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STAR WAR

and the american imagination

When Star Wars premiered, in 1977, it swept the nation like a fever. Lines circled blocks, and before long it was more than a movie—it was a craze. TV commercials hawked wares emblazoned with Star Wars figures, available from McDonald’s—“Get yours now!” Before all was said and done, the movie grossed nearly half a billion dollars. That’s “billion”—with a “b.”

I was, however, out of the loop. In 1977, I was in my twenty-third year of life, and the targeted demographic was preteen and teen, rather than post-teen. Besides, I was more of a Star Trek guy (and it didn’t hurt that one of the stars of the Trekkie universe was a Black beauty who blazed the screen like a dark, luscious comet every time she appeared). That said, I watched with fascination as the lines grew, and other film companies tried to copy the moneymaking magic of the Star Wars franchise (they usually failed miserably, however).

Why did Star Wars strike such a deep and jangling nerve? Why did it become a craze, one that seemed to surprise everyone—critics, the movie’s executives, all, it seemed, except producer George Lucas?

The nation had just recently been forced to submit to a seemingly uncivilized (as in low-tech) enemy, and it faced the generational rebellion of the ’60s. Vietnam syndrome permeated the entire culture, not just the political elites. The younger were virtually uniformly antiwar in their orientation, and a counterculture was sweeping the nation, changing dress, hairstyles, sexual mores, food consumption, and the way national minorities were perceived and perceived themselves. In short, the land was in the midst of a cultural and political rebellion, sparked, in large part, by resistance to an unpopular war. An American president (R. M. Nixon) had recently resigned several months after his vice president, and some of his top aides (including Attorney General John Mitchell) were sent to prison, the human detritus of the Watergate scandal.

In this context, why would a movie, even one set in another world, find appeal when the heroes were a ragtag bunch of rebels, decidedly low-tech, fighting against a fearsome, militarily invincible empire? Part of the success of Star Wars was its undeniable youth appeal, yet there must be deeper reasons for its cultural resonance.

America, the Empire, didn’t like its role (at least among its young). It wanted to re-imagine itself as the ragtag band, fighting against great odds, against an evil empire. It imagined itself as it wanted to be, as it had claimed to be in its infancy against a cruel and despotic

king in the late eighteenth century. It reshaped itself into the rebels, not the imperial overlords. It shaped itself as oppressed, fighting for freedom. But America, like every nation, has its ages of psychosis. It has fits of indecision and periods of self-delusion.

Consider how presidents spoke movingly of “freedom from tyranny” while personally holding hundreds of men, women, and children in slavery. Or imagine Jefferson, the Sage of Monticello, who was the father of half-Black children, at the same moment as he wrote, in his only book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that Black people were essentially nonhuman, a species related to the orangutan. (Does this mean that he saw himself as being into bestiality? Or did this mean he really thought his children were, well, half monkey?). Americans, like any people, are subject to delusions.

Was this fascination with Star Wars and the national identification with the rebels one of them? For generations, Americans have declined to define themselves as imperialists. That’s what our enemies called us. That wasn’t what we called ourselves. We were for freedom. We were for self-determination. We were good. We were white (mostly). We were Luke Skywalker, not Darth Vader, and definitely not the cruel, warped emperor!

Yet aficionados of the Star Wars saga know that Luke and Darth were, after all, intimately related. Darth’s infamous line at their light saber battle has become a cultural byword: “Luke, I am your father!” It is a measure of Lucas’s genius that he scripts that moment of self-realization, of self-discovery and revelation.

In the grisly aftermath of a war that tore millions from the face of Asia, all to cover for the corporate exploitation of Vietnam’s bauxite and other natural resources, the imperial shock trooper, the imperial, metallic death’s hand, was father to the rebel. They were, in fact, more than related. In truth, they were one.

That is the meaning of Star Wars: we were rebels; we are Empire. And like all rebellious children, we were but going through a phase. We are getting ready for adulthood, after we sowed a few wild oats. Once grown, we put on our imperial uniform, and bowed to the Empire. “It is your destiny.”

Right? Unless—