**A ‘Force’ For Good**

Not long ago, in a city fairly far away (although culturally, it may as well be galaxies…), an epic deal was struck in Los Angeles between two behemoths of the entertainment industry. A deal that would spark joy in the hearts of millions of man-children around the world, and an epic eye-roll from long-suffering partners. Yes, The Empire had struck back: Lucasfilms had signed an agreement giving Disney the rights to the Star Wars franchise. Fans waited with baited breath to see how Disney would use their new-found Force: after a series of prequels that were more Skyflopper than Skywalker, they were right to be apprehensive. However, what Disney has created has been a true testament to what is truly at the heart of Star Wars: not sci-fi, fantasy escapism, but a celebration of diversity, inclusion and progression.

In a film franchise predominantly about aliens from galaxies far, far away, it perhaps seems bizarre to talk about Star Wars and diversity. However, it is a belief at the core of the franchise that has paved the way for actors of different genders, races and abilities to find a voice and place in the acting community. A mixed cast has contributed to the success of Star Wars, allowing those around the world a character to sympathise with: everyone can see themselves reflected in the Star Wars-verse. Gender representation has been a clear focus for directors of the franchise, consistently subverting gender stereotypes of what Princesses and young women are capable of. The addition of Daisy Ridley as the lead character in ‘The Force Awakens’ confirms that Disney will continue to inspire female fans to reach for the stars, following in the lightsaber swooshes of Princess Leia, another badass female character. Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilms, said of Rey: “[she] embodies that sense of self-reliance and independence”; qualities that are often only afforded to men in sci-fi. Rebecca Keegan of The LA Times, notes that Rey “appears on-screen in a weather-beaten tunic, slouchy pants and a pair of rugged boots … She wears no high-heeled shoes, no copper-plated bikini, no princess robes. Rey is costumed as a woman might dress herself, for herself.” Where Leia may have at times been seen as a sexualised figure, or token female character, Rey is placed firmly in the Millennium Falcon’s pilot’s seat both physically and metaphorically-she is a hero in every aspect, and her gender is irrelevant. For a genre that is so often male led and where women often take the sidekick role, Rey is a strong feminist icon for a new generation of fans, and is making sci-fi a more inclusive place for women.

In addition to increased representation of women in the franchise, the new Disney-led projects have seen a dramatic increase in diversity, with actors of colour taking centre stage in the most recent films. In ‘The Force Awakens’, the young black actor John Boyega takes the central male role as a Stormtrooper turned good; with Hispanic actor Oscar Isaac also taking a key role as a pilot for the Resistance. Having previously faced backlash for a lack of diversity in the earlier films, it is clear director JJ Abrams was enthusiastic about representing the reality of the diverse world he lives in, even when transposed into the stars: "I think it's important people see themselves represented in film," Abrams said. "I think it's not a small thing." Star Wars is finally attempting to answer a question that sci-fi has tended to shy away from: if, in sci-fi, all forms of alien life can exist, why are people of colour seen as too alien to be the stars? As Chauncey Devega of The Salon states: “The women and people of color who populate Abrams’ “Star Wars” film are present as quotidian fixtures; their existence is not marked by their uniqueness, but rather in how common and mundane humane diversity would be in the fantastical worlds of ‘a long time ago’ and in ‘a galaxy far, far away.’” This approach to race in any form of film is a refreshing stance, but on the global stage, acts as a new hope for fans who perhaps could not picture themselves in the franchise before. As the highest grossing film of all time in its opening week, ‘The Force Awakens’ certainly demonstrates an awakening of awareness to the diverse world we live in.

When you open up a film setting to the entire universe, you open up opportunities for creativity: anything can exist in sci-fi. With a host of aliens of different sizes and shapes, it’s no wonder that Star Wars has been seen as an inclusive environment for people who may feel rejected from the real world. In this way, Star Wars has paved the way for actors with disabilities to take starring roles, and showed Hollywood they must recognise the value of the differently abled. Kathie Snow, a celebrated disabled writer, recognises this: “I recall the ‘bar scene’ in the very first Star Wars…A diverse collection of living, breathing humans, creatures, and other personas who all ‘created community’ during happy hour. Commonalities brought them together; differences were unimportant.” One particular shining example is Warwick Davis, an actor with dwarfism, who found fame at the tender age of 12 on the set of ‘Return of the Jedi’, and has gone on to star in not only a number of other Star Wars films (including ‘The Force Awakens’), but also the Harry Potter film series. He acts as a role model for children who may come to see difference not as a disability but as a hidden superpower: a Force for fame and fortune.

Despite these positive steps towards an inclusive universe, many still see Star Wars as perpetuating negative stereotypes. Within the much-criticised prequels of the early 2000s, there were some who criticised the opinion-dividing character of Jar Jar Binks, suggesting that the accent and sentence construction used for this character was a parody of the patois used in Caribbean communities: “At first the audience assumes that English is not his first language, and that a kind of lingua franca has developed between the English-speaking human inhabitants of Naboo and the Gungans to allow them to communicate. However, when we see Jar Jar’s home, we discover that he communicates to the King in this language and that it’s all they’ve got.” In this way, the Gungans and Jar Jar are seen as less than the other, more fluent, speakers within the series. However, George Lucas has vehemently denied this link with Caribbean culture, stating that he found the comparison “…completely absurd. Believe me, Jar Jar was not drawn from a Jamaican, from any stretch of the imagination." In retaliation to such claims, new director JJ Abrams has made it his priority to destroy the controversial or potentially offensive ideas of the past films, telling Vanity Fair that he “wanted to "kill off" Jar Jar by showing his bones in the background of a desert scene.” Abrams’ acknowledgement of the past missteps of the Star Wars franchise and drive to actively promote diversity in the new cast demonstrates that Star Wars are leaving the racist errors in the past, at hyperspeed.

Ultimately, Star Wars has used The Force for good: highlighting the dark side of sci-fi and exposing the genre as one that tends to under-represent females and people of colour. In their gender and colour blind casting process, the franchise ensures that the best actors are rewarded with challenging and intriguing roles, and ensuring that generations of varying ages have visible heroes within the sci-fi sphere. One small step for man, one giant step for nerds around the globe.

**Word Count**

1276 words

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