

ENGLISH FILM CLUB 2020 - 21



41st SEASON

Massagno, LUX ART HOUSE

18.15

Friday, 13th November 2020

THE CURRENT WAR

2019

101 minutes

Directed by A. Gomez-Rejon

Starring: Benedict Cumberbatch, Michael Shannon

It is 1880 and Thomas Edison has unveiled his electric lightbulb and has decided on Direct Current (DC) which is cheaper and cleaner than gaslight but it is limited in range and expensive. George Westinghouse, a successful business man and inventor himself, wishes to learn more, and invites Edison to dinner. After being snubbed by Edison, Westinghouse sets out to prove Alternating Current (AC) is the better technology as it can work over greater distances and at significantly lower cost. Edison and Westinghouse compete to get cities across the United States to use their system. Brilliant inventor Nikola Tesla arrives in the United States and begins working with Edison, but is disappointed by Edison's unwillingness to reconsider his ideas and to fulfill what Tesla thought was a financial promise which Edison passes off as just a joke. Tesla then leaves Edison's team. Edison fiercely guards his patents and sues Westinghouse.

Edison suggests that AC is dangerous and engages in a publicity war, while Westinghouse stands behind the technical merits of AC. As Edison struggles to find ways to make DC more affordable, Westinghouse attempts to get the high-voltage AC system to work with motors. Edison's wife dies, and Westinghouse is also struck with personal tragedy when his friend Franklin Pope dies in an electrical accident. Both face significant financial risk. To generate funds Edison commercially sells his speaking machine, the phonograph. To damage the reputation of AC, Edison shows that it easily electrocutes animals, and secretly works to help the creators of execution by electric chair, despite his previous objections to manufacturing weapons or other machines of death.

Critics' comments:

Gomez-Rejon's film moves in spry, elegant fashion with some striking imagery and showy camera movements (rogerebert.com)

The battle over rival electricity systems fought out between Edison and fellow inventor George Westinghouse is illuminating.

(The Guardian – September 10th, 2017)

Despite the inevitable creative liberties, it's a generally faithful retelling of events. (CNN entertainment – October 24th, 2019)