May the Force be with You

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Spoiler alert! *Our discussion encompasses plot points throughout the whole Star Wars saga.*

Among all the science fiction (SF) and fantasy sagas ever released, Star Wars has a very special place in our collective psyche. Renewing the codes of the genre and, perhaps, the codes of Hollywood itself, Lucas paved the way for the "blockbusters' era"[i]. Star Wars created a kind of nearly religious fervour among its most devoted fans. Hundreds of parallel stories emerged while the original films were glorified. The 1977-1983 trilogy took mythical proportions among the purists, who sometimes deliberately ignore some of its original flaws.

All generations considered, everyone at least heard about Lucas' creation. "Luke, I am your father" or "May the Force be with you" are not just quotes: they are cinematic emblems, parodied, for better or for worse, in a huge number of artistic fictions. Anyone, at the very least in the Western world, immediately recognizes Darth Vader, ranked by the American Film Institute among the three most iconic villains of the cinema. As for Jedis and lightsabers, they have become as emblematic as were the Musketeers and their swords decades ago.

More than a series of movies, Star Wars is definitely part of our culture.

From our perspective of research fellows in International Relations (IR), this series is like a rough diamond. At first sight, it may seem uninteresting, insignificant, even irrelevant. But beyond appearances, it quickly reveals a real treasure full of meaning, at least at two levels. While training Luke Skywalker into the use of the Force and becoming a Jedi, Yoda teaches him to look at things in a different way, change his perceptions: "No different, only different in your mind. You must unlearn what you have learnt".
Beyond the *Star Wars* movies, this quote reminds us of the importance of taking a different perspective to look at reality. Nowhere is it accomplished with more creativity and open-mindedness than in popular culture – movies, literature, visual art… International politics are no exception to that.

The Pedagogic Virtues of Culture, Underestimate, You Won't.

STATE OF RESEARCH

Scholars and teachers in international studies deal with the complex task of having to transmit dry and abstract concepts about a reality that can easily evade students, tackling issues of global politics, states relations and systemic trends. Facing this question, an increasing number of professors resort to popular culture to animate theory and stimulate students to integrate and handle the paradigms and concepts of the field. The growing amount of published literature on the subject – books, journal articles or blog entries – feed into this gap to provide examples and advice on the subject, for example: *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Nexon and Neumann, 2006), "The International Relations of Middle-earth: Learning from *The Lord of the Rings*" (Ruane and James 2008), *Battlestar Galactica and International Relations* (eds. Kiersey and Neumann 2013), *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (Drezner 2015).

We discern three general trends on the manner in which movies can be used in the classroom: first, those using movies as analogies to the political reality at the moment of the movie projection. Movies become a way of portraying politics, sometimes rather directly, sometimes more figuratively (such as in SF, Fantasy, Animated Movies…). Subsequent to this first trend is the depiction of a political and societal reality into which movies take us: for example, what was it like to live during a certain period? How did the balance of power affect the political life in the 19th century? Second, comparing the behavior of movies' characters can illustrate the debates animating the field of international studies (Ruane and James 2008). Third, the illustration of abstract theoretical concepts can be developed with the use of in-movie examples, with a double advantage: first, it connects the class and appeals to the newest generation of students by connecting them with their own reality (Ruane and James 2008); second, it offers "alternative reality data points" to enrich the discipline (Dyson 2015).

Yet despite the spectacular cross-generation success of the *Star Wars* saga – not mentioning the Expanded Universe – the literature on the subject is surprisingly underdeveloped – despite the high number of blog posts comparing the in-movie world to the in-reality one. This section is a small attempt to contribute to this debate, as well as to explore the ways in which *Star Wars* – and other popular culture artifact – can be operationalized by both the professors and the students in the field of international studies.

The first part of our commentary copes with the third aspect, i.e. the illustration of key concepts, issues and events through fictional worlds and references[ii]. We draw from Engert and Spencer's study (2009) on the several ways of using movies to teach IR to focus on *events* and *issues* approaches. *Star Wars* can be used as an analogy for a vast number of issues and events, which are central to international politics. Among others are the life span of a political system, congressional (in *Star Wars* senatorial) powers in foreign policy, the *War Powers Act*, terrorism, asymmetric and hybrid warfare[iii]. We will focus on the first of these issues in the following section. For explanation's sake, we will take the Episodes in chronological order (Episodes I to VI), not in order of film release (Episode IV to VI, then I to III). The second part deals with the first aspect of apprehending *Star Wars* in the classroom, namely contextualizing the movie to its political reality at the time it was first projected.

DEPICTING THE EVOLUTION OF A POLITICAL SYSTEM: FROM THE FALLING OF A DEMOCRACY TO IMPERIAL OVERSTRETCH

Either George Lucas has been gifted with premonition, or his sense of the political arena is outstandingly accurate – despite a number of authors decrying that "Politics was never Lucas' strength" (Masket 2014), or that "The Jedi Out of Politics, You Must Keep" (Bernstein 2014). Indeed, drawing an analogy of President George W. Bush's post 9/11 foreign policy from *Star Wars*' Episode 1, which came out in 1999 – as many did, can be seen as a stretch.

The fact remains that the depiction of a political system's life cycle is one of the central narratives of the *Star Wars* saga, which portrays, through the mains characters' evolution, the falling of a democracy and the rise of an authoritarian regime. Like most movies, *Star Wars* focuses on one

individual, or a small group of individuals, carrying the idea that it takes one (very motivated) person to change the course of things [iv] – what Bernstein refers to as movies' "Mr. Smithism" (2014). In a *Washington Post* blog, Alyssa Rosenberg thus notes that "in 'Star Wars', politics is always personal" (2014), thus highlighting that politics in *Star Wars* is "a function of the characters' personality traits" (Market 2014).

What derives from this is a strong personal characterization, at times stereotyping, of (political) types and ideas: Princess Leia, the fiercely revolutionary who fights for freedom; Han Solo, the pilot smuggler-turned-rebel who is driven by his attraction to Princess Leia and his sense of honor; Luke, the young farmer longing for adventure and searching for answers about his origins; Padmé Amidala, the Queen of Naboo-then-Galactic Senator defending democracy but becoming more and more disillusioned by galactic politics; Supreme Chancellor-turned-Emperor Palpatine, a.k.a. Sith Lord Darth Sidious, seeks ultimate power through the dark side of the Force; Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker, a.k.a. Sith Lord Darth Vader, is first driven by his desire to control death to save the ones he loves ("I will do whatever you ask. Just help me save Padme's life" to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, Episode III; later, to Padmé, in the same episode: "I am becoming more powerful than any Jedi has ever dreamed of, and I'm doing it for you: to protect you."), then devoted to the dark side of the Force and to his Sith Master Darth Sidious.

The prequel, Episodes I to III, narrates the fall into authoritarianism of a democratic system, parallel to the descent into the *dark side* of a young Jedi, Anakin Skywalker, who becomes throughout Episode III the (in)famous Darth Vader. This trilogy tackles the issue of fear and insecurity as drivers of authoritarian rule by consent, a phenomenon illustrated by Senator Padmé Amidala's famous quote "So this is how liberty dies...with thunderous applauses". The narrative of Episodes IV, V and VI revolves around a resistance group, the Rebel Alliance, fighting the authoritarian nature of the Galactic Empire and defending freedom – with the eventual death of Emperor Palpatine at the hands of his right-hand man, Darth Vader, who turns to the "good side" at the very last moment.

When relating this cycle of the rise and decline of the Galactic Empire with Political Regime Theory, different elements come to characterize the *Star Wars* saga as an example of imperial rule and authoritarian regime. The literature on political regimes is far from being homogenous, and a common typology remains to be found. Yet, the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism does not bring much debate. As Van den Bosch explains, authoritarian regimes are equivalent to autocracy, in that they "refer to the 'autonomy' of the rulers to create their own norms" (2013, 82). Drawing from Linz (1975), Van den Bosch differentiates authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, the former characterized by "the simultaneous presence of an ideology, a single mass party and concentrated power in the hands of an individual or a small group" (Linz in Van den Bosch 2013, 85). In that sense, totalitarian regimes gain legitimacy from their ideology. Authoritarian regimes, on the contrary, are much more unstable, as they rely on coercion to make up for their legitimacy deficit. Likewise, Brzezinski identifies a series of criteria for totalitarian rule: the "centralized leadership of an elite movement" wields "technologically advanced instruments of political power (…) without restraint"; totalitarian regimes are objective-driven, as they aim at "affecting a total social revolution, including the conditioning of man on the basis of certain arbitrary ideological assumptions, proclaimed by the leadership" (1962, 46-47).

We draw from these definitions to argue that the Galactic Empire emerges from the Galactic Republic as an authoritarian regime, over-relying on coercion and fear, aiming at establishing a totalitarian regime based on the Emperor's absolute faith in the dark side of the Force (and his overreliance upon his own capabilities), an ideology he struggles to impose. As instability grows in the Republic (Episodes I and II), due to Palpatine's manipulations of events [v], the Senate deposes Supreme Chancellor Valorum and transfers this function to Senator Palpatine, then giving him more and more power:

Mas Amedda: The Senate must vote to give the chancellor emergency powers. He can then approve the creation of an army without a vote.

Palpatine: But what senator would have the courage to propose such a radical amendment?

Eventually, the fear of instability and the search for security leads the Supreme Chancellor to declaring the "reorganization" of the Republic into an Empire (Episode III). As the literature on authoritarian regimes highlights, fear of insecurity becomes the first driver of regression into a "restrictive and repressive mode of governance" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 2013, 25).

Nevertheless, authoritarian regimes are among the most unstable types of political regimes. *Star Wars* illustrates this observation as 19 years pass between Episodes III and IV, leading the spectator to understand that these years have been used to consolidate the regime's power over the Galaxy. One would expect that 19 years of authoritarian rules would have led to a highly structured, centralized and institutionalized rule. While this is the case to some extent, Episode IV opens with Darth Vader and Imperial Stormtroopers searching for Princess Leia, a notorious figure of the Rebellion against the Empire. In other words, we are faced with the dissident voice of a small rebel group which goal is to overthrow the regime and restore the Republic, an illustration that "authoritarian regimes are inherently fragile because of weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, overcentralization of decision making, and predominance of personal power over institutional norms" (Nathan 2003, 6). The Death Star, the Empire's ultimate weapon that can destroy an entire planet, quickly appears central in Emperor Palpatine's plan to consolidate imperial power. Rather than ruling by force, the Emperor seeks to establish his authority by the fear of force. The Battle of Yavin, in which the Rebellion manages to destroy the first Death Star, thus represents a massive blow to the Empire's rule. Can the centrality of the Death Star in Palpatine's strategy be analyzed as imperial overstretch? Clearly, the reliance on military force and increasing military expenditures and efforts participate in the Empire's decline of political control – which accidentally is one of the elements characterizing imperial overstretch as defined by Kennedy (1988). The monolithic power consolidation of the Empire (illustrated by everything becoming "imperial", the Senate, the army, cities…) revolves around military coercion and Palpatine's faith in his own ability, blinding the Emperor into believing he can control everything. The fracturing of this fragile arrangement announces the beginning of the Empire's decline, which suffers its final blow in the Battle of Endor and the death of the Emperor and his right-hand man, Darth Vader. The high personalization of decision-making in the Empire cannot survive the death of the individual who ruled. Thus, illustrating the literature on the consolidation of authoritarian regimes, the absence of institutionalization and power-sharing arrangements, and the overreliance on military coercion appear as key weaknesses of the Empire.

A UNIVERSAL FICTION BORN IN A PARTICULAR CONTEXT

Apart from this undeniable pedagogic virtue, films are also useful in IR because of the insight they give on a nation's perceptions in a given period. For any research fellow working in a constructivist perspective, movies are a choice material. Siegfried Kracauer, author of the seminal *From Caligari to Hitler, A Psychological History of the German Film*, once wrote: "the films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media." He gave two distinct reasons. Firstly, they are never the mere product of an individual; the creation of a movie is always a collective process reflecting the beliefs of several persons. Secondly, films address themselves to "the anonymous multitude" (Kracauer 2004, p. 6) and must therefore reflect its most essential desires, values, fears and hopes. To this extent, what movies mirror are "not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions – those layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciensiousness."

To this starting point, we should add that SF has something more than any other type of artistic creation. In its essence, SF – just like

fantasy – is the best mirror of the world we have at our disposal. More exactly, it is the best mirror of a nation's perception of the world and of the principles that underpin it. Indeed, SF authors or filmmakers always start from a blank page: they are free to create their own fictional world(s). However, their creation has to be plausible for the readers/ viewers, so that the latter can actually relate to this new universe. Therefore, the creators pick up in their environment various elements they consider as relevant for their work and put them together. In this process, events that would never have been assembled in any other type of fiction are suddenly linked in a coherent and, in most cases thrilling, narrative. However, a small interpretative work is often needed to fully grasp the plurality of the various allusions.
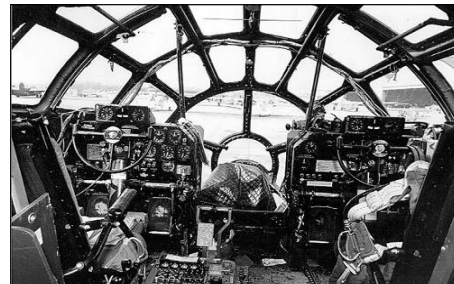
WORLD WAR II IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY

At this level, Star Wars is one of the best examples to illustrate how SF cinema renders the collective psyche of a whole generation. One of the main striking features of the original trilogy, and more specifically of the fourth opus – *A New Hope* (1977) –, is the omnipresence of World War II. This is clearly not a coincidence. Born in 1944, George Lucas belongs to a generation that grew among veterans of this conflict. The 1941-1945 era deeply affected the way Lucas and all the people of his age envisage war, international relations, and more generally politics. The basic plot, carefully examined in the former section, is typical of the political concerns of this generation: how can a seemingly peaceful Republic fall into the abyss of tyranny? Basically, the original trilogy is meant at answering this central question proposed by someone who was raised in the shadows of Nazism and its atrocities.

The War, as it is called in the United States, did not just influence the global political background of the saga. In plenty of more or less iconic elements of the original trilogy, the footprint of this conflict is clearly visible. We will just take two of the most striking examples:

1) The uniforms of imperial soldiers are clearly modelled on the ones used by the German *Wehrmacht* and *SS* between 1939 and 1945. Besides, the huge troops gatherings, such as those seen in *A New Hope* and in *Return of the Jedi*, resemble the enormous Nuremberg meetings filmed by Leni Riefenstahl in her *Triumph of Will* (1935).

2) World War II's aerial combats are Lucas' main reference for spaceship battles. After his saga's release, he admitted watching a lot of (now classical) war movies depicting dogfights such as *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, *The Dambusters* or *633 Squadron*. This influence can be seen in many sequences, but the ones involving the Millenium Falcon are perhaps the easiest to grasp. The Falcon's cockpit is indeed a copy of the B-29 *Superfortress* interior and it is fitted with manned turrets for its defence, just like its famous cousin[vi].

Cockpit of a B-29 Superforstress

Cockpit of the Millennium Falcon

This last point is not as anecdotal as it seems. In the 1970s, manned turrets were totally out-of-date: the few aircrafts still carrying them used remote-control systems. It is therefore not exaggerated to state that, in spite of the dawn of the nuclear age, World

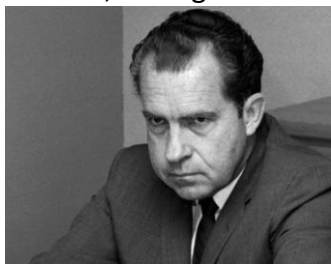War II widely conditioned Lucas' generation's perceptions of strategic issues.

WITNESSING A LOSS OF FAITH

Even if World War II is omnipresent throughout the saga, it is not Lucas' only political and strategic reference. What happened in the United States when the director was a young adult also influenced his creation. Let's take a look at Emperor Palpatine, a former Senator of the Galactic Senate who, through a series of evil means, created tension and panic in the Republic to gain absolute power. This character does not so much evoke Adolf Hitler as Richard Nixon, who resigned just three years before the release of the first opus. It should indeed be reminded that Watergate is not just a political scandal: it is an event that marked a breakdown of trust between the American people and their President.

Since 1974, the image of the Executive has irremediably deteriorated. To this extent, cinema was one of the first media to depict this change of attitude (Morgan, 2009). As Antoine Coppolani further confirmed it in his biography of the 37th President of the United States, Nixon was Lucas' main source of inspiration when he finally put a face on the Emperor's character in the sixth Episode (Coppolani, 2013). His appearance, his prominent nose, his grins… A closer look at this legendary SF figure, the true villain of the saga, shows the analyst how much the "Watergate President" had a powerful impact in the psyche of a whole nation.

Another crucial and well-known element of these times must be kept in mind when analysing the original films: the Vietnam War. Depicting a situation of empire overstretch in 1977 is not without significance. Four years earlier, the United States had left Southeast Asia, leaving an impression – at home and abroad – of defeat in front of an adversary that many had considered inferior. In one respect, the story of a seemingly almighty Empire defeated by a small group of Rebels appears as Lucas' unconscious rendering of this tragic conflict.

CONCLUSION

"There has been an awakening", dear colleagues, "can you feel it"? Popular culture is making its way into IR studies. The advantages it offers are many and our research only illustrates a small part of its richness. As we have seen in this paper, "pop" artifacts can be used in different ways, and offer interesting data points from which one can draw an analysis, whether we use them to illustrate theoretical elements or as references for studying certain time periods.

For several decades now, culture has been proved to be of importance for international relations theorists (see for example Wendt 1999 or Katzenstein 1996). Popular culture, however, is a different matter. Only recently has it drawn the attention of the field to enrich its debates. In other words, much resource remains at our disposal to dig deeper into the richness of books, movies, visual arts, etc.

Therefore, young Padawans, do not hesitate, and "Join the cultural side of the force".[vii]

[i] For an original and funny historical retrospective of the American cinema, see DEBBACHE Karim, CROSSED - 06 - Starfighter, 2013, available online, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YQad3qDkpo.

[ii] For brevity's sake, the authors decided to focus on these two aspects, while being aware that studying *Star Wars* and international relations would require an in-depth study.

[iii] A list that could probably be expanded with Episode VII, to be released on December 16, 2015.

[iv] The most striking examples are recent movies adapted from the young adult literature (*Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, etc.), which follow the same narrative thread. Other examples include *The Lord of the Rings*, …

[v] For a summary of the way in which Palpatine took control over the Senate, see Wookieepedia's page on the Galactic Empire, at http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Galactic_Empire.

[vi] HORTON Cole, From World War to Star Wars, available online, http://www.worldwartostarwars.com.

[vii] Image sources:

- *R2D2 and C3PO*: Kotobukiya, seen on www.lojamundogeek.com.br, 2015.
- *Yoda*: Wokieepedia, The Star Wars Wiki, 2013.
- *Lightsaber*: Wikimedia Commons, 2010.
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