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Abstract

This project explores how science fiction can be used to examine social justice issues in our contemporary world. This project will explore two case studies from the Star Wars: The Clone Wars television series through a framework of race, empire, and orientalism. These case studies surrounding the oppression faced by alien communities in The Clone Wars are connected to issues of empire and racial inequality experienced by Muslims and Black people in the United States. I use Edward Said’s Orientalism as a framework to discuss the roots of Islamophobia, empire, and the “clash of civilizations” narrative. Furthermore, Walidah Imanish’s notion of visionary fiction is utilized as a lens to explore how speculative fiction can serve as a tool to understand critical real world issues, and how The Clone Wars can teach audiences lessons about these injustices.

Theoretical Frameworks

Orientalism (1979), Edward Said

- In Orientalism, Said argued that much of the way that the West views the Middle East and South Asia is through sweeping generalizations as “Islamic” (Said):
  - They would culturally describe “the Orient,” as inherently inferior, savage, war mongering, and this would justify colonial violence against them.
  - Said’s work also applies to other racialized communities who have faced colonialism.

Walidah Imanisha and Visionary Fiction

- Visionary fiction allows audiences to explore certain social issues through a lens of alternate universes, such as in sci-fi, fantasy, or fiction, that can help us build more just futures (Imanisha).
  - Analyze oppressive systems
  - Who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed?
  - Complex systems of power and its complex dynamics
  - Explore Inequalities
  - Furthermore, viewers are drawn to think about these issues and can apply them to the real world when they are watching, helping evoke a political consciousness.

“We believe that radical science fiction is actually better termed visionary fiction because it pulls from real life experience, inequalities and movement building to create innovative ways of understanding the world around us, paint visions of new worlds that could be, and teach us new ways of interacting with one another. Visionary fiction engages our imagination and hearts, and guides our hands as organizers” (Walidah, 2016).

Case Studies

Star Wars’s “Clash of Civilizations”

- In case study one, I analyze the Clone Wars episode “Trespass,” which depicts a story surrounding an indigenous alien race, known as the Talz. When the Talz are discovered by a colonizing group, called the Pantorans, they attempt to justify the occupation of the Talz’s land by casting them as inferior, savage, and uncivilized, mirroring the same themes in Said’s Orientalism used to justify colonialism. The Pantoran leader, Chairman Cho describes the Talz in this way:
  - “These creatures are little more than animals. You can’t lie to an animal! They can’t be trusted. It is obvious these creatures are not covered by the Convention of Civilized Systems.”
- These portrayals of alien races present themselves in forms of institutional racism on Coruscant, which is the capital of the “liberal democratic” Republic government and home of the Jedi Order, who are supposed to be protectors of “peace and justice” (see right photos).
- The Republic’s discriminatory practices, heavy emphasis on investing more in its military might, and creeping authoritarian nature foreshadows its eventual transition into the human supremacist Galactic Empire.

Ahsoka Tano and Inequalities in the Criminal Justice System

- This case study explores how the portrayals of alien races manifests itself into the criminal justice system of the Republic. Here, I look into the female, non-human Togruta Jedi Padawan Ahsoka Tano, who is presumed guilty by a leading Republic military officer, General Tarkin. He overlooks any evidence in her favor and even vows to prosecute her with the death penalty.
- Tarkin uses a “might makes right” and “law and order” type of mentality that drives his militaristic political ideology (Filoni). Similarly, this mantra of policy has been historically used to target Black people under the U.S. criminal justice system and Muslim Americans under the “War on Terror” (Seydou, Kumar, Taylor).
- Under the U.S. criminal justice system, studies indicate that Black Americans are about 5 times more likely to be arrested for non-violent drug offenses by law enforcement and 12 times more likely to be wrongly convicted of drug crimes (Balko).
- Muslim communities have also been targeted of state surveillance programs, and were put on a national registry list following 9/11 (Garcia, Siagal, & Kumar).

Conclusion

- Overall, my hope with this project was to explain the value that speculative fiction can have in allowing audiences to evoke a political consciousness, rather than just viewing media as entertainment. The Clone Wars shows how science fiction includes critical real world themes relating to issues of racial, social, and economic justice, and how it can help us reimagine a world that is more just.

References


