Postcolonial Star Wars

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Essays on Empire and Rebellion in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

Edited by

Matthew Schultz

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

MATTHEW SCHULTZ, PHD

In a 19 September 1944 article for the French resistance newspaper, *Combat*, Albert Camus wrote, "Revolution is not revolt. What carried the Resistance for four years was revolt—the complete, obstinate, and at first nearly blind refusal to accept an order that would bring men to their knees. Revolt begins first in the human heart. But there comes a time when revolt spreads from heart to spirit, when a feeling becomes an idea, when impulse leads to concerted action. This is the moment of revolution."[1] The theatrical release of *Star Wars* in 1977 was itself a revolutionary cultural moment—one that invites a closer examination of why and how these films have enjoyed such wide-ranging cultural impact and longevity. Yet surprisingly little scholarly work has been done to situate *Star Wars* within the field of Postcolonial Studies. Surprising not only because empire and rebellion are central to the plot and themes of this space opera, but also because its release coincided with the publication of Edward Said's influential intellectual history of the Western imperial project, *Orientalism* (1978), and the subsequent explosion of the Western literary canon.

Each essay in *Postcolonial Star Wars: Essays on Empire and Rebellion in a Galaxy Far, Far Away* examines the rhetoric of conquest and empire, freedom and rebellion in the *Star Wars* canon. By situating the films in a theoretical context provided by leading postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth, 1961*), Edward Said (*Orientalism, 1978*), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1985), and Homi K. Bhabha (*Locations of Culture, 1994*), as well as political theorists like Albert Camus (*The Rebel, 1951*) and Hannah Arendt (*Between Past and Future, 1961)*, the authors show how *Star Wars* is both influenced by and helps explain postcolonial thought.

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[1] Camus, 55.

The following essays consider representations of the intersections between imperialism, revolution, and identity politics on the one hand and form, rhetoric, and the cultural implications of *Star Wars* on the other. The authors move beyond a depoliticized appreciation of the films to examine their historical, political, and cultural significance across the millennial divide. Such contextualization means using postcolonial theory to appreciate and understand how *Star Wars* reinforces, complicates, and undermines Imperial discourse, while simultaneously positioning the films as a lens that can help us interrogate the very idea of postcoloniality. In other words, we argue that *Star Wars* offers viewers an opportunity to examine and consider what Michel Foucault refers to as "subjugated knowledge"[2]––that is, those discourses that are routinely disqualified by the dominant cultural narratives.

Frantz Fanon, an Afro-Caribbean revolutionary who became involved with the Algerian National Liberation Front and the Algerian War of Independence, contends that we live in a "compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, is inhabited by different species…Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost, what species, what race one belongs to."[3] And, further, "National Liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event."[4] As a paragon of political resistance and the rhetoric of retributive violence, *Star Wars* invites us to consider the possibilities of organized rebellion as a crucible for self-knowledge and deliberate action.

Each of the essays included in this collection mines the *Star Wars* cinematic and textual canon to introduce readers to the postcolonial landscape of George Lucas's Galaxy far, far away. They each, therefore, analyze and apply the central concepts of postcolonial theory—Orientalism, Hybridity, and the Subaltern—across the *Star Wars* universe to explore topics ranging widely from a Feminist reproach of the portrayal of women to a consideration of droid rights, and from martial economics to galactic linguistics. Still, the central focus of this collection is the relationship between representation (understood primarily in terms of genre and medium) and the historical phenomenon of imperialism and resistance to colonization. At its best, *Star Wars* does not merely transport preexisting ideas about empire and resistance but is itself a cultural actor influencing

[2] Foucault, 81-2.
[3] Fanon, 5.
[4] Fanon, 1.

how we identify and criticize imperial practices as well as paramilitary revolt in the 21st Century.

What do we mean by Postcolonial?

The term "postcolonial" can refer to one of two states of being: (1) a nation that has been colonized by an imperial power and is therefore currently in a state of colonization, or (2) a nation that has thrown off the yoke of imperialism and currently exists in a state of decolonization. For our purpose of discussing the *Star Wars* film franchise we will use the former definition, as the Empire has firm rule over the Galaxy until The Battle of Endor that takes place at the conclusion of *Return of the Jedi*. The sequel films—*The Force Awakens, The Last Jedi,* and *The Rise of Skywalker*—exist under the latter definition as the Empire has crumbled, the New Republic has formed, and the First Order doesn't quite have political power over any particular star system.

The first group of essays collected under the heading "Rebellion" focus on the consequences of necessarily violent rebellion and revolution. They are concerned with justifying the use of violence against an oppressor. Further, this group of essays examines forms of decolonization and self-government once independence has been declared and explores the genuine threat of the oppressed becoming oppressors in an ostensibly inescapable cycle of modern warfare. Readers are asked to consider some of the foundational questions about where power resides and how it is maintained by seeking to answer how *Star Wars*, explicitly or allegorically, represents various aspects of colonial oppression. What does *Star Wars* reveal about the problematics of postcolonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity? And, what does *Star Wars* reveal about the politics and psychology of anti-colonialist resistance?

The subsequent sections look at the ways that colonization plays out in the lives of oppressed individuals, specifically women, racial minorities, and the subaltern (which, in the *Star Wars* universe, can refer to the servant classes like droids). In his "Theses on the Concept of History" (1942), Walter Benjamin asks us to think about how historical narratives are (re)produced and consumed. (1) Who, for instance, are the victors of history; who gets left behind? (2) Who gets to define, label, and categorize time within the boundaries of history, and who does not? (3) How do dogmatism and ideology shape the frames through which we understand history? (4) How can we recover the lived, material experiences that are left out of history when time is understood as progressive, or as marching

toward some teleological end? (5) And, what is *authenticity*, and what are the *mechanics* of the constitution of perceived authenticity? Analyzing the most marginalized characters in *Star Wars* helps us to answer some of these essential questions.[5]

Star Wars reveals to us the operations of cultural difference—how race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs intersect to form individual identity and, therefore, shape our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. Indeed, the films and attendant media force us to consider as neighbors those who dominant cultural norms typically identify as "other" or "stranger." In *Nation and Narration* (1990), cultural theorist Timothy Brennan argues that unadulterated language, homogeneous race, and geographical borders do not define a nation or a people. Rather, the idea of a nation is just a sense of belonging: "The nation," he argues, "is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined. Race, geography, tradition, language, size, or some combination of these seem finally insufficient for determining national essence, and yet people die for nations, fight wars for them, and write fictions on their behalf."[6] By recognizing how *Star Wars* responds to and comments upon its characters, themes, or assumptions, we can begin to see how these films simultaneously reinforce and undermine colonialist ideology through its representation of imperialism and colonialization.

A Pedagogical Tool

The aim of this collection is two-fold. First, we hope to inspire a wider audience of *Star Wars* fans and aficionados to consider issues about the nature of power and exploitation as well as authority and subjugation. Second, as more colleges and universities begin to offer courses across the curriculum on *Star Wars*, these essays serve as a valuable repository of exemplary undergraduate writing, which student writers can use as models for successful argumentation both in the classroom and in the broader arena of popular criticism about *Star Wars*.

The remainder of this "Introduction" outlines the Vassar College First-Year Writing Seminar in which my students produced these essays. The text below is distilled from my 2019 presentation at the Modern Languages Association Conference in Chicago, Illinois, titled, "Textual Transactions:

[5] Benjamin, 389-400.
[6] Brennan, 49.

Scholarly Communication Across Asynchronous Courses." It describes the genesis of this book.

Writers need readers. Peer-reviewers narrate for writers their experience of a text: where and how they felt invited into or excluded from the scholarly conversation that the writer has initiated. The review process includes identifying moments of wonder, pleasurable language, and intriguing ideas as well as places of confusion stemming from structural incoherence, unconvincing analysis, or lack of evidence. These transactions, strategies, and habits of mind are tools that can be used in various and varied situations, whether at another point in the course, for a different class altogether, or even outside of the university. Small class sizes and one-to-one meetings afforded by first-year writing seminars invite innovative thinking and the time necessary for peer-to-peer collaboration. I wanted to show my students that such tools are useful outside of the classroom and beyond the graded environment.

So, in 2015, in an attempt to establish lines of communication among the various courses I was teaching on modernist literature, I designed *Modernism Visualized*, a geospatial timeline that represents the trans-national convergence of literary, artistic, and musical production with cultural, political, and military history from the 1850s through the 1930s.[7] *Modernism Visualized* was an on-going, multi-course project in which my students developed existing entries or added additional data to the current timeline, thereby creating a community of cross-seminar collaboration that taught the technical and rhetorical elements of multimodal composition. For the most part, the project was a success except that it wasn't really collaborative: there wasn't any dialogue among my students across course sections.

In the Fall of 2017 I developed a collaborative, multi-course project that would span across academic years and manifest as a digital anthology that would collect argumentative essays from my annual First-Year Writing Seminar offered through the Media Studies Program at Vassar College: *The Postcolonial Star Wars Anthology*. The goal of this project was less about introducing students to postcolonial theory and criticism, or of affording them the opportunity to develop an ability to analyze and construct complex arguments about digital storytelling and more about seeing themselves as literary critics even in their first semester on campus. This meant engaging with the work of my previous students as primary texts and also expecting that future generations of students would, in turn, look to their work in much the same way. In short, I expect my students to read like writers and

[7] http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/maschultz/modernismvisualized.html

generously write like readers. Thought of another way, I wanted the classroom experience of engaged conversation to live on beyond the end of our semester as a way of modeling how professional scholarly conversations exist in conference presentations and peer-reviewed publications.

In week seven of the course, following an introduction to postcolonial theory and a discussion of at least half of the *Star Wars* films, students workshopped a 250-word abstract for their final projects both with Writing Center consultants and with peers during an in-class review session. The following week, each student proposed their plan to the class in a 3-minute pitch followed by a five-minute Q&A session. Once back from Fall Break, students workshopped a four-page draft of their argument (including an annotated bibliography) in class. They each wrote an accompanying "Peer Review Memo" to help guide their colleagues as they commented on this in-progress work. Two weeks later, a six-page multimodal version of the essay was due. We then organized a two-day conference that was open to the entire Vassar Community and which sought to strike a balance between personal investments in consuming and writing about *Star Wars* and the more audience-based practice of successful argumentation. Students were responsible for organizing their papers into panels of three-to-four papers, selecting a chair, and co-authoring an opening statement that traced a thread of argumentation through the panel's essays.

But peer-review and audience feedback didn't end during the drafting stages. The final exam for this course was a 500-word response to a colleague's essay that complicated or contested the original author's argument. Each student drew upon various texts to craft their response: another student's essay, a theoretical text, and at least one *Star Wars* film. My idea was to show them how conversations do not end once a "final draft" is submitted. There are always potential revisions. And in fact, authors continue to receive reader feedback on their work even after I have submitted grades and classes have ended. My Fall 2018 class was assigned to write a 500-word response to one of the Fall 2017 essays for their midterm evaluation. For the Fall 2017 writers—many of whom read and responded to these new comments on their work—this means that their intellectual engagement with *Star Wars* has transitioned from being primarily about evaluation and credit into an experience of scholarly pleasure.

To date, over fifty Vassar students have taken the course and produced essays like the twenty collected in this volume. These essays reflect not only each authors' unique interest in a particular intersection of postcolonial theory, media theory, and *Star Wars* but also an investment in crucial social justice issues that are relevant in the increasingly globalized world today.

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PART I:

REBELLION

CHAPTER 1

REBEL VIOLENCE

RACHEL SIPRESS '21

The original *Star Wars* trilogy presents viewers with a Manichean moral dichotomy between the Rebel Alliance and the Galactic Empire. George Lucas presents the Galactic Empire as an entirely evil entity willing and able to destroy entire planets. On the other hand, the Rebel Alliance is portrayed as morally superior and ethically just in its use of retributive violence. Consider, for instance, the celebrations that take place following the destruction of both Death Stars with no thought given to the ostensibly neutral individuals who died in each of these attacks. We do witness the Rebellion's willingness to take lives, but these are the lives of faceless stormtroopers and the anonymous citizens of the Death Star who die off-screen.

Frantz Fanon, a postcolonial thinker and freedom fighter, opens his book *Wretched of the Earth* with a declaration of violence: "National Liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event."[1] Decolonization, Fanon opines, cannot come without violence. And while conflict is shown in *Star Wars,* it is often presented without consequence. The only blood that we see throughout the Original Trilogy occurs during the cantina scene in *A New Hope* when Obi-Wan Kenobi slices off the arm of an alien who is bothering Luke—and this is only because producers hadn't yet figured out that the heat from a lightsaber would instantly cauterize a wound. In this way, *Star Wars* repeatedly takes complex topics and reduces them to black-and-white questions of morality. Yet, the act of rebellion is not so simplistic. Those rebelling *must* use violence, and this violence is what makes that act so horrific. Freedom comes at a significant moral cost. It is through the work of Fanon and Albert Camus (particularly *The Rebel*) that we can begin to

[1] Fanon, 1.

see parallels between the Algerian National Liberation Front, the Algerian War of Independence, and *Star Wars*.

Fanon begins by setting up a clear distinction for his reader between the colonist and the colonized. It is a "compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, is inhabited by different species…Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost, what species, what race one belongs to."[2] Race and colonization are intrinsically linked, and yet in *Star Wars*, this link is whitewashed. The films do set up something of an antagonistic divide between humans and aliens that seems to mirror the racial tensions of colonization. Yet, even the seemingly more progressive Rebellion is overwhelmingly made up of human actors—especially in positions of power. It isn't really until the final installment of the Original Trilogy, *The Return of the Jedi*, that we see aliens such as Admiral Ackbar, in leadership positions.

The very construction of the Galaxy, which is bifurcated into core planets and outer-rim planets, further illustrates the Imperial project. Outer-rim planets such as Tatooine serve mainly as resource-rich planets that are farmed or mined to profit the core planets. When Fanon describes colonized sectors, we envision the Jawas and Tusken Raiders of Luke Skywalker's desert home: "The colonized's sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The colonized's sector is a sector that crouches and cowers, a sector on its knees, a sector that is prostrate. It's a sector of niggers, a sector of towelheads. The gaze that the colonized subject casts at the colonist's sector is a look of lust, a look of envy. Dreams of possession."[3] Tatooine is meant to be seen as something of a backwater. It is a planet with scorching suns and little water or vegetation. It is inhabited primarily by moisture farmers and serves as a hub for criminals participating in the space trade. And of course, it's all ruled over by the mob boss, Jabba the Hutt. Tatooine does offer us a glimpse of the Empire as a subjugating force, particularly when Stormtroopers patrol Mos Eisley and harass civilians to uncover information about the lost Death Star plans and the droids who supposedly stole them.

It's interesting, given Fanon's perspective, that the Rebellion doesn't have a more substantial presence on Tatooine. Instead, Alderaan serves as central hub of the Rebel Alliance. From there, Leia Organa and Mon Mothma—both powerful white women from the core planet—lead the fledgling rebellion. These powerful humans with political agendas don't

[2] Fanon, 5.
[3] Fanon, 4.

necessarily serve the image of revolution presented by Fanon. For, according to him, "In order to assimilate the culture of the oppressor and venture into his fold, the colonized subject has had to pawn some of his intellectual possessions. For instance, one of the things he has to assimilate is the way the colonialist bourgeoisie thinks."[4] Yet, nowhere in the *Star Wars* canon are the Rebels shown to be facing this sort of oppression. The only character in any of the films who is forced to assimilate his thinking to that of the "colonialist bourgeoisie" is the young Anakin Skywalker. And we don't even learn of this until *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* twenty years later in 1999.

Qui-Gon Jinn rescues Anakin (so to speak) from slavery on Tatooine and takes him to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, which sits at the center of the Galaxy—both geographically and politically. The Jedi Council forces Anakin to assimilate into his new urban environment and into his new role as a padawan (a Jedi's apprentice). Anakin is clearly gifted, yet his knowledge and abilities are presented as innate rather than learned/earned on the streets of Tatooine. Both Anakin and the audience are expected to forget his upbringing in the slums of this colonized planet.

Of course, Anakin's lot in life is not wholly unique. As I suggested earlier, there are similarities between his situation and that of Algerians who were forced to leave behind their Algerian identity to assimilate into Imperial French culture. Assimilation was one the most insidious tenets of the Imperialist project: French colonial policy told subjects that they must adopt the French language, customs, and culture to be accepted as French. We must consider what sorts of trauma follow as an entire population is forced to abandon their individual and collective identities.

Anakin's development into Darth Vader offers us some insights; that he turns away from his fellow slaves and abandons the Jedi Order to fight alongside the Emperor seems the ultimate betrayal. Curiously, Anakin's son, Luke, who also grew up on Tatooine, does not succumb to the same fate—a fully assimilated servant of the Empire. Instead, Luke fights for the Rebel Alliance. Perhaps this is because Luke never had to assimilate into a modern, urban society on Coruscant. He leaves Tatooine on the Millennium Falcon with Obi-Wan Kenobi and Han Solo in search of Alderaan, but they find it destroyed. Luke witnesses first-hand the horrible lengths to which the Empire will go to consolidate power. Luke also doesn't have to navigate a seemingly corrupt Jedi Counsel. Instead, he is trained (albeit for a short time) by the rogue Obi-Wan and later enjoys a one-to-one mentorship with

[4] Fanon, 13.

Yoda, which focuses less on Jedi Bureaucracy and more on personal introspection.

Though *Star Wars* works to present a clear dichotomy between the Empire and the Rebellion, the closer we look the more obscure such a boundary becomes. Consider Albert Camus's *The Rebel,* for instance. Camus writes, "Our purpose is to find out whether innocence, the moment it becomes involved in action, can avoid committing murder."[5] Camus questions outright whether an innocent person can avoid committing murder when involved in a rebellion. Of course, this is not a question the *Star Wars* narrative invites us to ponder while watching any of the action-based films. The purity of the Rebel Alliance and its mission to destroy the Empire goes unquestioned despite the ever-rising death toll. Admittedly, a number that never quite reaches the cataclysmic loss of life when the Empire destroys Alderaan.

Still, by ignoring the violence inflicted by one side in a conflict, the actual cost of a rebellion remains unknown. Think of representations of the Algerian War of Independence, particularly the 1966 Italian-Algerian historical war film *La Battaglia di Algeri*. This film depicts the urban Guerrilla warfare that took place from 1954-57 during the Algerian War of Independence. Critics have celebrated the film for showing violence on both sides of the conflict between the Algerian National Liberation Front (ANLF) and the French counterinsurgency. The ANLF commits atrocities, including bombing French citizens, in the name of freedom. In *La Battaglia di Algeri* the ANLF rebellion is more significantly nuanced than the Rebel Alliance in *Star Wars*. It is this moral complexity that affords their rebellion meaning. The National Liberation Front are not heroes, but they are fighting against oppression.

I see distinct similarities between the Algerian bombings depicted in *La Battaglia di Algeri* and the Rebel's destruction of the Death Star in *A New Hope*. What might not be as apparent are the differences. *La Battaglia* shows us the attacks on civilian locations: an Air France terminal, a cafe, and a bar. Individuals living their everyday lives are on screen when the bombs explode. We see a child at the cafe licking an ice cream cone seconds before all Hell breaks loose. Inconceivably, the Algerian woman tasked with detonating the bomb sees the child moments before fulfilling her revolutionary duty. The argument here is that French civilians were not innocent in the subjugation of Algeria. Even if they were not active in the military, every French citizen or "pied-noir," as they were known, was complicit in the institution of imperialism over Algeria.

[5] Camus, 1.

The destruction of the Death Star, though, is quite different. Here we see only military personnel, and even then we rarely witness their deaths. It's all inferred. There is no overt moral quandary. In the *Star Wars* films, not only are individual deaths typically not shown on screen, but only members of military institutions are ever-present in the frame. We just do not have an opportunity to see the consequences of this Rebellion play out in the lives of ordinary citizens. This absence changes the way we understand revolutionary violence.

In the original *Star Wars* trilogy, the Rebel Alliance is perceived as just while the Galactic Empire is seen as evil. This binary oversimplifies their relationship to one another. *Star Wars* repeatedly takes incredibly complex topics and presents them in ways that are simply not realistic. Fanon insists that rebellion against a colonizer is always racially charged, yet we don't see racism or even speciesism play out on the screen. Similarly, Camus' presentation of violence as a moral quandary is also absent in the films. That is until we view them through the postcolonial lens.

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CHAPTER 2

THE DARK SIDE OF THE REBEL ALLIANCE

TATIANNA BROWN '21

Star Wars replays the age-old fight of good versus evil: the Rebellion is presented as the epitome of morality and justice while the Empire is corruption and oppression incarnate. However, when filtered through a postcolonial lens, the Rebel Alliance's ruthlessness comes into focus. Not only this, but we see how the writers frame the rebels' actions in stark contrast to those of the Empire to make the Rebellion *seem* just. My aim is not to condemn the Rebellion for fighting against an oppressive authoritarian government, but rather to complicate the strict binary of good and evil amid a civil war. Though the Rebellion has become synonymous with the image of purity in modern culture, it commits violence that is equivalent to, if not more gruesome than, the abuses perpetrated by the Empire, thus subverting the primary narrative of the *Star Wars* enterprise.

In his essay, "The Rebel," Albert Camus analyzes the theoretical and philosophical motivations behind a rebellion and ultimately suggests that acts of murder and rebellion are inherently contradictory. He also implies that rebels get carried away by the crimes they commit and that this leads them astray from their original intentions for resistance. Camus ultimately rejects the use of violence to stage a successful uprising. The *Star Wars* saga leads the audience to believe the opposite—that destruction of the Imperial apparatus (whatever its form) is a crucial component to winning a rebellion. Both the Empire and Rebel Alliance resort to brutal maneuvers in their fight for power. The Empire uses torture, commits mass genocide, and indoctrinates Stormtroopers to be completely obedient to the Imperial project. At the same time, the Rebels send several squadrons on suicide missions for information, and also kill myriad, ostensibly neutral, citizens of the Empire. Together, the body count reaches into the billions. The original *Star Wars* trilogy ends with the Empire in ruins and an opportunity for the Rebel Alliance to assume power (which it does). Yet, its plans to

reform the Galaxy are unknown, leaving room for retributive violence from Imperial sympathizers.

In her essay, "What is Authority?" Hannah Arendt discusses the place of violence alongside groups with authority and the cyclical nature of rebellion. She claims that "...violence is authority," and that one cannot maintain power without committing abusive acts against the oppressed group.[1] This oppression, a consequence of authoritarianism, coupled with power exacted over the oppressed group, leads to rebellion and the upheaval of the established authority and power structures. Now that the subjugated group has subverted the balance of society, they abuse those below them, resetting the cycle of oppression. In short, the oppressed become the oppressors.

Arendt's theory thus calls into question the Rebel Alliance's most probable actions once it has gained power. According to Arendt's thinking, it is inevitable that the Alliance will eventually repeat the atrocities of the Empire and become an oppressive regime toward specific groups. The New Republic, which the Rebellion organized shortly after their victory on Endor, only lasted for about thirty years before the First Order rose to oppose and overthrow it, signaling another shift in the cycle of power. During the New Republic's rule, it imposed harsh rules and strict reparations on the remnants of the Empire.[2] Little is written about the firsthand experiences of those living under this power shift and consequent reformation. Most sources are concerned with how the Galactic Concordance outlined treaties and disarmament agreements. These materials typically detail the politics of peace in the Galaxy that followed the fall of the Empire rather than the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens. Though the New Republic took measured steps to quell remainders of the Empire without resorting to its level of oppression and violence, the New Republic still falls into this cycle.

Since we engage the *Star Wars* narrative through the storyline of the rebel-protagonist Luke Skywalker, the audience recognizes the Rebellion as a beacon of good in the Galaxy; however, upon closer inspection, the Rebellion is comparable to the Empire in terms of brutality. It is just as guilty of killing millions of innocent civilians. Analyzing this shifted perspective changes our understanding of the Rebellion as a pillar of good to a more morally ambiguous movement. Therefore, we must reconsider many of the major events throughout the *Star Wars* narrative. While the films depict the Empire as heartless for incinerating Alderaan, they subsequently frame the Rebellion as heroic for destroying the Death Star.

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[1] Arendt, 7.
[2] "New Republic."

Perhaps less shocking but no less tragic is how we inevitably see Stormtroopers as faceless pawns. Even their deaths are void of any emotional weight. And then there's the case of *Rogue One* in which a Rebel squadron heads to Scarif to retrieve the Death Star plans in the first place. Each of the crew members has a questionable past, and they don't even attempt to hide their criminal backgrounds. Clearly, the Rebel Alliance is not picky about who it employs in the fight against the Empire.

Three nearly identical catastrophic events occur during the Original Trilogy: the destruction of Alderaan at the hands of the Death Star, and the retributive annihilations of both space stations (The First and Second Death Stars). While the violence itself is similar, the way we respond to it is quite different. The destruction of Alderaan is unquestionably tragic, while the elimination of each Death Star is cause for celebration.

After capturing Princess Leia at the beginning of *A New Hope*, Grand Moff Tarkin, a governor for the Empire, has "chosen to test [the Death Star's] destructive power on […] Alderaan" as punishment for her withholding the Rebel base's location.[3] He issues the order, and the Death Star obliterates Alderaan in a matter of seconds. Immediately after the explosion, the scene cuts to Obi-Wan Kenobi's physical shock to the event as he feels the impact, "as if millions of voices cried out in terror… and were suddenly silenced," through the Force.[4] Based on his reaction, the audience views what just happened as an unspeakable atrocity. Though Leia tells Tarkin otherwise, Alderaan is the Rebellion's primary source of weapons and ammunition and houses approximately two billion people.[5] The destruction of Alderaan thus serves two purposes for the Empire: it breaks Leia's morale since Alderaan was her home, and it simultaneously weakens the Rebels' counter-strike capabilities. Of course, Tarkin was well aware of the strong Rebel presence on the planet despite Leia's blatant lie.[6] In the eyes of the Empire, these rebels pose a severe threat to the status quo; the Empire claims to strive for a Galaxy of peace and order which the Rebellion directly challenges and disrupts. However, the Empire is still guilty of killing billions of innocent people in a broad preventative measure, rather than trying to target pockets of rebel sympathizers.

At the climax of *A New Hope*, the Rebels successfully blow up Death Star I. Though the scales of both attacks vary greatly, there are still many parallels. The Death Star is an immense structure, mistaken for a moon, that poses a significant threat to the Rebel Alliance and, admittedly, the Galaxy.

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[3] *A New Hope.*
[4] *A New Hope.*
[5] "Alderaan."
[6] "Wilhuff Tarkin."

It exhibits its power with the destruction of Alderaan and is on course to destroy the planet Yavin as well before the Rebel Alliance intervenes. Though the Death Star houses nearly one-and-a-half million personnel, the Rebellion chooses to destroy the weapon without giving them any forewarning. In contrast to Obi-Wan's reaction to the destruction of Alderaan, the Death Star's explosion is celebrated by a jubilant Han Solo commending Luke for successfully landing a "one in a million" shot.[7] The audience participates in Han's excitement and celebrates alongside the Rebels, even though more than a million people just died. The movie frames the scene in such a way that the audience has no choice but to assume that everyone aboard Death Star I was complicit in the Empire's plans for destruction and complete control over the Galaxy, and thus deserved to die.

At the conclusion of the Original Trilogy, we bear witness to another massive explosion. *Return of the Jedi* ends with the destruction of Death Star II, which at the time is only partially built. In a podcast titled "Workin' on the Death Star," Eric Molinsky and his guests grapple with the morality of killing the independent contractors who were working on this weapon when the Rebellion takes it down. Ultimately, Molinsky and his guests are concerned by the lack of value that the Rebellion places on the lives of those associated with the Empire. The podcast estimates that a "crew of over 265,000" were aboard the second Death Star, most of whom were independent contractors merely trying to eke out a living.[8] Sure, the Rebels' attack aimed to destroy the weapon and trigger the downfall of the callous Empire, but at a great cost. They were willing to take as many innocent lives as necessary. Those aboard the Death Star were primarily non-combatants who were not a significant threat to the Rebellion. However, the Rebellion disregards any chance of these hundreds of thousands of personnel being innocent and kills them in one swift blow. Again, following the final explosion, we are presented with pure, unadulterated joy in the face of Lando Calrissian who executed the Death Star's demise. The very next scene is a montage of celebrations across the Galaxy. News travels fast.

These celebrations divert the audience's attention away from the people who were just killed aboard the Death Star and frame the incident as a major victory for all that is good. Both the Rebellion and Empire, however, are guilty of committing horrific mass murders for their respective causes. Yet, we commend the Rebellion for its actions against the Empire, while both characters within the narrative and the audience watching it demonize the Empire. That we watch these films from the perspective of the Rebellion

[7] *A New Hope.*
[8] Molinsky, "Workin' on the Death Star."

means that we don't have a complicated understanding of the Rebellion or its actions.

The personnel aboard the Death Stars are not the only deaths to which the audience is numbed. Aside from the extensive deaths aboard the Death Stars, the individuals we see killed by the Rebellion are most often Stormtroopers, but to call them individuals is a stretch. They wear identical white and black armor and have their voices stifled and warped by their helmets. They are faceless, nameless pawns in this civil war, dehumanized and portrayed almost as a distinct species. Nothing differentiates one Stormtrooper from another except for their operating numbers. We don't even see an unmasked Stormtrooper until nearly 40 years after the theatrical release of *A New Hope* when Finn takes off his helmet at the outset of *The Force Awakens* to signal his defection from the Imperial Army. This moment raises questions about who the First Order chooses to be Stormtroopers and the potentially racist implications of this regime. For, the two most prominent unmasked Stormtroopers we see are both black. At the same time, all of the officers and commanders for the First Order are white, as were their Imperial counterparts in the Original Trilogy. The First Order uses Stormtroopers as slaves. They are coerced into loyal service from a young age.

It isn't until we encounter Jannah and her group of warriors in *The Rise of Skywalker* that we learn of another Stormtrooper who also defected from the First Order. By giving Stormtroopers complete uniformity and anonymity, the audience has no emotional attachment to them. Thus, the onscreen deaths of hundreds of Stormtroopers throughout the *Star Wars* saga draw no sympathy. On the one hand, each death of an individual Rogue One squadron member is tragic because the audience has grown attached to these characters and has seen them develop and interact with others. On the other hand, Stormtroopers' deaths merely add to the titillating violence of battle scenes. By forming the Stormtroopers into a single mass, the audience sees them all as equally expendable. However, Finn and Jannah complicate that notion because they show us that not all Stormtroopers wanted to be a part of this generations-long war. The First Order forced many of their troops into service through kidnapping, threats, and indoctrination.

Though we have closer access to individual members of the Rebel Alliance than the Empire's Stormtroopers, this doesn't mean that everything we see is good. Take the Rogue One squadron, for instance. Set shortly before the events of *A New Hope*, *Rogue One* tells the story of how the Rebel Alliance acquired the blueprints for the first Death Star, which consisted of the Rogue One squadron volunteering to infiltrate the Imperial data bank on the planet Scarif. They are "spies... saboteurs… assassins"—they have "done

terrible things on behalf of the Rebellion."[9] Indeed, the film begins with Cassian, a captain and intelligence agent for the Rebellion, killing an innocent man in cold blood after receiving information from him. Though many left the theater in tears after *Rogue One*—sympathizing for these flawed individuals—the movie shows the audience that the Rebel Alliance's members are not as pure as they seem, much like the Alliance itself. *Rogue One* is the first movie to address the imperfect pasts of Rebellion members. Of course, we know from our time with Han that the Rebels can be scoundrels.

While the Rebellion fights against an Empire to restore a republican government in which the citizens of the Galaxy would live with more rights and representation, the mediation of the movies creates a scenario that places the Rebellion and Empire as complete moral opposites, which they are not. The Rebel Alliance is just as guilty as the Empire for crimes it commits onscreen, even if the films dress them up as heroic victories. The Rebellion murders thousands upon thousands throughout the *Star Wars* saga without remorse and veils the measures it takes to further its goals, even though the crimes of the Rebellion and Empire are quite similar. Through analysis of the Rebellion's destruction of both Death Stars, killings of Stormtroopers, and the individual actions of its members for the cause, we see the Rebellion as a corrupt enterprise—a paramilitary fringe group.

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[9] *Rogue One*.

CHAPTER 3

BEYOND LIGHT AND DARKNESS: A GENERATION AWAKENS

CAMERON CULWELL '23

Part I: The Subversive Sequels

The original *Star Wars* trilogy set a Dark Side-aligned, homogenous, fascistic Galactic Empire against the Light Side liberal-democratic rebellion that ultimately defeated it. In the Prequel Trilogy, the established order favors the Light Side of the Force instead of the Dark Side of the Force. A benign and participatory Galactic Republic contemplates whether the need to quash an uprising justifies the means of militarization, only to find that they have created the conditions for Dark Side authoritarianism.

From the outset, the first of the Sequel Trilogy films, *The Force Awakens* (2015) subtly but definitively shifts the thematic ground of the Galaxy. The title suggests the idea that the Force itself could ebb and flow, as dormancy naturally precedes an awakening. Previously, characters spoke of the Force as something which requires "balance." The Force, or so the governments aligned with both its dark and Light Sides claimed, would ideally consist of a greater portion of the side they favored.

Artistically, the demolishment of these ideas is concise and abrupt. As the first trailer for *The Force Awakens* boldly proclaims that "there has been an awakening," a helmetless, panicked FN-2187 bursts through the bottom of the frame. That physical jump-scare heightens the drama and significance of this moment: it is the first cut showing a stormtrooper with their helmet removed in a *Star Wars* film. A new generation of stormtroopers is unmasked and, in the process, humanized. The moment raised questions about the stormtrooper's identity. It does not matter that, at this point in the film, audiences learn that Finn has abandoned the First Order and fallen in with the Resistance. The process of posing these questions added shades of nuance to fans' understanding of well-tread themes in *Star Wars*. Was this stormtrooper a double agent? A genuine stormtrooper or a Resistance

operative? A man fully convinced of the First Order's cause or a quiet saboteur? The ambiguity constructed around Finn catalyzed a discussion of the moral convictions of characters that the audience formerly saw as blind servants of evil. Marketing for *The Force Awakens* intentionally made readers question moral dichotomies that *Star Wars* once took for granted. The reflection promoted by this marketing exposed a new thematic vacuum that the sequel films, once released, would fill.

Part II: The Tragedy of the Boomers

Upon their release, the sequel films encouraged viewers to question an older generation characterized as unimaginative, weak, and often inept. I will take as my starting assumption the idea that the livelihoods of Luke and Rey depicted in the first acts of *A New Hope* and *The Force Awakens,* respectively, can stand in for the state of the average person in galactic society. Comparing those two depictions—farmer and scavenger—generates insights into our contemporary social context.

In the Original Trilogy, Luke's aspiration to master the Light Side of the Force parallels a then-contemporary American middle-class, meritocratic aim. In short, Luke's drive to find a better station in life mirrors the idea of the American Dream. Much of Luke Skywalker's rise to his station reflects his relatively stable economic position. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for young Luke's birth station lies in his family's patterns of consumption. We first encounter Luke and his uncle Owen Lars in the context of consumption. They are buying droids from the Jawas. In the process, they express preferences over which languages a protocol droid can speak and inspect astromech droids for defects. The fact that the family is purchasing servant droids further supports the idea of a stable economic situation. The directorial decision to introduce our characters via a purchase relays a message of character agency. The film's protagonist came from an economy in which he had *something* rather than nothing, a society with a middle class.

The Binary Sunset scene that follows a few minutes later vividly illustrates Luke's negative feelings about these circumstances. This is the meritocratic component of the class narrative *A New Hope* pushes. As Luke stands on a sand dune, his face washed in red, he forlornly stares at Tatooine's twin sunsets. Set in the context of the wider universe, the tiny Lars homestead now seems diminutive. This brief scene, as our first intimate moment with Luke, establishes the sincerity of his loneliness and longing.