

The Constructed Past in a Galaxy Far, Far Away: Nostalgia in the Star Wars Films

Zicheng Geng^{1,a,*}

¹Beijing Chaoyang Limai School, Beijing, China

a. cuaizen@tzc.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: *Star Wars* (1977-2019), directed by George Lucas, is a science fiction (fiction based on imagined future scientific or technological advances and major social or environmental changes) saga that takes place in the outer space universe. The whole story is an intergalactic adventure surrounding the ongoing battle between the Jedi Order, which represents the bright side and the Sith Order, which represents the dark forces. Despite that were massive number of studies done on them as films of science fiction, few have looked at *Star Wars* from a perspective that would categorize them instead as nostalgia films. According to Fredric Jameson, a theorist and critic of North American culture and literature, the nostalgia film is a separate category (from historical films) that does not directly employ historical objects but exhibits a resemblance of them to reflect a longing for the historical past. Combining sections from the *Star Wars* films with Fredric Jameson's theory on nostalgia films, this essay attempts to explore the purpose of George Lucas blending elements of the past with futuristic designs and seeks to argue that nostalgia was the intended overall atmosphere of the franchise.

Keywords: *Star Wars*, science fiction, futuristic designs, nostalgia films.

1. Introduction

The *Star Wars* franchise is a science fiction saga directed by George Lucas. The original *Star Wars* trilogy consists of "A New Hope" (1977), "The Empire Strikes Back" (1980), and "Return of the Jedi" (1983). These films follow the journey of Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Han Solo, and other characters as they battle the Galactic Empire. The prequel trilogy, released between 1999 and 2005, consists of "The Phantom Menace" (1999), "Attack of the Clones" (2002), and "Revenge of the Sith" (2005). These films explore the rise of Darth Vader, the fall of the Jedi Order, and the transformation of the Galactic Republic into the Empire. The sequel trilogy, released between 2015 and 2019, consists of "The Force Awakens" (2015), "The Last Jedi" (2017), and "The Rise of Skywalker" (2019). These films continue the story of the original characters while introducing new heroes and villains in the struggle between the Resistance and the First Order. The franchise has had a profound impact on popular culture, inspiring generations of fans with its iconic characters, memorable quotes, and timeless themes of heroism, redemption, and the battle between good and evil. Not only were they considered a typical representative of the science fiction genre, but the *Star Wars* films were also influenced by earlier history and cultures, which makes them worthwhile to study. This essay will mainly examine the original trilogy that was released between 1977 and 1983, using examples from which to support the claim. Having the effect of nostalgia, the saga aligns with what Fredric Jameson

described as "nostalgia films", a supposedly separate category of films that evoke a longing for the past.

Prior studies and research mainly focus on the investigation of how Star Wars and nostalgia films construct and manipulate memories and how the audience respond to nostalgia films like the Star Wars franchise. Despite the fact that there is a significant body of research that examines Star Wars in correlation with nostalgia films, this paper provides a more contemporary or contextualized perspective on the topic, examining the purpose of Star Wars specifically adopting certain features, thus filling the gaps that have not yet been thoroughly explored.

The Star Wars franchise comprises various elements from or reminds audiences of the early 20th century, far before it was filmed, mixed with its abundance of futuristic technology. This paper will examine how the costumes, weapons, vehicles, and architecture in Star Wars meet those goals. This paper will also explore the meaning of this sort of design to be present in George Lucas' works.

2. Retrofuturistic Design and Nostalgia Films

The Star Wars franchise, as described by Dava L. Simpson as "well on its way to becoming a cultural phenomenon" [1]. has exerted a profound influence on multiple generations of fans. An analysis of the retrofuturistic designs within the franchise can illuminate how these elements have played a pivotal role in establishing the series' iconic status and enduring appeal. The incorporation of past and future technologies in the costumes, weapons, architecture, and vehicles of Star Wars represents a distinctive form of artistic expression. Exploring these design choices enables us to gain insights into the intersection of art and technology in the creation of immersive fictional worlds. Furthermore, the retrofuturistic designs in Star Wars possess the potential for carrying thematic significance and conveying messages about the universe in which the narrative unfolds. Through a thorough examination of these design elements, the research can uncover deeper meanings and themes that contribute significantly to the overall atmosphere of the franchise. In essence, researching and discussing the intention behind the retrofuturistic designs in the Star Wars franchise can enhance the appreciation of the series as a work of art and cultural phenomenon while also offering insights into the creative process and thematic depth of the storytelling.

Renowned for its seamless integration of retrofuturistic designs, the Star Wars franchise, directed by George Lucas, skillfully merged futuristic concepts and technologies with nostalgic elements from the past. [2] This distinctive aesthetic is prominently displayed in various aspects of the franchise, including its intricate costume designs, advanced weapons, grand architecture, and iconic vehicles. The incorporation of these historical elements alongside cutting-edge futuristic elements reflects a deliberate artistic choice that resonates with audiences. This phenomenon can be interpreted through Fredric Jameson's theory, which suggests that nostalgia films evoke a longing for the past, often tinged with feelings of loss and absence. In the context of the Star Wars franchise, this implied "loss" and "absence" revolve around the decline of a more idealistic and just society that existed in the past. The narrative suggests a longing for a time when the Jedi Order was at its peak, the Galactic Republic was flourishing, and there was a sense of stability and order in the galaxy. This bygone era is portrayed as a period of peace, prosperity, and unity, where democracy and justice prevailed. This blend of past and future not only enhances the visual appeal of the galaxy far away but also evokes a profound emotional connection, making the saga a timeless and beloved cultural phenomenon.

3. Past Elements and the Future

When Luke Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Han Solo, Chewbacca, and the droids C-3PO and R2-D2 arrive at Docking Bay 94 in Mos Eisley Spaceport on the desert planet of Tatooine, the camera brings audiences to a wide shot of the exterior of an enormous curiosity. "What a piece of junk", commented

Luke Skywalker upon this disk-shaped giant of a machine, to whom Han Solo responded, "She'll make .5 past light speed" [3]. The Millennium Falcon is a distinctive and iconic design, with its circular saucer-like main hull, forward-facing mandibles, and large engines at the back. At a closer glance, however, the exterior shows signs of wear and tear. Scuffs and scratches are visible, battered and scarred from years of use and various modifications, giving it a rugged and lived-in look that sets it apart from the sleek and polished ships of the Galactic Empire. Still, as the characters board the Falcon, the interior boasts several incredibly futuristic technologies that continue to captivate audiences. One of the most surprising is the holographic chess game, known as Dejarik, which is played on the ship. This technology projects and animates holographic creatures that battle one another, creating an immersive and interactive gaming experience for the crew. The ship's hyperdrive system is also a standout futuristic technology, allowing it to travel at incredible speeds through the vast reaches of space. Clearly, the Falcon blends elements of past and future technologies, technologies that far exceed its time; this invites further exploration into what this design choice may suggest about the overall atmosphere of the franchise.

The costumes in Star Wars also blend retro and futuristic elements. For example, the Rebel Alliance pilots wear flight suits, which came in conjunction with flight helmets [4], that resemble those worn by World War II fighter pilots; the blaster rifles used by the Rebel Alliance and the Imperial Stormtroopers are based on real-world firearms from the early 20th century but with futuristic modifications; the X-wing fighters and TIE fighters combine sleek, aerodynamic shapes with vintage-inspired details; and the droids, such as C-3PO, in the franchise often have a mechanical look, while still being capable of advanced functions.

The Rebel, based on the jungle-covered Yavin IV, is housed in a Mayan temple [5], exemplifying the deliberate choice to incorporate Mayan architecture into the fictional universe. This architectural decision not only adds visual intrigue to the setting but also symbolically connects the Rebel Alliance with the rich cultural heritage and flourishing civilization of the ancient Maya. As George Oakley Totten notes, "In intellectual attainment and the plastic arts, the Mayas of Yucatan excelled both the Aztecs and the Incas" [6]. This statement underscores the remarkable achievements of the Maya civilization in various domains, highlighting their advanced level of intellectual prowess and artistic genius. However, the civilization was conquered by the Spanish, who "unwontedly destroyed right and left, utterly (wiping) out the civilization" [6]. By incorporating the Mayan architectural style into the futuristic setting of the Star Wars universe, the filmmakers create a sense of nostalgia as viewers are reminded of real-world historical civilizations. Moreover, within the temple's stone walls and intricate carvings, it can be seen that Rebel soldiers operate advanced computers, communication devices, and spacecraft. This fusion of ancient architecture with futuristic technology creates a visually striking contrast that underscores the retrofuturistic aesthetic of the Star Wars universe.

4. Nostalgia Films: A Symptom of the Postmodern Condition

The deliberate fusion of past objects with futuristic technology resonates with Fredric Jameson's theory on nostalgia films as a symptom of the postmodern condition. Jameson argues that in a fragmented and mediated present, it becomes challenging to represent the present directly, leading to a reliance on nostalgia and the recreation of past styles. In his book "The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on Postmodernism 1983-1998," he explores how nostalgia films seek to reawaken a sense of the past associated with characteristic art objects from older periods rather than reinventing a picture of the past in its entirety. "Unlike American Graffiti, it does not reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality; rather, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period (the serials), it seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects " [7]. It could be seen that the Mayan architecture within the futuristic context aligns with this phenomenon.

The creators aim not to make a clone or an exact replica of past objects but to bring up fractions that suggest a period bygone [8].

One might object here that the utilization of the worn-out manner of the Millennium Falcon, costumes and weapons that resemble their counterparts genuinely used in past wars, and the Mayan architectural style within the futuristic setting of Star Wars can be seen as a creative choice aimed at imbuing the film's settings with a distinctive and visually captivating atmosphere. [9] Indeed, the blending of ancient aesthetics with advanced technology creates an intriguing contrast that enhances the fictional world-building and contributes to the immersive experience for the audience. [10] In this context, the inclusion of Mayan temple imagery and intricate carvings within the Rebel base could be interpreted as a way to add depth and richness to the visual storytelling of the film without necessarily carrying specific cultural or nostalgic connotations. However, this alternative explanation lacks depth. The theory of postmodern nostalgia provides a more nuanced understanding of the emotional impact of retrofuturistic designs in Star Wars. The theory captures the complex interplay between past, present, and future, tapping into universal themes of memory, longing, and the passage of time.

5. Conclusion

In the film series titled Star Wars, George Lucas merges futuristic concepts and technologies with nostalgic elements from the past, evoking a longing for a bygone era of peace, prosperity, and unity. This distinctive aesthetic is prominently displayed in various aspects of the franchise, such as the Millennium Falcon, which was designed to look worn-out but accommodated futuristic technology; the Rebel base on the jungle-covered Yavin IV, which took the shape of an ancient Mayan temple but contained future-looking technologies. Through this incorporation, the saga creates a sense of reminiscence for the past and, at the same time, not present past objects as they were, which aligns with Fredric Jameson's theory that nostalgia films are a new category that reflects postmodern nostalgia, which is characterized by a sense of loss and absence of a peaceful period.

References

- [1] Simpson, D. L. (2006, January). *Stormtroopers among us: Star Wars costuming, connection, and civic engagement*. Digital Commons. <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5067&context=etd>
- [2] Bate, J. (2022, February 13). *Star Wars is using nostalgia to move forward, and that's not a bad thing*. Game Rant.
- [3] Lucas, G., director. (1977). *Star Wars: Episode IV-A New Hope* [Film]. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. (Accessed April 2024)
- [4] Wookieepedia, Contributors to. (n.d.). *A new hope: The princess, the scoundrel, and the farm boy*. In Wookieepedia. Retrieved from https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/A_New_Hope:_The_Princess,_the_Scoundrel,_and_the_Farm_Boy
- [5] Cohn, L. (n.d.). *14 Must-see Mayan ruins in Mexico*. Fodors Travel Guide. Retrieved from <https://www.fodors.com/world/mexico-and-central-america/mexico/experiences/news/photos/14-must-see-mayan-ruins-in-mexico>
- [6] Totten, G. O. (1926). *A study of Maya architecture*. *The Military Engineer*, 18(102), 462-469. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44691275> (Accessed May 2024)
- [7] Jameson, F. (1998). *The nostalgia mode*. In *The cultural turn: Selected writings on the postmodern, 1983-1998*. Verso.
- [8] Jameson, F. (2004). *Introduction: Nostalgia*. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5(1), 3-9. <https://doi.org/10.17077/2168-569X.1112>
- [9] Nora, P. (1989). *Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire*. *Representations*, 26, 7-24. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520> (Accessed July 1, 2024)
- [10] Boym, S. (2008). *The future of nostalgia*. Basic books.