

Cosmic Christ or Campbell's Soup?

Joseph Campbell - The Man Behind The Myth

The following article was authored in New York and originally published by Zenit News Agency on 21st May 1999 – the weekend of the opening of 'Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace'. It has been republished on Soul Food Cinema in May 2008 due to its editorial quality and enduring relevance with respect to the whole 'Star Wars' series of films.

To those "non-initiated" fans of the Star Wars saga, who are more mesmerized by Queen Amidala's couture and hairstyles or the size of the rocket engines on 9 year-old Anakin's podracer than the content of the dialogues, read no further. This article is not for you. But if you've ever asked yourself what goes on inside the mind of the man who made the movie, where does he get his inspiration and, as Alice in Wonderland asked the Cheshire cat: "what does it all really mean?" then read on. You might be surprised at what you find.

While George Lucas is respected and revered in Hollywood for his record-breaking, Oscar-winning special effects of computer generated images and cutting edge digital sound systems, it would be a serious oversight to dismiss his own intellectual prowess and ability to tell stories and create modern myths.

During his recent interview with Bill Moyers published in TIME's April 26th (1999) edition, Lucas admits: "With Star Wars I consciously set about to re-create myths and the classic mythological motifs". And adds, "I'm telling an old myth in a new way... I guess I'm localizing it for the end of the millennium more than I am for any particular place". In a 1997 L.A. Times Magazine article, Patrick Goldstein remarked that "Lucas is as well read as any filmmaker of his generation - one of his impromptu monologues on the psychological imprint of mythology in primitive cultures could easily pass muster at any graduate seminar lecture". Andrew Gordon, an English professor at the University of Florida, commented that Lucas, "with the more overt treatment of archetypes", is also "playing to the academics who have touted his saga from the beginning as serious modern-day mythology".

But what about the actual content of the Star Wars trilogy, and now, the new Phantom Menace release: is it "just a movie" as Lucas retorted in a New York press conference last week, or is there an intentional effort to propose "something else"? Michael Medved, author of the bestseller "Hollywood Versus America" and the follow-up video "Hollywood Versus Religion", points out that it's naive to accept movie director's assertions that hidden religious messages are often "unintentional" and that viewers are just "reading more into the script" than what's really there. How can you possibly admit that these things have been "overlooked" in major studio productions, he affirms, when directors and producers spend thousands of dollars investigating the most minute aspects of every scene, from the period costumes to background lighting to the best camera angles for the greatest impact on viewers? Religious objects, images and especially dialogue, he maintains, are carefully combed and reworked until the effect is "just right."

In Lucas' case, much of the mythological content of his own work has come under the direct influence of the late American mythologist and philosopher of religion, Joseph Campbell. According to Donal Leonard, professor of philosophy of religion at the Pontifical Atheneum Regina Apostolorum in Rome, who did his doctoral thesis on Joseph Campbell, "in Lucas Campbell maintained that he saw the man who understands what metaphor is and managed to translate aspects of his work into modern problems, such as the relation between man and the machine". "George Lucas", he adds, "has on many occasions explicitly referred to this

influence. Lucas changed the script after readings of Campbell's 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' and 'The Masks of God'. Up until 1994, Lucas was a member of the Board of Advisors of the Joseph Campbell Foundation". In fact, in a tribute to Campbell in 1985, film-maker Lucas affectionately referred to him as "my Yoda" and explained that he was indebted to Campbell for many of the main ideas present in the cosmology of the original trilogy. Campbell, in turn, said he was "proud that something I did helped [George] define his own truth".

Joseph Campbell was born in New York in 1904. Son of Charles Campbell and Josephine Lynch, both of his grandfathers had been immigrant workers from Ireland. He was raised a Catholic in New Rochelle, N.Y. and devoured children's books on American Indian folklore, as well as amassing a large personal collection of Indian artefacts. He began having serious doubts of faith in his undergraduate years at Dartmouth College and, after receiving his M.A. in literature from Columbia, he spent two years studying in Europe, first at the University of Paris, then in Munich, where he discovered the works of Freud and Carl Jung. Belden Lane, professor of theology and American studies at Saint Louis University, writes that Campbell was "continually drawn to the image world of medieval Christianity as symbolized in the cathedral of Chartres" and that he "recognized the force of Christian myth". Nevertheless, Lane continues, "he also harshly criticized Western theology and carefully distanced himself from the church. Christian theology, in his view, needs the intensive and universalizing influences of mythology. Campbell frequently would contrast the priest, who serves as a custodian of facts, with the shaman, who functions as a sharer of experience. He cited Jung's warning that religion can easily become a defense against the experience of God".

While an academic in his own right and an accomplished writer, Joseph Campbell broke into mainstream America during a six-part television interview with Bill Moyers, which quickly became the highest rated broadcast in the history of PBS. The 1988 interview was filmed "on location" at the sprawling 2,500-acre Skywalker Ranch in Marin County, California, owned by none other than George Lucas. During the encounter, which later was adapted into the best-selling book, "The Power of Myth", Campbell expounds his vision of myth, religion, belief, symbols and everything having to do with the "religious experience". Some claim that it was this interview, together with the original Lucas Star Wars trilogy which unleashed the landslide of interest in all things religious which overtook the U.S. in the past two decades.

"Channeling cosmic forces", "searching for your 'inner-self'" "seeking to balance the light side with the dark side", among others, all began to trickle down into the ordinary lives of soccer moms and yuppie executive dads and emerged into what was eventually vaguely labeled as "New Age" philosophy, complete with its own music, artwork, retreat centers and gurus. Several sociologists hold that the popularizing "force" for this mystical movement initially came from the underlying spiritual motif of the Star War series which allowed viewers to forget their post-Vietnam fears and escape from reality into the reassuring mythology of a distant land "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away."

So it's not surprising that reporters have described some of the "warrers" camped out for nights in front of theaters for tickets to the first release of the new trilogy as "pilgrims" at the end of the millennium looking for a new religious experience of the force. As the promotional material of the 'Phantom Menace' proclaims: "Every saga has a beginning" but some, whether tired of so much modern mythology or just overwhelmed by the phenomenon of the social event and 'Toys-R-Us' tie-ins, are already beginning to ask "when will it ever end?"

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