



Universidad del País Vasco Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

DEPARTAMENTO DE FROLOGÍA INGLESA Y ALEMANA Y DE TRADUCCIÓN E INTERPRETACIÓN
INGELES ETA ALEMANIAR FILOLOGI ETA ITZULPENGINTZA ETA INTERPRETAZIOKO SALA

TRASVASES CULTURALES:

LITERATURA
CINE
TRADUCCIÓN

3

Eds.: Eterio Pajares
Raquel Merino
J. M. Santamaría

Servicio Editorial
UNIVERSIDAD DEL PAÍS VASCO



Argitalpen Zerbitzua
EUSKAL HERRIKO UNIBERTSITATEA

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Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea
Departamento de Cultura de la Diputación Foral de Álava
Departamento de Educación, Universidades e Investigación del Gobierno Vasco
Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana y de Traducción e Interpretación

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Euskal Herriko Unibertsitateko Argitalpen Zerbitzua

Portada/Azala: Sixto González

I.S.B.N.: 84-8373-356-0

Depósito Legal/Lege Gordailua: BI-1569-01

Composición/Konposizioa: Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco
Euskal Herriko Unibertsitateko Argitalpen Zerbitzua

Impresión/Inprimatzea: Itxaropena, S.A.
Araba Kalea, 45 - 20800 Zarautz (Gipuzkoa)

Redeeming America's Fall from Grace between Utopian and Dystopian horizons: The Case of George Lucas's Star Wars trilogy

Francisco González García

Department of English and German Philology,
University of Almería (Spain)

«I wanted to make a kid's film that would strengthen contemporary mythology and introduce a kind of basic morality. (...) Nobody was saying the very basic things; they were dealing in the abstract. Everybody was forgetting to tell the kids, "Hey, this is right and this is wrong"». (George Lucas 1983)

1. Introduction

This paper examines the controversial relationship between utopia and science-fiction (SF henceforth) to determine whether there is a strong utopian component in SF. Thus, Fortunati (1982) argues that SF is decidedly utopian. By contrast, Ketterer (1974) denies the existence of such a connection between these two genres. In addition, this paper revisits the connections between American popular SF and utopia and/or dystopia, understood as unequivocally Western forms of literature. Specifically, this paper draws extensively from George Lucas's *Star Wars* classic trilogy (i.e. *Star Wars*, *Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*) with a view to exploring the phenomenon of cultural (and also historical) transfer in the creation and screening of its mythical universe. The main hypothesis entertained in this paper is that there is a decidedly utopian sustaining thread in George Lucas's *Star Wars* classic trilogy which boils down to the construction of an ideal, imaginary vision of America, free from the socio-political and historical vicissitudes that had subsumed the country under a profound national crisis in the 1970's, thus contributing to endorse, at least in the screen, the American dream of a better America.

2. The definition of utopia and science-fiction revisited

In this section, we shall proceed to outline a number of definitions of utopia and SF with a view to determining whether the two genres in question are inex-

trically connected or whether, by contrast, the two genres are essentially distinct in nature. With this objective in mind, let us start off by examining some of the definitions of the two genres provided in the literature. As far as the definition of the former is concerned, a representative sampling of the essentials of utopian fiction is provided below:¹

«Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of a world we could live in if we could do just that. The construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality, takes place in one form or another (...)» (Levitas, 1990: 1);

«A utopia is an invitation to perceive the distance between things as they are and things as they should be». (Eliav-Feldom, 1982: 1);

«Utopia is the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where socio-political institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis» (Suvin, 1973: 132).

As far as SF is concerned, the relatively wide spectrum of positions on the utopia-SF connection can be summarized, for the purposes of the present paper, in two diametrically opposing views, as presented in Ketterer (1974) and Butor (1974), to cite two representative cases.

According to Ketterer (1974), SF should be primarily characterized as apocalyptic imagination. By «apocalyptic» it is meant, «any work of fiction concerned with presenting a radically different world or version or reality that exists in a credible relationship with the world or reality verified by empiricism and common experience (...)» (Ketterer 1974: 91). Thus, Ketterer (1974: 99) categorically concludes that «there is no such thing as utopian science fiction, given my sense of science fiction as an apocalyptic form».

A much more general and dynamic definition of SF is provided in Butor (1974: 16), where SF is characterized as «a narrative form based on rational speculations and concerning the human experience of science and the technology that derives from it».

An outstanding difference between these two definitions stems from the fact that the latter capitalises on the *human concern* with science and technology, while the former restricts SF to the domains of a veritable, empirically verifiable fictional account of reality, without taking into account its reflexes at a human level. Pace Ketterer (1974), it can be argued that both «humankind» and «sci-

¹ These three definitions of the utopian genre have been selected for the purposes of the present paper from the repertoire of definitions outlined in Martínez López (1997: 11).

ence», far from being irreconcilable, can be taken to constitute the latent essence of both genres². In this respect, particularly explicit is the definition provided by Parrinder (1980: 79), who argues that «utopia was seen as the medium for the subjective lodgings of the human race; (...) yet science itself is a utopian activity to the extent that it aims to better the lot of mankind». Moreover, it seems that such a solution of continuity between utopia, dystopia and SF is also plausible in the case of American fiction. In the words of Kaul (1963: 35):

«Utopias and dystopias are regular science-fiction fodder for the American imagination, which is obsessed with dreams of utopia. American society is, in fact, a projected utopia that now seems to have turned into dystopia».

Therefore, this line of reasoning that assumes the existence of a continuum between utopia, dystopia and SF will be the one invoked in this paper. In sections 3 and 4, I will proceed to back up the viability of this position with special reference to the *Star Wars* classic trilogy³.

3. The utopian nature of science-fiction as portrayed in the *Star Wars* trilogy

At a higher level of delicacy, the contention that there is a decidedly utopian component in SF is substantiated, according to Fortunati (1987: 261ff), in the following thematic and technical devices, which are discussed in 3.1-3.3 below with specific reference to the *Star Wars* classic trilogy.

3.1. THE JOURNEY AND THE FIGURE OF THE TRAVELLER: The travel, understood as the means whereby the traveller can come to know about other ideal forms of social organization and improve his own society of departure, has now turned in the *Star Wars* trilogy into a journey through time and space, whose final destination is not a remote island (as in More's *Utopia*) or an exotic country (as in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*) but rather the vast unknown realms of the

² This should not be taken to imply that no differences exist between utopia and SF. Thus, while they both imply an intellectual component, we agree with Sobchack (1997: 25) that «the SF writer or filmmaker may want to present intellectual thought, ideas, and concepts to his reader, but his primary goal is not to inform, nor to philosophise, but to create a narrative which dramatically –through its style and structure, its characterizations, its events and objects and places– provokes the reader to think, to observe, to draw his own abstract conclusions.»

³ For obvious limitations of space, certain familiarity will be taken for granted on the part of the reader with respect to the characters as well as the plot of the *Star Wars* classic trilogy.

galaxy⁴. This utopian reading can be shown to be consistent with Campbell's (1973) thesis that the hero of epic myth is a dream-figure who stands in for the entire culture and must embark himself into a three-stage journey of *Departure*, *Initiation* and *Return*⁵.

According to Campbell, mythic heroes in every culture share a common, usually dangerous, three-stage journey that begins with a *Separation* from home in what he terms *the call to adventure*. These heroic figures –though often reluctant– are forced by circumstances (or fate, if you will) to undertake their dangerous adventure and face severe tests, which they may indeed fail. Their trek into what Joseph Conrad called the heart of darkness leads to an *Initiation*, in which they gain valuable insight into the dual nature of the universe and of themselves. That insight, often nurtured by a mentor (i.e. Ben Kenobi, Yoda), helps them face a confrontation with the dark father (i.e. Darth Vader) and endure wounding, even dismemberment. Heroes who survive the ordeal are awarded great treasure (either physical or spiritual), and *Return* with their treasure to empower or control other men or just to share what s/he has learned with others.

Indeed, the journey involves shattering pain, loss, and despair for the traveller. Thus, Gulliver is no different in this respect from Luke Skywalker. They both embark upon a dangerous, risky journey to a remote place to end up knowing about an alternative reality as well as about their own identity. Unlike Gulliver, who is always willing to leave his family behind and be constantly travelling, Luke does not so readily volunteer to leave his uncle and aunt and become a rebel pilot, as shown by his initial refusal to follow Princess Leia's call for help. It is not until his family has been killed and his home burned by imperial stormtroopers that he finally decides to embark upon the journey to the stars (Campbell's «Refusal of the Call»). He is emotionally shaken and almost dies at the end of *Empire Strikes Back* when he confronts Vader for the first time and comes to know that he is his long-lost father. In *Return of the Jedi*, however, feeling that there is still good in Vader, he is determined to die at the hands of the outmost impersonation of evil, Emperor Palpatine, to turn his father from Dark-Side Evil to Good.

⁴ It must be borne in mind that the advent of the space race (i.e. the launching of the *Sputnik I* by the Soviet Union in 1957 and of the *Explorer* by USA in 1958) definitely contributed to feed the SF reformulation of the utopian commonplace of the travel in the form of a travel through time and space to a «galaxy far, far away».

⁵ In this respect, George Lucas has explicitly acknowledged on several occasions that the classic trilogy follows Joseph Campbell's mythic structure, and that the new trilogy (Episodes I, II, III) is also likely to follow the same narrative structure. Due to limitations of space, we shall limit ourselves to pointing out that the trilogy that begins with *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* is nevertheless more dystopian in tone, since it tells us, among other things, how the young Jedi knight, Anakin Skywalker, is seduced by the Dark Side of the Force, thus becoming the evil Darth Vader.

3.2. COGNITIVE ESTRANGEMENT: SF is unambiguously characterized by cognitive estrangement. The «estrangement» stems from the introduction of some novelty which transforms the author's empirical (alias «real») world, whereas the «cognitive» character arises out of its affiliation to science and rationality. The estrangement effect is achieved in SF by presenting the wonders of technology, the strangely unfamiliar as something relatively veritable and familiar, more exactly through an extensive use of studio-devised settings and special visual and sound effects cinematography as well as highly sophisticated technology, ranging from the protocol android fluid in billions of languages (like C-3PO) to those powerful space-crafts jumping into the hyperspace (like the *Millennium Falcon*) as something unambiguously familiar and *real*⁶. Nevertheless, in the *Star Wars* trilogy, like in many traditional utopian works, there is also room for a detailed, matter-of-fact description of aspects of topography, weather, flora, (i.e. Dagobah, Alderaan, Tantooine, Hoth, Yavin, Cloud City, to name but a few), peoples and aliens (from human or quasi-human beings like Luke, Leia or the Sand People to wookies, stormtroopers or bountyhunters), politics and customs, technologies and languages (both intelligible and non-intelligible to the human ear).

3.3. THE POLITICAL ISSUE: The ends of estrangement are inextricably linked to a degradation of the political issue (Fortunati, 1982: 261), so prominent in the utopian genre (i.e. More's *Utopia*) in the form of the consideration of an ideal form of political state and a life in community where the fight among the different social classes is abolished. Thus, in the case of the *Star Wars* trilogy, the fight between the Rebels and the Galactic Empire can now be seen to run parallel to the utopian orientation of the aspiring social classes firing their various revolutionary thrusts against an established (and possibly also totalitarian) ideology. In fact, this galactic theatre of war keeps going the fire of the whole trilogy from the very opening lines of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*:

«A long time ago, in a galaxy, far, far away...It is a period of civil war, rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire. During the battle, rebel spies managed to steal secret

⁶ However, what is important to recognize is that some of the wonders of technology presented in *Star Wars* are not yet real, at least at the time of writing or filming, but may well come true in the not so distant future. This is perfectly cogent with the requirement that alien visualizations should be based on known scientific realities. In fact, Cavelos (1999) has pointed out that many of the facts presented in the fiction of *Star Wars* have a fairly plausible scientific basis. These include, among others, the following: planets in binary star systems which may support life (like Tantooine), robots with personality, intelligence and emotions (like C-3PO or R2-D2), or the possibility to travel quickly across vast interstellar distances.

plans to the Empire's ultimate weapon, the Death Star, an armoured space station with enough power to destroy an entire planet. Pursued by the Empire's sinister agents, Princess Leia races home aboard her starship, custodian of the stolen plans that can save her people and restore freedom to the galaxy».

3.4. SYMBOLIC USE OF PROPER NAMES: Proper names usually carry a symbolic meaning in utopian fiction. Thus, as Bony (1977: 6) has argued, «utopia is *par excellence* the place of nominalisation rather than of verbalization» (my translation). The *Star Wars* universe follows the general trend of the utopian discourse in this respect, too. Thus, the surname «Skywalker», especially in the case of Luke, is indicative of the fact that the destiny of the young man lies in embarking upon an interstellar adventure to «restore freedom and peace in the entire galaxy» rather than remaining a farmer in Tantooine. The name of Darth Vader has a number of evident associated connotations: «dark father/invader», «dirt», and so forth. Likewise, the surname Solo unambiguously evokes the *Lone Ranger* character of the spaghetti western that so neatly applies to the pilot of the *Millennium Falcon*, who is presented to us as an arrogant mercenary until he wins the heart of Princess Leia and finally marries her after *Return of the Jedi*. Other telling examples of symbolic uses of names include Vader's personal flagship «The Executor» or the «Death Star» itself, to cite but a few.

To summarize, it can be claimed that the *Star Wars* trilogy fiction is constructed around a re-elaboration of the utopian genre through a constellation of mythic devices of a most varied nature⁷. The question that now arises is whether this pastiche can still be considered to be utopian. To our mind, the answer is affirmative. As Champlin (1992: 125) has put it,

«From early folklore writings from many different cultures, Lucas devoured the great themes: epic struggles between good and evil, heroes and villains, magical princes and ogres, heroines and evil princesses, the transmission from fathers to sons of the powers of both good and evil. What the myths revealed to Lucas, among other things, was *the capacity of the human imagination to conceive realities to cope with reality*: figures and places and events that were before now or beyond now but were rich and with meaning to our present» (emphasis added to the original)⁸.

⁷ In fact, for his *Star Wars* fantasy, Lucas used a mix of mythic stories as well as different genres, such as the spaghetti western, Japanese films like Kurosawa's (1954) *Seven Samurai*, science fiction pulp adventures like the *Flash Gordon* series or comic strips like *Buck Rogers*, among others.

⁸ As the reader will observe, the function that Lucas sees in the myths fits in nicely with the definition of the utopian genre as defined, among others, in Eliav-Feldom (1982: 1). See page 2 for further reference.

4. A brief outline of the dystopian vision of america in the *Star Wars* trilogy

The *Star Wars* trilogy is not only utopian, but also dystopian, since it presents us the other side of the coin of man's dream of a better world, namely, a nightmarish vision of reality fed by socio-political conflicts, family crises and, above all, the ultimate threat to mankind, namely, man's ability to be turned into a machine.

4.1. TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS OR TECHNOLOGICAL DEHUMANISATION? As Henderson (1997: 152-153) rightly notes, the dystopian nature of many SF works in general, and the *Star Wars* trilogy in particular, points to the terrible consequences of power abuse and, more exactly, to the fact that an overly rationalistic, utopian ordering of society coupled with technological progress, when taken to the extreme, may give rise to a totalitarian state, thus turning freedom into oppression and people into machines.

The man-machine commonplace is prominently figured out in *Star Wars* in the character of Darth Vader⁹. The Dark Lord of the Sith, led astray by an uncontrolled thirst for domination, like the Fallen Angel, has gone as far as to betray his own race (and family) to become Emperor Palpatine's most faithful servant («What is thy bidding, my master?» is the way how Vader usually addresses Palpatine). Moreover, the artificially extended Vader that breathes in a dark mask unambiguously illustrates the alien that comes into being as the by-product of a brutal dehumanisation of man in a highly-sophisticated laboratory, thus pointing to the horror of a new technological era. In fact, the dystopian overtones of SF stem from the fear that we may alienate ourselves to such a considerable extent that we end up losing contact with our bodies. It must be nevertheless emphasized that this alienation may be physical or psychological. As Clarens (1967: 134, quoted in Sobchack, 1997: 123) has put it,

«The ultimate horror in science fiction is neither death nor destruction but dehumanisation, a state in which emotional life is suspended, in which the individual is deprived of individual feelings, free will, and more judgement...this type of fiction hits the most exposed nerve of contemporary society: collective anxiety about the loss of individual identity, subliminal mind-bending, or downright scientific/political brainwashing».

In order to better understand the social consequences of dystopia in American popular SF in the case of *Star Wars*, we shall briefly dwell on the cultural

⁹ Another particularly telling example is the «Death Star», described to us as «an armoured space station with enough power to destroy an entire planet».

and historical events that formed the immediate background for the release of the film. In 1977, when *Star Wars (A New Hope)* opens at theatres worldwide, America continues to be subsumed under a crisis after national catastrophes such as the Vietnam, the Watergate scandal and Nixon's subsequent resignation. All these events left the Americans' faith in politics in general and their government in particular severely damaged. As Henderson (1997: 148ff) conspicuously observes, the triumph of science and technology achieved with humans setting foot on the moon was soon overshadowed by the Vietnam war *fiasco* and President Nixon's announcement to withdraw U.S troops. In this war, victory had not been on the side of highly advanced technology. The American dream now gives way to a Fall from Grace. However, *Star Wars* aims, in a way or another, to redeem America's Fall from Grace by softening the immediate political decline and social malaise and displacing such Fall from Grace to another empire (whether the British Empire or Hitler's Nazi Germany)¹⁰. At least, the American dream could be preserved in the screen insofar as the American good guys return triumphant over the dark forces of Evil.

4.2. THE FAMILY TIES ISSUE: The increase of one-parent families in USA in the 1970s became a threat to the harmony of American society in general and the family as a basic institution in particular. This concern about family issues also finds reflection in the plot of the *Star Wars* trilogy. At the end of *Empire Strikes Back*, Vader unsuccessfully tries to win Luke over to the Dark Side of the Force. Vader, however, plays a most wicked and perverse card by appealing to his family ties with Luke. He tells his son: «With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the galaxy. (...) «You can destroy the Emperor... Join me, and together we can rule the galaxy together *as father and son.*» Although Luke finally refuses this tempting offer and steps

¹⁰ This displacement revolves around a carefully planned network of characterisations that can induce the viewer to identify the Galactic Empire with a real historical empire. Henderson (1997: 146ff) argues that such an empire might well be Hitler's Nazi Germany, if one is to attend to costuming (i.e. Vader's SS-like helmet and black robes), names (i.e. «storm-troopers» as the name given by Hitler to his personal bodyguards) and atmosphere (i.e. the rigid control and dehumanisation exhibited by the Galactic Empire being reminiscent of the fascism of Hitler's Nazi Germany). In our view, a more plausible candidate is perhaps the British Empire, whose nationalization of commerce into a central system in India is paralleled by the control that the Evil Galactic Empire exerts over the entire galaxy. Additional supporting evidence for this hypothesis comes from the exploitation of accent differences in the film. While the Rebels (good guys) speak with a plain American accent, the members of the Galactic Empire in general, and Moff Tarkin in particular, exhibit a perfect standard British (R.P) accent. The only two exceptions to this generalization are, nonetheless, Ben Kenobi (Alec Guinness) and C-3PO (Anthony Daniels).

off into the abyss, the family issue plays a far more central role in *Return of the Jedi*, where Luke is determined to die at the hands of the evil Emperor Palpatine in an attempt to turn his father from the Dark Side to Good. At the end of *Return*, Vader has detached from his evil master and has been transformed through his son. However, the moral victory for Luke comes when Vader finally confesses to him, as Luke removes the mask to see his father's face, the following: «Tell your sister you were right».

To finish, it must be emphasized that much of the appeal of *Star Wars* ultimately lies not only in providing a new hope for the American dream, but in nurturing mankind's dream of a better world. As Gordon (1995) has put it,

«*Star Wars* shows the triumph of good technology over evil machinery. (...) Viewers recognize that *Star Wars* has no direct relation to external reality, but it does relate to our dreams of how we would *like* reality to be» (Gordon, 1995: 82, emphasis in the original).

With Episode II being currently shot in Australia and four more films on schedule, it seems that Lucas will continue to fuel the utopian dreams of many generations to come. May the Force be with him (and with us)... always!

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