

FILM REVIEW

Star Wars, Hoyts Entertainment Centre, Sydney; Hoyts Cinema Centre, Melbourne

For all of you who have been undergoing extensive brain surgery, engaged in an under-the-polar-ice-cap submarine mission, or otherwise out of touch with Western industrial society, there is a film called **Star Wars** which has out-snatched the box-office successes of socko hits like **Jaws** and **King Kong**.

With **Star Wars**, the consumption nexus between art and advertising has found its fullest expression to date as promoters rush to sell their products via the film: **Star Wars** mini-posters in cereal boxes, **Star Wars** give-away glasses at take-away food chains, **Star Wars** badges and stills at trendy kids' clothes shops displaying space-suit weather gear, etc., etc. **Star Wars** surrounds and invades us, from theme music to bubble gum cards, from May the Force Be with You badges to the speech of our kids, most of whom seem to be cursed with total recall of the film's hokey dialogue. If you think you were weird when you pre-pubescently fell in love with Lassie, Black Beauty, and Cheeta, just consider the implications of anthropomorphising robots. Two of the "characters" in **Star Wars** are See-Threepio (C3PO) and Artoodetoo (R2D2); the former at least speaks, the latter merely bleeps.

Now, all of this slightly testy commentary relates to a degree of nervous exhaustion induced by the SW bombardment in both the public and domestic spheres, as well as a degree of bewilderment at finding my under-7s deeply enamored of both the inane and the inanimate. This is not to say that I am immune from some of the film's blandishments. It moves at a cracking pace, has some good lines and stunning visuals and special effects. Also, it is an orgy for genre enthusiasts, containing bits of just about everything: **Robin Hood**, **Shane**, **The Italian Job**, **Dambusters**, **2001**, **The Longest Day**, **Peter Pan**, **The Robe**, etc. About the only genre missing is the witty, intelligent and literate comedy crime drama like **The Thin Man** - where are you, William Powell, now that we need you?

At quite an obvious level, SW is about The Good Guys vs. The Bad Guys: way in the future, the Republic is battling to save the universe from the Empire's cold, tyrannical, technological

hegemony. The Republic's princess (don't ask me - apparently royalty and republicanism coexist quite merrily in the future, perhaps along the lines of that bland "self-determination" found today in demented, depoliticised constituencies like English Canada and Liberal Australia) sends a plea for help via R2D2 to Ben-Obewankenobe, one of the last of the powerful Knights of the Force. R2D2 and C3PO are guided to Ben by Luke Skywalker, the orphaned son of another Knight. After Luke's aunt and uncle are killed by Imperial stormtroopers in a manner evocative of Old Testament bloodbaths, Ben, Luke and the robots engage Hans Solo, a hot-rodding sky jockey to take them to the planet where the rebel Republican forces are regrouping, to rescue the princess, to steal the plans to the Empire's fortified, war-machine home planet, and by dint of human pluck, tenacity, and spirit, to defeat the Imperial forces.

Just in case any of you are sitting on the edges of your seats wondering how it all comes out, let me tell you that humanity and justice wins out over cruel, cold, computerised tyranny: after two thrilling Dambuster sorties down a Charge of the Light Brigade valley of death, Luke (aided at the last, crucial minute by Solo who, aw, gee, shucks, turns out after all to be the nice guy we all thought him to be under his hard, look-out-for-number-one self-employed entrepreneur exterior) drops the key fortress-destroying bomb. Tellingly, as the target nears, and Luke zig-zags his way down the approach run, he hears Ben's voice, urging him to trust in himself, in the power of The Force. Luke pushes away his computer targeting devices, and accurately unleashes his bombs on his own judgment. Result: Empire, 0; Republic, 1 - another win for love, warmth, humanity, republicanism, individuality, enterprise and grit.

Given all this monumental dualism and free enterprise special pleading, you'll hardly be surprised at the associations conjured up through costume and characterisation:

The Empire: Led by the icily malevolent Peter Cushing (of Hammer Horror fame), its supreme war council wear bottle green Russian-style uniforms, with modified Chinese collars. Their faces are stereotypically "slavic", stonily recommending ruthless, heartless, power-mad, order-obsessed actions (such as the instant destruction of an entire planet) without a blink.

The white, clanking armor of the Imperial stormtroopers symbolises the chilling, impassive, clinical sterility of the vivisectionist, and the Empire's starships are menacing, whirling, death machines in Nazi silver and grey.

The Republic: As befits pluralist ideology, the Republic is portrayed as a broad front of individually motivated right-thinkers. The rebel military leaders and troops are short-back-and-sides, clean-cut American types, wearing the khaki or orange loose overalls distinctly reminiscent of US Air Force scramble suits. They are presented as the valiant underdogs, whose commitment to freedom cannot be quenched. Outgunned and outmanned by the Empire, their weapons are multiplied by a cornucopia of Boy Scout virtues: kindness, courage, humor, ingenuity, determination and skill. It is no surprise that their starships are slim and streamlined, like souped-up versions of present day military jets.

The space dog-fights obviously trade on WWII films, and we identify with the Republican pilots and gunners, regarding the Empire's planes as depersonalised killers or "kills". Although the action is often spectacular, augmented by a sophisticated sound track which aurally situates you in the middle of the battle, you are never really moved because the film relies so heavily on hackneyed filmic conventions of good and bad, friend and foe, and the activities appropriate to each. The common-sense understanding that the world is "somehow" divided into those who want power and those who want freedom is massively reinforced; *Star Wars* is a profoundly ideological film. As organised, it is impossible to even consider the inappropriateness of the power-freedom dichotomy to our world where structures and processes generated out of capitalist contradictions and crisis management render pious good intentions meaningless as categories of social analysis.

Given the film's Cold War mentality, and the range of characters assembled as Good Guys - the individualist (Solo); the wise knight (Ben) whose commitment to Justice brings him out of retirement for one final, terrible encounter; the brave novice (Luke), motivated by love for the beautiful princess and loathing for his father's murderer; the resourceful woman (Princess Leia), whose tongue is appropriately tart for modern audiences; the loyal robots, and Hans Solo's animal mutant co-pilot, Chewbacca, devoted to their humans' cause - it is important to recognise how the film structures the Bad Guys.

Interestingly, the enemy is not monolithic. One might have expected that Our Heroes would combat some dread, inexorable historical process-like the Technology Run Amok, or Mother Nature's Revenge films of the '50s and '60s.

Instead, they are involved in two battles: one against the cold, technologised political power of the Empire; the other against the Dark Force of the human spirit which, through Darth Vader, the last of the Force's dark knights, has allied itself with order and Empire.

The Force, in a previous time, waged through its Knights the battle for good in the Universe. At some point, some of the knights defected, using their powers to link personal psychic resources to a kind of cosmic change, for evil purposes. (Well, I know it sounds silly, but that's what you get when you multiply the Round Table by the Fall of Angels, and divide by heavy doses of Freud and Svengali). The source of the Force's power means that the alliance between it and technology is an uneasy one: Darth Vader puts the double-whammy on an oafish Imperial strategist who dismisses The Force as mystical humbuggery. Such tension is a far cry from the usual *Star Trek* formula, which portrays a useful collaboration between science (represented by Dr. Spock) and human judgment, however emotional (as represented by the insufferable commander of the, yuk, starship, Enterprise, Jim).

As *Star Wars* develops, two modes of opposition emerge. The first, against the Empire, is conducted like a conventional war, with appropriate tactics, manoeuvres, and set-piece battles. The second, against the Dark Force, is conducted both by single-handed, laser-sword combat (e.g. between Ben and Darth Vader) and by a curious kind of Crusade. At bottom, the film is concerned with a quest - not for mere victory over the Empire, but towards the grasping again of those powers that The Force can unleash, positively, within one. Hence the pseudo-religious symbolism - Ben (Alec Guinness), is robed like a monk, his face registering the resigned, weary passion of an El Greco saint; the pilgrims, as in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* are led inexorably to the Enemy's heart. As in Frodo's journey to Mordor, the Good seek out and challenge the Evil. The film is rife with mediaeval crusade images, where doughty champions sally forth to do battle with infidels and dragons.

It is important to separate these two strands of villainy because the tendency is to dismiss *Star Wars* as just another space western, padded out with a grab bag of other genres and/or a send-up of everything. To the extent that the film recognises widespread feelings of impotence and frustration engendered by contemporary technocracy, and dissolves it by operationalising a triumphant quasi-religiosity, *Star Wars* validates the emergence of de-institutionalised Christianity. The film marks its crucial transformation - gone are the Jesus Freaks, gone is flower power, but here is The Force, a new wave of mystification.

- Kathe Boehringer.