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CLASSICS

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Rebecca Harrison



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This book is dedicated to all trans, non-binary, gay, lesbian, bisexual, Black, of colour, disabled, sex worker, indigenous, survivor, working-class and women Star Wars fans – in all their constellations of identity and presentation. It is written, with love, for all the galaxy's orphans; to all those who fight for equality and justice despite being marginalized or underrepresented or told they don't belong. May our alliances be strong. May our resistance be hopeful. May the Force be with us. Always.

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Notes on the Text

Given the amorphous nature of the Star Wars movies as a result of their various rereleases, I think it is helpful to clarify which versions of the films I refer to throughout this book.

Unless otherwise stated, all references to the original trilogy films (1977–83), including *The Empire Strikes Back*, are based on the original theatrical versions that are available on bonus discs as part of the 2008 Star Wars Special Edition box set. I have referred to the original theatrical versions to ensure that my analysis is as historically accurate as possible.

Owing to my historical approach (and in keeping with press, publicity, and general convention in 1980 when *Empire* was released), I refer to *Episode IV: A New Hope* as, simply, *Star Wars*. Whereas *Star Wars* in italics refers to the film, Star Wars, without italics, refers to the franchise. For example: viewers saw *Star Wars* in 1977; the Star Wars franchise includes films, games, and TV shows. Furthermore, to aid the consistency of the reading experience, I have amended all titles in primary documents to share a uniform format, for example ‘Box Office for “Empire Strikes Back” Outperforms “Star Wars”’, becomes ‘Box Office for *Empire Strikes Back* Outperforms *Star Wars*’.

For further information about Star Wars screen media, as well as summaries of major characters and components of *The Empire Strikes Back*, please see the Glossary of Terms.

Introduction

Avid fans wait in impatient lines that zigzag around blocks outside movie theatres. Television broadcasters hover around queues of people that disrupt the flow of movement along city streets. Advertisements, on-set photographs, and talent interviews are emblazoned across the pages of magazines in a blitzkrieg media campaign; Darth Vader glares out from the cover of *Time*. A production legendary for its near-impossible location shoot and challenging visual effects has wrapped, and the industry waits, watching, as the film-makers launch that tricky thing – a sequel – on a trajectory to hoped-for box-office success. Deviating from its wildly popular predecessor in style and tone, no one knows what to expect. It is 21 May 1980, and suddenly there is a disturbance in the Force. The cinema doors open at long last. The first lucky viewers are admitted and scramble into their seats...

The Empire is about to strike back.

What began life as a risky sequel to the 1977 blockbuster hit *Star Wars* is now just one film in a canonical saga that encompasses three trilogies, two spin-offs, five television shows, numerous arcade and console games, theme park rides, comics, novels, documentaries, and innumerable toys and merchandise. Yet forty years after its first theatrical release, *The Empire Strikes Back* (henceforth, *Empire*) is now widely regarded as the best *Star Wars* film. The movie regularly tops polls and critically curated lists in newspapers and on fan websites.¹ It appears in popular culture from music to television shows.² It's the first sequel ever included in the BFI Film Classics series. And – something of an aside but nevertheless an important feature of my analysis throughout this book – I love every second of this dark, messy, glorious film. Full of



The icy snowscapes of Hoth are visible in the promotional poster for *The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980

unexpected twists and turns (which might depend on both your age and ability to avoid forty-year-old spoilers), *Empire* propels viewers into fantastical worlds with evocative textures. There are the crystalline snowscapes of besieged ice-planet Hoth; the murky, twilight swamps of the deluged Dagobah; and the magnificence of the sun-speckled art deco city sitting high in the dusky atmosphere above Bespin. There are unexpected heroes, with a white woman, a Black man, and a cast of aliens and droids leading a rebellion against the evil Empire. Fantastical visual effects send asteroids spinning

towards the screen. It is a film that continues to entrance and excite me even after countless viewings over close to three decades.

But what is perhaps surprising, especially given *Empire's* prominence in popular culture, is that it tends to be neglected in serious critical and scholarly writing about Star Wars. Prior academic work has focused on the saga's industrial contexts, its fandom and remediation, and in some cases, textual analysis of the movies and other screen media.³ Possibly as a result of the franchise's commercial success and mass appeal, it hasn't received the kind of archival investigation that tends to elevate discussions about other major cinematic texts (for example, the Bond franchise). Consequently, this book maps *Empire's* social and political history, and focuses on the US and the UK as the two powers most heavily involved in

the film's production. Over the next six chapters, I excavate the connections between *Empire* and its cultural contexts over the course of its lifetime, beginning with its genesis in November 1977 and ending with its classic status in the present day. In doing so, I delve into archives in LA and London, looking at the distributor's market research, as well as scribbled continuity sketches in homemade folders. I scour Lucasfilm trade publications to read between the lines of carefully constructed narratives of public record. I sort through stacks of digital and paper articles from the trade and daily press for reviews, news reports, and *Empire*-themed features. By drawing together the ephemeral traces of *Empire*'s production, exhibition, and ongoing reception, I propose a new and historically oriented direction of travel for critical writing about *Star Wars*. It is a film that has touched people's imaginations and daily lives through shared cultural reference points for over forty years; now, my aim is to make its past tangible to both new and nostalgic viewers alike. It may have been a long time ago, but by recovering and discussing its material history, *The Empire Strikes Back* doesn't have to feel so far away.

Weaving back and forth between my primary archival sources and broader histories of the 1970s and 1980s, I argue that *Empire* is a film about disruption. From its off-piste production to the oblique shapes and diagonal perspectives of its design, it's a film that disturbs the certainty of the status quo. Where *Star Wars* relies on stillness and stability, with static cameras and ships moving across screens in straight lines, *Empire* throws everything up in the air and leaves viewers guessing as to how it will all fall down. Characters bounce around inside ships; unstable landscapes tremble; cameras pan, tilt, and track. Off-screen, the film's journey to release navigated the Cold War and the 1978–9 Winter of Discontent, which saw trade unions in conflict with the UK government about pay and working conditions across sectors that impacted the film industries. *Empire* emerged amid furious debates about equality for women and people of colour, which resonated both in front of and behind the camera. And, following a chaotic production beset by