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"I Am Your Father"

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"I Am Your Father"

Abstract
"Star Wars is supposed to be a generic mythological story with archetypes and narrative structures that transcend all cultures, both in space and in time."

Posting about the influence of movies on our culture from In All Things - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God’s creation.

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Josh Matthews

“Stay on target.”

“I find your lack of faith disturbing.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“I am your father.”

“Those aren’t the droids you’re looking for.”

“Use the force, Luke.”

At some point while reading them, most readers can figure out where these quotations come from. I’d guess that a lot of readers will know within the first three quotations, before certain words in the last three hint more clearly at the source (e.g., “droids,” “force”).

In fact, just google-search the very common words “do or do not,” without even the quotation marks that make it an exact phrase, and you’ll receive hits for *Star Wars*.

Yes, for us today, do or do not equals a movie, and not the Bible, Plato, or Shakespeare.

It’s well-known that *Star Wars* is one of the most impactful film franchises, if not the most impactful, of the last 40 years. Its influence is global; its audience is in the billions. Some people obviously obsess over it, but even some of us who don’t own its merchandise or care much about it still know it well enough to use quotations from it.

Its story, its voice, is forever in our heads. It’s a part of us.

*Star Wars*’ popularity means—for better or for worse—that it’s one of the most well-known stories in human history. I’m only talking numbers: 7.5 billion people on Earth today, far more than any previous era. A fifth of them, which I think is a conservative estimate, are probably aware of *Star Wars*, a good portion of them having seen the movies and experienced the decades-long marketing hype.

That makes George Lucas—for better or for worse—one of the most dominant story-tellers in human history. He’s up there with Aesop and the writers of *Arabian Nights*, just in terms of the total number of people he’s affected.

The era in which *Star Wars* arrived helped determine its cultural saturation. Movies are probably the most impactful storytelling medium ever, because of the number of people that they have reached in the last 120 years. Poetry, dance, music, and theatre have been around forever, yet before electricity most people rarely experienced them unless they were produced by local amateurs.

Movies, however, have long been accessible to ordinary people, now more so than ever. Today I carry around a pocket computer, my smartphone, and with two taps on its screen I can watch a movie. All my life, I’ve had access to vast libraries of movies: VHS rental stores and cable channels, then DVD stores, then streaming services.

*Star Wars* is a movie among movies, the first one (Episode IV, released in 1977) being the second highest-grossing movie yet made, when we adjust for inflation. It spawned seven subsequent movies to date, with more to come, plus many animated series, video games, and uncountable amounts of merchandise.
Again, all of this is well-known. But why *Star Wars*, instead of something else?

Let's take a quick stab at examining why Episode IV of *Star Wars* became a culturally dominant story.

If the answer isn't just marketing, which has to be part of the answer, maybe it's also the basics of the story.

Let's describe the story of Episode IV. A young man goes on a quest to rescue a princess from a fortress, which is dominated by an evil monster. He rescues the princess, then destroys the fortress.

This formula sounds like a fairytale, especially if I add in the fact that the boy is an aspiring sorcerer who's mentored by a wizard. That seems right—*Star Wars* is a fairytale in space ("A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...")—but let's think of it as a videogame. In the previous paragraph, I've also just described one of the most popular video games ever made, 1985's "Super Mario Brothers," which, like *Star Wars*, features platform-jumping, end-level boss battles, and princess-saving. When Mario击败s a level, he gets his points and his victory flag, while at the end of *Star Wars*, Luke and friends receive medals.

As with the blockbuster movie franchises it inspired, *Star Wars* no doubt had some influence on all the great videogames that would appear after it, perhaps on most videogames period.

The fairytale-aspect of *Star Wars* is deliberate. As is well known, George Lucas claims to have used Joseph Campbell's 1949 book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which attempts to sum up all human myths. *Star Wars* is supposed to be a generic mythological story with archetypes and narrative structures that transcend all cultures, both in space and in time.

In *Star Wars*, there's the orphan boy who must become his own man. He's prophesized as the chosen one, but he has to be mentored first by the old sage who, late in the movie, becomes the wise spirit-voice in his head. The hero, the boy, is initiated into the conflict, is tempted to do evil, becomes a special person or god-like character (e.g., a Jedi), and defeats his greatest fear.

There's much more to the Campbell-*Star Wars* connection than that. Lucas' general idea, though, was that *Star Wars* could work in any culture. Whether that's true or not, I have no idea, but the fact is that, in the last 40 years, *Star Wars* has translated well across cultural and national boundaries.

But that can't be all. Maybe people love *Star Wars* because of its political messages. After all, isn't everyone yearning to be free from oppression and tyranny, just like Luke and Leia?

In *Star Wars*, the ragtag Rebel Alliance faces the menacing Empire. This Empire, thanks to the stormtroopers and to Darth Vader, is machine-like in appearance. It uses the ultimate weapon, the Death Star, as a means to terrorize and control. It's up to a few freedom-fighters, space guerrillas, to destroy the Empire and restore freedom to the galaxy—whatever freedom means.

*Star Wars* came out one year after the United States celebrated its 200th anniversary of declaring independence from an empire, Great Britain, so it's likely that Episode IV celebrates the spirit of 1776. It does seem that the rebels—an American type is the young rebel who rebels against political oppression, cultural norms, or just about anything else—are supposed to represent our idea of what the American revolutionaries were like. Darth Vader is the big bad King. Luke and his friends, meanwhile, are the sons who must break away from their political “father.”

Except that in 1977, the U.S. was an empire, and it still is. Back then, the U.S. had just lost the Vietnam War; the fall of Saigon happened two years before *Star Wars* came out. Although Episode IV might’ve enlivened American spirits after Vietnam, it might have also shown us a bit of role-reversal: what it is like for small nations across the world to combat a technologically superior empire.

Is *Star Wars* about the U.S. breaking away from an empire, or the U.S. as an empire? Doesn't it support anarchy, or
some kind of political nihilism? (After all, who or what is going to replace the Empire after it is defeated? As far as I can tell, the movies have yet to tell us.)

Maybe it’s all of the above, or none of the above. Maybe it’s a work of generic political philosophy (I use this phrase as loosely as I possibly can). In other words, it’s about all empires and all people that they oppress. It’s like the Old Testament, which mostly roots for the little guys against larger despotic regimes like the Egyptians and Babylonians.

Or maybe Star Wars works perhaps because most of us feel like a David facing a Goliath. Darth Vader is the father you don’t want to be like, the tyrant who’s oppressing you, the tempter who wants you to do evil. Take your pick, then identify easily with Luke Skywalker.

Or maybe the generic spirituality of Star Wars aids it popularity. We can use our religion—whichever one we participate in, the movie doesn’t care—for good or for evil. Light side or dark side. Do good works or do bad works. Choice versus destiny.

I am not sure whether Star Wars is so beloved for any of the above reasons—its aesthetics, its politics, its religious aspects, its mythology, its Jungian archetypes, its marketing hype. Probably the answer is some combination of all of them.

But I think that Star Wars is a good example of why stories in general are so well loved by everyone everywhere. They hit on most or all aspects of our lives, all at once. And they do it unconsciously, or quietly, or subversively. Without thinking about why we love them, we know why we love them. They help make life worth living, especially the good ones. They become part of us.

Star Wars might last just a few more decades or, like the stories of Gilgamesh, the Trojan War, and King Arthur, it might last for a thousand years. It will probably be the former, but who knows?

For now, though, we can say that it dominated in its own day. It captured something about the world now, a something that future historians will have to determine carefully from their distanced perspective. These future scholars will wonder why we hated movie stormtroopers but accepted them on our streets, why we loved lightswords when we had millions of guns, and why our greatest philosopher was a green puppet.

They will have a delightful time trying to figure out those conundrums.

For us, and for now, that great green puppet, the master of the backwards sentence, is in our heads:

“A Jedi’s strength flows from the force.”

“Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”

“Do or do not. There is no try.”

“You must unlearn what you have learned.”

“Adventure. Excitement. A Jedi craves not these things.”

“May the force be with you.”