

Season 1, Episode 7: *Star Wars* and Mass Culture

SPEAKERS

Hannah McGregor, Marcelle Kosman

[*Material Girls* Theme plays: “Shopping Mall” by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]

Marcelle Kosman 00:30

Hello, and welcome to *Material Girls*, a scholarly podcast about popular culture. I'm Marcelle Kosman.

Hannah McGregor 00:37

And I'm Hannah McGregor, and today, we are talking about the origin of one of the most well-known and successful movie franchises of all time.

Marcelle Kosman 00:47

It's true. We're talking about *Star Wars*! Coach, a stinger, a stinger!

Hannah McGregor 00:55

Drop that theme!

[*Star Wars* theme music (by John Williams) plays briefly]

Marcelle Kosman 01:06

This script is full of fun facts. Did you know that when the movie was first released in 1977, it was only called *Star Wars*, and that the subtitle “Episode Four, A New Hope” wasn't added to the opening screen crawl until four years later in 1981?

Hannah McGregor 01:20

I did know that it was retconned to be called A New Hope, once they decided to call the whole trilogy *Star Wars*. Yeah. Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 01:31

So cool. Did you know? **[Hannah laughs]** Hey, listeners, if that was a fun fact that you didn't know. You got to leave us an Apple review now, please. **[Sound effect of doorbell ringing]**

Hannah McGregor 01:42

Oh, it has to be five stars.

Marcelle Kosman 01:45

Oh, sorry. Yeah, just to be clear. "Four stars. I don't care about *Star Wars*." How dare you.

Hannah McGregor 01:50

That's the real *Star Wars* are the stars we demand you leave us in our reviews. **[Marcelle laughs]** Marcelle, here's a fun fact about *Star Wars* and me, which is that I didn't watch *Star Wars* growing up. It was not part of my childhood lexicon. It was not part of my family context. I watched it for the first time, I want to say... seven or eight years ago. So, I got to experience it for the first time as an adult, which is actually a pretty fun way to get to experience something this hugely popular, because like, I had all of this like, so much larger contextual information about it. But had just truly never seen the movies. And then I watched them and I was like oh yeah, I see why people watch these so much. These are pretty good!

Marcelle Kosman 02:42

It's pretty fun, huh?

Hannah McGregor 02:44

These are pretty fun.

Marcelle Kosman 02:47

I love them so much. They are so-

Hannah McGregor 02:49

That Harrison Ford. I think he's going somewhere! **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 02:52

Oh, another fun fact. Did you know that he was not originally hired as an actor? He was just like, he was just like staff.

Hannah McGregor 03:00

No!

Marcelle Kosman 03:01

Yeah, I can't remember the details.

Hannah McGregor 03:02

There's nothing more cursed to do on the internet than recite half remembered facts about Star Wars. Well, I know our mentions are going to be ruined. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 03:14

Okay, hey, listeners. Hey, listeners. If you know the full story of Harrison Ford, like becoming the character Han Solo, you need to leave us a five-star Apple review! **[Sound effect of doorbell ringing]** **[Marcelle and Hannah laugh]**

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Hannah McGregor 03:32

Clearly, we are not the only two people who love a star war. Good Arrested Development reference, Marcelle. I like it.

Marcelle Kosman 03:40

You know it.

Hannah McGregor 03:42

Let's find out why in "Why This? Why Now," the segment in which we consider the material conditions that allowed our object of study to become Zeitgeist-y. **[Marcelle goes "oooooooo"]** What if I get a tattoo that says Zeitgeist-y?

Marcelle Kosman 03:56

On your knuckles?

Hannah McGregor 03:57

Ooh, Zeitgeist knuckle tattoos? It's too late. I'm already planning my nasty little grabbers knuckle tattoos, so...

Marcelle Kosman 04:06

I'm not sure it's too late.

Hannah McGregor 04:10

It's too late.

Marcelle Kosman 04:12

Hannah. This is not so much a fun fact. It's just a real fact. I went to the reopening of Edmonton planetarium last weekend.

Hannah McGregor 04:20

That makes me feel very jealous.

Marcelle Kosman 04:22

I'm there and I'm just like, man, I've got this this *Star Wars* script that I'm percolating. And I want to like this building was built in the 60s and like, I really want to I want to look into the history and the developments of astrophysics in the 60s in the 70s. And I bet that's going to be really important to the development of why *Star Wars* was so popular.

Hannah McGregor 04:45

Makes perfect sense to me. Jurassic Park emerged out of exciting new things that happened in paleontology in the 60s and 70s. This is a totally logical connection.

Marcelle Kosman 04:56

Yeah! George Lucas and Steven Spielberg famously very good friends. Fun fact, they met in the 70s. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 05:03

That is such a fun fact.

Marcelle Kosman 05:06

But Hannah, do you know what, what else was happening in the 60s and 70s?

Hannah McGregor 05:12

Uh...the hippies, hippies happened. Flower and a gun. Vietnam protests.

Marcelle Kosman 05:18

Okay. Okay. Now we're getting there.

Hannah McGregor 05:20

Vietnam and the protests, and the related protests?

Marcelle Kosman 05:22

Yes. Yes. It's Vietnam. It's Vietnam. It's the Vietnam War. That is the thing that was happening. And now that's the big thing. That's the big thing.

Hannah McGregor 05:33

Okay, so we're not going to talk about space, we're going to talk about Vietnam.

Marcelle Kosman 05:37

No, I wouldn't do that to you. We've got to talk about space. We'll start with space. But trust me, we're gonna get to the war.

Hannah McGregor 05:44

Okay, what was happening with astrophysics?

Marcelle Kosman 05:48

[**Marcelle laughs**] Okay, I am sure that it will not come as a surprise to anybody that the 60s and the 70s was like a pretty big developmental period for science and technology. Like we learned a lot of stuff in that period that we didn't know before. It was important. So, when I was trying to find, you know, what was going on, and what were folks thinking about that time, I found this retrospective article that was written by an astrophysicist named Eric J. Chaisson. And he wrote, and I quote, "Over the course of the past two decades, we have learned more about the cosmos and our place in it than in the entire previous 10,000 years of civilization." End quote.

So, while that might be hyperbolic, he's an astrophysicist. And I don't think astrophysicists are known for hyperbole? I don't know. But the way that I interpret that statement is that during the 60s and 70s, space nerds, which I refer to lovingly, space nerds were fundamentally redefining the relationship between humans and the cosmos. And like, that's a big deal. And part of this is because those technological developments were allowing mere humans to explore deep space. So, being able to, like see and interpret the cosmos in ways that we couldn't previously because we didn't have the technology to make our eyeballs see it, you know?

Hannah McGregor 07:28

Okay, so humans were able to see space. What does that mean? Can you give me an example?

Marcelle Kosman 07:35

Yeah, yeah. So, like, when we look into the night sky through like a telescope, we can only see so far, like, no matter how kind of powerful the telescopes are, our eyeballs can only kind of perceive so much information. But like reading Chaisson's description, the way that he describes the things that we were able to discover and learn is so romantic. So, I will, I'll give you I'll read one example.

Hannah McGregor 08:03

So, astrophysicist's like romance, but not hyperbole?

Marcelle Kosman 08:07

I know. So okay, so listen, listen. So, here's one example. The rest we'll put in the Substack. Okay? Quote, "radio and infra-red techniques now enable us to, quote unquote, listen to huge interstellar clouds slowly contracting to form stars. Thus, we are now learning a great deal about the embryonic stages of stars, a subject about which the oldest science, astronomy had been experimentally ignorant until the dawn of the 1970s." End quote. Listening to stars being born! Hannah! **[Hannah laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 08:49

Yeah, it's cool.

Marcelle Kosman 08:49

It's so cool. It's so cool.

Hannah McGregor 08:51

It's cool. Space is cool.

Marcelle Kosman 08:53

Space is cool. And in the 60s and 70s people were really like, space being cool was becoming part of the like popular cultural conversation. And we can see that if we look at, like, the different types of popular culture programming that we start to see emerging, right, like we already had things like comic books and science fiction, for sure. So, in 1957, the BBC launches this educational program called *The Sky at Night*, and the host basically like nerds out about the night sky and continue to do so for 50 years. In 1963, BBC releases the very well-known fictional program called *Doctor Who*, you might be familiar. In 1966, we get the original *Star Trek*, also a camp masterpiece like *Star Wars*. In 1968 Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* hits theaters, like there was so much cultural interest in telling stories and learning in different ways and imagining the cosmos. But there is a downside.

Hannah McGregor 10:08

[sarcastically] To rapid scientific development? Never!

Marcelle Kosman 10:10

I mean... Surprisingly.

Hannah McGregor 10:12

[sarcastically] When has that ever gone badly?

Marcelle Kosman 10:14

Name two-I mean- **[Hannah laughs]** So Chaisson explains that, and I'm going to, I'm going to quote here, even though, quote, "public understanding of science was on the rise," end quote, science and technology were advancing too rapidly for regular folks to keep up. And Chaisson argues that a big part of this problem is that scientists lost their willingness to, quote, "grant a small fraction of their time to what might be called scientific citizenship," end quote.

Hannah McGregor 10:46

This is also the period when scientists start arguing that funding for science should only be decided by other scientists. It's the advent of peer review, as distinguished from like a more general review, its scientists being like, actually, nobody else is qualified to say what we're allowed to study. Nobody else is allowed, nobody else is allowed to think about it. Only us! So, if science communication is not happening, which is now good, I like it, that has shifted. There's, there's like a really sort of rich, robust world of science communication now happening. But if in the 60s and 70s, scientists are like, we're learning hella cool stuff about space, and it's none of your business.

Marcelle Kosman 11:29

Yeah. Yeah. Like, it's a bummer. And it's also not exactly new. Like historically, there have always been communities of people excluded from scientific discourse, scientific education. And that's, in part where the breadth of science fiction comes from, because folks who couldn't participate in the actual real-world development of science, they took their imaginations elsewhere into the world of, you know, fiction.

Hannah McGregor 12:04

Like *Star Wars*!

Marcelle Kosman 12:06

Exactly! Like *Star Wars*. So, I want to tell you and listeners about this very sweet conversation between scholar Lisa Yaszek, and writer Kathy Goonan about how satisfying it was to see *Star Wars* when it first came to theaters in 77. So, Kathy Goonan first remembers that quote, "before *Star Wars* came along, science fiction at the movies mostly meant monsters or aliens, but 1977 changed everything. George Lucas made it really easy to understand our genre," end quote. And Lisa Yaszek, adds that quote, "people didn't need to have a deep background to understand it,"

it being the science fiction of *Star Wars*, end quote. So clearly, the people wanted to think about space. And that included people who didn't have a background either in science fiction or in science education.

Hannah McGregor 13:02

Yeah, so a plucky young filmmaker comes along and decides that he's going to democratize science and give the people what they want.

Marcelle Kosman 13:12

Give the people what they want. That's what Hollywood always does, right?

Hannah McGregor 13:17

Hollywood, we can agree, the great democratizing nonhierarchical institution in which all people have equal access to knowledge. Hollywood!

Marcelle Kosman 13:27

Lolll. [Hannah laughs] Okay, so obviously, we're going to talk about Hollywood and the government. So Hannah-

Hannah McGregor 13:35

Oh, the government? Sorry, I just got more excited about the government. Oh no. This podcast has ruined me.

Marcelle Kosman 13:43

Hannah loves the government.

Hannah McGregor 13:45

I'm like, oooh policy?

Marcelle Kosman 13:46

Yes. Ooo! Hannah, do you remember what a repressive state apparatus is?

Hannah McGregor 13:54

Of course I do. Of course. Okay. So, Louis Althusser, French post structuralist theorist had this idea of repressive and ideological state apparatuses, as being the different ways that the state enforces or perpetuates ideologies. So, the repressive state apparatus is the like, sort of outward ways that the state mentally and physically coerces its citizens into compliance. So, it's like the institutions that let the state enact violence on its citizens.

Marcelle Kosman 14:34

Yes, yes, exactly. Could you give us a couple examples?

Hannah McGregor 14:39

Marcelle? I think about them every day. The police, the military, and prisons.

Marcelle Kosman 14:44

Precisely! Althusser wasn't writing about the repressive state apparatus in an American context, but-

Hannah McGregor 14:52

[In a French accent] What context would you say? French?

Marcelle Kosman 14:55

[In a French accent] I will say that it was French. **[In normal voice]** And I'm so sorry to our French listeners-

Hannah McGregor 15:01

Coach is gonna cut that, Coach just gonna cut that. That was bad, we're badly behaved. **[Sound effect of sports whistle blowing]**

Marcelle Kosman 15:05

If I had to make a bet, I would put money on Althusser including institutions like the CIA and the FBI under the umbrella of the repressive state apparatus, but I bring them up not for fun, but for educational purposes. Because, as you know, Hannah, there is a long history of evidence to show that the various elements of the US Department of Defense, for example, have been in bed with Hollywood-

Hannah McGregor 15:37

Because the state doesn't want its repressive apparatuses and its ideological apparatuses working out of sync. The state is invested in them being aligned.

Marcelle Kosman 15:48

Exactly, exactly. So, I did a little bit of reading about, you know, what this looked like. And at various times in history, it's extremely obvious. So, we've talked in previous episodes, I think, about like how the Marvel movies are basically US military propaganda. Is that a thing that we've talked about?

Hannah McGregor 16:13

Who know if we talked about it, but it's true. It is true. **[Marcelle and Hannah laugh]** I don't think we have talked about Marvel much, but that's true.

Marcelle Kosman 16:21

Okay, so it is true. And if you don't believe me, you should google it, and then leave us a five-star Apple review. **[Sound effect of a doorbell ringing plays]**

Hannah McGregor 16:26

Listen, if you don't believe us, you have to leave us a five-star Apple review. But also, maybe we'll make an episode about it.

Marcelle Kosman 16:33

So according to scholar Tanner Mirrlees, during World War II, quote, “the US Office of War Information, had a unit dedicated exclusively to Hollywood called the Bureau of Motion Pictures,” end quote. And quote, “between 1942 and 1945, the bureau reviewed 1652 scripts, revising or discarding anything that portrayed the US unfavorably including any material that made Americans seem oblivious to the war or antiwar,” end quote. So, it's not just Marvel movies. This nonsense goes back at least to World War II.

Hannah McGregor 17:19

Oh, yeah. Oh, for sure. I mean, watching the American movies made during World War II. They're pretty obviously pro US propaganda. It's just Bing Crosby been like, war is great!

Marcelle Kosman 17:31

It's not like, like, none of us is super surprised.

Hannah McGregor 17:35

“Man, I wish I was back in the Army” is a fucking song in *White Christmas*. **[Marcelle laughs]** I wish I was back in the army, sings Rosemary Clooney. Doing a jaunty little dance, like it's not subtle.

Marcelle Kosman 17:52

It's not. It's not subtle. But I think what's really interesting about this, from a material perspective is the way that it sort of ebbs and flows between obvious propaganda and very subtle, indirect propaganda. So totally like during World War II, Hollywood is a propaganda machine. It is churning out pro military, pro war cartoons and pictures. Walt Disney, very

famously, talks about working with different departments to produce propaganda pictures, including one about taxes. **[Marcelle laughs]** And this won't come as a surprise, but Hollywood's movies about American military involvement in World War II are stories about the good guys.

Hannah McGregor 18:40

Yeah, of course. Of course. Yeah, undeniably, yeah. And then we get sort of post-World War II, sort of probably the most famous alignment of Hollywood with the government, which is Kubrick helping to fake the moon landing. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 18:58

That's not where I thought you're gonna go, but that is also an absolute- Coach is saying no. **[Sound effect of a sports whistle plays]**

Hannah McGregor 19:06

Okay, Coach tells me people will be confused. There's a conspiracy theory that the US government faked the moon landing and that Stanley Kubrick directed it. Which, I just think... it just really tickles me. I find it really funny. For a couple of reasons. One, Kubrick's involvement? Hilarious, two, could be true. Governments are liars.

Marcelle Kosman 19:28

[Laughing] Can you just read what I've scripted for you so we can move on?

Hannah McGregor 19:31

Fine. **[Marcelle laughs]** Okay, so Hollywood is actively working with different parts of the government, as well as the military to make propaganda-

Marcelle Kosman 19:40

Including possibly the moon landing-

Hannah McGregor 19:42

-including possibly the moon landing. I can't believe I'm being silenced on my own podcast.

[Marcelle laughs] The truth will get out. So, the other important context post World War II, surely, is the like communist witch hunts that were happening, right? Like that's what, you know, *The Crucible* is famously just an extended metaphor for McCarthyism and the way that people were literally turning on each other and ratting each other out for being communists.

Marcelle Kosman 20:16

The thing is that that actually didn't start after World War II. There is evidence that it started as early as 1941. Because anti Semites in Congress didn't necessarily know the difference between Jews and communists. So, Alison Perlman-still don't- Allison Perlman, writing for the website *Britannica* says, quote, "congressional accusations of communist influence in the film industry began in 1941," end quote, and basically continued until the 1960s. So, like throughout World War II and the decade following Hollywood is simultaneously collaborating, simultaneously collaborating with various federal departments to sniff out socialism, and making varying degrees of military propaganda movies depicting American soldiers as heroes. Now, Hannah, riddle me this, why might both have slowed down in the 1960s?

Hannah McGregor 21:22

Oh, that would be the massively unpopular war that the US was waging in Vietnam. Super, super unpopular.

Marcelle Kosman 21:30

Yes, yes. Super unpopular. That's right.

Hannah McGregor 21:31

Not originally, but fun fact, the rise of photojournalism played a major role in the shift of public opinion about Vietnam, because people were coming back with pictures. And being like, hey, guess what's happening in this war? And the public was like, what?

Marcelle Kosman 21:47

Yeah, exactly. So, what we had with the American involvement in Vietnam was evidence that, one, the US was losing. And two, that American soldiers were being war criminals. So, it ceased to be possible to make movies that would sell in Hollywood, about the good guys in the US Army going overseas and fighting the bad guys. So going back to Tanner Mirrlees. Apparently, during this time, the military didn't have editorial oversight. And I'm not sure whether or not that's because it's like, quote, unquote, contributions were not particularly effective, or if it's because relationships had already been established, because they had had editorial oversight for like 20 years.

So, I think it's worth pointing out that even though we don't have very obvious pro US military propaganda movies being made during this time, there's no intensive critical interrogation of the military, the military industrial complex, or US foreign policy at this time. It does come later. But even movies like *The Deer Hunter* or *Taxi Driver*, that are supposed to show the impacts that the war has had on soldiers. Again, this is Mirrlees, quote, "they very much individualize and psychologize and pathologize the war, but don't give us the bigger backdrop that would help us

understand the forces driving that war, and the real consequences for those on the receiving end of the bombs falling, those being the Vietnamese people.” End quote.

Hannah McGregor 23:29

Of course, I mean, they're still about, those movies are still about like, white American men, and the impact of the war on them. It's there's certainly not a like, either a critical structural framework for thinking about militarism and imperialism, nor, like any actual telling stories about Vietnamese people.

Marcelle Kosman 23:54

And like pretty famously misrepresented the opposing side, the Vietcong, representing them as like brutal sadists. And in this way, scholars argue that the films really still function very powerfully as pro US propaganda, and not antiwar critiques. They're just like, wow, war is hard on people and not we solve the war. We save the day.

Hannah McGregor 24:25

So, in the midst of this, 1977, a movie comes out called *Star Wars*. Is it like, like, how does that how does that fit in?

Marcelle Kosman 24:38

Yeah. **[Marcelle laughs]** What a great question, Hannah. What a great question. Why that? Why then? We got to start with the fact that George Lucas has very overt and strong leftist politics, as strong as a white billionaire can have, mind you. So, we're going to put a pin in that and maybe an unnecessary addendum, but like he wasn't a billionaire when he made *Star Wars*. He was a scrappy up and coming filmmaker who had recently graduated from the University of Southern California. And this area is like a real hotbed for anti-war protests and action and things like GI coffeehouses, which were, like anti-military hotbeds.

Hannah McGregor 25:31

Marcelle, the way that I want to just like, sweep your entire nuanced script right off the table, and be like, Okay, well, let's talk about why this movie, which is so obviously critical of the US, as a huge, militaristic empire has been embraced by right wing viewers who are pro US military. How's that happen? But I'm skipping ahead. I'm skipping ahead.

Marcelle Kosman 25:56

So, Lucas himself says that *Star Wars* was a critique of the Vietnam War. And he was writing it during the Watergate trials, right? So, in 1973, is when he like, starts writing it. That's also when the burglars from the Watergate Hotel go on trial. And he refers to, in interviews, he refers to

Nixon's attempt at reelection as playing a role in the development of the movie, like Lucas says, in interviews that Nixon's efforts at reelection quote, "got me thinking historically about how do democracies get turned into dictatorships," end quote. And I think it's fair to suggest that the notion of say, a major galactic government committing war crimes in secret is like a little reminiscent of Nixon ordering secret bombings in Cambodia. Like it's possible.

Hannah McGregor 26:56

Yeah, literally. It's like a huge empire secretly developing mega weapons and then dropping it on people. Like the metaphor is not a particularly tortured one. It's pretty straightforward.

Marcelle Kosman 27:06

It is not. But since we're not really talking about content, because we do materialist critique here, we only rarely dip into actual analysis of the film itself, you know, for fun.

Hannah McGregor 27:19

I'm gonna talk about the films. You can't stop me.

Marcelle Kosman 27:21

I want to bring the science fiction scholar, Lisa Yaszek, back in because she talks about how the film represents the figure of the soldier in really interesting ways. So she says of *Star Wars* quote, "These are stories about how you turn men into weapons, we increasingly understand that soldiers who experience war come home transformed and different, and that it can be hard for them to stop being a weapon or a soldier and become human again. *Star Wars* explored these themes with Darth Vader, and even Luke Skywalker, who loses an arm, gains a cyborg arm, starts dressing in black and has to make tough decisions while being conditioned by his life as a warrior," end quote. So, this metaphor, as you're saying, not a stretch. It's clear. People saw it.

Hannah McGregor 28:23

Okay, so we've got, one, new technologies that are letting us learn and dream about the cosmos in different ways and listen to the birth of stars. But only astrophysicist get to listen to the birth of stars, because there's not much interest in sharing those advances with the public. So, then we've got this movie industry, like, hypothetically, that can sort of step in and engage the public's interest in space.

But that industry is heavily influenced by the various arms of the American repressive state apparatus, and mostly wants to tell stories that obscure America's growing imperial reach. So, it's like, we can tell stories about space, but only specific kinds of stories. And then we've got a movie coming out that's like, oh, well, we can't tell stories about America being bad. But don't

worry about it. This is a story about space, and robots and a scrappy group of rebels who are successfully fighting a massive imperial government who uses wanton violence in place of diplomacy. So don't worry, we're not criticizing the US. We can make this movie. It's just about space, and people are horny for space.

Marcelle Kosman 29:33

They sure are. And they're also British. You know? Like, the bad guys are British. It's not about America.

Hannah McGregor 29:37

It's not about America. This guy has a British accent. **[Marcelle laughs]** It couldn't possibly be about America. Let's make this movie. That's fine. Nobody here is a communist. I feel like I've got some good historical context. But you know what I need now?

Marcelle Kosman 29:52

A little theory?

Hannah McGregor 29:53

Yeah, something that will tie the room together. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 29:57

Okay!

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Marcelle Kosman 30:02

Okay, obviously, when I agreed to do this, I forgot that I am a mere mortal.

Hannah McGregor 30:09

Adorno! Adorno!

Marcelle Kosman 30:11

I did promise you a deep dive into the Marxist critique of mass culture. And so I went to the big dogs, Adorno and Horkheimer. And because I am a transparent scholar, I am not ashamed to admit that I needed help sorting out their ideas.

Hannah McGregor 30:31

That's really reasonable. Is that maybe in part because their critique of mass culture sounds like elitist bullshit?

Marcelle Kosman 30:37

Yeah. **[Marcelle laughs]** Yeah, yeah. Like that's a big part of it. So, I need to I need to make a quick note, because Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, co-authored the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. And this is where the chapter "Critiquing Mass Culture" comes from. But no one really talks about Horkheimer.

Hannah McGregor 31:03

Yeah, he's the Angles of this collaboration. Sorry, dude.

Marcelle Kosman 31:07

And like I didn't do an historical materialist analysis of Horkheimer's relative erasure from contemporary scholarship and critical theory. But I just I need to bring this up. Because even though scholars and theorists like-

Hannah McGregor 31:19

They're citing Adorno, and Horkheimer, but they just say Adorno.

Marcelle Kosman 31:23

Precisely, exactly. So, the scholar that I found who I felt most palatably explained what Adorno says about mass culture is Owen Hulatt. And so, I'm going to do a lot of referencing what Hulatt says about what Adorno says, Okay?

Hannah McGregor 31:49

You're kind, Marcelle.

Marcelle Kosman 31:50

I do my best. Okay, so here's a couple of bullet points. Okay? So, this is like Adorno (and Horkheimer's) theory in a nutshell. "High culture requires adequate time and space to think about it, to be changed by it. But under capitalism, who has the money, let alone the time to sit and think undisturbed about say, a painting or a symphony? So, we regular people overworked and underpaid, we flocked to mass culture, or popular culture to fulfill our need for rest and pleasure. But" Hulatt explains, quote, "popular culture is not the spontaneous expression of the people, but a profit driven industry. It robs us of our freedom and bends us to conform to its needs for profit." End quote.

Hannah McGregor 32:46

Okay, so is Adorno claiming that a symphony *is* the spontaneous expression of the people?
[Marcelle laughs] I don't buy that.

Marcelle Kosman 32:59

Yeah, it is. It is elitist bullshit. And Hulatt agrees that Adorno absolutely sounds like a snob. But what he argues is that our arrogant theoretician's problem isn't just that pop culture is quote, bad art, "though it is that, Adorno claims," end quote. The problem with pop culture is that it is harmful.

Hannah McGregor 33:20

Okay, so how is it hurting us?

Marcelle Kosman 33:24

Hulatt's interpretation of Adorno's critique (and Horkheimer's) of mass culture claims that, quote, "Popular culture presents itself as a release of our repressed emotions and desires and so as an increase in freedom, but in truth, it robs us of our freedom twice, both aesthetically in failing to give aesthetic freedom in enjoying art-"

Hannah McGregor 33:51

Gah... Sounds pretty elitist.

Marcelle Kosman 33:54

"-and morally in blocking the path to true social freedom." End quote. So Hulatt contextualizes Adorno's perspective very helpfully by reminding us of two things. First Adorno emigrated to the US in 1938. Right? He is escaping the rise of Nazism. So, this cultural critic who was notorious for making composers like Stravinsky, and Schoenberg cry in the bathroom was quote, "now brought face to face with Mickey Mouse," end quote, okay?

Hannah McGregor 34:29

Yeah, I understand why he might have been a little horrified by American culture.

Marcelle Kosman 34:33

And so then second, that Adorno, a snob, having, as we said, fled the rise of fascism in Europe, suddenly finds himself and his semi obscure pen pal, some guy named Horkheimer, under surveillance by the FBI for thinking and writing about mass culture Marxist-ly.

Hannah McGregor 34:53

Yeah, so could we say that Adorno's critique of mass culture was informed by things like Walt Disney snitching on his employees for striking? Maybe he was like this is harmful because it's being made by a bunch of fucking pro government snitches in the context of the rise of fascism?

Marcelle Kosman 35:15

Yeah, so all of this, all of this, obviously part of the same sort of anti-communist moral panic that really intensified in cultural industries like Hollywood during this period. And, Hannah, I know that you and I have talked at length, about the many ways that popular culture is ideological, and the many ways that it teaches its consumers how to think about things like say heterosexuality and consent and what it means to be a woman. So, like, Hulatt argues that this ideological stuff is a big part of Adorno's resistance to pop culture. But I would love it, if you could just read the following quote from Hulatt for us to, to flesh it out a bit.

Hannah McGregor 36:04

Quote, "For Adorno, a large part of the harm inflicted by popular culture is harm to our ability to act freely and spontaneously. He claims that popular culture, as well as being a source of pleasure is also a kind of training. It engages us in and reinforces certain patterns of thought and self-understanding, that harm our ability to live as truly free people. It accomplishes this partly through its very predictability." End quote.

Marcelle Kosman 36:35

And so what I hear as elitism, like, this is Adorno's distinction between high culture and popular culture, high culture, mass culture.

Hannah McGregor 36:46

Like, you know I am not on board with a full-scale rejection of mass culture. And also, I get it. Like, I get the way that the machine of Hollywood produces certain kinds of predictable narratives over and over again, in a way that I find imaginatively exhausting.

Marcelle Kosman 37:04

Totally. Yes, exactly. So. So even though, like we already know the ideological stuff. That's not a surprise to us.

Hannah McGregor 37:14

Listeners, sorry, if you don't, if you don't understand what we mean by like the ideological force of popular culture, please go back and listen to the entirety of *Witch, Please*, and also leave us a five star review on Apple podcasts. Thank you. **[Sound effect of a doorbell ringing plays]**

Marcelle Kosman 37:30

It's not unreasonable, I think, to say that like feminists and Critical Race theorists have maybe articulated concerns about ideology a little bit better than, like two elitist white dudes.

Hannah McGregor 37:43

But what's kind of interesting about Adorno in the parts that you have highlighted so far, is that he's not talking in the same way that we often do about like the machine of Hollywood and like, who actually gets to, like the structural reasons why some people get to tell stories and others don't. Like he's talking about, like, aesthetics and like, narrative structure. Right?

Marcelle Kosman 38:10

Yeah. And so I think that's maybe what he has to offer this conversation. So maybe perhaps like a little ironically, like the part of his critique that feels the most elitist is also maybe the most useful.

Hannah McGregor 38:26

Haha. You said we weren't going to talk about content, but we're going to talk about content right now.

Marcelle Kosman 38:30

Hannah, would you please read the next quotation still from Hulatt?

Hannah McGregor 38:36

I will. Popular culture, quote, "accustoms us to a kind of aesthetic experience that is very similar to the work it is meant to release us from, a constant checking of the artwork against preset standards and tropes." End quote.

Marcelle Kosman 38:54

That's right. So basically, Hulatt is saying that Adorno (and Horkheimer) are saying that a popular film is an assembly line and we the viewers are employed the task of ensuring that each part connects correctly to the whole. Okay, one more quote from Hulatt, please!

Hannah McGregor 39:15

Quote, "Consider how rare it is when watching a popular film, for example, not to be aware of the function of the scene. One scene is clearly establishing relationships that will frame the events to come. Another is an action scene. Another gives the villains motivation." End quote. Formula.

Marcelle Kosman 39:33

Formula. So, the fact that we can seamlessly elegantly plot *Star Wars Chapter 4: A New Hope* onto a widely used storytelling device, like the hero's journey, it tells us that watching the movie isn't releasing us from our work as cogs in the wheel of capitalism, rather and worse, as Hulatt reminds us, watching the movie actually satisfies our are conditioned brains by putting us to work, quote, "organizing, checking and filing the moments of the film as it passes by. Instead of being given time for consideration and interpretation, we are engaged in the very sort of classification and sorting that characterizes the world of work we thought we were escaping from." End quote. So, in other words, the pleasures of popular culture simply keep us conditioned to work.

Hannah McGregor 40:28

I know that generally we're a materialist podcast. And also I think talking about aesthetics and the impact that different aesthetics have on us is really valuable.

Marcelle Kosman 40:38

Mhmm. It is, it is, it is. And they connect very tidally in this one final point that I need to make about Adorno (and Horkheimer). And that's the way that Hulatt analyzes our cultural lives today through what we may have interpreted before this episode as Adorno's snobby elitist lens. So, using pop music as an example. And this is a great example because Adorno hated jazz. And like I said, like made Stravinsky cry in a bathroom.

Hulatt writes, quote, "Social provocation and protest has been harnessed to digestible music backed by large business conglomerates and used to provide the harmless release of dissatisfaction. In this release, popular culture really does meet our needs, but it ties them back into the process of profit making and disperses the energies we might have needed to make genuine change. The temporary pleasure we take in satisfying our needs and discharging our frustrations in popular culture stands in the way of a more powerful change in our way of life that could ameliorate our frustrations and serve our pleasures in a deeper and more lasting way." End quote, so remember earlier when you were like, what? If we're not watching Marvel movies we could like make the make the world better? And Adorno would say yes.

Hannah McGregor 42:17

Yeah, Adorno is like, take all that time you spend watching Marvel movies, and instead overthrow capitalism. To which I say, fair. Fair. And also, I just want to add as a note, I think that Adorno hating jazz is really racist.

Marcelle Kosman 42:32

Oh, yeah. Hands down. Yeah. Yeah. So, the reason that this is useful for us in talking about *Star Wars* isn't just the hero's journey, it puts a bunch of things into perspective, right? George Lucas is the wealthiest film celebrity in the world. His personal net worth is estimated to be between 7.5 and 9.4 billion dollars. He got rich off of *Star Wars* because it was popular, not because it had incisive political commentary.

Hannah McGregor 43:05

Yeah, so aesthetically, it is pro imperialism, even if narratively it's anti-imperialism.

Marcelle Kosman 43:12

Exactly. And Ryan Teague Beckwith writing for like *Time* magazine talks about the success of *Star Wars* and how it became so popular that these things like the characters, the plot devices, things like the Death Star, the storm troopers, like all of these things become a kind of cultural shorthand, and, quote, "politicians and activists used it," the cultural shorthand, "to make their arguments sometimes for ideas that Lucas disagreed with." End quote.

Hannah McGregor 43:42

That makes perfect sense. Like the anything you want to call the evil empire can become the evil empire. And anything you want to call the rebels can become the rebels.

Marcelle Kosman 43:53

Yes, and a great example, Hannah, a great example because in 1983, then President Ronald fucking Reagan, Ronald fucking Reagan, referred to the Soviet Union as the evil empire. Like like and and, and there's, there's this article that talks about how whether his speech writer like deliberately referenced the Galactic Empire or not, evil empire, as the Galactic Empire is precisely the reference that the Soviets thought that he was making. Further, another not unrelated Reagan example, the space-based missile defense system that we know of now colloquially called the *Star Wars* missile defense system. That nickname came from critics of the missile defense system, but then adopted, [**Hannah gasps**] I know, but then got adopted by the proponents and they're like, You know what, yeah. *Star Wars* missile defense system.

Hannah McGregor 44:52

Marcelle, nothing means anything!

Marcelle Kosman 44:54

Nothing means anything. Can you imagine being George Lucas and hearing I don't know, like a radio ad or something for the *Star Wars* missile defense system for like President Ronald fucking Reagan, like you would poop your pants. I bet he pooped his pants.

Hannah McGregor 45:11

You know what you would do is you would insist on making new versions of your movies that were worse with bad CGI in them. That's how you would respond. **[Joke "sting" plays]**

Marcelle Kosman 45:20

One final thing for this segment, okay? It's another quote from Ryan Teague Beckwith, who says, and I quote, "As a director, you can have an idea for what a movie is supposed to mean, and how people should respond to it politically. But all you can do is put it out there. After that the audience does what it wants." End quote, does not sound like decoding and encoding, Hannah?

Hannah McGregor 45:46

Oh my god, it sounds like decoding and encoding. Just so folks know, that is an exciting teaser for an upcoming episode where we will talk about the important scholarship of one Stuart Hall. So, you're just going to have to keep listening to find out what decoding and encoding means.

Marcelle Kosman 46:03

An exciting teaser for a future conversation about Marxist critique!

Hannah McGregor 46:08

From decades ago. So long ago. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

Marcelle Kosman 46:15

We are so fun!

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Hannah McGregor 46:21

Hey, Coach, can we get that *Star Wars* Stinger again? **[Star Wars Theme music plays]** Because it's time for "In This Essay I Will." And Marcelle is about to read us her thesis.

Marcelle Kosman 46:39

The 1960s and 70s were fraught decades of rapid social, technological and scientific development. The Space Race, for example, increased the general public's interest in and access to cosmic awe, an indirect celebration of the audacity of American imperialism at a time when the anti-Vietnam War movement was simmering across America. Hopeful stargazers and dissatisfied citizens alike turned to popular media like the movies to help make meaning of the unfathomable chaos of being alive.

Popular culture, however, is likewise fraught with censorship, propaganda, and supposedly empty escapism, with its accessible representations of science fiction tropes, including the reassuring deployment of the hero's journey and a happy ending, as well as carefully pointing its anti-imperialist critique at an imaginary Galactic Empire, *Star Wars* is so heavily cloaked in allegory that even fascist pigs can see themselves reflected in the good guys. In this essay, I will-

Hannah McGregor 47:49

Okay Marcelle, I really need us to talk more about fascist pigs seeing themselves reflected in the good guys because because, man, oh, man, there's so much exciting stuff to untangle here. And one piece of it is certainly the way that culture made in an unfree landscape has to work around what is unsayable. And we've talked about this, we talked about this in the context when we did our bonus about the *Barbie* movie. And Coach was like, Why isn't this more gay? And I was like, well, it's it's, it's supposed to be a global movie and if it has any gay content. It can't be screened in a lot of places. So you know, this is a version of that. Like, there are things that are unsayable. And one thing that is unsayable in the historical moment of the 1970s is that the US government is a violent, imperialist force, creating horrifying mass weapons and committing war crimes on a hitherto unconceived of scale.

Like it's true and can't be said out loud. And not just in a like, I'll get in trouble if I say it out loud, but in a like, Walt Disney will tell the FBI on me if I say it out loud kind of vibe. So, you create a story that says it otherwise, right? To paraphrase Emily Dickinson, you tell the truth, but tell it slant. Like Emily Dickinson and George Lucas have a lot in common when you think about it. So, you create a narrative that uses analogy, parallel, genre, familiar narrative structures, lots of other stuff, to tell a story or to make an argument that can't be made overtly. But then you've kind of functionally, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, you're kind of using the master's tools to try to tear down the master's House. And at least according to Adorno, you can't do that.

Marcelle Kosman 50:01

According to Lorde too.

Hannah McGregor 50:03

According to Lorde too. Yeah, you know what? Actually really great point. Most importantly according to Lorde, you can't do that.

Marcelle Kosman 50:11

But also Adorno. Adorno would agree.

Hannah McGregor 50:14

So, despite the fact that Adorno's disdain for popular culture is something that sits very uneasily with both of us, in this particular case, we can see a lot of what he argues in action, via the fact that like, right wing people watch these movies and see themselves in the rebels, not in the empire.

Marcelle Kosman 50:38

Totally. I don't remember where this comes from, it'll probably show up in the Substack. So just hang on to your hats, people.

Hannah McGregor 50:46

Gonna be a long one.

Marcelle Kosman 50:47

There are also, there are also instances where people will posit that perhaps the Galactic Empire, were the good guys, that this is a movie about, I know, that this is a movie about rebels trying to dismantle a stable and functioning government.

Hannah McGregor 51:09

Yeah, yeah, I agree. I agree that my leader should be able to psychically choke me when I talk back. That's, that's a stable, a good stable government.

Marcelle Kosman 51:22

Truly, truly, like people watch these movies in all kinds of like, shocking and wild ways. And I don't know, like, do you remember when we first were talking about this episode? And I was like, I want to know, the question that I want to ask about *Star Wars* is, how is it even possible that such a successful movie franchise in late capitalism can be so clearly about overthrowing the boot that is on our necks? And like even reading through the history of its development and like, like, on the one hand, yeah, it had to be so heavily cloaked in allegory that the story could be told in the first place. But then it becomes so financially successful, that they can get like quite literal, the spin off series *Andor* is like quite overtly about the ways in which the repressive state apparatus is violent and coercive, and not our friend and not there to help us. But at this point, *Star Wars* is this huge money-making franchise owned by Disney!

Hannah McGregor 52:33

Making money for... Yeah! That's the one.

Marcelle Kosman 52:36

I mean, he's dead and *Elemental* has a non-binary character. So, like, rot in your grave Walt Disney, you snitch, but- **[Hannah laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 52:50

Sorry. I just actually need our numerous to say "Rot in your grave, Walt Disney, you snitch."

Marcelle Kosman 52:59

So, the point is, at a certain point, the profit making of the polemical franchise is so successful, so huge, so reliable, that you don't need allegory anymore. You can just be like, Man, the government is corrupt. And it's, it's okay, it's still gonna make you money. The people don't care anymore. The people in power don't care.

Hannah McGregor 53:31

That's it, the people in power don't care. Like, isn't there something a little bit sinister, potentially, about recognizing that at this point, pop culture can say the quiet part out loud and the government's not worried. Because like, what is Adorno was right?

Marcelle Kosman 53:48

Oh, Adorno was absolutely right. Not about jazz.

Hannah McGregor 53:52

Yeah. But specifically when I say Adorno was right, I mean that formulaically produced popular culture can have a deadening effect on its potential political meaning, particularly when it's obscured to the point that anybody can use it as a metaphor for anything. But also, like at an aesthetic level, when it, like let's think aesthetically about the first *Star Wars* movie. And the fact that it's like, cool, okay, who are we going to imagine as the figurehead for the person who's being crushed by imperialist violence? It's a plucky young white man. Okay, who are we going to imagine as the figurehead for as the, you know, representative for a sort of like, guerrilla approach to warfare? That's going to be a plucky young white man. Okay, who are we going to and then it's, it's, so that's just one example of the ways that aesthetically yeah formulaically popular culture reproduces a version of reality that ultimately reinforces the status quo and the power of the existing ruling class. Even when it is simultaneously saying at a textual level, like it's bad.

Marcelle Kosman 55:22

Mm hmm. Yeah, exactly.

Hannah McGregor 55:24

The part of the *Star Wars* fandom that I find particularly intriguing around all of these things we are talking about is, do you know what like, the most common form of *Star Wars* cosplay is?

Marcelle Kosman 55:36

Stormtroopers, Darth Vader?

Hannah McGregor 55:38

It's Storm Troopers. Right? It's like this huge thing where like people, like there's, there's and again, listeners, if you've got more context about this, because I don't remember the details. So, if you have more context, feel free to write that context down in a five-star Apple review, thank you. **[Sound effect of a door bell ringing plays]** **[Marcelle laughs]** That's actually just the best way to communicate context to us.

Marcelle Kosman 56:04

If you want us to take it seriously you need to come with a five star review. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 56:08

It's gotta have it. Otherwise, we can't hear it. We can't hear it. But people like, dress up like stormtroopers and go to, I don't know, go to children's hospitals. Like go go do like, go do community events. Like, yeah, it's this whole big thing. And it's so baffling to me. Because obviously, the evocation of *Star Wars* itself as a whole is a comforting thing for people. Like its cultural role for us is such that any references to it have a kind of shared pleasure. And the stormtroopers are a very powerful visual signifier of the world of *Star Wars*. And so, they produce that, you know, that pleasure reaction for us, like, Oh, I know this, I recognize this, right? What Adorno is telling us is our little factory brains at work, being like, I know where this belongs. I know what cog this goes on. But also, they are like the movies metaphor for Nazis. They are a violent, faceless Imperial force doing terrible war crimes. And it's pretty wild that that's what people dress up as.

Marcelle Kosman 57:33

Yeah, yeah, Elliot has a stormtrooper costume. And she loves it. And she does not identify with the bad guys. Even when we were watching *Star Wars* when she was smaller. She always wanted to skip through the scenes with Darth Vader, because they were too scary. And yet, she was so excited to get this costume, precisely because it's activating those pleasure centers in her brain where she's like, Oh, this is the fun imagination world in space.

Hannah McGregor 58:00

Yeah, fun imagination world in space. Somehow, by putting on this helmet, I get to be a little bit closer to the experience of listening to the sound of a star being born. Man, we've made a lot of references to *A Star is Born*.

Marcelle Kosman 58:17

We sure have... Let's get the saddest stinger. Maybe when they're playing the piano. You know, in the flashback, the flashback?

Hannah McGregor 58:26

No. I want **[Hannah vocalizes]** You know that one? **[Sound Bite from *A Star is Born* plays]** But when I used to teach at the University of Alberta, I taught English for engineers quite a lot. And while the majority of that course was about teaching, grammar and clear writing, I did include some segments about sort of some basic ideas of cultural critique, just to be like, I'm going to try to get you to think a little bit about how culture works. And I gave them an article, maybe you can look this up and include it in the Substack, because it's out there somewhere. But it is a reading of the new trilogy, against the old trilogy, the original trilogy, we're not talking about prequels at all, they don't count.

Um, talking about the way that it is reimagining the analogy for an updated generational struggle with fascism. So, the argument that the article is making is that in the original trilogy, the enemy is your parents' generation, who are aligned with fascism, and it is youth culture that is fighting back against that. Whereas in the new trilogy, it is one of your peers who is voluntarily redonning the helmet of fascism, and demonstrating that we thought that like, if we overthrew our parents' generation, we would be able to create a world of freedom. And then we looked around, and we were like, oh, our peers are voluntarily becoming fascists. And all of our sort of thinking about generational change has been upended.

And I was like, Cool. This is like a pretty straightforward argument about how texts mean things that, you know, use some really popular narratives that people are familiar with. And I presented it to my students, I asked them to read it. And where they took issue with it, was the premise that culture means anything. Their issue was the idea that a movie is about anything other than what the movie is literally about. And it was a pretty eye-opening moment for me, in terms of, say, watching *Star Wars* and being like, how could anybody not see that this is obviously anti-imperialist? And then realizing that for a lot of people, the idea that a story is anything other than just the thing it is, is an unfamiliar concept.

Marcelle Kosman 1:01:21

To go back to Adorno that might help explain why he was so into (and Horkheimer) high culture that doesn't give its meaning to you readily. It forces you to sit and think about it, and like wrestle with the ideas, so that you have to accept that it's doing something.

Hannah McGregor 1:01:50

Yeah. So, we can spend our time thinking and talking about pop culture, but we've got to work to demonstrate that it is doing a thing.

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:03

And you know what, I'm here for it.

Hannah McGregor 1:02:05

Hey, Marcelle, do you have like another hour or so to talk about the role that fandom plays in all of this and like, the sort of massive complex fan communities that have emerged around *Star Wars*? Like maybe I just think one more hour, this will just be a two-and-a-half-hour episode.

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:21

You know what we should do? Why we should do a bonus where people ask us questions, and then we answer them.

Hannah McGregor 1:02:29

That's actually a really great idea. Let's do that.

[*Material Girls* Theme plays: “Shopping Mall” by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:36

Material Girls is a *Witch, Please* Production, and is distributed by Acast. You can find the rest of our episodes and our other podcasts on Acast or at ohwitchplease.ca. Our website has all kinds of fun stuff we think you'll love: you can sign up for our amazing newsletter and substack; you can access our transcripts and reading lists, and you can check out our merch, including our latest addition, Harry, our “Weird Feral Little Guy.”

Hannah McGregor 1:03:06

Marcelle, you know, I ordered that hoodie immediately. If you have questions, comments, concerns, or praise – we thrive on praise – come hang out with us at [@ohwitchplease](https://www.instagram.com/ohwitchplease) on Instagram, Threads, and maybe Twitter, or on tiktok at [ohwitchpleasepod](https://www.tiktok.com/@ohwitchpleasepod). You simply MUST also

check out our Patreon at patreon.com/ohwitchplease. You won't believe the quantity of perks available to supporters. It defies the laws of physics. Which, I know the laws, and it defies them.

Marcelle Kosman 1:03:48

Sounds like a star being born. As I just said, we've started a Substack! Every month we're offering a look at the rollercoaster rides we take while researching our episodes. So far we've got STACKs on our *Barbie* x Petro-Capitalism episode and our *Avatar* x Hypermediacy episode! To subscribe to our Substack head over to <https://ohwitchplease.substack.com/>

Hannah McGregor 1:04:13

If you subscribe you also get the monthly who via the same subscription. What a deal. Special thanks to everyone on the Witch, Please Productions team who keep this Rebel Alliance operational, including our digital content coordinator Gaby Iori, **[Sound effect of BOING]** our social media manager and marketing designer Zoe Mix, **[Sound effect of a record rewinding]** our sound engineer Erik Magnus, **[Sound effect of chimes]** and our executive producer Hannah Rehak, aka COACH! **[Sound effect of sports whistle blowing]**

Marcelle Kosman 1:04:47

At the end of every episode we will thank everyone who has joined our Patreon OR boosted their tier to help make our work possible. Our enormous gratitude goes out to:

Mollie H
Amanda D
Eleanor S
Sara M
MB
Jilian M
The Knife

Hannah McGregor 1:05:12

We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens, but until then:

Marcelle Kosman 1:05:19

Later lightsabers!

[Material Girls Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]