

On The History and Politics of Star Wars: Death Stars and Democracy
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Chris Kempshall

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Review by Zoltán Kocsis

With a witty title comes a strong start and a thorough examination of the *Star Wars* universe from an academic perspective that is presented for wider audiences as well. Chris Kempshall's research is revealing the opposing or sometimes shared public and non-academic, subjective understandings of global and historical events by viewing and analysing the products of popular culture that originate from these different worldviews established by the vastly different cultural groups. In this case the academic lens fell on the *Star Wars* franchise that represents three different historical periods because of its process of creation. And aptly so, the author also reveals how society forms its own interpretation—and the effects of these interpretations—of history besides and outside academia. While the films and other media are predominantly of US origin, the book also provides an outlook on British history and contemporary events from an outside perspective, which makes this book relevant to today's global events, movements, changes and politics. The author, as a result, provided the first detailed analysis and comprehensive examination of *Star Wars*, compared to previous literature, on a complex, academic and intertextual level that accounts for all the films and most of the comic books, novels, television shows and video games from the franchise. His focus is on the portrayal and representation of real-world history and politics in the *Star Wars* universe.

First of all, the novelty of the book comes, on the one hand, from its aim to circumvent the issue of canonicity by attempting the creation of a more democratic and unique canon by taking into consideration all of the vast amount of literary works that are labelled with the *Star Wars* brand. Therefore, the book analyses literary works that were previously not considered as research material for academic analysis. Previously, a comprehensive and detailed list was collected and compiled in *A Universe of Star Wars Collectibles* by Stuart W. Wells in 2002 about all of the products that were related to *Star Wars* available at the time of its writing. However, it was intended to be a guide to collectors and did not include any analysis of the source materials, while Kempshall's work may lack the level of detail regarding the listing of products, it provides instead a tool to interact with them. On the other hand, the book approaches the different narratives as a web of intertextuality, especially by tying Lucas's narrative elements with that of other *Star Wars* creators and authors. As a result, the book also considers the effects of other authors alongside the contemporary events that are incorporated into the films, thus challenging the already established literary tradition that only the (now) three-trilogies are considered as the main medium within the established scholarship.

Second, for better understanding, Kempshall did a great job by providing the readers a comparative timeline of real-life events and the releases of different *Star Wars* media. Furthermore, the other favourable aspect of the author's work is the inclusion of interviews made with Lucas, the directors of the films and some actors as well. Through these segments, the reader is provided with excellent insight into the background and inspirations behind the origin of *Star Wars*. First of all, mythology plays an important role regarding the narrative, which presents the fight of good and evil. Second, we are introduced to the biases of George Lucas, who sees the democracy and the idea of the republic as the epitome of good, but not without its flaws. Third, there are the historical analogues with contemporary and past events, providing commentaries on the times when the films were made. In addition, there are sections dedicated to the Disney era *Star Wars* media which continue this tradition of including and providing a critical attitude to society, history, ideologies and politics.

Lucas is not a historian, hence the inaccuracies regarding certain elements shown in the films. However, the analysis of these aspects is the strength of the book, because Kempshall provides an opposition to the historian and academic narratives to establish that these films and other *Star Wars* related media are the epitome of how the public understands, perceives, and relates to historical events, processes and ideologies on a big scale. For instance, imperialism, nationalism and the notion of democracy and the ideologies behind them are a heavy aspect of the films. These are criticised thoroughly and put up against one another in the films, but at the same time their depictions are not faithful and complex enough, although they are true to the experience and the perspective of the public. It is fundamentally only a fiction, so Lucas is under no pressure, simply because he is not a historian to accurately reproduce these events, processes and notions. This is his benefit and the book's source of analysis, because he in his films turns these internal perceptions into reality about his historical-cultural-societal context in a faithful and believable way. Therefore, Kempshall's study provides a new perspective and a new way to contextualise and analyse the social, emotional, political, and historical content of *Star Wars*.

The book also underlines that *Star Wars* is not just the creation of George Lucas, it is also the creation of the public, through the vast number of books, comics, video games and other fanfictions that are written and created by groups and other individuals. Lucas and the other involved authors are turning to historical events and notions for inspiration, such as the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, Imperialism, and the cultures that they idolized or found fascinating. For instance, the Japanese samurais serve as the inspiration for the Jedi, the Anglo-Saxon and German cultures are the foundation of archetypal characters and fictional spaces. In addition, if we take the fictional space of Naboo then it is visible that the architecture and the planet are designed after the scenery and cityscapes of Italy. Similarly, many other cultures and countries provide basis to build a coherent and living-breathing world that is filled with diversity. For this reason alone, despite Lucas being of US origin, *Star Wars* is not just an American production, but it is a global one. Consequently, as it draws from the history of British imperialism and colonialism, just as much as it is inspired by the American counterpart, this too makes it obvious that British Imperialism is also not just a British matter, but a worldwide one.

Kempshall made sure to provide examples through the selected and analysed literary works to this process of creation, such as the inclusion of the War on Terror in the prequel trilogy and the first *The Clone Wars* television series. This trend was also present in the case of books, most notably in the *New Jedi Order* series of novels, where contemporary cultural elements are inseparable from the fiction, such as 9/11 and the authoritarian regimes that arose around the globe at the time of its writing and release between 1999 and 2003. The two directional flows of ideas between Lucas and other *Star Wars* creators are exemplified through the analysis and presentation of narrative elements within the story. For instance, the *Extended Universe* gave birth to Coruscant, which was depicted as the centre or the capital of the Galaxy and the Galactic Republic. This was the creation of Timothy Zahn introduced in the *Thrawn Trilogy*, whose idea was cemented by Lucas in *The Phantom Menace*.

The main idea behind the book is that real world implications and effects in today's politics are composing the core of the narratives of the *Star Wars* universe. So, there is a relationship presented to us, which is much more complex than *Star Wars* simply being a fictional universe; instead, Kempshall argues that it is truly a world analogous to ours. For example, before the release of *The Force Awakens*, as it is presented by the author, George Osborne, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer did not allow the iconic stormtroopers from the films to stand guard outside Downing Street in order to prevent any comparisons arising between the British government and fascism.

As mentioned above, the author also looks at other media outside the main films and the television series created by George Lucas and Disney. These, prior to the acquisition of the franchise by Disney, were known as the *Extended Universe*, and now they are simply titled *Legends*. Therefore, the book acknowledges the problem of canonicity, which creates a number of interpretations regarding *Star Wars* by the fans. However, for the sake of simplicity and the

complex nature of the matter, Kempshall decided to regard everything that is branded *Star Wars* as canonical, with which he diplomatically appeased everyone. However, from this complexity also spans one of the main limitations of the book, which was also acknowledged by the author. Namely, it cannot account for all the published materials, simply because of their complex and wide nature. For instance, only the vast amount of books published under the brand *Star Wars* is just too much to cover, let alone to be read by a single individual.

Regarding the book's argumentation and its sources for the historical reading of *Star Wars*, Kempshall establishes three main periods that correspond with the three trilogies. The Disney version of *Star Wars* is remodelling the Galactic Empire to be more akin to Nazi Germany; portraying the Rebels as the heroic allies of WWII. The prequel era films, which were released between 1999 and 2005, involve both the democratic challenges of the period and the US and British involvement and significance in the War on Terror. Therefore, with the controversies surrounding the invasion of Iraq and the workings of the United Nations, scenes in the prequel trilogy were included to represent the bombings of civilians and non-military objects, and war crimes that were committed on both sides. In addition, the breaking of the Galactic Republic stands as an analogue to the separatist and nationalist movements around the globe, while the original trilogy era films concentrate more on Imperialism and the revolutions to achieve freedom, such as the independence movements against the British Empire or the Vietnam War, the various proxy wars of the Cold War, and last but not least the uprisings against soviet occupation. As a result, both trilogies have in common the heroes' fight against totalitarianism.

The book accounts for contemporary issues as well, so it also presents a criticism of neo-colonialism through inspirations taken from the Second World War. As it is underlined, the sequel trilogy, especially the First Order, the New Republic and the Resistance provide a critique of the European Colonial Empires, and Britain in the spotlight in order to present a critical analogue between neo-colonial tendencies and the old colonial ways. This results in a unique outlook on the Interwar period in Britain that was historically challenged by and in the films which is compared to Nazi Germany, and the wish for peace by citizens, who had suffered enough. The result of the intricate political and societal contexts was the appeasement policy, in which Britain took a major part; and this is contextualised in the relationship between the New Republic and the First Order. Similarly to the Nazis, the First Order is being appeased and they are left to their own devices until they regained their strength to start a new era of war. Following this, the Second World War is also modelled in structure, from the initial defeat and failures of the allies, to their struggles and then finally, when they turn the tides, which are exemplified by defeat and retreat of the Resistance forces at the end of the eighth film and then the united attack of the allied heroes on the Emperor's seat of power in the final part, mirroring both Normandy and the race for Berlin. By drawing an analogue to create a criticism for the present through the past, these above-mentioned examples reflect the traumas of war, the exploitation of periphery and the tendencies of neo-colonial and modern warfare, such as the bombing of civilians and the economic conquest of war-torn Africa.

In addition, othering and racism, as well as their criticism, especially regarding the relation to non-British citizens, also appear on screen, which are contextualized through the comparison of Nazi bombings in Western Europe (e. g. the Battle of Britain) and NATO bombings in the Balkans (e. g. Bosnia). Similarly, the Empire is destroying multiple planets and kills countless civilians without batting an eye. Furthermore, Britain's criticism includes the treatment of its imperial subjects, which is done in the films through the treatment of the clones and the different alien species that are subjugated. Within this interpretation, the failure of democracy also mirrors the political challenges that Britain had to face following the two World Wars. For instance, these challenges include the extreme measures implemented during and after the war years that restricted civilian liberty, the control of the economy by the government, the ethnic questions regarding Home Rule and representations both in the political and everyday sense. Notably the inclusion of these scenes and analogues in the films reflects in comparison the modern challenges that the United Kingdom has to face nowadays, which also struggles with

identity related issues, the economic and social consequences of Brexit, and with the integration of immigrants.

While the book makes references to literature that deals with British history, especially regarding the First and Second World War, it does not present detailed analysis of the internal troubles other than referencing some aspects of them. As a result, the most important limitation of the book is also its main weakness, because it remains on the surface regarding the complex nature of socio-historical readings of literature. In other words, the book lacks academic sources regarding historical events and persons, and it also fails to present the effects and the connection between the social atmosphere and politics and ideologies. For instance, the appeasement policy is mentioned and drawn into analogue regarding the New Republic and the First Order, but the debates and discourse surrounding the topic are not mentioned and detailed despite their importance to the results, consequences and decisions that also affect everyday life. Neither Churchill or Chamberlain and their opposing viewpoints, nor the moral dilemmas of the era are cited in the book in relation to the topic. This tendency of the book, which is present in connexion with other topics, feeds into the black and white presentations of the various issues by the films that are also lacking in the finer details of certain political elements. Most noteworthy is the presentation of the Empire and the Rebels, where those who serve the Emperor are seen as pure evil without any complexity to their nature, similarly to the way Nazi Germany was associated with the devil in US propaganda; while the Rebel Alliance is purely comprised of good people, there are not even spies among them.

In contrast with other academic papers, dissertations and books that research and analyse *Star Wars*, Kempshall made the most complex intertextual analysis, which gives his book its main strength and uniqueness. As it is mentioned above, a compilation that contains all *Star Wars* related products had been written previously in 2002, although it is now outdated, but which lacked academic purposes. Furthermore, the book also shows mastery over a great deal of academic sources and references them, and even challenges and expands upon them, such as Chris Taylor's *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe* (2014), which serves as a basis for the establishment of historical analysis and comparison with contemporary issues. Similarly, Cyrus R. K. Patell analyses the filmmaking, philosophical and cultural background of the films that were released at the time of the writing of his book, titled *Lucasfilm: Filmmaking, Philosophy, and the Star Wars Universe* (2021). Comparatively, Kempshall puts emphasis on the cultural background and on history that is represented through the films and approaches mythmaking from the analysis of contemporary issues instead of ideology criticism, while still includes ideology in his equation.

A very similar undertaking by Michael Kaminski analyses the different cultural (including popular culture) and personal effects on George Lucas and his creation of *Star Wars* and the development of the narrative in the book titled *The Secret History of Star Wars*, which was released in 2007. The development of the plot and the different iterations of the narrative are put into the centre of the research and intertextuality does not extend to other *Star Wars* authors in such detail as it does in Kempshall's work. Therefore, *The Secret History of Star Wars* makes only a few references to other authors and works with only a handful of titles, while thorough examination is concluded on the different drafts and interviews with Lucas and the directors involved in the creation of the films. As a result, when reading *The History and Politics of Star Wars: Death Stars and Democracy* after Kaminski's work, Kempshall's book acts a sequel and extends on the academic discussion that researches the intertextuality, history and culture represented in what we know as *Star Wars*.

Additionally, Kempshall takes it a step further with the contrasting of the societal elements included in the different *Star Wars* narratives that results in a take that even totally opposite ideologies can exist in the same fictional universe, which relate and influence each other in a very unique way. Therefore, the book finds its place nicely within academia and covers previously unexplored grounds. The 2012 collection of academic papers, *Sex, Politics, and Religion in Star Wars*, edited by Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka, exemplifies the broad spectrum under

which Star Wars is researched. However, the scope of the collected papers reflects on individual aspects, while Kempshall's work is able to establish a metanarrative of intertextuality, which addresses most of the cultural and societal issues, such as race, religion, gender and sexuality among others. Furthermore, *The History and Politics of Star Wars: Death Stars and Democracy* can also contextualize these issues in the broader sense that the readers are introduced to a detailed timeline and historical context as well.

In summary, Kempshall provides a relevant understanding of *Star Wars* and how history, society, ideology and politics are reflected in popular media. Both the distant past and contemporary issues are discussed and challenged by the narratives. Moreover, the book introduces a new perspective towards the interpretation of the notion of nationality and Britishness. Mainly, this reflects on the author's interpretation of political and economic events, which in turn, combined with the diverse creative teams and people working on the franchise, also presents the various micro- and macro-groups' point of view that is transmitted through literature. Moreover, this analysis shows how both disconnected and shared, at the same time, is the audiences', the individual's and the different groups of peoples' understanding of politics, global tendencies and the economic context of historical events. In contrast with the different worldviews included in *Star Wars*, the common elements make it possible for the audiences to create a somewhat shared interpretation, based on George Lucas' fiction. Despite the book's minor faults in the grand scheme of things, it is an important piece and gives a unique insight and tool to researchers dealing with popular culture by providing analysis of previously not considered *Star Wars* media and by establishing a web of intertextualities between authors and literary works.