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HHS 387-RA

22 February, 2023

Spaceballs: The Essay

The 1987 hit comedy release *Spaceballs*, directed and produced by the famous actor and producer Mel Brooks, quickly became a sensation for its unique and controversial comedic style. Starring Brooks himself, along with Bill Pullman, Rick Moranis, and John Candy, the movie is a parody of various science fiction franchises; with the most direct and obvious being *Star Wars*, but also references other works such as *Alien* and *Planet of the Apes*. The film's humorous take on science fiction attracted both positive and negative reviews upon its release. Through this essay, I will analyze the contemporary response to the film, the social and historical context in which it was produced, and how the form of the film uses elements of film art to create meaning. Ultimately, the enduring appeal of *Spaceballs* lies in its unique approach to comedy, and its reflection of the popular culture and Hollywood trends of the late 1980s, establishing itself as a standout product of its time.

The plot of *Spaceballs* centers around the evil Dark Helmet (Rick Moranis), an obvious mock of Darth Vader, and his attempt to steal the air from the peaceful planet of Druidia. A rogue space adventurer named Lone Starr (played by Bill Pullman) and his sidekick Barf (John Candy), a half-man, half-dog creature, are hired by Princess Vespa of Planet Druidia (Daphne Zuniga) to rescue her from the clutches of Dark Helmet and retrieve the stolen atmosphere. Along the way, they encounter a variety of bizarre characters and engage in a series of ridiculous adventures that send up the tropes and clichés of the science fiction genre. The film features an all-star cast of comedic actors, including Brooks himself in the role of Yogurt, a parody of the wise old mentor character found in many science fiction films, with the clear reference being Yoda from *Star Wars*. The humor in the film is often irreverent and absurd, with jokes ranging from puns and one-liners to elaborate sight gags and

physical comedy. For example, in one memorable scene, Dark Helmet demands Colonel Sandurz to stop the ship while it is traveling at its maximum speed, resulting in him being launched right into a wall. Despite its wacky humor, *Spaceballs* also contains some biting satire of consumerism and commercialization in modern society. This is exemplified by the character of Yogurt, who not only teaches Lone Starr about the power of the "Schwartz", being a spoof of the "Force" from Star Wars, but emphasizes merchandising and the importance of "Spaceballs: The T-Shirt". As mentioned before, the film contains several meta-references to the *Star Wars* franchise, including a sequence in which the characters watch a VHS tape of the original film to learn about their enemies' plans.

Moving on to its reception, it would take a novel to remark upon all the comedic complexities throughout this film, and while it was meant to poke fun at the thriving science fiction genre, the film has garnered harsh feedback and criticism from critics upon its release, citing its lack of originality and reliance on cheap gags. According to film critic Roger Ebert, "Spaceballs is a movie that depends on your affection for *Star Wars*, Mel Brooks, and goofy humor. If you don't have an affection for all three, the movie may not be for you." (Ebert 1987) This sentiment is echoed by many other critics who believe that the film's success is heavily reliant on the audience's familiarity with the *Star Wars* franchise. However, I would argue that *Spaceballs* may have actually had the opposite effect, instead giving more attention to *Star Wars* and the science fiction industry through its elaborate references. Furthermore, critics have claimed the film was trying too hard to be funny, which consequently made it more unamusing and harder to watch. In a review for *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby writes that the film is "never as funny as it should be," and criticizes the "loose, sometimes sloppy" editing and "too-bright" cinematography (Canby 1987). The film itself was never meant to rival *Star Wars* or be put on a pedestal, and perhaps the problem with a lot of the critical feedback projected towards *Spaceballs* was that critics expected it to contain a plot that didn't feel rushed while some running gags would be recycled throughout the duration of the film. Nevertheless, Canby goes on to praise the

"zany characters, goofy dialogue and elaborate special effects that are more elaborate than they are special," showing that the film had still achieved what it had intended. As Ebert puts it, "This movie is not greatness, but it is silliness, and that's a good thing sometimes," (Ebert 1987) and I agree that in the case of *Spaceballs*, it certainly is a good thing. In the end, the controversy surrounding *Spaceballs* is a testament to its enduring legacy as a standout product of its time, reflecting the popular culture of the late 1980s and the prevailing trends in Hollywood cinema.

However, to understand the film's significance in its time period, it is necessary to delve into its historical context. The motivation behind the creation of *Spaceballs* was in light of the widely recognized success and popularity of the *Star Wars* franchise, namely *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope (1977)* and *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back (1980)*, two films which many believe initiated the science fiction boom in both Hollywood and American society in general. The extensive use of practical effects throughout the film brought forth a new era of Hollywood where such techniques became the norm in generating eccentric fictional content in great detail. "The special effects helped set the pace for modern action movies," claims columnist Peter Suderman on how *Star Wars* redefined the notion of what a movie could be. Mel Brooks took note of these techniques, and as a long-time director and producer of classic satirical films, saw this as an opportunity to expand his palette of expertise while also having some fun in the process. In response to the great success of *Star Wars*, a movement of rampant consumerism sparked in the following years as demand for more outstanding products became commonplace. This new age of filmmaking with an emphasis on sales developed a focus on producing high-budget films with mass appeal and provoked changes in distribution and marketing, stressing the concept of merchandising. "When Star Wars became a cultural phenomenon, every kid had to have action figures, lightsabers, etc." (Time Magazine 2007) The science fiction empire created an epoch of collectibles that are still being sought after over 40 years later, and in the process, proved how valuable such commodities could be from a business

standpoint. Brooks himself was personally impacted by this, reflecting on how much his son Max adored the *Star Wars* movies growing up. "For his tenth birthday, he had a Star Wars–themed birthday party. And boy, did those kids love it!" asserted Brooks in his autobiography *All About Me!* "So I thought, Science fiction! Now there's a genre I haven't wrecked yet…" Being a comedian known for clothing seriousness with comedy, and a consequent history of bastardizing classic film genres, like his Western spoof *Blazing Saddles*, Brooks knew he would have a ball writing and producing his next destructive piece: *Spaceballs*.

Now let's turn our attention to the film's form. A variety of unique filming and production techniques were used to make this film in a way that supplemented its satirical nature. One notable technique used in the film was the utilization of miniatures to create the various spaceships and settings, such as the Eagle 5 and Planet Spaceball. As noted by film scholar Tom Shone, "the film relied heavily on miniature effects, which gave the movie's spaceships and sets a tangible quality that complemented the humor" (Shone 2016). Indeed, using miniatures in the production of a film designed to mock a movie like *Star Wars*, with a multitude of high-budget special effects and intricacies, was nothing short of crude, which worked well with Brooks' already rudimentary comedic style. *Spaceballs* is a comedy after all, and that means the visual effects can afford to be cheesy, with wobbly miniatures and visible matte lines guaranteeing the movie is a laugh-riot.

Filming in miniature behind the scenes on Spaceballs (Stan Winston School 2018)

Moreover, the film's humor and parody were largely achieved using slapstick combined with elaborate costume and makeup designs. Ebert inscribed in his review of the film that "Brooks and his cast approach the material with manic energy and a willingness to do anything for a laugh" (Ebert 1987). The character Dark Helmet's oversized helmet and suit were particularly noteworthy for their intricate and distinctive appearance that hinted at Dark Helmet's overcompensating for his short stature. This was also demonstrated in the beginning scene of the movie, where a drawn out shot of Dark Helmet's spaceship "Spaceball One" is seen, emphasizing the unnecessarily long expanse of the ship, providing an indicator to the audience of his own insecurities, and resulting belligerent behavior. Ultimately, the combination of these unique production techniques and the film's cheeky humor helped to establish *Spaceballs* as a cult classic that continues to entertain audiences to this day.

It is no secret that Spaceballs is an eccentric and iconic parody film that stands out as a prime example of Mel Brooks' unique brand of humor. It not only parodies popular science fiction franchises but also satirizes modern consumer culture. The charm of the film was enhanced by its unique use of miniatures to illustrate disparity, being among the first of its kind to do so, as well as its exceptional use of practical effects and elaborate costumes and makeup. *Spaceballs* was a success both commercially and critically, cementing its place in pop culture history. To this day, I still notice new intricate details injected throughout the film that further convey the comedic genius of Mel Brooks, such as "Spaceballs: the placemat" in the diner scene at the end of the movie. While some may view it as a silly and nonsensical movie, its ability to make audiences laugh and provide a fresh take on science fiction is undeniable. As Brooks himself once said, "If I don't have a good time making a movie, nobody's going to have a good time watching it." *Spaceballs* is a tribute to that philosophy, from which we could all learn to "laugh it off" more and stop taking everything so seriously.

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