

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2ZoW28C>

Star Wars' Fans Are Angry and Polarized. Like All Americans.

What arguments over the movie series say about our nation.



By Annalee Newitz
Contributing Opinion Writer

Dec. 24, 2019

Like a lot of Americans, I have formative memories of my first exposure to George Lucas's epic tale of space Rebels defeating a planet-destroying Empire. I got so excited as a little kid in 1977 about seeing "Star Wars: A New Hope" that I threw up outside the theater.

Years later, I was thoroughly disoriented when I found out on the news that Star Wars was no longer a movie; it was a nuclear missile defense system described by Ronald Reagan as the most futuristic arsenal ever built. Officially called the Strategic Defense Initiative, the Star Wars weapons system never came to fruition. But it forever changed the way an entire generation thought about the "Star Wars" movies.

Mr. Lucas's series about interstellar superweapons became a way of talking about American power in the world. When "Star Wars: A New Hope" was released, the Vietnam War had just ended in traumatic ambiguity, Richard Nixon had resigned under the threat of impeachment, and the old American dreams didn't fit our changed reality.

"Star Wars" became a new national mythos; it rebooted America's revolutionary origin story and liberty-or-death values using the tropes of science fiction. Now, however, the movies no longer strike the same chord. Just as America's political system is falling into disarray again, our cultural mythmaking machine is faltering as well.

When I say "faltering," I don't mean economically. The "Star Wars" franchise is among Disney's most lucrative properties. But each new installment has escalated conflicts between fans over everything from character arcs to the diversity of its cast. Filmmakers are torn between catering to the base, with its rabid nostalgia for the 1970s and '80s movies, and striking out into new territory that feels more relevant to the 21st century. The cinematic results are uneven at best.

"The Rise of Skywalker," released last week, is a muddled and aimless homage to previous films in the series. Its countless callbacks to the older films feel like an effort to "make 'Star Wars' great again," though it does manage to deliver a few liberal-sounding messages. Call it the Joe Biden of "Star Wars" movies.

To continue the analogy, you might say that "The Last Jedi," "The Force Awakens," and "Rogue One" are in the Barack Obama tradition. They gave fans truly diverse casts and grappled in a relatively nuanced way with the class and race conflicts that have hovered at the margins of every "Star Wars" story.

They also made fans of the early movies livid. Some used social media to demand that Disney stop with the politically correct storytelling, while others launched racist attacks on the Vietnamese-American actress Kelly Tran, who plays the engineer Rose Tico in two of the films.

I'm not the only one who has noticed this obvious parallel to American electoral politics. J.J. Abrams, who directed "The Rise of Skywalker," noted in a recent interview that the vicious polarization within Star Wars fandom is not a phenomenon restricted to "Star Wars." As he put it, "This is about everything."

And a recent study by Morten Bay, a University of Southern California digital media researcher, revealed that over 50 percent of the venom directed on Twitter at Rian Johnson, director of "The Last Jedi," came from the same sources as Russian election meddling.

Using the analytical tools that other technologists deployed to uncover Russian influence during the 2016 election, Mr. Bay found that “bots, trolls/sock puppets or political activists” were using the “Star Wars” debate “to propagate political messages supporting extreme right-wing causes and the discrimination of gender, race or sexuality” and that “a number of these users appear to be Russian trolls.” So it seems that it was political operatives, not fans, who were denigrating the movie and fomenting some of the virulent racism and misogyny against its cast.

Using “Star Wars” as the vehicle was a canny move by the trolls. Fans, like the American electorate, are polarized and angry. Online and in real life, they scream at one another about how Luke Skywalker would *really* behave decades after finding out that his dad was Darth Vader.

Often these fights begin with someone asserting that the latest “Star Wars” movie ruined their childhood. That’s not wrong. An attack on “Star Wars” is an attack on what many adults of George Lucas’s generation were taught as children: that the most important good guys are generally white men, and the biggest threat on earth is a superweapon.

The problem is that nobody agrees anymore on what the good guys look like, nor what this century’s global threat really is. Fights over “Star Wars” cut to the core of American identity — all the way down to our childhood selves — because they aren’t just squabbles over whether Rey’s Force powers are realistic. They’re about who we are as a nation, and how we will survive as a people in the future.

There are hints of a new hope for the franchise in works set outside the movies’ central plotline. Delilah S. Dawson’s recent “Star Wars” tie-in novel “Phasma” reveals that the First Order wrecked the environment on Captain Phasma’s home planet, leaving our battered protagonist no choice but to join the bad guys. In the new Disney Plus television series “The Mandalorian,” the hero comes from a marginalized group whose planet was strip-mined by Imperials seeking the precious metal beskar. These stories gesture at a revitalized “Star Wars” mythology that might speak to people who fear rising seas more than superweapons.

Maybe the unresolved outrage set off by “The Last Jedi” and “The Rise of Skywalker” is a sign that this franchise needs to make way for a new set of stories. Americans’ trust in government is being ripped apart by scandal and a looming impeachment trial. We desperately need a new American mythology to fit the 21st century realities of a majority-minority nation dealing with planet-wide threats like climate change.

The process of revitalizing American democracy doesn’t begin and end at the voting booth. We also have to tell better stories about ourselves.

Annalee Newitz (@Annaleen) is a contributing opinion writer and the author, most recently, of “The Future of Another Timeline.”

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We’d like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here’s our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow *The New York Times* Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.