

Star Wars

Essays Exploring a Galaxy Far, Far Away

Edited by

Emily Strand

Amy H. Sturgis

Series in Cinema and Culture



VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Cinema and Culture

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023936068

ISBN: 978-1-64889-671-2

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Foreword

Ian Doescher

It starts with wonder. It's different for everyone; for me, it was the creatures. It was Bossk; it was the Ewoks; it was Jabba the Hutt; it was Hammerhead (only much later did I learn his real name, Momaw Nadon). I saw *Return of the Jedi* at age six, sitting in the theater with my parents, my uncle translating into Japanese for my aunt in the row behind us. I made up stories with action figures. I watched *The Making of a Saga* to learn—and re-learn, after repeated viewings—how the magic was made. I stretched out my hand to see if maybe, this time, I could move an object using the Force. And my story isn't unique. While the details are different, I fell in love with *Star Wars* the way billions of people have since 1977. People just like you. It starts with wonder.

After the wonder, *Star Wars* becomes part of your cultural consciousness. No matter where in the world you go, you notice people of all ages wearing *Star Wars* shirts. You hear the theme music playing in Minnesota's Mall of America. You see a man in a Stormtrooper outfit in Belgrade. You hang out with members of the *Star Wars* fan club in Kuala Lumpur. You encounter life-size R2-D2 replicas at a London comic con. You realize *Star Wars* has a broader reach and has "become more powerful"—as Obi-Wan Kenobi might say—"than you can possibly imagine." You see *Star Wars* everywhere.

Next, you codify your thoughts and opinions. *Star Wars* is the modern mythology; you know its characters as well as you know your friends. If pressed, you could separate them into major gods (e.g., Leia, Luke, Darth Vader), minor gods (e.g., Boba Fett, Qui-Gon Jinn, Maz Kanata), and aetiological myths (e.g., how Han Solo won the *Millennium Falcon*). You form beliefs and take sides in longstanding arguments: Who shot first? Is *The Last Jedi* a work of genius or the worst of the bunch? Where do you stand on the Prequels? In what order should you watch the movies? You realize that in a gathering of 1,138 *Star Wars* fans, there will be 1,139 opinions.

Then, you make connections. You relate *Star Wars* to other important pieces of your life. People who love electronics build droids. People who sew make costumes. People who draw make fan art. People who write create fiction and nonfiction. There are *Star Wars* books about parenting, education, philosophy, religion, cooking, architecture, and the film industry (naturally). The stories

have been expanded, explained, and transformed into everything from comics to erotica, paper art to video games, arcana to academic articles, and children's books to, yes, Shakespeare. You make connections because *Star Wars* is part of your identity, and you want it to speak to your other interests.

Eventually—whether you're a scholar or a fan or some combination of the two—you seek out books like this one, which connects *Star Wars* to language, numerology, motherhood, art and artists, identity, and much more. With each page, you smile at familiar references, you grapple with new ideas, you reshape your thoughts and beliefs, and you emerge with a new understanding and appreciation of this thing—this film series, this story machine, this cultural juggernaut, this contemporary collection of legends—called *Star Wars*.

And in the end, you're right back at wonder. Happy reading, and may the Force be with you.

Portland, Oregon, January 2023

Introduction

Emily Strand and Amy H. Sturgis

After more than 45 years since its first release, can there possibly be *more* to say about *Star Wars*?

As the “acafans”¹ we proudly admit we are, we could be biased, but we suspect that even if 1977’s *Star Wars* had been the only *Star Wars* film, both fans and academics would still be talking and writing about it today. Of course, there is no need for such speculation. There are no alternate timelines to speak of in *Star Wars* as boggle the imagination in *Star Trek* and other franchises. There is no world in which that 1977 film phenomenon—one that saw audiences wrapping around blocks to see it and cinemas clearing the house between showings, when they’d never had to before²—was a stand-alone. George Lucas talked of sequels even as the first film was in production. But with now more than a dozen feature films, hundreds of novels and comics, close to 400 episodes of narrative television (and counting), and a distinctive and desirable brand serving up everything from toys to fashion, from kitchen utensils to cars, *Star Wars* continues to provide rich fodder for conversation from as many angles as there are visible star systems in the night sky over Mos Espa.

One need not be as ambitious as Anakin Skywalker to want to visit them all. But this is no small feat; the universe is still expanding, after all. As *Star Wars* stretches out in space and time, it only gains relevance. An obvious, recent example is the 2022 first season of the television show *Andor*, contextualizing one of the heroes of 2016’s critically acclaimed *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. Critics have noted real-world parallels to *Andor*’s depiction of unease and dissatisfaction morphing into rebellion in places like Iran, China, and Peru and among global activists concerned with climate change, reproductive rights, and

¹ This is a term for an academic who identifies as a fan of what they study, popularized by Matt Hills in his monograph *Fan Cultures* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2002), but forerun by Patricia Gillikin’s founding of ACAFEN-L, an academic group for the study of fandom. See “Acafan” on Fanlore, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Acafan>.

² Chris Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of a Multibillion Dollar Franchise* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 183.

racial justice.³ But this amplified relevance of *Star Wars* stretches backwards as well, as previous works in the franchise resonate in new ways for new audiences in new times. For instance, the Prequel films of the 1990s and early 2000s presently enjoy something of a renaissance, as demonstrated by new works that narratively explore those “Dark Times” in which the Prequel films leave off, like the seventh season of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2020), *The Bad Batch* (2022-), and *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022-). Indeed, even *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), a film many fans and critics point to as the worst of the franchise, carries a grim, new relevance in a post-COVID-19 pandemic, post-January 6, 2021 world in which American democracy is widely regarded to be backsliding. Turns out, when you look beyond the romance scenes between Padmé and Anakin that made some fans cringe in *Attack of the Clones*, one finds a darkly political film that poses important questions about the nature of fear and how it contributes not just to one man’s descent into evil but to the transformation of democracy into tyranny.⁴

This enduring and expanding relevance of *Star Wars* certainly helped bring the editors of this volume together. Our connection began as that of student and teacher; Emily Strand had taken Amy H. Sturgis’s courses at Signum University, an online institution for the study of speculative fiction. When Sturgis announced she would offer a course on *Star Wars* in the fall of 2015 in anticipation of the new films soon to be released, Strand eagerly registered. The space afforded by the course for observation, dialogue, investigation, and interpretation led to collaborations by Sturgis and Strand at conferences, in edited collections, and on podcasts. When an opportunity to co-edit scholarly volumes on *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* emerged, Sturgis and Strand came together as an editing team, drawing other scholars into the “larger world” of academic conversation on these franchises’ enduring and expanding relevance.

The essays ultimately selected for the present volume (and for its companion volume, *Star Trek: Essays Exploring the Final Frontier*, also published by Vernon Press) represent a broad range of scholarship by an international, highly qualified, and diverse array of scholars. Chapters herein astutely observe and fruitfully reflect on every era of the franchise from *A New Hope* to *Andor*, demonstrating the franchise’s continued resonance. Some chapters put the

³ Oli Mould, “Star Wars Andor captures the essence of resistance that is happening in the real world,” *The Conversation*, November 17, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/star-wars-andor-captures-the-essence-of-resistance-that-is-happening-in-the-real-world-194566>.

⁴ Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker, “Introduction, ‘The Circle is Now Complete,’” in *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy: You Must Unlearn What You Have Learned*, ed. Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 2.

franchise in dialogue, as Ian Doescher describes in the foreword, with the scholar's own academic expertise. Others take the franchise on its own terms, telling the story of some aspect of it in revealing, insightful, and sometimes critical detail. All chapters help readers gain awareness, insight, and appreciation for, as Doescher puts it, the "cultural juggernaut" that is *Star Wars*. (Doescher's own Shakespearean translations of *Star Wars* confront this juggernaut—in both its glories and faults—through his mastery of the clever genre of pastiche, increasing reader's appreciation for both Shakespeare and *Star Wars*. His works are highly recommended.) But *Star Wars* inspires critique as well as admiration, and many observations of the scholars whose writings fill this book are not unqualified. Indeed, one of the many ways in which *Star Wars* continues to assert its relevance is in the observable ways it has evolved and changed over time, often in answer to critique.

Exploring the Series and Films

This dynamic of change is readily observable in our first essay, a broad-ranging and compelling textual analysis of the evolution of Twi'leks from 1977 to today by *Star Wars* non-fiction author Amy Richau. Richau's sharp-eyed look at *Star Wars*' treatment of this iconic species, marked by their long, fleshy head tails and a certain sexual allure, tells another story: how the metaphorical Other has been perceived and presented in *Star Wars*—and how it might be going forward. It's a complicated story that resonates in a #MeToo world. In the next chapter, Vikki Terrile writes about a subtler but no less relevant strain of *Star Wars*: the importance of makers like Rey, Kuuil, Rose Tico, and others in the stories who, through their making, resist tyranny, giving us hope for a more vibrant existence—not just for ourselves as individuals but for our communities, our society. As Rose Tico says, the way we'll win is by saving what we love; Terrile's analysis invites us to consider the role of creative endeavors in fostering a stronger, freer society. Lastly, in this section, in focusing on a bleak, even misogynistic aspect of the franchise, Élôise Thompson-Tremblay's study of mothers in *Star Wars* performs important work, acknowledging the grim truth that motherhood in the stories makes even strong women disposable, passive, dispossessed. But Thompson-Tremblay's work also points up how essential these sometimes forgotten women are to the stories and their heroes. As *Star Wars* expands into the future, the chapter notes how its message about mothers shifts, as recent *Star Wars* television shows demonstrate. Perhaps motherhood—in *Star Wars* and in real life—need not sap a woman's will to live.

Exploring the Ideas

The powerful ideas that thread through *Star Wars* stories keep viewers coming back to the franchise, offering windows into larger concepts, and such vistas

of insight feature in our second section of the volume. Emily Strand's chapter, "21-87: Not Just a Number in *Star Wars*," spans the franchise to reveal the depth of influence of Arthur Lipsett's 1963 experimental film *21-87*, not just on Lucas but also on the creators who make *Star Wars* today. No matter what one thinks of the Sequel films, in their overt emphasis on rebelling against the Machine for the sake of self-actualization and—even higher on Maslow's hierarchy of human needs—transcendent connection with others,⁵ Strand's essay argues the Sequels are, in at least this sense, of whole cloth with the franchise. In "The Map in the Mirror: Reflections of Time, Self, and Salvation in *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*," Kathryn N. McDaniel argues that the mirrors both Rey and Harry encounter serve as metaphorical maps, pointing them through past, present, and even future realities to their own heroic destinies. Along this journey, the many striking parallels McDaniel identifies between these two heroes and their stories will fascinate those familiar with both franchises. Finally, in this section, Jennifer Russell-Long takes a creative approach to her argument that paratexts, like the *Star Wars* card game Sabacc, are an important way in which fans create and express cultural memory. Sabacc gameplay, she argues, offers material, ludonarrative experiences that effectively gain players a better appreciation of the many perspectives that make up *Star Wars*—not to mention real-world history and culture. (Russell-Long's chapter may also inspire you to acquire your own deck and give Sabacc, a storied blend of Blackjack and Poker, a try. We receive no commissions.)

Exploring the Multimedia Storytelling

Four chapters in the final section of the volume explore the important narrative and cultural contributions in other forms of *Star Wars* media besides the blockbuster films—or behind the scenes. Aaron Masters's essay on the complex moral perspectives in the video game *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II—The Sith Lords* provides a valuable contribution to both *Star Wars* scholarship and to video game studies. It also gives film-only fans of *Star Wars* a glimpse into the important characters, narratives, and ideas featured in other media. In "This is the Way: *The Mandalorian* and the Evolving Serial Medium," Paul Johnson explores the serial nature and production techniques of *Star Wars*'s first streaming television show, demonstrating how *The Mandalorian* adheres to fundamental aspects of the franchise while innovating new ways for at-home viewers to immerse in its alluring world.

The volume's final two chapters expertly explore behind-the-scenes aspects of *Star Wars* storytelling. Andrew Higgins's chapter, "From 'Utinni!' to 'Aliit

⁵ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 127.

Ori'shya Tal'din': The Glossopoeiac Journey of *Star Wars*," gives a fascinating and expansive view into a crucial but sometimes overlooked aspect of *Star Wars* world-building: invented languages. In his comprehensive study, Higgins chronicles the creative and problematic methods that marked the franchise's early approaches to language invention, mostly done through sound-capture. But Higgins also details how the franchise's approach to constructed languages has evolved and complexified over the decades, upping *Star Wars*'s conlang game and bringing opportunities for greater diversity and representation in *Star Wars*. Finally, veteran *Star Wars* fiction author John Jackson Miller expands our minds about the troublesome question of canonicity in the franchise's books and comics. His valuable insider perspective will help long-time readers of tie-in works better understand Disney's 2014 decision to de-canonize the Expanded Universe (or EU, now known as "Legends"). As Miller shows, there will always be a bit of truth in these "legends," as characters, planets, storylines, and other elements from the EU are harvested to feature in new, canonical works of *Star Wars* literature.

Author Chris Taylor says, "the greatest strength of *Star Wars* is what it doesn't tell you."⁶ Lucas left much of the world-building and narrative context off-screen in that first *Star Wars* film, inviting viewers to imagine for themselves, as the best stories do. The following chapters aim not only to expand our understanding of the many and multiplying narratives from a galaxy far, far away but also to help us grasp the many ways in which *Star Wars* resonates with our contemporary world. The future is always in motion, as a wise Jedi once said, and these essays provide a fascinating set of coordinates to explore. Shall we make the jump?

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⁶ Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe*, 180.

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Aaron Masters received a B.A. in Classics from Emmanuel College, Cambridge University, for which he wrote a thesis on the cultural impact of the Library of Alexandria. He then moved on to an M.A. in English Language and Literature from Signum University, which culminated in a thesis assessing the association between J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Gothic fiction. It was at Signum that he first studied *Star Wars* under Amy H. Sturgis, who convinced him that it might actually stand up to being taken seriously. He lives in Cambridge, UK and works for local government, largely in pursuance of the needs and whims of his cat. His interests are broadly academic.

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Amy Richau writes about *Star Wars*, pop culture, and history. She's the author of several non-fiction *Star Wars* books including *Star Wars Timelines* and *Star Wars: I Love You. I Know*. Her work has also appeared at StarWars.com, *Star Wars Insider*, StarTrek.com, and in the documentary *Looking for Leia*. Amy received a Film Studies degree from University of California Santa Barbara and studied film preservation at the George Eastman house. She lives outside Boulder, Colorado, with her husband, two children, and several pets.

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Éloïse Thompson-Tremblay has been fascinated with representation of women and queer people in films and media, particularly in science fiction and dance films, since she started studying films in 2015. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts, majoring in Film Studies and Art History, from Concordia University and graduated from New York University Master's program in Cinema Studies in 2019. Since then, she has worked in the visual effects industry in her home town

of Montréal and has strived to keep original takes about gender in films and media. Her favorite *Star Wars* character, unoriginally yet unapologetically, is Leia, though she has a soft spot for Han Solo.

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