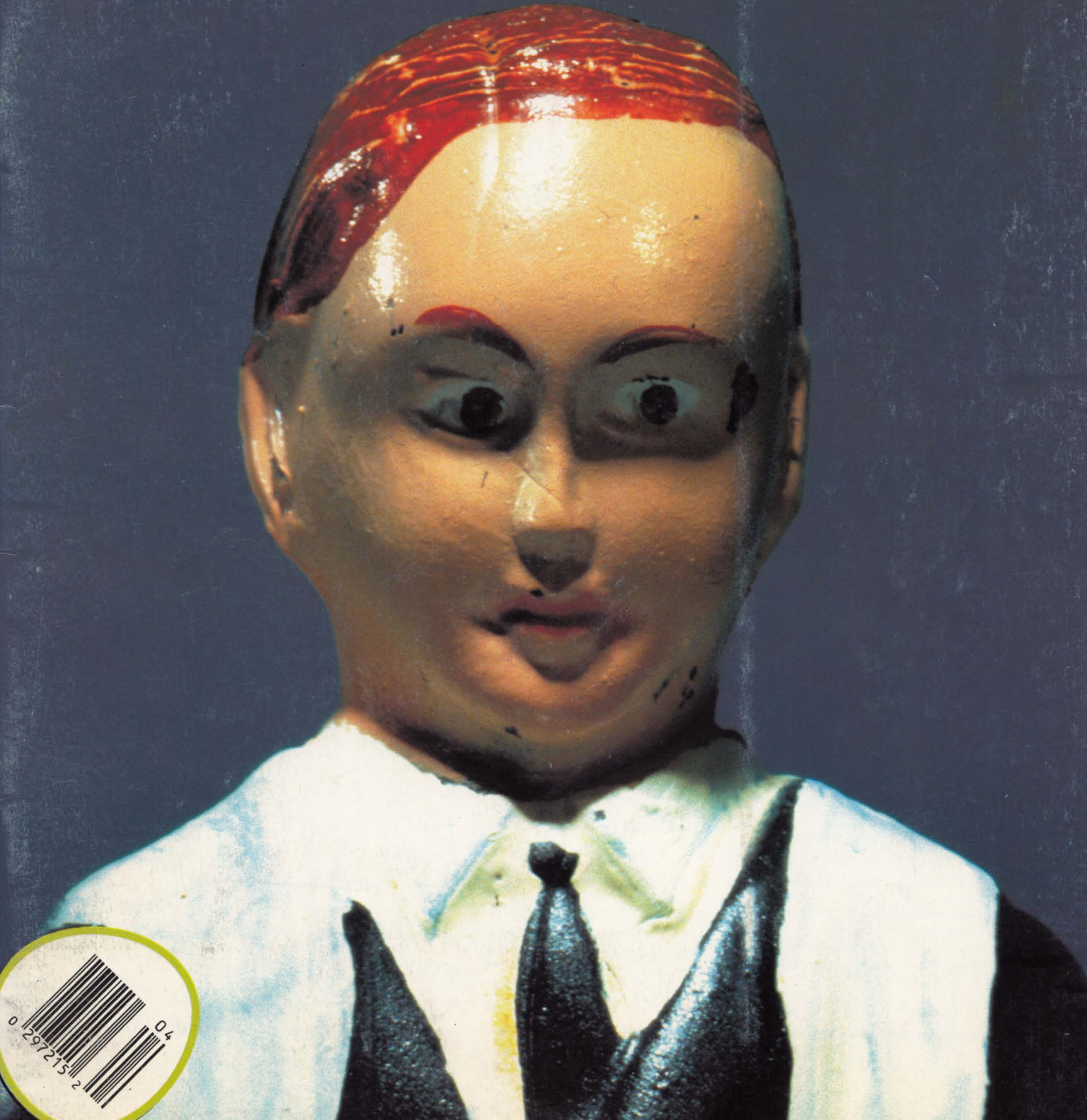


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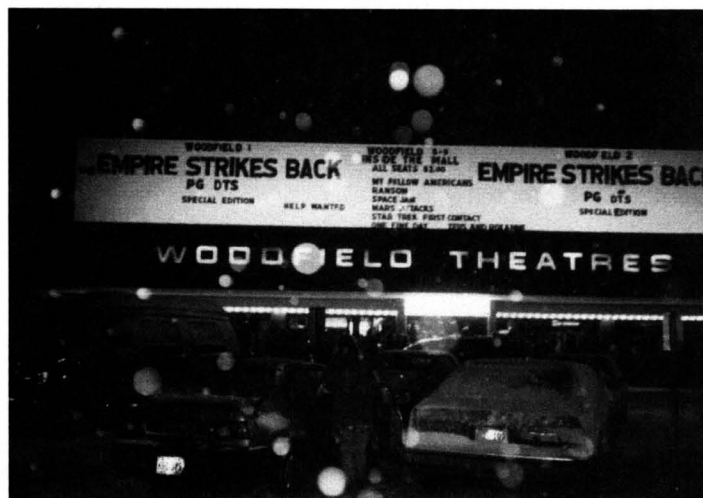
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# NEW | ART

EXAMINER



When *Star Wars* first exploded into the popular consciousness in 1977, it all seemed so innocent to us. Admittedly we were not even ten years old, but the spell its naïveté cast over us has



Opening night of *The Empire Strikes Back Special Edition*, Woodfield Theatres, Schaumburg, Illinois, February 21, 1997. Photo by John Rodriguez.

lasted. Now, with the release of the *Star Wars Trilogy Special Edition* 20 years later, we are torn between two worlds. A part of us longs for (and experiences) the childish pleasures we felt two decades ago; another part has become more cynical and urges us to cast a critical eye on the veil of innocence George Lucas wraps around his creation, to be wary of this spell under which we walk.

Lucas has said that his impetus for creating the films was “to give young people an honest, wholesome fantasy life. The kind my generation had.” The kind his generation had refers to the *Flash Gordon* serials of the '30s and '40s. Considering the relationship of *Star Wars* to these series, theorist Frederick Jameson writes:

*Star Wars* reinvents this experience in the form of the pastiche: that is, there is no longer any point to a parody of such serials since they are long extinct. *Star Wars*, far from being a pointless satire of such now dead forms, satisfies a deep (might I say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which on some first level children and adolescents can take the adventures straight, while the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the critical mistrust of the new versions of the *Star Wars* films stems from a connection to Jameson's idea of nostalgia. That is, seeing the Special Edition of the films reminds us not of a bygone, innocent era like the originals did, but rather of a recent period of late capitalism that *Star Wars* itself helped usher in. There is a clash between what we are expecting to feel—wonder, joy, and nostalgia—and what we actually experience—this connection to the late '70s and early '80s. By having the foreknowledge that we are going to be experiencing this sense of nostalgia, and at the same time having actual memories of *Star Wars* as a cultural event, our feeling of innocence is threatened. *Star Wars* very much becomes a product of the now, of our contemporary position.

In a 1977 review of *Star Wars*, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote that “confusion between past and future, however useful to the tactics of George Lucas's *Star Wars*, seems almost secondary to the overriding insistence that wherever this giddy space opera is taking place, it can't possibly be anywhere quite so disagreeable as the present.”<sup>2</sup> For good or ill, *Star Wars, The Special Edition* is now firmly part of the present, perhaps because it tries to take on too many time periods at once.

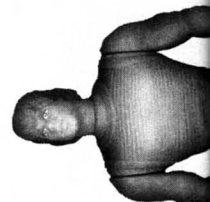
It is this aspect of time, the issue of technology, and the ability to manipulate a historical artifact like *Star Wars* that make this situation unique. An intriguing aspect of the Special Edition is that a filmmaker has never chosen to go back into a film like this before, not remaking or re-editing, as director Ridley Scott did with *Blade Runner*, but instead inserting new footage, old footage, and, in general, “enhancing” it. By digitally manipulating his film in this fashion, Lucas made filmmaking a more fluid medium than ever before, fluid in the sense that a film (though the word “film” may cease to be applicable as movies go digital) no longer has to be considered finished at any one point. Lucas has shown that a movie-maker can go back into a work, change it, rerelease it, and achieve commercial success.

The possibility now exists for an artist to rework, edit, and modify footage in all stages of the filmmaking process. In a recent interview in *Wired*, Lucas compared the next step in filmmaking to more organic processes like painting or word-processing, a technique of layering. He said: “Filmmaking by layering means you write, and direct, and edit all at once.”<sup>3</sup> This is revolutionary in that it allows for greater thought and experimentation to be put into a film. Variations of different scenes and characters can be tried more quickly and less expensively than ever before.

If it had happened to another movie, i.e. *Blade Runner*, it may have been simply curious. It would still have been important for the filmmaking industry, but not as important culturally. Because of the enormous impact the films have had on our

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Kenner “Luke Skywalker in Dagobah Fatigues” action figure, 1995, Lucasfilm Ltd.



culture, Lucas is, by retooling *Star Wars*, retouching history. A precedent for this can be seen in the movie *Forrest Gump* (oddly enough, another movie presumed to be about innocence). In *Gump*, director Robert Zemeckis digitally spliced Tom Hanks into historical footage so the star could interact with former presidents and the like. Suddenly the past becomes just a little bit different. *Gump* happens. Lucas went one step further. He changed what we consider to be an actual historical document, in a sense collapsing time. The years 1977 and 1997 have become one.

What also takes us back in time is the release of *Star Wars* action figures into the market. When Lucas first licensed the *Star Wars* toys to Kenner Products in the '70s, the company wasn't sure how to go about marketing them. Up until that point, most toys aimed at boys were of the 12-inch G.I. Joe variety. Kenner decided the *Star Wars* line should be a doll/vehicle/accessory-driven line. However, if children were to want a similarly sized Han Solo to pilot a to-scale Millennium Falcon, the ship wouldn't fit through a child's bedroom door and would be cost prohibitive. They hit on the idea of the three-and-three-quarter-inch action figure, which at two dollars apiece started an unexpected collecting frenzy. Whereas the marketing department originally expected children to choose from Luke, Han, or the others, children wanted Luke, Han, *and* the others. Thus the action-figure industry was born, fostering devotees around the world "ages four and up." We loved them.

Now, with a new set of action figures introduced with the re-release, we suspect that the target audience is not only a new generation of children, but the obsessive collectors who are willing to pay ridiculous sums to toy dealers for a hit of nostalgia.

Collecting has become an arena where the color of the plastic used to mold a particular piece determines whether or not it is a "treasure," a competition in which a packaged Luke with a long light-saber is more valuable than a Luke with a short light-saber. More valuable still is a short-sabered Luke in long-sabered packaging! As fanatical as we are about *Star Wars* and collecting, we feel threatened as the new figures (and the collecting frenzy around them) eclipse the old ones with which we grew up and loved. We fear that the old memories will be subsumed in the onslaught of hype for the retooled versions.

We hold on to the memories of an innocent *Star Wars*, the one Lucas created as a new fairy tale, though now we view it with a sense of uncertainty. Lucas has, for good and ill, altered the way that cultural artifacts are produced and perceived. Indeed, it may be increasingly difficult to tell the past from the present from the future.

**KARL ERICKSON** traded a blue Snaggletooth for a mint condition Power Droid from the collection of **JULIO FLORES**.

## notes

- 1 Frederick Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 116.
- 2 Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Solitary Pleasures of Star Wars," *Movies as Politics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1977), 105.
- 3 Kevin Kelly and Paula Parisi, "Beyond Star Wars: What's Next for George Lucas," interview, *Wired*, February 1997, 165.

From New Art Examiner Press:

# The Artist in Society: Rights, Roles, and Responsibilities

*A collaboration between the New Art Examiner and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, this publication gathers together, in book form, selected papers from "The Artist in Society: Rights, Roles, and Responsibilities," an October 1994 conference organized by the museum and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

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