

ASSIGNMENT SPECIFICATION

Student name:	Matthew Davies	Student P number:	P147044
Programme:	Contextual Practices	Faculty/School:	Art & Design/Contextual Practices
Module:	Major Written Project - Dissertation	Module Level (4, 5, 6, 7):	6
Module code:	M6X01791	Contribution to Overall Module Assessment (%):	100% (20 credits)
Lecturer:	Julia Lockheart, Timi O'Neill, Gwen Beynon	Internal Verifier:	Rob Charters
Assignment Title:	Dissertation	Assignment No (x of x):	1 of 1

Hand Out Date:	04/10/2017	Submission Date:	By 4pm on 13/12/17	Feedback Date:	by 31/01/2018
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Star Wars and Christianity

Star Wars is a Christian Film

A Film and Television Production Dissertation

For the University of Trinity Saint David

Digital Film and Television Production

Student Number: P147044

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Introduction



Image 2 – Star Wars logo

This dissertation will explore whether Star Wars holds any connections with Christianity and if it does, what are the connections between the two? Also, it will debate counter arguments against the outlook of Star Wars holding a primary stand point that promotes Christian beliefs.

This dissertation will investigate if Christianity is the only belief system that is promoted in Star Wars. When looking at Star Wars this essay will look in depth at the saga using some dialogue from the films and using different ideas and impressions from philosophers, and combining those sources to find out is Star Wars a window into Christianity and what it means to us as an audience watching Star Wars.

This thesis will also compare the similarities between Star Wars and Christianity and will consider whether there are other belief systems who find their ideals in saga. It will use these different sources to help balance the findings and will look at all sides of Star Wars to discover what spiritual aspects are present and how these could change what viewers think about the film in relation to spirituality. In reviewing the research and considering the results, the study will examine the messages being told in Star Wars and what can be learnt from the saga that could change how we see the world as we know it and change us as individuals. And as Obi Wan Kenobi said, "*The Force will be with you always*" (Star Wars - A New Hope, 1977).

Background of Star Wars

In a digital age, many films capture the heart of audiences worldwide. But none more captivating than the global hit film franchise Star Wars. Star Wars- *A New Hope* was created with an estimated budget of \$11,000,000 receiving an income of \$35,906,661 on its opening weekend in the USA also reaching a gross total of \$460,935,665. It also grossed a total overall figure of £190,762,521 in the UK (Lucas et al., 2017). The figures that have just been presented here show clearly the success Star Wars had and still has today. This suggests that the time in which Star Wars first came onto our cinema screens opened a new outlook on the universe. From Darth Vader's first encounter to Luke's journey through a New Hope nobody could have foreseen that generations later Star Wars would still be going strong.

A New Hope was released in 1977, and Star Wars soon changed the face of film and its emergence launched the genre of Science Fiction (sci-fi) into a new age of cinema. Star Wars was largely responsible for the rising popularity of sci-fi in the late 20th century. But the success of Star Wars didn't remain an isolated one-off success for the sci-fi genre. With each film's release from *A New Hope* through to the latest film in the franchise *The Force Awakens*,

with yet *The Last Jedi* soon to be released in December 2017, the success and rising popularity of Star Wars continues to retain its freshness with new and encapsulating storylines that leave audiences continually bowled over come the closing credits. With films constantly being released audiences are left wondering will the story ever end; but for now, the success of Star Wars is set to increase even more.

Looking at the success of Star Wars and how its grown from one man's vision to a global saga that reaches audiences on an international scale, it is important to consider the morals that lie within it that make it so successful. This work aims to explore the hidden messages within Star Wars. Although it will mainly focus on what religious elements noticeably lie at the heart of the story of Star Wars. It will explore in detail Christianity and what morals and concepts are imbedded into the story and will attempt to find out whether the writer, realising it or not, promotes Christian ideals to a world that is eagerly searching for meaning in the universe. Does Star Wars hold the key to creating a fresh perspective on religion and making it relevant for the world today?

Christianity

The second subject is Christianity. Being the most supported faith system in the world (Pew, 2017) and with Star Wars being a popular film franchise in modern culture today, it would be interesting to see if these two leading subjects in the modern era combine or differ in any way, and question the place of religion in modern culture today.

With this thought in mind it is important to consider the origin and history of Christianity. Doing this would make comparisons between Star Wars and Christianity clearer or perchance create more questions left unanswered. Christianity's central message is about the story of Jesus, of whom Christians believe is the Christ. The word Christ originates from a Greek word meaning 'anointed one' (Baker, 1995), which was a name associated with who God was and is and ever will be, yet who was at the same time a human being. The Christian message is founded upon the life of Jesus and his sacrifice for sinners and his resurrection in a mission to save humanity from destruction by a just God. However, Christianity is a younger religion than that of for example: Buddhism, Judaism and Hinduism (Benko, 1984). But not only that Christianity calls on much more ancient cultural wellsprings from places like Greece and Israel. This points out that Christianity originates earlier in history or even millennia before Jesus's time (Benko, 1984).

Chapter 1 - Portrayal of Religion in films

The big question to ask here is to know what makes Star Wars a Christian film. Then it must be asked what does make any film a Christian film. Firstly, in considering that religion can relate to elements within films one of these elements is violence. An example of this is within the film *The Godfather* (1972). In a scene within the film an order to kill some people is carried out off the background of a wedding at a church. This represents a juxtaposition between Religion and violence. Though it would not be correct that violence and Religion go hand in hand, what this does show is that violence can be evident behind or overshadow in the background of religion. So, when looking at how religion is presented in film there are many different elements that can come into view such as juxtaposition (Stone, 2016).

Another element appears when watching films that have religious themes in, and that is Religion as an aid to victims of violence (Stone, 2016). This element takes religion to comfort the characters suffering in the film. There are many films that hold this element and connection between violence and religion. There are films that promote this such as: *Saving Private Ryan*, *Titanic*, *Apollo 13*, *Independence Day* and *Armageddon* (Stone, 2016). The most recognizable use of this combination in film appears in *Titanic*, in the scene when the ship is sinking there are two sequences. The first sequence is when the ship is starting to sink the band begin to play the hymn "Nearer My God to Thee." And they play this hymn right up to the point where the ship goes bellow the lcey water. The second sequence where Religion acts as an aid to victims of violence is right up to the point where the ship is going down. A few people surround a Vicar at the back of the ship where he says the words of the Lord's Prayer as an aid to the passengers in their last moments before the ship fully sinks. When considering the way violence can be portrayed in films in relation to Religion, it shows that

religion can connect and differ from the use of violence; it either supports it or rejects it through righteous and redemptive actions (*Stone, 2016*).

Looking more directly at Christianity and what makes a film Christian in its presentation. Firstly, according to Lindvall (2010, pg. 2-3) "Christian films are designed to primarily preach rather than entertain viewers, they are generally made to emphasize moral and religious concerns rather than an aesthetic delight." So, when we consider what Christian films are it becomes clear that Christian films aim to point to something within the Christian belief system. It is also designed to work as a guide to Christians and in general the audience. An example of this is the film made by Mel Gibson called the *Passion of the Christ* in 2003. This film is a more obvious example of the aim of a Christian film to illuminate or point to Christian stories and to bring them into a visual art form that educates viewers and other Christians of the themes of the Christian faith (Lindvall, 2010).

Chapter 2 – Parallels between Star Wars and Christianity

Looking more closely at Star Wars we will attempt to see whether this global franchise shares any Christian elements that make it fit into the Christian film genre. On the surface, it would seem that Star Wars is a Christian film, since it holds one of the main Christian values: the concept of good vs evil which is one of the vocal driving points in the Christian faith. Further indicators to Star Wars possibly being a Christian film and what archetypes there are between Star Wars and Christianity will be explored.

Christian Archetypes in Star Wars

The first main archetype between Star Wars and Christianity is good vs evil. Although this maybe an aspect that falls under every religion in the world, it's a primary vocal and a driving point in the Christian faith highlighting the battle between God and Satan. This is clearly seen in Star Wars in the war between the Jedi and the Dark Lords of the Sith, with the Jedi representing the good and the Sith representing the Evil. Ingersoll, Nickell and Lewis (1980) made the connection between evil and the rise of the empire from the old republic, aided by the Sith or dark side. In consideration of this it could be argued that the good is represented by the Jedi and Rebellion.

Another big theme in Star Wars is redemption which is mainly pointed to in the character Darth Vader who was seduced by the dark side of the Force and only through his son his redemption arrives. Redemption is one of the major themes in Star Wars and the Christian Faith. The archetype with redemption within Star Wars and Christianity is mostly present in the Character Anakin Skywalker who became Darth Vader. His son Luke Redeems him and

finally destroys the Sith and essentially fulfils the Prophecy that he was the chosen one who would bring a balance to the Force.

One of the big features in Christian films are the Christ figures. A Christ figure is a symbolic or allegoric representation of Jesus in a character within a story (Reinhartz, 1999, cited in Kozlovic, 2005). In consideration of the Christ figure within film it needs to be asked who are the Christ figures within the Star Wars Universe. In consideration of the theme of the Christ-figure it is clear that Star Wars doesn't have one single character that resonates with the Christ-like character. But it does however present the characteristics of the Christ-figure into many of its characters who are in a sense Christ like. One example of this is the Character Obi-Wan Kenobi who gives up his life as a sacrifice to ensure the freedom of others. His death is of a mysterious nature. He doesn't remain dead. Rather he "rises" again to aid Luke and acts as a presence to Luke offering advice and instruction and reminds him "The Force will be with you always" which in essence is an echo of Jesus's parting words to his disciples (Matt. 28:20 cited in McDowell, 2007, pg. 111 and 112).

One of the characters that stands out as a potential Christ Figure within Star Wars is Luke Skywalker. One example of this is illustrated in the way Luke deals with the character Han Solo at the end of Star Wars where he passes his blessing "The Force be with you", providing a connection in the way that Jesus blessed his disciples before he left their presence (Deacy, 1999). Luke does possess other elements attributed to the Christ Figure in film. One of these areas is seen through the redemption of Darth Vader. Luke's love for Darth Vader, who turns out to be his father, is shown by Luke seeing the good within Vader when others have failed to. This could be connected to Jesus' quest to redeem humanity. Another element that connects Luke to the characteristic of the Christ Figure is the theme of temptation. The theme

of temptation is illustrated by the way Jesus was tempted by the devil to sin and Luke's temptation to join the dark side through the pull of Darth Vader and Darth Sidious in Star Wars *the Empire Strikes Back* and *the Return of the Jedi* (Adequacy.org, 2017).

The disciples that follow Jesus could be compared to Luke's companions that travel with him on his mission to save the galaxy from the Sith. This highlights the pull that Jesus had in attracting people like his disciples to follow him on his mission to save the world from destruction, which Luke also possessed. Another characteristic that indicates to Luke being a potential Christ figure is the theme of portrayal which is indicated by Judas betraying Jesus. This is shown through the character of Lando Calrison who betrays his friends when he hands them over to the empire in the *Empire Strikes Back*. Preacher Simon Perry (Simonperry.org.uk, 2017) notes that Luke's surname Skywalker is defined as "Heavenly Light Traveller." He goes on to discuss how Luke's battles with Darth Vader are a possible metaphor of the battle between Jesus and the fallen Angel Lucifer.

Another potential candidate for a Christ figure in the Star Wars universe is the character Anakin Skywalker. Although Anakin isn't a perfect analogue of Christ because of his succumbing to the dark side by the tempting of Chancellor Palpatine. McDowell (2007, pg. 62) states this as "the tragedy of Anakin Skywalker". Lucas himself spoke of this in relation to the character of Darth Vader who was the Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker before he turned to the dark side. He intended that he didn't set Darth Vader to be as evil as he appeared in *A New Hope* but through the prequel episodes I, II and III people then began to see the tragedy of Anakin Skywalker (McDowell, 2007).

In consideration of the character of Anakin Skywalker he does however possess qualities attributed to the Christ-figure. The character of Anakin Skywalker is one that most speaks of the supernatural aspects of the Christ-figure. This is strongly linked to Anakin's circumstances surrounding his birth.

*QUI-GON: [...] The Force is unusually strong with him, that much is clear.
Who is his father?*

*SHMI: There was no father. I carried him, I gave birth, I raised him, I can't
explain what happened. (Lucas, 1999)*

This is a strong connection to Christ's birth who was conceived through a supernatural intervention. Another strong link between Anakin and Jesus is the title of "Chosen One" indicated in a prophecy. This is a strong theme in the bible concerning how Jesus was the chosen one by God who would be sent to redeem humanity from destruction.

*Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul
delights I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the
nations. (The Bible New International Version, 2015, Isaiah 42:1)*

Similarly, in consideration of Anakin who also was prophesied to bring balance to the force and destroy the Sith. Although they do then differ because Jesus didn't fall into temptation and betray the people he came to save, however Anakin is flawed showing the human capability to make mistakes. Anakin's fall to the dark side completes the tragedy of Anakin Skywalker. However, he does eventually fulfil the prophecy and destroy the Sith through the redemption of Luke Skywalker his son (Decker and Eberl, 2011).

The Father and Son relationship in Star Wars is an interesting concept. In connection with Christianity, according to Weedman (2011), the relationship between a father and son speaks of a positioning making one greater than the other. In his study of the Father and Son in their

divinity, Weedman lays out the issue that fitting God and Jesus into this system creates a problem of position making the father greater and higher than the Son when the Bible clearly states that they are one in the same and cannot be divided as we on a humanistic level perceive the Father and Son relationship. Nevertheless, there are still elements that could possibly be connected to the Father and Son relationship aspect in Star Wars.

The Luke-Anakin relationship in Star Wars could resonate with the story of the prodigal son in the Bible (The Bible NIV, 2015, Luke 15: 11 – 32). This story pictures a relationship between a father and two sons, a younger and older son. The story focuses on the relationship between the father and the younger son as the son goes to a distant country and gets into bad habits and spends all his wealth. Eventually the son realises his errors and casts his mind back to his father and how well he treats his servants, so broken and ashamed he makes his way home ready to face the consequences for his bad behaviour and ventures back to his father to find he has been waiting for him and runs to his son and welcomes him home. This story resonates with the relationship of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader with the roles of the Father and Son reversed. Luke becomes the Father figure to Darth Vader and Darth Vader becomes the son that wandered from the path and got lost. Through Luke he finds the path and thus secures his redemption and fulfils the prophecy that Qui-Gon-Jin fiercely believed in *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace* (1999).

QUI-GON: He is the chosen one...you must see it. (Lucas, 1999)

The Luke and Darth Vader relationship is unlikely to have been based upon the story of prodigal son. However, they do hold certain Christian morals. These morals could be argued to be redemption, compassion and forgiveness. It is not clearly stated that Luke forgave Darth

Vader for his actions, but Luke does show compassion for Darth Vader in that he attempts to connect with Darth Vader's light side. In consideration of redemption, Darth Vader does redeem himself when he destroys the emperor which would not have happened if he had not encountered Luke. As discussed in Chapter 1, Christian films aim to inform the audience of Christian ideals. It could be argued that Star Wars is a Christian film based on its use of these ideals.

Chapter 3 –Star Wars: Christian film or spiritual film?

This Chapter will counter the idea that Star Wars is a Christian film using different religions that are evident within Star Wars. It will also contemplate Lucas's attempt to create a new mythology that would educate a younger audience.

Star Wars and other religions

There are many religions that claim to find its beliefs within the Star Wars universe. One such religion is Buddhism. Bortolin (2005, cited in Feichtinger, 2014) notes that although Lucas has a sympathy for the Buddhist religion he does not use it as a theme in Star Wars. Rather he uses it as a resource and a range of elements to add to the films a mystic atmosphere. Bortolin states that although Star Wars is not directly linked to Buddhism, it does powerfully relate to the teachings of Buddha. These elements of the Buddhist faith challenge the possibility of Star Wars being primarily a Christian film.

The argument that George Lucas created Star Wars to focus only on Christian morals as its spiritual themes is not certain. In an interview, Lucas discussed the meaning of Star Wars (Rose, 2014). He implied that he combined all faiths and myths to make up the spiritual aspects of Star Wars. Lucas (cited in McDowell, 2007) stated that he intended to educate a younger audience making Star Wars to provide a moral study, that contains palpable concepts that they could understand. He went on to say that there is always lessons to be learned, these lessons traditionally come from church, art and in a modern era we get these lessons from media and from movies.

It could be argued that Lucas intentionally designed motifs and beliefs from various faiths in Star Wars to act as a counter-image. It almost lies as a criticism of western culture showing

through mainly the Jedi to represent a peaceful, spiritual counter-image to ourselves (Feichtinger, 2014). Feichtinger indicates that the creation of Star Wars was a way in which Lucas aimed to criticise an egotistical and materialistic western culture. In consideration of this, it could be argued that Lucas intended these elements to remind audiences of the basic moral principles of spirituality he feared was being rejected by the culture of the time. This would explain the depth of spirituality within Star Wars making it a counter attack reminding western culture of the morals it had abandoned.

Star Wars covers such a wide array of cultural values that it could be seen as a religious experience. Lindvall (2010) appears to suggest that film audiences could be viewed as pilgrims. This could mean that film audiences are on a quest or journey to find something even if they don't know what they're searching for. Peterson (2017) stated that Star Wars fills a gap in a person, in their yearning for something beyond the universe itself. Peterson goes on to say that Star Wars is "a modern mythology." This creates a similarity with how religion is interpreted in modern culture. In consideration of this, maybe film can be a religious experience that could bridge the divide between audiences and religion. This would then indicate that Star Wars may not be a Christian film but a film that creates an experience of religion as a whole. This is supported by theologian Dr. Geisler (Oneminuteapologist, 2013), who states that Star Wars is possibly a pantheistic film, in that it portrays the Force as an impersonal God-like power.

A crucial element that made Star Wars such a success was the influence of philosopher Joseph Campbell upon George Lucas in the creation of Star Wars. Campbell sums up his interpretation of the Hero's Journey by stating his belief that "All religions are the same, but none are literal" (Brennan, 2006, para. 3). Campbell's statement implies that Star Wars is a

religious film, in that it represents good and evil which links all religions together. However even though Lucas may have intentionally created Star Wars to combine all religions together, Lucas has a Christian background and this likely had a greater impact on his storytelling than the other religions he came across. Schaff, Hauck and Herzog (1908) point out that religion and literature essentially come from the same place in that they are designed to deal with and ask questions that humanity has been asking for centuries.

Seastrom (2014) records the nature of Lucas and Campbell's relationship, noting that Campbell had such an impact on George Lucas that he called Campbell his "Yoda". They enjoyed discussing myth and most influentially *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* which had an impact on Lucas's filmmaking. Seastrom goes on to describe when Lucas introduced Campbell to Star Wars, it was soon clear that Campbell was more than impressed with what he saw. Campbell said, "You know, I thought real art stopped with Picasso, Joyce and Mann, now I know it hasn't" (para. 10). Even the infamous composer of the Star Wars saga John Williams stated in regard to Star Wars "The power resides in the experience equally as much as the understanding" (Seastrom, 2014, para. 11).

With Star Wars being a global franchise, it offers a connection with audiences on a wide scale. Star Wars has become so successful on an international dimension, as illustrated by the takings from foreign markets growing as the films progressed until they had surpassed the domestic figures when *Force Awakens* was released in 2015 (Box Office Mojo, 2017a; 2017b). In consideration of these figures it would appear to suggest that Star Wars has grown to such an extent that not only western culture is fascinated with the film saga. It also suggests that the popularity for the Star Wars saga grew right up to the relaunch after Disney took over the rights for Star Wars.

One country that embraced Star Wars when the original trilogy came out in the late 70s was Hungary. According to Google trends (2017) Star Wars as a search term was more popular in Hungary than any other country. This indicates that the Hungarian population is fascinated by Star Wars possibly more than western countries like the US and UK. The success in Hungary might be connected to the fact that the first Star Wars trilogy was released during the Cold War. Star Wars became popular as the first trilogy gained success in the US, but it was largely received in Hungary because they had more access to Star Wars and other western films at the time of the Cold War because the country's imports were limited less than other countries in Eastern Europe (Schneider, 2017).

Considering that the majority of Hungary at the time of the Cold War were Christian (Usman, 2017), this could explain why Star Wars was such a success. Perhaps the population could experience connections between Star Wars and their faith which allowed them to understand the reality of their faith through the saga. This experience could conceivably have been something inside them as they subconsciously connect to the film. This connects to Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious (Bratton, 2004). It could be argued that Jung would suggest that Star Wars is potentially a spiritual film rather than a Christian film because he believed that there is an unconscious part of each human being that makes a link to a religious instinct within us (Palmer, 2003).

With Star Wars being such a success internationally, it is interesting in consideration of who the original audience for Star Wars was. As already discussed, Lucas designed Star Wars to educate a younger western audience teaching them the spirituality that exists in the world. This explains why Star Wars has so many spiritual aspects in it as it offers a glimpse into spiritual life. However, as Star Wars has developed and grown as a franchise, it is unclear

whether the target audience has shifted from its original audience considering how other countries seem to have grown to love to saga. Other cultures may have embraced Star Wars more than western countries. This supports the idea that Star Wars is relevant for any audience regardless of who the actual intended target audience is.

Conclusion - Is Star Wars a Christian Film?

To conclude this dissertation, it is clear that the content of Star Wars is vast, and it is hard to argue that Star Wars is one thing because of how much spirituality lies in the heart of the saga. It does, however, provide us with the sense that there is more to life out there to be enjoyed. Star Wars provides the desire to explore and find meaning to everything which could be a part of what makes it so successful; it fuels something deep inside us to find out more. It is hard to argue one perspective of Star Wars against the other because each is backed up by its own evidence. This makes Star Wars hard to define, but that is the beauty of the saga. In consideration of the counter argument, Star Wars has strong content that makes it hard to say that it is only either spiritual or Christian. However, it is clear that Star Wars has elements of faiths, spiritual connections and Christian elements in it. This suggests that Star Wars is so open and capable of fitting into any faith that viewers from all faiths can connect to it.

It would seem from the evidence that Star Wars is a Christian film because George Lucas does have a Christian background and some of that built in connection with Christianity would have found its way into the story of Star Wars. It also possesses many morals and themes that Christianity promotes such as good vs evil, redemption, sacrifice and the idea of the afterlife. The force itself could connect to the idea of the force relating to God and the spirit. However, Star Wars could be a religion in itself because it is so successful and accessible to anyone.

Star Wars fits into so many religions and concepts that anyone can respond to it. This means that Star Wars can connect to anything that involves spirituality, which highlights the need to explore this further, meaning there is far more research that could be conducted. This research could help us further in order to see just how far reaching Star Wars is in terms of

its attempt to bring faiths together and bring an awareness of there being something more to life than viewers think. This further suggests that Star Wars is so influential that it taps into a part of everyone who watches the saga that makes Star Wars irresistible and timeless. More research into different religions could be explored such as Hinduism, Islam or Judaism to see how broad Star Wars really is.

This dissertation has shown clearly that Star Wars can resonate with viewers in a way that maybe no other film franchise has or ever will. This may be because it is set in a time and place beyond human understanding that fuels within every human being the need to explore and find out whether there is something more to life. Yet film goers who become pilgrims, as discussed previously, try to find that thing which keeps them coming back for more every time a Star Wars film is released. There will soon be people lining up to see the latest instalment of the saga, the most anticipated film *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, in an attempt to find that thrill and excitement that will leave peoples jaws dropping with delight and to rediscover that place that Star Wars endlessly finds in each of us.

Image References

Image 1 - <http://www.digitalspy.com/gaming/star-wars/news/a801635/star-wars-darth-vader-own-virtual-reality-game/>

Image 2 - <http://www.entertainmentbuddha.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/starwarswall-e1460596159123.jpg>

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