Your book is the first analysis of the "Star Wars phenomeon" that concentrates on its core: the films. Why has this approach been closed until now?

The academic world often shows interest for "mainstream entertainment", but not for its products. The only scholars who work on cultural industries are affiliated with sociology or "Cultural Studies", which means their topics ultimately are cultural practices, not films. Aestheticans could do it, but they usually ignore objects such *Star Wars*, because of two main reasons :

- both ideology of avant-garde and "Critical Theory" of the Frankfurt School assert this kind of art to be pure escapism, designed to maintain a not-so-good social order (= "if I can dream of Jedi so I can bear a silly job, obey to my cruel boss and ignore politics...") ; so aestheticians are supposed to refuse to be accomplices of such a forfaiture...

- think of a simple corporative interest : films like *Star Wars* dont call for keys to be understood, they seem intended for an untutored audience (children adore it) – so aestheticians win bigger gains into deciphering obscure and avant-garde works of art, which obviously need some guidance.

I'm not convinced by these two assertions. First, there is no causal link between one's favourite movies and political tendancies. One can adore Darth Vador and be a leftist, one can be fond of experimental cinema and be conservative. Second, there shoud be no "good" or "bad" objects for film analysis. Anything on a screen deserves attention, work and science. And if you don't see golden nuggets, change your glasses before to blame the river.

If one follows the Star Wars saga chronologically, the first three films (1977-1983) tell the end of the story, the following three films (1999-2005) its beginning. How does the second trilogy manage this backward movement? In which respect has the message of the films changed compared to with earlier episodes?

The two *Star Wars* trilogies differ greatly. The first one (1977-1983) belongs to the ethics and aesthetics of Postmodernity. To be accurate, it can be labelled as "Nostalgia film", a kind of cinema which was reacting against the unenchanted post-Vietnam and modern European motion pictures. I call these films "third-degree objects".

First degree is defined by the Golden Age of Hollywood : heroes, villains, princesses to rescue, dragons to fight, happy endings – one of the assumed model of George Lucas when writing the first opus is *"The Adventures of Robin Hood"* starring Erroll Flynn. Then occurs the horror of World War 2. How can you keep on doing *Robin Hood* after Auschwitz ? The world needs some changes, so a new art can help, since Hollywood is unsynchronised with our society - second degree is born, one can call Modernism. But Modernism is itself a "Grand Narrative" which fail to change the real world - maybe first because Modern films are unbearably boring... How can we find an issue ? The issue is the postmodernist third degree : let's turn back to *Robin Hood*, but don't forget "the possibility of horror", so *be smart*. Being smart, for a film director, means to make his/her audience able to detect the self-consciousness of the film. "Yes, here is a princess to rescue, and monsters and happy endings – recognize and enjoy, together with me !... Everybody knows Good Ol' Times are over, but *let's pretend* ! This is *cool* !".

The second *Star Wars* trilogy (1999-2005) no longer belongs to Nostalgia, third-degree or self-conscious smart pictures. It has got dark modernist aspects : the motives of action appear unclear, the heroes are hesitating, nothing remains sure. The real world contaminated the saga. The filming and editing style has changed too, it is less turned to the past : in the book I show the influence of Hong-Kong movies or *Matrix* is obvious when considering the lightsaber fights of the late films. Hollywood Golden Age is no longer the exclusive (and lost) model. Moreover,

the two trilogies don't match on the line of ethics : in the first one, Darth Vador is kind of a cartoon villain, close to *Robin Hood*'s sherif of Nottingham. In the second one, Vador is a children murderer, closer to Hannibal Lecter than to the sherif. This is not *cool* anymore.

Which trilogy is for you as a film critic the better one?

One trilogy is not "better" than the other : they're belonging to totally different ways of filming and telling stories.

Critics of the Star Wars often argue that the films propagate an imperialistic view of life, etc. Is this political approach to the phenomenon Star Wars appropriate?

I could answer "Anything goes !", the famous postmodernist quote from philosopher Paul Feyerabend : if you say the films propagate an imperialistic view of life, OK you're right, since you're picking up whatever you want in the supermarket... Now suppose you are *really* right, *i. e.* there are no other things to pick up in these six films than such a dangerous ideology. The most important insight into the world of *Star Wars* I personnaly got while working on the book is to realize these six films are the tiny little emerged part of a gigantic iceberg called the *Extend Universe*.

Hundreds of thousands people 24/24 all over Earth are occupied to expand the original story : there are professional working for the Lucasfilm Co. and its branches, producing novels, cartoons, comic books, action figures, etc. And there are amateurs (I prefer "amateur", which comes from the latin "*amator*", *i. e.* "the one who loves", than "fan", which connots some pseudo-religious unundersandable faith). Amateurs, far from to be passive receptors and consumers, do their own *Star Wars* world, building internet forums and encyclopædias, writing short stories, directing short films, etc. In this "amateur" Extended Universe, you can observe fanship creates fraternity and social links ; most people feel like belonging to a community, if not a family. Besides, it's very easy to join the family : thousands of tutorials teach the new comers how to write novels or to design lightsabers... This is not an imperialistic view of life !

More notably, a great number of these "amateur" items (some of them are technically amazing) seem to make up for some insuficiancies or coynesses of the official *Star Wars* world. Do you reach for sex and violence ? Just look at the underground Extended Universe, you will find princess Leia naked, or a gay Obi-Wan in love with Anakin. Do you prefer cross-over with reality ? Here is a cartoon showing Darth Vador fighting against Ben Laden (Note : during the 2007 French presidential campaign, some friends sent to me several internet links, leading to political parodies using the *Star Wars* characters or audiovisual design to criticize French politicians...) Do you find the Lucas style too timorous ? Look at Evan Matter short films, made with action figures in a Godard-Tarantino manner... etc.

Psychoanalysis would call this *furia* the "return of the repressed", but I simply think of a *tool box*. The entire *Star Wars* saga is a *tool box* designed to play with, more than a story to enjoy.

As you yourself say in the foreword of your book: it's rather unusual that a film scholar analyses a blockbuster-series like "Star Wars", especially in regard to its content. How did you get the idea for this book?

I wanted to show there is no "good" neither "bad" objects for aesthetics. Films like *Star Wars* dont call for keys to be understood, they seem intended for an untutored audience (children adore it) – so scholars win bigger gains into deciphering obscure and avant-garde

works of art, which obviously need some guidance. But I feel different. Almost every movie can hide treasures, even for "high art" specialists. It's a question of "how to look at it". Since *Star Wars* is dispised by most of my colleagues, it was the evident choice to try to prove it !

Are you yourself a fan of the series? What's interesting for you about "Star Wars" and blockbuster-cinema in general?

I'm not a "fan" in the sense *real fans* are. I'm not able to tell you the name of the children Luke and Leia are gonna have in the "postquel", neither to say how many tentacles has got Jabba the Hut. It's better to a dealer not to be an addict himself !... I'm interested about blockbuster-cinema in general because these kinds of films are not "texts" you can analyze in an armchair, but "spectacles" you have to scrutinize "live". When I was a child, movies were not "texts" but fun or discovery. As a film scholar, I try to be faithful to these ways of being amazed by terrible monsters or deeply moved by cruel dilemmas.

Your analysis is very thoroughly. How many times did you watch the "Star Wars"-movies?

Maybe ten times, but the number is not important. What is important is to look at different parts of the images and to listen at different sounds every time the film is playing, in order to understand how it works and why it fascinates millions of people.

Your point is that the pleasure of Star Wars does not lie only in the spectacle but also its story. Why do people like to watch those movies a second or third time when they know what will happen?

French scholar Roland Barthes said : reading a new book every time you want to read is equal to read the same book every time ! This is not so paradoxical it seems first : when you're discovering a new narrative, you pay attention to the story itself. And the mechanics of narrative are almost always the same : beginning, causal links, suspense, endings. On the contrary, when you know what it will happen in the next shot or the next episode, you can concentrate on details, discover new things, and most of all play with "possible worlds". Fans, on the web forums, spend a great amount of time discussing possible worlds : what would it happen if Anakin hadn't choosed the dark side ? is Obi-wan gay ?, etc...

And in the same vein: Why does the repetition of musical themes etc. give so much pleasure?

On one side, this is part of the "meta-textual pleasure", like scholars use to say... When you hear the "Empire" theme, you know bad guys are supposed to appear : so the movie itself shows you how it is constructed... On the other side, this is part of the "being home" pleasure. Most *Star Wars* fans feel to belong to a woldwide big family. Musical themes, jingles, design, logos, are signals refering to the family. Hearing R2D2's *beeps* is being home. On an anthropological point of view, these signals are functioning as "totems for the tribe".

Serial story-telling has always been popular but it seems to have even increased its popularity in recent years, TV series like "Lost" become more and more spectacular and successful, this blockbuster-summer is packed with sequels. Why has serial storytelling reached NOW this climax? Is this sequel-

mania, as many critics say, a sign of lack of inspiration on the side of the studios?

I dont think this is a lack of inspiration, on the contrary. Think again to the "paradox" of Barthes, when the "novelty" is a *false* novelty. Need I a 74th medics story ? a 235th detective New York story ? No (except if I'm 15 years old, beginning to acquir a narrative culture). Serialism allows to build more sophisticated relationships between characters. When the hero appears on the 6th season, you know his past, his tastes, his failures, all his ex-mates : this is a better way to play with possible worlds... There is no "passive" spectators. Spectators like to think and play – not just to buy and consume. It reminds me an old french joke about love relationships and the difference between "libertinage" and marriage : do you prefer doing always the same thing with new different partners or doing new different things with the same partner ? Let's say George Lucas choosed the second solution : marriage...

The third part of "Pirates of the Carribbean" starts this week worldwide in cinemas. The second part ended with a cliffhanger which is rather unusual. Has serial story telling changed significantly since the "Star Wars"-series? In what way and why?

Pirates of the Carribbean remains chronological, when the second *Star Wars* trilogy was a *prequel*. A prequel is more ambitious and risky because it can't count on too much suspens. The audience knows what it will finally ends – but il doesn't know exactly *how*. *Star Wars* possibly proved film writers and producers releasing a prequel could be successful : see *Hannibal*, *Texas chainsaw massacre*, *Batman begins*, and all recent "How it all begins".

The "Star Wars universe" is all around. Ronald Reagan belongs to its residents as well as freaks from the rocker- or hacker-scene do. Can you explain the fascination of the saga? Why does such different people identify with it?

This fascination shows that aestheticians are wrong when they think "fun movies" are poor objects. No empty work of art could agree to such an amount of different people. Films like *Star Wars* compare to a free supermarket : once you push the door (*i. e.* once you understand the basic lines of the story told), you can pick up whatever you want. Do you like political questions ? OK, here is one : "When war is unavoidable, which is the better candidate among countries, a dictatorship or a democracy ?". Do you prefer practical philosophy ? So, look at this : "Is the 'will power' always sufficient to succeed ? To be talented or not has it really no matters ?". Or are you better thrilled by ethics ? "Must I kill my father if he's trying to kill me ?". Or religion ? "Can we manage to live a second life, as Jedi do ?". Or simple practical problems ? "I'm younger than she is. Can I marry her anyway ?"... etc.

Sure there is great visuel pleasure to watch at fabulous landscapes or giant outerspace cities, but it seems starcrusers, monsters and lightsabers build sort of a smoke curtain ; behind these fancy appearances you can do whatever you want, you are "authorized" to dig and play seriously. Nietzsche wrote : "The maturity of man - that means, to have reacquired the seriousness that one had as a child at play" (*Beyond Good and Evil*). As far I am concerned, *Star Wars* is closely related to this nietzschean view on adulthood.