

Star Wars and the exploitation of Australia

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As the much-awaited seventh instalment of sci-fi space epic Star Wars is released in Australia, Professor Toby Miller [1], the Sir Walter Murdoch Professor of Cultural Policy Studies at Murdoch University, writes about the 'dark side' of the money-making behemoth.

As I write this, I'm drinking tea in Bogotá. Akin to countless other possible and actual infringements of trademarks and copyright of *La guerra de las galaxias* (*Star Wars*) here and elsewhere, I'm sipping a cup of Xue, which markets itself on teabags with the words: 'May the forcebe [sic.] with you'.

There is great excitement in Colombia about the upcoming release of the latest instalment of the saga, *Star Wars7: El despertar de la fuerza* just like in Australia, where *Star Wars 7: The Force Awakens* [2] opens tonight.

People are speculating about everything from its plot [3] to claims that it is the most-watched trailer [4] of all time. Box-office receipts are predicted [5] to reach US\$3.5 billion.

Australia has played an important role in the incredible wealth



already generated by the series, and in two ways.

First, Australians buying *Star Wars* merchandise have consistently paid more for the privilege than United States consumers. The recommended retail price [6] for the latest 9.5 cm figurines is A\$14.99. The same item [7] in the US costs US\$7.99, about A\$11. Going back in time, the comparisons [8] are even more invidious. Toy prices in Australia have been dropping due to over-supply [9] but the disparity remains, shall we say, exploitative. (Though the gullible English pay even more [10]).

LucasFilm [11] was very good at merchandising tie-ins and cross-promotions. The museum Rancho Obi-Wan Inc [12], boasts 350,000-items of Star Wars merchandising, and still keeps the faith: 'Rancho Obi-Wan was thrilled to participate in the KRAFT Star Wars Macaroni and Cheese commercial now airing'.

With Disney [13]'s US\$4.5 billion takeover in 2012, LucasFilm was subsumed by a market leader [14] in defraying filmmaking costs through toy sales.

Long before movies are released, licensed merchandise floods toy stores, web sites, fast-food restaurants, and supermarkets. For example, Hasbro Toys [15] guaranteed Lucas US\$500 million in royalties from *Phantom Menace*. Hasbro is dutifully providing toys for the new picture; youngsters across the

country can purchase the items of their dreams and their parents' labor thanks to a marketing extravaganza [16].

Disney launched the new merchandise three months before the premiere, much earlier than is the norm. Bankers anticipate sales to reach US\$1.5 billion over the next year—and it's not just action figures. The needy and nerdy among us can purchase everything from lipstick to pizza cutters [17].

In addition to being gullible consumers, Australians provided the setting (in one sense) for two episodes of the saga, in 2002 and 2005. Rich McCallum [18], their co-producer, preferred Fox's Sydney studios to Hollywood, which 'represents everything repugnant ... it's so unionized'. He claimed [19] that the 'commitment to two films' signified that '[t]his isn't rape and pillage'.

His grotesquely anti-labor attitude and misogynistic, imperious use are matched by the desire for public funds to pay for allegedly private endeavor.

Fox built its studios with state assistance, a typical element of the New International Division of Cultural Labor [20]. It is claimed that more than A\$1 billion has been generated for the Australian economy by foreign-film production, but these figures rarely account for [21] the loss of revenue through tax relief and other sweetheart deals and the outlay of state money in studio construction and training of personnel.

Wherever public money is available and exchange rates are favorable, and technology is present, you'll find the movie magic of *Star Wars* as Disney lines up, smiling, with hands held out. *The Force Awakens* was filmed in Dubai, England, Iceland, and Ireland, because they offered better government deals than Australia. The Irish military was only too happy to work for the filmmakers—for free [22]—as personnel and *materiel* were gleefully made available.

The result endangered wildlife on Ireland's Skellig Islands, a place with a unique ecology. Permissions were obtained without proper environmental and democratic scrutiny and hundreds of kittiwake chicks were swept into the ocean to drown [23], thanks to repeated mass-helicopter adventures.

But when people file into and out of Imax theaters in Australian cities, will any of this matter to them? They want to be entertained, to be excited—it's thrills, not political economy, that matters to them.

We do know that *Star Wars* fans are not all happy with Disney's takeover, perhaps fearing contamination of the Manichean childishness, violence, and imperialism that have been so central to the franchise. Australian agitators supposedly stand ready to express outrage [14].

And *Gizmodo Australia* is perturbed by its 'weaponized nostalgia [24]' that draws not only on the franchise's own past but classic right-wing and even Fascist cinema, in keeping with

the anti-Semitism lurking in Joseph Campbell's nasty map of humanity-for-simpletons that so entranced Lucas all those years ago.

Wouldn't it be nice if Australian filmgoers realized they were also citizens and workers, and collaborated with one another and their colleagues around the world to suggest that that the super-profit of merchandising be leavened—just a wee bit—by pricing parity, and that movie magic rely on risk capital and entrepreneurship, not exploiting public hand-outs?

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URLs in this post:

[1] Toby Miller: **<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/News/Find-an-expert/English-and-Creative-Arts-experts/>**

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