# What's Wrong with *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and **Žižek?**: A Marxist Analysis

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# What's Wrong with *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and Žižek?: A Marxist Analysis

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**Abstract**：*Star Trek* and *Star Wars* are two of the most popular science fiction franchises in commercial history. This essay examines these two franchises from a critical Marxist perspective. Both offer fantastic visions of human development, which I will argue prove all too familiar to the reified consciousnesses of contemporary consumers. How and why do these films appeal, and how do they repackage the "end of history" in ways that normalize current logics of hegemony for a future that remains founded, nevertheless, on forms of injustice and commodity fetishism as familiar to us now as they were to Marx in the 19th century? In the first half of the essay, I will show how *Star Trek* has been the commodity designed to appeal directly the political and economic consciousness of its moment. I will demonstrate how these projections have degraded from a type of popular progressiveness in the 1960s to an entrenched conservative militarism in its recent film reboots. In the second half I will show how *Star Wars*, conversely, was designed in the first instance to appeal to consumers on a universal, timeless, and unconscious level, one that I will argue is consistent with the type of *cogito*-consciousness that is itself both a product and producer of capitalism. Along the way, I will contrast these ideologized narrative forms with those found in pre-modern, Chinese consciousness. Thus I will show how both *Star Trek* and *Star War*s work in powerfully ideological ways consistent with "capitalism lately," but likewise demonstrate how the latter functions as the far superior commodity form. This then provokes, in the conclusion, a critical engagement with Slavoj Žižek's discussions of these and similar films and his unflagging defense of the *cogito*-consciousness as a vital presence of revolutionary agency for the future.

**Keywords**：science fiction； *cogito*-consciousness； commodity fetishism； reification； cultural hegemony

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标　题：《星球大战》《星际迷航》与齐泽克之过：一个马克思主义视角的分析

摘　要：本文从批判性的马克思主义视角审视商业史上最受欢迎的系列科幻电影：《星际迷航》与《星球大战》。二者均对人类发展提出了精彩的愿景,但实际上,这些愿景只是将当代消费者再熟悉不过的意识具体化了而已。本文试图分析：为何两部电影会大受欢迎? 它们受到何种欢迎? 它们是如何将"历史终结论"重新包装并与当前的霸权逻辑同谋? 须知,这些针对未来的愿景与马克思批判过的 19 世纪大同小异：它们都建立在不公和商品崇拜之上。本文第一部分论述,《星际迷航》如何成为与同时代的政治和经济意识相契的商品。第二部分论述,《星球大战》一开始是如何在普世、永恒和无意识的层面备受消费者追捧,并试图证明,它与笛卡尔式的我思意识一样,都是资本主义的产物,也是资本主义的推动者。此外,本文亦会将这种意识形态化的叙事形式与前现代时期的中国意识相对照。总之,《星际迷航》与《星球大战》在意识形态运作层面,与晚期资本主义如出一辙,但作为商品形态,《星球大战》更加高明。最后,本文针对齐泽克对类似电影的论述,提出批判性的对话,因为他孜孜不倦地辩称,我思意识是未来革命能动性的关键。

关键词：科幻小说； 我思意识； 商品崇拜； 具体化； 文化霸权

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## Introduction

The value of science fiction from a Marxian perspective can be summed up as a utopian genre that has the potential, theoretically, to present a forward-looking imagination as a critical perspective on the present. As Fredric Jameson opines, the best of such efforts carry merit insomuch as they may constitute either a thoroughgoing attempt to express an imaginary but theoretically possible materialist vision of a future socialism, e. g., Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1993 – 1996), or a projection of the age-old contradictions of capitalism whose future forms and likely consequences are already taking shape around us, e. g., William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) (Jameson 221 –26).

Of course, "science fiction" today is a popular commodity form, one in which *the most popular of these* products appear to be little more than uncritical projections of the present in the grossest of forms. As will be argued here, foremost among these are the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* media franchises that have earned more than US＄42 billion and US＄10 billion respectively (Chew 2015；CGTN 2016), placing them first and second in total revenues earned in the science fiction genre.

This paper begins with discussions of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, examines what is regarded here as Slavoj Žižek's understandable but deeply problematic commitment to *cogito*-consciousness, and culminates with a Marxist discussion of various points raised throughout. The main argument here is that these updated media franchises offer greater technical spectacles than their earlier products and truer representations of the *cogito*-consciousness. In other words, these products have achieved deeper correlations between capitalist reification and commodity fetishism.

## What's Wrong with *Star Trek*?

It is in part due to the hero mythos that it is common to imagine a vast media franchise as being largely the product of a single creative genius. Nevertheless, both *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* began as many such creative projects do, as a film treatment written by one person who became celebrated heroes of fandom. In the case of *Star Trek*, by one account, Gene Roddenberry first conceptualized *Star Trek* in 1964, as a futuristic space-based Western modeled on *Gulliver's Travels*. By another account, he claims Robert A. Heinlein's *Space Cadet* (1948) as the single most important thing he had ever read. Roddenberry, who considered himself an anti-religion humanist, intended a show that was progressive, believing it could be marketed profitably to the emerging counter-culture movements of the 1960s. When it was finally produced and aired in 1966 (and running until 1969), the show featured a multi-racial cast, as well as roles designed to signal the end of the Cold War and an ensuing peace among earthlings. At Roddenberry's insistence, the show was among the first to feature an interracial kiss just months after miscegenation laws were ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court (Loving v. Virginia, 1967). Even though racists could find comfort in the fact that the kiss was the result of villainous alien mind control (Wolfe 432 –37).

Although the show was much more amoral and neutral than some have imagined, it is fair to say that many did view it as being anti-war and anti-imperialist. There was in some measure a type of "end of history" at work, along with universal human rights, peace and development and the positive power of technology and voluntary federation. Although by today's standards the ship's captain would be considered too sexually aggressive, the original series was viewed by some as espousing feminist values, and these, along with other

progressive values, were updated and reinforced substantially in films and subsequent series. For example, in a subsequent series, *Star Trek*: *The Next Generation* (1987 – 1994), roles played featuring women and minorities were given key leadership roles, and the role of the white male captain and first officer, while mainstays, focused more on team efforts. A subsequent series, *Deep Space 9*(1993－1999), featured a black man in the leading role, with the chain of command peopled primarily by women. Then, yet another spin-off series, *Voyager* (1995－2001), the captain was a woman and her leading subordinates were men.

Along the way several feature films depicting alternate timelines and casts were produced. The franchise served to depict a kind of critical utopia that provided viewers with both escapism and what can only be described as progressive political agenda, which espoused an imperfect but clearly socialistic ethos. Which reached a milestone during *The Next Generation* series, where Roddenberry insisted on an egalitarian brother and sisterhood among crewmates, who eschewed baser motives of greed, lust and power. To some extent, these values were written into the show's bible and remained in force, even after Roddenberry's death in 1991. By other accounts writers quietly celebrated by widening their storylines in ways that stopped thinking so much about the future and became instead at times nostalgic for a past (Engel 238 – 47). It is interesting to note that both the *Original Series* and *The Next Generation* were products that bookend key milestones in the Cold War, from initial American involvement in Vietnam to Ronald Reagan's arms race with the Soviet Union and the latter's political collapse. Meanwhile, one of the reasons for ending *The Next Generation* was to give *Deep Space 9* room as a new series and upcoming films (Svetkey 1994). As such, its storylines paralleled the frustrated efforts to enact a new world order, and culminated with fighting.

These are the primary historical contexts through which its audience viewed the show. Later series built on these themes can be viewed as a parallel to the muddled political and economic affairs facing the United States and the rest of the world following the end of the Cold War. Much like the hopefulness of a new world order following the collapse of the USSR, *The Next Generation* and its spin-offs, including both series and films, ended in a mess. As leading-film critic Roger Ebert said of the last *Next Generation* feature film, *Nemesis* (2002), "I'm smiling like a good sport and trying to get with the dialogue … and gradually it occurs to me that *Star Trek* is over for me. I've been looking at these stories for half a lifetime, and, let's face it, they're out of gas" (Ebert 2002). More to the point, a central plot line in *Nemesis* revolves around the marriage of two main characters. What's the tried and true formula for reinvigorating a tired franchise: stage at long last a marriage that resolves long standing sexual tensions between leading characters. Such a topic that was taboo during Roddenberry's tenure because it was inconsistent with his views of future human relations, but he was first and foremost interested in promoting whatever would sell.

When a franchise "runs out of gas," one option is to let it lay dormant for a few years and then "reboot." A reboot can take many different forms, but for many big franchises it includes going back to an original story line and simply updating it with young stars, enhanced special effects, and, on occasion, an alternative timeline where old stories and characters can be reimagined to reflect contemporary interests. Whereas *Nemesis* concluded with a storyline that promoted peace between longtime arch-enemies, the Federation and the Romulans, those same arch-enemies return as "terrorists" with torture scenes, genocide, and other echoes of the contemporary world in the first reboot. Ebert again responded, this time writing that "the Gene Roddenberry years, when stories might play with questions of science, ideals or philosophy, have been replaced by stories reduced to loud and colorful action" (Ebert 2009). In his review in *Newsweek*, Marc Bain wrote, "The latest film version of *Star*

*Trek* ［...］ is more brawn than brain, and it largely jettisons complicated ethical conundrums in favor of action sequences and special effects" (Bain 2009). Nevertheless, the film was a major commercial success, earning ＄388 million against a ＄150 million dollar budget. *Nemesis* earned only ＄67 million against ＄60 million. The two reboot sequels that followed the first, *Star Trek Into Darkn*ess (2013) and *Star Trek Beyon*d (2016), both had budgets of ＄185 million, with the former earning ＄467 million and the latter earning ＄344 million (*Box Office Mojo*). Ultimately, the franchise that had always enjoyed a loyal fan base and a consistent but modest market share had reached its fuller commodity form as the reliable blockbuster.

It helped of course to put a writer-director like J. J. Abrams in charge of the reboot, given his experience producing other massive Hollywood successes, like low budget but extremely high return *Cloverfield* series and the three most recent *Mission Impossible* sequels, which together earned nearly ＄1.8 billion, including the last two which each earned almost ＄700 million (*Box Office Mojo*). One cannot fault Hollywood capitalism for maximizing profits over concepts, for emphasizing action and special effects over Roddenberry's concerns for social progress in the form of a morality play. And, given some of the special awards earned by the new *Star Trek* films, one can even claim that they showcase multicultural ideals, where race, gender and sexual equality are stated unequivocally even if the lead roles are still male and heterosexual.

In fact, it is fair to argue that despite efforts to normalize homosexuality in order to create space for such a development. The films have not only returned to showcasing Kirk's dalliances and tendency to objectify women, it has also added the new hetero-normative storyline of Spock involved romantically with Uhura, the franchise's key black female character. On the surface, this would appear to be an interracial relationship, but of course, Spock is only half-human. This would perhaps relieve those inclined against interracial

relationships, and let's be frank, a great number of people are opposed to them, but it is also good to remember that Spock was one of Roddenberry's favorite characters, insomuch as he conceived Spock as a man who had mastered his emotions and channeled his energies into more productive and equitable ends, and per Roddenberry's demands, was the only character retained when a second pilot was produced after the poor reception of the first (Roddenberry and Whitfield 110).

But the rebooted Spock is not so finely honed, and his relationship troubles, his amorous cooing to Uhura, his emotional response to the death of his mother and his friends, and so on, play such important roles in the film that it would be fair to say that Spock now serves as the franchise's romantic and emotional lead. Interestingly, the fact that Spock is in a position of authority over Uhura, and that she has to balance her submission to Spock as a junior officer while her position as his girlfriend gets only minor attention, although it is precisely the sort of moral conundrum that Roddenberry envisioned future humans overcoming. What is more compelling is that the position of authority, reason and self-sacrifice, qualities that were previously shared between Kirk and Spock, are now largely located in the character of Kirk.

As for homosexuality, there is a postmodern shell game afoot. On the one hand, Zachary Quinto, the actor who portrays Spock, is a high profile, openly gay man, and more lately an activist for LGBT rights (Zakarin 2011). On the other hand, John Cho, the Korean born actor who portrays Hikaru Sulu, is a straight, married father of two (*People* 2013). Nevertheless, in the films, Spock's character, as noted, is a heterosexual lead, while Sulu's rebooted character is a gay man who is married to his male partner with whom he parents a daughter. This change to Sulu's character in the rebooted films was a nod to George Takei, the actor who originally played Sulu in the original series and several of the films. Takei has been a prominent gay rights activist since 2005, and did little to hide his

sexuality during his earlier years with *Star Trek*. Nevertheless, he strongly discouraged the reboot writers from making Sulu gay, saying it was not part of Roddenberry's vision (Abramovitch 2016), despite his contention that the creator was comfortable with his sexuality, and Roddenberry's own statements along these lines later (Alexander 1991). The reboot writers insisted on it being one of the franchises well-known characters in order to avoid the appearance of "tokenism," and made Sulu gay anyway (Shoard 2016). Given his work advocating Asian masculinity, Takei was probably concerned with the fact that there is an Orientalist tendency to feminize Asian men, and that making the one character who represented Asians in the franchise a gay man was an unfortunate play towards the stereotype. Furthermore, as a gay Asian American, Takei has probably encountered enough "rice queens" to know that the masculinity of the Other is their little secret.

Crafting and selling a major contemporary franchise reboot is about trying to be as inclusive as possible. To this end, the well-crafted film aims at pleasing four main audiences：original fans who enjoy a nostalgic return；late-coming fans who have some more recent connection to the franchise；genre fans who enjoy science fiction generally (but who, in the odd world of genre camp loyalties, might consider themselves opposed to *Trekkies*)；and new fans attracted to the spectacle. And what a spectacle it is！Special effects improve from one generation, and the old aesthetics of the future seem more futuristic, or at least, the ship's bridge now has more in common with an Apple Store than its predecessors, which were variously analog by comparison. Such improvements are vital, of course, but there's much more going on than a set redesign and lighting. With respect to cast and crew, there are a number of key elements that come together in a cultural algorithm of sorts. We can only speculate here, but have little doubt that Abrams et al have a precise formula. It seems to include a white male captain, the cocksure cowboy who

ignores the rulebook while sitting in the privileged position of command and who, in the end, *always wins*；the return of an original cast member who effectively blesses the project as "authentic；" an expanded role for the African American female role；a gay Asian male role；a gay-icon actor playing a socially and romantically awkward heterosexual half-alien；a who's-who of sex symbols with British or Australian accents (Eric Bana, Benedict Cumberbatch, Idris Elba) devilishly handsome actors playing devious villains intent, of course, on destroying, peace, humanity, etc. But it turns out the gay Asian male is good at hand-to-hand combat and ship-to-ship maneuvers. In the climatic moment of the first film reboot, Sulu appears at the helm with lasers firing in glorious and unexpected climax saving Kirk and Spock, who were saving humanity. Because his homosexuality is not feminine token… is it？

Michel Foucault was initially attracted to what he saw in homosexual sadomasochistic relationships as potential sites of resistance to the totality of capitalism as a reifying force. The appropriation of Nazi SS aesthetics and leather as inversions, the recognition of power as a relationship, where care-for-the-sub seeks to tread the thinnest, most delicate and delightful line between destruction and preservation. And yet, near the end of his life all Foucault could see was the assimilating force of capital (Foucault 501), where all sites of resistance became pageants—Mr. Leatherman pageants, gay weddings, gay Disney cruise ship… What happened to the darker underbelly of post-Victorian and pre-post-human sexuality, where "cruising" meant something vastly different, or at least, wasn't mediated by an app on a smartphone？

In *Cruising Utopia：The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz answers a similar question by describing such developments as "late-Disneyfication," and attributes them to the assimilating movement of capitalism. Which remaps both minds and material landscapes according to a double-movement of

inclusion and exclusion—the former where sex is the private domain of bourgeois culture, and the latter where the working class, including sex workers, plus incorrigible queers are either swept away or given corporate makeovers as servers at franchise restaurants and ticket takers at tourist traps. As Muñoz argues, these changes are not simply a heteronormative encroachment of capitalist assimilation. These forces accompanied a new "homonormativity" that is likewise marching lockstep with heteronormativity (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 53 − 54). Here, he borrows Lisa Duggan's term, who defines homonormativity as a "new neoliberal sexual politics⋯ that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 50).

Of course, if the writers wanted a gay film, and not merely a token that reaches out to one audience but in a way that does not really offend a much larger audience, then they would have made Kirk gay. Can you imagine, that instead of chasing every girl he sees⋯ But no. We get a nice gay married Asian man, married to another Asian man, raising an Asian daughter. Even here you see the calculation, the algorithm at work: a son would have been too disconcerting for many viewers. Or, what if Spock, played by a gay man, had a love love interest in Sulu, and homosexuality was not merely a few seconds of Sulu greeting his family upon returning home? This is what Foucault feared, and homonormativity, this is precisely what the new Sulu represents.

But all of these points, for better or worse, avoid more fundamental concerns. At its best, *Star Trek* is little more than utopian humanism. More often, and more recently, at its worst, it is a carefully crafted commodity within a marketplace, an alignment with the ideology of the moment. Thus, it is rarely more than a reenactment of the "white man's burden," a contemporary Orientalist literature

of noble explorers projecting justice wherever they go. It is the myth of the restrained killer, the man of peace who is, time and time again, compelled to use his reason, and if necessary, his cunning and capacity for lying, to launch weapons. In this respect it too often mirrors the paternalistic self-righteousness of Anglo-American foreign policy, which likewise portrays itself as the reluctant warrior rising to an unwanted challenge and sanctimoniously annihilating the enemy.

To illustrate this point, in the first of the film reboots, the enemy ship, of Romulan origin, is already defeated and sliding unstoppably into a black hole. Kirk offers to "render assistance" but Spock objects, preferring to see them perish. Kirk is surprised and answers, "You show them compassion, it may be the only way to earn peace with the Romulans. It's logic Spock. I thought you would like that." And Spock says, "No, not really, not this time." No matter, the enemy captain defiantly refuses Kirk, saying, "I would rather die in agony than accept assistance from you." Kirk responds, "You got it." Without hesitation he orders his crew: "Arm phasers, fire everything we've got." Later Kirk is honored and promoted, without question. But let's ask it here: Why was it necessary to fire that final time? Is this not the immoral equivalent of executing a defeated enemy on the battlefield? And even if one can argue, technically, through some possible suppositions not made clear in the film itself, how would this action in any form help tell the story of a noble people engaged in noble activities?

In the next reboot film, the crew face "Khan Noonien Singh," a genetically engineered super-human seeking revenge portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch. Khan has a legitimate grievance and his actions are predictable. Originally created as a super soldier who decides, with his superior intellect, that fighting for those who created him and his kind is a fool's errand, he instead fights against his creators. Nevertheless, he is defeated, and he and his followers are sentenced to hyper-sleep. In

the future, he is revived with the purpose of once again serving as a super soldier, but his Starfleet master loses control over him and once again, he wreaks havoc. Ultimately outwitted by Spock, he crashes on earth, but not before Kirk sacrifices his life to save the crew. In anger, Spock personally hunts down Khan, and having subdued him with help from Uhura, proceeds to beat him to death. He only stops when his Uhura explains they need to keep Khan alive to harvest his blood for a lifesaving transfusion for Kirk. Later, in a voice over by Kirk, he states, "There will always be those who mean to do us harm. To stop them, we risk awakening the same evil within ourselves. Our first instinct is to seek revenge, but this is not who we are."

A number of critics attacked the casting of Cumberbatch as "whitewashing" a minority role (Blauvelt 2013; Wang 2013). The character name suggests someone of South Asian descent, as Singh is a name common among Sikhs and Khan is common among Muslims in Central and South Asia. In *Star Trek*, the character first appeared in 1967, and was played by Ricardo Montalbán, a Mexican actor who formed a group called the Nosotros Foundation in 1970, to protest the negative portrayals of Mexicans in Hollywood films, and many characters of Mexican descent were portrayed by non-Mexicans (L. Muñoz 2009). Nevertheless, Montalbán's greatest film triumph came when he reprised the role of Khan in a pre-reboot *Star Trek* film, subtitled, *The Wrath of Khan* (1982). If this seems ironic, then consider the deeper historical context. In 1983, Ronald Reagan met with Afghan Mujahedeen leaders in the White House following several years of working with the Pakistani military and intelligence services to create and train a fundamentalist Islamic army to oppose the Soviets in Afghanistan. One of these trained was Mullah Omar, the future leader of the Taliban, and one of those who helped recruit radical Muslims to the cause was Osama Bin Laden. Although the US government would later claim that it never had a direct relationship with Bin Laden, it nevertheless conceded in effect that it had an association with him (US State Department 2005).

When the filmmakers of the reboot were criticized for casting Cumberbatch, a white Englishman instead of someone of Islamic descent, producer and screenwriter Roberto Orci responded, "Basically, as we went through the casting process and we began honing in on the themes of the movie, it became uncomfortable for me to support demonizing anyone of color, particularly any one of Middle Eastern descent or anyone evoking that. One of the points of the movie is that we must be careful about the villain within us, not some other race" (Orci 2013). That's a noble sentiment, perhaps, but not killing a man you created so you can in turn harvest his blood and save yourself hardly seems noble, and further, recalls precisely what the US has done in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo, Libya, and so on. Even though American leaders insist it has no intention of targeting a specific people or religion.

In the third reboot, the villain is portrayed by Idris Elba, a first generation black Englishman whose parents immigrated to London from the former British West African colonies turned independent nations of Sierra Leone (father) and Ghana (mother) (Fitzherbert 2012). His character, Krall/Balthazar Edison, is a former war hero turned Starfleet captain, who was the sole survivor after his crew perishes following a crash on an isolated planet. On that planet, there is left-behind technology that allows him to extend his life and control drones, but only at the expense of his humanity. He becomes increasingly radicalized, acquires a weapon of mass destruction, and puts in place a plan to destroy a Federation space station that is the happy home to multicultural millions. Very little reason is offered why this plan is put into motion—it is merely the stuff of madmen, and frankly, contemporary audiences do not need it. Killed in the last minute by Kirk, who once again serves as the model of reason and self-restraint, the parallels with contemporary life are so obvious that

they require no discussion here.

In final analysis, *Star Trek*'s utopian humanism is less a futuristic fantasy than a commodified projection of the myths that we tell ourselves about ourselves in the present day. From product to product, the franchise has succeeded when it has closely *followed* in the wake of real social and political developments. While some of these developments since the 1960s can be characterized as progressive, and while some of *Star Trek*'s more imaginary developments might be considered slightly more progressive than the real historical moment of the audience, the franchise has been most successful when it has reinforced the cultural hegemony of contemporary ideological narratives and political values. Over time, and perhaps after Roddenberry, as the reboot film series demonstrates, such reinforcement has become more obvious as masking it has become less necessary. In this respect, given the descriptions above, the franchise can be viewed as an authentic expression of "capitalism lately," to use Fredric Jameson's term, and is consistent with other narratives reinforcing with what David Harvey calls "new imperialism." These are not new developments.

## What's Wrong with *Star Wars*?

Whatever the sins of *Star Trek*, the sins of *Star Wars* are greater. If measured in terms of dollars earned, those sins outpace *Star Trek* four-to-one. If this seems like a gratuitous criticism, then gratuity earns it. After all, this is a Marxist analysis and *Star Wars* is in a class by itself in terms of how it is crafted to sell. Our focus here will not be an analysis of storylines or how they intersect with recent and contemporary history as was done above with *Star Trek*, nor will we examine the incredible goldmine of associated merchandising and product tie-ins. Rather, our purpose is to theorize a deeper connection between commodity and consumer, and to do so in ways that builds on and extends previous discussions by other writers. The key point here is that while *Star Trek* is designed to appeal to consumers as a commodity of the moment, *Star Wars* is designed intentionally to appeal to if not exploit consumers on an unconscious level. In this sense, comparatively, *Star Wars* aims to be the commodity fetish *par excellence*.

From the start, the genius of *Star Wars* is found not in its originality, but the opposite. To be sure, creator George Lucas created *Star Wars* in part because he was unable to buy the rights to *Flash Gordon*, a favorite space adventure comic from his youth (Macek 2013). Determined to make his own Flash Gordon, the original *Star Wars* (1977) film, retroactively subtitled "A New Hope," is an admitted pastiche of a great number of influences, including *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, David Lean's *Laurence of Arabia* (1962), several Japanese films by Akira Kurosawa, and so on (Kaminski 29, 50, 61, 63). In terms of political influence, the film makes direct allusions to Nazism, where the soldiers of the evil Empire's army are "Stormtroopers," where the emperor's rise mirrors Adolf Hitler's rise to power, and where key Empire leader Darth Vader is a play on German for "dark father" (Watson 2005). The second released film, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), likewise resonated rhetorically with Ronald Reagan's characterization of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire." Further, many have drawn comparisons between the film and the stories of Arthurian legend, as well as other heroic epics (Lucas, *Empire of Dreams*, 2005).

But the genius of the film as Lucas admits, is its most unoriginal element: it takes as its narrative template the so-called "monomyth" described by Joseph Campbell in the latter's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). These points were underscored repeatedly during Bill Moyers' special six-episode interview series on Campbell's work, *The Power of Myth* (1988), which was filmed at Lucas' home, Skywalker Ranch, where the influence of the book on *Star Wars* was discussed extensively, and they have been rehashed in more recently as Disney has extended the franchise (Higgs 2015; Seastrom

2015）. After 1977, several reprint editions of the book featured an image of *Star War*'s principle hero, Luke Skywalker, along with other images from historical and archeological record.

Campbell develops the idea of the monomyth by drawing primarily from the works of Sigmund Freud （the language and concepts of Freud, plus, especially the Oedipus Complex, Campbell 2004, passim）, Carl Jung （the theory of unconscious archetypes, passim） and Arnold van Gennep （*The Rites of Passage*, 1909, passage in three stages, which Campbell reconfigured in Hero as departure, initiation, and return （Campell 9,34）. Another important influence was Otto Rank, Freud's close associate, whose work took psychoanalytic theory into the study of myth （Campell 59,235,297）. To put it briefly, the central idea of the monomyth is that there is a universal formula at work in human mythmaking, the pattern of which Campbell argues can found repeatedly in various forms throughout history and across different cultures, including the story of Oedipus, the Buddha, Jonah, Jesus, Arjuna, Siberian shamanism, Andean creation myths, and so on. It should be clear therefore that Campbell is working within the ahistoricist, universalist tradition established substantially by Freud, including the notion that there are unconscious structures at work, which Campbell ultimately believes shape and express human subjectivity again and again in the familiar form of a single "monomyth."

Campbell argues in *Hero* that the monomyth does not always appear as its full form in each myth. Rather, parts can show up that can belong in turn to a broader literature or cultural context, e. g., the story of Jonah and the whale within the Jewish tradition or the larger narrative context of the Bible as a whole in the case of Christianity, when the story is repeated symbolically at the story of Jesus execution and resurrection （Campell 83－88）. This is to say that parts of the story are often partial and episodic, which of course suits well a media franchise of multiple products. But at a deeper

level, Campbell is really talking about the interplay of what he takes to be universal structures at work in the human unconscious, to which we might awaken through studies by Freud, Jung and Gennep, or, more anachronistically, Buddhism—which for Campbell is the religious practice of the meditative consciousness which awakens to itself, and which he argues has parallels in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* （Campbell and Moyers, 2017）. Such an awakening, incidentally, is closely connected in many respects with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical maxim of "learning to enjoy one's symptom," as Žižek makes clear in the opening frames of his film, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* （2012）.

Despite mentioning very briefly and often only tangentially a number of Chinese myths, what is striking about *Hero* is the extent to which Chinese stories are absent. Furthermore, while Campbell notes a number of far flung stories in different places to underscore the universality of his theory, the great majority of his evidence comes from either European or Hindu cultures, as well as those with close relationships to the same.

It is a great importance to Campbell as well as those influenced him most directly to believe in a type of unchanging, universal essentialism with respect to human psychology. Campbell, as is well known, was also a scholar of James Joyce, whose organization in *Ulysses* （1922） not only influenced *Hero*, but also shaped other aspects of Campbell's work, including Campbell's （with Henry Morton Robinson） book *A Skeleton Key to Finnegan's Wake* （1944）. It is in *Finnegan's Wake* （1939） that Campbell discovered the term "monomyth," which would be developed as the central concept in *Hero* （Campbell 28）, and likewise, as with that same novel, Campbell seeks a skeleton key to all the heroic myths of mankind.

This comes from Sigmund Freud's privileging of the ancient Greek story of Oedipus story, which he redeveloped as the Oedipus Complex in an attempt to explain a universal and ahistorical basis of subjectivity. Despite the fact that Aldous Huxley

effectively satirizes Freud in *Brave New World* (1946), recognizing that the Oedipus Complex owes more to Fordist industrialism than to pre-capitalist Greek mythology—i. e., as a means for addressing quality control issues related to production and reproduction of modern psyche in the age of industrial capitalism and its utopian pretenses, where God's name is "Ford" except when talking about psychological matters, then it's "Freud" (Huxley 77 - 78).

Nevertheless, perhaps some subjectivity has always existed in the West, and if so, we might well suspect its roots are found in Indo-European languages at the level of *la langue*, which is what Ferdinand de Saussure called structuralist linguistics. Is it not striking that only those within the Indo-European language group formulated a law of non-contradiction (in the Indian case, see Staal 109 - 28; Dasgupta, Vol. IV 97, 109, 226, 228; Dasgupta, Vol. V 183), or that structuralism insists that language as a system functions per differentiation, i. e., a dog is not a cat, not a horse, not a puppy, not a house, and so on? In other words, perhaps the foundations of such subjectivity preceded the Greeks—and Aristotle was merely the first or among the first to record such thinking so precisely. Nevertheless, despite paternity, the radical form of Western subject is a modern phenomenon, which is to say that it is a relatively recent development, one that, by most indicators, never emerged in China on its own and was unlikely to do so without Western influences. This failure to emerge in China could be due to the fact that it's not universal, or that different material conditions in China produced different ways of thinking, or because Chinese thought conscientiously developed resistances to such thinking. If we pursued this further here, we could show that there are arguments supporting all three possibilities.

This is by no means a new observation and in fact it has long been articulated as a fundamental difference between Chinese and Western thinking. Okakura Kakuzo's *The Book of Tea* (1906) famously attributes this difference to convergent influences of Daoism and Buddhism, originally synthesized in China. In fact, an understanding of similar and sometimes the same differences were not lost on Western philosophers, particularly those who found themselves too confined by the fundamentals of Western subjectivity. The example of Martin Heidegger is perhaps the most striking. Heidegger was introduced to Okakura's works initially through dialogues with Okakura's student, Kuki Shuzo, who had been introduced to Heidegger by Heidegger's own teacher, Edmund Husserl. This set in motion a decades-long exchange between Heidegger and Japanese philosophers. It has been argued that Heidegger "quietly appropriated" Okakura's concept of "being-in-the-world" as a philosophical exit point from Western subjectivity. It's a phrase that Okakura uses in *The Book of Tea* and elsewhere as an explicit contradistinction to Western subjectivity, but whom Heidegger never cites (May 84 - 99; Imamichi 123 - 24).

Nevertheless, in *Being and Time* (1996), Heidegger famously rejects the Cartesian idea of the individual as a *cogito*-being, and consequently, rejects Kant, whom he regards as being likewise ontologically founded (Heidegger 21, passim). "*Cogito*" here serves as shorthand for the Cartesian declaration, "*cogito ergo sum*," which has served as a powerful expression of Western subjectivity, with variations of the *cogito* found in key works that both precede and come after René Descartes (e. g., in Aristotle, Augustine, Kant as noted, Sigmund Freud, Husserl, etc.). As a cogito-committed philosopher (e. g., see Smith 12 and *passim*), Husserl took Heidegger's break from the *cogito* as both a personal rejection and as a gross betrayal of reason itself. He described it as backsliding into primitive Asian mysticism and a crisis for "European man" (Husserl 163 - 71). The point here is that Heidegger's stance helps illustrate the differences between Chinese and Western subjectivity, and indeed, his work influenced a great number of postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial

thinkers who reached similar concerns. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that such developments have substantially unsettled Western subjectivity or its modes and manifestations of power.

Kant's work was predicated on the same form of subjectivity and its reliance on the Aristotelian laws of logic recalls here another key point, one that is fundamental to Kant's concept of critical thinking and which runs contrary to the Chinese tradition of dialectical/correlative thought (Hall and Ames 124; Tian 139). Kant asserts that "dialectical thinking" is a "logic of illusion," one that is prone to "metaphysical jugglery" and that is far inferior to that "analytical thinking." His privileging of the latter is derived from the Aristotelian tradition with only minor modifications. Such thinking according to Kant provides an epistemological foundation for the age he signals—the "age of criticism" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 7–8,116; *Lectures on Logic* 433,513–35). In fact, this position is not wholly unique to Kant but it is with him that it finds its clearest expression and firmest anchor in the Western intellectual tradition vis-à-vis the modern Western subject (Taylor 1989,83). The heart of the matter is found in Kant's claim "that the unity *of consciousness* is an *a priori* necessity from which we can deduce the validity of the categories" (Guyer and Wood 65). This has led some like Theodor Adorno to conclude that Kantian thought is inescapably tautological because it accepts *a priori* a form of thinking that is unable to fathom an immanent critique of its own ontological assumptions, i. e., the foundations of Western logic that are self-normalizing in Kant's hands (Adorno 67–73).

This problem was recognized in part by G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, the latter who ultimately believed that capitalism itself was a manifestation of such logic and could not, therefore, be critically assessed by the same, as he similarly understood "bourgeois economics" to be. As Marx detailed in his notebooks in the late 1850s (Schrader 2014),

he arrived with the understanding that such developments occurred in tandem with an increasing hegemony of such thinking qua modern subjectivity and its corresponding delegitimization and suppression of dialectical thinking. From roughly 1857 to 1861, in a major departure from his earlier and oft-cited materialist conceptions of consciousness in *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx concluded that consciousness suffers from a type of sickness of which alienation is merely a symptom and ideology merely a diagnosis. Western subjectivity had suppressed its capacity to think dialectically, so that its consciousness and further, the political and economic manifestations of that consciousness, were merely fragments. This is why people continued to subject themselves as commodified labor to the denigrating and impenetrable mysteries of capitalism. Their ability to understand the system of value that they created was hindered by the same self-valorizing inadequacies that had led to building such a system (Schrader 2014). Marx then makes a return to the Hegelian dialectic as a foundation for his critique of capitalism (Arthur 95–96; O'Malley and Schrader 423–32), and furthermore it was a jab at the inadequacy of Kant's *Critiques* that led Marx to use the word "critique" in the subtitle of his first volume of *Capital*.

Despite the efforts of Hegel and Marx, as well as a significant number of post-War philosophers and critical theorists, the pejorative view of the dialectic continues to occupy a hegemonic position in Western thought and is reinforced continuously by the totality of capitalism and its multitude of operations. Epistemologically, this table was set, so to speak, by Thomas Aquinas, whose pseudo-dialectical syntheses of Aristotelian thought and Augustinian Platonism in the *Summa Theologiae* proved deconstructable not because of "metaphysical juggling," as Kant would have it, but because the Summa was argued within the framework of Aristotelian logic. As both the heavy favorite and the referee, Aristotle could not lose, and in short order thinkers like Duns Scotus made sure he did not. In

turn, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke found themselves too radically Aristotelian to tolerate even Aristotle himself. Even a good Enlightenment Catholic like Descartes was already more Aristotelian than Aristotle such that his *cogito* expression is an unsurprising product of a subjectivity that confirms itself uncritically in the mode of understanding peculiar to itself.

Whether or not one accepts the broader aspects of Campbell's work, which also emphasizes the role of the hero as the "master of two worlds," who leaves home, conquers the other, and takes his position as hero and justice-bringer when he comes home (Campbell 212 – 26), what should be obvious is the deep resonance Campbell's descriptions have had with modern and postmodern culture, as they have been used as script templates for billion dollar film franchises like *Star Wars*. This sort of resonance was true of Freud and this privileging Western mythos of the self, where even New Age interpretations of Buddhism constitute Protestantism sans God, is less a human universalism than the culmination of Orientalism in the information age of global capital and Western political, economic and cultural hegemony. A key work to reference here is Samo Tomšic's *The Capitalist Unconscious* (2015), in which *cogito* being as capitalist being finds its best treatment to date. Nevertheless, what should be striking is the noticeable absence of similar heroic narratives in pre-modern China, and the explicit attempts to create such literary characters by Chinese writers including Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Mao Dun, Ba Jin and a multitude of lesser known figures in order to stimulate a modern Chinese consciousness qua heroic subjectivity precisely at the point described as the crisis of consciousness stemming from foreign aggression (Ng *passim*; Ip 84 – 136). In some cases, these heroic literary figures were created as alter egos of the authors themselves, as intentional expressions of a new subjectivity, and in turn helped fashion some of these authors as being the heroes they portrayed, as Lu Xun exemplifies (Davies 1).

There are heroes of sorts in Chinese literature,

but even the greatest of these are anti-heroes in a struggle against a corrupt state or god and often central figures within much larger groups, who either retreat ultimately to a Buddhistic renunciation of self, or whose final acts are interpreted in substantially the same way. This is true, for example, of Wu Song, one of the central figures of the Chinese classics, *Shui Hu Zhuan*, *Water Margin* (late 14th to late 16th centuries) and *Jin Ping Mei*, *The Golden Lotus* (1610), and likewise, Guan Yu, in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (16th to 17th centuries), and Sun Wukong (the Monkey King) in *Xi you Ji*, *Journey to the West* (16th century).

A more recent example is Zhang Yimou's film, *Hero* (2002). A fictional account of Jing Ke's attempt to assassinate the Qin emperor in 227 BC, which concludes with the "hero" intentionally failing in his mission and being complicit in his own execution upon realizing that the despot's activities were creating a stronger state, one that would better serve the collective good. In fact, this film was posed in part as a more authentic Chinese film, one that was viewed in part as a critical response to Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000).

But this long discussion and consideration of Chinese differences brings us now to three key points. First, *cogito*-consciousness is intrinsic to psychoanalysis. More specifically, one of the necessities underpinning Lacanian psychoanalysis is the conviction of the ahistorical universality of the human being as a *cogito* being. Indeed, Lacan's foremost contemporary disciple Slavoj Žižek makes this point clear and provides a laundry list of thinkers with similar points of view. For example, Husserl expressed a *cogito*, that Augustine had one (Žižek 2015), and as it must be said, so did Aristotle. While I do suspect that such subjectivity has deep linguistic roots and may well manifest in Indo-European cultures as well as others, I do not consider the evidence that it is both universal and timeless to be well-established. Furthermore, as noted above, there is a radical version of this subjectivity that emerges with European modernity,

and that in turn produces the ideological and material constructs familiar to us from that and the current time period.

Second, as critics of Campbell like Robert S. Ellwood have made clear, Campbell's work suffers from viewing normatively any myth it selects for analysis from a predetermined frame, which coincides with heroic valorizations of individual and liberalism. This reinforces the fantasy that it is through the individual efforts of the hero that the spectacle of a *Star Wars* universe becomes possible, in lieu of massive government organization and financing. Indeed, such organization belongs precisely to the other of the Evil Empire against which the heroic individual prevails, although it is well known that space travel and related developments have required massive public expenditures and government leadership ( Ellwood *passim* ). In terms familiar with our discussion above, I would reframe this tendency in Campbell as the problem of a Freudian capitalist hermeneutic, which, along with selection bias and building on his predecessors, Otto Rank and particularly Lord Raglan, popularizes a hermeneutics of the present. Subsequently, Campbell transmits to Lucas a skeleton key of the capitalist unconscious.

Third, the success of *Star Wars* is attributable in part to this template, insomuch as the commodity form is constructed perfectly to carry forward the metaphysical suppositions of Being that are intrinsic to *cogito*-consciousness and the products of such thinking, namely, commodity, and intrinsic to commodities, as Marx argues, commodity fetishism. Therefore, what *Star Wars* offers its consumers is the sheer pleasure of enjoying a timeless universalism, which they can purchase, and into which they can escape. *Star Wars* itself begins with the scrolls, "in a galaxy far, far away, a long time ago." Thus one is invited in the first moment to an imaginary universe that psychoanalytically reassures otherwise the alienated and exploited capitalist unconscious that these myths we tell about ourselves are true. But to historicize this：*Star Wars* appears firstly in

1977 when capitalism is subject to profound self-doubt, and it carries forward with Reagan as a trope, pushing commodity consumption to new highs in the 1980s, defeating the Evil Empire in the 1990s, lumbering through the 2000s, and now, with Lucas having sold the franchise to Disney, essentially, not a reboot, but a repetition, with new films already in the marketplace that replay the same basic themes and characters. After all, one can hardly improve upon the basic story or its template, because thanks to Campbell and Lucas, the genius of *Star Wars* is its projection of the reified consciousness as the commodity form par excellence.

## Conclusion：Pathological Being, or, What's Wrong with Žižek?

One of the great failures of Žižek has been his fundamental inability to offer a meaningful politics of resistance or revolution. The joke, if one could joke about such matters, is that psychoanalysis is the so-called "talking cure," and if talking alone could bring change then maybe Žižek could be revolutionary as he sometimes valorizes. Žižek is not alone in this respect. Similar charges have been made against Derrida, Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou. It may well be that the bailiwick of critical theory is a certain type of idealism that cannot reconcile with the muddier if not bloodier aspects of politics.

I suspect the root of this problem is Žižek's commitment to the *cogito*-consciousness. If, as I have argued, the *cogito*-consciousness is at the root of the thinking that produced capitalism, then could or should such consciousness be attenuated to help open up a new sort of critical consciousness and thereby offer the possibility of change. Marx suggests dialectical materialism as an effective method for immanent critique, but Marx does not discuss things like *cogito*-consciousness nor does he dismiss Aristotle. In fact, with respect to the latter, neither do I.

While I cannot accept the normative or

universalist discourses of psychoanalysis, I recognize that such psychoanalysis can help offer critical insights into the capitalist unconscious, and further, can help better understand the problem of ideology, which, as the meaning of the Chinese translation of that word reminds us, is the "shape or character of consciousness" (*yishixingtai*). Furthermore, I am sympathetic to the fact that in today's world, *cogito*-consciousness has become increasingly the norm of capitalist hegemony, even in China, especially among the younger generations that grew up under the market economy. Thus, psychoanalysis not only offers a tool for understanding, it likewise helps understand the very masses that one might try to organize in the course of revolutionary praxis.

But does the possibility of such a praxis become increasingly distant, particularly if we normalize the *cogito*? Is the *cogito*-consciousness the cul-de-sac of history? Is this why Žižek cannot offer an effective politics, but has to return to his frequent pseudo-Leninist admonition that we have to learn to fail better (*In Defense of Lost Causes* 361), while predicting that the foreseeable future is one that will look more fascistic than socialistic?

In *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006), Žižek concludes, "In order to understand today's world, we need cinema, literally. It's only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension which we are not yet ready or able to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is in reality—more real that reality itself—look into the cinematic fiction." But in that same film he discusses *Star Wars'* Darth Vader through the lens of Freud's Oedipus Complex when he describes Vader as the father who we wish to kill but who refuses to die. This, he says, is the significance of the heavy breathing of Vader's mask—a horrifying life force that by itself produces unresolvable anxiety. Here again is the problem: Vader was of course constructed to conform to the Oedipus Complex; consequently, his appearance is not the accidental occurrence which theory can uncover as an authentic confirmation of theory itself, as one might interpret Žižek as implying in part. But

here is the twist. On the one hand, theory wrote Vader in the first place. On the other hand, the theory appears valid if we take as evidence the success of the franchise and in particular, the apparently deep psychological resonance that Vader's character has had with his viewers. But this does not confirm his conclusion that cinema is where we confront what we are not yet able to confront otherwise. Rather, given the other concerns raised here, the cinema might instead be seen as normalizing systems of oppression which appear to depend, in the first and last instance, on normalizing and universalizing the *cogito*-consciousness as an ideological construct of pathological Being. This is what is wrong, perhaps with Žižek, and further, what is wrong with *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

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