

• *Notes* •

Folklore, Politics, and Fake News in the Reception of *Rogue One*

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One of the more bizarre but intriguing rumors related to the United States presidency in 2016 was that the makers of the film *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016) had rewritten and reshot scenes to make it seem explicitly opposed to the policies and personality of President-elect Donald J. Trump. According to the usually reliable Snopes.com, this claim “could be traced back to Jack Posobiec, the self-described special projects director of ‘Citizens for Trump,’ who [tweeted] the (completely false) rumor that the new *Star Wars* film was altered to add an anti-Trump scene” (Evon 2016). As often happens with social media, Posobiec’s tweet went viral, sparking calls among Trump supporters to boycott the film—even before the film had been released in theaters. The threat of a boycott stirred Robert Iger, CEO of the Walt Disney Co. (which owns Walt Disney Pictures, which produced the film) to declare, “Frankly, this is a film that the world should enjoy. It is not a film that is, in any way, a political film”—a claim that even the *Washington Post* (which has been consistently critical of both Trump and fake news) declared plainly “wrong.” As the *Post* imaginatively explained, “to deny the politics of *Star Wars* is to throw the franchise’s rich history under a bus the size of an Imperial cruiser” (Guarino 2016).

Even though one Australian dictionary named “fake news” as its “word of the year” for 2016 (“Fake News” 2017), there is still relatively little consensus about what the term means, or how it may differ from rumor, disinformation, alternative facts, or even post-truth—the latter which Oxford Dictionaries identified as its own “word of the year” for 2016 (Wang 2016). Nevertheless, this essay will utilize some of the organizing principles developed by folklorists of the Internet in order to

provide a folkloristic analysis of the *Rogue One* incident. It will reconstruct—as best as possible—how the *Rogue One* story spread, and how it may help to connect folklore and fake news.

Walt Disney Pictures, in association with its subsidiary Lucasfilm, premiered *Rogue One* in Los Angeles on December 10, 2016. The film's widespread release, both in the United States and around the world, followed on December 16 (Petit and Huver 2016). *Rogue One* was directed by Gareth Edwards; Chris Weitz and Tony Gilroy were credited as screenwriters, based on a story by John Knoll and Gary Whitta, using characters created by George Lucas.

What seemingly triggered the controversy was a series of tweets by Chris Weitz three days after the U.S. presidential election). According to the *Hollywood Reporter*,

On Nov. 11, *Rogue One* writer Chris Weitz launched a barrage of anti-Donald Trump tweets that mirrored what many in Hollywood had posted on social media in the wake of the presidential election. But several messages took the crusade further, injecting the new *Star Wars* film into a divisive political debate: "Please note that the Empire is a white supremacist (human) organization," wrote Weitz. Added fellow *Rogue One* scribe Gary Whitta, "Opposed by a multicultural group led by brave women." Both men changed their avatars to a Rebel insignia with a safety pin, a reference to the symbol of solidarity with persecuted groups that has spread following the election. (Siegel 2016)

Within the next twenty-four hours, both Weitz and Whitta had deleted their original tweets, and apologized—though they also continued to respond to critics (and a few fans) on Twitter. For instance, Weitz sent thirty-four tweets within the space of three hours on November 11. Many of his tweets were to clarify that the film is

opposed to hate; though some of his tweets directly criticized the president-elect. Referring to Trump, Weitz observed, “He’s not Hitler. Hitler believed in something. Trump is just an unqualified, narcissistic buffoon” (Weitz 2016). Only one of the tweets in response to Weitz mentioned a possible boycott: “Lose the election fair and square, and still merge your propaganda into a Star Wars movie. Easy boycott” (Weitz 2016).

Around this same time, Weitz’s tweets “prompted industry speculation that backlash from Trump supporters could hurt the film’s box-office results,” according to a reporter from the *Atlantic* (Sims 2016). However, this same reporter concluded, “it’s unlikely that they’ll do lasting damage to *Rogue One*’s ticket sales. Hollywood creators have long inserted ideological slants into their movies, and even when ‘politicization’ of movies does hurt box office, there are usually other factors at play” (Sims 2016).

Similar conclusions were reached by a reporter for the *Mary Sue*, which identifies itself as “an inclusive, feminist community of people who not only love what they love but care about others who love it and have an intense passion for those who create it” (About Us 2017). The reporter observed, “It would be almost impossible to remove the political aspects of *Star Wars* at this point, considering that the anti-imperialist and anti-totalitarian messaging has been a part of the story from the start, and arguably has only increased as the series has gone on. The problem is that being against white supremacy is, apparently, becoming a more controversial stance than it used to be. Even noting the parallels between the Empire and white supremacy is, apparently, something that goes too far... even though it’s a stance that is already baked into the original *Star Wars* movies, games, cartoons, and so on” (Myers 2017).

On December 8, 2016, less than one month following the comments by Weitz and Whitta, a movement to boycott *Rogue One*, using the hashtag #DumpStarWars, was launched by Jack Posobiec, who identifies himself on Twitter as political director of Rev18, which is “a super PAC dedicated to overhauling the GOP” by

“using social media to elect America First candidates in 2018 and beyond.” On Twitter, Posobiec also identifies himself as “Conservative Christian. Veteran Navy intel officer. Philly kid. Author [of *Citizens for Trump: The Inside Story of the People’s Movement to Take Back America* (2017)]” (Posobiec 2017b). Born in 1984 and raised in Norristown, Pennsylvania, Posobiec graduated from Temple University with a double major in political science and broadcasting mass media, and was deployed to Guantanamo Bay as part of his Naval service (Posobiec 2017a). He has posted more than 54,000 tweets, and has more than 210,000 followers (Posobiec 2017b).

When asked by email what motivated him to launch the movement to boycott *Rogue One*, Posobiec responded, “My speaking out on *Rogue One* was prompted by tweets presented by the writers of the film, not rumors.”¹ Posobiec added that his primary sources of information were three of the online articles already cited: “Will *Rogue One* Appeal to Trump Supporters? Probably Not... Which Poses a Problem for Disney’s Bottom Line” (Myers 2016); “A Deleted Tweet Won’t Hurt *Rogue One*” (Sims 2016); and “‘Star Wars’ Writers Get Political: Will Anti-Trump Tweets Hurt ‘*Rogue One*’?” (Siegel 2016). Curiously, all three of these articles were posted on exactly the same date: November 21, 2016. Why Posobiec waited two weeks until December 8 to launch his attacks on the film is not known.

Throughout the morning of December 8, Posobiec tweeted almost continuously to express his disgust with *Rogue One*, starting at 5:35 a.m.: “I just cancelled my Star Wars *Rogue One* tickets after the writers said its an Anti-Trump movie. I’ll take my dollars elsewhere.” At 5:39 a.m., using Periscope (Twitter’s live video platform), Posobiec posted a rambling eighteen-minute video, headlined “Star Wars Writers Say *Rogue One* is Anti-Trump Film,” and using for the first time the hashtag DumpStarWars. In the video, Posobiec—sitting in a car and talking into the camera—asserts:

The writers for *Star Wars Rogue One* just came out and said that they made the film as an anti-Trump move. They're starting an anti-Trump campaign called #TrumpIsVader. That's what the writers of *Rogue One* are doing. And remember *Rogue One* is owned by Disney and Disney was a huge, huge supporter of Hillary Clinton. So why would the writers of *Rogue One* be starting #TrumpIsVader? Why would they do that? Why would Disney allow them to do that? Why? Why would they allow the writers of *Star Wars* to start a #TrumpIsVader campaign? Why would Disney allow the writers of *Star Wars*? Guys, you got to ask yourselves these questions. Why would it happen? Why would they do this? Why would it come up? You guys remember when Disney movies would come out before, when *Star Wars* movies would come out before, it was apolitical, right? It wasn't tied into anything. It wasn't done with anything. But now they've started a #TrumpIsVader campaign, and not only that, but the writers of *Rogue One*, here's what they said. They said that in *Star Wars*, the Empire is a white supremacist organization, like the Trump administration, and the diverse rebels are going to defeat them. That's what they said. That's what they said about the Trump administration, that's what they said apparently about the voters of the United States who elected him, and now they're out there saying Trump is Vader, a white supremacist. . . . First of all Trump isn't a racist, if you've looked at his Cabinet, or anything the man has done in his entire life. There is nothing to say he is a racist whatsoever. So that doesn't make any sense. So what they're trying to do is to make the point of using this movie to push the false narrative, push this lie, push the fake news that Trump is a racist. We all know that he is not. We all know he is a regular American who doesn't even see race. He is a nationalist, an American nationalist, because he supports America. All Americans. Period. Not just some

Americans. Which apparently Disney has an issue with. So, yes, that is why I am starting the hashtag campaign, #DumpStarWars. . . . We're not going to sit there and give them our money. We're not going to sit there and allow them to take our money, take our time, take our kids . . . to see this propaganda. Sorry not doing it. #DumpStarWars is what we're going to do. (Posobiec 2016)

At 5:58 a.m., Posobiec continued, "Star Wars writers: Trump is a white supremacist and Rouge [sic] One is an anti-Trump film." At 6:00 a.m., "Star Wars writers rewrote and reshot Rouge One to add in Anti Trump scenes calling him a racist. Disgusting." At 6:02 a.m., "Watching Anti-Trump movies is not how I want to spend my money, sorry." At 9:11 a.m., "No one understands the impact Rouge One's anti-Trump campaign will have on their film. Keep your politics out of our galaxy." At 9:14 a.m. "I can't believe Disney re-wrote Rouge One to bash Trump. Disgusting." At 9:29 a.m., "1) Writers suddenly change the ending of Rouge One. 2) Writers then launch hateful Anti-Trump campaign." At 9:39 a.m., "Just got a full refund on my Rouge One tickets. Keep your politics out of my galaxy." At 9:57 a.m., "Waited all year to see Rouge One on my bday. Sad to hear what they did to it," which includes a screen shot of a video from BreakYourOwnNews.com, headlined "Writers: Trump is a Nazi."²

Not surprisingly, Posobiec's tweets and his call to boycott *Rogue One* started an avalanche of responses on Twitter—numbering in the thousands over the next several weeks, and even lasting into October 2017 (as of this writing). Posobiec's campaign also sparked numerous news reports, starting with *Esquire* online, which compared Posobiec's boycott with the alt-right campaigns to boycott Starbucks and *Hamilton*, adding:

And now, they're dumping *Rogue One* (which hits theaters later this month) with the hashtag #DumpStarWars, because of (oh, hey,

shocker) fake news. Twitter user Jack Posobiec, who's allegedly the "special projects director" for a group called Citizens for Trump, tweeted claiming that the writers of *Rogue One* rewrote and reshot the film to "add in Anti Trump (sic) scenes calling him a racist." (Nickalls 2016)

Rejecting Posobiec's claims, *Esquire* countered:

Here's the truth: *Rogue One* certainly underwent reshoots. Also, when Trump won the election, the screenwriters tweeted what could be interpreted as anti-Trump messages, including that "the Empire is a white supremacist [human] organization." When *Esquire* spoke to Posobiec, he used this tweet to say that the writers called Trump a Nazi. However, there's no evidence that the changes had to do with any political ideologies whatsoever, and films undergo massive changes all the time. "I haven't seen the movie yet, but if the writers are so virulently anti-Trump, I would be surprised to not find that bias embedded in the film," Posobiec told *Esquire*. Though this is purely based in conjecture, facts haven't stopped the alt-right from loudly shouting that they'll boycott the entire series. (Nickalls 2016)

Although *Esquire* never uses the term "fake news" to describe Posobiec's accusations, the implication is clear. Posobiec's claims are "purely based on conjecture" and lack any supporting evidence. Even his position within Citizens for Trump is "alleged." A reporter in the *Daily Beast* was more explicit, asserting that Posobiec "shared a fake news chyron falsely alleging that the *Rogue One* writers not only called Trump a Nazi, [but also] changed the ending of the upcoming film to 'bash Trump'" (Stern 2017). The *Daily Beast* also interviewed director Gareth Edwards, who commented, "There's loads of fake news. That's the thing: no offense

to anyone, but I just don't believe anything I read on the internet." Regarding the claims made online about *Rogue One*, Edwards called them "blatantly fake. I don't know where that came from." If something has "been copied-and-pasted twenty times, it becomes the truth. . . . Or maybe it's twenty-five times" (Stern 2017).

Whether or not one agrees with Posobiec's claim about *Rogue One*, the controversy surrounding the film raises serious questions about the phenomenon of fake news and its intersection with folklore. According to Russell Frank, a folklorist and professor of journalism, fake news stories can take several forms:

- 1) They are "written in conformity with journalistic style," meaning that they may imitate or replicate "the style of legitimate news sites" (Frank 2015, 315).
- 2) They are "promotional material disguised as news," meaning that they are "*intentionally* false reports," as opposed to "inadvertently" false reports, either because news organizations "are taken in by a hoax or they obtain information offered in good faith that proves to be erroneous" (Frank 2015, 316).
- 3) They are stories "generated in a non-professional social context," which may use "the style of news either to parody that style, satirize issues and personalities in the news, or perpetrate a hoax or prank" (Frank 2015, 317).

Assertions by Gareth Edwards and the *Daily Beast* notwithstanding, none of Posobiec's claims about *Rogue One* seem to fit any of Frank's fake-news categories. Posobiec's constant, urgent tweets starting on December 8 were not written in a style that resembles journalism in any way. Moreover, they were not intentionally false nor in the least satirical or parodic—as even a cursory glance at Posobiec's Periscope video demonstrates; he appears intently sincere and totally convinced

that his accusations are truthful. So, how might a folklorist categorize or classify Posobiec's claims?

In his own attempt to establish intersections between fake news and folklore, Stephen Winick observes that "fake news" may not be a very useful term after all, and that the alternative of "folk news," which Whitney Phillips has proposed, is not much better (Phillips 2017). Winick is "uncomfortable with a simple substitution of 'folk news' for 'fake news'" because for "too long 'folklore' was used as a substitute for 'popular error' or 'untrue stories believed to be true'" (Winick 2017).

According to Russell Frank, the Internet has been evolving "along two separate though frequently intersecting tracks: the professional and the amateur," which Frank likens to the difference between "what is institutional and what is vernacular," as described by Robert Glenn Howard (Frank 2015, 316; Howard 2015, 251). This second track, which Frank terms "the 'folk' sector of cyberspace," may be regarded "as a communication underground that runs parallel to and often comments on the 'above-ground' communication of the media" (Frank 2015, 316). To label this second track as "folk" or "vernacular" does not in any way (as Frank cautions) refer to "differences in skill level or social standing between one person and another" (Frank 2015, 316). Rather it confirms William Westerman's remark that "All knowledge is folk knowledge. Whether we are concerned with the scientific findings by a Nobel laureate published in an academic journal, the report of the destructive power of a hurricane reported in a local newspaper, gossip about a neighbor spread via the rumor mill, or a local legend, all knowledge is produced within the communication conventions of a particular community and disseminated in ways that are acceptable or trustworthy to a degree held customary by that same group" (Westerman 2009, 123).

Jack Posobiec steadfastly believes that *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* was revised by Trump-hating screenwriters, with the consent of a Clinton-supporting production company. To his 210,000 followers on Twitter, it does not matter that *Philadelphia* magazine recently called Posobiec "the king of fake news" and the

“Trump troll the Internet loves to hate” (Valania 2017). Members of his folk community—firmly connected by a sector of cyberspace—share his beliefs, whether they be termed fact, fiction, fake, or folk.

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Notes

¹ Personal email communication, Jack Posobiec to James Deutsch, August 2, 2017.

² These tweets (and many more) from Posobiec were found by searching Twitter.com using the following query, from:JackPosobiec since:2016-12-08 until:2016-12-09.

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