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Second Paper

*Rebellions, Resistances, and Revisions - Disney's Star Wars and Revolutionary Anti-Fascist Culture*

As a work of art and a piece of popular culture, the *Star Wars* films have always been political. This has never been more apparent than in recent years, where in online circles an individual's love (or hate) of specific *Star Wars* films is often used as a sort of locus to determine their political views. I believe that this is due, at least in part, to the specific coding and messaging built into the first three *Star Wars* films that were released under the Disney corporation (*The Force Awakens*, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, and *The Last Jedi*) of present-day anti-facism. But despite this messaging, I maintain that these films are not representative of modern revolutionary and anti-fascist culture, given the ethos of Disney and that of the *Star Wars* content it has released from 2018 to the present day.

Not only has *Star Wars* always been political, but it's always been steeped in periods of specifically American politics. Even though the most common parallel drawn from the Original Trilogy is usually that of the Galactic Empire to nazism, the story of the trilogy itself is actually much more representative of the Vietnam war and youth uprisings of the 1960s and 70s, and what way forward the American myth can find out of that aftermath (Porter, p. 1). Our heroes are idealistic and openly spiritual, believing that by coming together under the spirituality of "The Force" and the political banner of "The Rebellion," war will end and true peace can be restored

to the galaxy. This messaging, of course, is the great irony of the entire *Star Wars* film franchise - in order to end war, restore spiritual balance, and bring peace, war must still be waged, and enthusiastically so. Yet despite parallels to Vietnam and the late World War II era alike, the Original Trilogy is not incredibly concerned with real-life conflicts.

The Prequel Trilogy fares similarly, although here we can see the beginnings of political conflict sewn between its consumers due to the commentary woven through it. Placing Lucas' own poor writing and frivolous fan anger aside, the last film in this trilogy, *Revenge of the Sith*, sparked some backlash among right-wing political groups claiming that the movie "promot[ed] anti-Bush rhetoric" (Proctor, p. 1) due to a few lines of dialogue from the villain's descent into madness that paralleled words from the then-President. Besides this, some of the most prominent plot threads in the Prequel Trilogy - for better or worse - revolve around an ineffective, bloated Democratic-Republic consistently granting more and more power to an obvious fascist; "George Lucas made no secret of the film's political analogies" (Proctor, p. 2). Yet, despite outrage from a few fringe right-wing groups attempting boycotts, not much came of this political messaging on either side of the fence. Its presence, while interesting, never amounted to any serious conflict, and was not particularly intended to.

However, the new *Star Wars* movies - at least, the first three released under Disney - utilize specific parallels to anti-fascist movements that came into their own in the U.S. around the time of the 2016 Presidential election. In *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*, the "Rebels" this time around are known as "The Resistance," a gang of soldiers and political figures far scrappier than their predecessors from the Original Trilogy. Through this Sequel Trilogy they face off against the "First Order," a contingent modeled off real world neo-nazism, set on bringing back the glory of the Galactic Empire. The casting of members of The Resistance (and,

in the case of *Rogue One*, the Rebellion from the original trilogy), from extras and background characters to our main protagonists, are noticeably diverse, particularly in group shots and ensemble moments and especially in comparison to the largely white and male First Order. A single seven-second scene in *The Force Awakens* that takes place inside the Resistance base shows, besides an alien and a white man, a white woman, a Black woman (with natural hair, no less!) and an Asian man all acting as competent and necessary individuals (1:50:23 - 1:50:30), a first for the franchise. Women in particular are placed in prominent leadership roles quite often in these first three Disney installments - Princess Leia, the somewhat waifish character from the Original Trilogy is now a General (*The Force Awakens*, 1:20:12 - 1:20:13), and in *The Last Jedi* works alongside a woman admiral in a subplot explicitly about how the stereotypical male action hero character isn't always right (1:35:27 - 1:36:45). These moments of writing and filmmaking, among many other examples, seemingly show where the politics of the Resistance in these films lie - aligned with aspects of the modern left.

This aligning of *Star Wars* rebellions with modern anti-fascism isn't just true within the films themselves, however. Before the release of *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* in 2016 but shortly after the results of the 2016 Presidential Election, Brett White, a writer for the film wrote in an op-ed for the website *Comic Book Resources*, "When I look at the 'Rogue One' trailers, I see what I want from America. I see a multicultural group standing strong together led by a rebellious and courageous woman. That's what we are working towards, and what we will continue to work towards no matter what" (White, *Why Rogue One Matters*). Around the same time, another writer for *Rogue One*, Chris Weitz, tweeted, "an image of the Rebel insignia with a safety pin through it, a reference to the symbol of solidarity with persecuted minorities that has gained currency in the U.S. following the election" (McMillan, *Rogue One Writers Subtly*

*Protest Trump*). While the safety pin symbol has since been to varying extents decried in leftist circles, at the time the message was clear: resist Trump like the Rebels against the Empire, who in the film are portrayed as being largely old white men (*Rogue One*, 1:02:12 - 1:03:08).

Unusually political for anything to come out of the Disney umbrella, even with the implied leftist leanings that were already present in *The Force Awakens*.

Considering the specific anti-fascist politics baked into these three movies, does that make them - and indeed, *Star Wars* as a whole - an example of revolutionary culture? With any piece of art made for or under corporations, this is a tricky discussion to have, and one that often lacks appropriate nuance. Unfortunately, even with these three explicitly political films, I do not believe that *Star Wars* is an artwork representative of revolutionary cultures. Apart from the main goal of the Disney corporation being, of course, profit-making, I believe this is mostly because of the franchise entries that have been released since *The Last Jedi* - namely, the last film in the Sequel Trilogy *The Rise of Skywalker*, and the streaming series *The Mandalorian*.

*The Rise of Skywalker* in particular fails to deliver on the coding and parallels set up in the two films that preceded it - much less attention is focused on the diversity of The Resistance and the white supremacy implied in the First Order and Empire. Particularly in the group shots and base scenes referred to earlier, while many women and BIPOC actors are still present among the extras, none of them have speaking lines, and white characters alongside the main characters are focused on by the camera more (*The Rise of Skywalker*, 15:16 - 16:01). Also of note is the character of Rose Tico introduced in *The Last Jedi*, played by Vietnamese-American actress Kelly Marie Tran, who is essentially written out of this installment (*The Rise of Skywalker*, 17:43 - 17:50). The priorities of the storytelling have clearly changed.

This shift in focus regarding Star Wars' politics holds true in *The Mandalorian* as well. The series practically begs to be seen as separate and apart from anything the Sequel Trilogy set into motion, especially its anti-fascist parallels. The titular character is a bounty hunter, politically neutral in-universe. Emphasis is largely placed on the culture of the "Mandalore," or "The Way," paying no mind to either the Rebellion/Resistance or the Empire throughout the series except when one organization decides to help or to hinder ("The Sin" 8:45 - 11:01). Story focus is mainly on the found-family aspect of The Mandalorian's relationship with his surrogate son, Grogu (or 'Baby Yoda,' as he's commonly referred to outside the series) instead of typical good-versus-evil *Star Wars* dynamics. While the series is well-made and entertaining, any whisper of the revolutionary politics seen in *Star Wars* installments between 2015 - 2017 has been abandoned by the same producers and writers who seeded them to begin with.

Above all, this to me is the prime reason why *Star Wars* is not a revolutionary or anti-fascist work of art - because despite well-intentioned beginnings after the Disney buyout, the focus of its creators is and always will be primarily on the making of money, even if existing leftist stories, plotlines, or characters have to be swept under the rug to do it. Even after the departure of George Lucas from the franchise, that fundamental irony of *Star Wars* is still present: that despite any leftist or anti-fascist posturing inside or outside of the universe, war and inequality are what fuel the story's existence and the purposes of the characters, and will presumably continue to do so until the series is no longer profitable. They are, to put it another way, perhaps the most pro-fascist anti-fascist films there are.

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