



A collection of products executed in Naoron (photographs courtesy of Siwa).

but also their methods of craftsmanship. The museum was established 80 years ago by Sōetsu Yanagi, leader of the mingei folk art movement, and in 1977 both the directorship of the museum and the leadership of mingei passed to his son Sori Yanagi. Sori was an internationally renowned product designer and pioneer of Japanese industrial design (responsible for the Butterfly stool for Vitra, which combines Eastern forms with the plywood moulding techniques of Charles and Ray Eames). His background in design and its production influenced his relationship to craft. Contrary to the founding idea of handmade mingei crafts,<sup>2</sup> Sori explored a new meaning for the mingei movement in an era of modernised production.

Sori argued against sentimentalising beauty, stressing the importance of mingei as a movement that would evolve in parallel to wider society. In particular, he pointed out similarities between the Bauhaus and mingei movements: the functionality of their products, the way they allowed materials to dictate form, and the importance of precise production techniques. “I try to create things that we human beings feel are useful in our daily lives. During the process, beauty is born naturally,” he noted in a 2002 interview in *The Japan Times*. It’s a mission statement relevant to both craft and industrial design.

Since succeeding Sori at the Folk Crafts Museum in 2012, Fukasawa’s relationship with mingei and design has cemented this ideology of his predecessor. In partnership with British designer Jasper Morrison, Fukasawa devised *Super Normal*, a 2006 exhibition, publication and ideology that espouse a concept very similar to the “anonymous design” so beloved of the mingei movement. “Mingei is the ordinary craft of anonymous craftsmen and its beauty stems from everyday life,” says Fukasawa. “I believe that mingei and the products I design share the same philosophy, one that endeavours to create things with aesthetic beauty which can be used on a daily basis. I am interested in the enduring principles that people pass on from generation to generation. I adopt these principles to design a product which supports an ever-changing modern life.” By reinventing the two traditional Japanese materials of washi paper and urushi lacquer, Siwa’s products are a direct reflection of Fukasawa’s design ethos; a vindication of his belief that contemporary design can push the relationship between innovation and craftsmanship forward to establish links between the past, present and future. **END**

<sup>2</sup> Speaking at a 1952 potters and weavers’ conference in England, Sōetsu Yanagi had specifically set down that mingei “must reflect the region it was made in; and it must be made by hand”.



### Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens

Words Ilona Gaynor

What do the lightsabers, Sith masks and Stormtroopers of *Star Wars* reveal about a franchise built on objects, fandom and merchandising?

I am a thoroughly dedicated fan of *Star Wars*. I wasn't born when the first instalments of George Lucas's trilogy were released in theatres, but at the tender age of seven, sitting on the floor, legs crossed and side-by-side, my brother and I were initiated.

*Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* is one of the longest-awaited films by the largest number of fans in cinema history. As a story, as a world, as a cultural artefact, it sits firmly rooted in its fan culture. So much so that J.J. Abrams's direction of the film has been ardently questioned by critics and fanzines for being too reminiscent of, if not a direct replica of, that of Lucas's first creation, *Episode IV – A New Hope*. And they're right: it is similar. But upon viewing, it seems this may be more of a commentary on Abrams's taking emphatic measures to erase Lucas's much disdained prequels: a welcome attempt to return to the familiar. In doing so, *The Force Awakens* has brought back not only the plot, but also the original visual language of the *Star Wars* universe. Tactile in its design, it recalls objects and scenery of the past, evoking a nostalgic sense of coming home.

The film (of course) starts with John Williams's upbeat theme, accompanied by the horizontal yellow type scrolling into the distance – carving up the ongoing battle of good and evil. *The Force Awakens* takes place some years (it's not clear exactly when) after the events of *Return of the Jedi* and follows Rey (Daisy Ridley), a young scavenger on a quest to not only find power through the awakening of the Force, but also to return a precious piece of information to the newly formed Resistance. Throughout her journey she encounters not only old characters – Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher), Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew) – but also a fresh-faced cast of new ones. These include BB-8, loyal droid to the Resistance, and Finn (John Boyega), a renegade stormtrooper of the First Order, this film's substitute for its predecessors' Empire. We are also introduced to Kylo Ren (Adam Driver), Sith warrior and servant to the First Order.

Even in the earliest teaser trailer, the reveal of Han Solo was introduced with the line "Chewie, we're home". As pointed out by the critic Mark Kermode in *The Observer*, Abrams has taken the

series "back to its roots while giving it a rocket-fuelled, 21st-century twist. As always with this director, the film feels very physical, scenes of dogfighting TIE fighters and a re-launched Millennium Falcon crashing through trees possessing the kind of heft so sorely lacking from George Lucas's over-digitised prequels." In this sense, the film could be defined as an object with a physical character of its own. Abrams likewise plays with our attachment to the objects we surround ourselves with in the way he crafts it.

The film was shot on celluloid rather than digital, a medium with few remaining advocating directors



BB-8 is a new BB unit astromech droid who appears in *The Force Awakens*.

(Christopher Nolan, Sam Mendes, Steven Spielberg, Quentin Tarantino and Paul Thomas Anderson being the chief proponents). The final production was shot on a combination of 35mm and 65mm ImaX footage, yet when Abrams first approached cinematographer

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Dan Mindel, his aim was to use the same lenses as in the filming of Lucas's original trilogy to resurrect its look and feel. But technology had moved on; given the advances in digitised intermediaries, film stock and visual effects, this proved impossible. However, motion-picture equipment specialists Panavision stepped in, offering to custom design and fabricate lenses that would give

the same visual properties of films from the 1970s (from modified contrast and sharpness drop-offs, to accurate colour mixes of 70s lens coatings), granting *The Force Awakens* a warmer feel than is typical in today's cinematic aesthetic. The process took months of trial and error, the end result of which was described by Mindel as a contemporary, but classic look that "will definitely affect the audience in a subconscious way". Again, it was perhaps a nod to reinforcing the need to return to something genuine and familiar in the film's physicality by not solely producing digital imagery.

Throughout the film, particularly on the desert planet of Jakku, we are reminded of this. Scattered across Jakku's dunes are vast battleship graveyards – presumably relics left over from the fallen dynasty of the Empire – featuring everything from decommissioned Star Destroyers and TIE fighters, to X-wings and fallen AT-AT Walkers (one of which Rey has made her home). Watching these sequences, which are shot from a great height and distance, I couldn't help but respond to the toy-like scales embodied in these images, giving the sense that these are discarded *Star Wars* toys left in a sandbox for 32 years since *Return of the Jedi*, now ready to rise up again.

But toys, artefacts and merchandise have always been an important part of cultivating the cultural consciousness of the *Star Wars* franchise. These objects enable us to bridge the gap between the fictitious *Star Wars* universe and our own reality (not to mention giving Disney a return on its \$4.05bn purchase of Lucasfilm in 2012). Often manufactured at a one-to-one scale, these toys give

children (and adults) the chance to act out the roles of their heroes or show their undying allegiance to the franchise. The most prominent to date is, of course, the lightsaber. Who can pick up a toy lightsaber without making the vshhhvroom sound? Designed by Lucas in 1977, the lightsaber is a distant cousin to the raygun, an object embodying years of sheer cult, swashbuckling phenomena. Yet it has since transitioned beyond its sci-fi origins, so much so that it may be appropriate to begin classifying it as a contemporary household object. Upon writing this article, I did a sweeping Google image search for "lightsaber". Most of the images that surfaced depict scenes in mundane domestic settings. Often children are wielding some form of lightsaber (officially merchandised or not), or else the object is displayed in various degraded conditions throughout the home: hanging off a television screen, on the kitchen counter, in the dog's mouth, or discarded on a carpeted floor. Despite the object's abstraction – its factual lack of function – its fictional presence has transcended the two worlds. It has become a readily available item: able to be purchased in petrol stations, hung on keyrings or placed on supermarket shelves, displayed in corner shops and toy stores – a presence that spans the 32-year gap between films.



Sith warrior and First Order servant Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) with stormtroopers.

Inherent in the object's design is its colour, denoting which side of the Force the weapon sits: red for the Sith (dark side) and blue for the Jedi (light side), a vocabulary so familiar (not unlike the trademark vshhhvroom sound) that it almost becomes an indicator as to the owner's fictional political preference.

Two prominent characters within *The Force Awakens* are also somewhat defined by the objects they carry. Rey's destiny to become a Jedi is set upon finding Luke Skywalker's lost lightsaber, and Kylo Ren's weighted mask is designed to block out the positive effects of the Force, in homage to Darth Vader's iconic mask. Both objects have a historical presence within the larger *Star Wars* narrative, making them not only integral to the plot, but also to the deeply rooted fan culture.

Throughout *Star Wars*'s legacy, its props have always been steeped in fascination, designed with rich tactile qualities and an acute sense of detail. *The Force Awakens* proves no exception, backed up by the readily available volumes of published literature and fan infrastructure – *Star Wars: The Visual Dictionary* and the freely accessible Wookieepedia being the two most prominent resources – that document the film's vast index of props, costumes, weaponry and ships. One particular



C-3PO (Anthony Daniels).

standout item is Rey's bartered food supply, described in the dictionary as "ration packs, salvaged from the New Republic and Imperial military kits". The ration pack is a vacuum-sealed hexagonal disc split down the centre, dividing dehydrated powders of Veg-Meat and Polystarch. Activated by water, the ingredients swell and grow, the Polystarch forming the most beautifully articulated puffed bread roll that cinema has ever offered. More surprising is its design. The bread was a practical effect shot in camera, which is to say without the assistance of CGI. "It started off with the mechanics of getting the bread to rise and the liquid to disappear, but then there was the ongoing problem of what colour should the bread be? What consistency should it be? Should it have cracks in it? Should it not have cracks in it?" special effects supervisor Chris Corbould told *MTV News*. "It took about three months. The actual mechanics of it was [sic] fairly simple, but the cosmetic side took a lot longer." But despite this object (among others) being seemingly incidental, it plays a significant role in the film, in that it embodies the tactile in-camera spirit that Lucas's first trilogy set out to achieve. The release of *A New Hope* arguably defined a pivotal cinematic movement, when visual and special effects started to come into their own, beginning with the formation of Lucas's own effects behemoth Industrial

Light and Magic. It's a point that Abrams wants to remind us of. As a consequence, recipes for Rey's bread have begun to pop up online across Youtube and culinary blogs, documenting fans' attempts at replicating its consistency in all manner of technical experiments.

Whilst not forgetting *The Force Awakens's* established origins, Abrams has also set out clear definitions of evolution and indicators as to how the forthcoming films may grow systemically through their design. While the visual language of the Rebellion (now called the Resistance) has remained largely unchanged, that of the Empire (now the First Order) has changed somewhat. With a fresh coat of slicker, blacker and more powerful paint, we see notable new weaponry and a more prominent hierarchy of stormtroopers. Objects in their own right, the stormtroopers in Lucas's original idea depicted an aesthetic that leant towards riot gear; sketches drawn by concept artist Ralph McQuarrie depicted stormtroopers carrying shields and lightsabers. While Lucas, for whatever reason, eventually moved in a different direction, the sense of riots lingered in the troopers' timely stomps and rattling of plastic armour heard echoing around the hallways of the Deathstar. However, even in light of such an idea, the stormtroopers always came across as somewhat feeble, ineffective soldiers in spite of their volume. In *The Force Awakens*, Abrams revisits this idea, perhaps with the intention of evolving the First Order into a more powerful adversary through the design of new weapons, ships and armour; even the stormtroopers' physiques appear far bulkier, with more defined silhouettes. A more notable introduction is the Z6 riot control baton: an electrified riot stick held at its base by a single-handed metal grip, which is designed to be swung a full 360° towards any unruly assailants, electrocuting them in a manner somewhat reminiscent of a combined sick stick and vortex cannon from Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002).

Alongside the step-up of the First Order is the final obstacle, Kylo Ren. Whilst the charismatic forces of Darth Vader (James Earl Jones/David Prowse) are left firmly in the past, Ren is nevertheless a descendant of Vader and a Jedi trained under Luke Skywalker

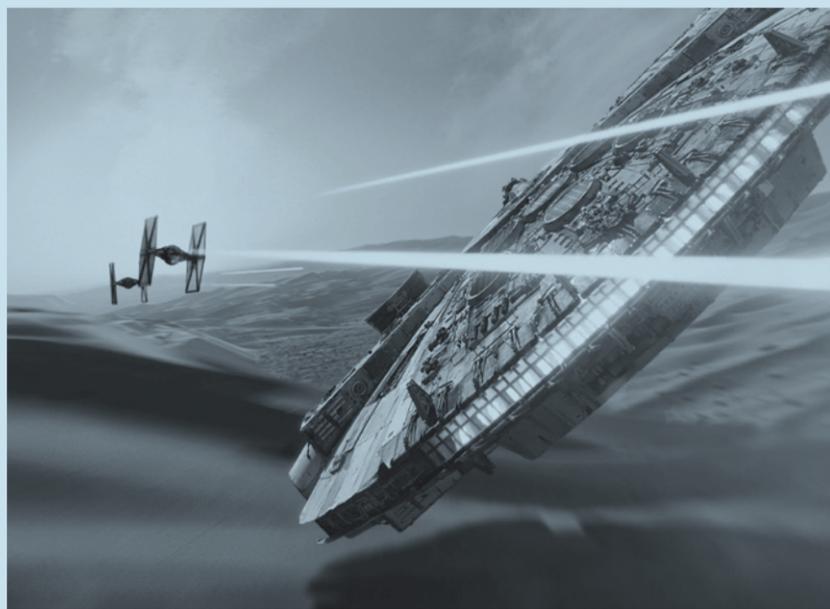
(Mark Hamill), and consciously mirrors Vader's presence in both posture and style. Through his design, Ren becomes the embodiment of conflict and, not unlike Vader, is given aesthetic force as an archetypal, mythical figure: a villain defined by how inhuman he appears to be. Once described by Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) as being "more machine now than man", Darth Vader could have been described as an object in and of itself – and, if not an object, then certainly as some form of industrially designed man with his vac-formed definitions, stiff upper-body posture and pneumatic breathing device augmenting his famously terrifying voice.

Equally, it is the objects associated with Ren – his shrouded cape, weighted steel helmet and red lightsaber – that initially tell us everything we need to know about his character. When the first trailer was released there was a strangely loud uproar of speculation – not about the film itself, but about the geometry of Ren's lightsaber. Unbeknown to the audience at the time, Abrams's aim was to design Ren's character in reference to the ancient religious teachings of the Sith. His lightsaber is red (denoting his basic allegiances) and set in the shape of a cross, with its three fields jagged in their movements. According to the dictionary it is "crudely assembled and designed to mirror its ancient design,

unstable in its power". Presumably the implication is that Ren himself has fashioned this implement from the plans of something pre-existing. His helmet and mask are designed to project his voice, in a similar form and wavelength to Darth Vader's. Battered black steel, with a distinctly radiated eyepiece, Ren's helmet and mask communicate their obvious lineages: not only Vader's appearance but also a broader cross-section of the 1970s sci-fi aesthetic.

The film's design is present in every way, the beauty being that much of it goes largely unnoticed in the eyes of the viewer. *The Force Awakens* – and no doubt the same will be true of the films that follow – is embedded in a precise infrastructure of pre-existent knowledge. But whether you are new to the franchise or an established fan, you'll find that *Star Wars's* visual language is constantly being developed despite its 2015 reawakening. I don't think Lucas or Abrams would have wanted it any other way. The erasure of the prequels has begun, a new generation of fans is being initiated. The cult of *Star Wars* continues.

*Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* will be available on DVD and Blu-ray from 18 April 2016.



The Millennium Falcon in a dogfight with TIE fighters.

# Preserve, Erase, Destruct

## *A roundtable with Janna Bystrykh, Ekaterina Golovatyuk, Rem Koolhaas, Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli, and Stephan Petermann, chaired by Shumi Bose.*