

The Heroic Myth in Modern Times. The *Star Wars* Franchise

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Abstract: *Symbolic language is a particular system of expression which renders an individual's feelings, emotions, as well as one's accumulated psychological experience, as sensorial experience manifest in the outer world. Understanding symbolic language serves as an important tool in understanding the significance of dreams as well as that of archetypal narratives such as myths, be they archaic or modern. Modern artists have searched for new ways of updating the universal content (and implicitly the narratives) in order to present role models that would enable modern individuals to access the transcendent. One such example is the Star Wars franchise and the soundtrack created for it by John Williams from which I choose to analyze „Duel of the Fates”.*

Key-words: *personal myth, heroic myth, transcendence, film scores.*

1. Introduction

Carl Gustav Jung (1875 – 1961) pointed out that the images recurrent in individuals' dreams and fantasies, which are rooted in the depth of their *psyche*, are the same as the ones found in comparative mythologies and in the studies of the history of religions. This idea concludes his own quest for the *personal myth*.

According to Jung, each individual has his/her own governing *myth* (Campbell 2018, 151) and it seems that each individual alternatively wears two masks during the course of his/her life (Campbell 2018, 172): the *primary mask* – the role society expects one to play, and the *antithetic mask*³ – when the individual assumes his/her own life, contrary to the one he/she is assigned by society membership. This represents the moment of revelation of one's *personal myth*.

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³ Midway into adolescence, the onset of adulthood.

It is essentially the *individuation process* formulated by Jung – which in his view is the universal form of individual psychological development⁴.

His research represented a reference point for many of his contemporaries and beyond. A modern, minute, and clear presentation of the *personal myth* was outlined by Joseph Campbell. His works on the subject have enjoyed great notoriety. They inspired people all over the world and opened new areas of study and exploration.

2. The Modern Interpretation of the *Personal Myth*

According to Joseph Campbell, the myths of a civilization offer role models for the respective society. They require adaptation to the times and space they belong to and the one presenting/re-enacting the myth is assigned to connect everyday life to eternity. Therefore “what the mythic image shows is the way in which the *cosmic energy*⁵ manifests itself in time” (Campbell 2018, 13).

As the mythical image is preserved during lengths of time, it takes on the function of a role model. When the individual assumes such a mythical image as a role model, he/she becomes “transparent to the *transcendent*” (Campbell 2018, 17), so his life will not unfold focused on material success or immediate benefit, obtained on Earth, but his path will be set up in the name of this transcendence. Yet in order to reach the latter, personal experience/tradition is required beforehand.

The writer explains „the nature of the energy that flows through the myths” by resorting to the Vedic tradition⁶ – with reference to the five layers that surround “the spiritual germ of the individual”: 1. The layer of the physical body – the *food layer*⁷; 2. The layer of the body- the *breathing layer*⁸; 3. The body awareness – the *mind layer*; 4. The *wisdom layer* through which the *transcendent* flows; 5. The *happiness or bliss layer* which actually is the core of the *transcendent* itself.

It is actually this concept of stratification that represents the essence of Campbell’s proposition as in his search, he actually anchors the symbolic wisdom of

⁴ It refers therefore to the transition from responsibility to old age and attaining completeness - one grows as a whole during childhood while later on some functions develop more than others, in the end one becomes whole again.

⁵ Transcendent energy which originates from a dimension beyond our knowledge capacity (and so cannot be accessed through experience).

⁶ *The Vedas* – a collection of the oldest Hindu scriptures.

⁷ The human body is made up of food and will become food once the person has passed away.

⁸ It provides life through oxygen.

mythology to the individual level in a pursuit to explain life as “a manifestation of *bliss*”, as referred to previously (Campbell 2018, 22).

Due to the 20th century and especially the 21st century taking on the *speed* at which events unfold as a major point of reference, individual life lags behind focusing on local and transitory tasks. It misses out on *mythical* reference, on archaic role models which seem to have been lost. Campbell’s answer to that condition is for the individual to resort to a character which has influenced one’s childhood – a powerful, noble image of a person with a strong character who has done great deeds.

One other option is for the individual to uncover the core of one’s own authentic *bliss* and follow a *blissful* life. The individual will thus be guided towards channelling the “energy of *transcendent* wisdom embedded within one’s own self” (Campbell 2018, 27).

Eventually, *myths* will take shape, which are in accordance with the contemporary mindset, without relinquishing the timeless values they want to express. Such an example is the modern interpretation of the *myth* of the *hero’s journey* as present in the *Star Wars* franchise – creator George Lucas (b. 1944) systematically resorted to the *archetypes* presented in Campbell’s works which he was an avid reader of, to bring to life this series.

In conclusion, it is the mission of present-day artists – be they painters, musicians, poets, film makers, etc – to evoke in their work *symbols* and motifs which might connect the individual with the depths of his own self (Campbell 2018, 214).

Before outlining a number of particularities in George Lucas’ film series, we shall point out to a few characteristics underlying the *Heroic myth*.

2.1. The Heroic Myth

From a psychoanalytical perspective, an *archetype* is “that archaic image present in the common thesaurus of humanity” (Kernbach 1978, 217). By extension, the civilising heroes known as *archetypal* heroes can be included here. They are demi-gods⁹, prophets¹⁰, more rarely gods¹¹ – and they all venerated as gods by their descendants.

⁹ Hercules (Greek mythology).

¹⁰ Moses (Judeo – Christian tradition).

¹¹ *Quetzalcoatl* (Aztec mythology), *Zamolxis* (Getae – Dacian mythology).

With regards to the *myths* which refer to the *primordial human*, it has to be pointed out that they focus on high achievers who brought about the emancipation of mankind and have thus been included into the collective memory as central to narratives that glorify their deeds -see Gilgamesh¹², Prometheus¹³ and Zamolxis¹⁴.

The Jungian perspective provides a series of definite features regarding these *heroic myths*. Firstly, despite the fact that the heroic myths belong to civilizations which were not connected they differ only as to the details. Meanwhile, structurally they display similarities which assign them to a universal pattern – the humble birth of the hero, the early manifestation of supernatural powers, the ascension to glory (victorious battles, conquered obstacles, defeat of evil forces); the sin of pride is sometimes manifest as are the fall by betrayal, or the sacrifice by death.

They are of utmost importance both on a micro-level – for uncovering and affirming the human personality, and on a macro-level – for establishing the collective identity of a civilization, and by extension, of the entire humanity.

In addition, during his journey, the hero often receives protection and help from a supernatural force, in order to overcome difficulties. This force actually stands for the psyche in its entirety, and is to be regarded as the that supreme energy which provides strength when the personal self is deprived of it (Jung 2017, 138).

3. *Star Wars*. On the *Heroic Myth* and *Archetypal Identity*

Star Wars is a phenomenon and a reference point in the history of cinema. The project came into being in the late 80s and was initiated by film maker and producer George Lucas (b. 1944).

It started with *A New Hope* (1977). Its remarkable (albeit unexpected) success led to the creation of the first trilogy, or the second one within the overall

¹² See the epic of Gilgamesh, the Assyrian version, in 12 tablets or cantos. Gilgamesh, a demigod and the fifth king after the Flood, reigned for 127 years in Uruk. This myth reflects the existential drama of the human being – the confrontation with inescapable fate and with the will of supernatural forces; it reveals the immutable characteristic of the human condition.

¹³ Greek mythology. He was the son of Iapetus, a Titan, and of Clymene; remembered for stealing the fire from the gods to bring it to the humans.

¹⁴ Described as a *deified hero* by Strabon (d 21 or 26 AD), or as *a magus and a soul doctor* by Platon (427-347 BC), *a king and a philosopher* by Jordanes (6th century AD), *celestial god* by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986); he taught on astronomy and medicine, on moral education and philosophy, and set up a religious system, respectively a political one.

chronological perspective of the nine episodes series, comprising episodes IV – *A New Hope* (1977) already mentioned, V – *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and VI – *Return of the Jedi* (1983).

Considering the internal chronology of the narrative, the subsequent series of three episodes is a prequel comprising episode I – *The Phantom Menace* (1999), II – *Attack of the Clones* (2002) and III – *Revenge of the Sith* (2005).

These were continued with the third trilogy of episodes VII – *The Force Awakens* (2015), VIII – *The Last Jedi* (2017) and IX – *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), made by Disney upon their acquisition of Lucasfilm. They also released two standalone films *Rogue One* (2016) and *Solo* (2018) – which are connected to the original story but focus on different characters. *Rogue Squadron* will be released in 2023 as the start of a new trilogy.

The project developed multilaterally with TV series, video games, books, which all confirm the success of the franchise.

Star Wars focuses on the *hero's journey* (Sweet 2016, 89) but there are other *archetypes* which can be identified within the main characters¹⁵: the *shadow* – in Darth Vader; the *mentor, guide or sage* – in Obi-Wan Kenobi or Yoda; the *outlaw* – in Han Solo, all of whom are there to help the hero shine by assisting him in finding his way forward or working out solutions to puzzling matters; there is also the *female hero* – Leia.

There are also R2-D2, as the *journey initiator*, and C-3PO; together they provide solid assistance along the *hero's journey*. They could reflect the *puer aeternus* archetype – as they manifest a certain kind of innocence and naivete. Alongside these two robots features Chewbacca, as the *friendly beast*.

Along come the stormtroopers as the *collective evil antagonist* – assigned with creating obstacles and obstructing the hero in his attempt to fulfil his mission.

The good-evil *duality* underlies the entire narrative and can be directly perceived in the two categories of characters. It is also manifest in the dynamics of the range of conflicts they impersonate. These are set within a context revelatory of social, political and cultural attitudes of the historical times of the narrative.

The ambience is dominated by two imposing presences: an *Evil* authoritarian one which rules by fear and violence with a malevolent supreme commander and the opposing side of *Good* incarnated by heroes and secondary characters as well

¹⁵ Griffin, Charles. *Star Wars. 10 Archetypes of the Main Characters*. Article published on <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-archetypes-main-characters/>

as by the qualified warriors of order – the Jedi masters. These latter ones are guided by an invisible force which is *Nature* itself¹⁶.

The message is directed towards the idea of achieving inner balance, of living in harmony with the force, with nature, with existence itself. *May the Force be with you* is the phrase which serves as a prayer in the moments preceding the onset of massive scale action.

Such ideation can be referred back to the Jungian vision of the *unity of opposites* and related to the process of *individuation* as an aspiration towards the *transcendent*.

3.1. The Soundtrack of the *Star Wars* Series. Composer John Williams

John Williams is an iconic figure in the history of film music and the creator of some of the most remarkable soundtracks in cinema – *Superman* (1978), the *Indiana Jones* series (1981-2008), *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Home Alone* (1990-1997), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Schindler's List* (1993), *The Lost World* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), the *Harry Potter* series (2001-2004), *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2006), and others.

His work also includes symphonies, orchestral scores, chamber music, concerts for various instruments – *Symphony No.1* (1965), *Concert for flute and orchestra* (1969), *Liberty Fanfare* (1986), *Concert for clarinet and orchestra* (1991), *Elegy for cello and piano* (1997), *American Journey* (1999), *Concert for horn and orchestra* (2003), *A Timeless Call* (2008), *On Willows and Birches for harp and orchestra* (2009), etc.

He also conducted national and international orchestras, such as the renowned Boston Pop Orchestra (between 1980-1993) and constantly receives invitations to conduct the most prominent orchestras worldwide.

The composer received an impressive number of awards – 25 Grammy Awards and multiple BAFTAs, Academy Awards, Golden Globes and others. With a total of 52 nominations, he is second only to Walt Disney as the most nominated film personality.

In 2005, his work for *Star Wars* was awarded the title of best soundtrack of all times by the American Film Institute, and in 2009 he received the National Medal of Arts – the most important distinction for artists from the US government.

The defining features for his *Star Wars* music refer to the memorable musical theme, the perfect fusion created between the proposed musical themes and the

¹⁶ Hunt, Theodor. *Star Wars*. Article published on https://www.academia.edu/16855498/Star_Wars

narrative requirements, and implicitly the particular manner of manipulating these themes in order to emphasize the dramaturgical aspect¹⁷.

At the same time, each character is assigned a particular *signature* or *musical entity*, a personalized musical discourse which is identifiable at various times when the respective character participates in the plot.

These *musical signatures* act as *leitmotifs* and are recognizable in all episodes – *Main Theme*, *Imperial March*, *Princess Leia's Theme*, *Yoda's Theme*, *Cantina Band*, *Across the Stars*, are just a few examples.

One other important feature is the use of variations which enable the main themes to develop and increase in complexity as the plot unfolds.

Last but not least there is the signature sound, a mark of the composing style rendered by the particular manner in which the composer employs orchestral colour as well as vocal colour, and the approach to the various instrument sections, depending on context and necessities.

3.2. *Duel of the Fates*

Duel of the Fates is the musical theme featuring in episode I – *The Phantom Menace* (1999) of the first trilogy. The work underlies the confrontation between Darth Maul and respectively the Jedi master Qui-Gon Jinn and his apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi. The narrative moment is called the battle of the Naboo, when the forces of the Commercial Federation confront the security forces of the Naboo territory.

Duel of the Fates was recorded in February 1999, at the Abbey Road Studios in London with the contribution of the London Symphony Orchestra and the London Voice Choir. The musical theme is also used in the other two episodes of the trilogy *Attack of Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*; subsequently the theme will recur in the *Solo* standalone film, as well as in TV series, video games and various media products that advertise the *Star War* franchise¹⁸.

John Williams chose the Sanskrit language to voice the selected text, for its abundance of vowels, and especially as it facilitated the rendering of the ritualic, quasi-religious trait, in a convincing manner. The source text is the medieval poem *Cad Goddeu*, translated into English by Robert Graves (1895-1985) in the 5th decade

¹⁷ Audissino, Emilio. *Introduction: John Williams, Composer*. Article published on https://www.academia.edu/37822547/Introduction_John_Williams_Composer

¹⁸ https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Duel_of_the_Fates

of the 20th century. The composer uses lines 32-35: *Under the tongue root/A fight most dread/And another raging/Behind in the head*¹⁹.

There are **three musical structures** that underlie the entire architecture of the musical form.

The first structure marks the intervention of the choir: the piece commences in a homophonic manner with the choir theme unfolding along four bars, with the notation *Maestoso*, making a forceful statement (Fig. 1). The second intervention unfolds in *mf* dynamics and the number of bars is doubled; it is essentially a recurrent motif. The following interventions are similar in their structure – they include the climax (A2) and bring as a novelty the dynamization of the basic musical discourse.

Maestoso, with great force

Kor - ah, Mah - tah, Kor - ah, Rah - tah - mah...

Fig. 1. “Duel of the Fates”. The first structure

The second structure is represented by the melodic line executed by the string section. It is based on a rhythmic cell (Fig. 2) comprising a group of quavers and an anapest, recurrent along a certain number of bars. The structure is doubled as it progresses, by low brass or woodwind instruments. This musical design is present in a twofold form – as a transitory element between structures 1 and 3, or it serves as the fundament upon which any of the two structures can intertwine its sonic discourse.

mp

Fig. 2. “Duel of the Fates”. The second structure (the rhythmic cell)

¹⁹ <https://www.aaronkrewicz.com/star-wars-blog/on-the-lyrics-of-duel-of-the-fates>

The third structure (Fig. 3.) represents the melodic line executed in succession by such wind instruments as a clarinet and a French horn (with an echo sustained by a trombone). It can occur as main musical discourse or it can serve to consolidate the re-emergence of the choir, alongside the second structure (at the third intervention of the choir).



Fig. 3. "Duel of the Fates". The third structure

If **the first structure** is generally correspondent with a *f-ff* dynamics (with the exception of the second intervention which is *mf*), the others unfold at a diminished intensity precisely to highlight even more the structure comprising the vocal part and focus on the lyrics. Otherwise, they can mark the section preceding the choir intervention by their *f* dynamics, in which case the orchestral ensemble sustains a moment of preparation realized by means of a crescendo, which is meant exactly to emphasize the subsequent emergence of the vocal section.

The sonic discourse is nuanced by the punctuated intervention of the grave accent strings and respectively of the trumpet or the tuba, by the luminous colour rendered by the harp, or later on by the intervention of the percussion instruments, which rhythmically dynamize the melodic evolution.

The particulars of the composer's style can be identified as presented earlier – there are **three** well-defined **themes** which enable one to highlight some aspects, by classifying them according to the emotional intensity each of these themes sustains musically. There is **the second structure** in the form of an *ostinato* which supports the thrill of the action in its entirety. Then **the third structure** displays a poignant melodic line, suggestive of a feeling of eager anticipation and anxiety as to what is going to happen and especially as to the final outcome of the event. Finally, the climax is contained in **the first structure** which involves the human factor and physical, material presence; it highlights the dramatism of the scene, it takes on the colour of fatalist extremism and it is a musical representation symbolical of dichotomies – good vs evil, divine vs malevolent, light vs darkness, day vs night.

The **three themes** work together in perfect fusion; there are certain variations – structural ones or others regarding the approach of the orchestral mechanism, yet the overall construction of the soundtrack is extremely compact and balanced.

The respective scene is assigned to a historical time and to a defined space yet at the same time it renders the subject matter universal, it points to the never-ending confrontation between *good* and *evil*.

The composer successfully transposed the visual proposition in musical terms, enhancing the significance of the moment – the actual conflict between the characters involved is intensified and the profound symbolism of the scene is highlighted.

It is to be noted the manner in which each and every descriptive detail actually makes a contribution to supporting the progress of the sequence.

One such detail is the flash of the swords which is perfectly attuned to the overall mood intended for the scene. Thus, the villain carries a red-light sword as a symbol of destruction, suggestive of hate, aggression, a burning flame, alienation (the devil).

At the other end of the spectrum, the heroes “flash” their swords in blue and green – symbolical of order, spirituality, calm, depth and peace directed toward

eternity and hope, the flow of the subconscious, nourishing energy, the spirit of vegetation, reconciliatory energy²⁰.

4. Conclusion

Music expresses *human experience* – birth, death, individual evolution, the social or the intimate side of human personality etc.; these are all *archetypal dimensions* which relate not only to individual life but also to music (Georgescu 2020, 27).

The way in which the *hero's journey* is rendered in the *Star Wars* series illustrates the need to employ new forms, to find alternative, modern templates in order to reflect various aspects of individual life within the modern society.

The original manner in which composer John Williams was able to provide a sonic response to meet the exigencies of visual storytelling along with the symbolic clout pertaining the creative endeavour of this film series, shows the contemporary artist at its best, while the musical theme *Duel of Fates* is an eloquent example of creatively employing the musician's craft to channel "*the transcendent*".

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²⁰ For more details on the *symbolism* of colours and also of numbers and shapes, see Abt, Theodor. 2019. *Introducere în interpretarea jungiană a desenelor*. București: Editura Trei.

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