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Digitally Remythicised: *Star Wars*, Modern Popular Mythology, and *Madam and Eve**

Jessica Tiffin

Summary

The successful re-release of George Lucas's *Star Wars* films has confirmed their popular appeal. Such an appeal can be traced to the films' employment of popular cultural collage as much as to their investment in the initiatory scenarios of older forms such as myth, epic and folklore, which are integral to the space opera genre. Following the re-release, the treatment of *Star Wars* in the popular South African comic strip *Madam and Eve* suggests that the films' mythologies have some role to play in the "New South Africa". Close analysis of a *Mail and Guardian* strip and five *Cape Times* strips reveals an acute and cynical use of the *Star Wars* mythologies to comment on contemporary politics. Play with the concepts of a "digitally remastered" new version of the films is used to highlight flaws in the concepts of moral reform in a "New South Africa", and the juxtaposition of the destruction of the Death Star with the TRC allows the strip to problematise issues of moral polarity and guilt. The functioning of the films as a recognisable popular mythology is thus demonstrated.

Opsomming

Die suksesvolle heruitreiking van George Lucas se *Star Wars*-rolprente het weer eens hulle gewildheid bevestig. Die trefkrag is toe te skryf aan die rolprente se gebruik van 'n gewilde kulturele collage, sowel as aan die investering in die aanvangscenario's in eietydse vorms soos die mite, die epiese en volksoorlewering, wat almal integrerend deel is van die ruimte-opera genre. Na die heruitreiking, is die hantering van *Star Wars* in die gewilde Suid-Afrikaanse strokiesprent *Madam & Eve*, 'n aanduiding dat die rolprente se mitologieë oënskynlik 'n rol te vervul het in die "Nuwe Suid-Afrika". Deeglike analise van 'n *Mail and Guardian*-strokiesprent en vyf strokiesprente in die *Cape Times* toon 'n skerp en siniese aanwending van die *Star Wars*-mitologieë om kommentaar te lewer op die hedendaagse politiek. In die eksperimentering met dié konsepte van "digitale herbemeestering", word 'n nuwe weergawe van die films gebruik om leemtes in die konsepte van morele hervorming in 'n "Nuwe Suid-Afrika" sterk na vore te bring, en die naasmekaarstelling van die vernietiging van die *Death Star* en die WVK, stel die strokiesprent in staat om die strydvrae aangaande moraliteit en skuld te problematiseer. Op hierdie wyse word die funksionering van die rolprente as herkenbare populêre mitologie as sodanig gedemonstreer.

If you didn't actually see the films again, you'll probably remember the trailer, which promised "newly enhanced visual effects" and "digitally enhanced sound", and invited you to "feel the force like never before". The successful re-release of George Lucas's three *Star Wars* films earlier this year has proved their enduring appeal. From their first release (1977, 1980, 1983) the films have been blockbusters, within the high-grossing, theatre-filling definition of the term. *Star Wars* itself was one of the highest grossing movies of all time ($524 million at the box office, only recently eclipsed by the behemoth success of *Titanic*), and the films have elicited the kind of devotion which led fans to watch them thirteen to fifteen times during their big-screen release, mouthing the dialogue. The re-release in enhanced format seems to have cashed in on an appeal which has survived ten to twenty years of bigger budget movies with flashier special effects and bigger-name stars. Some, at least, of the kids and adolescents who filled the theatres first time round are, as young and not-so-young adults, trickling sheepishly back to fill the theatres all over again.

The appeal of the *Star Wars* universe seems at first difficult to assess. They are "after all, as Lucas keeps telling us, popcorn movie(s)" (1983: 75). As fast-moving adventures packaged to thrill and entertain, their special effects are as important, if not more important, than acting and dialogue. Sarah Lefanu's encapsulation of *Star Wars* is biting - "fairhaired princess-type saves universe from fate worse than death" (1991: 178). Profound, the films are apparently not. The root of their appeal, however, seems to lie in a far from simplistic rehashing of genre, cliché and narrative expectation, to produce something which cuts through apparent nativity of content to a profound level of mass appeal. While the films have a massive juvenile and adolescent following, the response to the re-release has suggested that the films offer something to adults as well - even if only a nostalgia trip. More importantly, the trilogy has become an integral part of our modern popular culture, a myth in its own right. Darth Vader and the light-sabre are familiar icons, an unquestioned part of our pop-cultural heritage; their meaning has become symbolic, mythical, accepted.

The construction of *Star Wars*' mythic quality invokes both modern and ancient elements; its appeal relies on our recognition of basic narrative patterns as much as modern cultural clichés, which is perhaps why the re-release has been successful despite the inevitable datedness of the films. The modern elements are varied, but they invoke almost exclusively popular rather than canonical forms. Andrew Gordon, responding to the first film in 1978, comments that "Lucas has raided the junkyards of our popular culture and rigged a working myth out of scrap" (1978: 314). Lucas himself (quoted by Gordon 1978: 317) has described *Star Wars* as being "the flotsam and jetsam

from the period when I was twelve years old - all the books and films and comics that I liked when I was a child" [which would have been in the 50s]. The film is patched together and souped-up from unlikely elements in a manner rather akin to the Heath Robinson construction of the Millennium Falcon herself. Elements have been identified from classic space opera of both novel and screen - Edgar Rice Burroughs, Flash Gordon, *Forbidden Planet*, comic-book superheroes. Classic fighter-plane dogfights, high-speed car-chases and Indiana-Jones-style interludes with primitive tribal cultures are likewise represented. Parallels with the classic Western are also obvious, most notably in Luke's return to his uncle's burned-out frontier homestead in *Star Wars*, and in the saloon atmosphere of the Mos Eisely tavern (Gordon: 1978). Generic borrowings stress the adventure narrative, fitting neatly with the most obviously popular framework of the films themselves - space opera, the "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn spaceship yarn" identified by Wilson Tucker as far back as 1941 (Clute & Nicholls 1993: 1138).

The haste with which critics rush to dissociate space opera from true science fiction is at times almost comical. Brian Stableford refers to the genre with a somewhat patronising "nostalgic affection" for its quality of "naiveté", while Brian Aldiss defines it as "heady, escapist stuff, charging on without overmuch regard for logic or literacy" (both quoted by Monk 1992: 296). Both these definitions are integrally true of the *Star Wars* films. The rigour of social and scientific extrapolation or Le Guin's concept of anthropological thought-experiment are simply not appropriate here. This is not to say, however, that there is nothing in the films beyond the most superficial adventure narrative. Perhaps the most useful characterisation of the trilogy thus far has been that of *Time* magazine, whose feature article on "Return of the Jedi" refers to "George Lucas' marvellous rocket-propelled fairy tale" (Clarke 1983: 74).

Obviously, the trilogy, despite its apparent science-fiction framework, is not science fiction at all. At the same time as demonstrating this pop-cultural collage, the narrative and generic roots of Lucas's films are very old indeed. Lucas has commented, "I didn't want to make 2001 ... I wanted to make a space fantasy that was more in the genre of Edgar Rice Burroughs; that whole other end of space fantasy that was there before science took it over in the Fifties. Once the atomic bomb came, they forgot the fairy-tales and the dragons and Tolkien and all the real heroes" (Lucas qouted by Gordon 1977: 315). A recent article in *Wired* magazine defines *Star Wars* as "popular galactic fairytale ... the classic saga of a charming princess and brave knights, but also of very unclassical warp drives, bots and droids. Lucas's mythmaking is a novel convergence of Hans Christian Anderson and Issac Asimov, the blending of soul and tech, the meeting of inner child and inner nerd" (Kelly & Parisi 1997: 160).

Most fundamentally, *Star Wars* is fairytale, fantasy, romance; and, to return to my original theme, it goes deeper than these, to participate in the underlying impulses and structures of myth.

Northrop Frye has commented that

> the hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rules of probability once the postulates of romance have been established.
>
> (Frye 1957: 33)

The illogic of the space-opera genre is thus completely at home within the structures of romance. The *Star Wars* series operates under a different set of parameters to more "serious" science fiction. Various critics, and Lucas himself, have identified the roots of the tales among the essentially magical narrative traditions of folklore, myth and particularly epic - Jabba the Hutt's criminal "underworld" as the site for the descent and return of Orpheus, for example (Sammons 1987: 357). The chivalric parallels - the Jedi knight with the shining sword, sworn to defend the good - are obvious. More profoundly, however, Lucas acknowledges a debt to Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* in his basic structure of "the hero who ventures forth into dangerous and unknown territory who is tempted by his own dark impulses, but who eventually conquers them and emerges victorious" (Clarke 1980: 70). The potential for symbolic significance within the films is thus high - other critics have noted the essential Freudian Oedipal scenario of *The Empire Strikes Back* (Gordon 1980; Miller & Sprich 1981; Sammons 1987).

It is here, in this depiction of primal and significant experience, that the mythic nature of the trilogy becomes apparent. The films are not profound, but they touch upon a profound experience which, according to Mircea Eliade, is at the very heart of myth. Speaking of the fairytale as myth, he says:

> Today religious behaviour and the structures of the sacred - divine figures, exemplary acts - are found again at the deepest level of the psyche, in the "unconscious", on the planes of dream and imagination .... Though [the fairy tale] has long since become a literature of diversion or escape, it still presents the structure of an infinitely serious and responsible adventure, for in the last analysis it is reducible to an initiatory scenario ... its content proper refers to a terrifyingly serious reality: initiation, that is, passing, by way of a symbolic death and resurrection, from ignorance and immaturity to the spiritual age of the adult.
>
> (Eliade 1963: 201)

The appeal of the *Star Wars* series to adolescents particularly is now readily explicable; the attraction is in recognition, the films' dealing intrinsically with issues of identity, self-worth, family, place - growing up. It is this kind of appeal which makes the re-release possible, and which identifies the *Star Wars* series as in the *Mail and Guardian* did, as an "eternally modern story" (Malcom: 1997: 38). Eliade's conflation of fairy tale with religious experience also goes some way towards explaining the sometimes bizarre and compulsive behaviour of many adolescents watching *Star Wars* on its first release - not once or twice, but routinely twelve or thirteen times. This is not entertainment so much as ritual, and the prevalence of the ritualistic response suggests that there is indeed something basic and relevant in the initiatory scenario which the films present.

Ultimately, however, the appeal of the films is in a proffered resolution which has nothing to do with reality. *Star Wars* is fairy tale, and the fairy tale typically offers closure, a happy ending, in which the universe is saved (cf. Lefanu), the monsters are slain, and somebody, at any rate, gets the princess. The resolution is unrealistic, because the construction of the universe is unrealistic - in fact, makes no attempt at realism. Bettelheim has noted how "the fairy-tale simplifies all situations. Its figures are clearly drawn, and details, unless very important, are eliminated. All characters are typical rather than unique" (1976: 8). Equally, all moral dilemmas are clichés, all moral attributes absolute. This tendency cuts across the multiplicity of genres which the *Star Wars* films invoke: the moral absolutes of fairy tale are also those of space opera, which similarly deals in the concrete rather than the ambiguous. Patricia Monk has noted the tendency of space opera to show "an authorial mindset which sees the extraterrestrial universe in holistic terms as both knowable and manageable ..." (1982: 300). Both space opera and fairy tale tend to offer a utopian scenario in which evil is clearly defined, good is obvious, and everything always works out perfectly in the end.

Clarity of moral vision thus gives the *Star Wars* films some kind of universality of appeal; nonetheless, their success in South Africa is interesting. The moral absolutes of the films' mythic scenarios are also in many ways absolutely American. Leia wears white, Darth Vader black, but Storm Troopers have Nazi or Russian-style olive uniforms, and the good-guy rebels wear good ol' American khaki (Zipes 1979: 118). The simultaneous unreality and familiarity of the moral stereotypes may be comforting to an American audience, but could be expected to be less appealing to cultures less likely to identify with the ideologies of American cultural empire-building. At the same time, the films have succeeded, at least partially, simply through being an obvious part of the package deal of American culture, big-budget Hollywood movies and big-name film-stars which South Africans regularly and uncritically consume. The basic

adolescent initiatory scenarios of *Star Wars* may, in light of this, have been as appropriate to the privileged white children who watched it in the 80s, as it was to America itself.

The place of *Star Wars* in the "New South Africa", however, is a lot more problematical. Certainly, a lot of cinema attendance after the re-release was sheer nostalgia, but this hardly explains the sudden appearance of *Star Wars* in our own cherished institution, the acute and irreverent cartoon strip *Madam and Eve*. Even more bizarrely, its writers chose to use *Star Wars* gags to illuminate an unlikely area of South Africa's own popular mythology, namely the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Of course, a lot of the reason for this is because the strip's writers (Francis; Dugmore; Schacherl; Rico) are very much part of the alternative culture/comic book ethos (later strips have also dealt, in less detail, with *Star Trek* and *Men in Black*), but behind the apparent unlikeness of the pairing is also an acute awareness of the basic impulses behind the *Star Wars* phenomenon and behind popular mythologies in general.

The opening *Madam and Eve/Star Wars* strip appeared in the *Mail and Guardian* of April 18-24, 1997, and, while it was no more than an introduction to the TRC strips which followed in the *Cape Times* of the following week, it demonstrated many of the connections which the writers were making. Bearing in mind my previous characterisation of *Star Wars* as popular mythology, I'd like to look closely at the *Madam and Eve/Star Wars* series in order to draw some slightly irreverent parallels.

The longer format of the *Weekly Mail* strip allows rather more complexity than the punchy messages of the daily strips. The strip is cleverly constructed with the alternation of frames from an early *Madam and Eve* cartoon (1992, anthologised in *The Madam and Eve Collection*) with images from the *Star Wars* films. Effectively, every second frame from the original strip has been redrawn in the *Star Wars* idiom, imposing the moral polarities of Darth Vader and Luke onto the basic conflict of Madam and Eve, the old wrangle about salary. The story-line of the strip continues uninterrupted through the contrasting settings, cutting across these juxtapositions to create some bizarre and incongruous moments.

The most obvious connecting factor between *Star Wars* and South Africa in this strip is nostalgia - nostalgia for the adolescent enjoyment of *Star Wars*, and nostalgia, within the specifically "New South African" context, for the "Old South Africa". The initial gag is the rewriting of the Madam and Eve heading as a *Star Wars* logo, but the important point here is the idea of the "special edition", followed by the concept of "digitally remastered, computer enhanced, six track dolby sound". This is immediately linked to the idea of the "Old" versus the "New South Africa" - a "New South Africa" somewhat satirically

characterised, by extension, as "digitally remastered, computer enhanced", with Madiba as the equivalent of six-track Dolby sound. The new version of both film and South Africa is thus emphasised as being bigger, better, brighter, louder, clearer, and generally more likely to fill theatres.

The "new version" gag is picked up with the next two frames, Madam confessing the low salary she pays Eve, which are an exact duplication of the original strip. The reminder that this represents South Africa as it was back in the "bad old days" is enhanced by the caption in the first strip, in suitably *Star-Wars*-font style: "A long time ago/In a suburb far, far away ...." As with the *Star Wars* films themselves, this is a fairy-tale encoding, signalling the onset of symbolic rather than realist narrative. Another coded signal is the visual gag of the strip's drawing style (the original, less refined style of the 1992 strips), which picks up on the same nostalgic sensation created by rewatching *Star Wars* itself in the new release - gosh aren't the actors young, and aren't the special effects clunky?

The defining comparison being made here is that the actual content remains unchanged, both in the films and in the *Madam and Eve* repeat. Some additional gloss has been added, and the "change" has been heralded by every variety of advertising hype and carefully-created expectation, but the basic product is essentially the same. The underlying point here is to suggest rather cynically that perhaps the "New South Africa" itself is not so new, either - despite the hype, the claims made for it, and the new packaging, the actual product is not markedly different, in essentials, to the Bad Old Days.

From here, the strip moves into a sustained play with unlikely juxtapositions, using familiar *Star Wars* imagery to explore the notion of moral polarity. Visually, black and white are alternated in the frames from here onward. On the most basic level, the strip uses the *Star Wars* mythic narrative to suggest the existence of parallel mythic moral narratives within the South African situation - and to suggest that they are equally polarised and unrealistic.

In the first frame, Madam's words are issuing from a fairly atmospherically-drawn Star Destroyer; the subtext is that Madam is one of the Bad Guys. Apart from the comic juxtaposition of space-epic evil with domestic strife, the image suggests the "New South African" awareness of white guilt and acceptance of moral culpability. More cynically, however, it also plays with Madam's rather obviously pleasurable self-indulgence in the notion of her own "evil" - and the *Star Wars* series, of course, plays intrinsically with the depiction of evil, or at least the power of evil, as profoundly sexy. (Half the people I watched the movies with were rooting for Darth Vader).

We are jolted from an enjoyment of the comforting polarised depiction to a more "real" situation, the suggestion of course being that the Star Destroyer is

an idealised and escapist view of evil. Eve's amused and highly aware approach at an actual solution shows how ultimately futile such an idealised depiction of evil actually is (a point underlined by Madam's startled face as she is recalled from her fantasising). To continue this comic and visual dissection of the nature of evil, the next two frames play rather entertainingly with notions of black and white in the light-sabre duel depicted. The discussion of morally polarised narrative in terms of black/ white is obviously highly problematical in the South African context, a fact underlined by the reversal in the images; Madam, the "baddie", wearing Darth Vader's black, is actually white, and Luke, white-clad, the good guy, stands for Eve, who is black. Again, the point being underlined is that the moral polarities of the *Star Wars* narratives simply do not apply to South African situations. The sense of epic clash as Vader and Luke face off with light-sabres also highlights the ridiculousness inherent in the extreme romanticisation of a banal domestic situation - the ongoing conflict between Madam and Eve over Eve's wages.

Eve's perfectly logical solution again highlights the dangerous gap between idealised moral polarities and actual moral reform. It is evident, from Madam/Darth Vader's surprise at the solution, that awareness of guilt in no way constitutes moral reform - a comment that the strip's canny writers are quite obviously applying to the "New South Africa". Within the *Star Wars* context, Vader has embraced evil deliberately, knowingly and perversely, and his eventual reform is a highly difficult moral decision. Madam appears to be surprised to discover that the acceptance of moral culpability is not enough, and that a sense of guilt should find its logical expression in redress. Darth Vader thus stands for a simplistic and unrealistic image of evil, although this is to some extent redeemed by the workings of the *Star Wars* story line itself - while tagged as fairy-tale "villain" by all the symbols of darkness and inhumanity, Vader nonetheless achieves moral redemption in the films by his eventual denial of the Emperor. Madam's conflation with Vader is simultaneously a mockery of her melodramatic sense of her own "evil", and a faintly hopeful possibility for future moral change. Of course, the assumption is that this is still the "Old South Africa", underlined by the outdated style in which Madam is drawn, and the expectation is that the idea of actually doing anything will be rejected, since guilt is purely superficial. This picks up on the circularity and eventual pointlessness of Madam's confession in the first couple of frames.

The eighth frame catapults the scenario from the "Old South Africa" to the "New" - the drawing of the frame reflects the current, familiar Madam and Eve. In the digitally remastered, computer-enhanced South Africa, reform should be the natural sequel to realisation of guilt. Of course, Madam's response is as self-centred as that of the priest in the first two frames; reform has nothing to do

with redressing wrongs, and everything to do with making her feel better. The point of juxtaposing such a domestic moral dilemma with images from an archetypally feel-good film becomes clear. Again, comic effect is gained from Madam's eager "I'll get my purse" issuing from the Death Star with swarms of attendant Tie fighters. The planet and moon in the background suggest Endor, and consequently the approaching downfall of the Empire/Madam, a point developed neatly with Eve's rapaciousness in the final frame.

On the broadest possible level, the *Star Wars* narratives can be seen as loosely appropriate to the context of a "New South Africa" if only because the trilogy's depiction of the downfall of an evil Empire is in some sense an apology for imperialism, American or otherwise (Zipes 1979: 118). It can also be seen how Eliade's initiatory scenario, the maturation from adolescence to adulthood through hardship and moral testing, applies in the most idealised sense to a nation attempting to re-create itself, negotiating potential human and political disaster in an effort to reach a moral maturity. In this particular case, however, the specific invocation of the *Star Wars* images along mythic lines (as instantly recognisable and significant, needing no explanation) suggests unavoidably that the "New South Africa" is potentially just as much of a mythology as the Rebel triumph over the Empire - that is, that it represents an oversimplified and idealised moral resolution. The entwined images of the strip resonate together throughout; the *Star Wars*/space opera framework of unambiguous moral polarity is used to problematise our awareness of moral dilemmas within the South African context.

With the series from the following week in the *Cape Times*, the strip builds upon the relationships established in the initial, more complex *Weekly Mail* strip, introducing a more specific South African mythological parallel, namely the TRC. Whatever the actual goals and achievements of the TRC, its construction within public consciousness - and I would argue that this is a mythic construction - provides precisely such an initiatory scenario as that described by Eliade. As in any fairy tale, the TRC appears to provide an arena in which protagonists will be faced with their own inadequacies and rigorously tested before emerging triumphantly to political maturity in a blaze of unambiguous moral judgement; fade out on a clinch with the princess. The unlikely juxtaposition of the *Star Wars* personalities with an amnesty hearing serves to underline the nostalgic nature of the South African mythology about the TRC; the concept of hearings for Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker forces us to acknowledge our desire for the TRC to create for us the clear-cut moral resolutions of the *Star Wars* world. This, of course, is impossible; however much we yearn nostalgically for the lost innocence of good/evil, the TRC deals most fundamentally in ambiguity, grey areas, an attempt to look at differing

views of good and evil, accept their existence, and then to get on with our lives.

The *Cape Times* strips are short, punchy and rather cynical; they do not offer a progression so much as a continually shifting perspective to suit the message of the strip's writers. The first two strips (*Cape Times*, Monday 21 April and Tuesday 22 April 1997) offer us the wonderful image of Darth Vader attempting to justify the Death Star to an amnesty hearing, but the immediate cynical suggestion is that his crimes are equivalent to those of the amnesty commission's actual applicants. Comically, the strip attempts to overlay the encapsulated moral resolution of the *Star Wars* trilogy - the downfall of Vader and the Empire, with Vader's and the Emperor's deaths a punishment for their crimes - with the TRC's ongoing attempt at establishing reconciliation, forgiveness, remorse. You don't just blow them up, you try to reclaim them. Vader's presence, masked, caped and drawn very, very blackly, at the hearing table, gives the lie direct to his wonderfully irrelevant claim, in the second strip, of moral change. As in the initial strip, the emphasis is on the superficiality of the changes - "digitally enhanced, remixed and totally remastered", a somewhat exaggerated retake on the claims of the re-release's trailers - they are changes in presentation, not in content, not in the format of the film, not in the action of the characters. The commissioner's naive delight echoes the prevailing popular investment in a mythology of moral change, but the strip cynically suggests that the mythology is precisely that, idealised and fairy-tale rather than realistic. Regardless of Vader's last-minute moral reformation, the films' message remains clear-cut and unassailable - he dies in the process. In the unambiguous moral terms of the film, he should not survive to be sorry.

The presence of R2D2 and a rather sleepy-looking Luke at the table in the Thursday strip (24 April 1997) is in some ways a jolt - these are the good guys, they don't need amnesty. Here, the South African context imposes on the clear-cut morality of the films an awareness of the realistic implications of some of Luke's "heroic" acts - his actions in the Rebellion, while entirely justified by the romance framework of the films, have caused massive death and destruction. The strip thus undercuts the idealised and mythological nature of the *Star Wars* battles at the same time that it painfully invokes the realities of South African conflict - everyone tries to believe their political agendas to be justified, everyone thinks they're Luke. Luke's insistence on the mythic nature of his adventures and their moral resolution - "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away", the essence of the fairytale opening - is suddenly insufficient in the face of political reality. Subtly, the commissioners' demands for "specifics" suggests a mythology of "truth" through circumstantial detail, exactitude and an attempt at objective knowledge. The setting of the films, of course, denies this completely; objectivity is impossible when faced with mythologised morality, in both

the *Star Wars* and the South African contexts.

The following strip (25 April 1997) continues with the undercutting of the *Star Wars* mythology in its depiction of a mythic hero suddenly inadequate in the face of moral questioning. Again, the destruction achieved by the Rebellion is emphasised, along with the concept of moral culpability. The last two frames provide a wonderful example of a mythological clash; the *Star Wars* myths, the heroic achievements through the Jedi use of the Force, jolted up against the more paranoid aspects of contemporary South African political mythology. Again, as with the first strip in this series, the commissioners effectively get it wrong; an attempt to map South African mythologies onto the *Star Wars* myth reveals not only their incompatibility, but the fact that neither mythology has much to do with the realities of the situation. The commissioners' attempt to ascribe unambiguous moral positions to the situation is thus doomed.

It is perhaps the central strip (Wednesday 23 April 1997), which is the most cynical as well as the most baroque: the *Madam and Eve* writers betray a profound cynicism about the processes of reconciliation and indemnity within the TRC. The attempt to subscribe to the unambiguous morality of the films - Darth Vader is the villain and cannot simply be forgiven - is doomed because of the nature of evil within the *Star Wars* mythology. Both powerful and completely cold-blooded, it is also, in subtext, highly attractive - Darth Vader has always exemplified the appeal of power. While the commissioner's indignation for a moment celebrates unambiguous morality, allowing the moral mythology of the films to prevail briefly, this nostalgic unambiguity is quickly overturned by the reaction of the commissioners to Vader's evil Jedi mind-powers. They are drawn with clever-schoolboy enthusiasm as they abandon their moral stance in sheer self-preservation. The final message is depressingly bleak: South Africa's desire for moral certainty will always fade before the prospect of threat, force, intimidation. By implication, amnesty is granted through fear of those on trial. The strip invokes and interrogates current South African situations such as police negotiations with gangster organisations who plead, like Vader in the first strip, that they are not the same men who used to deal drugs. A mythology of moral outrage is proved to be exactly that - myth.

In constructing this series, then, the *Madam and Eve* writers invoke and juxtapose myth systems which are mutually enlightening despite their origins in apparently different cultural and political experiences. While unashamedly space-opera adventure-tales, the *Star Wars* films are revealed to have become a part of our popular culture, through their clever manipulation of recognisable popular cultural clichés as well as their reliance on more basic and profound forms of narrative. Despite their essential Americanism, it is interesting to note how the films, in their use of mythology, can resonate across a different cultural

experience in a manner which is both understandable and illuminating. Of course, in the final analysis it must not be forgotten that the readership of the *Madam and Eve* cartoons represents a highly specific section of the South African population, with a large proportion of privileged/white/liberal bourgeoisie; while operating as myth, *Star Wars* cannot be said to be truly universal. At the same time, it is somehow comforting to reflect that, while the films may simply pander to a regressive nostalgia for a naive and over-simplified morality, they are also capable of contributing to the symbols and mythologies through which we understand our world.

* Copies of the comic strips of the latter appear at the end of the article.

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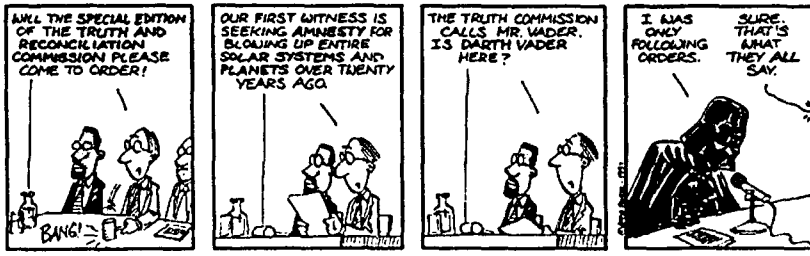
Madam & Eve: Monday, 21/04/97 *Cape Times*



Madam & Eve: Tuesday, 22/04/97 *Cape Times*



Madam & Eve: Wednesday, 23/04/97



Madam & Eve: Thursday, 24/04/97



Madam & Eve: Friday, 25/04/97

