A-LEVEL FILM STUDIES

Paper 2: Critical Approaches to Film

Section A: Contemporary British and US Film

Set text #2

Star Wars: The Force Awakens **(US, 2015)**

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Intellectual Property

The Hollywood studio system is and always has been a business. While the noun 'art' is often used in the industry to add a veneer of prestige and respectability to their product (think of the official title of the Oscars—the Academy of Motion Picture *Arts* and Sciences, or MGM's motto *ars gratia artis*: 'art for art's sake', for example), the main concern of the American film industry is turning a profit, and a large profit at that. The apparent key to financial success is Hollywood is *replication*: the big studios finance and distribute films they know will make money for them, more often than not duplicating something that has been financially successful in the past. Crucial to this strategy is the idea of **intellectual property**.

Look at the Top 10 box office hits of 2018 (source: www.proboxoffice.com):

Film	Studio	Domestic (US) Gross
1. Black Panther	Disney	$700m
2. Avengers: Infinity War	Disney	$680m
3. Incredibles 2	Disney	$609m
4. Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom	Universal	$417m
5. Deadpool 2	Fox	$318m
6. Dr Seuss' The Grinch	Universal	$258m
7. Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle	Sony	$405m
8. Mission: Impossible – Fallout	Paramount	$220m
9. Ant-Man and the Wasp	Disney	$217m
10. Solo: A Star Wars Story	Disney	$214m

A few things should be immediately obvious when looking at this data:

a) The Top 10 box office hits of that year consist exclusively of titles released by the **major studios**, with Disney having distributed *five* of the highest grossing films of that year (*three* of which are at the very top of the list). The dominance of the market by Disney, at least at the very top of the box office charts, is no doubt due to their on-going acquisition of film production companies such as Lucasfilm and Marvel.

b) None of the films on the list is an 'original' product, and all have their origins in existing **source material** of some kind—comic book, novel, film, TV series, etc.

c) *Eight* out of the ten films on the list are **sequels** to successful films; one is a **remake** (*The Grinch*) and the other is a **reboot** (*Jumanji*). This suggests that studios are very much focused on **formulas** that work, or have worked in the past.

d) Finally, with the exception of *Deadpool 2* (rated R in the US and 15 in the UK), each film on the list is essentially family-friendly in nature.

To summarise, the bulk of Hollywood's output—and certainly in terms of films that generate a large amount of profit—is dependent on **intellectual property rights**, a set of regulations and laws that prevent others from copying or stealing ideas for their own gain, and which allow producers to replicate the success of one particular product over and over again if possible. In short, they allow the major studios to make money through:

- exclusive rights to depict characters, storylines, settings, etc.

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- licensing for sequels, remakes, reboots, spin-offs, etc.
- licensing for marketing and merchandising

A powerful and diverse **conglomerate** like Disney, for example, can purchase the rights to a novel or comic (or whatever) and have sole and exclusive rights to make a series of films (i.e. a **franchise**) based around that particular property; in addition they can use various **subsidiary companies** to create other profit-making products based on that property, such as toys, games, lunchboxes, clothing, etc. (**merchandise**). This industry practice, where one large company uses it various subsidiary companies to produce additional product and profit, is referred to as **synergy**.

Task

Make a list of the various film franchises you can think of, past and present. Which ones are based on an original artefact (book, comic, video game, TV series, etc.) *and are any of them based on a film that was an original idea? Can you remember owning any merchandise based on a particular film franchise when you were a child, or even more recently?*

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The idea of intellectual property needs to be kept in mind when one considers the notion of **creative control** in Hollywood, and certainly when one tries to argue a case of individual authorship. It also illustrates why a company like Marvel is willing to have 'creative differences' with a director of considerable pedigree and artistic merit such as Edgar Wright, and to prioritise what is 'safe' formula film-making over what might been seen to challenge the formula. (See the following article for more detail on Wright's departure from *Ant-Man* (2015): https://news.avclub.com/edgar-wright-finally-opens-up-about-why-he-left-ant-man-1798263342)

Suffice it to say that the major studios tend to be wary of funding and distributing films that aren't based on some kind of intellectual property; they are almost certainly reluctant to spend large production and distribution budgets on them unless they are in a marketable in some other way (i.e. star, genre, etc.). We've already seen how an intelligent, sophisticated sci-fi movie can be viewed with caution by a major distributor (remember how Universal 'passed' on releasing *Ex-Machina* in the States).

Task: read the article called "11 Most-Anticipated (Non-Franchise/Reboot) Movies Of 2018". You can find it here: http://monkeygoosemag.com/2018/01/11-most-anticipated-non-franchise-reboot-movies-of-2018/

Task a) *Research who distributed these films and how well they movies did at the box office.*

Task b) *Explain whether or not you think that the major studios are sensible to focus their attention primarily on franchises.*

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SET FILM #2: *STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS* (US, 2015)

The Original Phenomenon

The original *Star Wars* was a 1977 science fiction-fantasy film that became an overnight box office phenomenon and developed into the second highest-grossing franchise of all time (overtaken in recent years by the so-called 'Marvel Cinematic Universe'). *Star Wars* was the third feature film by director George Lucas and starred relative unknowns in the leading roles (including a young carpenter named Harrison Ford!), with support from seasoned British actors Alec Guinness (as Obi-Wan Kenobi) and Peter Cushing (General Tarkin). Generally speaking, *Star Wars* was an unexpected success: from its initial development through to the eve of its theatrical release in May 1977, hardly anyone—including most of its cast and crew, not to mention the studio that released it—expected it to make any money. Science fiction was deeply unfashionable by 1977, eclipsed by the cynical realism of 70s Hollywood cinema such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974). In an era when America was in the doldrums following the Vietnam War and Watergate, no one believed that an old-fashioned, high-tech update of the 1930s *Flash Gordon* serial would find an audience. How wrong they were…

For a fascinating insight into the troubled making of *Star Wars*, watch the first part of the excellent documentary *Empire of Dreams: The Story of the Star Wars Trilogy* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-ux9jn1tRU) .

Star Wars broke box office records, surpassing those set by other 70s blockbusters such as *The Exorcist* (Warner Bros. 1973) and *Jaws* (Universal, 1975). In addition to being a gigantic smash-hit with the cinema-going public, the film was a massive money-spinner in other ways; thanks to a shrewd merchandising deal with 20th Century Fox (who were happy to give the rights away), George Lucas had full commercial rights to any products associated with *Star Wars*—toys, t-shirts, lunchboxes, etc. and the merchandising profits alone made him virtually an overnight millionaire.

Task

Research the original Star Wars *merchandise released in the late 1970s/early 1980s, and find out how much some of these items tend to fetch on the Internet.*

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The original *Star Wars* film launched a new subgenre of science fiction—the 'space opera'—and inspired a slew of immediate imitations, including *Buck Rogers in the 21ˢᵗ Century* (Universal, 1979), *The Black Hole* (Disney, 1979), and the low-budget *Battle beyond the Stars* (New World, 1980). Its success also prompted Paramount to make a film adaptation of the TV show *Star Trek* (1979) and arguably inspired the hit TV show *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-79). Research some of the original theatrical posters of these films if you want to see a good example of formula film-making/promotion.

The Franchise: *Sequels* (1980-1983)

Because Lucas had such a traumatic time directing *Star Wars*, he decided not to direct the immediate sequels, *The Empire Strikes Back* (Fox, 1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (Fox, 1983), both featuring the core group of heroes Luke Skywalker, Han Solo and Princess Leia, as well as audience favourites C-3P0, R2-D2 and Chewbacca. Nevertheless, owing to the success of the first film he retained complete creative control and was closely involved during all phases of production, serving as Executive Producer. He also funded the films out of his own pocket.


Task

Watch the original theatrical trailers to The Empire Strikes Back *and* Return of the Jedi. *To what extent is Lucas clearly appealing to fans of the original film?*

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The Franchise: *Spin-offs* (1984-1985)

The release of so-called 'spin-off' movies to cash in on a major hit is not a new phenomenon, and Lucas was already hard at it in the 1980s, way before Disney decided to make spin-off *Star Wars* films such as *Rogue One* (2016) and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018).

> **Task**
>
> Return of the Jedi *in particular saw Lucas keen to expand into television. Use the Internet to find out the names of the two TV movies and the animated TV show based around characters from this particular film.*
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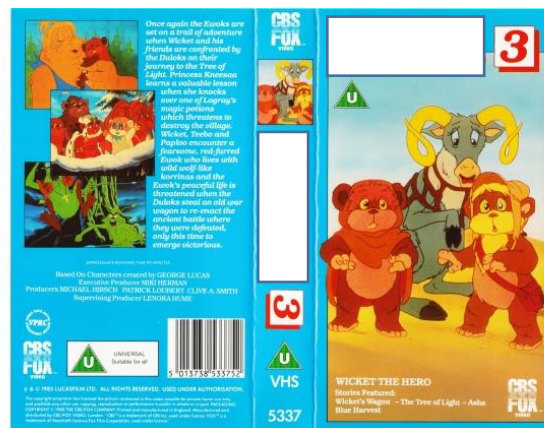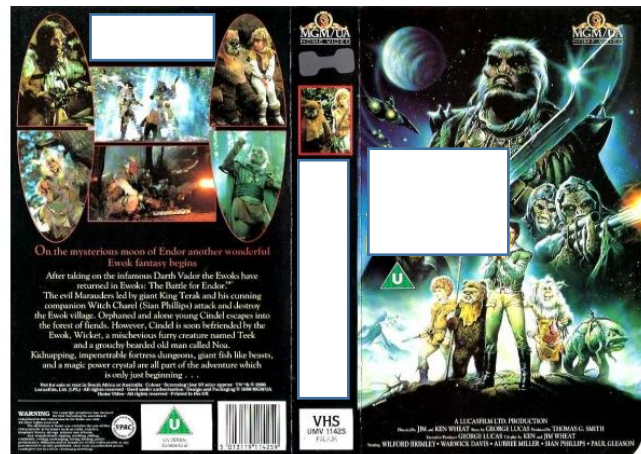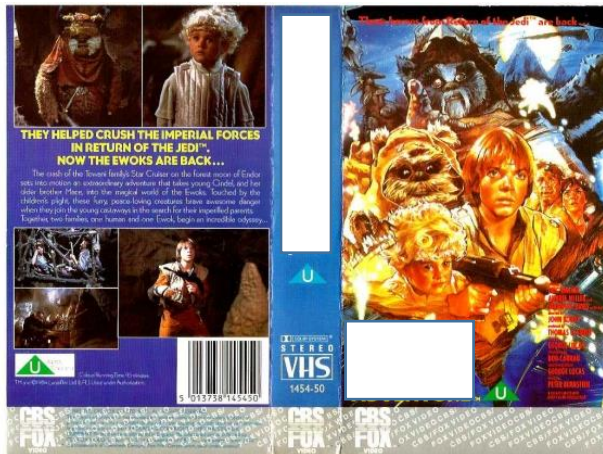
The Franchise: '*Special Editions*' (1997)

In the late 90s, those who were too young to catch the original *Star Wars* trilogy at the cinema had the chance to watch so-called 'Special Editions' of the films, released in 1997. Unhappy with the compromises made during their original production (mostly due to the limitations of special effects at the time), Lucas made some revisions to his trilogy, adding new scenes and enhancing the visual effects. These digital alterations annoyed many fans, who loved the originals as they were. However, these re-releases were once again box office hits for Lucas, who was adamant that these were now the *definitive* versions, definitive versions that he would tweak each time they were released on video, DVD or Blu-Ray!

Whatever one thinks of these editions, it certainly makes a strong case for Lucas as an 'auteur', making changes in his films as an author might revise a sentence or chapter in a novel, or a painter might rework a

portrait. He has also resisted demands from fans to release the original trilogy in its original theatrical format, generating much online hostility from *Star Wars* aficionados.

Task

a) *Research some of the changes Lucas made to his original trilogy over the years and, if possible, one or two comments that fans have made in response.*

b) *Now research the 'De-specialised' editions made by Star Wars fan 'Harmy'. What do his efforts tell you about the relationship between die-hard fans of the series and the films themselves?*

The Franchise: *Prequels* (1999-2005)

In 1999, Lucas—now a billionaire thanks to the *Star Wars* franchise, his production company Lucasfilm and his special effects company Industrial Light and Magic (ILM)—returned to the series with a prequel: *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, starring Liam Neeson and Ewan McGregor (playing a young Ben Kenobi). Now that CGI had made photorealistic effects possible, Lucas wanted to make more films in the series that would satisfy his creative vision.

Task

The following comments are from online fan reviews of the prequels, written during their respective theatrical releases.

After you've read them, highlight or bullet point similarities in perspective/opinion across the three reviews:

a) I waited 17 years for this movie. Star Wars was the first movie I ever saw in a theater (I was seven). Needless to say, I was expecting a lot from the newest entry in the Star Wars saga and I must admit I was slightly disappointed in what I feel is the weakest of all the films. Lucas spared no expense on special effects, but the eye-popping CGI effects in this movie are so perfect that they are almost TOO perfect. In many ways, the original Star Wars films -- with their models of space ships and on-location sets -- look more realistic than entire landscapes and battle scenes done on computers, IMHO. This is a movie for kids of today, not kids like me who grew up with Star Wars and are now twentysomethings. There is no other explanation for the annoying presence of the computer-animated character Jar Jar Binks, who seems to serve no other purpose than to interrupt otherwise serious dialogue with barely decipherable, inane banter. (User review of *The Phantom Menace* by rdesalvo, IMDb, 11th May 1999)

b) Being a huge Star Wars fan myself, I was very eager to see the next chapter in this saga. I must admit I have been disappointed by the Phantom Menace which I found evasive and quirky compared to the more "serious" or "classic" sequels. Nevertheless, I had heard the second one would be different, that it would be targeted at a more adult audience and I hoped some people might have learn from their past mistakes...It is true that the special effects are very impressive, realistic and believable. I can't deny the fact that the movie looks good (it's been filmed in digital format) and that it sounds good. Attack of the clones is like a nicely wrapped up gift. The only problem is what you find when you open the gift: merely nothing. Young Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen) really doesn't look like much of a Jedi; he doesn't seem to have a personality of his own…[And] I'm sorry, but if R2 would have had rockets on his sides so he could

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fly, he wouldn't have let himself fall down in the sand in the beginning of Return of the Jedi. (User review of *Attack of the Clones* by johnbeer, IMDb, 14th May 2002)

c) This is the year of let downs. Star Wars Episode III turned out to be an over-hyped, video-game-esque, poorly acted, under-directed, repetitive, FX-laden, sad excuse for a movie. I dare say that the characters are more card-board than ever, and the dialog was soooo cheesy, it gives cheesy dialog a bad rep. The effects are just as good as in previous episodes, just more of it. There were so many battle sequences that it completely lost touch with those little luxuries like um....character development (or at least character interest), realism, and oh yeah did I mention dialog?!?!. Hayden Christiansen is so incredibly poor as an actor, that his presence on the screen just makes me cringe (he is sub-Keanu...yes, it's true)...and his portrayal as whiney/stoic Anakin is horrible...he is supposed to become DARTH VADER, DARK LORD OF THE SITH!!!...argh!!!Wow, what a mess. I mean I am a MAJOR Star Wars fan, and I came in with fairly good expectations, not high, but not low....but man oh man...This came right on the heels of that horrible version of Hitchhiker's Guide....there is nothing here for me now.....I am now just a sad little man. (User review of *Revenge of the Sith* by ffisshh, IMDb, 11th May 2005)

Source: Internet Movie Database

Similarities in perspective/opinion:

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LOOKING AT *THE FORCE AWAKENS*

When you study *The Force Awakens*, it will be useful to consider the following ideas and how they might impact on our understanding of the text:

1. <u>The role and status of Disney as producer of the text</u>.
   To what extent does the studio's desire to make money from the franchise impact on the creative freedom of the auteur (J.J. Abrams)? To what extent is the studio driven by genre and narrative conventions, as well as opportunities for synergy? Is *The Force Awakens* an example of formula film-making, or does it bring something new and original to the franchise?

2. <u>The auteur vision of *Star Wars* creator George Lucas</u>.
   To what extent does the spirit of Lucas hang over proceedings? Is the film so firmly entrenched in the *Star Wars* universe that we might make a claim that George Lucas is still the auteur of the franchise, or does Abrams' auteur stamp emerge in spite of this being another film-maker's concept?

3. <u>The importance of the fan base in terms of the film's production, marketing and release</u>.
   To what extent is this a film made for die-hard *Star Wars* fans? How has it clearly tried to appeal to what the fans seemingly wanted? In what ways does the film ensure that the widest possible audience will enjoy it, as well as *Star Wars* enthusiasts?

4. <u>The role of digital technology in the film's production and exhibition</u>.
   What can be said about the film's combination of CGI and practical effects? What exhibition formats enhance the film's impact for cinema audiences? Does the film lose any of its impact when watching the film on DVD, Blu-Ray or as a download?

An audience await the first ever public screening of Star Wars: The Force Awakens (2015), TCL Chinese Theatre Hollywood

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Pre-Production

In 2012, George Lucas sold Lucasfilm (the production company he started in 1971) to Disney for approximately $4 billion, including shares in the company. This came as a surprise to many, including fans, with fan club co-founder Ming Pan commenting, "I didn't expect it to happen while Lucas was still alive because he has always expressed such a tight control over the Star Wars license." (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/disney-star-wars-films-buy-210830937.html) For some fans and critics, the decision to sell Lucasfilm may have been motivated by poor fan response to the prequels and relentless tinkering with the original trilogy:

Lucas was hailed as a cinematic visionary when the original "Star Wars" came out in 1977. But he had become an object of often-vicious ridicule by the time he started releasing 3-D versions of all six films in the franchise this year. Die-hard fans had been vilifying Lucas for years, convinced that he had become a commercial sell-out and had compounded his sins by desecrating the heroic tale that he originally sought to tell. They railed against him for adding grating characters such as Jar Jar Binks to the prequel trilogy, which Lucas directed and which came out from 1999 to 2005. They attacked him for tinkering with the original trilogy that spanned 1977 to 1983, too. Revisions in special editions and home video releases — such as making the Ewoks blink and having a green-skinned alien named Greedo take the first shot at Han Solo in a famous bar scene — were treated as blasphemy.

The sale of Lucasfilm to Disney included the rights to the *Star Wars* franchise, meaning that Disney could now make new films in the series as well as consumer products/merchandising. The studio quickly announced that future *Star Wars* films would be produced, including direct sequels and stand-alone/spin-off movies. At this point, George Lucas was announced as 'creative consultant' on any new *Star Wars* films.

Meanwhile, 20th Century Fox—who retained the theatrical and home video distribution rights for *Star Wars* Episodes I-VI—announced that they had no intention of releasing the original, unaltered trilogy on DVD/Blu-Ray since they wanted to remain true to Lucas's original vision.

> *At this early point (following Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm) to what extent could you argue that Lucas remained the true auteur of the* Star Wars *franchise?*

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Glossary – these are useful terms relating to the film industry.

Look up the ones you're not sure of and find definitions online.

arthouse	hybrid
auteur	intellectual property
box office	licensing
budget	major
chain	marketability
co-production	marketing
distribution	mass audience
distribution rights	merchandise
distributor/distribution company	mini-major
domestic gross	multiplex
event movie	niche audience
exhibition/exhibitor	pre-production
fanbase	production company
film rights	production values
franchise	representation
genre	synergy
genre codes and conventions	trope
gross	worldwide gross
high-concept	