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*STAR WARS, Extended Universe, Legend, Canon? "I thought he was a myth!"*

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## **Introduction: Lightsabers and Beetle-Effect**

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*Translated from French by Carl Therrien*

In a context where the Disney empire seeks to transform the Star Wars franchise with the Marvel recipe, opening production valves on many platforms (comics, TV series, video games) – the flux of feature-length movies and transmedia objects seemingly unstoppable – it is fitting to question the evolution that the most famous contemporary fictional *galaxy far, far away* is undergoing at the moment. This Kinephanos issue will approach the phenomenon from a resolutely contemporary angle, since it targets first and foremost movies that were released after the Disney buyout. However, it is impossible to dovetail a diachronic approach: except the youngest of spectators and naysayers coming to the theatre to accompany fan friends, the vast majority of the Star Wars audience consumes these movies through a cognitive and affective capital inherited from their experience of the first two trilogies. The temporal span of the saga is full of change, even if creator George Lucas spent his time at the franchise's helm trying to keep it forever present, notably through retouches keeping it in line with technical progress. Be it the typical style of mainstream fictions, the balance between production and postproduction,

the films' distribution or reception practices, many movie-making dimensions aren't what they used to be in 1977. From there, one can observe three socio-anthropological "issues" that these transformations bring to the new Star Wars movies.

First "issue" (quotation marks here seek to moderate this epithet's legitimacy since, from a purely economic point of view, the saga couldn't do better, which is a sign of successful adaptation) : the passing time. Each of the trilogies corresponds roughly to a generation, and what one has seen as a child cannot be seen again through the children's eyes. This is why the prequel now has a much better reputation than it did 20 years ago: those who saw it with these eyes are now old and influent enough to defend it publicly, even more so considering it acted as their gateway to the first films – this is undoubtedly why, contrarily to original fans who have seen *A New Hope* in theatres, they haven't experienced a feeling of treason. But this *New Hope* in 1977, as viewers from the time will remember, was inscribed for commentators in a stylistic genealogy called nostalgia movies (not postmodern yet). One could oppose them at the time to another part of the New Hollywood (another then-unknown expression) that found its specificity in disillusioned observation, bleakness and the end of utopias (from *Point Limite Zéro* to *Taxi Driver*, *Sorcerer* or *The Rain People*). The integration of *self-consciousness* in Lucas' approach could not go unnoticed, even beyond the implicit intertextual references in *Flash Gordon* and the more explicit ones in *La Prisonnière du désert*. It was impossible, in 1977, to avoid cataloguing Lucas as a director operating "to the third degree", copying on a first degree level but differentiating itself with just a pinch of benign and smart irony<sup>1</sup>. However, a large part of the audience at the time wasn't aware of these elements: children, of course, and all the viewers who looked through it because of ignorance or indifference towards the New Hollywood's dark side. In a recent interview, Mark Hamill relates asking Lucas during the first movie's production if he should interpret Luke with a hint of irony, and being told he should simply interpret what was written – a way to let the audience gauge this aspect already<sup>2</sup>. Forty years later, the proportion of viewers who see the original episode as a "third degree" reflexive

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<sup>1</sup> On these levels of irony, see Laurent Jullier, « L'image à l'épreuve de l'ironie. Les degrés d'énonciation et de réception du récit audiovisuel », *Revue française des sciences de l'information et de la communication* [Online], 12 | 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rfsic/3404> ; DOI : 10.4000/rfsic.3404

<sup>2</sup> Discussion with François Forestier, « *Star Wars. Les Derniers Jedi* : Comment je suis devenu Luke Skywalker », *L'Obs*, December 13 2017 [Online] URL : <https://www.nouvelobs.com/cinema/20171212.OBS9147/star-wars-les-derniers-jedi-comment-je-suis-devenu-luke-skywalker.html>

film has become negligible, even more so than in 1977. Furthermore, *post-cool* has taken over the *cool* trend. One would look for long for traces of irony in the most successful contemporary titles : *Titanic*, *Avatar*, *Harry Potter* and... the Lucas 1999-2005 prequels. The times have moved towards outward sincerity – to more or less overt intimate *New Sincerity*, referring to one of the buzzwords used for a time in Anglophone media.

The conjunction of these two antinomic factors (third degree reading and the taste for total sincerity) leads to our second « issue », which would not have been one had Disney chosen a reboot option that completely abandons what has been created before. Star Wars screenwriters hired by Disney have treated the original trilogy as a first degree piece of fiction, as a paragon of authenticity. This conception calls upon a great number of artistic clichés, in particular that of the creator misunderstood for its idiosyncrasy, rejected by the studios, who works by himself in his garage on incredible special effects and can't afford to hire stars. It also depends on the consideration for the cult emerging around the first trilogy and that gave birth to a considerable fandom. Screenwriters have effectively adopted a TV series logic: with regards to the new episodes, the first trilogy acts as a “bible”<sup>3</sup>. One must stingingly observe, then, that a work opposing modernity, resting on a tradition associated with the Golden Age in a way that highlights some its most pleasurable aspects, can act as a pedestal to embody tradition itself. The allusion to mythic elements becomes myth, full stop; however all the viewers don't have the temporal distance nor the critical will required to taste this historical irony.

Third and last « issue », further in this logic of merchandising, and thus connecting with problems that are well-known in the realm of TV series: every new Star Wars, like any new episode of a long-lasting successful story, must find balance between differentiation (for instance: Luke's personality changed) and repetition (for instance: lightsabers, parricide, benevolent droids). Walt Disney is confronted with one of the major difficulties for entrepreneurs who seek to market on a wide scale a product that first had success as a unique and authentic product. One could describe this difficulty with the tools used by Boltanski and Chiapello to talk about the marketing of authenticity: the balance between repetition and

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<sup>3</sup> <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible\\_\(screenwriting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_(screenwriting))>

difference, which they refer to as a process of codification, “tends to limit the diversity of significations that can be extracted from the product. Thus, once the significations intentionally introduced through coding have been acknowledged, the product tends to lose some of its interest and to disappoint even though its usage keeps exerting correctly a specific function”<sup>4</sup>.

It is well known that the “significations” extracted from this peculiar “product” that is the Star Wars universe have flourished essentially thanks to its audience. Observers that didn’t realize this had to notice following the prequel’s release, when numerous fans have expressed their feeling of being dispossessed or betrayed by Lucas –simply, they didn’t extract from this universe the same meanings that its creator did...The producers for the new Disney branded Star Wars line have tried to conform to the idea they had about the essence of the first trilogy as understood by fans (but which exactly?). We can highlight a similarity between this strategy and the one chosen by the Wolkswagen to launch its New Beetle in 1998, following the enthusiasm generated by the first Beetle launched in 1946: the “Beetle” name was chosen by the public, and “New Beetle” was meant to acknowledge this reading. Thus functions the marketing of authenticity, until one or two generations down the line, in case of success, the artificial aspect of this operation vanishes.

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The papers featured in this issue propose, from different angles, an enlightened point of view on the Star Wars transmedia object of the Disney era. How does the franchise evolve between transnarrativity and merchandising, between contradictory fan opinions and the autoreflexivity of post-Lucas creators, seemingly less interested in prolonging the saga than producing movies that speak *about it*. For instance the last opus at the time of writing these lines, *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, appears to be a scapegoat in a context that some observers have called *Star Wars fatigue*. Quentin Mazel’s paper, which opens the issue, doesn’t discuss this fatigue directly but exposes the underlying context that leads to the repetitive use of discursive forms. It brings into view how these forms are, on the one hand, perceived by critics and transformed into criteria to evaluate a film’s quality, and on the other hand, analyzed by fans to nourish their homages or sharpen their wrath on social media! The “marketing of authenticity” depends on a movement of cultural re-appropriation that takes multiple shapes. In “A bridge and a reminder: *The Force*

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<sup>4</sup> Luc Boltanski & Ève Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, p. 598.

*Awakens*, between repetition and expansion”, Ana Cabral Martins articulates the question of continuity between the old and the new, and the need for a taxonomy whose terms are still discussed and redefined. Sequels, reboots and revivals, on top of respecting a market logic coming from the tradition of serials, have become tools for transnarrative explorations and expansions that need to be distanced from the notion of remake.

Jessica Austin’s “Fan Girls Going Rogue” discusses *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One*’s reception within feminine circles through an online survey with 330 respondents. Her analysis focuses more specifically on the reception of new central female characters, Rey and Jin, and addresses the perception of these characters by a group of reactionary masculine viewers. The fourth paper by Tom Cuisinier-Rosset seeks to highlight the autoreflexive nature of the Disney era episodes from a fan’s point of view (or an *acafan*’s point of view as Jenkins would call). As we mentioned above, the first trilogy, especially *A New Hope*, almost acts as a bible, as a blue print on which *The Force Awakens* takes hold, acknowledging (or constructing) the myth value of the initial episodes. Rey’s line “I thought he was a myth” speaks for itself.

The following two papers offer case studies. “Go Rogue” from Pedro Moura analyses a contest set up by Disney before the release of *Rogue One*, inviting participants to create short videos inspired by their favorite universe and share them online. Moura exposes Disney’s strategy which seeks to keep a certain amount of control, or at the very least to regulate fan production. Katriina Heljakka, for her part, takes interest in toys and in the relationship adult fans have with these objects, specifically the collector. In “Re-playing legends’ worlds: Toying with *Star Wars*’ Expanded Universe in adult play”, she addresses the question of world building in relation with world play, and the way some fans use toys as a diegetic vector through photographic *mise en scène*, an activity she calls “photoplay” (not to be confused with Münsterberg’s photoplay). Finally, Amedeo d’Adamo’s paper, “Deathstarchitecture : the Space of Evil”, offers a perspective on architectural transfiguration of evil space, from *A New Hope*’s Death Star to *The Force Awaken*’s Starkiller base, comparing the figurative and symbolic evolution between the Empire and the First Order.

We hope that these contributions can help us see more clearly in the star Wars saga, an inextricable metatextual constellation of references, nods and allusions to the past (its own).

