

Why the force is still with us

**Thirty years after the release of *Star Wars*, the swashbuckling space opera still resonates as a mythology for the modern age.
Robert Sibley contemplates why it affects us so**

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By Robert Sibley

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There's a whole generation growing up without any kind of fairy tales. And kids need fairy tales.

— George Lucas

In the late 1980s, Bill Moyers, a well-respected journalist with the Public Broadcasting System in the United States, was producing a documentary on the mythological background of George Lucas' *Star Wars* movies. In later years, Moyers recalled how he asked his youngest son why he saw *Star Wars* over and over. The boy responded: "For the same reason you have been reading the Old Testament all your life." The comment prompted Moyers to wonder whether his son, and perhaps his son's generation, had adopted "a new world of myth" to replace the old myths of Judeo-Christianity.

That might seem an outlandish idea to some. How could a swashbuckling space operacum-western-style good guys-bad guys soap opera constitute a myth for our time? Is it not a reflection of our dumbed-down times to suggest that a film so laden with wooden acting, stilted language and banal psychology could be the equal of, say, Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Cervantes' *Don Quixote*?

There's no question that Lucas drew on the mythological sources and cultural archetypes of the West to make *Star Wars* 30 years ago. Consider the movie's main ingredients: an orphaned hero, a princess in need of rescue, a wise-beyond-the-ages mentor, fearsomely evil villains, magical swords and mental powers, and a universe imbued with a mysterious "force" — "sort of like magnetism, plus ethics," in journalist James Lilek's witty phrase — that only the well-trained adept can perceive. Such is the material of myth. Yet is it, as Mary Henderson, the curator of a 1997 Smithsonian exhibit devoted to the *Star Wars* series, asserted, "one of the great myths of our time?"

Quite a few respectable critics and scholars think so. Beyond the boys' own adventure sensibility, they say, the *Star Wars* series offers a narrative suitable to our post-modern, post-Christian globalizing, humanistic culture. *Star Wars* has become "part of our memories," says film reviewer Roger Ebert in a 1999 retrospective. "A fantasy for our times," says film critic Andrew Gordon. Anne Lancashire, a professor of literature at the University of Toronto, argues that George Lucas has created "an epic mythological saga."

“Lucas’ universe has an impact on generations of moviegoers utterly out of proportion to its formidable qualities as spectacle or excitement,” concludes film critic Stephen Greydanus. “The Force, the Jedi knights, Darth Vader, Obi-wan, Princess Leia, Yoda, lightsabers, and the Death Star hold a place in the collective imagination of countless Americans that can only be described as myth.”

Star Wars is about a reluctant hero, who, aided by a motley crew of friends and hindered by a slew of villains, sets out on a series of hazardous adventures to defeat evil, save his tribe, and fulfil his destiny as a man — updated for our high-tech times. Such a narrative fits the framework of the classic mythological hero quest that has provided the narrative structure for so much western literature.

In this light, it is perhaps understandable why the *Star Wars* story would colonize the imagination of generations that may have never heard of, much less read, Homer or Cervantes. In an age when film has replaced the novel as the dominant medium for our collective self-expression, movies like *Star Wars* provide people with an unconscious narrative of meaning, a fiction that captures and expresses the largely unarticulated existential concerns that form the psychological and spiritual backdrop to their lives. So argues cultural historian John David Ebert. “It is in film, and most especially in mythologically inspired film, that the great questions, which were once posed by the contemporary novel, are now being asked — that is, the really big questions, the very posing of which indicates the essential nature of our being as a questioning, thinking kind of being in a world among other beings ...”

Lest you think the claim exaggerates the psychic depths of the *Star Wars* series, consider the essential story, which can be summed up in Freudian Oedipal terms. The prequels — *The Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*, or Episodes I, II and III — relate the story of a boy, Anakin Skywalker, who is turned into a machine known as Darth Vader after duelling with his surrogate father, Obi-wan Kenobi, and marrying his surrogate mother, Amidala. (Vader kills Obi-wan in Episode IV). The initial trilogy — *Star Wars: A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, or Episodes IV, V and VI — tells the tale of the son, Luke Skywalker, who helps his father recover his humanity. Thus, the *Star Wars* series raises perennial existential concerns: Who are we as humans? From where do we come? What is our purpose?

Perhaps Christopher Sharrett, a professor of communications at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, captures the existential dimension of the *Star Wars* films with this anecdote. “Each semester, when my students offer their proposals for term papers, I am amazed by the number who wish to write about George Lucas’ *Star Wars* trilogy. It is apparent what a formative influence these pictures had had on two generations of moviegoers.” The consequence of this, he says, “is not to be underestimated.”

Indeed, whatever the aesthetic or intellectual inadequacies of the *Star Wars* movies, they cannot be regarded as mere escapist entertainment. Admittedly, it is easy to settle for the pyrotechnics of the special effects, to see the stories as boys’ own adventures. But behind the hype, the merchandising and the whiz-bang gadgets, there’s a worldview, a

cosmological claim. The movies need to be seen as both a reflection of and a harbinger of the contemporary mindset. As such, it is reasonable to consider their moral and spiritual messages, implied or otherwise, since they may well offer a glimpse of the new world that is coming into being.

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George Lucas has offered various comments about his intentions in making the Star Wars movies. Earlier on, when *Star Wars* first came out, he said he was merely making a “fun” movie, that his “only purpose was to give pleasure.” Yet, he also told screenwriter Stephen Zito, “I wanted to do a modern fairy tale, a myth.”

Two decades later, Lucas attributed spiritual purposes to his movies. “I see *Star Wars* as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct,” he told Bill Moyers in a 1999 interview for *Time* magazine. “I put the Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people — more belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery.”

In a 2002 interview, Lucas drew on the Buddhist ideal of detachment to explain Anakin Skywalker’s turn to the “dark side” of the Force. “He turns into Darth Vader because he gets attached to things. He can’t let go of his mother; he can’t let go of his girlfriend. He can’t let go of things. It makes you greedy. And when you’re greedy, you are on the path to the dark side, because you fear to lose things.” This is also what the Jedi master Yoda warns Luke Skywalker against. As Lucas’ biographer, Dale Pollock, writes, “Yoda’s philosophy is Buddhist — he tells Luke that the Force requires him to be calm, at peace, and passive.”

If all this sounds like new-age mish-mash — why would love for your mother or loyalty to a lover make you greedy? Isn’t someone who seeks passivity as his friends are being killed a moral cretin? — that’s because it is. The morality of the Stars Wars movies reflects a sweeping appropriation of various philosophic and religious traditions, Western and Eastern, whose conceptual assumptions don’t readily mix. Christianity, for example, is grounded in the metaphysical assumption that God created the world *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, which, of course, makes God radically separate from the world. The “Force,” on the other hand, implies a pantheist metaphysic in which God is, as it were, embedded in the material realm; that is, God is the world, and the world is God.

No wonder you find a contradictory brew of belief and behavior in Star Wars. There are Christological notions (young Anakin’s implied Immaculate Conception, for example) mixed with Zen Buddhist psychology (training Jedi knights to be indifferent to everyday passions). Moreover, as Dale Pollock points out, the “religion of the Jedi” reflects Lucas’ acquaintance with both Buddhism and Carlos Castaneda’s once-popular *Tales of Power*, which feature the Mexican Indian sorcerer Don Juan, who often refers to “the force.” And

let's not forget the Jungian archetypes, Freudian theories and New Age spiritualism (the telekinetic abilities of the Jedi, for example).

Apocalyptic themes and biblical allusions aren't neglected either. Like Jonah in the belly of the whale, Luke enters the Death Star only to escape after he acquires faith in God, or the Force. ("May the Force be with you" is merely a word substitution for "May God be with you.") The Star Wars series offers, in the words of cultural theorist John Lyden, "a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil; a great cataclysm is foretold, but the faithful will survive with the help of God (The Force); a messiah figure (Luke) appears; and a new world order will come about in which justice triumphs and wickedness is punished."

This apocalyptic myth is made relevant to a modern audience by being framed as a battle of technology vs. the natural human: the machine Vader vs. the human Skywalker, the Death Star vs. the Force. Says Lyden: "The films' apparent technophilia is cover for a technophobic message: we must remember our humanity lest we be absorbed or destroyed by our machine creations."

It is this hodge-podge profusion of ideas and traditions that makes Star Wars both a reflection and a perpetrator of our confused and confusing age. In the post-everything era you can believe anything you want because, well, your beliefs are your values. Such a spiritual assumption is, of course, essentially pagan. As philosopher Peter Kreeft puts it: "The Force of Star Wars fame is a pantheistic God. (It's) available whenever you want it, but not bothersome when you don't want it. How comfortable to think we are bubbles in a divine froth rather than rebellious children of a righteous divine Father!"

In saying this, I follow Kreeft in distinguishing ancient paganism from modern paganism. The ancient Greeks, for example, worshiped numerous gods and goddesses, but they had a sense of piety toward those divinities, a natural spiritual instinct that acknowledged the existence of something greater than themselves. Modern paganism, by contrast, describes "the virtual divinization of man," says Kreeft. That is to say, New Age paganism is humanist — it worships humans as the new gods.

Modern paganism is also different from the ancient version in that it lacks the latter's sense of awe and mystery. The old pagans may have worshiped gods very much like themselves, but at least they thought there was something to worship besides themselves. In contrast, says Kreeft, modern pagans worship themselves in the sense that their highest good is comfort, not any desire for insight into the mystery beyond themselves. Modern paganism gives you the patina of spiritual sustenance without the ancient pagan fear of and respect for divine wrath. Since modern paganism denies any genuinely divine revelation, no one's values can be judged to be wrong, which, of course, is very comforting. Nor is there any sense of sin because sin means separation from God, and in the modern pagan imagination "no one can be separated from the All."

You see this comforting paganism in the redemption of Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader in *Return of the Jedi*, the 1983 movie that concludes the series (in terms of the narrative

sequence, if not chronologically). Vader's death scene at the end of the movie offers not only a final reconciliation between father and son, but as film reviewer Steve Curtis says, a "moment of confession and forgiveness between Vader and the universe at large."

Not everyone finds this cosmic reconciliation morally acceptable. Film critic David Brin points out that over the course of Star Wars series, Anakin Skywalker — a.k.a. Darth Vader — has not only tried to kill his son and his friends, but also destroyed numerous planets and killed billions. Yet, supposedly, everything must be forgiven because Darth Vader kills the Evil Emperor and saves his son. *Return of the Jedi* ends with Luke Skywalker smiling at the benign ghosts of Obi-wan, Yoda and Anakin, who has been restored to the good side of the Force. Vader/Anakin receives no punishment for his career as a genocidal sociopath. He doesn't even apologize, because, after all, he's a good father. This "romanticization of a mass murderer" shows appalling demagoguery, says Brin.

Brin is right to denounce Darth Vader's apotheosis, but I suspect that what he sees as new age demagoguery is more aptly attributed to a postmodern sensibility that, as it seems, disavows moral judgment as, well, judgmental. As philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it, the Star Wars series is "an empty container of multiple, inconsistent and even mutually exclusive meanings ... Its 'meaning' is precisely to serve as a vessel of multiple meanings."

Commentators have linked this plethora of "meanings" to the series' multiple sources. Star Wars, says film critic Stephen Greydanus, expresses "the quintessential American mythology" in borrowing from everywhere and anyone — from the legends of King Arthur and the fantasies of J.R.R. Tolkien to Akira Kurosawa's 1958 samurai epic *The Hidden Fortress*, Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *The Triumph of the Will*, and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In his 1999 interview with Bill Moyers, Lucas said that in writing *Star Wars* he had to come up with "a whole cosmology." To create his new cosmology, to "express it all," as he put it, he borrowed from Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, paganism and gnosticism, among others. He also ransacked libraries for ideas and images, looking at everything from Grimm's Fairy Tales and Frazer's *Golden Bough* to Edgar Rice Burroughs' John Carter of Mars novels, C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia and Isaac Asimov's Foundation series. Lucas then dressed it all up in the trappings of 1930s Flash Gordon serials festooned with nostalgic Hollywood influences — western cowboy shootouts, movie-Nazi villains and Second World War aerial dogfights. For example, the scenes where starfighters speed between the canyon-like walls of a Death Star echo both the light trip into another dimension in Kubrick's film and *The Dam Busters*, a classic war film.

Interestingly, there's a Canadian thread in the Star Wars tapestry. You might remember a scene in *Star Wars* where Luke and Han Solo are rushing through the detention security area on the Death Star, trying to locate the cell where Princess Leia is held captive. After

zapping the imperial guards with blasters, Han shouts to Luke: “We gotta find out which cell this princess of yours is in. Here it is, 2187.”

The cell number is Lucas’ salute to Arthur Lipsett, a one-time avant-garde filmmaker with the National Film Board who made a short abstract film in 1964 titled 21-87. The film was part of the curriculum at the University of South California where Lucas got his initial training in filmmaking. It contains numerous discordant images and sounds — a horse jumping from a diving board, people looking blankly into a camera as they get off an elevator, a robot arm maneuvering a vial — that, as one account has it, “touched a nerve in the aspiring filmmaker’s experimental mind.”

Writer Steve Silberman, who interviewed Lucas in 2005, explains that one of the audio sources Lipsett used in his film was a conversation between cinematographer Roman Kroitor and Warren McCullough, a pioneer in artificial intelligence. Responding to McCullough’s claim that humans are little more than complex machines, Kroitor says: “Many people feel that in the contemplation of nature and in communication with other living things, they become aware of some kind of force, or something, behind this apparent mask which we see in front of us, and they call it God.”

“When asked if this was the source of ‘the Force’,” Silberman writes, “Lucas confirms that his use of the term in *Star Wars* was ‘an echo of that phrase in 21-87’.”

Lucas paid his debt to Lipsett in the best tradition of his craft — by slipping in stealthy references to 21-87 in his own films. Besides the reference in *Star Wars*, one of Lucas’ first projects, a 1971 science fiction film entitled *THX 1138*, is set in the year 2187.

But the deepest source material for *Star Wars* is the oldest of story-telling traditions. To tap that source, Lucas turned to scholar Joseph Campbell’s studies of ancient mythology, particularly his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, originally published in 1949. As theologian Albert Mohler observes, “Campbell introduced a generation of secularized and confused Americans to the world of ancient and modern myths.” One of those confused Americans was George Lucas. “No book would be as influential as Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,” says biographer Garry Jenkins. “Throughout the *Star Wars* era the book ... remained stacked on his desk at all times.”

That explains why Lucas described Joseph Campbell as “my Yoda.” The original *Star Wars* trilogy captures what Campbell calls the cultural “monomyth,” the story of a hero whose adventure follows a pattern of departure, initiation and return. Campbell discovered that the mythologies of many cultures refer to a leader who is required to undertake a quest on behalf of the tribe. This hero undergoes various ordeals that culminate in his near-death or actual-death. The hero is then resurrected, symbolically or literally, to achieve his salvation or that of his tribe. *Star Wars*, says Anne Lancashire, a professor of literature at the University of Toronto, “attracted a massive popular following for its combination of this mythology — in which the hero is all of us, expressing what Campbell has described as the dreamwork of the culture, our conscious

and unconscious aspirations and fears — with familiar characters both archetypal and everyday.”

Thus, *Star Wars* grafts the mundane story of a boy, Luke Skywalker, yearning to leave home for adventure onto the political story of a rebellion against a dictator. Within that structure you get many of the archetypes identified by Campbell. There’s the Arthurian knight’s hero-quest, the Biblical Renewal of Faith, the Good Father versus the Bad Father, the Redemption of Evil, and, as a modern twist on the archetype of Man versus Nature, we get Man versus Machine. In other words, biographer Garry Jenkins concludes, “the entire *Star Wars* saga boiled down to a clutch of classical storylines that had been reproduced and reworked through the ages.”

Like Homer’s *Odyssey* and Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*, the *Star Wars* series lays a claim on our psyches because it speaks to the deepest fears, hopes and longings of the human soul. Critics castigate Lucas for his stereotypical characters, shallow psychology and simplistic morality, but, according to Steven Greydanus, this misses the point — Lucas’ characters and stories “aren’t so much stereotypical as archetypal.”

Stereotypes and archetypes may be similar on the surface, but the emotions they evoke work on different levels, says Greydanus. Stereotypes exploit popular prejudices and assumptions. Archetypes, however, “work by connecting with primal or basic categories.” In the case of *Star Wars*, we get the archetypal hero in Luke Skywalker and the archetypal wise mentor in Obi-wan Kenobi. And there’s the archetypal plot of good versus evil with the Rebel Alliance versus the Empire. “In these familiar patterns the struggle of good and evil stands out in sharper relief than is the case, at least without distortion, in realistic drama, which must reflect in some way ... the mixed motives and awkward contradictions that are part and parcel of real life, but not of the black-and-white conflicts of fairy tales and myths.”

Lucas’ achievement is to have woven a new-age myth out of the mismatched threads of the worlds’ cultures. The popularity of the *Star Wars* movies is due not simply to marketing or even the special effects, but also, in John Lyden’s words, “to their ability to tap into basic religious or mythological concepts with which viewers can connect.” The numerous cultural cross-references and allusions, along with the archetypal characters and plots, give the films a deep resonance for audiences that may not recognize intellectually those references and archetypes, but nevertheless respond emotionally to them.

This mythic resonance certainly goes a long way in accounting for the popularity of the *Star Wars* series, but the movies also benefited from the climate of the times. In 1975, two years before *Star Wars*’ release, the United States had suffered an ignominious defeat in Vietnam. The American military was superior in the field, but the politicians were unwilling to do what was necessary to win the war. The result was the humiliation of the United States. The shock of Watergate, which suggested the corruption of American

politics, only added to a sudden sense of uncertainty and self-doubt, not only in the United States but also throughout the western world. To borrow Andrew Gordon's words, the West suffered "a period in which the heroes have been cast down ... when the lines between good and evil grow cloudy."

With the presidency of Ronald Reagan still a few years away, movies of the late 1970s such as *Superman* and *Star Wars* reflected a desire for new hope. "Such fantasies give voice to our deepest longings and speak to our hopes about the future of our society and ourselves," says Gordon. *Star Wars* may have no direct connection to the real world, "but it does relate to our dreams of how we would like reality to be."

Every historical "reality" is shaped by the prevailing myth of the times. In medieval times, people thought of reality as a Great Chain of Being in which all things — from God and angels to humans and animals — were connected in a hierarchy of order. This chain was cut apart in the 17th and 18th centuries by the tools of the scientific method. The new myth, at least in the West, perceived the world to be governed by laws that could be known through the use of reason and exploited to improve the human condition. Thus was born the Enlightenment myth of progress.

Nowadays, in the wake of horrors of the 20th century (yes, I know, there was a lot of progress, too) faith in human reason is waning. The weakening of the rational cosmology is, arguably, reflected in the irrationalism of new age paganism. "The emergence of archaic, mystical motifs in the culture today represents a groping effort to find a replacement for the worldview we have lost," says cultural critic Kathleen Avena.

The *Star Wars* series occupies such a prominent position in our collective psyche because it responds to this longing for a sense of meaning and purpose. We live in an era of transition, a period in which the world we have known is breaking down even as a new world is being born. Such birth-times are inevitably times of confusion, uncertainty and conflict. The *Star Wars* movies, as a grab-bag of mythology, psychology, cultural icons and inchoate spirituality, capture and express both the breakdown and the reformation of our times.

In this sense, then, the *Star Wars* movies do constitute a myth for our time. And they do so in keeping with a tradition that goes back to Homer's *Odyssey*. In Greydanus' insightful summation, "If the adventures of Hercules and Odysseus can be enjoyed by Christians and shared with their children, those of Luke Skywalker and Obi-wan Kenobi have a place as well. *Star Wars* is pop mythology — a 'McMyth,' as a recent critical article put it — but in our McCulture even a McMyth can be vastly preferable to no myth at all."

Star Wars, in other words, is a fairy tale for a society seeking, for good or ill, re-enchantment.