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Trash Aesthetics in *Star Wars* and the Recycling System of Transmedia¹

Abstract

From the scrappy Millennium Falcon to the deserts of Tatooine, the *Star Wars* universe revolves around junk, trash, and waste. Waste becomes the stuff of utmost importance in the *Star Wars* saga: the things and people discarded by the ruling intergalactic government become immensely valuable. *Star Wars* aesthetics gravitate to the grimy and earthy; instead of sleek, synthetic designs, the future is rendered used and secondhand. In this article, I expand the long tradition of sociopolitical readings of *Star Wars* to the relatively new grounds of ecocriticism, “greening” the *Star Wars* galaxy through the junk, trash, and waste motifs that dominate the transmedia franchise. While it may seem paradoxical to “green” via matter that appears toxic, dead, or environmentally unfriendly, examining the cultural concept of pollution and appraising the wide range of objects that fall into the gutter helps us reconfigure what life means on a polluted Earth. Through a close reading of the iconic trash compactor scene in *A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) and how its story elements transform over time in other *Star Wars* texts, I examine how the transmedia terrains of *Star Wars* turn trash into treasure (and vice versa). We can move beyond reading diegetic representations of junk, trash, and waste in *Star Wars* to analyze the global *Star Wars* phenomenon itself as living media, a sentient story universe that constantly evolves through recycling and repurposing its parts. Ultimately, by scavenging across the *Star Wars* universe and repurposing garbage objects for analysis, I argue that popular culture science-fiction texts, largely ignored by ecocritics, are enormously regenerative for thinking about ways to exist and evolve in the damaged, hybrid, and polluted environments of the Anthropocene.

Introduction: Into the Garbage Chute

Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles.

—Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*

Luke Skywalker:

There’s something’s alive in here!

—*Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*

The first time that audiences see the iconic protagonists of the original *Star Wars* trilogy working together is in a garbage heap. After Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Chewbacca free Princess Leia Organa from her jail cell on the Imperial Star Destroyer in *A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977), the motley crew is pursued by Stormtroopers.² Leia, unimpressed by the

haphazard rescue and Han’s chauvinism, grabs a gun and fires at a small grate. “Somebody has to save our skins! Into the garbage chute, wise guy,” she quips. Unfortunately, the quartet stumble upon something far worse than smelly space sewage in the Galactic Empire’s trash compactor. A one-eyed tentacled creature lurks beneath them in squalid water and grabs Luke, nearly drowning him in debris. The three unlikely figures — “the princess, the scoundrel, and the farmboy”³ — only stop bickering over the botched rescue plan when they encounter the nameless monster in the junk pile. None of the characters seem to know what the alien lifeform is. Luke can only exclaim in panic, “There’s something’s alive in here!” before being plunged underwater. Luke’s use of “something,” not “somebody,” indicates that the protagonists of *A New Hope* draw a boundary between themselves and the unseen, strange, enemy-affiliated mollusk in the darkness. The Rebellion may boast several nonhumanoid comrades, like the squid-headed, bug-eyed Admiral Ackbar or beeping astromech

droids like R2-D2, but the Imperial scrapheap cephalopod is too different and too frightening to consider an ally, even for Luke, a Jedi-in-training who will soon learn from the legendary Jedi Master Yoda that the Force exists everywhere, and to some extent, in everything/everybody. The famous trash compactor scene not only establishes our heroes but also raises questions about who we count as sentient beings worthy of connection.

Having said that, sentience in *Star Wars* is not a static thing; in fact, the most brilliant moments in *Star Wars* are predicated on the transformation of the inert. Amitav Ghosh opens *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, his groundbreaking book on the challenges of representing environmental crisis in fiction, with a *Star Wars* reference.⁴ To dramatize the absurdity of treating the ecosystems of the Earth as mere malleable material, Ghosh recounts a scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) where Han lands the Millennium Falcon in a cave, only to discover that the cave is the throat of a ginormous space worm. Ghosh uses this *Star Wars* scene to illustrate how “something that seems inanimate” can “[turn] out to be vitally, even dangerously alive,” suggesting the potent life of our planet.⁵ We are reminded in *Star Wars* of the scale of the galaxy and the fallibility of our human perception. For example, in *A New Hope*, Han, Luke, and Obi-Wan Kenobi initially assume the gigantic Death Star is a moon; instead, the celestial object turns out to be “no moon,” but an Imperial space station and superweapon. In the trash compactor scene, the seemingly insensate, lifeless floating bits of discarded hardware and broken tools are not actually “trash” but the environment of a sentient, fast-moving mollusk. The trash is, in essence, alive—a joke that is echoed in the very much alive-and-kicking characters being sorted into the “recyclables” unit because of their metal armor and weapons.

By envisioning complex relationships between humans, creatures, and droids in speculative worlds set “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away,” *Star Wars* continually crushes and reproduces the fragile distinction between Life and Nonlife. Appraising the wide net of objects that fall into the gutter—as Jane Bennett does by cataloguing the “vibrant matter”⁶ of “garbage, litter, dirt, debris, filth, refuse, detritus, rubbish”⁷—helps us reconfigure what life means on a polluted Earth.

Inspired by Anthony Lioi’s description of the figure of the nerd as “trash, effluvia, pestilence, flux” in *Nerd Ecology: Defending the Earth with Unpopular Culture*,⁸ I rummage through the *Star Wars* universe, repurposing the garbage objects of popular culture for analysis. I argue that so-called “lowbrow,” popular culture science-fiction films are enormously regenerative for thinking about ways to exist and evolve in the damaged, hybrid, and polluted environments of the Anthropocene.

Star Wars has attracted many schools of sociopolitical analysis but is rarely discussed for its environmentalism and ecological critique. Nevertheless, *Star Wars* has dealt with hot-button environmental issues since its conception. The history of *Star Wars* runs concurrently with the history of North American environmentalism: the original trilogy was released in the same decade that marked the first Earth Day celebration and a wave of new environmental policies in the United States.⁹ By examining how ecological critique in *Star Wars* has shifted over the course of its forty-five years, we can track changes in environmental thinking in popular imagination.

If science fiction in the wake of the Cold War threat of nuclear Armageddon operates as “a disaster imaginary,” as Susan Sontag formulates, the undergirding anxieties behind the trash compactor in *A New Hope* involve resource management and planetary annihilation.¹⁰ Because the rescue of Leia comes only after her Earth-like home planet, Alderaan, has been obliterated by the Death Star’s superlaser, the drama of the harrowing scene taps into fears of severely limited space and resources topical in the 1960’s and 1970’s. After Luke surfaces from the grasp of the trash monster, our heroes discover that the diabolical Empire is (somewhat) environmentally conscious—to their horror, the Imperial starships crush their recyclable waste as compactly as possible before processing. As the walls of the compactor grind and scrape, inching closer and closer to pulverizing our heroes, the gang scrambles to the top of the garbage heap, desperately MacGyvering pipes to force the moving metal mashers apart. Just as the walls are a mere foot away, protocol droid C-3PO finally hears Luke’s anguished cries for help over the comlink and R2-D2 manages to shut down the trash compactors. Luke, Leia, Han, and Chewbacca whoop, embrace, and cheer in disbelief of their survival.

The terrible groaning walls of the compactor

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and the group's eleventh-hour attempts to scale heaps of debris recall timely concerns in environmental thinking, from the enduring metaphor of Earth as a spaceship with finite resources popularized by Buckminster Fuller to the menace of overpopulation in lifeboat ethics as imagined by Garrett Hardin.¹¹ Although the overly technocratic and utilitarian writing of Fuller and Hardin contain deeply problematic ideas regarding whose lives are disposable in times of scarcity, these early environmental thinkers are useful for understanding why a shrinking, shrieking metal box of trash which nearly smashes its inhabitants in *Star Wars* may have captivated original audiences. To the viewer of *A New Hope* in 1977, the flotsam and jetsam might appear as sobering reminders of the polluted, chemically altered, and synthetic environments that the nascent North American environmentalist movement was fighting against.

The Evolution of the Dianoga

Today, audiences of *A New Hope* in 2022 may pay less attention to the allegory of resource management and more attention to the monstrosity of the tentacled creature in the scene. In line with strands of contemporary ecocritical thinking, the ecological messaging in Disney-era *Star Wars* media has increasingly explored the subjectivities of the nonhuman. What if the monster is no monster and, instead, a hero? In Nnedi Okorafor's "The Baptist," a stunning retelling of the trash compactor scene published in 2017 for the anthology *Star Wars: From a Certain Point of View*, Okorafor finally bestows the garbage monster a name—Omi.¹² Okorafor also grants Omi membership within a cephalopod species called the dianogas, recycling the name of the creature used in Lucas's early drafts of *A New Hope*, "Dai Noga" or "Dia Nogu."¹³ Harvested from her swamp homeland, Omi longs for her planet and her lost community of dianogas. Shacked in the damp darkness of the Empire's cargo cell, Omi is as much a victim of Imperial violence as any other lifeform. From her prison window, she ponders on her jail, the Death Star, "a dead planet that had never been alive" which "looked like a fruit of the dead."¹⁴ Omi eventually memorizes the movement of the walls and learns to navigate the shallow waters of the trash compactor. Intelligent, suffering,

and starved of stimulation, Omi becomes overexcited when another creature with the Force—Luke—enters her "false swamp."¹⁵ She wishes she could understand his language and, attracted to "something sparkly and electric" in his bones, chooses to confer a ritual baptism that nearly kills him.¹⁶ Her tentacles submerge Luke in an act that Donna Haraway might deem "making oddkin... in hot compost piles."¹⁷ The ceremony allows a shade of Luke's former self to slink off. Okorafor's rewriting grants Omi depth and dignity—she becomes a heroine in the shadows of the original movie, paving the way for Luke to connect more fully with the Force. In this version of events, Omi becomes a priestess figure not unlike Princess Leia, crowning and baptizing the entire Rebellion.

Stories sprout from the strangest soil—what appears as an icky sewer squid transforms into all sorts of productive engagements in the *Star Wars* universe. One of the most recognizable *Star Wars* creatures, the life history of the dianoga exemplifies the diverse transmedia terrains of *Star Wars*. In 1978, Kenner Toys released the first *Star Wars* creature figurine, the dianoga, only available with the Death Star Space Station playset.¹⁸ The neon green plastic toy resembles a fluorescent mutant shark more than the film's octopus monster, but the imperfections led to the figurine's popularity with collectors.¹⁹ In 1989, *Galaxy Guide 1: A New Hope*, published as the work of an in-universe Rebel historian to supplement *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, fleshed out the backstory of the trash monsters as enterprising scavengers: migrating from their home planet Vodran, dianogas stowed away on garbage ships in their microscopic larval form, feeding off all sorts of organic waste.²⁰ Fast-forward to 2022, and the dianoga appears as an animatronic robot inside the water tanks of the *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge* theme park.²¹ As parkgoers drink from the water fountain, the dianoga's eyestalk emerges from the water tank, and visitors can hear the sound effects of the dianoga squelching and swimming through the pipes in the bathroom.²² In 2021, *The Bad Batch* "Battle Scars" episode features a huge dianoga living in an abandoned Star Destroyer on the planet Bracca, which functions as a massive ship graveyard.²³ In line with Ann Laura Stoler's concept of "imperial debris," the ruins of empire, symbolized by the metamorphizing qualities of the Imperial trash monster, live on in *Star Wars* and exert tangible

forces on the protagonists.²⁴ This very brief survey of dianoga appearances throughout *Star Wars* transmedia shows the continuous fascination with and transformations of what Amitav Ghosh might deem “vitality, even dangerously alive” trash.²⁵

The garbage compactor set-up has been endlessly recycled in the fight between the Resistance/Rebellion and the First Order/Galactic Empire, showing the political power of the concept of waste. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Han Solo uses his knowledge of the Imperial base’s quotidian rhythms to avoid the Empire’s detection, disguising the *Millennium Falcon* as junk along with the rest of the jettisoned garbage from the Star Destroyer.²⁶ In *The Force Awakens* (J. J. Abrams, 2015), the first film of the sequel trilogy, the trash compactor trope is revived, with a twist: when Han and ex-stormtrooper Finn sneak into Starkiller Base to disable the shields, instead of escaping through the trash compactor, they get rid of the imposing First Order leader Captain Phasma by tossing her down the garbage chute.²⁷ As a tongue-in-cheek joke, it is precisely because of the perceived mundaneness of Finn’s role on the base (he was, among other things, tasked with sanitation duties) that Finn is so effective at fighting the First Order from the inside. When Finn finally faces off with his former commanding officer in *The Last Jedi* (Rian Johnson, 2017) and Phasma spits out, “you were always scum,” Finn subverts the insult. “Rebel scum,” he declares, resignifying what was meant to be filthy and immoral with righteousness and dignity. Scum becomes more-than-human rather than less-than-human: a bold assertion for an ex-stormtrooper previously known only by his serial number, FN-2187. If the Galactic Empire and its fascist successors have operated on the power of turning persons into throw-away products, the Rebellion and its political afterlives proudly reclaim the personhood of trash. On a thematic level, *Star Wars* takes the side of the good guys by elevating the dregs of society—marginal people like Luke Skywalker, an Outer Rim farm boy—and reframing the vermin, riffraff, and the good-for-nothings, turning trash into treasure.

The Recycling System of *Star Wars*

Star Wars goes beyond thematizing waste and concretizes a recycling ethos through its film aesthetics. While the franchise is known for its

pioneering special effects, *Star Wars* films gravitate to grimy, earthy aesthetics, especially when the original trilogy is compared with its immediate predecessors in science fiction like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) and *Star Trek: The Original Series* (Gene Roddenberry, 1966–1969), which brought the final frontier to life through futuristic mod design. George Lucas has frequently spoken about his intention to create a “used future” in the set design of the *Star Wars* films.²⁸ Moisture farms on Tatooine are rusty and dusty. Luke’s poncho is dirt-streaked and his boots are scuffed. The *Millennium Falcon*, the most iconic *Star Wars* vehicle, is a scratched, beat-up hunk of metal that threatens to fall apart, a far cry from sleek, chrome hovercraft. Upon first sight, Luke exclaims the vehicle is “a piece of junk”; years later, in *The Force Awakens*, Rey dismisses the *Millennium Falcon* as “garbage.” In his visual essay-manifesto “*Star Wars: A New Heap*,” John Powers imaginatively sums up George Lucas’s pioneering vision for the bucket-of-bolts starship like this: “a flying saucer had never been a slum before.”²⁹ In an interview, Lucas said he was inspired by “Apollo capsules [that] may have looked brand new when they soared away” and returned from space “littered with candy wrappers, empty Tang cans, and other trash.”³⁰ The loving attention to junk extends even to the soundtrack: to create the sound effects of Imperial AT-AT walkers, sound designer Ben Burtt recorded a squeaky dumpster near his house, and the noise of the *Millennium Falcon*’s hyperdrive failure (which we hear fairly often) is a mix of “a dentist’s air jet, a 1928 biplane ... arc light motor starting and stopping, the motor noise of a tank’s gun turret and the sound of a broken sink in the studio’s bathroom.”³¹ By rendering science-fiction lived-in and secondhand, Lucas peeled away the pristine, shiny surfaces of capitalist modernity, setting the asymmetrical and imperfect front and center instead.

On a meta-level, the *Star Wars* universe is built on salvaging pre-existing texts. Andrew Hageman notes that recycling aesthetics in *Star Wars* are present through its bricolage of Western, *jidaigeki*, fairytale, space opera, and war film genres.³² The global *Star Wars* transmedia phenomenon as a whole works like a recycling system. Inspired by Marsha Kinder’s work on the “ever-expanding supersystem of entertainment,”³³ Henry Jenkins famously defined transmedia storytelling as

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“a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.”³⁴ Jenkins notes that this “unified and coordinated” experience tends to be more disorderly in real life, with “unauthorized, grassroots expansion of the text by fans” and franchises that might favor “diversity over coherence.”³⁵ Often cited as the prototypical example of a transmedia franchise, in many ways the meteoric success of *Star Wars* launched the now-common phenomenon of telling a story over several platforms, such as toys, video games, comic books, tie-in novels, board games, television shows, theme parks, and more.³⁶ The *Star Wars* universe is not complete; in fact, as the editors of *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling* emphasize, *Star Wars* presents “a complicated landscape,” one that is alive and constantly evolving.³⁷ For example, upon acquiring Lucasfilm in 2012, Disney expelled the Expanded Universe, the corpus of licensed *Star Wars* media beyond the saga films, from the official *Star Wars* canon so Disney could reboot the franchise.³⁸ Although the Expanded Universe is no more in Disney’s *Star Wars*, vestiges of Expanded Universe stories are repurposed in Disney-era releases like the sequel trilogy and *The Mandalorian* (Disney, 2019—Present). The case of the Expanded Universe demonstrates how *Star Wars* is perpetually in flux, converting stories into scraps and vice versa.

Studying *Star Wars* as an ongoing recycling system, rather than a fixed artistic product, allows scholars to pay attention to how characters, settings, plots, genres, and mediums apparently on the periphery might be at the core of the *Star Wars* universe. Building on Jenkins’s writing, Jonathan Gray observes that the main “film or program is never the entire sum of the text,” proposing an “off-screen studies” that focuses on the “paratext,” a term first used by Gerard Genette to refer to all material surrounding the main body of literature, for example, book covers or marginalia.³⁹ Gray recontextualizes the paratext for the transmedia age as advertisements, film trailers, and merchandising, arguing that “textuality has been created by multiple entities,” especially in the case of *Star Wars*.⁴⁰ For instance, because George Lucas opted for a lower director’s salary in exchange for rights to merchandise licensing when making *A New Hope*, *Star Wars* toys (like the funky green dianoga figurine) and other ancillary properties not only

helped fund future *Star Wars* films but also became central to keeping the *Star Wars* universe alive in between *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983) and the release of the prequel films.⁴¹

Medianatures

If *Star Wars* is all about junk, trash, and waste, how do we consider the material effects of the franchise? Jussi Parikka proposes the term “medianatures” to describe how both media and nature are co-constitutive.⁴² Parikka defines “medianatures” as “the continuum of mediatic apparatuses and their material contexts in the exploitation of nature.”⁴³ One could think about the vast undersea cables that power the internet, mountains of e-waste, the transfiguration of wood pulp into the morning newspaper, or the enormous amounts of energy needed to cool data centers. To bring the discussion back to *Star Wars*, we could think about the sheer amounts of plastics, metals, and paints used for legions of *Star Wars* toys since 1977, the real Mount Etna eruption footage used by the crew on *Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, 2005) for the volcanic planet Mustafar,⁴⁴ the electricity powering massive LED screens on *The Mandalorian*’s virtual production sets,⁴⁵ fan-tourist photographs of Luke Skywalker’s home in Tunisia helping scientists determine the rate of desertification,⁴⁶ the moth *Wockia chewbacca* (one of many insect species named after *Star Wars* characters),⁴⁷ and promotional graphics from environmentalist organizations proclaiming “May the Forest Be With You.”⁴⁸ Our media and natural environments are entangled, embedded, and enmeshed.

How do we make sense of the ecological messaging of the *Star Wars* universe and the excessive consumption driving the multibillion-dollar franchise? Theorizing the global *Star Wars* phenomenon as a recycling system predicated on trash gathers these disparate, contradictory elements. The franchise encourages an understanding of objects (humans and nonhumans) embedded in a network of relations through the Force, a nebulous, hazily defined “energy field” holding the massive *Star Wars* universe together. The mysterious ecology of the Force allows for feats like levitating rocks, a remarkable transformation of insensate matter that echoes Jane Bennett’s conceptualization

of “thing-power,” “the ability to shift or vibrate between different states of being ... from trash/inanimate/resting to treasure/animate/alert.”⁴⁹ In the Force, we find a compelling dramatization of the entanglements suggested by medianatures on expansive, immersive, and galactic scales.

It may be tempting to see the thematic valuing of trash in *Star Wars* as entirely undercut by Disney’s infrastructure as a global media conglomerate; however, *Star Wars* is a story system constructed simultaneously by multiple actors beyond Disney’s control. The importance of toys in the material presence of *Star Wars* directs us to fan practices like collecting. Writing about hoarders, Jane Bennett sees hoarding “as a symptom of a hyperconsumptive body politic” that encourages consumers to stockpile products.⁵⁰ To Bennett, hoarders actually “obliquely... affirm the existence of a material agency at work” by becoming *too* attached to ephemera of consumerism and letting objects control them.⁵¹ Bennett characterizes hoarders as “preternaturally attuned to things.”⁵² We might say the same about fan collectors, who see *Star Wars* figurines, shirts, stamps, cereal boxes, and other merchandise as prized artifacts. Rancho Obi-Wan, a nonprofit museum that hosts the largest private *Star Wars* memorabilia collection, displays indiscriminate gems from Stephen J. Sansweet’s collection, ranging from *Star Wars* toilet paper to pieces of the original Death Star movie prop.⁵³ Bennett observes that far from a total embrace of capitalism, which operates on the disposability of such products, hoarders (or fan collectors) view things less like “possessions... than pieces of self” or *belongings*.⁵⁴ In sum, beyond the on-screen celebration of trash in *Star Wars*, we need to take diverse forms of audience participation with the “trashy” objects of *Star Wars* into account.

Conclusion: The Eco-Politics of Survival

To recapitulate the course of thought this essay has taken, we started with junk, trash, and waste, and moved on to how these motifs of “dead” matter are recycled and regenerated by the transmedia system of *Star Wars*. Now, it seems fitting to return to the trash compactor scene since it is emblematic of this argumentation. We return to the refuse, the murky water of the Imperial garbage masher in *A New Hope* where Leia, Luke, Han, and Chewbacca pull off an eleventh-hour escape with the help of C-3PO and R2-D2. As we hurtle head-on into global warming and rising sea levels, how will we come together to conduct such feats of survival? We could learn a thing or two from Leia, who isn’t afraid to get her hands dirty. While mobilizing her own rescue, she proclaims, “Somebody has to save our skins!” Trapped in a polluted, artificial swamp, the young Rebel Alliance leaders rise from the Empire’s garbage and fashion a makeshift multispecies family. To watch the 1977 trash compactor scene in 2022 means to view the dianoga, too—the strange, unknown “monster”—as a viable member of that family, a kindred spirit worth saving. To paraphrase Donna Haraway, we might update Leia’s rallying cry to “Somebody has to save our kin!”⁵⁵ If the old eco-politics of survival meant saving the Earth mainly for the continued existence of the human species, the new eco-politics of survival means expanding our sense of the “human” and saving the Earth for everyone/everybody/everything. *Star Wars*, with its stories of discarded people saving world(s) and forging belonging, offers us a compelling vision of an eco-politics of survival based on reclaiming trash.

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Notes

1 The current paper is adapted from the author’s undergraduate thesis, “Star Wars and the Eco-Politics of Survival” completed at New York University Abu Dhabi. The author would like to thank Professor Cyrus R. K. Patell for his invaluable mentorship and feedback on an earlier version of this essay

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