good, mature storytelling. I don't particularly agree with Michaud here, as it implies that the prior instalments of Star Wars, or the myriad fans and critics commenting on them, were unserious in some fundamental

[2] Jon Michaud, "The Force is AWOL in 'Andor'", The New Yorker, 2022: newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-force-is-awol-in-andor.

way. In my view, the influence Star Wars has had on pop culture would belie the notion, and I hope my own analysis of Star Wars above also indicates otherwise. Furthermore, I think *Andor* does include many of these elements where it has the room to do so, to a greater degree than Michaud suggests. We mightn't have a missing father figure, but Cassian was very much concerned with a missing sister. All the same, I would agree with his central statement, and likewise contend the absence of the Force is key to the discussion when discussing *Andor*'s differences. Yet, I don't think that's the end of the story. Rather, instead of examining what the show has removed, I believe we would be better served by examining what it has added in lieu. In other words, what was it that needed space in the show such that Tony Gilroy had to put the Jedi on the backburner?

The new ingredient, I would argue, is materiality. This is a term with a few different extant definitions, but I am not drawing on any one in particular. When I refer to the term, I do not mean philosophical materialism, i.e. the metaphysical view of the universe as consisting solely of matter. This would be a difficult position to hold within the Star Wars universe. Nor do I mean an interest in objects per se, nor even something as broad as dialectical materialism, which makes claims beyond what I am trying to make here. By materiality, I refer simply to the positioning of objects relative to each other in space and time, how that positioning changes, and how the physical properties of those objects determine the interactions people can have with them. It is the way in which objects reveal and influence the culture of social institutions and the identities of those within. Simply put, it is how logistics relates to people.

When one examines the theme of materiality within *Andor*, the number of examples to explore quickly becomes overwhelming. We could talk about how various demands for resources determine Cassian's journey to become a rebel, right from the large-scale strip mining of Kenari and its apparent

well with the genre discussions we've had so far. In fact, as an aside, we might well read Luthen as a synecdoche for the entire approach Tony Gilroy has taken. The only objects which appear to have sentimental value for the character are a Kyber crystal, a core lightsaber component, which he gives away to Cassian as a security deposit, and something which looks like a lightsaber hilt, found when Saw Guerrara's men search him. If Luthen does turn out to be a Jedi as fans speculate, then perhaps he is one who relinquished the practice in order to orchestrate revolution. Someone who shifted away from the spiritual, to focus on the nuts and bolts of bloodshed. Perhaps he and Tony may yet return to it.

In conclusion, I think there is a clear genre distinction between *Andor* and the rest of Star Wars, one which emphasises attending to the material nature of the universe and thinking through its mechanics without recourse to mysticism. I suspect genre shifts in Star Wars explain the negative or even violent reactions from the fan-base when certain instalments try to buck the trend. There is an expectation of a fantasy story when there may be a science fiction story, and misaligned expectations can create a jarring, dissatisfying experience even where the writing itself is solid. I'd hazard this is what Star Wars Theory, and others like him, reacted to in *Andor*. They did not get their galaxy far, far away. They got bricks and screws. However, I prefer *Andor's* choice here. We might find it disenchanting as viewers to look at, say, the death of Maarva Andor, and know that she will not become a Force ghost like so many other mentor figures. She was a lowly creature, one of the earth in a cold universe, and so she will be cremated and turned into a brick. It seems a crude view of people, to reduce them to burnt clay, to materials. Perhaps so, but, to my mind, both *Andor* and Maarva deliver more impact that way.

industrial accident. We could look at the many appearances of the theme in the Aldhani arc. The planet is special only because of its positioning relative to other planets, which makes it, in Vel Sartha's words, a "perfect hub for distribution", and the heist which follows also relies on a careful analysis of the relative spacing of military units. Even when Cassian is tested by his fellow rebels, it is by asking him how he would calibrate the weight gauge of a freighter. Not to mention the clear parallel in Mon Mothma's storyline — how both are fundamentally about how to move capital. We could of course also examine it in the prison arc — how the construction of such a colossal engineering project as the Death Star demands labour that is "cheaper and easier to replace than droids" (see Christoffer Bagger's essay in this issue), as well as how the prisoners avail of necessary systems like water pipes and tracks for an elevator to escape. We could, indeed, look to the imagery of the show, though more than the 'bricks and screws' of the finale, I would point to its opening shot, which is of a wire being soldered to the circuit-board of a pipe bomb.

Instead of trying to provide a comprehensive overview however, I would like to hone in on one example. I would like to talk about a navigation unit. Specifically, an Imperial N-S9 Starpath Unit, stolen by Cassian Andor from the Steergard Naval Yard before the events of the show had even started. It is an easily forgettable piece of technology, or at least, I had completely forgotten about it until I rewatched the show for this essay. The function of the device is thematic in-and-of-itself. Per Wookiepedia, it uses "proprietary Imperial signals and frequencies to coordinate and map the relation of a starship to every Imperial asset, whether it was an installation or a vessel, for nine radial parsecs",[3] which is to say it acts as a kind of GPS system for Imperial possessions. However, it is

[3] Wookiepedia, "Imperial N-S9 Starpath Unit", Wookiepedia: starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Imperial_N-S9_Starpath_Unit#cite_note-Ep3-1.

not this function but the way in which the object itself moves around that ties the plot together.

The Starpath Unit has substantial monetary value, which provides Cassian a means of egress from Ferrix. This is doubly important in light of his murders on Morlana One, and he had hidden it in case of emergencies like this. He has Bix contact Luthen to arrange a sale through the black market. Yet Luthen cannot immediately appear at Ferrix, as there are only certain times in which it is safe for him to arrive. The delay between Bix's message and Luthen's arrival allows for Timm to become suspicious of Cassian and snitch on him to corporate security forces. Once Luthen arrives, the two negotiate over the Starpath's value. As a consequence of their bargaining Luthen learns how Cassian operates and becomes convinced of his usefulness, which is why he takes a risk on him and brings him to Aldhani. We as viewers also learn the Empire's critical weakness is an unjustified belief in their symbolic power, blinding them to the significance of smaller figures such as Cassian, who was able to walk in and take the Starpath.

When Syril Karn and his police force attack, Luthen and Cassian are forced to leave the Starpath Unit behind. Of course, it is not the Unit itself that Luthen was really after, but Cassian, who is needed to act as the pilot of a cargo freighter during the Aldhani heist. Nevertheless, the events on Ferrix soon reach the attention of the Imperial Security Bureau, and, notably, Dedra Meero. Steergard was in the sectors assigned to her, and thus the potential presence of the stolen Unit in Ferrix ostensibly gives her jurisdiction. This leads to her failed jockeying for power. Yet, the Unit's theft, along with others like it, leaves her convinced of a coordinated rebellion. She secretly has all data on avionics thefts compiled so as to identify patterns, but

[60. Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

dalone objects, abstracted from any social relations. Something similar seems to be occurring in a lot of Disney's Star Wars, where the functions of many objects are to be explained by viewer's feelings about Star Wars, especially nostalgia. As a result, they don't work like material objects.

When Rey discovers the Millennium Falcon on planet Jakku in *Episode VII*, it does not matter that this was described as a hunk of junk thirty years before that event, nor that it's been buried on a scrap planet. It works fine, because it's powered by symbolism. It was a symbol of resistance back then and even if it has been abandoned in a junkyard, it remains a fetish of the franchise. If we contrast Jakku with Ferrix (see RK Upadhya's analysis of Ferrix in this issue) it becomes quite apparent how dissimilar the planets are despite having ostensibly similar roles in the economy. When Palpatine suddenly returns in *Episode IX*, he is able to summon an armada of Star Destroyers from the ether. Who worked on them, for how long, and where they found the materials, are incidental because they are needed to show how evil and powerful Palpatine is. There is also the dagger Rey uses as a map to find the wayfinder, which requires looking at a wrecked Star Destroyer from just the right position, assuming the wreckage hasn't changed at all in the interval. This is done to reinforce Rey's position as a Chosen One in the narrative, a position *Episode VIII* had almost dispensed with. Objects are imbued with an aura that cannot be explained by their physical composition, only as symbols, as fetishes, of Star Wars. The result of this is that the franchise as a whole veers further into fantasy storytelling.

Andor does offer a comment on this, albeit a very ironic one. Tony Gilroy wanted to avoid fan service as much as possible,[9] yet the art department snuck in multiple Easter Eggs into Luthen's gallery unbeknownst to him.[10] This means the environment with the most franchise fetishes is the shop where pretty artefacts are used to distract from the real business of rebellion going on in the backrooms, which aligns remarkably

Kreia), but if a showrunner wants to tell a story about the logistics of a rebellion, it is necessary for the Force and related ideas to be sidelined.

I should say that I don't think fantasy is necessarily reactionary or non-cognitive. *Game of Thrones*, when it was at its best, had a similar materialist spirit and was happy to explore the importance of troop logistics or feudal economics. The sociologist Zeynep Tufekci made a similar distinction to explain why the finale season of that show was so reviled, only she casts it as sociological vs psychological storytelling rather than materialist vs mystical. It's a close overlap in my view, and it is no coincidence that the best example of sociological television, *The Wire*, also took the position that "all the pieces matter".[8] We may dispense with details when telling a fable, but not when we're trying to say something about the real world. As a recommendation for further reading on this subject, I would point the reader to James Gifford's *A Modernist Fantasy*, which examines strands of modernist and anarchist thinking present in non-Tolkienesque fantasy, something often overlooked by sci-fi critics. It's important to keep a nuanced stance on fantasy in mind when considering what *Andor,* or indeed Star Wars as a whole, could become.

This brings me to the final point of this essay, which is how *Andor* fits alongside its Disney contemporaries. There is a phenomenon, which has become increasingly pronounced over recent entries, that I think encourages the fantasy read of Star Wars. It's not exactly pandering to fans, although it's closely related. Pandering to fans is not necessarily a bad thing, as it's reasonable for any kind of commercial storytelling to try to anticipate what those who enjoy it want and give it to them. No, the phenomenon is what I'll call franchise fetishism, after commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism is the idea that goods, once they enter the market place and have a price tag put on them, become viewed as having some inherent value that is separate from the labour that created them. They become stan-

is caught out. She then makes the case that the rebellion will not respect the borders of the Empire and that systems "either change or die". The Morlana Sector is reassigned to her, and thus she is able to connect the Unit to the Steergard base. Her new insight allows her to connect Luthen, who she refers to by the code-name "Axis", to the events on Aldhani. Thus, simply by examining the locations the Starpath Unit has been, how it has moved, the Empire is able to learn a substantial amount of information about the nascent rebellion.

The above may have read like a summary of the core plot, but this is because of the mechanics of how the narrative works. By tracking this one incidental Unit, both sides of the war are revealed to each other and restructure themselves to match the threat. It is not a supplemental method of storytelling – no additional structure to guide the viewer forward. It is critical to how the plot of *Andor* functions, and its use has ramifications for the show's genre.

According to Canadian academic and prominent science-fiction critic Darko Suvin, science fiction stories operate using two features. The first is what he calls a *novum*, or innovation, which is the dominant feature of the narrative that distinguishes its world from our own world. It's difficult to identify a singular novum in *Andor*, but we might say it is the particular galactic civilisation in which its stories take place, with certain conceits such as hyperspace travel or blaster rifles acting more as incidental elements which enable it. Within the broader Star Wars universe, the Force would no doubt be taken as a novum too. As discussed, we should ignore that for *Andor.*

The second and more important element is *cognitive estrangement*, a phenomenon whereby the careful and logical exploration of a novum, and the alternate reality it supposes, allows a reader to re-examine concepts in the real world with new understanding. This means it's not simply the speculative or irreal aspects of a sci-fi story that makes it so, it's how they are treated. The mere presence of a spaceship or teleporter is

not enough to make a story science fiction, rather, the logical entailments of these devices – their *materiality* – must also be explored in the narrative. This definition circumvents some problems the genre has encountered in defining itself, such as whether or not a novum is strictly scientifically possible. As science has advanced, we've learned that more and more concepts are off the table, but this definition allows us to consider classical stories as still part of the genre. Time-travel may not be physically feasible, but *The Time Machine* is still sci-fi. Importantly however, a fantastical novum may prohibit cognitive estrangement. This is often the case with magic systems, where the rules may not be fully available for analysis or even actively contradictory, and thus a logical exploration is impossible. In such cases, we have fantasy.

What then might Suvin make of a science fantasy like Star Wars? The polite way to put it would be a fantasy story, which dons sci-fi clothes so as to make use of the aesthetics of the genre, but is not itself true science fiction. The more accurate way would be something akin to an abomination unto God and man. Suvin despises fantasy, and considers the fact that the two genres occupy the same shelf in most bookstores to be "a grave disservice and rampantly socio-pathological phenomenon".[4] More specifically, he has said SF's turn to space opera to be an instance of "committing creative suicide".[5] I find Suvin's hyperbole amusing, but he is not alone in his disdain for fantasy. Fellow Marxist critic Fredric Jameson has, for example, observed that fantasy has a "non-historical vision" of the world, where mediaeval ideology is recapitulated in its cosmic struggles between Good and Evil, which only certain great magicians can overcome.[6] Fantasy is taken by Suvin and others to be an essentially regressive genre mode, where it is the villains who upset the status quo and where solutions to problems are magical (i.e. non-cognitive, irrational) in nature. In their view, it entrenches a reactionary view that assures the reader of a moral order in the world, one which will be borne out through

symbolic and ethical argument. Palpatine does what he does because he is evil, and because he is evil, someone will eventually toss him down into a big pit. The new mythology of George Lucas hence cannot be trusted because, in Suvin's words, "myth is diametrically opposed to the cognitive approach".[7]

By contrast, Suvin values cognitive estrangement precisely because it is subversive in nature. A systemic analysis allows for a re-evaluation of the status quo and for potentially progressive social policies to come to the fore. We can actually see shades of this idea within *Andor*. When the Aldhani heist is underway, the Commandant attempts to bluff the rebels by saying the vault requires more than his presence to unlock it. However, because they have studied the lock and know how it works, they know they can break it open. Similarly, when Luthen's ship is accosted by an Imperial cruiser, his understanding of their tractor beams allows him to deploy countermeasures. Conversely, Nemik avoids using Imperial technology precisely because their inner workings are kept secret, and thus cannot be exploited. The rebels must analyse the materials around them in order to be fully effective, and a key point *Andor* repeats is that the Empire's belief in their symbolic authority makes them vulnerable to workers who know the infrastructure. As Luthen put it: "never carry anything you can't control".

This is why *Andor* feels different. It's not that it's darker, or more political, it's that the darkness and politics are grounded in a logical examination of the material components of the Star Wars universe, which consequently shifts its genre from science fantasy to science fiction. The Force, however influential it has been in the series, necessarily presents an aporia – an impasse in logic – that stops this investigation dead in its tracks, owing to its mystical qualities. When it is present, it can supervene on any turn in the narrative and explain it away. This is not to say a Star Wars story could never take the Force seriously and examine it critically (again, shout-out to my beloved