

# An Analysis of Pastiche of Old Styles in Star Wars (1977)

Yijie Wang\*

School of Foreign Language and Literature, University of Shandong, Jinan, Shandong, 250100, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: herpiece@mail.sdu.edu.cn

## ABSTRACT

*Star Wars* (1977) is a fantastic post-modernist film that offers audiences an unparalleled space adventure while conveying director George Lucas's vision of society. Remarkably, as a science fiction film, *Star Wars* constitutes a variety of artistic styles from a bygone era, which this study argues were Lucas's primary means of expression. This paper examines the old fashions of *Star Wars* from the perspective of artistic style through Fredric Jameson's theory of "pastiche". The conclusion is that he builds a new mythology through the pastiche of old art forms in a context where Americans have lost faith in the old mythology, and he also argues against the use of dehumanising technologies such as nuclear weapons. This research will contribute to a better understanding of the *Star Wars* series and the postmodernist culture of the United States.

**Keywords:** *Star Wars*, Pastiche, Postmodernism, Fredric Jameson.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The film *Star Wars* (1977) provides audiences with a novel and exotic cultural experience with its fascinating setting frameworks and extraordinarily advanced technologies, and it has amassed a large following worldwide. However, when the audiences are amazed by the fancy adventure in another galaxy, they may notice a "strange mixture" that except the future technology there are some old looks and fashions in the film. George Lucas wanted to create not only science fiction but also a modern myth as well, according to the researchers like Andrew Gordon and Robert G. Collins.

Although there are already abundant studies such as *Star Wars: The Pastiche of Myth and the Yearning for A Past Future* by Robert G. Collins and *Star Wars: A Myth for Our Time* by Andrew Gordon that have argued how George Lucas developed *Star Wars* as a myth of the twentieth century by examining the narrative styles, characters in the film as well as the other film' elements which Lucas borrowed. Few of these films focused on its artistic styles, for instance, the architectural and clothing styles. As suggested by Fredric Jameson in his book *The Cultural Turn*, pastiche is the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language [1]. It has also been claimed by him that *Star Wars* is a pastiche of the cultural experience of Americans who grew up in the 1930s -1950s, which can

categorize the film as a nostalgia film [1]. Thus, in my opinion, Lucas wished to deliver some of his views to the audience by putting these nostalgic things together. And this paper will apply Jameson's theories Pastiche Eclipses Parody and the Nostalgia Mode in order to investigate the impact of this pastiche in the *Star Wars Episode VI: A New Hope*.

There are three sections in the following analysis: the first section will explain the terms "pastiche" and "nostalgia mode" as per Jameson. The next section will focus on the old fashions in the film in order to reveal how pastiche is practiced by Lucas. Moreover, the last section will talk about the connection shard by this pastiche as well as the aroused nostalgic feeling and indicate how this nostalgia works on Lucas' expression of his society's vision.

## 2. PASTICHE AND NOSTALGIA MODE

Pastiche emerge because of the loss of a common language. As stated by Jameson, pastiche is akin to parody, the imitation or the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles [1]. The distinctiveness of styles is the focus of parody and it creates an imitation to ridicule the original. But this ridicule of a private style has been based on normal language, if it disappears, parody will turn impossible and it will be the moment at which pastiche

appears. As a result, pastiche is a neutral activity of imitation and mimicking, and viewers of pastiche are unable to imagine the meaning of the original artworks or comprehend the pasticheur's aim [2]. In the case of *Star Wars* precisely, the advent of nuclear weapons made people stop believing in the heroes of the past. Therefore, the parody of the past myths or fairy tales lost its common language. When George Lucas wished to create a modern myth for the 20th century by evoking the past, pastiche was the only means available to him.

Jameson also clarifies the distinction between nostalgia and historical films. Unlike historical films, which depict the full past, nostalgic films conjure up a mental image of the past, or a stereotype. This can allow the audience to understand the film without historical references. Moreover, Lucas utilised this nostalgia mode in *Star Wars* through the creation of a modern myth, a yearning for a sense of Innocence before the appearance of the atomic bomb in order to convey his anti-nuclear concern to the audience, as he asserts in an interview: "Once the atomic bomb came ... they forgot the fairy tales and dragons and Tolkien as well as all the real heroes." [3]

### 3. OLD STYLES REINVENTED IN PASTICHE

In *Star Wars*, it is hard for audience to identify the period from which the objects appearing in the film come, as they never really exist. *Star Wars* varies from standard nostalgia films in that it does not depict history in its entirety, instead recreating the sensation and shape of historical art artefacts [1]. Consequently, there can be a possibility that old fashions from diverse eras have been seen in a film without the limit of time. For instance, the political setting of the film references the Roman Empire. In regards to this, the protagonists wear European medieval-style clothes and fight villains dressed in what looks like Nazi uniforms. Furthermore, they fight in the style of Japanese samurai - dueling with swords. Although from different eras, all these elements have one thing in common: they can arouse the audiences' yearning for the history.



Figure 1 The dueling

American comics from the 1930s to 1950s have great impact on the depiction of technology in the film. The technology in the galaxy where the story happens is more advanced than ours, so it can be named "future technology" at the releasing time of *Star Wars*. In

contrast to the contemporaneous films that also provide the concept of "future technology" like *2001* (1968) or *Alien* (1979), *Star Wars* has a dissimilar style. It appears to occur earlier, implying that the "future technology" in *Star Wars* comes from a fantasy of the future in some past era, a nostalgic vision of the future. Aircraft, battleships, fighters, robots, mining vehicles, laser weapons, and even the master-disciple relationship between Luke and Obi-Wan Kenobi can be explored in similar designs from American comics released decades ago like *DC*, *Marvel Comics*, *Buck Rogers*, and *Flash Gordon*. Therefore, *Star Wars* is a compendium of American pop and pulp culture [4], because of the reconstruction of such former cultural experiences.

The lifestyles of the characters form a part of pastiche, realistic elements which fulfil the audiences' image of a bygone time of innocence, a time of fairy tales, a time of heroes and epics is recreated directly. The example of the people's way of life on Tatooine, which is similar to that of a medieval era with advanced technology, is used here. In the protagonist Luke's first encounter with two robots C-3PO and R2-D2, they are sold to Uncle Luke. From Luke's conversation with his uncle, later on, the audiences get informed that the robots have been bought for agricultural purposes, which quickly reminds people of mediaeval Europe's serfdom. Similarly, the dangerous wilderness filled with bandits of all kinds, the lively taverns of the town, the reclusive masters as well as the lightsabres, the weapons of the Jedi, are all more or less suggestive of that period.

The lightsabre, one of the most iconic symbols of the *Star Wars* films, also helps to evoke the Homeric era's longing. Generally speaking, the sword is the main weapon of heroes in myths, epics, or fairy tales and is also seen as the symbol of the most valiant hero. The legend of *Prince Arthur*, according to Robert G. Collins, is the dominant myth in the picture [5]. Prior to the heroes being given their swords, they are often tested like the Sword in the Stone, Excalibur, or Gram, which usually have magical powers. However, in the high-tech setting of *Star Wars*, magic is no longer possible, and ordinary words appears pale in contrast to long-range weapons as well as fails to reflect the heroic image. The film, thus, introduces a new concept, the Force, which can be interpreted as magic in another galaxy, and adds a high-tech part to the sword, the laser, to suit the setting, the sword's primary function, however, remains unchanged, and it continues to serve to emphasise the hero.

Along with the comics, reality, as well as fairy tales, *Star Wars* also draws on elements which come from other action-adventure films. The audience can explore the influence of Westerns, Samurai films, World War II movies, and even Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), and Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) [6]. The most obvious of these is C3-PO's prototype, the Maria from

*Metropolis* which is highly consistent not only in appearance but also in characterization with C3-PO; Second, *Star Wars* borrows the staging and camera language used to depict the big scenes from *Triumph of the Will*, such as Awarding Ceremony at the end of the film; the interior design of the airship is very similar to that of *2001* (1968); the Jedi's action of using lightsabers can be heavily influenced by Akira Kurosawa's samurai films. Not to be overlooked is the fact that the aforementioned wilderness and taverns also point to American western movies. George Lucas frequently takes character settings from western films such as Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, in which he redefined Hollywood western traditions by avoiding black-and-white characterizations [7]. Han Solo fills such characters well, as he does not explicitly support the protagonist's position for quite some time after his appearance until he finally sides with Luke when his life is threatened.

The image of the Galactic Empire is a concentration of the aforementioned pastiche of old styles. It can be thought of as a mash-up of elements from the previously listed comics, fairy tales, and films such as the death ray or the doomsday box, powers far beyond those of the protagonist, the ambition to control the world, and so on. Beyond this, the empire itself evokes a kind of nostalgia. From republic to empire, the evocation of the Old Senate, which embodied freedom and enlightened government, as well as its replacement by a totalitarian Galactic Empire [8], it is hard not to build a connection between such a political development and our historical reality - the Roman Empire. The political system and the classical architectural style, slavery, also, the dress of the characters in the film imply this connection. Especially the scene at the end of the film when Princess Leia honours Luke and Solo - the bright hall, the green foliage climbing on the marble columns, and the tidy march of troops.

Nevertheless, in parallel to its recreation of the Roman Empire, the Galactic Empire also replicates Nazi Germany. "It depicts one reimagining of the Roman Empire, with its warlike eagles, military symbolism, vast public buildings, and genocidal tendency [8]." In other words, the film reimages both the Roman Empire and its Imitator. The high similarity between the symbol of the Galactic Empire and today's Ukrainian neo-Nazi symbol corroborates that this symbol is based on the German Nazi symbol. Moreover, the greyish colour of the empire officers' uniforms, the black high boots, and breeches all find their counterparts in the Nazi Wehrmacht uniforms; the officers' accents were British, which might also be an attempt to make them sound more German. The significant of the Wehrmacht can also be observed in the Stormtroopers: the design of the helmet image come from Germany, some of the weapons are directly adapted from the machine gun MG-34 or MG-42 utilised by the German army in World War II, as well as the manning

arrangements during combat, which also refers to the Wehrmacht. "*Star Wars* resurrects the fascistic warriors and evokes the archetypal evil of Nazi villains [9]." This evil is not only reflected in the parody of the Nazi Empire, but also in the portrayal of villains.



Figure 2 The machine guns in the film

Darth Vader is one of the most villainous portrayals of Nazi portrayal evil in the film. According to Christine L. Aube, "there was a quasi-omnipresence of Germanic or Nazified villains in post-World War II films [10]". Darth Vader can be seen as both a reimagining of these villains such as *Captain America's* Red Skull or *Wonder Woman's* Nazi Baroness and a recreation of historical reality. He wields abilities not normally found in Imperial officers, wears a black cloak and mask, and has the same fighting style as the protagonist, whose true identity is also unknown. From this standpoint, he is a recreation of those comic characters. However, at the same time, it can be concluded from the design of his helmet and mask and his dogfight with Luke which is such dogfights in World War II that he comes from historical reality.



Figure 3 The uniforms of the imperial military forces and Darth Vader

#### 4. A SENSE OF INNOCENCE AROUSED BY PASTICHE

From the foregoing research, these aspects from the past have shown themselves alongside an indefinable nostalgic past. It is hard to say which specific era the audiences are producing nostalgia for because it is a pastiche. And pastiche is, according to Fredric Jameson, a neutral practice of mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal in contrast to the which what is being imitated is rather comic [1]. As a result, this pastiche can be used to evoke an inexpressible nostalgia for a world without nuclear weapons.

*Star Wars* emphasizes this idea by alluding to the

Death Star, a strategic weapon developed by the Empire to fight the Rebellion, with the power to shatter a planet in a heartbeat. Of course, as rulers, the Empire naturally cannot destroy every planet with any rebellion on it, as well as it is feasibly impossible to do so. The Empire's decision-makers, on the other hand, are well aware of the purpose of such a weapon of mass destruction: they use it to destroy the planets where the Resistance headquarters are located as well as use it to threaten and deter the rebels to force them to surrender. And it seems to be a once-and-for-all approach, as everyone would choose to submit to the Empire out of fear of the Death Star's power. In this way, the Empire can be able to consolidate its power.

The prototype of Death Star is nuclear weapons, because of the similar power and use. The film's plot revolves around the battle station, the Death Star that can destroy a planet in an instant: The Empire constructs it to deal with the rebels and consolidate power, while the rebels steal the station's design drawing and prepare to destroy it. When nuclear weapons first revealed their horrific power to the world, the fairy tales as well as legends of the old days lost their colour. The destructive power of nuclear weapons surpassed that of any fairy tale villain so that no hero can be trusted to defeat them. Therefore, there had been an absence of any shared contemporary myths [4]. But the fear of the threat of nuclear weapons appears. In the light of these circumstances, a new myth meeting the emotional requirements of the people is required.

The film makes another allusion to nuclear weapons in its scenes. As proposed by the name, the *Star Wars* story is set in space, which enables the audience to relate to the reality of what happened in space when the film was released, the competition between the USA and the USSR. The content of it is a space race on the one hand and an arms race on the other. Furthermore, nuclear weapons take dominance in the arms race that continuously put the entire human society under threat. That the film is set in a "space opera" can may wave for the audiences to the US-Soviet space race and then to the threat of atomic bombs.

In *Star Wars*, a sense of innocence prior to the advent of nuclear weapons is first developed, in order to help people to get away from the fear of the nuclear threat. Moreover, so they return temporarily to the simpler patterns of the past [4]. The film reproduces fragments of the past, creating a high-tech agricultural civilization, which will give people hope that returning to such a simple state of life without changing their material conditions is not impossible. A pastiche of western movies and early space movies like *2001* also satisfies memories of the good old times of freedom and enhances faith in people's vision of the future.

Meanwhile, *Star Wars* develops a menace that can endanger this innocence, much the nuclear weapons

threaten our real world, the Death Star. And its user, the Galactic Empire, appears in the film as a replication of Nazi Germany under whose rule innocence cannot exist. On the one hand, it induces the memory of World War II -it is a nostalgia that ordinary men on the battlefield can be heroes to the masses when everyone unite against fascism, therefore, giving people confidence that a new hero would emerge; on the other hand, the fate of the Galactic Empire is implicit by the destruction of the Third Reich, further reinforcing the confidence that this hero, who has yet to emerge, can prevail. As Gordon said, "incorporating an old-fashioned plot like the annihilation of an evil empire into a futuristic fantasy speaks to our deepest longings and dreams for the future of our society and ourselves, such as opposition to the dehumanising use of technology [4]". The failure of Empire on the Death Star directly reflects of this desire.

"Each generation must create its myths and its own heroes, or else regenerate those of the past [4]". Finally, there is Luke Skywalker, a new hero whose setting is based on all of the previous cultural experiences. Moreover, *Star Wars*, through its peculiar mixture, retrieves such a past and carries it into the future, making the old fable of a fateful youth rising to combat universal tyranny into a paean of communal hope [5]. Luke Skywalker acquires a new ability, the Force. Therefore, Luke ends up destroying the Death Star with the help of the Force, rather than simply relying on himself. Nevertheless, In the film, the Force is only depicted in a very abstract way, and George Lucas probably wants to leave room for reflection on the utilisation of nuclear weapons: how to build a world without the threat of nuclear weapons and conveys that this goal is achievable, predicated on instilling a sense of innocence in people to enable them dissociate themselves from their fear of nuclear weapons, and a new hero who can fight evil with his magical strength, the Force.

## 5. CONCLUSION

With the advent of nuclear weapons, post-World War II Americans no longer believed in the heroes and myths of a bygone era, and George Lucas, through his recreation of the past in *Star Wars*, developed a sense of innocence before the arrival of the atomic bomb and created a new mythology for the 20th century. Simultaneously, he expressed his vision of a society free from the threat of nuclear weapons.

The loss of universal faith made it no longer possible to imitate the single heroic stories of the past, which had themselves lost their meaning. Therefore, if Lucas wishes to recreate the cultural components of history, he must take a different approach: parody. He draws elements from several cultural experiences of the past as well as from art forms such as comics, cinema, mythology, fairy tales and historical reality in order to evoke in his audience a yearning for the innocence of the past.

Meanwhile, by giving a new look to traditional storytelling genres, he also provokes the audience to think about real issues, especially the issue of nuclear weapons.

There is no doubt that *Star Wars* franchise has a huge reach and a huge fan base worldwide. Still to this day, *Star Wars* remains a popular intellectual property, as well as still being updated. However, with the passage of time, the world today is facing new problems: the global pandemic of covid-19, the war between Russia and Ukraine, and the global economic recession. Against this backdrop, the question of whether the myth of *Star Wars*, born forty-five years ago, is still relevant, and whether a new myth of the times is needed, still requires further reflection.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, London & New York, Verso, 1998, pp. 4-8.
- [2] Min H. Lee, *Parody, and Pastiche in the use of Popular Culture in the Evangelistic Practices of Korean Churches*, Boston University, Ann Arbor, 2018, p. 15.
- [3] Paul Scanlon, *The Force behind George Lucas*, in: Paul Scanlon, *Interview with George Lucas*, Rolling Stone, 25 August 1977 p. 43.
- [4] Andrew Gordon, *Star Wars: A Myth for our Time*, in: *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol.6, no. 4, 1978, pp. 324-325.
- [5] Robert G. Collins, *Star Wars: The Pastiche of Myth and the Yearning for a Past Future*, in: *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. XI, no. 1, 1977, p. 2, p. 9.
- [6] M. M. Winkler, *Star Wars and the Roman Empire*, in: M. M. Winkler, ed., *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, Oxford, 2001, p. 272.
- [7] Elaine Bander, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Reading Character in Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2011, p. 2.
- [8] Michael B. Charles, *Remembering and Restoring the Republic: Star Wars and Rome*. In: *The Classical World*, vol. 108, no. 2, 2015, p. 282-283, p. 302.
- [9] Florentine Strzelczyk, *Our Future-our Past: Fascism, Postmodernism, and Starship Troopers(1977)*, in: *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2008, p. 87.
- [10] Christine L. Aube, *The Enduring Villain: Germans as Nazi Stereotypes in American Cinema*, The College of William and Mary, Ann Arbor, 1998, p. 3.