Orders of Resistance

Galactic Hauntology and the Force of Recognition in Star Wars

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"A long time ago…"

For over four decades, *Star Wars* and the expansive elements of its multimedia franchise have been held up by fans and critics alike as a kind of cultural barometer to their constantly advancing times. The mind-blowing genesis event of the initial 1977 theatrical release of *Star Wars*, spawned from the mind of creator, writer and director George Lucas, eventually lead to the overwhelming success of the original film trilogy (*Episodes IV–VI*). It was an event which precipitated a critical heralding of modern myth as science fiction, a shared cultural narrative that rushed to fill the vacuum inherited by children of a disillusioned post-Vietnam America stalked by their forefather's nostalgic yearning for "The Greatest Generation."

In the decades that followed, the mixed reception of Lucas' prequel trilogy (*Episodes I–III*) was emblematic of the rapidly approaching digital frontier of the new millennium. Over six years, this new trilogy was released to trepidation from fans of the original trilogy and the excitement of many young viewers experiencing *Star Wars* on the big screen for the first time. Now firmly under the shadow of Disney's global corporate behemoth, the middling sequel trilogy (*Episodes VII–IX*) set out to complete the "Skywalker Saga" while also probing ever further into the *Star Wars* universe for story lore and intellectual property opportunities. Much like their prequel predecessors, the most recent episodes of the franchise also received a mostly lukewarm critical reception, despite adhering to the rigid strictures of big-budget theatricality indicative of the Hollywood blockbuster.

Across the life of *Star Wars*, audiences of all generations have looked to the franchise with an expectation to be told and shown the same, now-iconic story while also—quite paradoxically—demanding to see something new. While this expectation may appear unrealistic in terms of the audience's desire for wish fulfillment, it nonetheless remains a mode of viewing that the films of the *Star Wars* universe cultivate in their audiences. Through its earliest iterations, the original trilogy functions within what Fredric Jameson termed the *nostalgia mode*, a form of narrative storytelling which reflected the historical experience of late capitalism and the cultural logic of postmodernism throughout the mid to late twentieth century. However, as the late capitalism that defined conditions of commerce and technology during this period began to transition to a more rampant register of neoliberal economics and static politics, so too have the cultural contours of postmodernism been shaped by the force of capital. Accordingly, concepts such as *hauntology* and *capitalist realism* have emerged in recent criticism, yielding more potent formulations for thinking through this transition and its implications on the media environment of the early twenty-first century.

Within the space of *Star Wars* criticism, what remains to be tracked and articulated is how this transition has manifested within the franchise itself, moving from traditional modes of postmodern storytelling and nostalgia to a new mode entirely, one that is distinctly hauntological and profoundly post-postmodern. In *Star Wars,* this transition is marked by a turn in its nostalgic mode from nostalgia for the cultural objects, histories, and signifiers of older

time periods towards a seeming *nostalgia-for-itself*, a narrative mode unique to *Star Wars* as a cultural object with its own seemingly inexhaustible reserve of internal signifiers and histories. What we arrive at is not the presence of traditional nostalgia that could be described as *inter*textual, but rather an *intra*textual nostalgia that longs for the incessant repetition of its own shapes, forms, and contours—a haunting of itself, for itself.

As we hope to show, *Star Wars*, seen most predominantly across the forty-two-year progression of the three trilogies and nine film episodes that constitute the "Skywalker Saga," embodies a distinctive mode of storytelling that is consistently evocative of and engaging with its audience's cultural and technological experience. Our aim is to describe *Star Wars*' most recent narrative mode as one indicative of a *galactic hauntology,* a post-nostalgic notion characterized by the force of recognition within audiences, emerging from latency during the prequel trilogy before becoming robust and fully formed in the most recent sequel trilogy. Within this narrative mode, distinct forms, objects, motifs, events, and themes occur and inevitably reoccur as signifiers in a fictional timeline that spans thousands of years. And yet, an eerie feeling of *timelessness* also pervades the franchise, one that lacks any trajectory in relation to its own history or that of its audience, generating a specific form of weaponized nostalgia-for-itself that obscures the lost futures of the *Star Wars* universe.

For us, considering the limitless galaxy of potential that is the *Star Wars* universe, what is at stake here is how to conceptualize a cultural object that has not only remained present at the forefront of cultural memory for over four decades, but also one that spans a perceptible transition from the postmodern ontology of its genesis to the inevitable hauntology of our current era. How did this transition happen? How was it maintained? What is the present form of cultural memory in *Star Wars*, and what are the spectral contours of its hauntological absences? What we aim to do by articulating the concept of galactic hauntology is to conceptualize *Star Wars*, the cultural object, occurs as a dynamic narrative mode bearing out its place in ongoing cultural memory through the constant (de)stabilization and (re)stabilization and of its own hauntological form.

Hauntology, Postmodern Specters and the Nostalgia Film

Originating with Jacques Derrida (1994) and his work, *Specters of Marx*, the term hauntology is both a pun and a portmanteau of the words *haunting* and *ontology*, denoting the return or persistence of elements from the past in the manner of a ghost or specter. Here, ontology refers to the philosophy of existence, and for Derrida, hauntology describes the contingency of absence that prefigures any state of being and essence: "To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept" (202). As Louise Burchill (2009) notes, Derrida's hauntology is not merely a static state but rather a "process" of constant "deconstruction," of dismantling and reconfiguration, by which any purported present entity is revealed as the product of a "non-presence," construed, though, not as a simple contrary or negative, but as a point of leverage by which to overturn and reconfigure the entire system privileging the "presence" of the original element (167).

Within Derrida's conception then, it is impossible to posit any presence without first recognizing how this presence is necessarily imbued and informed by a corresponding absence. This understanding of hauntology as it applies to the study of film—and ultimately our conception of a galactic hauntology specific to *Star Wars*—becomes important, as Derrida "would have us understand the spectrality of the [film] image… [as partaking of a logic] in which the indistinction of hallucination and perception would… be prior to, and the condition of, any ascription of 'reality', 'verisimilitude', [or] presence and non-presence" (169). There is, in this sense, always a spectral (if not outright hauntological) presence latent in film as a form of media, which may be brought out as soon as the form turns to more self-aware modes of representation.

Contemporary usage of hauntology, particularly upon objects of mass culture and political theory, has been popularized by critics such as Mark Fisher (2014). In his work, *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher advances Derrida's hauntology to diagnose a perceived cultural inertia in the twenty-first century, evidenced by a pervasive sense of "timelessness" and "failed mourning" in cultural production that results in continued anachronism and stasis: "What's at stake in 21st century hauntology is not the disappearance of a particular object. What has vanished is a tendency, a virtual trajectory" (30). Fisher's allusion to an absent virtual trajectory indicative of hauntology refers to and builds upon the works of Fredric Jameson (1998) and the conditions of postmodernism that he famously considered. Jameson identified *schizophrenia* and *pastiche* as the dominant cultural impulses of late capitalism most prevalent in "postmodern" cultural objects of literature, art, film, and architecture.

Within Jameson's notion of pastiche, he also identified the distinctive machinations of the *nostalgia mode*, where cultural objects are "serenely liberated from the pressures of historical becoming, [and] can now be periodically buffed up by new technology" (Fisher 2014, 21). As Vera Dika (2003) notes, one of the key text types that Jameson identifies as embodying the characteristics of postmodern pastiche and the nostalgia mode is the "nostalgia film": a film that is "not so much a re-presentation of particular historical periods as it is a re-creation of [that period's] cultural artefacts," where the "past is metonymically re-experienced" (10). For Jameson, the then-recent and theatrically released *Star Wars*, which would later become *Episode IV* of the franchise, was an exemplary instance of a nostalgia film, not necessarily because it returned to definite historical periods on which to exercise nostalgia, but to the "old film genres, and to those genres' imagistic and narrative signifying systems" so that the past, "returns through the composite of an old generic universe" (10-11).

By evoking the roving ronin of Akira Kurosawa's filmography, the pulpy futurism of *Buck Rogers*, and the archetypal hero of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, the original *Star Wars* trilogy's pastiche has been thoroughly recognized as working upon large tracts of Lucas's own film viewing history. As Jameson writes in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society":

> One of the most important cultural experiences of the generations that grew up from the 1930s to the 1950s was the Saturday afternoon series of the *Buck Rogers* type – alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress, the death ray or the doomsday box, and the cliff-hanger at the end whose miraculous solution was to be witnessed next Saturday afternoon. *Star Wars* reinvents this experience in the form of a pastiche; there is no point to a parody of such series, since they are long extinct. Far from being a pointless satire of such dead forms, *Star Wars* satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which on some first level children and adolescents can take the adventures straight, while the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artefacts through once again. (8)

It becomes important then for us to revisit this well-established critique of *Star Wars*—a critique almost as old as the films themselves—as the nostalgia mode recognized above is what we believe to be the repertoire of narrative and representational strategies inherited from and actively deployed by each successive *Star Wars* film.

Building on Jameson's observation, Fisher reflects on why the cultural production of the late twentieth century was so intently focused on rehashing old ideas: "Why did the arrival of neoliberal, post-Fordist capitalism lead to a culture of retrospection and pastiche? Could it be that neoliberal capitalism's destruction of solidarity and security brought about a compensatory hungering for the well-established and the familiar?" (14). For Fisher, by indirectly evoking nostalgia for certain historical periods through pastiche and exploiting the "gaps and fissures in

temporal continuity," the original *Star Wars* trilogy was able to invent its own form of the nostalgia mode and use futuristic "technology to obfuscate its archaic form" (13, 22).

What Fisher's conception of hauntology makes clear is the "persistences, repetitions, [and] prefigurations" of twenty-first century cultural production are in many ways a haunting return of the "formal attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past, a consequence of a retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience" (35, 11). As Martin Hägglund (2008) argues: "What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet' (82). Elaborating on Hägglund, Fisher identifies two specific types of hauntology: one referring to "that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which remains effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat', a fatal pattern)"; and another referring to "that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour)" (19).

Since the success of the original trilogy, *Star Wars* media has been continually re-stabilizing and destabilizing this nostalgic mode, not merely as Jameson's "pointless satire of dead forms," but as a pastiche of *its own forms*, where the aesthetic and thematic artefacts of each cultural object are the previous *Star Wars* episodes themselves. We suggest that the dismay many older *Star Wars* fans hold for the subsequent trilogies that bookend the "Skywalker Saga" might have more to do with the hauntological figure of the *specter* than any perceived deficiencies in the films themselves. Viewed in this way, *Stars Wars* is eerily spectral in the way it nostalgically resuscitates the familiar forms of the original trilogy—which are, by necessity, its own forms—but never fully encapsulates the revelatory and groundbreaking experiences they elicited in audiences. We argue that for each subsequent trilogy and film entry in the larger franchise, the process of negotiating this mode has ceased to be nostalgic for cultural objects outside of the *Star Wars* universe. Instead, this process now functions as a *nostalgia-for-itself*, turning what was originally a postmodern ontology into an internally nostalgic hauntology—a galactic hauntology—that is eerily familiar to fans yet consistently plagued by the lack of Fisher's virtual trajectory.

The Force of Recognition and the Spectral Return

Take the iconic opening crawl of a *Star Wars* episode: "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away…." This single line of text makes the conception of a galactic hauntology explicit. The *Star Wars* universe is one that is perennially past, despite being anachronistically futuristic to the modernist or linear senses of advancement. On the one hand, there is the familiar shape of a nostalgic mode and structure that creates the feeling of *Star Wars* as a contemporary myth and origin story told through past archaic forms. And on the other, *Star Wars* also undeniably continues and extends upon the generic convention of science fiction as a narrative form of future ontologies. From the familiar expectations created by the opening crawl, each episode could easily be imagined by its viewers as a potential found future populated with the recognizable technologies of their own historical moment. As Carl Silvio (2007) has argued, this atmosphere of futurity manifests in *Star Wars* through a retro "machine aesthetic," with "the construction of a high-tech 'globalized' galaxy filled with sublime objects of technology," such as blasters, holograms, lightsabers, X-Wings, and Star Destroyers (59, 54).

This is the inherent paradox that sits at the heart of galactic hauntology. The archaic connotations of the *Star Wars* myth structure and the presence of such hyper-futuristic technologies generates a spectral disjunction and dislocated sense of *future-pastness*. Within the original trilogy, this paradox is also represented by familiar and alienating forms of capitalism, where each film presents a nostalgic vision of the past in conjunction with visual metaphors of the future, contrasting the prevailing ethos of pre-capitalism and feudal capitalism with the maverick entrepreneurialism of Tatooine and the Outer Rim. And yet, this

contradiction is exactly what engages audiences within the narrative mode of *Star Wars* as it shifts between nostalgic and hauntological registers. For Silvio, the audience reads underneath the surface of each film's nostalgic structure, "in order to construct [their own] coherent fictional ontology from these [visual] signifiers":

> We must imagine a late capitalist galaxy that coexists with a nostalgic version of older modes of economic production. In other words, we must imagine a logical relationship between two somewhat antithetical systems, one familiar and one alienating. This process of imaginarily reconciling these systems so that they form a coherent whole helps to normalize our experience of late capitalism. It is beside the point then that we can ultimately create a plausible justification for this conjunction of early and advanced modes of capitalism in the *Star Wars* galaxy. More to the point is that a fantastically popular blockbuster film like this invites us to perform such an imaginative operation at this particular moment of historical and economic transition. (62)

What we suggest, however, is that *Star Wars* does not just rely on this mode as a means of co-opting contradictory images (and thereby histories) of capital into a coherent ontology, but through this process reconciles various forms inherited and inevitably (re)deployed through its own contingent form of hauntological pastiche. While the mode articulated above is arguably recognizable throughout the "Skywalker Saga," the effect generated in audiences from the release of *Episode I* onwards suggests that this hauntological sense of spatio-temporal dislocation—an awareness of a de-historicized timeless *future-past* that is also hauntingly present—has become the primary rather than latent element of the *Star Wars* viewing experience. For each subsequent trilogy and film entry in the larger franchise, *Star Wars* itself, its unique forms and sense of *future-past-ness*, has become the cultural object of nostalgia, rather than the structure through which nostalgia is expressed.

From this perspective, contemporary *Star Wars* media fulfills what Fisher articulated with trepidation and prescience: a hauntological state where the cultural object exists only to be repeatedly (re)produced, where what is lost in (re)production is precisely that tendency and virtual trajectory in relation to the object's past, which may have led to a future anywhere other than its already articulated present. The specter (or absence) of this lost future haunts the structure of the original trilogy's nostalgia mode and its contingent articulation of a timeless present. Contemporary audiences, regardless of their generation or entry point into the *Star Wars* universe, are now endlessly engaged through the force of recognition, watching and (re)watching episodes haunted by the spectral return of one another. Rather than representing a standalone narrative, each new *Star Wars* film is a delicate interplay of repetition and recurrence, informed by the presence and absence of other films in the larger franchise.

With the arrival and subsequent canonization of the sequel trilogy, this galactic hauntology has calcified into the very structure of the franchise's narrative storytelling, exacerbated to such an extent that a haunted cannibalistic nostalgia for the foundations of *Star Wars*—its forms, images, shapes, motifs, and themes—are now the normalized expectation of fans and critics alike. For example, the quest of each trilogy's central Skywalker protagonist—Luke, Anakin, and Rey—follows the well-known path of the hero's journey. And yet, it is the force of recognition that pulls audiences more deeply into this mythic structure, acknowledging the parallels between each character, retracing the steps of not only their ancestor's path as a Jedi but also of their descendants. While this seemingly regressive structure of repetition may invite accusations of "fan service" from audiences, these thematic parallels raise important questions about the nature of determinism, fate, self-fulfilling prophecies, and inheritance across non-linear histories. Viewing the progression of the "Skywalker Saga" is not simply a matter of reading back through the linear progress of a stable ontology's history. Rather, the franchise's galactic hauntology actively engages the audience's sense of a timeless present, allowing for these

readings to occur "out of joint," so that Anakin's tragic narrative haunts both Rey's path to self-discovery and Luke's desire for redemption.

Iconic *Star Wars* objects such as Luke's landspeeder and the corresponding montage of his travels across the desert sands of Tatooine establish inescapable thematic structures that work to reveal both Anakin's pod racer and Rey's speeder bike as profoundly hauntological objects: machines of homemade salvage that evidence their respective owner's innate resourcefulness, guiding them through similar physical and allegorical journeys. Moreover, the infamous "Trench Run" is another prescient example of this form of spectral return. In the climactic final moments of *Episode IV*, Luke acts as the Rebel Alliance's only hope, harried by Imperial TIE fighters on all sides, before ultimately navigating a course along the Death Star's surface and landing a critical hit on the impenetrable space station's hidden weakness. This pivotal scene sets in motion a hauntological chain reaction throughout subsequent film entries in which no symbol of enemy power, whether that be the Trade Federation Control Ship (*Episode I*) or the First Order's Starkiller Base (*Episode VII*), can be destroyed in any other way.

Just as the returning X-Wings in *Episode IV* had to make the original "Trench Run" again and again until a fatal shot landed, so too do fans participate in the haunted logic of the franchise through their access to a communal memory of *Star Wars* as a cultural object, making their own symbolic trench run again and again as willing participants for each spectral return to the *Star Wars* universe. As this hauntological mode has become the dominant structuring logic of *Star Wars* film entries in the twenty-first century, such resonate readings emerge in relation to any number of objects, events, and motifs that continue to populate the franchise. Consider the Cantina Bar full of mysterious rogues, the clashing red and blue hues of a lightsaber duel, the Death Star and its ongoing resurrection through increasingly aggrandized superweapons; all invoke and partake in a distinctly galactic hauntology.

Orders of Resistance

Nostalgia and repetition have always been constituent elements in the *Star Wars* franchise, and this is something that Lucas himself envisioned—albeit with entirely different motivations. In a DVD documentary included with *Episode I*, Lucas explains that the prequel trilogy films were intentionally written to be "like poetry," where "every stanza kind of rhymes with the last one." However, where galactic hauntology differs from this kind of intentional parallelism is in its indistinction between presence and absence. Much like the force ghosts of Jedis dead and gone, the specter of the original trilogy continues to haunt contemporary *Star Wars* media, destabilizing and foreclosing its virtual trajectory.

With the critical benefit of being able to view the complete "Skywalker Saga" as a unified, although amorphous, text, the transition in cultural logic from late capitalism to capitalist realism, from narrative modes of nostalgia and hauntology, across the franchise's forty-two-year history is more apparent now than ever. Due to chronology, the turn-of-the-millennium prequel trilogy was somewhat able to downplay its emerging hauntological tendencies. At the time of their theatrical release, the original trilogy represented a narrative future that was both necessary and canonically contingent. The temporal dislocation of viewing Darth Vader's previous life as a young Anakin Skywalker did not disconcert audiences so much as provide an excuse for their expressed disappointment at the derivative nature of the character's spectral past giving way to his tragic future.

As Derrida and Fisher articulated, the hauntological mode has now become the main driver of twenty-first century cultural production, and the original *Star Wars* trilogy bears such a striking resemblance to the sequel films in both form, content and narrative structure that it has become both a deterministic past and lost future, a specter prefigured as anachronistic absence within the sequel trilogy's perpetual present. While many critiques of contemporary *Stars Wars* media have read such occurrences and recurrences as embodying cheap simulacra and fan

service, we suggest that an understanding and recognition of galactic hauntology allows for a slightly more generous reading—one that allows critics to explore the films' hauntological resonances and perhaps even revisit evidence of such elements within the prequel trilogy.

In her analysis of recycled culture in contemporary film and television, Dika argues that the calcified image of "latter-day remakes" presents an opportunity for a distinctive and dynamic model of resistance, where "displacements and disruptions" can be used to engender "an internal friction between past and present, between old images and new narratives, and between representations of the real" (224). Rather than being merely simulacra or copies of films whose originals are often lost or little known, we suggest that the calcified presence of *Star Wars* films as cultural objects in of themselves—still present and active in the broader spectrum of cultural memory—generates the force of recognition necessary for galactic hauntology to reveal these structures as they operate more generally in our strange and haunted contemporary times.

However, even as we recognize and come to terms with this current hauntological mode in *Star Wars*, there are no doubts that the "Skywalker Saga" has demonstrated the limits of this mode. As new endeavors like Jon Favreau's *The Mandalorian* suggest, yet another barometric turn might be upon us as we exit the millennium's first quarter century, embracing the possibility of hauntological gestures that both pay homage to canonical history while also successfully resisting and reaching beyond the looming shadow of the *Star Wars* that came before towards an unknown virtual trajectory.

As Kylo Ren utters to Rey in *Episode VIII*, during one of the franchise's most striking moments: "Let the past die. Kill it, if you have to. That's the only way to become what you are meant to be." For *Star Wars*, what remains to be is whatever comes after the true death of the franchise's specter, a hauntological marker fading from the force of its own recognition, perpetually present and curiously absent.

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