

## *Star Wars: A Critical Analysis*

By Karen McCain

The original Star Wars trilogy of films by George Lucas known as *Episode IV: A New Hope*, *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* appeared on movie screens in 1977, 1980, and 1983, respectively (Lucasfilm, 1977) (Lucasfilm, 1980) (Lucasfilm, 1983). It is the traditional story of the hero's journey. A young farm boy reluctantly becomes the hero of The Resistance in the struggle against the evil Galactic Empire that is endeavoring to rule the galaxy. It's a morality play. There are lessons of good versus evil or light versus darkness, believing in one's self, loyalty, faith, trust, and perseverance. It is also a story of forgiveness and redemption. These films have breakoff stories, a series of prequels and sequels, video games, home decor, countless amounts of apparel and merchandise including the beloved "action figure". There are animated and live-action television shows inspired by the original *Star Wars* films. This trilogy has been around long enough and has been popular enough to work its way deeply into popular culture. To understand its influence better one can employ the use of four different lenses to study it more closely. There is the lens of history, the humanities, natural and applied sciences, and the social sciences. Using these different lenses to look at *Star Wars*' effect on culture will help us understand it from different angles and much more deeply.

### *History*

America in the 1970s was feeling the effects of the civil rights movement and the political upheaval of the 1960s. There had been social tensions around the economic downturn caused by inflation, an energy crisis caused by rising fuel prices and shortages (Energy Crisis), and a tide of cynicism about its leaders and heroes. The Watergate scandal didn't help matters. The nation was also divided by different opinions about America's involvement in the war in Vietnam. Films of the early 1970s were gritty and downbeat as a response to the social and political upheaval as well as the violence of the last decade. People were focused on the present and did not readily look to the future. (Empire of Dreams)

In the 1960s the heads of Hollywood studios were retiring and selling to corporations who were interested in what films to make as dictated by what their Marketing Research Department told them. Their research revealed that young people were becoming an economic force and that there was a market for movies made for young people by young people. The new studio executives felt this need could be filled by discovering new, young talent at the film schools. One of those new, young filmmakers would use his innovative storytelling skills to give audiences a new epic filled with ancient story elements presented in a new setting, space. "Fast paced and funny, they repackaged an archetypal quest for revenge and reconciliation as an outer space western.", Said Jeff MacGregor in his article, *Robot Love*, for Smithsonian magazine. News

anchorman, Walter Cronkite, said, “George Lucas’s *Star Wars* lifted us out of our sort of depression of the 70s, made an awareness and the focus on space and its possible future” (Empire of Dreams).

George was born during World War II and raised in northern California surrounded by society who was proud of their efforts and success in destroying evil. (Horton, 2015) George left Northern California to study at the University of Southern California. His idea to make small films quickly grew into something bigger (Collison, 2016). Meanwhile, On the world and national stage The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) began in the 1940s under the name Aircraft Engine Research Laboratory (AERL). By 1945 researchers were using the first supersonic wind tunnels and in the 1950s they were looking at nuclear propulsion and “high energy rocket propellants”. The space race caught the world’s attention when in 1957 Sputnik was launched by the Russians. The American space program began in the 1960s. Experiments were done on rockets and other spacecraft to be designed and launched to the moon, to Mars, and to explore the outer reaches of the solar system (Dunbar, 2015).

*Star Wars: A New Hope* was released in 1977 (Lucasfilm, 1977) and is the first chapter released of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. It came on the scene about one generation after the golden era of Hollywood and the golden era of comic books which was in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It was influenced by World War II, the Vietnam War, westerns, classical myths, and swashbuckling heroes. *Star Wars* put a new twist on the stories with the use of

groundbreaking special effects that cost \$3 million (Mackey-Kallis, 2001).

Movie posters for each of the movies in the trilogy focused on dramatic images of the characters with the name of the movie usually incorporated somewhere into the design. These images are usually framed like the dramatic pages of a comic book showing lots of action and emotion. The main characters in *Star Wars* were played by relatively unknown newcomers with seasoned actors in the supporting roles. This is unlike the Golden age of Hollywood when the studios pretty much owned the actors and splashed their names in large print on the advertisements. This was a new age and a new way to show what the studio had to offer.

American journalist, Bill Moyers, indicated that he felt that *Star Wars* had come to our collective conscience at just the right time. He said, “Timing is everything in art. You bring out *Star Wars* too early and you get Buck Rogers. You bring it out too late and it doesn’t fit our imaginations. You bring it out just as the war in Vietnam is ending when America feels uncertain of itself, when the old stories have died, and you bring it out at that time and suddenly it’s a new game.” (Empire of Dreams). It had an impact on American culture because it resonated so personally with the audience. They could identify with the characters in the struggle between good and evil. The strong feelings engendered by this new story created bonds of understanding among its fans. Mr. Moyers also said, “I think our cultural imagination has been transformed by Lucas’s films by taking us back to stories that make us all feel that we share in the heroic journey of the human species on this earth.”

It is fascinating to look at historical events prior to the creation of *Star Wars* and see how they collectively created an environment in which audiences imaginations were ready to embrace such a saga. Taken individually, each of these historical events is interesting on their own. When they are put together to create a clear and fuller picture of that time in history the whole story is more colorful and vibrant. Each piece is easier to understand as well as how they worked together to lead up to the creation of *Star Wars*.

### *The Humanities*

*Star Wars* has had an effect on the humanities as well. Creative thinkers such as George Lucas inspire other creative thinkers. In an article in Deadline magazine Ridley Scott shared how the *Star Wars* films affected him. He was powerfully struck by George Lucas' stunning film that he knew he had to change his plans for what project he would do next. He was super excited when the script for *Alien* fell into his lap even though he wasn't the first choice. He talked about the way Stanley Kubrick influenced George Lucas and himself with *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Jr, 2015). The interviewer asked him, "So we have *Star Wars* to Thank for *Alien*?" He said,

"Yes. Thanks to *Star Wars*, and to Stanley Kubrick for the way he influenced George and definitely influenced me with *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The design on *2001*...that's the threshold for everything being real. You look at *2001* and you look at *Star Wars*, that design was influencing everybody. I

could never shake it off and it influenced me even in *Prometheus*. Stanley really got it right."

Guillermo Del Toro, renown producer, director, actor, in the same article goes on to explain that George Lucas took the typical sci-fi universe that audiences were used to seeing as pristine and shiny and making it feel lived in by showing things that were rusting, broken, and dusty. This made it feel more realistic and accessible to viewers. These same elements are visible in *Alien* where on the ship there are parts that "feel worn and used and dingy". He calls this "the crossbreeding of *2001* with *Star Wars*".

Just as George Lucas inspired other filmmakers who came after him, he, himself, was inspired by the decades of film that preceded his own work. There wasn't just one overarching influence on *Star Wars* except maybe Lucas' love of film. In 2015 Tim Robey wrote an article for The Telegraph in the UK entitled "10 Films That Influenced *Star Wars*". He shows how the editing techniques, costumes and hairdos, the camera shots, and direction were plucked almost directly out of 10 classic films that span from the 1930s to the 1960s and include almost every genre, including a Nazi propaganda film. Even the characters in the *Star Wars* universe were inspired by these earlier stories. Robey said, "Lucas has acknowledged that the characters in *Star Wars* are more "tributes" than original creations" (Robey, 2015). If the old idiom it is true that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" ("McGraw-Hill," 2002) then George Lucas has paid great homage to the filmmakers of the past.

In *Episode IV: A New Hope* the special effects team at Industrial Light and Magic created special effects That had never been done before. They had a realism to them that was stunning. Over the next two

movies the team continued to perfect their craft and make breakthroughs in technology as they looked for new ways to create the effects that were required to tell the story. These new technological developments were used to realize George Lucas's vision. After *Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi* Lucas Digital Ltd. LLC, LucasArts, THX, Skywalker Sound, and Industrial Light and Magic were used on other projects and continued to revolutionize the film industry. It was a sort of renaissance (Empire of Dreams).

EditDroid, in 1984, and Sound Droid, in 1985, were the first nonlinear editing systems developed. Even though they weren't completely successful they were groundbreaking and a great step forward in moviemaking. EditDroid was sold to Avid in 1993. The Pixar Computer System that was developed in 1985 and was known for creating 3D realism was later sold and became Pixar Animation Studios. In 1997 ILM (Industrial Light and Magic) brought the story full circle. The original trilogy was redone with new technology the way George Lucas had originally imagined it. Before, it had been too expensive and took too much time to get it exactly how he wanted. Now the technology existed that would allow him to tell the story the way he wanted to. George Lucas not only contributed greatly to the mythology of the American (and worldwide) culture with his storytelling, but he also contributed greatly to the film industry by way of new technologies and processes that forever changed the way films would be made.

Disneyland, which opened in California in 1955, is itself a popular cultural artifact as well as Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Both parks are comprised of different themed areas known as a "land". There is Fantasyland, Tomorrowland, Adventureland, New Orleans Square, Main

Street, USA, etc. A highly anticipated addition to both Disneyland and Disney World is a brand-new area or "land" called "Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge" (Financiera, 2019). This is the place constructed to look like landscapes and architecture from the Star Wars universe as well as a life size replica of the famous spaceship, The Millennium Falcon. The rides, shops, and eateries in Galaxy's Edge are all created to give the visitor a sense of inhabiting destinations on the outer rim of the Star Wars galaxy. Because it is part of Disneyland, which is a destination for families, fans of all ages will be able to enjoy this experience. Disney fans who have not seen the Star Wars movies maybe curious about the new land, Galaxy's Edge, and choose to visit the area during their time in the park, thus, exposing them to the Star Wars universe through physical experience that may inspire a theatrical experience.

#### *Natural and Applied Sciences*

Through the lens of natural and applied sciences we can see that George Lucas' portrayal of life in space was light years ahead of reality. America was only less than two decades into its space program and so much of it was still experimental. *Star Wars*, on the other hand, showed us a sophisticated view of space travel and the use of technology that made traveling through hyperspace seem as ordinary as driving on the freeway.

There are many lessons to be learned and innumerable details of this saga that inspire our imaginations. One of those details or objects that causes a lot of excitement among fans is the Light saber. It is a sword with a blade of light that can be retracted into the hilt when not in use and extended with the push of a button. Light saber blades come in a variety of colors such

as green, red, blue, and purple. An important part of the light saber is the Kyber Crystal. It is what determines the color of the light saber.

In the Star Wars universe Kyber Crystals are mined from the natural elements of the planets. On Earth, as the natural elements of our planet are mined geologists study how they react with one another, and what uses they have. Bits of diamonds are added to drill bit and saw blades to increase cutting ability. Quartz crystals possess a quality that makes them useful in electronic equipment used for video production because they generate an electrical field. It is called piezoelectricity. Synthetic rubies and sapphires are useful to watchmakers. The Ruby laser has been used in microsurgery, CD players, and as pointers used by lecturers (Flynn). These few examples show that earth science can help us understand how elements of our planet can be put to use. We see that natural science is also important in the world of *Star Wars* as elements of the planets are used in their tools, weapons, and technology.

*Star Wars* has had a big influence in the interest of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) In April 2019 FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) teamed up with Lucasfilm, Disney, and *Star Wars* at Celebration Chicago “to inspire the next generation of heroes and innovators”. It is an effort to provide mentorship and learning opportunities to the rising generations in hopes of teaching them the important role technology and science play in our society. Young people who are fans of *Star Wars* are able to come together with engineers and other like-minded professionals to learn from them, carry on, and build their knowledge. There are also websites with *Star Wars* themed STEM activities children can do at home.

In the applied sciences arena George Lucas’s portrayal of artificial intelligence (AI) was what we all dreamed of, robots that could interact with humans and be pretty much independent. 40+ years later we still have not reached his level of technological advancement in the area. For example, an article from 2018 presents the opinion of W. Kris Verdeyen a NASA robotics engineer that droids who have the power to solve problems and make repairs without the aid of a human could be helpful to astronauts and that “NASA should strive to create its own *Star Wars* inspired droids”. He goes on to say, “Unfortunately, we don’t have the abilities to build a real life R2-D2 or BB-8 just yet, even though those robots are more realistic than you’d think. But NASA is working on the problem” (Gartenberg, 2018, Wilson, 2015).

Another application of artificial intelligence is happening in the medical field. Medical holography is a blending of live 3D cardiac ultrasound imaging and Live X-ray. In the article *Hologram: The Future Of Medicine – From Star Wars To Clinical Imaging* Sundeep Mishra stated the following,

“By rendering these 2D images into 3D floating projections, this technology will revolutionize the way medical professionals plan and carry out their treatments and surgeries. The technology will enable physicians to zoom in and out of the images to get a better view of parts that are unclear in the initial scans.”

These “3D floating projections” are very familiar to fans of *Star Wars*. In *A New Hope: Episode IV* a 3D image of the Death Star was used to show the rebel fighters

where its weak point was and how they could destroy it. In the very beginning of the film Princess Leia creates a message and sends it in the droid, R2-D2. It contains a 3D holographic image of herself and records her voice and her movements. If surgeons are able to see organs as holographic 3D floating projections and are able to manipulate them by zooming in and out and turning them, they will have a clearer picture of problems to be rectified and the best way to approach them.

It is also anticipated that this technology will allow a presenter to give a lecture to an audience from a remote location. Instead of relying on video an audience would see a life-size, 3D image of the presenter that could interact with them. There are currently several companies who are developing holographic imaging systems. They are moving ever closer to making the incredible technology seen in the *Star Wars* films a reality.

When viewed through the lens of the Natural and Applied Sciences we see that even though the *Star Wars* saga takes place “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away” our worlds are not so different and we as an audience are able to relate to it. By knowing that gems and minerals on this earth are used in a variety of ways to enhance our lives seeing characters in the movies use the natural elements of their planets in ways that help them live better makes the story seem more plausible and their galaxy not so far away. The very fact that scientists are striving to create the same technology seen in *Star Wars* tells us something about our society. It tells us that imagination, desire for exploration and discovery is not dead. We still have dreamers among us, dreamers that are willing to work through trial and error to achieve the impossible by finding the path that makes these miracles a reality.

It is exciting to know that scientists appreciate the technology they see in the *Star Wars* movies, don't totally discount it, and are inspired by it to search out ways to create it in our world.

### *Social Sciences*

*Star Wars* not only gives the audience the excitement of a heroic adventure story, but it also addresses two social subjects that are often said should not be brought up in polite company, politics and religion. However, these subjects are two of the largest in the *Star Wars* saga.

Politics are in the background of the original trilogy but are at the core of the story. At the beginning of *Episode Four: A New Hope* the rebels are still trying to bring down the Galactic Empire that was created some 20 years before. Members of the Rebel Alliance believe in freedom and sovereignty of each world in the galaxy and are willing to fight for it. They have fallen from being a Republic to having an Emperor who leads the repressive Empire. The trilogy ends with the destruction of the second Death Star, the death of Emperor Palpatine, and the return of Darth Vader (Anikin Skywalker) to the light side of the force.

It is a message of hope for freedom loving people everywhere not to give up. In the turbulent social environment of the 70s *Star Wars* gave a great example of what life was like under the oppressive thumb of a dictator. George Lucas said,

“I wanted it to be a traditional moral study, to have some sort of palpable precepts in it that children could understand.... Where do these lessons come from? Traditionally, we get them from church, the family, art,

and in the modern world we get them from media — from movies.”

*Star Wars* has also had an effect on religion in society. In the saga religion is completely discounted by some people and embraced by others. The Jedi doctrine is laid out by the Jedi church that had arisen in our reality has some basic concepts. They are as follows,

- “The Jedi church recognizes that all living things share a living force and that all people have an innate knowledge of what is right and wrong, and the Jedi Church celebrates this like no other religion.

- There is one all powerful force that binds the entire universe together.

- There are 2 sides to the force, the dark side, and the light side.

- we must listen to the force so that we will know the right thing to do.”

These concepts are worked into the game, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Players are given the choice to either join the Empire or the Republic and then engage in the political scenarios in the galaxy. One player shared his feelings about playing the game as a Jedi character. He said,

“I do feel like the Jedi Philosophy in general can help in real-life situations and is beneficial.”. He went on to say, “In a few small ways it [being a Jedi in the game] made me a better person (Sloat).”

Looking at politics and religion as part of our personal lives can sometimes mean that those two subjects get distorted by our own perceptions of them because we are too close. When we see these subjects addressed in a world that is not our own, we

can look at them more objectively. With that objectivity we can make more informed choices and be less likely to fall into compromising situations. If we look at the moral and political choices set before us in the examples of politics and religion in *Star Wars*, we can see that we would do well to learn from their mistakes and recognize that living the Jedi philosophy will help us all be better people. Through the social science lens, it is easy to see the further effect the *Star Wars* trilogy has had on culture. Entertainment is a large part of our modern culture. In 1987 Mel Brooks cowrote, directed, and started a movie called *Space Balls* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer [MGM], 1987). It was a satirical take on the *Star Wars* franchise. The characters were caricatures of Lucas’s characters. The plot involved a princess that needed to be saved from the evil *Space Balls*. The cast included many of the most popular actors of the 80s. It’s opening weekend it earned over \$6 million and it’s cumulative worldwide gross was over \$38 million.

*Studio C* is a sketch comedy show that is produced by BYU TV. It is a family-friendly show with a format similar to *Saturday Night Live*. *Studio C* has been on for 11 seasons and has a very talented ensemble cast that sheds a humorous light on the most common aspects of popular culture. In season four their sixth episode featured a sketch that portrayed the dress rehearsal of the scene in the new *Star Wars* movie. This was soon after Disney acquired the *Star Wars* franchise when JJ Abrams was brought on to direct *The Force Awakens, Episode VII*. Their jokes centered on the mashup of notable elements in both the Disney and *Star Wars* universes. They are punny and poke fun at political correctness, film history, and marketing goals. This sketch is only one of many where *Studio C* pokes fun at this pop-culture icon (BYU Broadcasting, Season 4 Episode 6) These two examples show the

breadth of the audience that *Star Wars* has. Enough people are familiar with *Star Wars*, it's plot and characters, to appreciate the satire. Members of the fandom love *Star Wars* but they don't take it so seriously that they can't laugh at it when a parody is presented. They seem to love references to this beloved universe wherever they are found.

*Star Wars* is a story set among the stars "in a galaxy far, far away" and yet it is

relatable to millions of people in this galaxy, on our planet. That's because it is a simple story about a farm boy turned hero and good triumphing over evil. The impact it would have on multiple generations of fans, scientists, moviemakers, gamers, toymakers, apparel designers, etc., could not have been predicted. The events that preceded its creation shaped and molded the imagination of George Lucas. In return, the wonders of George Lucas's imagination have shaped and molded large parts of popular culture.

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