

Some features of the Star Wars phenomenon

Star Wars—Episode 1: The Phantom Menace, written and directed by George Lucas

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One must say what is: at heart this is a stupid, pernicious movie. It may be more tolerable than *Titanic*, but it belongs to the same species of bloated, empty spectacle. It is without depth, without complexity, without a critical thought or impulse. Whatever the conscious motives of its creators, which are by no means entirely above board, *The Phantom Menace* will function to encourage masses of people *not* to think about the critical issues in their lives. It is a gigantic stalling tactic, a structure of evasion on a mass scale.

Is it not an indication of disorientation that a war waged in some imaginary galaxy “far, far away” elicits a greater response at this point from large numbers of American adults than the very real military conflict currently being prosecuted in their name? I would go so far as to say that one of the reasons the murderous operation in the Balkans evokes relatively little overt opposition is an intellectual state of affairs in which a *Titanic* or a *Phantom Menace* is treated as a serious cultural object.

This film treats events that supposedly came before those dramatized in the three previous *Star Wars* films. *The Phantom Menace* shows us the future arch-villain as a child; apparently the product of a virgin birth, no less! Is he the Chosen One, or something else? Robot armies assemble. Various creatures appear, some of which seem to embody racist stereotypes. Warrior-priests, white and Anglo-Saxon (or, rather, Celtic), and a beautiful young queen save the day, for the time being. Until Episode 2.

The film cost \$115 million to make. The great question in film industry circles is, will it top the one-billion dollar mark in box office sales worldwide? Will it match *Titanic*'s \$1.8 billion?

Commercialism of the crassest variety is certainly a factor, but I have a feeling that George Lucas has other concerns, unfortunately. Lucas has only directed a handful of works: *THX 1138* (1971), a work of science fiction that Warner Bros. executives took out of his hands and re-edited; *American Graffiti* (1973), that sentimental and vulgar exercise in invented cultural history; and the original *Star Wars* (1977), which has retroactively been renamed *Episode IV: A New Hope*. He has

produced a good many films, including *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), which he also wrote, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Willow* (1988), *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (1988) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989). He, of course, presides as well over the film industry giant, Lucas Digital, which incorporates Industrial Light and Magic and Skywalker Sound.

Many critics and many in and around the film industry as well are willing to acknowledge that Lucas is no artistic genius, that his dialogue is unmemorable at best and ludicrous at worst [“Be mindful of the living Force, my young Padawan”], and his acting mediocre, but then quickly add, “But he’s a technical genius! His images are spectacular!” This is a specious argument. Technical genius is not in short supply in Hollywood; ideas, depth of feeling and artistic principle are. Lucas is simply the most outstanding example of the imbalance. An image not charged by serious ideas or deep emotions is not of any importance. The appeal of such images, insofar as it is genuine and not simply media-generated, is another expression of a filmgoing audience largely at sea, which is only given the opportunity, by and large, to pick and choose between different samples of empty bombast.

How is the public to defend itself, in any event, against a marketing campaign on the scale of the one organized for *The Phantom Menace*? Does it, under the present circumstances, have much choice? Just as the media and political establishment inform broad layers of the population that they “loved” Princess Diana, and they are “outraged” by the crimes of Hussein or Milosevic, so it instructs them that they are waiting breathlessly for the opening of Lucas’s new film. Many have a difficult time at this point distinguishing between what official sources tell them they feel and what *they really feel*. Or the official version *becomes* temporarily the popular one by default insofar as millions have no real life yet.

Lucas is able to assume a prominent position in the vacuum at the center of American cultural life due both to his technical skill and to his ideological sensitivity to the desire millions feel, and that he perhaps himself feels, for some meaning or purpose

in their lives. Unfortunately, he provides a shabby and false meaning.

Brian D. Johnson, in a useful article in *Maclean's*, the Canadian weekly newsmagazine, observes: “Amalgamating everything from Christianity to Buddhism, from *The Wizard of Oz* to Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress*, Lucas has concocted a story-cum-superstore of myths and archetypes. A major inspiration was mythology scholar Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), who suggested that basic narratives are hardwired into the human psyche. According to Campbell, all mythologies essentially tell the same story of an archetypal hero being transformed by a return trip to a supernatural world—and finding an identity with God.

“After being discovered by Lucas, Campbell saw his theories become gospel for Hollywood screenwriters. And before his death in 1987, he conducted a book's worth of interviews with PBS broadcaster Billy Moyers at the Skywalker Ranch [Lucas' ranch]. *Star Wars* is ‘good, sound teaching,’ Campbell told Moyers ...”

Campbell was a student of mythology, who taught at Sarah Lawrence College from 1934 to 1972. An exposure to the writings of Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, convinced him that, to quote an admirer, “each person is living out a personal story, which is an example of the timeless patterns or archetypes found in fairy tales and other myths.” Campbell turned this shallow notion into something of an industry. Timing was everything in his case. The deep disappointment and disillusionment produced by the tragic events of the 1930s and 1940s, encouraged a goodly number of intellectuals and artists to seek solace in universal symbols and mythology. Campbell's celebrity status was the accidental by-product of this generally retrograde trend and mood. (Merce Cunningham and John Cage, two fixtures of the New York avant-garde, for example, came under his influence.)

The Jung-Campbell outlook has definite social implications. If one is merely living out a pattern that infinitely repeats itself, whose driving force is something preternatural, then any attention paid to improving the circumstances of life is not only misplaced, it is an absurdity. Campbell remarked, for example: “Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world. We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy.” Or, even more explicitly: “When we talk about settling the world's problems, we're barking up the wrong tree. The world is perfect. It's a mess. It has always been a mess. We're not going to change it. Our job is to straighten out our own lives.”

The appeal of this to a wealthy, relatively self-satisfied Hollywood filmmaker should be obvious. Lucas, who currently sits on the board of the Joseph Campbell Foundation, has said, “I put the Force into the movie to try to reawaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people. I see *Star Wars* as taking all the issues that religion represents, and trying to distil them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct.” This is

pretty wretched stuff: congealed intellectual laziness and banality, joined to a comic book version of history and mythology, and adding up to a justification for everything one has done or is likely to do as the “life-centering, life-renewing” working of the universe. In Campbell's words: “The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.” (Unhappily for the latter, he was born too soon to ever host his own daytime talk show.)

In criticizing Lucas's new film, some critics are treating the original *Star Wars* as though it were universally recognized as an extraordinary work. It ought to be remembered, in fact, that Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* and *Star Wars* ushered in a generally dismal era of commercial blockbusters in the mid-1970s, obviously reflective as well of a different social atmosphere, from which we have not yet emerged. That having been said, nonetheless, it is true that the 1977 work had something of a tongue-in-cheek character to it and was interpreted, all in all, as a send-up of the genre. Moreover, appearing so soon after the defeat of the US military in Vietnam, audiences inevitably identified the rebels in *Star Wars* with opponents of the American imperial status quo.

Twenty-two years and hundreds of millions, *billions* of dollars later, there is none of that feel to the current film. It is thoroughly establishment, solemn and takes itself extremely seriously. The technical effects, advanced and astonishing as they are, cannot possibly compensate for the blandness and conformism at the core of this work.

As a final point, I have to ask: what are these actors doing here? Liam Neeson has done certain interesting things, and he can hardly be in need of cash. But even more surprising (and troubling) is the presence of Ewan McGregor, a talented performer in “independent films” such as *Trainspotting* and *Velvet Goldmine*. He has apparently committed himself to the rest of the new trilogy of Lucas films. Why? And the last time I saw Pernilla August she was playing Ingmar Bergman's fictional mother in *Best Intentions*. It seems at times that there are so few in the acting profession who can calmly, but firmly say, “No, thanks.”



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