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2020, January 13

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Star Wars, Intellectual Property, and Cultural Expropriation

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To say I am a *Star Wars* fan would be an understatement. In high school, I could win the *Star Wars Trivial Pursuit* board game in one turn: I didn't get any answers wrong and kept going around the board until I had collected all the tokens (yeah, not many friends). Of course, as I got older, I realized that the Jungian archetypes, Daoist philosophy, and tale of rebellion against authority that had so enchanted me were mixed in with a democratic storyline of restoring a "rightful" government, along with plenty of racial stereotypes and settler tropes. Nonetheless, it is hard to disavow the fantasy worlds one grows up with. The total conversion of *Star Wars* into a "franchise" is occasion enough to comment on how we might respond when capitalism eviscerates an imaginary world we love. The kind of cultural resistance I want to explore also offers some tactics for dealing with problematic aspects of the original movies.

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away

To discuss how capitalism ruined *Star Wars*, we need to chart the galaxy's long decline. My steadfast position is that the only real *Star Wars* is the original trilogy, Episodes IV to VI. I will later contradict this position, but for now, bear with me: all of the subsequent movies are shit.

When Episode I came out, I rushed to the theater the very first day. From the moment I walked out, for the next half week, I was dumbstruck, trying desperately to invent excuses for what was undeniably a troublingly clumsy movie. Once the trilogy had wrapped up, it was clear: George Lucas had lost his touch. Leaving aside the awkward dialogue, there were numerous plot contradictions, as though he had forgotten what had happened in the original trilogy.

Furthermore, he was unable to recapture the spirit of the originals. Granted, it had to be a different story, not one of an underdog rebellion, but of a decadent Republic and Jedi Order unable to fend off a growing threat. Unfortunately, Lucas does not create any interesting plot out of this conflict. A trilogy in which the bad guys win provides mouth-watering opportunities for reversing clichéd storylines or questioning moral assumptions, yet Lucas does not ex-

plore any weakness or flaw in the Senate or on the Jedi Council that lets Palpatine triumph (except maybe bad acting?). Evil wins in the prequel trilogy because, well, that's how *A New Hope* begins. And letting a storyline get carried along exclusively by the demands of the next installment is simply not good writing (though, as we shall see, J.J. Abrams has lowered the bar so much that the plot of the prequel trilogy starts to seem brilliant).

Lucas even seems to forget the genre he is writing in. *Star Wars* is not science fiction, it's fantasy in space, complete with knights, wizards, monsters, and princesses. His source material was not Arthur C. Clark, but Joseph Campbell, the Brothers Grimm, Tolkien, and Lao-tzi, and at no point in the original does he explain how things work or explore how technology affects society. Nonetheless, in Episode 1 he suddenly, inexplicably, tries to elucidate that the Force works because midi-chlorians. Which doesn't actually explain anything and also cheapens the most potent element of the galaxy and the one in least need of explaining.

What does any of this have to do with capitalism? It's not just that I'm disappointed in George, the way I might be—again, and again, and, ooh, ouch, again—with Terry Gilliam. In this case, there is a question of commercialization.

A long time ago, in a Hollywood far, far away, George Lucas was a cultural worker, creating awesome stories (c'mon, who can't love *Willow*? oh shit, more Eurocentric fantasy, urgh) out of myths and archetypes that are collectively elaborated and passed on. As a member of the most privileged stratum of the working class, he had the opportunity to become a property owner, and as soon as the commercial success of *Star Wars* made that possibility manifest, he seized it with both hands. He and his team were pioneers of visual and audio effects, but more than that, he was a pioneer of the cultural franchise, marketing *Star Wars* paraphernalia from the get go. And that has become his Empire.

The prequel trilogy was bad not because sometimes filmmakers lose their touch (and it's interesting how this happens much more in

cinema than among novelists; perhaps decadence is proportionate to investment and returns?), but because for the decades between *Return of the Jedi* and *A Phantom Menace*, George's principle focus was on marketing and money-making. The prequel was bound to be crap. And his loyalty to the fantasy galaxy he had created was bound to be weaker than Disney's offering price.

It was no coincidence that the industry reproduced, on a meta scale, its own stylistic template: in a sequel, the villains have to be bigger and badder.

I Will Not Give Up My Favorite Decoration… There Will Be No Bargain

An economic subtext to this unfolding tragedy is that George Lucas had the democratic right to disappoint and betray millions of fans, first making a travesty, and then selling the whole galaxy to the McDonalds of video entertainment. He owned the Intellectual Property. And this technical mumbo-jumbo is so convincing a myth that among all the betrayed, I haven't heard anyone questioning Lucas' legitimacy in sending *Star Wars* through the slaughterhouse of dreams.

But there is an element we have overlooked. I mentioned that the prequel trilogy conflicted with several minor plot details from the original trilogy. This is something that Lucas clearly failed to notice, but the fact that it is known, that I can mention it, shows there were other eyes being more attentive. Tens of thousands of fans, in fact, commented on these inconsistencies, all of them, at that point, people who knew *Star Wars*, and cared about it, more than George Lucas himself.

Let us not speak of meritocracy. Show me the corpse! Who owns the *Star Wars* galaxy?

Now I Am the Master

The sad answer is, Disney, the largest news and entertainment corporation on the planet. And you don't get Death Star big by respecting art, but by blowing up everything that stands in your way.

Moore, who has had his work stolen from him by DC Comics and turned into one awful or at best liberal movie after another.

Seizing the means of production is not an adequate solution. All storytellers possess their own means of production at a small scale. And the big publishing houses, bookstores, Hollywood, and so forth are designed to exponentially amplify a small number of manageable voices, all in the interests of profit and social control, and not to make storytelling more participatory and more diffuse.

The answer, then, is to focus on the needs of writers and artists not to starve, and the need of everyone for good stories. And as the fire-fighting wombats of Australia can attest, the best way to answer a diversity of needs is with the logic of mutual aid, and not the arbitrary, cruel lottery system of today, by which one starving writer in a thousand gets published, and one in a million gets their story picked up by HBO.

Are more writers today telling Other stories featuring people left out of literature for too long? They need to be getting closer to those Others who are also dreamers trying to create Other worlds, rather than revalidating the continuous attempts of a sick, cruel, homicidal old world to recruit diversity and get more hands on deck to keep it from falling apart. It is dreams, after all, and not compromises, that are the stuff of inspiration.

Property is theft! Houses for those who live in them, the land for those who take care of it, stories for those who imagine them!

The creators of fan fiction dance in the face of the absurd pretension that a story can have an owner. And though they avail themselves a certain liberty by, traditionally, distributing their work for free, there is no complete freedom as long as capitalism exists. As we have seen, the owners of a story can create a market for commercialized fan fiction, as happened with Del Rey and the "Expanded Universe." And writers making a paycheck will generally adapt their work to "the market," which is nothing but a euphemism for the demands of the big publishing companies and bookstores, or in this case, the owners of the IP.

Since George R.R. Martin's seminal betrayal of his own work, the dream of the commercially viable writer is no longer to get published; it is to get published and then sell their story to HBO or TNT. Truly good, truly radical writers are taking this step without considering how it affects their craft, their story, and their readers.

As much as I love aspects of *Songs and Ice and Fire* and appreciate George R.R. Martin, I hope he goes down in history as the first one to sell a story he hadn't even finished, allowing a couple of Hollywood hacks to give the first version of the finale, because, well, they paid a lot. I don't wish him this infamy out of any grudge, quite the contrary. But, you know: for the good of the realm.

But, purity aside, writers who refuse to make these financial compromises or—more often—are never even given that opportunity, face rising rents and a miserable job market that leaves no time for writing. A society in which artists starve—which, in fact, can cavalierly normalize the starving artist as a cliché—is an unjust one. Simultaneously, *it is not okay* for artists to become millionaires, and in a Brechtian sense, more important now than ever, an artist who becomes a millionaire is by definition not a good artist. Someone who wants to sell their story to Hollywood, if you're going to give the money to prisoners or the YPG, hey, sometimes we have to sacrifice our babies. But it is absolutely not okay that the new definition of success among writers is to sell their story to Hollywood. On this front, we could all learn a thing or two from Alan

Disney's method represents a whole new level of cultural production: compartmentalized, technocratic, eyes always on the bottom line. Their goal was to make the first in a long line of blockbusters. To do this, it wouldn't be enough to make something that would thrill *Star Wars* fans. Doing so would require esoteric references to the original trilogy and the target market would be in the tens of millions rather than billions.

So, *a priori*, they had to make a crowd pleaser, they had to make something visually stunning but plotwise, tame and safe. Why not a remake? The wave of remakes sweeping Hollywood is not a simple fashion, but a calculated marketing decision: movies that already got famous represent accumulated advertising capital, a brand that in large part will sell itself, and surely there is plenty of market research showing that Boomers and Gen Xers are particularly prone to nostalgia.

The first sign that the financial department, and not a squad of *Star Wars* nerds, were running things was the hiring of J.J. Abrams, just in from shooting a *Star Trek* movie. I don't believe it's impossible to like both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, but it's a total ignoramus who would suppose the two are similar and would think of recruiting *Star Trek* talent for the next *Star Wars* production, the way you might bring in Ridley Scott for *Blade Runner* after *Alien* was a hit.

Of course, I use the word "talent" ironically in that sentence. J.Bro Abrams' *Star Trek* flick was probably the worst of all of them, and there have been a lot. There is not a creative bone in that wretched man's body. His one, singular talent is to make buttloads of money off of perfectly mediocre storylines. But Episode VII, *The Force Awakens*, is an atrocity even for him. Perhaps, in a tragic act of personal homage to the man behind the myth, he wanted to slap together something so awful that people would have fond memories of George Lucas' prequel trilogy.

It seems to me that one of the first steps in writing a sequel is to look at where the original ends and figure out where to go from there, but the odious, insipid J.J. Abrams was incapable even of

this simple task. Everywhere in the sequel trilogy his gross, latte-stirring, smartphone screen-swiping fingers probed, the result was nothing but a thinly veiled, inferior remake of the original trilogy plot.

At the end of *Return of the Jedi*, the Empire is mostly destroyed, and the Rebellion just has to waltz into Coruscant and put the New Republic together. At the beginning of Abrams' money-making vomit, the Empire is more powerful than ever, and the Rebellion is still a rebellion. Only the names have changed. Even the superweapons are the same, but a little more powerful, and with more obnoxious violations of basic physics (like, you can watch the destruction of a planet lightyears away in realtime).

Since I haven't yet pointed out what an ass J.J. Abrams is, let me take a little time to do so. In another of his productions, the execrable *Cloverfield Paradox*, they don't even know how centripetal force works (you know, the standard rotating spacecraft that creates artificial gravity with down being the outside of a rotating ring?) and they seem to believe that "up" and "down" are fixed directions in space, as when they are shocked to find that a constellation is suddenly "upside down". Seriously, science fiction like this makes people stupider, it paves the way for Trumps and Flat-Earthers.

In one of the best trilogies of fan fiction in the *Star Wars* galaxy, Timothy Zahn thought hard about what conflicts would appear after the triumph of the rebels in *Return of the Jedi*, and though at times his books read like military scifi (Zahn's background), the result is compelling and exciting. Abrams accomplished none of that.

I have to salute Rian Johnson for intentionally sabotaging J.J. Abrams' more moronic story arcs: insisting that Rey's parents weren't anybody important, and abruptly killing off the Harry Potter villain who had appeared out of nowhere to lead the Empire and resurrect the Sith. I also think Johnson did his best to make a good movie in unpromising circumstances, and came close to succeeding. He captures the urgency of the Rebellion fighting rearguard actions against a more powerful enemy, reintroduces

The makers of *Rogue One*, on the other hand, gave a completely plausible explanation for how the Rebellion seized the Death Star plans that fits coherently with what we already know from the original trilogy, but they also took the creative license to invent wholly new aspects of the *Star Wars* galaxy, focusing a good deal on conflicts within the Rebellion and giving us the radical faction led by Saw Gerrera.

The anonymous author of *The Unquiet Dead* argues that *Rogue One* "is a good movie, but a bad Star Wars movie" because the protagonists die rather than triumphing, and presumably also—though they are not very explicit on this point—given the lack of an Oedipal storyline. Though I would say that there is in fact a version of such a storyline between Jyn Erso and her father, *Unquiet*'s analysis of myth is spot on. However, *Star Wars* cannot be read exclusively as myth, especially when dealing with the aspect of fan fiction, which exists in large part to fill in all the space around the central plot. And the protagonists of fan fiction are usually not the protagonists of that central plot; therefore they cannot obey the same mythical rules. If the good guys win in *Star Wars'* mythical grammar (an assumption the prequel trilogy already forces us to throw out the window), that same grammar cannot apply to fan fiction, since such a medium requires that we be able to make a couple of stormtroopers the protagonists of our story, or poor Greedo.

I always knew there was more to you than money!

The profit motive is antithetical to good art and good storytelling, and Intellectual Property exists to protect the right of owners to profit. Someone who creates a story can later betray it or neglect it, as in the case of George Lucas; or, someone can acquire ownership of a story without having done anything to contribute to it, as in the case of Disney. The ownership regime takes none of these things into account. The only thing that matters is the sacred right of people with money to make more money, no matter whom or what they destroy.

as extremists? Owen and Beru raise Luke to be a racist settler? How about a story from the perspective of the Tusken Raiders?

In fact, the writers—and the assiduous readers—of fan fiction are something more than fans. Fans implies passive spectators, and the fan fiction crowd creates and adds to the fantastical world in question. These were also the people who called out the errors in the prequel trilogy, rather than passively accepting them.

The fan fiction crowd is also different from the passive mass of spectators for whom the Disney trilogy was intended, those infantilized, self-infantilizing recipients of cultural product called into being by the Spectacle itself, who loudly bray their opinions over social media and whose voice is by no means commensurate with a process of care or attention towards the *Star Wars* galaxy. They are mere consumers of culture. World-eaters. And in this case, the vast majority of them hated Episode VIII, and were largely pleased with Episode IX. These are people who, when they go to the theater, do not want to be challenged, and in fact want to see a movie they have already seen a thousand times, though each time with a different skin painted over it. And these are precisely the people Disney had identified as their market.

Help me [Fan Fiction], you're my only hope

I think we can evaluate the two parallel *Star Wars* movies—*Rogue One* and *Solo*—as fan fiction. Both films were clearly made by people who know the *Star Wars* galaxy and paid close attention to the original trilogy. The main difference, to me, is that *Solo* played it safe. There is almost nothing in the plot extraneous to the bare bones details we know about Han Solo from the original trilogy. Every feature is constructed and precision-fitted to deliver these details in a coherent way, and no part of his backstory is overlooked. In other words, they did a much better job with this movie than Lucas did with the prequel trilogy. The problem is, there's hardly anything else there. (Really, they should have taken a whole trilogy to develop Han but of course, that decision was Disney's and therefore, it was a financial and not an artistic one).

an actually anti-authoritarian element missing since the original trilogy when he takes the war to the rich (though making all of the galaxy's wealthy denizens not only aliens, but of varieties not heretofore seen comes too close to anti-Semitic tropes that are making a big comeback), questions the Tom Cruise maverick trope in a way that is both incisive and compassionate, provides a truly dramatic confrontation that comes to head in Luke's final face off with Kylo Ren, and makes a beautiful meta-jab at J.J. Abrams' total lack of creativity by creating and breaking the illusion that the middle-of-the-trilogy ground battle against the Empire is taking place on an ice planet.

The result, however, is a trilogy made completely incoherent as the two directors hired by the financial department have a hundred million dollar cat fight over conflicting visions and plot elements. The fact that Disney could allow this to happen shows how little respect and seriousness they have brought to the *Star Wars* galaxy. And the fact they brought J.J. Abrams back in to finish the trilogy off (and I mean this in the original sense of *coup de grâce*) shows they prioritized box office concerns over creative ones.

Episode 9 was pathetic. Truly interesting characters with mostly good actors just trundled along. Only Rey and Kylo Ren showed any complexity, and all the other characters who were vital to a large part of the plot experienced no development whatsoever. The big revelation that Rey was some bad guy's daughter was insultingly staid, again revealing Abrams to be shameless in recycling plot elements from the first trilogy, anything to avoid an original idea. Palpatine's back? I almost choked on my own yawn. Bringing back characters thought to be dead is a dead giveaway that the writers are gimmicky hacks, unless we're dealing with epics or cyclical legends of the Baron von Munchhausen variety, in which multiple deaths of the protagonist is a feature of the genre. (Okay, it was done to decent effect in the fourth season of *Peaky Blinders*).

Finally, the big victory felt meaningless. There was no ongoing relationship between the Rebellion and the rest of the galaxy,

so when they showed up at the predictable, opportune moment to save the day, they were only so many anonymous spaceships keeping the plot from falling apart. And given that the Empire's reappearance in Episode VII was gratuitous, its sudden defeat was just as gratuitous.

I Fear Something Terrible Has Happened

Finally, forcing Carrie Fisher to act from the grave was just dystopian, fucked up, and disrespectful, and this will have major consequences for cinema. We already got a peek in the chilling, dizzying 2013 movie *The Congress*. Whereas the original *Star Wars* trilogy revolutionized movie special effects, this technological change to the bounds of acting represents the first salvo of a new weapon in an ongoing class war. When actors can sign over their image and be reanimated by CGI, Hollywood gains an inestimable victory over its highest paid workers. Since social media allow people to become famous on their own effort, Hollywood will have access to a growing number of beautiful celebrities with millions of followers and no bargaining power. Once the CGI does the acting, the bosses don't have to be as dependent on hiring established actors. Actresses, in particular, are vulnerable: as they age, younger versions of them can be kept in the warehouse, and as the technology advances, famous actors can be brought back from the past.

Of course, this is one of the limits of a class war analysis: there are plenty of means of production that should be burned to the ground rather than seized, and the Spectacle, for its part, cannot be occupied; it can only ever occupy us. The point is not to elevate workers but to abolish work and therefore abolish the category of worker. As concerns cultural production, the key is to break the paradigm of bourgeois art and end the separation between performer and spectator.

The Fans Strike Back

When rich people steal away something you love and destroy it piece by piece—whether it's something important like the planet

or trivial like *Star Wars*—the only answer is to go in with blasters blazing and take it back.

When I said at the beginning that the only real *Star Wars* is the original trilogy, this wasn't entirely true. Parallel to those movies is an expansive body of fan fiction that fills in every last nook of the *Star Wars* galaxy. Part of that is the traditional fan fiction, distributed for free and therefore *in a dimension where evil cannot touch her*, to paraphrase Willow, which is to say, beyond the reach of Intellectual Property. And because Lucas was such a merchandiser, another part of that parallel fiction was tamed and brought within the bounds of Intellectual Property: the licensed novels put out by a major publishing house. In time, video games also began to be taken seriously a medium in which the history of the *Star Wars* galaxy could be developed, despite the necessary superficiality of plot and the imperative for impossibly high body counts.

Though this latter production was tamed, that doesn't mean it wasn't good. I have already mentioned the Timothy Zahn trilogy. In fact, I would say that all the commercial *Star Wars* fiction was legitimate fan fiction until the release of the prequel trilogy. Why was this a watershed moment? Because no serious *Star Wars* fan thought that the prequel trilogy was any good. This is where the domestication effect of Intellectual Property comes in: writers of true fan fiction are free to dispute George Lucas' terrible telling of Episodes I-III; those writing under contract for Del Rey Books cannot. They had to plug their noses and keep on writing for a paycheck, embellishing the outer edges of Lucas' impoverished story, but never contradicting it outright. Their first loyalty was to the regime of Intellectual Property, and therefore, they were no longer fans, in the sense alluded to by fan fiction.

The independence of the fan fiction writer has another advantage: through this creative practice, we can go back and challenge socially problematic aspects of a work we otherwise love. The Rebellion are actually just a bunch of authoritarian liberals? How about a story featuring true revolutionaries cast out of the Alliance