

One Christian's Response to "Star Wars – The Phantom Menace"

A generation ago, half a continent away, I stood in line on a hot summer day waiting for the next Star Wars movie. In those days it was an event, a daylong affair of waiting in one line to buy your ticket and then in another line for your particular showing. Choosing the "right" people with whom to wait and share the magical experience was crucial, especially since the waiting time far exceeded the viewing time. There was something hugely nerdy about dedicating so much time to a sci-fi flick, and yet enduring long waiting times, perhaps even for your second or third screening, was worn like a badge of honor even among non sci-fi fans. Star Wars clearly mainstreamed science fiction; it also saved Hollywood, reinforcing the blockbuster movie theatre experience that differentiated it from television and other diversions.

However, my experience of The Phantom Menace was not quite the same: we bought advance tickets over the phone and stood in line for less than thirty minutes. The show never even sold out. I felt sorry for the kids today who didn't wait all day, anticipation building like the slow ascent of a roller coaster ride, bonding with friends and strangers, speculating on what the next installment would bring. But then the cruelty of aging kicked in: easily one-half of today's audience did not see any of the Star Wars trilogy in the movie theatre; they hadn't been born yet. Nonetheless, through the miracle of the VCR, these younger viewers had probably seen the Star Wars movies many more times than I had, if the number of A Bug's Life video viewings shared with my five year old daughter is any indication.

What is it about Star Wars that attracts so many people, crossing lines of generation, nationality, religion, geek and non-geek, and now with Phantom Menace, even gender lines? Everything about Star Wars is a serendipitous combination of talent, work and luck. George Lucas is a master storyteller who, in addition to painting his canvas with the conflict and drama of good vs. evil and father-son relationships, understands all the elements of cinema that make for a moving experience. He understands the power of myth and how to reinterpret classic myths for today's audience. Above all he creates to please his inner muse, and thereby has also pleased hundreds of millions of others.

Star Wars stands as an industry unto itself. In addition to the movies, there are books, comic books, web site, toys, clothing, commercial tie-ins and parodies. In the mid 1980's there was a kitchen appliance spoof of the

Star Wars battle scenes entitled "Toaster Wars" with schlocky special effects but very steeped in the Star Wars spirit. In the mid 1990's there was a short video obtainable only over the Internet which spoofed the reality television show "Cops" in which a camera crew shadowed Imperial Stormtroopers on the planet Tatooine as they probed relatives and friends for the whereabouts of Luke Skywalker. Although Lucas could have sued for copyright infringement, he was so flattered by the quality of the spoof that he allowed distribution of the video, though only on the Internet.

Star Wars is so popular and engrained in our increasingly global culture, that one could paraphrase John Lennon's comment about the Beatles' popularity; that proportionately more people today know about the Star Wars mythos than those who know of the Christ story.

Is there anything that the Christian community can learn from Lucas' masterful storytelling? Can the Christian community garner the attention of and tap into the huge Star Wars audience?

George Lucas provides some insights in a recent Bill Moyers interview published in the April 26, 1999 issue of Time magazine (<http://cgi.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/articles/0,3266,23298-1,00.html>). He commented on recurring Star Wars themes such as the capacity to become, or do, evil. The most evil character (so far) is the intimidating black-clad more-machine-than-man, Darth Vader, who finds his strength in the dark side of the Force – something that is present in varying levels of every creature in the universe, whose potential is released as one trusts one's own feelings. In the Star Wars trilogy, Vader reveals to the hero of our trilogy, Luke Skywalker, that he is Luke's father, Annikin, and that he is bound to the dark side of the Force. At the close of that trilogy, Luke provides the opportunity for Vader to relinquish the dark side and come to the light: redemption. The compelling aspect of this year's release, "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace", is how a cute and gifted Annikin Skywalker, so much like any other nine year old kid, will grow up to become a personification of evil. Lucas states it's like trying to imagine what Hitler was like as a nine year-old.

The most interesting facet of this interview was Lucas' comments about Star Wars and religion:

MOYERS: *What do you make of the fact that so many people have interpreted your work as being profoundly religious?*

LUCAS: *I don't see Star Wars as profoundly religious. I see Star Wars as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily*

accessible construct—that there is a greater mystery out there. I remember when I was 10 years old, I asked my mother, “If there’s only one God, why are there so many religions?” I’ve been pondering that question ever since, and the conclusion I’ve come to is that all the religions are true.

MOYERS: Is one religion as good as another?

LUCAS: I would say so. Religion is basically a container for faith. And faith in our culture, our world and on a larger issue, the mystical level—which is God, what one might describe as a supernatural, or the things that we can’t explain—is a very important part of what allows us to remain stable, remain balanced.

MOYERS: One explanation for the popularity of Star Wars when it appeared is that by the end of the 1970s, the hunger for spiritual experience was no longer being satisfied sufficiently by the traditional vessels of faith.

LUCAS: I put the Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people—more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery. Not having enough interest in the mysteries of life to ask the question, “Is there a God or is there not a God?”—that is for me the worst thing that can happen. I think you should have an opinion about that. Or you should be saying, “I’m looking. I’m very curious about this, and I am going to continue to look until I can find an answer, and if I can’t find an answer, then I’ll die trying.” I think it’s important to have a belief system and to have faith.

MOYERS: Do you have an opinion, or are you looking?

LUCAS: I think there is a God. No question. What that God is or

what we know about that God, I'm not sure. The one thing I know about life and about the human race is that we've always tried to construct some kind of context for the unknown. Even the cavemen thought they had it figured out. I would say that cavemen understood on a scale of about 1. Now we've made it up to about 5. The only thing that most people don't realize is the scale goes to 1 million.

MOYERS: *The central ethic of our culture has been the Bible. Like your stories, it's about the fall, wandering, redemption, return. But the Bible no longer occupies that central place in our culture today. Young people in particular are turning to movies for their inspiration, not to organized religion.*

LUCAS: *Well, I hope that doesn't end up being the course this whole thing takes, because I think there's definitely a place for organized religion. I would hate to find ourselves in a completely secular world where entertainment was passing for some kind of religious experience.*

Lucas clearly believes in God and yet wisely remains vague, partially because the veil of his storytelling mystery (the cliffhanger!) was such an integral part of the first Star Wars trilogy's success. But his ambiguity is also wise in leaving each individual free to simultaneously delve further into him or herself and to explore outward into the bigger picture. Lucas' goal is for people to realize there's more to life than what we see (including movies).

This master storyteller wants us to leave his story and reenter our own worlds (and stories) richer for the experience. His vagueness allows us to see what we want to see and even if we see more than Lucas intended, as long as our imaginations are sparked, Lucas has completed his mission. This is as specific as one can be when using a mass medium like cinema.

As Christ-confessors we cannot build the same kind of audience Lucas has done with Star Wars. The gifts that Lucas possesses – of molding plot, characterization, drama, humor, pathos, music and special effects into a cinematic and thought-provoking journey – are special. We should be thankful that Lucas has found an outlet for his talent and points us to something greater than ourselves and sparks our collective imaginations. We should not try to compete for attention, especially with someone who is so good at it. We should tap into the pulse Lucas has found and build upon the audience that has already been gathered and point to what we know and confess in the mystery of The Story, that of the One who became one of us, who lived among us, and although innocent, suffered and died for us a painful and ignominious death, and rose again for us.

Does the Star Wars audience clamor for more drama? The Story has plenty of it. Do they/we want a Father-Son story? Got it. Epic confrontations, larger than life figures, empires, heroes, underdogs? Got it. The Fall, wandering, return, redemption? Got it. In spades. The Teller of The Story is not only The Master Storyteller, but The Storymaker and all for our benefit.

Even though the Bible is no longer the central ethic of our culture and may never regain its centrality, we are still called to share The Story, especially to those who are seeking. Perhaps the ones who turn to movies for inspiration and away from organized religion do so because they first see the monolithic institutional qualities of organized religion and don't stick around long enough to hear The Story. They're looking for meaning, for something larger. To paraphrase a recent ad campaign: they got questions, we got answers.

Finally, in addition to building upon Lucas's gathered audience, we can apply one main lesson from him: we must learn to reinterpret The Story in our own lives and share this with

others, which is a gift from the

Holying Spirit. Lucas reinterprets or “localizes” classic myths for our times; through the Holying Spirit, The Story is localized into our stories. Since we are called to preach to all nations, we can help others – who have never heard The Story, or have forgotten it – by helping to reinterpret and localize The Story into theirs. It is the simple act of bearing witness to The Truth of God’s gift to us in the crucifixion and resurrection of God’s son, Jesus Christ, and how this gift plays out in our lives. Our sin, brokenness, dying and death are all taken away by that loving act on the Cross. We as Christ confessors have wonderful stories to tell and Lucas has gathered an audience for us. All that is left is to tell our stories about The Story in our lives. And if you’re timid about doing so, recall the wisdom of the Jedi sage, Yoda, when he told his young disciple, Luke Skywalker: “Do not try; do.”