

Technological Ideology and Robots in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*.

Project Proposal

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Area of Concern: Ideology, Narrative fidelity

Artifact

Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope. Dir. George Lucas. By George Lucas. Perf. Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher. Lucas Film Ltd, 1977. DVD.

Justification for Study

Praised, criticized and discussed by popular and rhetorical critics, *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* has been in the rhetorical hot seat as an example of how the technological advances of today closely resembles yesterday's science fiction. Jeanne Cavelos, an astrophysicist and writer points out, "while George Lucas may not have attempted to create a scientifically accurate universe, science may actually be turning his vision into truth" (xii). The idea that the current American technological vision is derived from film initiates a powerful discussion of how science fiction acts as a mold for the future realities in technology.

The future reality based on past fictional narrative signals the persuasive nature of the story. "Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric and wherever there is meaning, there is persuasion" (Fisher). This essentially means the primary contribution to persuasion is narration,

which refers to the symbolic actions of words and deeds that create meaning to the interpreters of the story (Fisher). *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* unwavering popularity indicates the constructed scenes leave enough room for audience interpretation, allowing the underlying ideologies within the film to maintain its force and power over time. This study intends to investigate the technological ideology through the development and maintenance of human-robot and robot-robot relationships in the film.

Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope is a depicted fight between good and evil: the Rebel Alliance seeks to thwart the Galactic Empire's hold over the galaxy. The film rhetors weave an underlying techtopian ideology, defined as an unidirectional technology that moves only towards the improvement of mankind and society (Walton), into the dominant civil war narrative that projects the enslavement of technology to serve humankind's goals. The hegemony of *Star Wars* is a masculine, white world (Atkinson and Calafell) in which a group of religious white humans dominates over all other classes, including robots. Da Cruz suggests there is a close relationship between modern technological ideas and religion (795), which entangles itself with the Hollywood white male-dominated lens (Semati) and the function of robots in the film. These intertwined concepts play a large role in the creation of science fiction films, thus contributing to the continued propagation of the future technological ideology and realities that influence the current perception of human-robot relationships.

Padgett claims our technological future stems from the idea that technology is dehumanizing and that humanity itself will be driven towards becoming machines. This is reflected in the critical theme regarding the human reliance on technology on both sides: good and evil. The narrative fidelity within the depicted human-robot relationship development scenes suggests that human reliance on robots is required in order to sustain life, substantiating the

ideology that human-robot relationships is based on robot servitude to man. The only group in the film that can subsist without technology are those characters belonging to both the Rebel Alliance and Jedi Order. The Jedis align with an invisible power, the “Force”, and learn to coexist with technology; they do not depend upon it for basic survival. The religious alignment with the “Force” to “God” is unmistakable, thus presenting the ideology that those aligned with “God” belong to the ruling class. This is evident in the scene prior to the destruction of the Death Star. The protagonist, Luke Skywalker, disengages the aiming technology and relies upon the “Force” to save the day. This is starkly contrasted with the antagonistic characters from the Galactic Empire that distort “God’s” purpose for evil and no relationship between humans and robots exist. The robots do not have faces or personalities and clearly utilitarian. Darth Vader is fully integrated with technology to the extent that he relies upon it to breathe.

However, despite the dependency on robots to survive and humankind’s ruling nature, a relationship between the audience and robot is established based on the anthropomorphization of the main robotic characters, R2-D2 and C-3PO. Human characteristics are typically demonstrated through reciprocity, self-disclosure, politeness and personality (Nass and Moon), all of which are continually represented in the Rebel Alliance human-robot relationships. After crash landing on a planet, Tatooine, C3-PO and R2D2 are arguing about the proper direction. C3-PO refers to R2D2 as a “near-sighted scrap pile” and walks off in the opposite direction. R2D2’s swivels his head to look towards C3-PO and back. R2-D2 chirps something to C3-PO, which elicits the response, “No more adventures, I’m not going that way,” from C3-PO. In another scene, C3-PO verbally expresses guilt when the Rebel Alliance characters, Princess Leia, Luke and Hans Solo, are screaming in joy after having been trapped in a garbage compactor. C3-PO misinterprets the screams of joy for agony and exclaims, “Curse my metal body, I wasn’t

fast enough.” Coupled with the integration of the robots into the storyline and their continued faithful service to Luke Skywalker, these scenes indicate robots are emotional beings; ones who think and care for humans and other robots. These characteristics contribute to human’s mindless acceptance of computers as social actors (Nass and Moon); socially constructing the way robots behave when aligned with good and socializing an idealized human-robot relationship concept that drives the technological future of creating and building robots that function only to serve human needs.

Evidence of the American past construction of the tectopian ideology and the human-robot relationship can be seen in the examples of human-robot communications today. Robots are currently constructed to mimic human empathy (MIT Media Lab) and an application called Siri, incorporates voice as both the command input and response output (Apple) changing the way in which Americans interact with and perceive robots. The examination of creative storytellers in film is critical in assessing how the imaginative past as represented in science fiction films informs the ideological future of technology. This study aims to uncover how the portrayal of human-robot relationships shapes the current technological ideology.

Justification for Artifact

Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope grossed \$775,398,007 worldwide since its release in 1977 and is the oldest film to remain in the Top 50 (Box Office Mojo), falling only slightly behind E.T. The film has won six Oscars and 35 other awards for best film editing, visual effects, music, sound effects, picture and other related awards (IMDB). Most critics were not impressed with the film’s lack of commentary on humanity and unique plot line, however most would agree it created a science fiction spectacle in theatres (Rotten Tomatoes). Top critic, Gene

Siskel, said, “It simply is a fun picture that will appeal to those who enjoy Buck Rogers-style adventures. What places it a sizable cut above the routine is its spectacular visual effects, the best since Stanley Kubrick’s ‘2001’.” A contradictory review from Roger Ebert suggests, “The movie relies on the strength of pure narrative, in the most basic storytelling form known to man, the Journey.” Despite the mixed reviews, *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* remains a classic with archetypal characters and plot lines that transcend time (Brode and Deyneka).

Research Question

How does the depiction of robots in 1970’s films shape the current technological ideology in the United States?

Method: Research

Owen and Ehrenhaus characterize the film, the *Green Mile* as the “crystallizing moment in American cultural memory of race violence,” (133). The introduction reveals the cultural memory of race in United States and the religious plot links with the five elements of the Christ story: man’s innocence, betrayal, punishment, sacrifice and redemption.

The study itself is organized into three distinct sections: History, Strategies of Reading and Implications. Within the context of the Strategies of Reading section, the authors construct three categories of conversation: melancholy, mourning and negative sublimity. Within these categories the critics detail both the positive and negative critical reviews and attempt to provide an explanation for their comments. For example, Owen and Ehrenhaus comment that negative reviewers, hindered by societal feelings of white supremacy, are thus compelled to voice their concern for concealment of historical race relations in the film in contrast to the positive

reviewers who envision that this film helps move beyond victimization and acts as possibility of social justice. Subsequent analysis is woven in between the primary categories and the implications section, detailing major themes that arose in the initial analysis. The authors suggest the protagonist of the *Green Mile* is crafted from the clay of Jesus Christ: born a simple man with special abilities for healing the ill, persecuted for actions that were not his own and eventually dying at the hands of the dominant class and for the sins of others. Finally, in the implications section, the authors work through the religious storyline and engage the reader in the memory of race relations and how the film's plot works to surface race and religious tension in the world today.

Owen, Susan A., and Peter Ehrenhaus. "Communities of Memory, Entanglements, and Claims of the Past on the Present: Reading Race Trauma through the Green Mile." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27.2 (2010): 131-54. Web.

Fiske argues that television shows are polysemic, meaning mass media in this form must be written in an 'open text' format in order for subcultures to generate meaning in addition to engaging in the negotiation and resistance of the hegemonic narrative. His introduction to television and ideology is the central theme to this article, which opens into unresolved contradictions within television scripts. Using the example of the 70's mystery show about a married duo of private investigators, *Hart to Hart*, Fiske analyzes the construction of the dominant ideology within the character text that constrains the audience, but leaves room for identification and allegiance regardless of the viewer's race, class or age group. Fiske categorizes the hegemonic narrative in *Hart to Hart* through the roles and symbols. In one example Fiske

raises the subject of the female heroine. He notes her role as a detective contradicts the hegemonic narrative. Scenes portraying her in a domestic or nurturing way are interlaced with the detective-focused scenes to smooth over the contradictions and guide the audience back to the dominant system. Fiske closes with how essential it is for mass media to include the 'open text' concept.

Fiske, John. "Television: Polysemy And Popularity." *Critical Studies In Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 391-408. Web.

Condit uses Fiske's concept of polysemy and audience interpretation of text as a basis for the analysis of a television episode, *Cagney and Lacey*. (1) Condit performs a short review of Fiske's work and the theoretical construct of the study prior to launching into the full analysis regarding an episode concerning abortion. (2) Condit outlines the plot of the episode and continues with her (3) method of analysis. Her method consists of obtaining viewpoints from two students, which are profiled within her study, detailing their responses to the episode's topic of abortion. Condit moves on to discuss (4) the ability for producers of television shows to publish content given the constraint of attracting and maintaining the largest audience as well as the oppositional coding within public messages, citing magazines and television shows. The (5) analysis at the end of the study, Condit indicates that while the masses may not be "cultural dupes," they are also not skilled rhetors that understand how public messages are constructed and thus may not be aware of the process and may not be aware of the mediated oppositional codes. Finally Condit (7) details of the plot of the television show from her perspective. Her analysis extends into the purpose of the television show as a means to address the abortion argument only

and there is no mention of practical solutions or steps for people to take; the television show did not become a public service announcement. However she argues that television is neither a simple pleasure, nor oppressive; indicating a balance that exists between the rhetors and the audience in the construction of meaning. The most interesting aspect of the analysis is the differentiation between hegemony and the dominant ideology. She states hegemony is, “a negotiation between elite and nonelite groups and therefore contains interests of the nonelite groups, though to a lesser degree” (17). This negotiated process means resistance to an ideology is to include resisting some of one’s own interests.

Condit, Celeste. “The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy.” *Critical Studies In Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 103-122.

Method

Using Owen and Ehrenhaus’ method, the rhetorical analysis of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* will introduce the artifact, the plot summary, film reviews, main characters, and technologies that are both visually and verbally expressed in the film. Additional research into other film analyses will aid in the further development of the research question. Deeper research and description of narrative fidelity and ideology will add clarity to the justification for study and the use of a thematic approach will maintain cohesion throughout the analysis. For example, Owen and Ehrenhaus approached their analysis using an established religious narrative and Condit used the theme of abortion. Following in their footsteps, the film’s technological ideology will be analyzed from a social constructionist perspective, in which I will discuss the technopian ideology and the robot-human relationship in the film, *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*. The analysis

will review the hegemonic structures, human reliance on technology and anthropomorphization of the two main robotic characters: R2-D2 and C-3PO and build a case for the techtopian ideology present in the narrative text. Within these broad sections, I will use Fiske's approach of providing detailed descriptions and examples of scenes and images that will enhance the reader's understanding of the analysis and provide quick references to the concepts explored in the paper. Using Condit's exploration of the limits of polysemic text, the socially constructed view of the techtopian ideology can be explored and elaborated upon through a comparative analysis with *Silent Running* (1972). Within both films, the individual story elements of religion, race and human dominance and be analyzed from a techtopian perspective with a specific focus on the human reliance on technology and the anthropomorphization of robot characters. The analysis will also incorporate the understanding of current day human-robot relationships, investigating the development of robots in the MIT Media Labs as a baseline of today's robotic reality. To conclude the comparative analysis, insertion of the trajectory of robotics as seen in academic journals would help identify the future proposal of the role and purpose of robots in society. Exploration of each of these elements along with specific examples and citations from other relevant rhetors in the field of science fiction will solidify this article's claims.

Finally, a conclusion of findings and a description of how rhetors can use this analysis to understand American technological culture will be woven together to describe the modern day techtopian ideology and view of human-robot relationships. Finally, the paper will close with an expressed paragraph of the limitations of the analysis and possible directions for future research.

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