“A Thousand Faces” is an annotated bibliography of the last twenty-three years of scholarly criticism on the *Star Wars* trilogy of films created by George Lucas. The annotations represent critical work from a variety of academic journals, as well as essays from more general periodicals. A survey of the criticism reveals that *Star Wars* scholarship is a varied and interdisciplinary field, reflecting the ability of the film to lend itself to different “readings.” *Star Wars*, often considered “pop-culture” by the academic community, is a kind of cultural artifact that deserves serious critical attention for what it reveals about the culture that created it.

INDEX WORDS: *Star Wars*, George Lucas, science fiction film, American film, Film criticism, Epics, *The Empire Strikes Back, Return of the Jedi.*
A THOUSAND FACES: A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF STAR WARS CRITICISM

by

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PREFACE

One Thousand Faces is an annotated bibliography of scholarship and criticism on the series of films created by George Lucas known collectively as Star Wars. As of 2001, four such films exist: Episode IV: A New Hope (commonly referred to as Star Wars); Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back; Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi; and Episode I: The Phantom Menace. Therefore, the title Star Wars will refer to the series as a whole, while individual films will be referred to by their sub-headings. Because Lucas intended the trilogies to be considered parts of a whole\(^1\), and the second group of trilogies has not yet been completed, I have narrowed the focus of this collection to articles concerning the first three films; any reference to “the trilogy” will correspond to them. Exceptions were made only in cases where papers dealt with The Phantom Menace in relation to the first three films or in terms of on-going critical debate within Star Wars scholarship.

This collection consists of essays from peer-reviewed journals, as well as some articles from more general periodicals. The scholarly works portray a veritable cross-section of academic journals, representing such diverse disciplines as film studies, folklore, anthropology, political science, philosophy, psychology and sociology. Works from more popular media were included because the academic criticism refers to them so often: several articles from general interest magazines appeared as secondary sources in so many of the academic works that inclusion seemed necessary.\(^2\) With one exception\(^3\), I

\(^1\) For a discussion of Lucas’s plans for the series, see Gerald Clarke, “The Empire Strikes Back,” Time 19 May 1980, 48-54.
\(^2\) For instance, see Anne Lancashire, “Complex Design in The Empire Strikes Back,” Film Criticism 5.3 (1981), n. 1 & 2.
omit or exclude excerpts from books or book-length discussion; by summarizing a few pages from an argument that may be hundreds of pages long, I would be doing a disservice to the author and the potential reader. Book-length discussions of science fiction that mention Star Wars are better left to another collection.

In general, I tried to avoid pieces that consisted mostly of review or those that were more concerned with entertainment value than with serious critical inquiry. Moreover, this bibliography excludes works that concentrated on production history and technical information, and it avoids biographic information on or interviews with George Lucas almost entirely. While production history and biography may shed light on the man George Lucas, this collection is concerned his films. Interviews present another problem, because they deal not only with information outside of the texts, but they also resist summary.\(^4\)

Although Star Wars exemplifies the concept of a mass-culture phenomenon, mass-culture texts such as fan magazines and Internet sites were also omitted. This brand of commentary originates from sources whose credibility can be questionable, at best; Star Wars fandom is often characterized by fanatical devotion and outright silliness (consider the popular Star Wars web-site Rebelscum.com).\(^5\) Additionally, secondary texts, such as the novelizations of the films and the “spin-off” literature by authors like Timothy Zahn, have been omitted.

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3 Andrew Gordon’s “Sex in the Star Wars Trilogy”
4 Interest in such subjects will be better tended in works such as Dale Pollack’s biography Skywalking: The Life and Times of George Lucas (New York: Harmony Books, 1983) and Sally Kline (ed.) George Lucas: Interviews Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1999) which collects and comments upon the best of such material.
5 For a detailed discussion of Internet fandom, see Will Brooker’s “Internet Fandom and the Continuing Narratives of Star Wars, Blade Runner, and Alien” in Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Films, ed. Annette Kuhn.
More important than what was excluded, however, is what was included. In the entries, I attempted to summarize and paraphrase the crucial elements, thoughts, ideas, and arguments from the texts. As often as possible I included direct quotations from the authors, for their words are the best indication of the nature of their work. In a few cases, I have made evaluative comments to indicate both the essay’s strengths and limitations. I have tried to be fair, representative, and thorough.

The selections are arranged alphabetically by author. If more than one selection appears under the same name, those entries are listed chronologically. I have followed documentation guidelines of the Modern Language Association.

Martin Rogers
Athens, Georgia
October, 2001
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Rise of Science Fiction

As more film studies courses begin to appear in universities across the country, more specialization occurs within that area of study. The popularity of science fiction films—and their frequency of appearance on course syllabi—has begun to shape what could be called a “canon” of science fiction film, consisting of the works most often deemed worthy of critical attention. In this case, worthiness is a matter of great debate and importance, because science fiction film has traditionally been the subject of critical apprehension, doubt, or disdain. Robots and space ships were the stuff of Saturday matinee serials, after all; the comic book sensibilities of Flash Gordon or Earth vs. The Flying Saucers hardly constitute cinema. The academic establishment has historically viewed science fiction as suffering from, in the words of critic Robert Pielke, “an impugned lack of seriousness and/or creativity” (Pielke 143).

But of course this disdain is no longer the case: science fiction cinema (along with its “sister” genre, the horror film) has earned serious critical attention and spawned a diverse body of critical inquiries into the meanings and ideas behind these films.¹ A canon has indeed been constructed. Consider a survey made of science fiction courses requiring films in their syllabi made in 1997: of the ten most widely assigned films in those courses, the film Blade Runner ranked first, followed by 2001: A Space Odyssey,

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¹ For a thorough and contemporary bibliography of the best in science fiction criticism, see the appended bibliography in Annette Kuhn, ed. Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema.
Metropolis, and The Day the Earth Stood Still (Kuhn 1). In fifth place was the Alien series of films, lumped together in one heading. Curiously absent from the list was George Lucas’s Star Wars.³

This omission is a curious one when one considers that this list of assigned films and texts—what Annette Kuhn referred to as “snapshot of a science-fiction film canon in the process of formation”—not only excludes one of the most recognizable examples of the genre, but also an example that is one of the most commercially successful films of all time (Kuhn 1). Of course popularity does not necessarily indicate a film’s worth; very often, at least in the eyes of the academic community, it may indicate a lack of critical or intellectual significance. Although the film earned millions in box-office receipts and was immensely successful with audiences, scholars and film critics alike are much more ambivalent about the film’s artistic merits.⁴ One critic branded Star Wars “a compilation of nonsense” and “the sort of thing that would leach one’s brain” (Hatch 794). But the film has stamped such an indelible mark on the last twenty years of science fiction that the critical exclusion of Star Wars represents a peculiar and considerable weakness in the field of science fiction discourse.

Much critical work on Star Wars has, in fact, been published, although much of the work attempts only to explain the immense popularity of the film. Science fiction scholars often acknowledge the film only in so far as it is an anomaly—that is, not representative of serious science fiction—or try to explain away its popularity or to

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² Science Fiction Studies 23.3 (1996).
³ In this essay, Star Wars refers to the trilogy of films beginning with Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope. As the title often refers to both the trilogy and episode IV simultaneously, I will observe the common practice of referring to episode IV as A New Hope.
⁴ A useful list of “bad reviews” appears in Anne Lancashire, “Return of the Jedi: Once More with Feeling,” Film Criticism 8.2 (1984), n2 & n3.
downplay its significance.\(^5\) So much serious scholarly work on *Star Wars* has been written, however, that a tide may be turning in favor of the films. Many people, not only the community of film critics and scholars, have been so fascinated by *Star Wars* for so long that it deserves more serious attention and scholarly recognition. The film represents a turning point in the direction and appearance of science fiction as well as in cinema as a whole, and I would like to argue that the film not only has a place in the so-called “canon” of science fiction films, but in the study of a variety of disciplines and interests—including the study of American literature. The film deserves this attention because, like the best of American literature, it offers a variety of readings, appeals to a variety of audiences, and presents itself as not simply a morality tale but also a commentary on film, literature, mythology, and the tradition of epic narration and storytelling our culture has always held as valuable to our human condition and identity. The meta-commentary of *Star Wars*—its propensity to comment on itself as a film, as a text, as a technological and cultural artifact, as an embodiment of American\(^6\) values—secures its place in the intellectual and critical conversation about science fiction, text, film and culture.

**The Great American Film**

In his study of American literature from 1820 to 1860 called *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis opened his discussion by describing the literature of that period as the

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\(^5\) The irony here is that something of a cottage industry has developed within the science fiction community wherein authors repeatedly attempt to define the genre—a feat which has yet to meet any critical agreement.

\(^6\) I designate *Star Wars* as an “American” film despite its international cast and production history (much of *A New Hope* was filmed in London, for example) because of its content and because its creator, George Lucas, is a notoriously “American” filmmaker. Although Lucas only directed *A New Hope*, he is generally credited as the “creator” or *auteur* of the entire *Star Wars* trilogy. As John Seabrook said in the January 6 1997 issue of *The New Yorker*, “… you applaud Lucas because he *is Star Wars*” [emphasis in original], p 42.
“tentative outlines of a native American Mythology.” (Lewis 1). This mythology prominently featured an image that the best authors of the period appropriated, including Hawthorne, Melville, James and Whitman. Such authors personified this mythical image as a hero figure—as Lewis describes it, the “American Adam”—signifying the ideal American in a country that was growing intellectually, artistically, and spatially. Lewis’s attempt to define the appeal of this figure and its prominence in the representative literature of the time is especially relevant:

it was an image crowded with illusion, and the moral posture it seemed to indorse was vulnerable in the extreme. But however vulnerable or illusory, this image had about it always an air of adventurousness, a sense of promise and possibility—of a sort no longer very evident in our national expression. Its very openness to challenge, its susceptibility to controversy, made possible a series of original inquiries and discoveries about human nature, art and history. (Lewis 1)

Central to the makeup of this “image” was a state of innocence, that reflected the idea that Europe was a “fallen” world, and that America represented a more innocent, Edenic space where humanity and civilization could, innocent of Europe’s sins, begin again. This innocence is the affected or constructed innocence of Thoreau at Walden, the escapist innocence of Huck Finn on his raft, and the sacrificial innocence of Billy Budd aboard the H.M.S. Indomitable.

It is also the innocence of Luke Skywalker at the helm of his “Land-speeder,” the “All-American” farm boy who dreams of greatness as he heads off into the wilderness to hunt down an errant robot—a hunt that will eventually lead him across a galaxy and to
his destiny (Scigaj 216). Lee Wilkins⁸ places the young Skywalker (as well as the film entire) in this tradition of American literature, claiming that Luke exemplifies the “modern” Adam (Wilkins 4). If one is to view the roots of American literature as a “mythology,” then Star Wars—so often described as the portrayal of a modern myth⁹—logically situates itself as an extension of this tradition. Luke is the hero through whom Lucas presents his myth; moreover, Luke persists as the heroic Adam figure that has come to embody so much of America’s romantic myth of itself.¹⁰

Lewis’s description of this tradition does more than explain Luke’s role as a modern American hero; it also provides a strangely prophetic framework for describing the Star Wars films and the criticism surrounding them. Star Wars epitomizes the image that Lewis described when he first wrote of the American Adam, only in contemporary terms and in a contemporary critical context. The visual surfaces of Star Wars are indeed ones crowded with illusions that penetrate below the surfaces of the film and into the messages (both explicit and implicit) to which the audience is exposed. The “moral posture” assumed by the heroes in the film, as well as the moral platitudes it delivers, was also vulnerable to the extreme, not only because of the seemingly contradictory nature of that posture but also because of the simplified terms in which Lucas presented complex moral and ethical dilemmas. And despite the new hope of “possibility and promise” that the film offered the audiences of both the 1970’s and beyond, Star Wars was further

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⁷ For this reading of Luke Skywalker I am indebted to Lee Wilkins.
¹⁰ For further discussion of the mythological aspects of American Romanticism—a discussion that by extension can be applied to the mythological appropriations of the Star Wars trilogy—see Robert D.
subject to challenge and controversy that made possible a series of explorations into the nature of film and a rich variety of readings for audiences and scholars alike. The diversity of these readings not only in content but also across disciplines has inspired an ongoing critical conversation that should be documented, observed, cataloged, and challenged. *Star Wars* is a text open to interpretive possibility that few contemporary texts lend themselves to, and these textual and critical riches are described in the ensuing bibliography, *A Thousand Faces*.

**The Critical Reception**

Lewis’s “Adamic” description of American literature can further be applied to an overview of *Star Wars* criticism. The image Lewis wrote of was one “crowded with illusion.” In the terms of his featured texts, this illusion was an illusion of innocence, the affectation of an infant-like naivete that justified future imperial expansion and the wholesale slaughter of indigenous peoples under Biblical pretensions of “Manifest Destiny.” The illusions of *Star Wars*, however, consist of the omnipresent\(^{11}\) and groundbreaking special effect shots that “crowd” the film’s visual surface (Scigaj 213). John Dykstra, head of Lucas’s effects team Industrial Light and Magic, lead a team of engineers that used Star Wars as the impetus for hundreds of technical innovations on which the special effects industry still depends.\(^{12}\) *Star Wars* earned much of its success from the power of its illusions, and the great spectacle it created for the audience to view. The critical establishment often used the elements of spectacle of the trilogy to point out

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\(^{11}\) According to Leonard M. Scigaj, there are more than 350 special effects shots per film—an astronomical number at the time of the release of *A New Hope*.

\(^{12}\) Such technical innovations include the steadicam, the dykstraflex camera, and the near perfection of blue and green screen technology.
its allegedly juvenile content. Michale Pye, writing for the March 1979 issue of The Atlantic Monthly, described *A New Hope* in such terms: “The single strongest impression it leaves is of another great American tradition which involves lights, bells, obstacles, menace, action, technology and thrills. It is pinball—on a cosmic scale.” (qtd. in Miller and Sprich 203). Other critics, like Leonard Scigaj, wondered whether the *Star Wars* saga might “perhaps offer more substantial rewards” than its “visual thrills,” and therefore become a film that was complex in meaning as well as in appearance (213). This spectacle was integral to the success of the narrative of the film, however; for adult audiences to take the “fairy tale” seriously, and for younger audiences to participate in and identify with the fantastic story-line, the film must actively provoke and stimulate the imagination with believable special effects (216). Without this believability and visual delight, Lucas would not have been able to tell his story.

Ironically, special effects were often used in this “fairy tale” to create scenes of chaotic violence that may tarnish the moral lessons of what Lucas himself described as a “children’s movie” (Zito 9). Jonathan Rosenbaum, writing for Sight & Sound, describes the “blitzkrieg” of fantastic imagery in *Star Wars* as being more threatening and portentous than a simple pinball game; children who view the film are participating in “narcissistic pleasures” akin to masturbation that glory in a “guiltless celebration of unlimited warfare,” devoid of emotional investment (209). The conflict between childlike innocence and relentless violence left *Star Wars* in quite a “vulnerable moral posture.” Although the film presents itself as innocent, Lucas actually frames the narrative in a series of violent battle scenes; the audience enters into the narrative in media res, viewing from below an isolated battle taking place in the midst of what the opening text-crawl
describes as a “bloody civil war,” and the trilogy ends amidst the celebrations resulting from the destruction of an Imperial battle-station. John Bronson, author of *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction*, sarcastically captures the irony of Lucas’s position:

... *Star Wars* is probably the most violent movie of all time. It’s one long battle, beginning with a massacre aboard a spaceship and ending in an orgy of futuristic destruction, while along the way a whole planet and its population are blasted into oblivion. All in all, *Star Wars* racks up a higher body-count than the Second World War and Vietnam put together. There’s not much blood, of course, and nobody actually suffers on screen, so that makes it all just good clean fun. (263)

The militarism of the film and its warrior/heroes offered a particular brand of spectacle that still sparks spirited critical inquiry.

This spectacular violence found as a vehicle the “futuristic” technology depicted in the film in the forms of the robots, space ships, warp-drive and, of course, weaponry.\(^{13}\) *Star Wars* is a film about technology made by state-of-the-art film technology, a paradox authors often resort to when attempting to point out the film’s conflicting meanings: overtly, one of the messages of the film is that man cannot put his faith in technology, nor forsake his spiritual, “human” side for the cold technological autonomy of power, as represented by the Evil Empire; covertly (and perhaps inadvertently), the film marvels in the wonder of speed, lights, lasers, and gadgetry, and still requires the heroes to exploit technology to succeed.\(^{14}\) The difference between the “good guys” and the “bad guys,” if we are to characterize them technologically, is that the good guys have technology with

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\(^{13}\) I put *futuristic* in quotes because the film is technically set “a long time ago….”
personality: robots with feelings and the capacity for self-sacrifice; space ships replete with names, temperaments, and histories; and “elegant” weapons like the light-saber. The Empire relies on technology devoid of personality, like the cold gray surfaces of the Death Star, and the legions of faceless, identical stormtroopers (Rubey 41). Luke’s rejection of his “targeting computer” in the final battle in favor of his “feelings” can be viewed superficially as a rejection of technology; he remains, however, protected in the mechanical life-support of his space ship, and his success at destroying the Death Star becomes, in the words of film critic Dan Rubey, a “bionic fusion” with the weapons of his ship rather than a humanist statement of technological independence (41). Luke does not “reject” technology to succeed; he succeeds by acting in harmony with it. Numerous critics have grappled with the film’s conflicting messages about man and machine; as both film and life technologies continue to speed towards an unclear horizon, the film’s lessons about the impact of technology on man will no doubt remain problematic.

The simple, binary depiction of “good” and “evil” in *Star Wars* further complicates the problematic position of the film as a morality tale. No single word appears in the texts of *Star Wars* criticism more often than “Manichean,” as Lucas is simultaneously applauded and condemned for his simple black and white depiction of the universe. This moral simplicity left *Star Wars* vulnerable to attack from critics for being morally deceitful: they felt that the complex world of adulthood should not be depicted in simplistic definitions of good and evil. “The film,” Rubey asserts, “pretends to depict the struggle of good against evil, but in fact the evil exists in order to allow the good characters to act violently” (41). Robert Hatch, writing for *The Nation* in 1983,

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concurred: “I doubt that viewers . . . are learning much about good and evil. Nor do I think they will conduct themselves better in society by being persuaded that morality deals in absolutes . . . fairy tales no doubt embody our fears and aspirations; how reliable they are as moral guides is another question” (78). Aside from this archetypical struggle between light and dark, and the hope that good should triumph over evil, the film seems to teach no other moral or ethical lesson. Despite the intentions of Lucas, the diametrical opposition of forces in Star Wars never develops, according to one scholar, “beyond an amorphously defined abstraction . . . reflected in the essential philosophic vacuity of the trilogy” (Ruppersburg 160). Others found not a vacuum, but a cash-register: “there is no real conflict . . . the binary moral opposition rests on an indentity of power, and it is this containment . . . which most accurately expresses the films ideology, consumerism” (Reider 34). The massive marketing campaigns surrounding The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi further implicate Lucas as being motivated by economic interests, and the “space fable” therefore assumes an even more questionable moral position by many critics.

On the surface, however, what Lucas was really selling was hope; the first installment of the trilogy was subtitled A New Hope, and fans of the film often refer to it by this title. Lewis’s image of American literature once again frames Star Wars in the critical context: “… however vulnerable or illusory, this image always had about it an air of adventurousness, a sense of promise and possibility—of a sort no longer very evident in our contemporary expression” (Lewis 1). A New Hope opened in 1977, one year after the bicentennial celebration, but also amidst public outcry and disillusionment over Watergate, the Vietnam Conflict, and what John Ozersky has called the “bone-deep
cynicism” of the 1970’s (49). Amidst the biting realism of films from that decade like *The Godfather* and *Taxi Driver* and the social and ecological disaster of science fiction films like *Soylent Green* and *Rollerball*, the “new hope” of *Star Wars* led sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists to inquire into the film’s strangely uplifting effects on the seemingly jaded and “post-ideological” audiences of that decade (Ozersky 75).

The wide-open spaces of *Star Wars*—that is, the expansive settings, featuring seas of sand, frozen wastelands and endless fields of black space punctuated by spots of light from distant stars—further distinguished the film from the “claustrophobic” and smothering scenery of its contemporaries. The film portrays through these spaces the endless possibility and “openness” of science fiction, and the countless readings of the *Star Wars* “text” that all manner of critics have created and offered reflect that openness.

Consider the diversity of the sources: some of the most important or original work concerning *Star Wars* has, of course, been published in science fiction journals like *Extrapolation* and *Science Fiction Studies*, as well as in general film journals such as *Film/Literature Quarterly* and *Film Criticism*. But scholars have also addressed the film (according to the apparatus of their respective disciplines) in journals as diverse as *Philosophy in Context*, *Social Policy*, *History Today*, *Textual Practice* and *The Kentucky Folklore Record*. One unifying element among the various disciplines consists of skeptically questioning the film: Why is this movie so popular? Attempts to explain how the film became what one critic called “a force of nature” proliferate, and a review of the

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16 I am specifically referring to Ridley Scott’s *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, although mechanical “cocoon-ing” can be witnessed in *2001* as well. See Gerald E. Forshey, “Heroism’s Dark Side,” *Christianity Today* 30 July 1980, pp 769-771.
criticism shows that almost all of the criticism addresses this question in some way.\textsuperscript{17} Star Wars so visibly saturated the film industry and retail outlets across the world (in the form of Star Wars merchandise) that it may have surpassed the jurisdiction of any specific genre or discipline; as “software” that has manifested in “hardware” like storybooks, action figures, piggy banks, and video games, the Star Wars mythos seems at times to be as pervasive as Ben Kenobi’s explanation of the Force to Luke in A New Hope.\textsuperscript{18} Todd Sammons has called Star Wars a “paraliterary” work, a text that draws upon “mainstream” literary works for inspiration, but that cannot be considered a literary text (355). Perhaps this paraliterary status is what invites such diverse criticism.

If the “paraliterary” paradigm rests upon the allusion to or derivation from academically sanctioned or canonical (“mainstream”) texts, Star Wars indeed exemplifies a paraliterary construct. The trilogy has been thoroughly (perhaps exhaustively) compared to The Iliad, The Odyssey, Morte d’Arthur, and The Song of Roland. More recent “sources” for the textual fabric of the trilogy include Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, Tolkein’s Lord of the Rings, and Carlos Casteneda’s Tales of Power.\textsuperscript{19} As a film, Star Wars has somehow been deified (or demonized) through criticism as being the compilation of all of Hollywood, a Frankenstein’s monster sewn together from the limbs of all cinematic material produced since Edison invented the moving picture in his Menlo Park Laboratory. Star Wars somehow simultaneously re-enacts The Wizard of Oz, Forbidden Planet, 2001, Birth of a Nation, Triumph of the Will,\textsuperscript{20} The Ten

\textsuperscript{17} The irony here is intentional.

\textsuperscript{18} Kenobi tells Luke that the force is an all-powerful energy field that “penetrates us and binds us.”

\textsuperscript{19} Works that concentrate on the literary antecedents of Star Wars include Gerald Clarke, “In the Footsteps of Ulysses,” Time 19 May 1980, p52 and Sammons, pp 355-369.

\textsuperscript{20} Although many critics cite the similarities between the closing scenes of A New Hope and Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will, the most reactionary comparisons come from Arthur Lubow “A Space Iliad,” Film Comment 13.4 (1997), 21-22.
Commandments, the finer films of Buster Keaton, and every John Ford cowboy picture ever produced. According to critics, Star Wars exemplifies the American Western as well as its Asian counterpart, the samurai films of directos like Akira Kurasawa.

The *vraisemblence* does not stop there: as a mosaic of cultural ephemera, the textures of *Star Wars* include such “lowbrow” cultural artifacts as comic books, Saturday matinee serials and Lionel Train sets. These popular manifestations resemble what may have been called in another time (before television, perhaps) “material folklore”: the temporal and tangible productions or “things” that we as humans make, use, and discard. Such material finds its way into the images and story of *Star Wars*; this storytelling tradition has earned the attention of folklorists and anthropologists alike. According to these critics, *Star Wars* best illustrates the concept of the hero in a culture that is described as no longer having such figures, and the previously mentioned mythological implications of *Star Wars* resonate powerfully in our culture and every culture because they have always been there. This approach to Lucas’s trilogy—its embodiment of what Joseph Campbell called “the monomyth”—constitutes the critical apparatus most often applied to the film. The popularity of *Star Wars*, as well as the diverse and interdisciplinary critical “conversations” that have sprung up around it, celebrates the narrative story-telling tradition we so often repeat and sustain in our cultural productions; furthermore, it allows critics to comment on that tradition—to tell stories about stories, to...

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22 The most famous example of the anthropological and mythological examination of *Star Wars* appears in the series of conversations between Bill Moyers and anthropologist Joseph Campbell collected in *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988). These interviews were filmed at Lucas’s own Skywalker Ranch; for more on the Lucas/Campbell connection, see Gordon and Makay.
talk about the act of talking about texts. *Star Wars* is meta-commentary, a text that can enable re-readings and the continuation of the critical discourse it inspires and creates.

It is the preservation of this tradition that inspired *A Thousand Faces*. But this collection ultimately needs no justification or argument, for it presents itself as evidence of the thriving and diverse world of scholarship that the *Star Wars* epic has produced. As more installments of the epic are produced, more young audiences will be exposed to the texts—and therefore to the messages, both explicit and implicit—of the films. The intellectual community therefore has a responsibility to give these films serious consideration, as David Wyatt so aptly cautioned in the pages of *The Virginia Quarterly* in 1982:

*[Star Wars] deserves our serious attention as well as our uncritical rapture . . . Its prerogative to intellectual scrutiny may be debated. But it makes a practical claim that is hard to ignore. The fact that *Star Wars* does and will mean a great deal to our children ought to arrest us . . . *Star Wars* will help create the future it tries to predict, and it will be a better one if we have not given up trying to connect its most deceptively packaged products with the best of the past.* (Wyatt 615)

The millions who first viewed *A New Hope* in the late 1970’s, dubbed “Generation X” by a market-conscious media, could more accurately be referred to as the *Star Wars* generation (Brabazon 12). As more of the aforementioned demographic emerges from the ranks academia, and as the world turns towards the next installment of the second trilogy, a collection, summary and overview of *Star Wars* criticism will hopefully become a
valuable research tool. Such a tool represents the past twenty five years of what has been a spirited and dedicated conversation.

Martin Rogers
Athens Georgia, 2001
Works Cited


CHAPTER 2
ONE THOUSAND FACES: A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF STAR WARS CRITICISM


A New Hope is compared to Thomas Mallory’s Le Morte d’Arthur, establishing parallels in characterization, plot, etc. The childhood of Luke closely resembles Arthur’s; the similarities also include their counsel (Obi-wan and Merlin) and their weaponry (ancestral swords, made of light and metal). The difference lies in their destinies: Arthur’s death vs. Luke’s survival. Han Solo’s resemblance to Sir Dinadan further satisfies the argument.


The Star Wars trilogy’s accessibility and popularity parallel what Umberto Eco called Casablanca’s “living textuality,” communicated and factualized by a generation who “have grown up deconstructing media texts.” The trilogy is “one of the greatest popular culture formations” of the post-war period: when first released, the film produced a collectively emotional experience akin to the shared emotions of war or catastrophe. The difference is that the emotions were not negative, like loss or fear, but rather positive ones, like victory or pride. The debut of Phantom Menace is therefore a major historical event, although it will be
dismissed as pop-culture or marketing hype. Brabazon uses the history of the *Star Wars* phenomenon to argue for the preservation of pop-culture “ephemera,” in danger of becoming obsolete as the digital preservation of history will soon be subject to “cache cleanings,” similar to a computer’s sweep of temporary data. The argument shifts often and suddenly from academic jargon bordering on meaninglessness to sentimental hero worship.


The “Golden Age” of science fiction produced a flurry of epics; largely absent from other genres, epics had a scale that allowed serious inquiry into the roles of good, evil, and empire in civilization. Despite poor critical reception, *A New Hope* can be viewed as an extension and homage to science fiction’s golden age. The essential conflicts in classic science fiction were moral ones, a tradition *A New Hope* continues in what is basically a religious and moral saga on a cosmic scale. The heroes of the film are pure and self-sacrificing; the evil, according to the author, is accepted by the audience without explanation or exposition. The article’s title refers to the “beautiful, somewhat serious, yet basically frivolous” operetta *Gondoliers*. The author suggests that the sequels will need more content and complexity than *A New Hope* offers if they are to be embraced with any substantial enthusiasm.


*A New Hope* and Speilberg’s *Close Encounters* represent a new breed of science fiction, notably different in tone and subject matter from the science fiction of the
Sixties and Seventies. Previously, science-fiction films arose from social anxieties over technological advancements and social and political tensions like those of the Cold War and McCarthy-ism. The optimism and utopianism of *A New Hope* and *Close Encounters* reverse the trend of dystopianism found in films like *Planet of the Apes*, *Logan’s Run*, and *The Omega Man*. This can be attributed to the relative familiarity with technology that Spielberg and Lucas grew up with, among other factors. In these films, science fiction is romanticized (Luke’s rope-swing with Leia) rather than intellectualized (HAL 2000’s alleged consciousness in *2001*). The trend in the genre, at least in the seventies, is thus one of regression; science fiction cinema is therefore becoming immature and intellectually unfulfilling. *2001* and *Star Trek* are included in the discussion.


One of the first popular pieces to treat *A New Hope* and *Empire Strikes Back* as parts of mythic/epic tradition, Clarke describes *A New Hope* as a tale about man’s attempts to “control the irrational savage that exists within him” and the attempt of civilizations to establish concepts of Justice and Love. Luke, Ben, and the droids are placed in the context of their mythic counterparts, and Joseph Campbell’s *Hero With a Thousand Faces* provides a template for predicting the events of the then unreleased *Return of the Jedi*. This piece accompanies a longer article titled “The Empire Strikes Back,” an informative review consisting of plot summary, promotional stills, and interviews with Lucas and members of the cast.

The success of *A New Hope* resides in the collective need for positive mythical heroes, and as a reaction against the “cliché psychology” of 70’s-era drama. *A New Hope* draws upon classical elements like Arthurian legend and *Paradise Lost*, but Lucas’s homage to twentieth-century films and Saturday matinee adventures treats them with an artistic reverence that legitimizes them as more than just popular culture. *A New Hope* is a ritualistic enactment of the quest myths for which our culture instinctually yearns. Collins’s most interesting contribution to *A New Hope* scholarship is his view of the film as a western, replete with “shoot-em-ups,” stock western dialogue and attacks by “savages.”


Conn begins by comparing *Empire Strikes Back* to Bergman’s *Persona* in a discussion of the Jungian implications of films. *Empire* deserves serious academic discussion from this critical viewpoint because the film provides young viewers with an introduction into “ambiguity and moral complexity”: by having the film’s heroes wounded, paralyzed, and nearly defeated, Lucas upsets many of the audience’s expectations. Conn asserts that *Empire* “could prove to be as … emotionally wounding, as morally challenging as a film like *Persona.*” He goes on to defend the *Star Wars* trilogy as part of the “lexicon” of collective American culture, in the tradition of *Jaws, Birth of a Nation*, and *Nashville*; the collective film experience the trilogy draws from (Kurosawa and Reifenstahl, vaudeville and classic literature) further illustrates the film’s synthesis of Jungian archetypes and the “entire cultural system” of America.

Structural similarities exist between Lucas’s *American Graffiti* and *A New Hope*, including the roles of the various characters and narrative events. Comparison is logical because, according to the author, “neither movie is grounded in a particular social milieu” and because both films portray rites of passage. Both films are forged on Lucas’s “allusive aesthetic,” drawing on rock & roll or film history to provide commentary and shared experience to the audience. Both films rely heavily on themes of questing and on the “passing of the West.” The awareness of cultural history in *A New Hope* is unprecedented in popular entertainment. Curtis attributes political commentary to *A New Hope*, which is disguised by a thinly veiled innocence.


*2001* and *A New Hope* represent the two “high water marks” of science-fiction from the late sixties until the early eighties. The science fiction of the seventies—after Kubrick and before Lucas—was neither commercially nor critically successful, and this can be attributed to the change in emphasis and thematic focus that occurred from the traditional sci-fi of the fifties. Science fiction films reflect the tensions and concerns of their era, and the cold-war tension and post-atomic technophobia of the fifties seemed to have more entertainment value than the ecological and sociological concerns of films like *Soylent Green* and *Silent Running*. *2001* broadened the intellectual horizons of science fiction, but the
emotional and escapist “space-ship adventures” of *A New Hope* and *Close Encounters* were the films that brought science fiction out of its slumber and fulfilled *2001*’s promise to make that genre the most commercially successful of all time.


*Empire Strikes Back* subverts the humanist, anti-technological themes of *A New Hope* by humanizing technology (exemplified in the personalities of R2-D2 and C-3PO) and by extension de-valuing life and human feeling. Robots act like humans and have feelings; Vader, ultimately a sympathetic character, is powerless without his life-support technology. The heroes (especially Han) show a curious disregard for other living things (blasting aliens, taun-tauns, etc), and Luke (just like C-3PO in Bespin) can easily be “re-built” with a robotic hand. Thus, a “confusion of values” results. The heroes of *Empire* are contrasted to the characters of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*; the relationship between man and animal in Peter Singer’s book *Animal Liberation* is used to further illuminate Lucas’s confusion between man and machine.


The “hyper-euphoria” surrounding *A New Hope* can be attributed to the film’s success in presenting established archetypes in new settings and situations. Contemporary science fiction confuses the roles, functions or characteristics of these archetypes or attempts to create new ones (consider *Rollerball*’s hero
Jonathon E, a combination Trickster-Warrior figure). These “hybrid” archetypes fail to communicate to audiences because they lack cultural antecedents, and therefore cannot “convey the utmost in experience.” The popularity of villains like Darth Vader results from audiences vicariously “experiencing” evil; since Darth Vader represents the Satanic or the “Shadow” of civilized humanity, his presence in the film expresses formerly repressed desires to confront our own “dark sides.” The villains of A New Hope are therefore positive, “healing” elements for the audience.


Lucas and Blake create imagistic visions of “extraordinary intensity,” and Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience share with Lucas’s films the transformation or the “possibility of change from one archetypical state to another.” This transformation from innocence to experience is common in cinema and literature, but Lucas’s works (especially American Graffiti) are “uniquely Blakean” and echo passages not only from the Songs but also from The Book of Thel. This article attempts to “clarify the importance” of Lucas’s early films, and the comparisons to Blake naturally lend themselves to the characters of the Star Wars trilogy.


Science-fiction/fantasy helps audiences adjust to what Alvin Toffler calls “future-shock,” the tension resulting from “the realization that the world… is becoming more complex than our emotions can assimilate, and that every advance in
knowledge opens seemingly infinite horizons.” This tension creates a need for moral clarity. *Empire Strikes Back* is less successful at relieving “future-shock” than *A New Hope* because the sequel offers more complex characters, moral conflict, and plot resolution. *Empire* is an allegory of the evils of ambition and its corrupting power, embodied in Vader’s disfigurement and tyranny as well as in Luke’s near failure to rescue Han and Leia. *Empire* and *A New Hope* differ from other science fiction films of the time because they are physically “open,” as opposed to the confined spaces of *Alien* and *2001*. Temporal restraints embody a lack of hope or a retreat inwards in the other films; in *A New Hope* the open space represents a world of possibility and hope.


The Rebel forces of *A New Hope* represent democratic civilization, and Lucas has created a major marketing device by having the heroes of this rebellion be teen-agers. Luke is a typical teen-ager, who values idealism over practicality, and eventually becomes a political crusader. Gans compares the Galactic Empire to Nazi Germany and America’s own imperialism (and corruption in the Nixon administration). *A New Hope* is fraught with irony: it delivers an anti-technology message in a medium dependent on technology and revels in the technological gadgets of its characters; democratic civilization triumphs, but “gives no hint of democratic practice” by the victorious rebels. Some colonial aspects of the heroes ( i.e. their attitude toward indigenous peoples like the Jawas) are also discussed.

The seminal reading of A New Hope as an enactment of Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth” hero-cycle, this argument divides its attention between the film and pop-culture allusions woven into A New Hope and the psychoanalytic/anthropological reading of Luke as representative of American culture and psyche. Resembling the “Space Opera” conventions of pulp science fiction, A New Hope is constructed from films like Forbidden Planet, Wizard of Oz, Errol Flynn, and The Searchers. Luke endures the trials of Departure, Initiation, and Return in his desire for independence, his rescue of Princess Leia, and his return from the Death Star with the ability to destroy the space-station. The comparison of Luke to the dream-hero of Campbell’s Hero With a Thousand Faces may seem obvious or redundant to contemporary scholars, but Gordon’s thorough and detailed discussion should begin any investigation into the trilogy’s mythic structures.


Gordon continues his psychoanalytic examination of the Star Wars trilogy. Although the mythic hero cycle is repeated in Empire Strikes Back, Lucas inverts the pattern from initiation to victory because the heroes “accomplish only minor victories and suffer major defeats.” The primal anxieties hinted at in A New Hope become more explicit in Empire, and therefore more threatening; the most unsettling knowledge, of course, emerges as Luke’s mortal conflict with his own
father. The fear of being eaten alive/dismembered resonates in *Empire* as a metaphor for castration anxiety. Han Solo further develops as a hero in *Empire*, and the film depicts parallel adventures of two brother figures; the two represent opposing forces in each other (Han is amoral, Luke virtuous, etc.). Solo most notably exists to suffer in Luke’s place.


*Return of the Jedi* fails as a film because it has forsaken the “mythic core” of the first two films for “Reagan-era” commercialism and sentimentality. *Jedi* simply reenacts events from the previous installments. Luke has returned for atonement with the father (a la Joseph Campbell), but Vader’s self-sacrifice is inconsistent with his previous villainy, and the event disregards the anxiety and “psychological conflict” of his previous characterization. Similar inconsistencies from Leia, Han and Luke contribute to Luke’s failure to reach maturity. The Freudian conflicts are disregarded and replaced with violence and action scenes. Gordon’s interpretation of the Emperor as a “homosexual threat” builds upon similar gender anxieties enacted in the film.


Although George Lucas kept overt sexuality out of his *Star Wars* trilogy, a covert “eroticism” is revealed by close examination of characters and events of the film. In Freudian terms, the plot is a deliberate “family romance,” and summaries of the psycho-analytic terminology appear in the text. The trilogy addresses adolescent anxiety over castration, homosexuality, and incest as part of the hero’s
development, and is ultimately little more than a spectacular “endeavor to get rid of the parents.” Gordon psychoanalyzes the film, offering a portrait of Jabba the Hutt as the embodiment of “oral regression.” Includes *American Graffiti* in the character discussion. Contains some previously published material; see Gordon, “*Return of the Jedi: The End of the Myth.*”


With references to Jung and Campbell, Grebe equates each trilogy of the originally projected nine films to three sequences of Tarot cards: a typical Tarot deck consists of three sets of seven cards, or “septenaries.” The seven cards of each septenary can be interpreted as narrative symbols or motifs of the films; the original three films correlate to the second septenary of cards, and the events of the upcoming films can therefore be predicted by examining their equivalent Tarot cards. History has made these predictions obsolete: Lucas has decided to complete only six films. Coralee’s comparisons continue to complement mythical interpretations of the film, however.


The central flaw in *Empire Strikes Back* is that Lucas has attempted “social relevance” and the intellectualization of material that does not benefit from such embellishment. *A New Hope* was successful because of its simplicity. In the interim between *A New Hope* and *Empire*, Lucas had become intellectually ambitious but was not “intellectually equipped” to handle such material. Grenier notes the particularly unusual “suicide attempt” by Luke in Bespin and the
religious philosophy of Yoda as “absurd.” Leia’s “obstreperousness” is merely a concession to developments in the women’s movement and the presence of aliens and robots are replacements for socially unacceptable racial stereotypes. Some claims are factually suspect or exaggerated; for instance, Grenier states Lucas embarked on a “crash course” in anthropology after the release of *A New Hope*, omitting Lucas’s research during the two year period he spent writing the manuscript for *A New Hope*.


Harvey profiles the art of comic-book creator Jack “The King” Kirby, the creator of Spiderman, The Fantastic Four, The Incredible Hulk, and Captain America. In February 1971, Kirby created the “Fourth World,” a series of four comic-book titles about the overlapping adventures of a group of science-fiction heroes. Although Lucas has acknowledged not only his love for comics but also their role in the creation of *Star Wars*, he has not directly admitted what many in the comic industry believe: that Kirby’s “Fourth World” characters Orion and Darkseid directly inspired Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. Harvey credits Kirby for the revival of the mytho-poetic tradition in pop-culture; his expansive and mythological comic books creations were several years ahead of Lucas. Harvey’s essay, therefore, can be counted among a growing number of *Star Wars* “revisionist” essays.


Often cited in *Star Wars* scholarship, Hatch’s reviews of the films in *The Nation* are invariably negative. While he applauds there visual punch and special effects,
he bemoans their “cardboard” characterizations and poor dialogue. Central to his disappointment with the films is the trilogy’s lack of a meaningful moral stance: “Fairy tales no doubt embody our fears and aspirations; how reliable they are as moral guides is another question.” He further questions the ability of “superheroes” to positively affect our world, since morality does not deal in “absolutes.” See also The Nation 224 (1977): 794 and 316 (1983): 78.


Horton argues against popular conceptions of Empire Strikes Back (Pauline Kael’s among them) as “the best of the Star Wars movies,” preferring A New Hope instead. According to Horton, Empire exists as the “least” of the films, despite the arguments from Kael’s “devotees.” Horton asserts that the weaknesses of the film arise from its inconclusive nature: it must serve as a “cliffhanger” between the first and third installments. Also at fault are the “platitudes” of Yoda, whose expressions about the Force explicitly state themes that are “nicely implicit” in A New Hope, making Empire part of an elaborate façade designed to make the audience feel a part of “something bigger” that he compares to a religious movement. See also Conn.


The Star Wars trilogy has helped resurrect romantic images of the military and right-wing militarism in contemporary film, evidenced in popular successes like Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter, An Officer and a Gentleman, and Taps. Star Wars implicitly argues that military enlistment and dedication help individuals attain their own “Force.” Through the spectacle of futuristic weaponry and
machines, Lucas has “made armaments fun,” and the heroism of his films has been co-opted by the Defense Department to promote the status quo instead of individualism. Similar investigations into Superman, WarGames, and Blue Thunder end with an eerily accurate prediction of the effect of personal computers on the economy and social “dehumanization.”


The success of art—or film—depends on the artist’s ability to synthesize cultural artifacts, symbols, or mythology into creative new forms that still resonate in a culture’s shared experience; art must be both new and familiar. The mytho-poetic approach of A New Hope succeeds for this reason, and also because this familiar tale is re-told in a way that “re-establishes control” over nature and technology (other films of that era depict man’s loss of control of these elements and reflect tensions and concerns of the time resulting from environmental concerns and technological advances). A New Hope thus contrasts with Hollywood successes like Jaws, Towering Inferno or The Poseidon Adventure, which present both natural forces and human technological achievements in chaotic opposition with mankind at their mercies. The lack of control over the supernatural or spiritual in The Exorcist further contrasts with Luke’s ability to “use the Force.” A New Hope provides a powerful affirmation of human control in a universe that is largely chaotic.

The role of *Star Wars* in Ronald Reagan’s missile defense program is discussed. The “cultural impact” of Reagan’s plan “derived from its successful combination of spectacular technology and profound spirituality.” The popularity of the *Star Wars* trilogy can be attributed to the same forces. The association of the Strategic Defense Initiative with the Death Star inverts the film’s anti-technology stance; association with a space fantasy initially hurt the president’s credibility, but his popularity (and support for the program) increased the more he adopted the “good vs. evil” ideology of the film. This essay places the films in an historical context that demonstrates their power as cultural artifacts. See also Meyer.


Kuiper examines the ideological underpinnings of myth-making in imperial societies by “reading” the *Star Wars* trilogy with detachment and objectivity, exposing new patterns in the films. There is great deal of summary, although it is done so in objective terms (both the Rebel Alliance and the Galactic Empire are referred to as the “warrior elite” or the “core culture”). The Skywalker family represents the nuclear family, which in turn symbolizes the empire as a whole: both the family and the political state must be protected from internal and external threats; the “warrior elite” of both the family (the father) and the core culture (the Jedi Knights) are allowed special privileges despite their more rigid moral responsibilities, etc. *Star Wars* exemplifies the dichotomies of imperial myths, i.e. good vs. evil, male vs. not-male.

Lancashire offers a structural and thematic reading of *Empire Strikes Back*: it is not just a “bridging segment” in the trilogy but a complex and unified film in its own right. The sequel builds upon the themes of friendship, heroism and spirituality in *A New Hope* by addressing human suffering, betrayal, personal sacrifice, and the duality of human nature. The divergent plot lines of the film are compared; Luke’s spiritual and mental growth mirrors Han and Leia’s deepening relationship (as well as the physical obstacles and tests they must overcome to escape capture). Luke confronts the evil within himself in the dream-duel against Vader; Han’s dark side is confronted in the form of Lando Calrissian, a “dark” version of himself and his criminal past. Lando is set in opposition against Han when he betrays him, just as Vader will attempt to betray his son for the Emperor. The development of Lando as a hero further characterizes the narrative episodes of *Empire* as dealing with human nature, not just individual (heroic) accomplishment.


Lancashire examines the differences in philosophy and imagery between *A New Hope* and *Empire Strikes Back*. The former focuses on mankind’s potential for greatness, while the latter deals with the limitations of a hero and the necessity for emotional control. Luke’s “temptation” in Bespin is given biblical underpinnings, as well as contrasted against similar behavior in the first film: reckless impulses
brought him success in *A New Hope*; in *Empire*, recklessness costs him both physically (his hand), symbolically (his father’s light saber) and socially (the torture and potential loss of his friend Han). The relationship between Han and Leia is further developed, adding complexity to formerly “archetypical” characters. Previously unmentioned “dark sides” of the imagery of *A New Hope* are illuminated to dispel the idea that the film was totally innocent or positive.


Lancashire develops a structural defense of the often criticized finale of the trilogy. Despite its commercial and spectacular excess, *Return of the Jedi* brings “complex structural and thematic unity” to the trilogy. *Empire Strikes Back* seems to depart from the themes and structures of *A New Hope*, but *Jedi* demonstrates the pattern of movements, conflicts, and passage rites the two former films depict; each segment of *Jedi* re-enacts segments from the first two films. For example, Luke’s descent into Jabba’s palace and his success in rescuing his friends mirrors his entry into the cantina in the first film; previously it was Luke who needed to be rescued by Ben, but the mature Luke now assumes the rescuer’s role. *Jedi* reworks the Christian myth to have the Father sacrificed instead of the son, and the characters are able to re-enter “Eden” as the closing family scene amongst the trees and plants of the forest village demonstrate.

Individual episodes of the *Star Wars* epic must be viewed as interdependent parts of a whole, and each subsequent film “revises” the readings of the other films. Through an analysis of structural and thematic elements, *Phantom Menace* is “integrated” into the *Star Wars* epic. Lucas creates “intertextual patternings” of mythological and psychological motifs that are repeated with minor variations that represent social, psychological or moral development in various characters—i.e., depictions of Anakin in *Phantom Menace* contribute to a re-reading of Vader throughout the first three films. The audience can now view Vader as a further illustration of the hero cycle that has been applied to Luke, Han, etc. The pattern followed by the first three films of initiation, departure and return (or boyhood, adolescence and manhood) must now be placed in the larger context of six films; what was once a personal mythology can also be seen as multi-generational (Anakin-Luke) and historical (i.e. the “cyclical” rise and fall of Roman Empire).

The flaws of the characters in *Phantom Menace* add further complexity to the “Manichean” characterizations of *Star Wars*; for instance, Obi-wan and Qui-gon attack Darth Maul very aggressively. This leads to the death of Qui-gon; in *A New Hope*, this knowledge contributes to Ben’s self-sacrifice and consequently in *Return of the Jedi* to Luke’s refusal to destroy Darth Vader.


Allegations of racist stereotypes in *Phantom Menace* and in *Star Wars* as a whole are valid; for example the Nemoidians re-enact Asian stereotypes from World War II, and the depiction of junk-dealer Wattoo closely resembles anti-Semitic propaganda form Nazi-era Germany. Jar-Jar Binks is “deconstructed,” revealing a
character consisting of traditional black caricatures such as Amos & Andy. An interesting new angle is the depiction of certain political figures in the film as stereotypical Catholics. The most striking evidence comes from Lucas himself, who claimed to have extensively researched images of the devil before designing the character Darth Maul; if such attention went to the imagery in the film, the racist caricatures could not have been accidental. See also Rubey.


The “total semiotic output” of science-fiction films convey the conflicting ideologies of the eras in which they were created. A New Hope, when compared to the Ridley Scott films, presents a conservative vision of the future. A New Hope presents the world as morally clear, asexual, and adolescent, and maintains the white-male dominated order. Alien and Blade Runner are built around inclusion or examination of the outsider (be it alien, human or clone) and treat female sexuality as forces both threatening and powerful. Though Alien and Blade Runner are inspired by and extrapolate on the science fiction foundations of A New Hope, the differences amongst them create a riveting “political dialogue.” The analysis of sexuality and the body are particularly useful in viewing contemporary science fiction heroines like Leia. Lev views A New Hope as a political dialogue that legitimizes a film often dismissed as pop-culture.


Lucas paradoxically offers an anti-technology message in a technologically dependent medium, reinforcing his humanistic themes. The often berated script
and “wooden” performance of the actors are deliberate acts by Lucas, who uses Nazi-style devices to invoke emotional reactions from the audience: legions of critics have likened the awards ceremony at the end of A New Hope to the Nuremberg scene in Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will, but Lubow does so in complimentary ways, removing the hostility of comparison to the Nazi “myth.”

The piece goes on to compare the ideology of the film to Goebbels, Bergson and Jung, claiming that heroic nationalism and mysticism in A New Hope explains the audience’s enthusiasm: “When the old Liebfraumilch is poured into new bottles, it packs a powerful wallop.”


In 1997, The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum opened an exhibit of Star Wars props, costumes, and production art entitled “Star Wars: The Magic of Myth.” The curators of the exhibit (which also spawned a companion book) followed the format of Campbell’s Hero With a Thousand Faces by representing in the exhibit 25 thematic elements found in hero myths. Lucas also deliberately drew upon Campbell’s work, but Star Wars ultimately fails as a “myth” according to Campbell’s own definitions of the word. In our current cultural context, Star Wars serves none of myth’s essential functions; these functions have been better served by science, government, and media outlets. Despite its humanist posturing, Star Wars—and the inclusion of its artifacts in a science museum—better serves the “scientific capitalism mythology” of our day than the heroic mythology of ancient cultures.

The popularity of *A New Hope* is reflected in the number of readings available through different critical perspectives or approaches, including “politco-technological,” “literary-cinematic,” and psychoanalytic. These perspectives are dismissed in favor of analysis in the formalist tradition of folklore using the Aarne-Thompson index, a collection of folklore motifs arranged numerically. *A New Hope* bears close affinity to AT 300, “The Dragon Slayer,” along with AT 514 & 613 (“The Helpers”) and AT 304 (“The Hunter”). The elements of these motifs are compared to the plot details of *A New Hope*. The article, although informative to non-folklorists, contains some folklore in-jokes.


Although the U.S. military adopted *Star Wars* terminology during the Reagan Administration (“Star Wars” for the Strategic Defense Initiative, for example), the *Star Wars* trilogy cautions against faith in technology as a peace-keeping force. The films appeared in political contexts that were chaotic, and the narratives reflect this “cold war tension” (as well as the domestic insecurities of the period) in their narratives. The darkness and turbulence of *Empire Strikes Back* “reflected the political upheaval of 1980”; *Return of the Jedi* was created and released “amidst a climate of conflict and confusion” that was reflected in the story.

Meyers risks devaluation of his finer arguments and insights because his essay contains mispellings (“Obi-wan Kanobie”), confused plot lines (specific battles or
scenes attributed to the wrong film) and outright errors (there is no planet “Degna”). See also Kramer.


The appeal of *A New Hope* cannot be explained in rational terms; an understanding of the psychoanalytic motifs in comparison to fairy tales and the Oedipus myth better explain the film’s success. As a work of art, *A New Hope* allows viewers to regress into pre-oedipal fantasies. The theological implications of the Force make religion accessible to the audience, de-personalizing God and making the film “life-affirming.” Technology is demonized in the villain Darth Vader; R2-D2 and C3PO humanize technology, because they are seen as machines becoming more human and therefore more “loveable” (as opposed to human Vader becoming “more machine than man”). Written from a developmental psychology perspective, Miller and Sprich speak with relative clarity to non-specialists.


While most critics refer to *A New Hope* as “space opera,” few have agreed on any critically established definition of the term. Monk attempts to establish the preconceived or “rule-of-thumb” criteria, and then “reclaims” and redefines the term: space opera entails, in her words, a monomythic romance mode, action-adventure plot, emphatic closure, optimism, social naivete, mimeticism (according to Northrop Frye’s definition), and conflict. Each of these
characteristics is qualified and discussed, with examples drawn from pulp
anthologies like *Amazing, Astounding, Worlds of If*, et al.


The reissue of *A New Hope* in 1997 resulted from the trendy revival of popular
culture from the Seventies: just as the revival of 1950’s imagery in television and
film (American Graffiti) thirty years ago “forgot” the tension and intolerance of
that decade, the current Seventies “fetishization” omits the cynicism and
narcissism of that period. *A New Hope* exemplifies this trend by concentrating on
“bigness” and the ironic dualism of spiritual victory (the Force) through violent
military means (the rebel attack against the Death Star). Our “post-ideological”
society prefers the commercial and simplistic pleasure seeking of the *Star Wars*
trilogy; the entertainment industry has resisted reviving the dramatic realism of
the Seventies (*The Deer Hunter, Network*, etc).

PIELKE, Robert G. “*Star Wars* vs. *2001*: A question of Identity.” *Extrapolation* 24.2

Science fiction often receives critical disdain because it is undefined, and is
therefore judged on “non-essential qualities” such as special effects, spectacle,
etc. A comparison of the films *A New Hope* and *2001*, both popular and critical
successes, will produce a list of characteristics that can be used to define sci-fi.

The films differ greatly in purpose (*2001* stimulates the intellect, *A New Hope* the
emotions), characterization of good and evil (complex in Kubrick, oversimplified
in Lucas) and depiction of technology. Similarities include “racial homogeneity”
and “the denigration of women.” The comparisons support a definition of science
fiction that draws upon Rudolf Otto’s lengthy definition of religion from his book *The Idea of the Holy*. Religious experience and science fiction can both be said to produce feelings of insignificance, awe, mystical experience and fascination.


Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Campbell’s “Who Goes There?” (later to become the film *The Thing*), and *Star Wars* illustrate the progress of science-fiction from Romanticism to “mass-culture.” Furthermore, the roles of aliens in these texts represent shifting ideologies in science fiction: from social criticism and utopianism to “patterns of consumption in the marketplace.” Frankenstein’s monster represents both Romantic alienation and the alienation of man from his creations. Campbell’s alien not only represents alienation by members of the corporate technocracy from the social class they serve but also the anxieties that accompany corporate identification. The aliens of *Star Wars* are not truly “alienated”; they are simply pitted against each other in conflict. The ideology of the film is consumerism: “Vader offers castration, while … Ben and the guru Yoda urge obedience and submission to the same force Vader exploits… It doesn’t matter whom the children invest in, as long as they invest.” Furthermore, special effects have created a “hegemonic” consumer element to science fiction films that make them products of leisure and pleasure.

The lack of “social relevance” in *A New Hope* allows Lucas and the audience to participate in a “guiltless celebration of unlimited warfare.” Because the film is a science-fiction fantasy, the violence of the film is divested of moral significance and the audience is left with “titillation” and a voyeuristic pleasure akin to masturbation (“sexual release devoid of any partner”). Science fiction further disguises the racial ideology of the films in characters like the Jawas, Chewbacca, etc. *A New Hope* is compared to *2001;* Kubrick’s film is cerebral and contemplative while Lucas’s film celebrates spectacle and “pure instinct.” *A New Hope* is likened by Rosenbaum to its own Evil Empire: popular media and film critics inadvertently “collaborated” to popularize the film, and have in effect overshadowed the more relevant, socially conscious films of Godard and other esoteric film auteurs.


The droids of *A New Hope* are discussed using Henri Bergson’s definitions of comedy from his 1900 essay “Le Rire” (Laughter). Bergson described the basic action of comedy as “a person acting like a machine.” C-3PO and R2-D2 not only fulfill this definition, but they also produce a curious doubling effect: C-3PO acts like a human, and does so rather comically; therefore, he is actually a machine that is acting like a man that is acting like a machine. This comic repetition is apparent in C-3PO’s “personality,” his mistreatment by the human characters, and his relationship with R2D2. Furthermore, science fiction often
concerns itself with the substitution of the mechanical for the natural, so it is an inherently “comic” genre.


Contemporary science-fiction films draw upon visual motifs from Westerns, and in effect have taken the place of Westerns as the most popular adolescent cinema. Films like *A New Hope*, *Empire Strikes Back*, *The Black Hole*, and *Battlestar Galactica* consistently use Western settings (saloons, the wilderness, the “devastated homestead”) as part of their cinematic lexicon. *A New Hope*, for instance, contains a desert landscape similar to those seen in films about the American West. Luke’s discovery of the burning corpses of his aunt and uncle evoke the slaughter of John Wayne’s family in *The Searchers*. Roth predicts that Science fiction will completely “eclipse” the Western as that genre moves farther away from our “cultural reality.”


*A New Hope*, despite its “rebellious” heroes and attempt to “disassociate” itself from the detrimental effects of “hard weapons technology,” implicitly reinforces the dominant “ideological clichés” of the modern private-enterprise system of capitalist, white upper-class America. The robots and “aliens” supports the dominant racial and sexual hierarchies of our culture by “glamorizing those at the top and” and turning those at the bottom into “machines.” The film’s celebration of technological warfare is an attempt to create a new image of heroism for a society dependent upon technology, especially in terms of military might.
Violence in *A New Hope* therefore becomes clinical and bloodless, like the precision bombings of the Vietnam conflict. The medieval romance is the basis for the film’s triangular “hero system” that eventually places Leia on the sideline so chivalric males can enter into power contests.


Just as the episodes of the trilogy mark the development of Luke Skywalker from boy to adolescent to man, so then should the audience expect structural and thematic differences that parallel Luke’s development. The differences are grounded in allusion: while *A New Hope* was a fairytale/Western and *Empire Strikes Back* drew upon myth and Freudian “primal fears,” *Return of the Jedi* follows the tradition of European epics. To demonstrate this point, Sammons compares the major sequences of the film to sequences from *Beowulf*, *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, *Paradise Lost*, et al. The three major divisions in the film—the Tatooine rescue, the Dagobah scenes, and the final, three-stage battle at the trilogy’s climax—are examined in detail. Although *Jedi* fails as an epic, it should ultimately be recognized as aspiring to epic standards.


Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingence, Irony and Solidarity* rewrite the “vocabulary of argumentation” as relativistic narratives; the history of philosophy and Rorty’s texts are then read as stories, and those stories
are readily comparable to the films *Patriot Games* and *Star Wars*. Rorty writes of a “bricoleur-poet” easily recognizable in the guise of Han Solo. Solo, nominally neutral, subverts or rewrites existing systems and therefore creates new metaphors with which to express modes of thought or argumentation. It is Solo’s spontaneity and independence that are required by the philosopher to triumph over dead metaphors or systems. Pointedly philosophical, this paper presents the narrative of *A New Hope* as an allegory “deeply woven into the fabric of the social.” Rorty attempts to “weave” his texts into a similar social relevance.


The spectacle of *Star Wars*—the space-ships, creatures, and swashbuckling—are revealed as integral factors in creating an effective “fairy tale” according to the discussion of such tales in Bruno Bettleheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment*. Fantasy trappings appeal to children and allow them to “compensate for [their] uncertainties… physical inadequacies… powerlessness… and lack of knowledge of the real world.” Furthermore, the Don Juan novels of Carlos Castaneda are discussed as the sources for “the Force,” which turns out to be a combination of Castaneda-inspired animism and Zen Buddhism. Included is a discussion of the ecological implications of the films in which the Empire is characterized as wasteful and environmentally abusive.

Sergi examines not only the technical innovations in sound of the original trilogy but also comments on the changes in the Special Edition re-release. *A New Hope* illustrates that film should no longer be viewed as a strictly visual, inherent in terms like “moving pictures” and “visionary directors.” *A New Hope* “sound architecture” not only reinvented the way audiences experienced sound in the theater but also used the soundtrack to advance the narrative and themes of the film like no other before it: “the main achievement of *Star Wars* lies in the successful translation of outstanding technological innovation into a powerful storytelling tool.” This narrative effect is achieved by establishing contrasts in pitch and volume between good and evil characters and dominant/subversive relationships in the film. Sergi’s analysis of sound and the “father and child” relationships the sound effects portray further support readings of the film that concentrate on the “good father/bad father” conflict of Luke’s development.


The author compares the *Star Wars* trilogy to Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, starting with the debt shared by both works to Kurosawa’s *Hidden Fortress*. Brief discussion of plot and theme similarities follows. The *Star Wars* trilogy is ultimately in the tradition of the great Chinese fantasy epics, and *Crouching Tiger* stands as the modern Chinese equivalent to the trilogy. The “purity” of Lee’s work results from a “soulful artistry” and emotional sophistication, which replaces Lucas’s “teenage whizbang gosharootie” and “club-wielding teddy bears.” Shepard claims that Lee’s success lies in the “loving
attention to setting” shown in *Crouching Tiger*; a similar attention to setting in *Star Wars* is unfortunately overlooked. Furthermore, Lee’s desire to pay “homage to the B-quality Chinese sword fantasies he watched as a child” seems remarkably similar to Lucas’s oft-repeated vow to capture the spirit of 40’s era adventure serials.


Stories like *A New Hope* function as answers to the moral ambiguity of life, an ambiguity not exclusive to modern man. Lucas casts Luke as a *mythic* hero in response to the realistic or anti-heroes prevalent in seventies cinema. The anti-hero “portrays a catatonic protagonist” who ultimately becomes a victim. The heroes of *A New Hope* recover in the audience a clarity that realistic art cannot achieve because realism has caused the familiar to become “trite” and stagnant. Darth Vader succeeds as a villain because he is clearly evil in the mythical sense: Vader is not only the proverbial defiler/tyrant, but he has also committed the ultimate taboo of betraying a benefactor (a la Lucifer, Judas, Brutus, etc).

Comparisons are made to Dante’s *Inferno*, Kubrick’s *2001*, and Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* and *The Sotweed Factor*.


The author discusses three previously overlooked inspirations for *Star Wars*: the 12th century epic *The Song of Roland*, Edgar Rice Burrough’s *John Carter of*
Mars novels, and Alex Raymond’s Flash Gordon comics (and of course the movie serials they inspired). Roland contains thematic similarities: the dual heroes Roland and Oliver are “brothers by oath,” as Han and Luke become once the romance between Han and Leia is acknowledged. Burroughs mostly provides similarities in surface details like names (the “jeddaks” from Mars become the “jedi”) and locale (snow planets). The chaste and chivalric nature of the heroes is also reflected in Luke.


Empire Strikes Back, a philosophical undertaking, consists of a hero making what Lucas called “the ultimate search.” It is therefore in direct opposition to Kubrick’s 2001, which presents the same search in radically different terms. In the journey to Jupiter, man is sent off “unmoved and unaware.” Kubrick’s journey removes the humanity from man as he drifts further out into the universe, becoming more at first more mechanical and then diaphanous, ethereal, soulless and alien. Lucas instead “infuses man with nobility,” asserting a “mystical faith” in the characters’ dependence on the Force. Empire becomes a film about faith and virtue, but the Force must not be confused with the righteous God of Christianity. Lucas offers answers—virtue—but no explanation of the source of that virtue.


This “de-colonial” reading of the Star Wars trilogy implicates the films as part of the Euro-centric “Master Text”: classical western narrative fits a paradigm wherein
the Christian “patriarchal bourgeoisie” takes the role of the hero, justifying imperialism, exploitation, and the marginalization of “hierarchical inferiors.” In this light, *Star Wars* most accurately resembles Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* in its ideological and formal construction. The Jedi Knights (erroneously labeled “Jeddi” throughout the article) must defend the “Old Republic” from the degradation of dark forces; specifically, Luke must protect his “blood-sister” Leia from corruption by the Empire. Ben Kenobi can be considered an aging Confederate officer, while C-3PO and R2-D2 closely resemble “back talking house servants” of reconstruction literature. The piece closes by associating Lucas’s films with Ronald Reagan’s political myth-making.


*A New Hope* achieves a complexity and “resonance” that differs from traditional science-fiction films through the abstraction and exaggeration of that genre’s conventions. Science-fiction traditionally addresses anxiety over technology and the conflict between the rational and the irrational. *A New Hope* overtly addresses the conflict between technological dependence and technological independence through the presence of the “technological terror” of the Death Star and through Luke’s reliance on instinct in the final battle. The Empire acts with a cold rationality throughout the film, and the Rebels achieve victory through their “irrational” methods (i.e. the attack on the Death Star is effective because “suicidal” one-man attacks against the base have not been planned for). The emotions of the heroes defy logic, and the sequence of seemingly random events
(the escape of the droids, their arrival at Luke’s farm, Han’s return during the battle) defeat the calculating, “systematic” efforts of the Empire. The author compares *A New Hope* to Kubrick’s *2001* and Lucas’s *THX-1138*.


Tiffin uses the release of *Star Wars: the Special Edition* to discuss the problems of “moral reform in the New South Africa.” A popular South African comic strip, *Madame and Eve*, used images from the film and the concept of a “re-mastered” story line to comment on the wave of “white guilt” and the possibility that, like the special edition, the “new” South Africa is not, in fact, new at all. Both the comic and the re-mastered *Star Wars* trilogy provide a recognizable “mythology” for South Africans to address problems with “moral polarity,” or the Manichean opposites of good and evil that *Star Wars* has so often been noted for espousing. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, moral positions are slightly more complex.


Lucas’s films are a continuing discussion on the impact of technology on human life: in *THX-1138*, technology dehumanizes and subverts humanity, and *American Graffiti* deals with the “seduction” of the baby-boomers by machines (in this case automobiles). The *Star Wars* films allow Lucas to “infuse the contemporary context of America’s space program and Cold War politics with a sense of moral inquiry.” In *The Phantom Menace*, an emphasis on special effects
shots, impersonal performances by the film’s leads and complex visual activity “illustrate the impending threat of human conflict and technological failure.” White views young Anakin in terms of his eventual transformation into Darth Vader, an anticipation many critics dismiss or mention incidentally. The influences of Joseph Campbell on the development of the films are also dismissed as justification for Lucas to appease youth markets with characters like Yoda and the Ewoks; White coins the word “anthro-pandering” to describe these childlike diversions from Lucas’s technological meditations.


Luke Skywalker joins Thoreau, Huck Finn and Melville’s Billy Budd in the literary tradition of the American Adam. Luke’s innocence and disconnection from human society (as an orphan and later a Jedi initiate) embody the “Infant Adam,” or the innocent set at the feet of a great wilderness. When his adoptive guardians are killed, Luke is free to set out into the wilderness, and it is his destiny to do so. Luke must immerse himself into nature—á la The Force—to succeed as a hero; like Thoreau, Luke repudiates “the traditional, the conventional, the socially acceptable, the well-worn paths of conduct” in an attempt to establish himself as an individual. This work is noteworthy for placing Star Wars in a specifically American tradition of archetypes and treating it as more of a work of “literature” than of cinema.

The Phantom Menace depicts racist stereotypes and caricatures. This is evident not only in the imagery of the film, but also in the entries from the Lucasfilm-sanctioned tie-in Star Wars Episode I: The Visual Dictionary. Jar-Jar Binks is only barely disguised minstrelsy; Watto represents anti-Semitic stereotypes and looks to be based on an widely reproduced anti-semitic cartoon from a WWII-era Viennese magazine. Analysis into the accents of the human character reveal the class-consciousness of the film. See also Leo.


A New Hope, White’s The Once and Future King, and Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings are “renegade” narratives in the Western tradition: they use realistic approaches to fantastic mise-en-scenes; they reject sexuality or sexual tension as necessary narrative elements; they “severely temper” materialism in favor of an “eastern” spiritualism or mysticism. The discussion concentrates on comparisons of the heroes (Luke, Frodo, and Arthur) and their “wizardly” counsel (Ben Kenobi, Gandalf, and Merlyn). The greatest similarities lie in the characterization of the heroes: since all are asexual orphans or devoid of familial ties, they are better able to represent their respective cultures because they are alien to its institutions and can therefore remain pure. The lead villains, furthermore, represent perversions of family ties or manifestations of taboo indiscretions.

A New Hope is more complex than its critics recognize: neither pro- nor anti-technology, A New Hope instead considers the acceptance of technology in the world and the relationship of people to that technology. Those that live “in thrall to their technology” (Jawas, Imperial forces) are ultimately destroyed by it; those that minimize the necessity of their technological extensions (Luke, the Sandpeople, Vader) are ultimately more free and “successful.” A New Hope investigates the ideas of technocracy, or “the extent that... an organization can exploit others as technological extensions of its own system of intentions.” Furthermore, allegations of racism or fascism in the ideological make-up of the trilogy are unfounded, as the closing scene of A New Hope markedly differs in context from Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will. The Sandpeople and Jawas are not merely disguised “minorities,” but entities that allow Lucas to comment on technology.

Wood makes a structural analysis and comparison of A New Hope and Empire Strikes Back. While many critics who panned A New Hope applauded Empire, relatively few dissimilarities exist in the narrative structures of the films: the first opens in a desert wasteland, the second in a frozen wasteland; A New Hope opens with the droids crash-landing on Tatooine, while Empire opens with Imperial probe-droids landing on Hoth, etc. Despite Wood’s assurances to the contrary, the comparison is exhaustive and meticulous. The narrative structure of Empire suffers because the meaning and significance of the scenes have changed while the activities stay basically the same; the narrative moves forward in local,
discontinuous episodes with minimal “dramatic role and thematic significance.” The story never builds on itself, and seems to occur for its own sake. This is due in part to Lucas’s refusal to officially direct *Empire*, which left the film “voiceless.”

WOOD, Michael. “Kiss Tomorrow Hello.” *Film Comment* 2.6 (1977): 14-17.

The revival of science-fiction films in the Seventies, including *A New Hope*, de-emphasizes story for spectacle. The paranoia, tension, and techno-phobia of Fifties sci-fi played upon “feelings outside of the movies”; the current trend in sci-fi is to replicate the themes or motifs without significantly adding to them or addressing new fears, adding special effects and lavish set design to produce an “exercise in cinema.” Technology is removed as a source of tension and replaced as part of the vision of the future. Sci-fi becomes more about what the directors can *do* than what the directors can *say*. A wide range of films are discussed, including Boorman’s *Zardoz*, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, and *2001*. This article does not specifically deal with *A New Hope*; however, it follows Stephen Zito’s oft-quoted “George Lucas Goes Way Out” in this issue of *Film Comment*, and it is useful in establishing the trends in film that Lucas so radically departed from.


Epics, through repetition, temporal extension and allusion, create a sense of place in history and argue for “the redemptive possibilities of life.” *Star Wars* stands in the tradition of great epics, most notably for its ambitious nine-sequence structure (projected to require almost thirty years to complete). Starting the story *in media*
“emphasizes that the present… is first of all a function of the past and second of all an anticipation of the future.” The three trilogies of the *Star Wars* epic concern themselves with three generations of the Skywalker family, repeating the “hero cycle” throughout each generation and further illustrating the eternal nature of and need for the hero. *Star Wars*, like other epics, depends on allusion to position itself in a historical tradition. The conflicted relationship between Darth Vader and Luke overtly allude to Hamlet’s vision of his father’s ghost and Satan’s temptation of Christ. Vader is also compared to Huck’s “pap” in *Huckleberry Finn*. The piece ends with an argument for critical scrutiny and respect for the trilogy because “*Star Wars* will help to create the world it predicts.”