Star Wars: A Myth for Our Time

Star Wars, George Lucas' lavish space opera, is truly a fantasy for our times, this generation's *Wizard of Oz*. Nevertheless, whereas Lucas' film has been almost universally praised for its costuming, sets, technical perfection, and wondrous special effects, its plot has been largely dismissed as corny or hokey, strictly kids' stuff. "The film's story is bad pulp, and so are the characters of hero Luke and heroine Leia," says Richard Corliss.[1] "I kept looking for an 'edge,' to peer around the corny, solemn comic-book strophes," writes Stanley Kauffmann.[2] And Molly Haskell sums up the critics' objections: "*Star Wars* is childish, even for a cartoon."[3]

Well, if *Star Wars* is childish, then so are *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Like Tolkien's Middle Earth series, *Star Wars* is a modern fairy tale, a pastiche which reworks a multitude of old stories, and yet creates a complete and self-sufficient world of its own,[4] one populated with intentionally flat, archetypal characters: reluctant young hero, warrior-wizard, brave and beautiful princess, and monstrous black villain. I would argue that the movie's fundamental appeal to both young and old lies precisely in its deliberately old-fashioned plot, which has its roots deep in American popular fantasy, and, deeper yet, in the epic structure of what Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* calls "the monomyth."

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In an era in which Americans have lost heroes in whom to believe, Lucas has created a myth for our times, fashioned out of bits and pieces of twentieth-century American popular mythology—old movies, science fiction, television, and comic books—but held together at its most basic level by the standard pattern of the adventures of a mythic hero. *Star Wars* is a masterpiece of synthesis, a triumph of American ingenuity and resourcefulness, demonstrating how the old may be made new again: Lucas has raided the junkyards of our popular culture and rigged a working myth out of scrap. Like the hotrods in his previous film, *American Graffiti*, *Star Wars* is an amalgam of pieces of mass culture customized and supercharged and run flat out. This essay will therefore have two parts: first, a look at the elements Lucas has lifed openly and lovingly from various popular culture genres; and second, an analysis of how this pastiche is unified by the underlying structure of the "monomyth."

George Lucas, who both wrote and directed, admits that his original models were the *Flash Gordon* movie serials and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *John Carter of Mars* series of books. "I wanted to make an action movie—a movie in outer space like *Flash Gordon* used to be. . . . I wanted to make a movie about an old man and a kid. . . . I also wanted the old man to be like a warrior. I wanted a princess, too, but I didn't want her to be a passive damsel in distress."[5] In other words, he wanted to return to the sense of wonder and adventure that movies had given him as a child, but to update it for modern tastes and to take advantage of all the technological and cinematic innovations of the past thirty years since *Flash Gordon*.

Thus, just like *American Graffiti*, *Star Wars* is simultaneously innovative and conservative, backward-glancing and nostalgic. *Graffiti* takes a worn-out genre (the teenage beach party movies) and reanimates it; *Star Wars* gives new life to the space fantasy. "I didn't want to make a *2001*, " says Lucas. "I wanted to make a space fantasy that was more in the genre of Edgar Rice Burroughs; that whole other end of space fantasy that was there before science took it over in the Fifties. Once the atomic bomb came. . . . they forgot the fairy tales and the dragons and Tolkien and all the *real* heroes."[6] Both *Graffiti* and *Star Wars* express a yearning for prelapsarian eras: the former for the pre-Vietnam era and the latter for innocence of the time before the Bomb.

While lamenting the dearth of classic adventure films and the consequent lack of a healthy fantasy life for contemporary youth, Lucas told an interviewer, "I had also done a study on . . . the fairy **tale or myth. It is a children's story in history and you go back to the *Odyssey* or the stories that are told for the kid in all of us."[7] "You just don't get them any more, and that's the best stuff in the world** —adventures in far-off lands. . . . I wanted to do a modern fairy tale, a myth."[8]

Far more labor went into fashioning the script than into making the final product.

> I began writing *Star Wars* in January 1973—eight hours a day, five days a week, from then until March, 1976, when we began shooting. Even then I was busy doing various rewrites in the evenings after the day's work. In fact, I wrote four entirely different screenplays for *Star Wars*, searching for just the right ingredients, characters and storyline. . . . What finally emerged through the many drafts of the script has obviously been influenced by science fiction and action adventure I've read and seen. And I've seen a lot of it. I'm trying to make a classic sort of genre picture, a classic space fantasy in which all the influences are working together. There are certain traditional aspects of the genre I wanted to keep and help perpetuate in *Star Wars*.[9]

What exactly is heroic space fantasy, or, as it is often called, space opera, and what are the conventions of this genre Lucas wanted to revive? Perhaps the best definition of space opera is given by Brian Aldiss in his anthology of such stories. Aldiss calls it a "renegade sub-genre" of science fiction, "heady, escapist stuff. . . . Essentially, space opera was born of the pulp magazines, flourished there, and died there."[10] Space opera is a formulaic genre, with certain rigidly fixed conventions which are its *raison d'etre*. "One may either like or dislike those conventions," says Aldiss, "but they cannot be altered except at expense to the whole."

> Ideally, the Earth must be in peril, there must be a quest and a man to meet the mighty hour. That man must confront aliens and exotic creatures. Space must flow past the ports like wine from a pitcher. Blood must run down the palace steps, and ships launch out into the louring dark. There must be a woman fairer than the skies and a villain darker than the Black Hole. And all must come right in the end.[11]

Star Wars obviously fits this prescription: not just the Earth, but the entire Universe is in peril from the tyrannical Galactic Empire; the quest is to rescue the beautiful Princess Leia from the clutches of the villainous Darth Vader and transport to the rebel forces the secret plans of the Death Star, the Imperial spacefort which can smash whole planets with a single blow; the man of the hour is young Luke Skywalker (his name suggests his destiny), a farmboy whose father had been "the best starship pilot in the galaxy, and a cunning warrior"; there are aliens, robots, and exotic creatures aplenty; the action moves across the galaxy; rayguns blast away, laser swords clash, and pitched battles explode in outer space; and, of course, the good guys save the universe at the last moment.

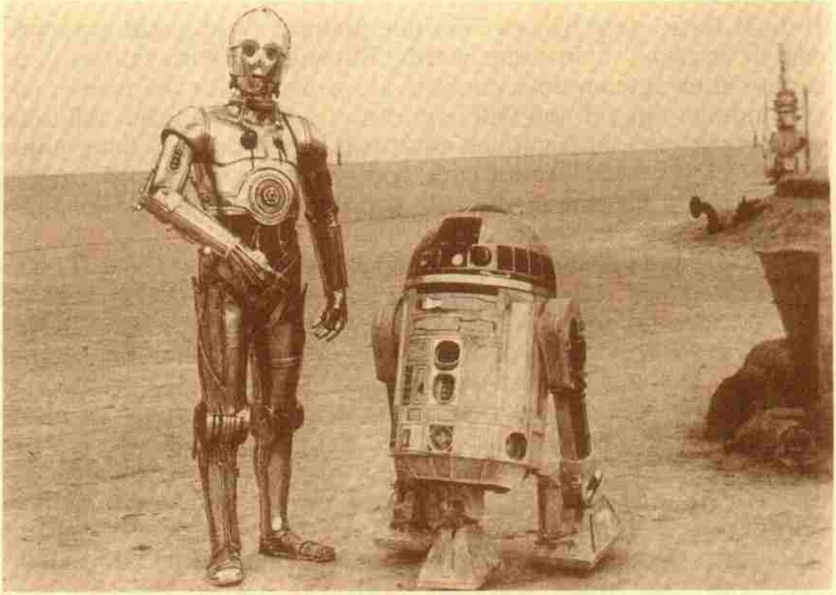
The science fiction historian Sam J. Lundwall qualifies the Burroughs tales as pure entertainment, "immensely popular, despite the fact that every one of them on close scrutiny turns out to be rather old hat. . . . the Burroughs adventure formula doesn't differ much from other action novels."[12] Of course not, since predictability is precisely one of the formal reassurances that pulp readers seek. What distinguishes Burroughs from the rest, according to Lundwall, is "the quick, breathtaking pace. . . . suspense . . . from beginning to end, and in Heroic Fantasy, this is what counts."[13] In addition, good and evil are clearly differentiated: "His heroes and villains are painted in unmistakable terms of black and white." Thus, although Burroughs' heroes "kill like maniacs," they still are represented as *clean*.[14] In other words, Burroughs' lavish fantasies, no matter their unconscious content, are guilt-free for the reader; one can indulge oneself and still come away feeling innocent. All these characteristics—old-fashioned adventure formulas, slam-bang action and suspense, and clear-cut good and evil, to the extent of dressing the hero and heroine in all-white and the villain in all-black—apply equally well to *Star Wars*.

If Burroughs provided the literary pattern, then *Flash Gordon* established the cinematic conventions for space opera. Richard Corliss finds the influence of the *Flash* serials everywhere in *Star Wars*, "from the theme to the pacing (a climax every fifteen minutes) to the quick, dead readings by many of the movie's bit players, even to the visual 'punctuation' (wipes, fast dissolves, etc.)—and *Star Wars* begins smack in the middle of things, as if you'd just walked into Chapter Four of a Buster Crabbe cliff-hanger."[15] One might add that Ben Kenobi, Luke's white-haired mentor, fulfills the same role as Flash Gordon's Dr. Zarkov; that Princess Leia must be rescued from the villain's stronghold just like Flash's girlfriend Dale Arden; and that Darth Vader wears the same black cape and speaks with the same sarcastic courtesy as Ming the Merciless.

But *Star Wars* is more than just an homage to Edgar Rice Burroughs and *Flash Gordon*: it also draws on elements common to other action-adventure and fantasy genres. As George Lucas (born in 1944) says, "It's the flotsam and jetsam from the period when I was twelve years old. . . . All the books and films and comics that I liked when I was a child."[16]

***Forbidden Planet* may be one of those sources; released in 1956, when Lucas was twelve, it is the greatest of the color, special effects, outer space films before *2001*. Having first seen the film myself at age twelve, I can testify to its indelible impression on a youngster. For that matter, most hardcore science fiction fans catch the bug with the onset of puberty. Certain key elements of *Forbidden Planet* —interstellar travel, a comic robot (Robbie), a damsel in distress, a mysterious "Force," and a vast machine civilization (the Krell) exploded at the climax of the film—also figure prominently in *Star Wars*.**

Another of those influences surely must have been the film of *The Wizard of Oz*. As in the *Wizard*, we have a nice kid, an orphan who dreams of going "over the rainbow," is tied to an isolated farm by an aunt and uncle, but magically gets his wish. The crystal ball is represented by hologrammed messages, and the tornado by a spaceship. Munchkins are replaced by "Jawas," funny little creatures who live in caves and talk in a high-pitched gabble, the faithful little dog Toto is converted into the plucky little robot Artoo, the tin man into the humanoid robot Threepio, the cowardly lion into an amusing, furry space creature named Chewbacca, who communicates by roaring, the Wicked Witch and her castle into Darth Vader and the Death Star, the Good Witch into Princess Leia,



See-Threepio and Artoo-Detoo are on Owen Lars' homestead on Tatooine.

and, of course, the Wizard into Obi-wan Kenobi. Once again, the pure of heart are able to defeat the forces of wickedness: we even get the final awarding of medals to the heroes, as in the *Wizard*.

Yet another genre from which Lucas borrows is the Western; as critics have pointed out, the scene in which Luke discovers his dead aunt and uncle is a reconstruction of a scene in John Ford's *The Searchers*, where the hero returns home to find his parents massacred by Indians.[17] And straight out of the old West rides Luke's companion, Han Solo, a gun for hire, quick on the draw, dressed in the compulsory cowboy vest, boots, and tight pants, with pistol (now a raygun) slung low in a holster on his hip. Although Solo is a loner, as his name suggests, he has overtones of the good guy Lone Ranger, with Chewbacca his Tonto. "The Wookies are more like the Indians," says Lucas, "more like noble savages."[18] As he told an interviewer, "One of the significant things that occurred to me is I saw the western die,"[19] and he is determined to revive the elements which constituted its basic appeal as adventure, even if the wide open spaces of the frontier are now in outer space.

In the tradition of Douglas Fairbanks and Errol Flynn, Solo is the bold and reckless captain of a pirate ship; instead of sailing the seven seas in search of adventure, he flies from one side of the galaxy to the other. Later in the film, Luke and the Princess swing on a rope across a chasm in the Death Star, conjuring up Fairbanks and Flynn, or, for that matter, Tarzan.

Japanese samurai films must have contributed to the conception of the half-religious, half-military order of the Jedi Knights, and the laser sword battle between Ben and Vader is surely indebted to the stylized combat of such movies.

Lucas drew on footage from a series of old war movies to orchestrate the final dogfight in space,[20] and Darth Vader thus becomes the equivalent of the Red Baron or the leader of the Nazi Luftwaffe (Lucas even gives him a Nazi-style helmet). The fact that the sequence was filmed in England, so that the rebel pilots speak with both English and American accents, could have been incongruous; instead it adds to the effect: we have the Allies, R.A.F. and American Air Force, winning the war once again.

Time mentions Lucas' debt for some settings and concepts to such science-fiction writers as Frank Herbert, author of the epic *Dune* trilogy (the monstrous skeleton behind Threepio in one shot on the planet Tatooine resembles that of one of Herbert's desert sandworms), and to Robert Heinlein (*Starship Troopers*) and Samuel R. Delany *(Nova)*.[21] In addition, many of the aliens, robots, sets and costumes resemble those which have appeared for decades on the covers of science-fiction magazines and paperbacks, drawn by such artists as Ed Emshwiller and Frank Kelly Freas. From television's *Star Trek*, he lifts the conventions of "deflector shields" and "tractor beams."

Finally, one could cite the obvious influence of comic strips on the film, most notably *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and *Marvel Comics* (whose Dr. Doom bears an uncanny resemblance to Darth Vader). In fact, *Marvel* has issued a comic-book version of the movie, which translates easily back into that form. As Jack Kroll writes in his review of *Star Wars*, "the great comic strips were the fables and fairy tales of industrial society before television and science fiction wiped them out."[22] Lucas himself is a longtime fan who owns a comics store in New York. He claims comic book art expresses "a certain cultural manifestation on a vaguely adolescent level but is much more pure because it is dealing with basic human drives that more sophisticated art sometimes obscures."[23] His remark could almost stand as a summary of his last two films.

Star Wars is thus a compendium of American pop and pulp culture, carefully crafted out of many and unabashed borrowings. As the critic Roger Copeland pointed out, its debt to old movies alone is so great that "it could just as easily—and perhaps more accurately—have been called 'Genre Wars.' "[24] The film commentator Stephen Zito writes that "Lucas is most comfortable with what is known and familiar. . . . *Star Wars* is literally constructed from bits and pieces of the usable past."[25] As Lucas says, the film is "a compilation. . . . It's all the things that are great put together."[26]

Lucas' achievement is to construct a coherent myth out of his pastiche of pop culture. The multiple cross-references, the archetypal characters and situations, give it both reinforcement and deep resonances for an audience which may not consciously recognize the sources, but will still respond emotionally to the conventions. Moreover, at its most fundamental level, the plot partakes of the timeless elements of epic myth. According to Brian Aldiss, space operas say "a great deal about fundamental hopes and fears when confronted by the unknowns of distant frontiers, in a tradition stretching at least as far as *The Odyssey*. They are, in their way, abstracts of the same impulses that lie behind traditional fairy tales."[27]

If, as Lucas says, he has studied myth and deliberately attempted to construct a myth in his film, it would be useful to determine how successfully the work meets mythic criteria. For the remainder of this essay, I will examine *Star Wars* in the light of Joseph Campbell's thesis in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that the hero of epic myth is a dream-figure who stands in for the entire culture. According to Campbell, the hero must descend into the infantile unconscious, the realm of sleep. "All the ogres and secret helpers of our nursery are there, all the magic of childhood."[28] There the hero gives battle to "the nursery demons of his local culture," and "brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of the society as a whole" (pp. 17, 38). Symbolically, he becomes a man by rescuing his mother and slaying his father. Despite the Oedipal nature of the conflict, he is finally accepted by the parent figures, and thus discovers his true identity and attains his true powers, which he realizes were within him all the time. Campbell divides this "monomyth" into three main stages—Departure, Initiation, and Return—each of which consists of various steps, so I will trace the action of *Star Wars* to see how closely it corresponds to this traditional pattern of mythic adventure.

Typically, the hero is the orphaned son of royalty. Unaware of his true identity, he is consigned to a life of drudgery and exile. He is first called to adventure by a herald, signifying that "the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (p. 51). The threshold represents a rebirth into adulthood; the hero or heroine must overcome the parents, who stand as "threshold guardians." When we first meet Luke, we find him bored and restless for adventure, but kept on a farm on the remote planet Tatooine by his uncle, who fears the orphan may turn out like his father. Luke is curious about this father, who his uncle claims was navigator on a space freighter. Later we find that Luke's father was actually a Jedi Knight, and, in the words of Ben Kenobi, "the best starship pilot in the galaxy, and a cunning warrior." The uncle, then, is the actual father—ordinary and repressive—while the Knight is the idealized image of the father. At this point, the call to adventure arrives fortuitously for Luke: a little robot appears, carrying a hologrammed plea for rescue from a beautiful princess. Symbolically, Threepio, Artoo's android companion, now refers deferentially to the boy as "Sir Luke." Like a Knight of the Round Table, he has been summoned to adventure.

The next step in this wish-fulfillment dream is the encounter with a protective figure, "some wizard, hermit, shepherd, or smith, who appears to supply the amulets and advice that the hero will require.... The call, in fact, was the first announcement of the approach of this initiatory priest" (pp. 72-73). The wizard here is old Ben Kenobi, once a rebel General (Obi-wan) and a friend to Luke's father, now a hermit in the desert wastes of the planet; the Princess' message had been a call for his help. Ben has supernatural powers: he first appears as a mysterious hooded figure, uttering inhuman howls to frighten away the desert Sandpeople, who have attacked Luke. And he is indeed a priest, last of the Jedi Knights, a mystic religious order which worships the Force, "the power which binds together the universe." Ben appears out of nowhere to save Luke, and he assumes the protective, paternal role which he maintains throughout the film. Like Merlin, he tutors this rough-hewn country lad, and hands him the sword his father willed him (in this case not Excalibur but the light-sword of the Jedi Knights).

Once he leaves the safe boundaries of the farm, Luke can never go back. As the attack of the Sandpeople shows him, the world is a desert place filled with danger, but only by abandoning the security he had known, leaving the womb of his childhood, can he enter the adult world. Luke at first refuses the call to adventure, but joins Ben when he discovers that, in his absence, Darth Vader's Stormtroopers have burned the farm and killed his aunt and uncle.

Of course, nothing in mythic plots adheres to the conventions of realism; it is all guided to fulfill the hero's "destiny." And what is destiny but a supernatural "Force" which arranges for things to happen? It is another word for the belief in the magical omnipotence of thought. For example, why does a chain of circumstances detour the little robot to Luke's farm? This is not chance—it was evidently predestined for Luke's sake. And why is Ben living as a hermit near Luke's farm? Obviously, so that he could be there when Luke needed him. For that matter, the death of Luke's aunt and uncle is arranged conveniently.

"Destiny" also helps to make Luke seem blameless: he does not seek out Ben, but merely tries to return the wandering Artoo unit to the farm, and, still loyal to his uncle, he refuses the call to adventure until he is left no choice. It has all been magically manipulated for Luke: his wish for adventure materialized and the obstacles (uncle and aunt) conveniently removed.

At the same time, our blameless hero is provided with a ready-made excuse for rebellion in the political situation and the slaughter of his father, aunt, and uncle by Vader or his minions. As Otto Rank notes in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, "the myth throughout reveals an endeavor to get rid of the parents," particularly the father; yet the hero, like Hamlet, sees himself not as the persecutor but as "the avenger of the murdered father."[29] In fact, Luke has a careless habit of losing father-figures: first the Knight, then his uncle, and then Ben fall to the demonic Darth Vader (whose name suggests "dark" or "death invader," or even "death father").

According to Campbell, the mythic hero, once having stepped beyond the safe bounds of his everyday routine, sallies forth with the Wizard, "the personification of his destiny to guide and aid him." Now he must confront a dangerous ogre, a "threshold guardian"

An Imperial Stormtrooper, one of the fearsome soldiers of the Galactic Empire, fires at the fleeing Princess Leia.

(p. 77). Here we have a series of threshold guardians: first the marauding Sandpeople, next a Stormtrooper guarding the entrance to the spaceport, and finally a foul-looking alien in the spaceport bar. In each case, Luke is saved by Ben, who uses either the Force or the power of his light sabre.

The next stage of the adventure, says Campbell, is the passage into "the belly of the whale" (p. 90); in *Star Wars*, the heroes are sucked into the enemy space fortress by a tractor beam. Here the hero symbolically dies and is reborn in the second phase, or Initiation.

The initiation consists of a series of miraculous tests and ordeals. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper" (p. 97). In Campbell's scheme, the endless corridors of the Death Star would represent for Luke "the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth," and his perils would represent the type we encounter nightly in our dreams (p. 101). Interestingly, among the typical dream perils Campbell mentions are two in particular: "Themistocles dreamed that a snake wound itself around his body, then crept up to his neck" (an obvious phallic symbol), and "the dreamer is absolutely abandoned . . . in a deep hole of a cellar. The walls of his room keep getting narrower and narrower, so that he cannot stir. In this image are combined the ideas of mother womb, imprisonment, cell, and grave" (pp. 102, 104). Luke encounters precisely these two perils after his plunge into the inferno of the garbage room. Meanwhile, he is aided by his various helpers: Ben unlocks the tractor beam to release their captive ship, and he fights Vader; the robots stop the walls from crushing them; and Solo and Chewbacca help the group shoot their way out. But Luke has passed his initiation; whereas previously he had passively relied on Ben, now he initiates and carries out the rescue of the Princess and the escape from the Death Star.

At the center of the journey is "The Meeting with the Goddess" and "The Atonement with the Father," both symbolic stages in working out the Oedipal crisis. The rescue of the Princess represents the former stage, and the death of Ben represents the latter. Luke's guardian, having fulfilled his function, seems to will his own destruction and is cut down by Vader; nevertheless, he does not die so much as he disappears in order to be subsumed into the Force. He persists as a voice which guides Luke at critical moments, like the superego, which Freud posited as nothing more than the internalized voice of the parents. Once they are safely aboard Solo's ship, Luke mourns Ben, and is comforted by the Princess, who maternally puts a blanket over his shoulders and tells him he is not to blame; there is nothing he could have done about it. Ben had similarly exculpated him after Luke found his aunt and uncle dead.

We can see here again how Lucas attempts to make this essentially Oedipal fable guilt-free. If myth is dreamlike, then all the characters are merely extensions of the wishes of the central character. Vader as destructive devil acts out Luke's patricidal desires, yet Ben, his good side, still forgives him and blesses him, as we all wish our parents to do. Solo, the apparently amoral loner, acts out Luke's antisocial desires for total independence; Luke himself is presented as dutiful and dependent. The ambivalence of love yet hate toward authority is thus successfully contained by parcelling it out among separate characters. Finally, the Oedipal desires toward the mother-figure are also kept in check by the inability of the Princess to decide between the two rivals, Luke and Solo.

Having symbolically met his mother and made his peace with his father, the hero, according to Campbell, has reached the stage of Apotheosis. He is now the possessor of the grace of the Gods, "the Ultimate Boon" which can restore his culture. This Boon is, of course, the Force. As Campbell writes,

> Briefly formulated, the universal doctrine teaches that all the visible structures of the world—all things and beings—are the effects of a ubiquitous power out of which they arise, which supports them and fills them during the period of their manifestation, and back into which they must ultimately dissolve . . . . Its manifestation in the cosmos is the structure and flux of the universe itself. (pp. 257-58)

This ur-religion is a basic element of all myth; the hero becomes the possessor of this ubiquitous power, or "Force," when he achieves adulthood.

Thus the mystical elements of *Star Wars* begin to make sense; they are indispensable to the mythic structure. Moreover, this Force, as Campbell explains, is not simply a religious power; it is also the power of the *libido*, and "its guardians dare release it only to the duly proven" (p. 182). Luke, having won through his trials and proven himself to his guardian, can now enter manhood. The father dies for his sake, freeing Luke's libido; as Ben tells him, "The Force will be with you always."

The Departure and the Initiation completed, the hero now begins the third and final stage: the Return. "The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of Wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds" (p. 193). Luke, accompanied by the Princess, escapes with the plans of the battle station in Solo's ship out of the Death Star, out of the belly of the whale. He now undergoes what Campbell calls "the Magic Flight" (p. 196); he is chased by symbolic "demons" out of the Death Star, but manages with the aid of Solo to destroy the pursuing ships and reach the rebel base—significantly, a lush, green, light-filled planet.

Having crossed the threshold from "the world of light" into "the world of darkness" and returned alive, Luke is now "master of the Two Worlds" (p. 229). He has the power to move at will between the two, and he proves this by returning at the risk of his life to the Death Star in order to destroy it. In combat, Luke now assumes his true identity, which is that of the ideal father: Jedi Knight, starship pilot, and cunning warrior. Guided by the Force, he naturally succeeds in his task, dropping some proton torpedoes down a symbolically suggestive narrow chute. The Death Star goes up in an orgasmic explosion of fireworks.

According to Campbell, "the work of the hero is to slay the tenacious aspect of the father (dragon, tester, ogre king) and release from its ban the vital energies that will feed the universe" (p. 352). His job, in other words, is the destruction of the status quo in order to permit renewal and restoration, and this is the task which Luke, ordinary boy raised to the status of mythic hero, successfully performs.

It is precisely this sense of renewal which makes *Star Wars* so appealing. In the absence of any shared contemporary myths, Lucas has constructed out of the usable past, out of bits of American pop culture, a new mythology which can satisfy the emotional needs of both children and adults.[30] The passion for *Star Wars* is akin to the fervor of a religious revival.

The fact is that each generation must create its own myths and its own heroes, or else regenerate those of the past. We are in a period now when the heroes have been cast down through such national catastrophes as Vietnam and Watergate, when the lines between good and evil grow cloudy, and when sexual identities have been redefined by the Women's Movement. Meanwhile, we have created a machine world for ourselves, a world which seems drained of spiritual values, a world in which we feel impotent and alien. We desperately need a renewal of faith in ourselves as Americans, as good guys on the world scene, as men and women, as human beings who count, and so we return temporarily to the simpler patterns of the past. The old superheroes rise again—*Wonder Woman* and *Superman*—and we get old-fashioned genre films like *Rocky* and *Star Wars*.

Such fantasies give voice to our deepest longings, and speak to our hopes about the future of our society and of ourselves. For example, in opposition to the dehumanizing uses of technology, *Star Wars* shows the triumph of good technology over evil machinery[31] —an updated version of the triumph of white magic over black magic in *The Wizard of Oz*. Viewers recognize that *Star Wars* has no direct relation to external reality, but it does relate to our dreams of how we would *like* reality to be. As the reviewer Jack Kroll says about the film, "It's the last chance for kids to have fun before they grow up to be Oedipus. And we hollow-eyed Oedipuses can, if we try, go back and enjoy the fun of our pre-guilt stage."[32]

"Kids' stuff," after all, is the stuff that dreams are made of.

Andrew Gordon
University of Florida
Gainesville

NOTES

[1] Richard Corliss, "A Cool Look at a Hot 'Star,' " *New Times*, 24 June 1977, p. 65.

[2] Stanley Kauffmann, "Innocences," *The New Republic*, 18 June 1977, p. 22.

[3] Molly Haskell, *Village Voice*, 13 June 1977, p. 40.

[4] See Robert M. Adams, "The Hobbit Habit," *The New York Review of Books*, 24 November 1977, p. 24. Adams compares the appeal of *Star Wars* to that of Tolkien.

[5] In an interview with George Lucas printed in the *Star Wars* souvenir program (NY: S. W. Ventures, Inc., 1977).

[6] "The Force Behind George Lucas," interview with George Lucas by Paul Scanlon, *Rolling Stone*, 25 August 1977, p. 43.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Stephen Zito, "George Lucas Goes Far Out," *American Film*, April 1977, p. 13.

[9] *Star Wars* souvenir program.

[10] Brian Aldiss, *Space Opera* (London: Futura, 1974), pp. 9, 15.

[11] Ibid., p. 10.

[12] Sam J. Lundwall, *Science Fiction: What It's All About* (New York: Ace, 1971), p. 102.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p. 103.

[15] Richard Corliss, "A Cool Look," p. 65. One might also note that heroic epics traditionally begin *in medias res*.

[16] "*Star Wars*: The Year's Best Movie," *Time*, 30 May 1977, p. 56.

[17] Roger Copeland, "When Films 'Quote' Films, They Create a New Mythology," The New York *Times*, Sunday, 25 Sept. 1977, Section D, p. 1.

[18] "The Force Behind George Lucas," p. 45.

[19] Ibid., p. 43.

[20] According to *Newsweek*, 30 May 1977, p. 61.

[21] "The Year's Best Movie," *Time*, 30 May 1977, p. 62.

[22] Jack Kroll, "Fun in Space," *Newsweek*, 30 May 1977, p. 60.

[23] "The Force," *Rolling Stone*, 25 August 1977, p. 47.

[24] Roger Copeland, "When Films Quote Films," p. 1.

[25] Stephen Zito, "George Lucas Goes Far Out," p. 12.

[26] Ibid., p. 10.

[27] Aldiss, *Space Opera*, p. 10.

[28] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: World, 1956), p. 17. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[29] Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings*, ed. Philip Freund (New York: Vintage, 1959), pp. 71, 79.

[30] See also Roger Copeland, "When Films Quote Films," p. 24. "The modern artist, in a world which has largely repudiated mythology, found himself with no shared public foundation on which to build. The artists I'm discussing [Lucas is one] have begun to build on older works of art. Having lost a mythological tradition, they have created their own tradition. . . ."

[31] See also Jesse Kornbluth, "The Gleaming of America," *New Times*, 24 June 1977, pp. 24-29. Kornbluth says that "thanks to *Star Wars*, I'm temporarily inclined to believe that technology isn't soulless. . . ."

[32] Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*, 30 May 1977, p. 60.

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