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EASTERN CULTURES ENTER HYPERSPACE. ASIAN INTERPRETATIONS IN THE POSTMODERN FICTIONAL UNIVERSE OF *STAR WARS*

Abstract

The article discusses inspirations from Far Eastern cultures present in George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga. This cinematic story is treated as a postmodernist text, in which references to earlier cultural works appear. More attention is given to the sequel trilogy, not explored in academic circles as much as the two earlier trilogies. These inspirations are analysed through the lens of Edward Said's concept of orientalism, with additional focus on the specific ways in which it was employed in the United States of America. In the conclusion, some reflections are devoted to audience reactions to the newest trilogy and the Eastern elements present therein.

Key words: *Star Wars*, orientalism, George Lucas, science-fiction, Far East, post-Saidian orientalism, postmodernism

There is little denying that George Lucas' *Star Wars* is one of the most culturally impactful multimedia franchises of the last half of century. Ever since the first screenings of *Episode IV – A New Hope*, the resulting films, books, comics, games and fan activity have constituted a text connecting people of at least two generations all over the world. It is therefore not surprising that it has attracted much academic interest over the years, having been studied from purely cultural and cinematographic angles, as well as anthropological, religious, political, economic and cultural identity perspectives.

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Throughout all of this research, two aspects are generally agreed upon: firstly, *Star Wars* as a text is a prime example of postmodernism in pop-culture (for a thorough examination of the first trilogy from postmodernist perspective see: Kapferer, 2000) and secondly, it is deeply inspired on textual, visual and spiritual levels by many different cultures – most notably, though, those of the Far East (see, for example, Wetmore, 2005).

The aim of this article is to outline the way those two topics intertwine in this cinematic saga. The topic is noteworthy since it highlights the unique way in which intercultural inspiration has been taking place since the 1970s up until the 2010s, a period characterized by massive political shifts and rapid globalisation, involving, at least theoretically, the intensification of cultural exchange on a daily basis. Additionally, the newest wave of *Star Wars* films involves a second level of postmodernist inspiration, since the new movies are to a large extent derived from the older ones, just as the latter were derived from classic American and Asian cinema. In order to properly analyse the issue of Eastern inspirations in the saga, three topics need to be introduced, namely: *Star Wars* as a cultural phenomenon; postmodernity in society, as well as art; and the ways in which Western people have been drawing inspiration from, but also framing, the East. Only after these aspects will have been properly outlined, shall precise examples of Eastern inspirations be analysed.

While a plethora of essays has been written about the original (*A New Hope*, 1977; *The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980; *Return of the Jedi*, 1983) and prequel trilogies (*The Phantom Menace*, 1999; *Attack of the Clones*, 2002; *Revenge of the Sith*, 2005), the sequels (*The Force Awakens*, 2015; *The Last Jedi*, 2017; *The Rise of Skywalker*, 2019) have yet to attract a comparable level of academic interest. Time appears to be the key reason behind this state of affairs: the audience is still waiting for the last episode of the latest trilogy – and the “Skywalker saga” in general – as this article is being written. Additionally, the essays on the older episodes have been written mainly by people who fell in love with them in their youth and only after obtaining academic degrees allowed them to bring the Jedi order into the noble halls of Academia, paving the path for the young Padawans of subsequent generations. The sequels have yet to get this kind of academic sentiment as the target audience is still of a young age. Nevertheless, the cultural implications of the currently unfolding series should not escape the attention of academics even now. While the very fact that Walt Disney Studios, which bought Lucasfilm in 2012 (Taylor, 2015), have taken upon

themselves the task which could be dubbed a popcultural equivalent of that of Franz Xaver Süssmayr – completing the *Requiem* after Mozart’s premature death – is in itself a noteworthy issue, an even bigger conundrum unfolds before the eyes of contemporary cultural researchers. The question is therefore: can a postmodern mythology for a globalized society be mass produced?



One of Queen Amidala’s many outfits in *The Phantom Menace* (1999). For 20 years, fans have not reached agreement on whether her iconic makeup is inspired by Chinese or Italian culture, or perhaps by a Renaissance-era Italian idea of Chinese culture (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/92/Queen_Amidala%27s_costume.jpg)

Various issues stemming from the above question deserve thorough examination, among which spoiler paranoia, and the ways in which mythological themes are made palatable for mass audience can be identified. However, the focus of this article is the international and intercultural aspects of the newest trilogy, which may be observed in Disney Studios’ conscious attempts at appealing to a very large variety of cinemagoers. *Star Wars* is no longer being created with American youth only in mind. While the most visible implications and studio’s reactions are certainly commendable, namely the inclusion of people of colour in prominent roles and giving the franchise its first female main protagonist (it is generally agreed that *Star Wars* trilogies’ have multiple main characters), it also begs the question: how are the different cultures comprising the target audience treated in this attempt? Most researchers exploring the Eastern themes

in *Star Wars* have reached the following conclusion, namely that “The danger, however, is that the Asian-named characters, wearing Asian clothing and expressing Asian ideas, are all played by European actors” (Wetmore, 2005, p. 124). With Asian actors, albeit by ethnicity if not by birth, finally being included in the cast (most notably Kelly Marie Tran, born in America to Vietnamese parents, as Rose Tico and Donnie Yen, Chinese, as Chirrut Îmwe), can it be said that the galaxy far, far away has eventually become the embodiment of the “good” Republic without its “evil” underbelly of cultural imperialism? Before giving any answer, however, the topic of post-modernism in contemporary culture must be introduced.

POSTMODERNISM IN SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Since more or less the early second half of 20th century, many social scientists have been proclaiming the emergence of a qualitatively new era in the global civilisation, usually called postmodernity. It is frequently characterized by post-industrial, service and informational occupations in the economy and the intensive intermingling of various elements from earlier cultural texts. Although sociologists are a bit less willing to agree upon the term “postmodernity” to describe current society, they mostly agree that economy, society, and culture do indeed function in a qualitatively different way than in the modern era, usually assumed to have ended after the Second World War. Two of the most interesting theories attempting to grasp the nature of these changes are late modernism and self-reflexivity, introduced by Anthony Giddens, and the precession of simulacra, as suggested by Jean Baudrillard.

Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist generally opposed to the term “postmodernism”, has this to say on the topic of what he dubs “the post-modern turn in social theory”:

Since the mid-1980s, advocates of postmodernism claim that the classic social thinkers took their inspiration from the idea that history has a shape – it “goes somewhere” and leads to progress. But this notion has now collapsed. There are no longer any “grand narratives” or “metanarratives” – overall conceptions of history or society – that make any sense. Not only is there no general notion of progress that can be defended, there is also no such thing as history. The postmodern world is not destined, as Marx hoped, to be a socialist one. Instead, it is one dominated by the new media, which “take us out” – disembed

us – from our past. Postmodern society is highly pluralist and diverse. In countless films, videos, TV programmes and websites, images circulate around the world. We come into contact with many ideas and values, but these have little connection with the history of the areas in which we live, or indeed with our own personal stories. Everything seems constantly in flux. (Giddens, 2009, p. 97, Giddens refers to Lyotard, 1985)

It is rather clear how the original trilogy of *Star Wars* fits into this description of cultural shift (at least in the perception of sociologists), namely, it is absolutely anachronistic, with the futuristic blasters intermingled with swordplay and royal houses fitted into modern democracy – essentially futurism being placed a long time ago – as well as pluralist and diverse, with lots of elements borrowed (or, pejoratively speaking, appropriated) from various cultures: the warrior-monk Obi-Wan Kenobi, resembling a member of Chinese Shaolin order, fits seamlessly alongside a clearly classic Western-cowboy-inspired Han Solo. It also coincides temporarily with Giddens' placing of the postmodernist turn in the mid-1980s, right after *Return of the Jedi* premiered. The prequel trilogy thus appears to be an escalation, but not an alteration of postmodern theme juggling. However, this renowned British sociologist has more to say about social and cultural changes of late, this time in the context of individual identity:

The self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible . . . We are, not what we are, but what we make ourselves . . . Otherwise, however, what the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours in which she or he engages. These are far more than just “getting to know oneself” better: self-understanding is subordinated to the more inclusive and fundamental aim of building/rebuilding a coherent and rewarding sense of identity. (Giddens, 1991, p. 75)

This may appear to be a misplaced reflection, considering the focus of this article is a multimedia text, rather than a self-conscious person. Though it could be said that *Star Wars* has developed a life of its own and has become much more than any of the creators anticipated – indeed, Lucas has sometimes compared the franchise to Darth Vader's armour and himself to Anakin Skywalker, both trapped and sustained by it (Taylor, 2015). The point is, however, that the creators themselves have been developing an increasing level of reflexivity over the texts they were creating. What is more, the same applies to the audience, especially intensely emotionally

engaged fans. So, while the films themselves have no self-consciousness, the people producing and receiving them have developed a high degree of reflexivity over what *Star Wars* is. A particularly clear example of this is a heightened degree of mythology present in the prequel trilogy: while the originals were created with a knowledge of film history and Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces*, episodes I–III were created as a myth from the start, because of three reasons: Firstly, the main idea behind the story was braver and more reflexive in its exploration of the myth it created; secondly, the audience was prepared to watch a myth; and thirdly and most importantly, the producers knew the audience knew it was watching a myth. The same applies to all the textual, musical, and visual aspects of the prequels. The sequels brought in the next breakthrough in that the creative team was not only highly conscious of all the cultural phenomena associated with *Star Wars*, but, as people who had come in “from the outside” of the already-developed franchise, they could also be compared to Giddens’ experts, meaning that the new generation of creators are simultaneously its producers, fans, and even scholars dealing with this topic.

If the application of self-reflexivity to the subject of a popcultural phenomenon may be a bit misplaced, one fitted specifically to culture may be more appropriate, while shedding light on a similar topic at the same time. This perspective, as suggested by Baudrillard, attempts to explain the changes in culture by placing them in the context of simulation. As he writes,

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself – such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences. (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 2–3)

This philosopher then further compares modern society to an allegorical country from Jorge Louis Borges' fable, in which the cartographers were so obsessed with recreating the land on a map that they eventually "draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly" (Baudrillard, 1994). While this description fits the creative process of the original and prequel *Star Wars* trilogies in that it involved recreating the already existing popcultural tropes, older film motives (aside from the Western-inspired Solo, one should also mention the humanoid robot C-3PO's and the planet Coruscant's visual parallels to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* [1927]), as well as elements from various cultures. The similarity becomes even more pronounced when applied to the sequels: the newest movies simulate not simply earlier cinematographic works in general, but earlier episodes of the same saga. One of the most frequent complaints about *Episode VII – The Force Awakens* is that it mirrors the plot of *Episode IV – A New Hope* almost exactly (though it should be noticed that *Episode I – The Phantom Menace* also has similar skeleton plot, albeit the similarities are less obvious). The robot BB-8 is not inspired by robots from any other earlier science-fiction classic, but R2-D2 himself (in fact, right after *Episode VII* premiered, fanarts often featured the older droid saying the eponymous "I am your father" line to the new one). Starkiller Base is essentially the Death Star, only bigger. Rey is basically Luke, only female, while Jakku is Tatooine in everything but name. And finally, Kylo Ren "breaks the fourth wall" by consciously trying to emulate Darth Vader, talking to the burned mask in a par excellence postmodern rendition of Hamlet talking to Yorick's skull.

However, this postmodern inspiration could also mean a further "simulacration" of the themes, where they become even more detached from their original meaning, even while appearing to be discussed more. John C. McDowell expresses this concern over an issue frequently brought up in regards to the sequel trilogy and related to cultural power imbalances, namely feminism. While he appreciates the creators' attempts at involving more women in the story and making the trilogy's main protagonist a woman, he also points out that Rey is a largely androgynous character, whose gender and sexuality play little role in her personality and story. In this way, the feminist potential widely recognized in the character of Leia, who, despite being a supporting character, became an icon for many women, only appears to be further explored by moving a woman to a central position, but is really nullified by making the psyche independent of the body. In this sense, these are no longer visual elements or storylines that get reused in

a postmodern fashion, but ideas, while the feminist potential present in the reception of the saga for forty years becomes frozen, exposed but unexplored (McDowell, 2019). Could the same thing be happening to the Eastern inspirations present in the original trilogy? Are they, while appearing more direct on a visual level, effectively nullified on an idealistic level?

A topic close, but not identical to postmodernity understood as a sociological phenomenon is postmodernism as a direction in art. According to the definition provided by the Tate museum,

Postmodernism can be seen as a reaction against the ideas and values of modernism, as well as a description of the period that followed modernism's dominance in cultural theory and practice in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. The term is associated with scepticism, irony and philosophical critiques of the concepts of universal truths and objective reality. (Tate, n.d.)

At first, this definition provided by a high-brow art museum may appear difficult to apply to a franchise aimed at mass entertainment. However, some of the latter elements of the Tate's definition come closer to the cinematic saga being discussed here: the emergence of this artistic direction in the 1970s, the oppositional referentiality to modernism – indeed, based on this definition alone one might get an impression that constant criticism of the former artistic era constitutes the only unifying feature of postmodernism in art – and, perhaps most importantly, blurring of the lines between high- and lowbrow culture. From this perspective, *Star Wars* could be framed as a mirror to Roy Liechtenstein's comic books inspired paintings, in that it is an entertainment franchise with conscious inspirations from mythologies, religions and traditional art from different countries and ethnicities. The apparent key difference between high- and lowbrow postmodernism, at least as exhibited by *Star Wars*, is that modernism is more of an inspiration than an object of criticism. Quite ironically, however, innocent playing around with conventions occasionally invites one to make a comparably deep examination of faith in modernist progress, as a sophisticated work of art.

ORIENTALISM IN THE USA

It may be believed that the above elaborations served to depict *Star Wars* as a text that is thoroughly postmodern. Therefore, one may return to the topic of inspirations with Asian cultures, by showing its elements in the

first two trilogies and then attempting to answer the question of how they present themselves in the sequels. However, some reflections on the ways in which the East has been a source of inspiration and an object of reference for Western artists must first be presented. The topic of “orientalism” was first introduced by Edward Said in his 1970s book of the same title. Its main argument states that the Orient is not an objective geo-cultural region, inasmuch as a concept created by visitors – or observers who have never visited the region they describe – from the West. Rather than focusing on the obvious negative stereotypes people tend to form of any “other”, Said focuses on what at first might seem a harmless if not positive phenomenon. Throughout the ages, Western scholars, writers and artists have been romanticising the East, indulging in its perceived exoticness and juxtaposing it with the Occident. At the same time, they appeared oblivious of the agency possessed by the peoples they were framing as the exotic promised land (Said, 1979).

Interestingly enough, Said’s legacy in discussions of popular culture is rather limited. This may be largely due to the fact that, as Hsu-Ming Teo points out,

Said was notoriously uninterested in popular culture. An erudite, highly literate and musically gifted man trained in classical piano, his personal preferences and professional focus with regard to the arts concentrated on “high” culture, whether in literature, art or music. (Teo, 2014, p. 3)

The author also criticizes Said’s assessment of orientalism in American culture: while the author of *Orientalism* views it as mostly an extension of French and British imperialism, Teo (2014) points out that Americans have a long history of “self-orientalising”. The westward conquest of the New Continent was often accompanied by conscious parallels to the biblical Orient, noticeable in the cities’ names (Salem, Canaan), interpretations of peoples and places encountered on the way (Native Americans as the Lost Tribes of Israel, Great Salt Lake as the Dead Sea) or even, on a more modern and popular level (the Luxor complex in Las Vegas). More importantly, Teo claims that American society (at least before the 21st century) was simply too diverse, too full of inner “others” to search for them abroad. That is not to say that orientalism is absent from American culture, but rather that it has always been of a different kind than its European counterpart. Where in Europe there was an intellectual dichotomy of the East objectified either

as a luxurious haven of unbridled sensuality or the despotic barbaric lands waiting to be civilized, the people of 19th and 20th centuries United States were focusing more on the former of the two aspects.

Teo's reflections on American self-orientalising are particularly useful in analysing the culture of 1970s, the time of *A New Hope's* premiere. This time, however, Anglophonic youths' exotic promised land moved more to the East, to India, China and Japan. It can be argued that George Lucas was one of the members of this cultural wave, a modern Byron for whom Western culture proved arid and who set out to find fulfilment in the exotic East, preferably one that existed 200 years earlier. This is not to discredit his talent as a director, any more than Said's writings were aimed at criticising Byron's talents as a poet. It is also not to say that his subjective experience of fascination with his imagined Orient was not genuine. What must be considered, however, are the consequences his observable orientalism in *Star Wars* had for interpretations of the saga among audiences from different countries.

ORIENTALISM IN SPACE?

In order to achieve the above goal, precise examples of far Eastern inspirations in *Star Wars* should be described. Two of the most thorough research studies concerning this topic in originals and prequels can be found in Julien Fielding's essay *Beyond Judeo-Christianity. "Star Wars" and the Great Eastern Religions* and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.'s book *The Empire Triumphant. Race, Religion and Rebellion in the "Star Wars" Films*. The former of these authors focuses, among other things, on the characters' names:

Queen Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman) is Luke Skywalker's mother and the wife of Anakin. Her first name comes from the Sanskrit word Padma; the lotus flower that is a symbol of purity and lucidity. Many Hindu deities and Buddhist figures sit on a lotus, including Brahma, Lakshmi, Buddha, and Maitreya. It is said that after Siddharta was born, he walked, and in those places where he had stepped, lotus plants grew. Her surname Amidala seems to recall the Sanskrit word Amitabha, also known as Amida, the "Buddha of measureless light". (Fielding, 2012, p. 26)

He also derives the word *padawan* from Sanskrit and associates the names of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn with the Japanese and Chinese

languages, respectively, though Wetmore, who also makes this connection, points out that the combinations of words mean nonsense in the tongues they supposedly come from. The latter author draws the cultural parallels even further, pondering if Kenobi changing his name to “Ben” when in hiding could symbolize the tendency among Japanese people to adopt Western names following the Meiji restoration. Both researchers associate the name of Master Yoda with Sanskrit, however where Fielding sees a connection to the word “yoga”, Wetmore insists it is in fact meant to mean “warrior”.

This minor disagreement is nevertheless insignificant when compared to the debate among fans, the importance of which becomes clear when considered that both authors claim that *Star Wars* draws a clear distinction between its “good” and “bad” characters: the former appear to have mostly Asian inspired names and the latter – Western or Latin. While this argument holds at the surface level, there are some crucial obstacles to asserting this is a consistent pattern, especially when it comes to some of the most prominent characters. The authors attempt to put forward the notion of Han Solo’s first name as having been derived from the name of a Chinese dynasty and, again, Wetmore goes even further juxtaposing this Eastern part with his Western surname, meaning “alone”. However, it could also be argued, and indeed this interpretation is more popular among fans, that “Han” derives from Germanic word for “he”. Fielding also admits that the “Eastern is good, Western is bad” divide does not hold when applied to the three crucial characters: Anakin (inspired, according to Lucas himself, by Ananke, Greek goddess of fate), Luke and Leia. The same central figures do not fit into the theory, according to which the moral symbolism of East and West is exhibited on the visual level: none of Leia’s numerous costumes can be described as purely Asian in style, whereas Darth Vader’s iconic outfit is clearly inspired by the samurai armour *yoroi*, which Wetmore admits in much detail:

The shape and sweep of Darth Vader’s mask, his breastplate, and cloak suggests the formal armour of a samurai or daimyo. Vader’s helmet is a *kabuto* helmet with a *mempo* faceplate. (Wetmore, 2005, p. 118)

Though one could argue that this may indicate Anakin/Vader’s inner goodness, the argument falls flat completely when faced with the fact that Emperor Palpatine’s robes are also inspired by a kimono. Finally, the entire

theory of the clear moral-cultural divide barely holds water when the following statement from Lucas is considered:

I was very intrigued by a lot of his movies because they were samurai movies, feudal Japan. The look of them was very exotic . . . and I found it very interesting that nothing was explained. You are thrown into this world and obviously if you know about feudal Japan then it makes sense to you; but if you don't, it's like you're watching this very exotic, strange thing with strange customs and a strange look. And I think that influenced me a great deal in working in science fiction because I was able to get around the idea that you have to explain everything or understand what everything is . . . You just put yourself into this environment. It's like the world of the anthropologist. You walk into this strange society; you sit there and observe it. (cited in Wetmore, 2005, p. 106)



A side by side comparison between an 18th–19th-century Japanese samurai armor and Darth Vader's popular outfit. The inspiration is generally accepted among the audience, though many point out that Vader's cape points to inspiration from medieval Europe as well ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Japanese_samurai_armor,_Royal_Arsenal_Museum,_Copenhagen_\(7\)_36361004436.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Japanese_samurai_armor,_Royal_Arsenal_Museum,_Copenhagen_(7)_36361004436.jpg); Darth Vader's armor: https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpngimg.com%2Fdownload%2F28343&psig=AOvVaw20ij2K5Zu0QmUXmPrFTS2D&ust=1574509981382000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCICJ1f_g_eUCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAJ)

In other words, Asian inspirations were mainly due to their perceived exoticness, rather than an attempt at subliminally showing moral superiority of the Orient over the Occident.

Nonetheless, this should not be a reason to brush aside Lucas' Asian inspirations completely. It should be noted that "The Creator" has frequently referred to Kurosawa Akira as his main inspiration for the stories in *Star Wars*. Not only does *A New Hope* have many parallels to the Japanese director's movie *Hidden Fortress* (*Kakushi toride no san akunin*, 1958) – aside from the general plot, it should be noted that, just as the older film is narrated from the point of view of two peasants transporting gold for the story's heroes, *Episode IV* is told from the perspective of the two droids holding the crucial Death Star plans. Moreover, one of the episodes of *Clone Wars*, acclaimed and beloved by fans, is a direct homage to the *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, 1954), as it involves Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi defending a planet of farmers from bounty hunters (Taylor, 2015). Notably, there was an initial concept of making *Star Wars* entirely in Japanese, with actors and actresses from Japan. Mifune Toshirō was the first dream candidate for the role of Obi-Wan Kenobi, the part eventually given to Sir Alec Guinness. It should also be noted that, while Lucas did not initially promote Kurosawa, as did some other Asian-inspired American directors, once he did, he put his money where his words were – literally, by funding some of the Japanese director's later films. It could also be argued that, through Yoda, *Star Wars* introduced to mainstream American cinema the figure of "the seemingly and deceptively harmless, wizened, crafty, benevolent, a little bit mysterious Asian man who is, in reality, a martial arts master" (Wetmore, 2005, p. 112), though the iconic nature of this character has a downside of all other representatives of this archetype, in that it is primarily associated with the small, green Jedi Master voiced by Fran Oz, rather than any Asian person. And finally, there is the matter of the Jedi order itself. Not only is its name derived from *jidai-geki*, a genre of Japanese stories settled in the feudal period and most frequently associated with films and television series based on them, but also the whole idea and rules of the eponymous guardians of peace in the galaxy are based on the Chinese Shaolin order of warrior-monks.

Having outlined the Asian themes present in the first two *Star Wars* trilogies, it is now time to return to the main question posed by this article, namely whether they are also present in the new sequel trilogy. Well, they have to be, if it is to be *Star Wars* trilogy at all. However, therein lies

the problem of postmodernity and simulation – if the inspirations from various cultures have to be a part of a galaxy far, far away by default, are they interwoven in a natural, thoughtful way, or are they only simulacra of inspiration, inserted but holding little to no meaning? How has the consciousness of global audience influenced intercultural inspirations? Going even deeper, if Lucas himself could not really understand or convey the messages of Kurosawa, thus making his own films simulacra, what can be said about the possible meta-simulation?

Although there are of course many elements inspired by Asian culture which the sequels simply “inherited” from their predecessors, most prominently the Jedi order itself, they cannot be considered examples of simulation. It is necessary to focus on the elements which were introduced in the new films. First of all, it should be noted that the sequel trilogy has so far introduced the audience to a limited number of new worlds. It can be assumed that, given the prequel trilogy’s relative unpopularity among fans and critics, the creators attempted to stay closer to the originals, which also did not boast an overwhelming number of cultures and peoples, though this last aspect is generally treated as a positive side of episodes I–III. It is definitely notable that among the new prominent characters (Rey, Finn, Poe Dameron, Rose Tico) there is a scarcity of Asian-sounding names, at least not in comparison with their prevalence in the prequels. However, the lack of obvious inspiration has not discouraged those fans conscious of *Star Wars*’ history of deriving names from Eastern languages, from searching for interpretations they just know must be there. Thus, the name Rey, mostly seen as deriving from the English word “ray” (and associated with the phrase “a ray of light”), has also been interpreted as based on a Japanese word *rei*, meaning “zero”, which some interpret as pointing at the heroine’s humble origins (Ariainstars, n.d.). Additionally, the sequels shake the already feeble divide of good characters having Asian names and the baddies having Western names. Though there is the positive character of Maz Kanata, whose name does have a Japanese sound to it, there is also a First Order employee Dopheld Mitaka, apparently a mixture of a Latin name and Asian surname (unfortunately, since his character is a rather minor one, there can be no deeper interpretation of possible moral significance of this fact).

While the names and visuals may be an interesting esthetical topic, there are deeper aspects to the consciously created Asian inspirations in the latest *Star Wars* trilogy, which also relate to self-reflexivity, or, more

precisely, fan-reflexivity. Fans, or even engaged “casual” viewers, know well that the saga draws inspiration from the East. And the creators know the audience knows. And the audience knows the creators know they know. Or at least, so they want to believe, apparently forgetting that target audience of *Star Wars* are children, whom one can hardly expect to be steeped in global cultural codes. The problem is, the aspect of Asian inspirations sometimes appears in the context of interpretation. It was a conscious choice on the creators’ part, and one obvious to anyone who has seen the older film, that much of *The Last Jedi* was inspired by Kurosawa’s *Rashōmon* (1950), most importantly, the sequences where Luke and Kylo Ren recall the same event from their own points of view, effectively producing two completely different stories. Though in both films the audience is eventually presented with what may be believed to be close to “objective truth”, the interpretative problem emerges. If *Rashōmon* is a story about futility of trying to construct one objective truth, then is the *Star Wars* audience supposed to interpret *The Last Jedi* in the same way, effectively brushing aside an event which triggered the current rift in the Skywalker family? The problem is that not everyone has to agree with this reading of Kurosawa’s film in the first place. What is apparent is that in some simulacric self-reflexive paradox, the interpretation of a *Star Wars* episode depends entirely on the interpretation of *Rashōmon*.

A very interesting phenomenon regarding Asian inspirations in *Star Wars* has emerged around the Knights of Ren. First of all, the name of the order and its only prominent member, Kylo Ren, appears to be derived from a Chinese word *rén*, signifying a person, as well as a Confucian virtue associated with altruism (Written Chinese, n.d.). At first, this may appear as a complete abandonment of the assumed moral symbolism of Eastern and Western languages and imagery. However, it may also be an indication that the knights are not as evil as their black outfits may suggest. Kylo Ren is, after all, a conscious simulacrum of Darth Vader and, in the story, Anakin’s actual grandson, Ben Solo, as such remaining the main focus of all fan debates over the saga’s ultimate message regarding redemption. Similarly, some fans derive the term from Japanese language, where *ren* signifies a lotus flower, thus drawing a parallel to Padmé Amidala, the character’s grandmother. What is even more interesting from the cultural point of view, however, is the status of the Knights of Ren themselves. As of now, the only things the audience knows of this group is their name, outfits (again, definitely Japanese in style, though one has to wonder whether

it is to honour the Earth's culture or simply Darth Vader) and little else. This does not stop them from already being highly popular among viewers, among whom they are already a subject of lively gender and race disputes. There is, however, a popular rumour among fans that the group was directly inspired by *Seven Samurai*, though until now the only confirmation of this is the number of knights. What is even more notable, fans do not only point out that, since *Star Wars* draws inspiration from Kurosawa, then it stands to reason that seven knights may be inspired by the Japanese director's famous film – this is in fact presented as another important argument that they may not be entirely malevolent, since the heroes of this 1950s movie were most definitely positive characters. Because of this, the eventual status of the Knights of Ren may be the best indicator of the sequels eventually emerging as either inspired by or simulating Asian cultures: if they do turn out to be a more morally complex group, it is a strong argument for the former, if simplistic “bad guys” with exotic names and styles – it is likely to be the latter.



A fanmade drawing inspired by *Star Wars Episode VII – The Force Awakens* and Japanese artistic style known as *ukiyo-e*, by Tumblr user Etodraws (<https://etodraws.tumblr.com/post/169618650905/japanese-ukiyo-e-star-wars-the-force-awakens>)

It is certainly far too early to proclaim a post-postmodernity, given that sociologists are not yet in agreement if “postmodernity” is even a correct term to describe contemporary society. Nevertheless, an interesting

phenomenon can be observed of late, at least within the confines of the entertainment industry: new films not only draw inspirations but are created in a way emulating texts used during productions that were themselves already considered postmodern. The *Star Wars*' sequel trilogy is certainly a prime example of this practice. While there are many topics that could be discussed in this regard, this article has focused on the aspect of intercultural inspirations, more specifically, from Asian cultures. It has been noted that the "Disney era" *Star Wars* films definitely deserve recognition on account of casting actors and actresses of different ethnicities, thus potentially improving the statuses of people who belong to them as well. It has also been pointed out that the inspirations drawn from the Orient by George Lucas may not have been as idealistically ideological as some interpreters would have it be. Because of this, it is difficult to pass the judgment on Asian elements in the sequels before the trilogy is complete, though some aspects have been pointed out, the development of which may indicate the status of inspiration – was it an honest idea, or only a simulation of inspiration?

Although the real answer could only be achieved through an in-depth interview with the creators of the latest trilogy, the popular perception may be what matters more to the informational society. It has been pointed out that the audience, or at least the fans, know in advance that *Star Wars* is bound to involve Eastern inspirations and look for them, despite the apparent lack of an invitation to do so. While academic analyses, like the one presented by McDowell, are certainly worth considering, it must also be noted that the audience is generally accepting of the way in which various social groups are involved in the story. Even if the themes do become more and more detached from the original meaning, in the manner described by Baudrillard, they do re-emerge as full of life in audience perceptions. Of course, while engaged fans are hardly representative of the audience at large, in the end it is they who create the entrenched public image of the saga's messages. At the same time, while discussing the – so far only potential – Eastern elements, people from all across the globe learn about the perceptions of viewers who grew up in Asian cultures. In summary, one can hope that even if mass culture becomes subjugated to increasing "simulacration", popular culture is there to reignite its themes with real life. Maintaining sufficiently deep respect and understanding concerning the themes global culture borrows from local cultures may be our only hope.

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