

• *Articles* •

**Across the *Star Wars* Universe:  
A Journey into the World of the Italian *Star Wars* Fandom**

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**Abstract:** *In this essay, we perform ethnographic fieldwork on the costuming, prop-making, and performances of the 501<sup>st</sup> Italica Garrison, the Italian sub-section of the 501<sup>st</sup> Legion, drawing on the "language" and "speech" theories of Gilbert Ryle and J. N. Findlay (Ryle & Findlay, 1961) and the theoretical position on "strategies" and "tactics" of Michael de Certeau (de Certeau, 2001). While considering the Star Wars franchise and its narratives as a "social phenomenon," we will examine if and how the official Italian fandom's tactics and performances conform to Henry Jenkins' concept of "textual poaching" (Jenkins, 2005). In fact, prop-making and collecting performances are in dialectical relation to the narratives of George Lucas, as Lucas's narratives are in relation to the concepts of Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949).*

## ***Introduction***

In 2012, LucasFilm Ltd. was purchased by the Disney company. As part of an enormous economic operation, the animation corporation put efforts into broadening the worldwide *Star Wars* franchise to cultivate the brand and reach more people than ever before. "A long time ago," in 1977, the first film in the franchise, *Star Wars: A New Hope* was released, creating a generation of fans—and nearly 25 years later, in 2001, *The Phantom Menace* was released. The new trilogy drew to *Star Wars* an entirely new generation of fans. This younger generation has high expectations for the franchise and are eager for new episodes and spin-offs. Being a *Star Wars* fan has always been more than just enjoying the films, but also includes buying toys and action figures and wearing characters' costumes. There is an official *Star Wars* fandom—international organizations that are directly in touch with Disney—the most famous official costumers fan group being the 501<sup>st</sup> Legion.

In this essay, we perform ethnographic fieldwork on the costuming, prop-making, and performances of the 501<sup>st</sup> Italica Garrison, the Italian sub-section of the 501<sup>st</sup> Legion, drawing on the "language" and "speech" theories of Gilbert Ryle and J. N. Findlay (Ryle & Findlay, 1961) and the theoretical position on "strategies" and "tactics" of Michael de Certeau (de Certeau, 2001). While considering the *Star Wars* franchise and its narratives as a "social phenomenon," we will examine if and how the official Italian fandom's tactics and performances conform to Henry Jenkins' concept of "textual poaching" (Jenkins, 2005). In fact, prop-making and collecting performances are in dialectical relation to the narratives of George Lucas, as Lucas's narratives are in relation to the concepts of Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949).

We attempt to conceptualize the ambiguous meaning of the term "original" for the 501<sup>st</sup> fandom and the Disney company. Our ethnographic observations focus on the tactics of prop-makers and art-collectors who approximate John Fiske's theories of popular and fandom culture, in which "the art of people is the art of 'making do' with what they have" (Fiske, 1989). According to Daniel Miller's "objectification processes" (Miller, 2013), costuming and art-collecting in the world of fandom are part of the process of commoditization, in addition to what Arjun Appadurai refers to as "diversion strategies" (Appadurai, 1986). Stormtrooper armor and *Star Wars* memorabilia would be considered by Fiske to be "textual productivity and participation" as a living example of "narrowcast texts" (Fiske, 1992). After the analysis of top-down narratives and bottom-up dynamics, the results of our ethnography fieldwork will shed light on the relationship between the Disney company and the fan world.

### **The Journey Begins, by Giada Bastanzi**

#### ***Strategies and Tactics in the Fandom***

In the article titled "Use, Usage and Meaning," G. Ryle and J. N. Findlay make a distinction between "language" and "speech" (Ryle & Findlay, 1961) that recalls the famous distinction between *langue* and *parole* made by de Saussure. The *Course in General Linguistics* (de Saussure, 1959) illustrates two main concepts: *langue* is a defined object, with a homogeneous and concrete nature, consisting in the set of social and historical boundaries within which the individual linguistic acts take place. *Parole* is each momentary, individual act of language, based on a grammatical system that exists

independently in some people's minds. Both *langue* and *parole* are part of the whole of a language. Ryle writes that a "language" is a stock, a fund of words to be known and learned; a "speech," however, is a momentary operation of parts of that language chosen for that particular occasion (Ryle & Findlay 1961; 223-24).

If we try to transpose this operation from Linguistics to another phenomenon, like the *Star Wars* fandom, we find a similar structure. On the one hand, there are the official *Star Wars* narratives: the movies and the mythology lying below them, encompassing the expanded universe of stories canonized by LucasFilm, Disney, and the fandom itself. These narratives are available to all types of audiences, and this is what I mean by "language." On the other hand, there are the different ways in which people use these top-down imposed systems, which form many different types of "speech." I think analysis of these approaches to the *Star Wars* franchise and narratives can help us to shed light on the thoughts behind the words in these types of speech, and to understand the value and meaning that *Star Wars* has assumed for audiences over the years.

This passion of *Star Wars* fans doesn't end with the movie credits; it infiltrates everyday life through activities like conventions, exhibitions and, in some cases, even involvement in costuming, prop-making, and official clubs. Some of these activities are expensive and time-consuming; it may sound weird to some that adults with jobs, families, and lives have the time, energy, and money to invest in *Star Wars* costuming, but there is no discord between these two spheres. From the dynamics of performing and all that lies behind it, a kind of play emerges. These *Star Wars*-themed performances and events are like plays, or other worlds with their own formulated and formalized rules. These

performances provide frameworks for the action. In the case of the 501<sup>st</sup>, members have put thought into every detail of playing the role of the character they are performing.

In this context, we can say that the practices and rhetorics of costuming disrupt the set rules of an existing system. It is what de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, defines as a practical art: something different from the top-down patterns of culture, which ingenerates a space and builds up a system with its own rules (de Certeau, 2001). Through practices like these, we can understand what popular culture really means, i.e., the ability to infiltrate the institutions on which they depend, inventing new techniques, and in some way transforming their object. *Star Wars* prop-making and costuming are cross tactics arising in a universe that gives them some pattern to follow, but in which, at the same time, they introduce a possibility of change that gives the costumers the benefit of creativity. Canonical narrative and characters give fans something to be faithful to, and the consequence in everyday life is to elaborate on the canon with their own rules.

De Certeau is also mentioned by Henry Jenkins in the article "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching" to explain how Star Trek fans make use of the dominant narrative of the plot. The aim of Jenkins' article is to provide an alternative perspective on fandom, in which the "Trekkers" are perceived as poachers of textual meanings. "Poaching," to Jenkins, means moving "across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write," and is "a kind of cultural bricolage through which readers fragment texts" (Jenkins, 2005; 250). According to Jenkins, fandom is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them to serve different interests, as a way of transforming mass culture into popular culture in the way it is defined above.

Therefore, becoming a fan translates the simple viewing of the *Star Wars* movies into a cultural activity through sharing feelings and thoughts about the content and joining a community of other fans with common interests; an oral counter-text is transformed into a more tangible form. Between the product and the consumer there is the distance of usage; in the case of *Star Wars*, it will be useful to analyze the complexity around merchandising as a market strategy on one side, and the tactics of reception and reinterpretation on the other.

### ***501<sup>st</sup> Italica Garrison in Milan***

Our journey began "far, far away" during one of the events promoted by Disney *Star Wars*<sup>1</sup>: in addition to putting new products out on the market, parades and activities were also organized in which participants wore costumes as similar as possible to those in the movies. Our starting point is Lucca Comics & Games 2015, featuring the official *Star Wars* Italian costumers<sup>2</sup> groups named the 501<sup>st</sup> Italica Garrison and the Rebel Legion Italian Base. There we met Giovanni, one of the key characters in our journey. He was wearing an Obi-Wan Kenobi costume, completely faithful to the original. Not only was the costume accurate, but even his attitude, movements, and the poses he struck physically resembled Ewan McGregor's portrayal of the character in the second trilogy. We were impressed: he was completely focused on looking like General Kenobi.

We also saw him at the *Star Wars* Day 2017 Celebration in Milan. The Force Day ("May the fourth be with you") in Italy was divided into two simultaneous events, one in Rome and one in Milan, on Sunday May 7<sup>th</sup>. We joined the latter, which took place at the

WOW Comics Space. From the beginning, the location was crowded: aside from a few young people's groups, the audience was mainly composed of families. There was an inner area designed as a museum with a shop, and an outer one dedicated to other activities, mostly for children, which was slightly spoiled by the morning rain. Because of the organization of the inner space, you had to pass through a small merchandising area full of Disney-branded objects. The exposition had many objects from the private collection of Amedeo, another main character in our journey. The objects, housed in the center and sheltered in showcases, were mainly lightsaber grips and other fine reproductions from the movies, such as helmets and costumes. Somehow, the fans who curated this collection had taken part in a "musealization" process, in which the artifacts were both carefully exposed and kept away from touch. All day long the organizations' members had been performing indoors and outdoors various activities: Jedi knights teaching children how to use a lightsaber, stormtroopers posing for pictures alongside Darth Vader or Anakin Skywalker, and Darth Maul demonstrating fighting choreographies with his red dual-phase lightsaber. In the afternoon, all the costumers passed by the external space, divided as usual into dark side and light side characters marching behind the legion's banners to the notes of the official soundtrack.

In our participant observation, we had the occasion to talk with some of the people in the audience, and we noticed a kind of intolerance toward Episode VII and its new characters, although there were official Rey and Kylo Ren costumers as part of the Celebration. For example, Mattia, a 28-year-old man from Mestre, told us that, in his opinion, since Disney bought LucasArt, the *Star Wars* plot has not been as accurate nor as deep as it was before. He also accused Lucas of having sold "his own child" to a major

corporation that was investing too many resources in merchandising in order to reach as many customers as possible. We had to wait until the end of the event to talk directly with some of the costumed characters we had seen, like Giovanni/Obi-Wan. We spoke to him about the meaning of costuming, and he introduced us to Amedeo. After the first few sentences, we realized that behind the performance we had seen that day there was an entire universe of fandom, encompassing their lives and everyday practices in a very deep way.

Amedeo and Giovanni are both members of the 501<sup>st</sup> Italica Garrison and the Rebel Legion Italian Base, born respectively in 2001 and in 2005. The Italian official fandom group called 501<sup>st</sup> Italica Garrison, is a sub-section of the 501<sup>st</sup> Legion, the biggest *Star Wars* imperial costumes club worldwide. People who take part in it are involved with the celebration of the *Star Wars* universe through the creation and display of quality character costumes by costuming themselves as the villainous characters from the movies. From the Legion Charter:

"The Legion is an all-volunteer organization formed for the express purpose of bringing together costume enthusiasts under a collective identity within which to operate. The Legion seeks to promote interest in *Star Wars* through the building and wearing of quality costumes, and to facilitate the use of these costumes for *Star Wars*-related events as well as contributions to the local community through costumed charity and volunteer work."

The first chapter of the story of the 501<sup>st</sup> was written in 1997, when Albin Johnson decided for the first time to wear his stormtrooper costume—a rarity at that time—at public events with his friend Tom Crews. Today, to join the organization it is necessary to obtain the



Legion Commander's quality approval, defined by LucasFilm and consequently by its current owner Disney. According to the 2016 census, the organization registered more than 10,000 people worldwide, divided into local garrisons, and in addition to attending to official events, it also is dedicated to charities, including partnership with Make-a-wish America and Make-a-wish International. The Rebel Legion—the official light side characters costuming club—was founded in 2000, in answer to the creation of 501<sup>st</sup> Legion. The Rebel Legion shares the same organization as the 501<sup>st</sup> and has been overall well-received. The 501<sup>st</sup> Italica Garrison was born after the 2000 Romics, the comics convention held yearly in Rome. After organizing a costume parade, a group of Italian fans of *Star Wars* costuming and prop-making, including Amedeo, began to discuss the idea of founding a defined group. Thus, the Italian outpost of the legion was born, and they began to attend fairs and events, gradually improving the quality of their costumes and getting positive feedback from the audience, thanks in part to the Battlefront II videogame.<sup>3</sup>

One of the goals of the 501<sup>st</sup> Legion is achieving new ways to celebrate the modern *mythology* of George Lucas. Their use of the word *mythology* in the 501<sup>st</sup> official website section, "Our Mission," is all but meaningless. It refers precisely to the studies and projects centered on the mythological pattern employed by George Lucas in the process of developing the *Star Wars* plot. Lucas followed the pattern drawn by historian of religions Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949). Lucas found an outline for the heroes of his saga through what Campbell defines as a "cultural archetype," the monomyth. According to Andrew Gordon, the connections between Lucas' epic plot and Campbell's monomyth are definite in the *Star Wars* narrative structure. Gordon evaluates Lucas' own words and asserts that "he has studied myth and deliberately attempted to

construct a myth in his film...*Star Wars* [can be examined] in the light of Joseph Campbell's thesis in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that the hero of epic myth is a dream-figure who stands in for the entire culture" (Gordon 1978; 320). Campbell divided the "hero's journey" into 17 fundamental steps that underlie mythological tales and stories including the contemporary *Star Wars* narrative of the Skywalker family story in particular. We can verify that the protagonists of our ethnography, Giovanni and Amedeo, know Campbell's theories on mythology and the patterns adopted in Lucas's movies; one of the first questions Giovanni asked us when we first met was: "There's a whole mythology behind *Star Wars*! Do you know who Joseph Campbell is?"

### **An Ethnography with Objects, by Andrea Franceschetti**

#### ***JTK Props and La Bettola di Yoda***

Noticing our interest and curiosity, Amedeo and Giovanni invited us to visit a place called "La Bettola di Yoda" ("Yoda's cave"), a private museum where Amedeo has curated a collection of thousands of *Star Wars* objects over the years. We got in touch with Giovanni to go from Venice to Camisano Vicentino, a little town near Vicenza where the Italian costumers have their base. We arrived at the shopping center "Le Vele" near Camisano on May 20<sup>th</sup>. We had breakfast with the other official 501<sup>st</sup> costumers while we were waiting for Amedeo, and they spoke about their work on a set of stormtrooper armor with which they were having technical problems; the shoulders and leg pieces did not permit a reasonable flexibility to wear the costume comfortably. The 501<sup>st</sup> members invited us to visit their lab where they create the costumes. Inside the costume workshop, a perfect

reproduction of the Original Saga droids C3PO and R2-D2 welcomed us into the 501<sup>st</sup> *Star Wars* world. The golden droid was a 1:1 scale model, while the blue astrodroid was just waiting for someone to switch on its circuits. White helmets, shiny chests, arm and knee plates, blasters, and every type of stormtrooper armor one could imagine were scattered on the desks. A big sign read "JTK Props."

JTK Props is the official costumers' lab located in a warehouse next to "La Bettola di Yoda." Here Giovanni, Amedeo, and others involved in the 501<sup>st</sup> build and assemble TK stormtrooper armor made to be worn during various events. They meet every weekend to create and improve one specific set of TK armor at a time. "JTK Lab is not just work and armor, it is a small common place where you can spend your time having fun evenings together," they declare. A peculiarity of the lab is the absence of marketing goals. The lab does not sell any of its work. The members of JTK rigidly respect the 501<sup>st</sup> rules about the methods and limits of costume crafting.

The armor creation process is divided into several phases. At the beginning, they sketch the entire set of armor while watching the movies with an eye to the original costumes. Next, they split the armor into sections and outline each component with close details. Then they pour ABS<sup>4</sup> into specific molds, similar to industrial working techniques of plastic materials, and they print a rough cast of the section of the armor. They put together these crude pieces, and the costumer tries on the armor to test the comfort and reliability of the shoulders and the leg plates. In the last and most important phase of the work, the armor becomes the specific costume of a particular character in the Saga thanks to individually handmade artwork. Details like a dent, an insignia, or a mark convert the armor into the sandtrooper costume seen in Episode IV during the dialogue between Ben

Kenobi and the Imperial Forces about "the droids you're looking for," the snowtrooper who drives the AT-AT on the planet Hoth in Episode V, or the clone who kills the Jedi Ki Adi Mundi on Mygeeto in Episode III.

The process of creation has no end, even when the armor is complete. Thanks to our ethnographic fieldwork, we have observed the significant creation performances of the members of JTK Props during their meetings on May 20<sup>th</sup> and June 11<sup>th</sup>. We saw how difficult it was fitting the C-3PO costume when Amedeo's wife was wearing it; it was clear that a costume like that could not be worn without people to help you. On that occasion, there were three others helping her fit into the golden foam rubber trousers. Meanwhile, Gianluca and Salvatore, the other two members of the official 501<sup>st</sup> who we met in the lab, tried to improve the flexibility of a set of TK stormtrooper armor. I was struck by the energetic work put into the C-3PO costume. Here we pointed out to Giovanni the different shades of gold on the matte legs and the shiny shoes. He admitted that it was an unresolved problem. They have tried unsuccessfully to create the right golden shade with different materials and techniques. They wanted to use galvanization or anodizing techniques, but these were much too expensive for them, and so they were left dissatisfied by the contrast between hues. In the last meeting they exhorted us to try on a standard set of TK armor.

While Giada was helped into her costume by Giovanni, Gianluca, and Salvatore, I was able to carefully observe the performance during the planning and assembly phases of the prop-making process. I helped them in setting the press fasteners that connect the shoulder sections and the chest plate. If you want to make armor approved by the Disney commission, the margin of error is 3 millimeters. The work isn't easy if done by hand. As they assembled the different white sections on Giada's body, the work was frenzy: "4

centimeters you say? It's too large." "Shit! The fastener broke. Put the glue here." "No, no, that is wrong. It must be flexible. She can't move!" they chattered while working. The outcome of this process was more than a simple handcrafted costume: in this prop-making process, the *Star Wars* world was brought to life.

The 501<sup>st</sup> costumers were set to begin working on stormtrooper armor when Amedeo joined us and introduced us into the "Bettola di Yoda." "La Bettola di Yoda" is a private museum belonging to Amedeo situated in a warehouse next to the JTK lab. As appears on the official museum website, it stocks "one of the largest memorabilia, gadgets, costumes, toys, video games, posters, autographs, and some incredible rarities linked to Lucas's famous Saga." At present, Amedeo's entire collection includes thousands of action figures, games, cards, film movies, and any official or unofficial object related to the *Star Wars* Saga created from 1985 to 1999. We saw a large number of artifacts connected with the *Star Wars* saga: Darth Vader, Tusken Raiders, Wookie 1:1 scale set costumes, dozens of mint-in-box Kenner action figures, thousands of play cards, comics, and books. Shelves and ledges overflowed with cups, dishes, lamps, and anything else Amedeo kept in the warehouse. Glass showcases displayed puppet reenactments of famous movie scenes, while Millennium Falcons, Star Destroyers, and Mon Calamari Cruisers swarmed the ceiling. Everything here told the story of *Star Wars*.

In our interview, Amedeo and Giovanni shared with us the origins of this private collection. The story properly begins in October 1977 when Amedeo saw *Star Wars: A New Hope* for the first time; he was 16 years old. Instantly he fell in love with the *Star Wars* Saga. In the 1980s, he began to buy and collect a few small things related to the films:

"I bought few little things, 'cause I liked them. However, my job gave me the opportunity to travel around the world. I remember the first box I bought in Argentina. For example, I didn't find anything in Russia. [...] When I found something in Germany, France, or Spain I brought them home. In my spare time I went in a lot of shops and asked for anything concerning *Star Wars*. And so I brought home a little bit at a time. There wasn't a difference between Italian or foreign shops. A few souvenirs became thousands of objects and today there are more and more. At the beginning, I restricted myself to buying only little things. When there were no more small ones, you needed medium-size stuff, then big, then bigger and bigger until you're collecting those that need plenty of room."<sup>5</sup>

In the art of prop-making and collecting *Star Wars* objects, the subjects enact strategies of distributing their commodities, similar to the strategies used by the Disney company to commoditize their entire franchise.

### ***Consumption, Objectification, and Diversion***

As Douglas and Isherwood say, goods are segments of a larger open information system that obscures what societies understand as goods. Goods are integrated into lines of communication-consumption, in which they assimilate an important social use: to work as bridges or barriers between individuals and societies (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; 13-14). Prop-making performances are therefore connected to the relationship between the performances of the members of the official 501<sup>st</sup> and the LucasFilm Ltd. franchise, now a Disney company. An example is the different processes of making an original set of stormtrooper armor. Disney produces and sells "original stormtrooper armor" through a

process of commoditization from the factories to the shops. JTK props assembles the "original TK armor" by hand, thanks to performances in the lab. There is a quiet ambivalence between what the official fandom and the Disney franchise mean when they refer to the "original TK stormtrooper armor."

Comparing ethnographic notes from different sources, official fandom seems to mean "original," the significance of which swings between "making an original costume" and "making the costumes of the origins." An "original costume" speaks to the different phases of handmade work so connected with performance as we have seen in the JTK lab. "The costumes of the origins" represents a deeper aim of the fandom: they don't want to simply reproduce the Saga costumes, but to *create* the costumes of the characters of the *Star Wars* universe. In this sense, the notion of the "original" is also the aim that guided George Lucas and his entourage in the late 1970s when Episode IV was released. The intrinsic ambivalence between subjects (costumers), objects (props), and the costume-making process can therefore be considered an attempt to "make costumes of the origins in an original way."

Prop-making performance is a difficult phenomenon to analyze. According to Daniel Miller, objectification is the process through which human beings improve their capacities. The dialectic relationship between subject and object leads to a self-alienation process linked to an intrinsic contradiction within the system considered (Miller, 2013; 55). If the prop-making process can be connected to Goffman's feeling-significance and Gombrich's frame analysis, then the framework of the performance is embedded in the same material as the costumes (in Miller, 2013; 55-56). When members of the 501<sup>st</sup> wear the stormtrooper armor, the armor becomes an extension of their bodies. In other words, the

official costumers don't just assemble the stormtrooper armor: they are also assembled *by* them. The size of the TK lab tells us more than what is immediately seen. The meaningful "humility" of things is linked to the invisible potential power of the "blindingly obvious" behind human capacities and performances (Miller, 2013; 45-48). As Giovanni told us:

"Since I started costuming, *Star Wars* movies have not been the same to me. I'm watching films looking for details like the pieces on Obi Wan's belt. So I can improve my costume and reproduce them accurately."<sup>6</sup>

He spends a lot of time pausing movies at the exact second in which he can glean every single detail. In this sense, the cinematographic choices made by the *Star Wars* franchise become essential.

LucasFilm Ltd. developed different "official" narratives. The first stormtrooper armor was commissioned by George Lucas in 1976 from an English industrial designer, Andrew Ainsworth of the Shepperton Design Studios. The story of how Lucas chose the Ainsworth red stormtrooper helmet has been described in the diaries of Ainsworth's business partner, Nick Pemberton. In 2008, LucasFilm's lawyers sued Ainsworth for intellectual property theft under U.S. copyright law. Ainsworth consulted the Supreme Court of the U.K. and the legal process ended in 2011: the court agreed to Ainsworth's property request and fixed the stormtrooper copyright to no longer than 15 years. In 2012, the Disney company purchased LucasFilm Ltd. for 4.06 billion dollars. In 2015, the corporation granted a license to Anovos, a U.S. company, to develop new stormtrooper armor with different materials and a new design.



Enforcing intellectual property rights is not unusual in Disney's policies. According to Janet Wasko, the Copyright Extension Act approved by the U.S. Congress in 1998 declares that "copyrights held by individuals are to be extended to a total of 70 years after death." This bill is connected directly with Disney pressures on state lobbies, enforced by the strict control of what Wasko calls "Disney Culture" (Wasko 2001; 186). Disney's action with the creation of new Anovos TK armor is in line with what the Animation Corporation described as "originality." Where the tactics of LucasFilm Ltd. failed, Disney had success.

As the anecdote of the stormtrooper armor demonstrates, the different interpretations of the word "original" are essential in the trademark tactics of commoditization. According to Arjun Appadurai, things and goods depend on processes of exchangeability, temporal variability, and social context: there is a dialectical movement from macro to micro in the relationship between the corporate tactics of commoditization and those of the fandom (Appadurai 1986; 12-15). De facto since 2015, the members of the official 501<sup>st</sup> have agreed to officially recognize the Anovos TK armor. Fandom costumers therefore have a direct relationship with the Disney franchise. The quality commission that judges the costumers is an example. The official commission appointed by Disney is responsible for judging if and how the costumes created by the 501<sup>st</sup> respect the "originality" of LucasFilm Ltd. The judges determine who is accepted in the official fandom. At present, Disney has strengthened their supervision of the costumers' performances. The top-down relationship is stratified by prop-making performances and shaped by the ambiguity of "originality" and by the difference between what the prop-makers and the Disney franchise mean by "originality."

The idea that the official fandom accepts top-down narratives concerning the costumes in the movies is interesting; they told us that the new *Star Wars* movies produced by Disney demonstrate a visible change in the design of each costume. In the original saga, every stormtrooper's armor was handmade, and because of this it could present asymmetry in its parts. In the new movies and especially in the prequel episodes, every suit of armor is precise and balanced, and so these are the ones found in every official Disney store. Compared to the old Ainsworth stormtroopers, this armor is homogenized and standardized by the commoditization process that regulates the similarity of all toys and objects sold worldwide in Disney stores.

As prop-making performances, collecting *Star Wars* objects demonstrates the same analytic logics; Amedeo underlined repeatedly the high cash value of his treasures. "La Bettola di Yoda" includes artifacts estimated at thousands of dollars by the official *Star Wars* trade, but he doesn't care about the economic worth. He sees "La Bettola di Yoda" as a private museum. He told us anecdotes about several collectors who would have bought his treasures; e.g., a U.S. collector offered him \$10,000 for one of the rarest action figures in his collection. He didn't care how high the offer was:

"It seems unusual 'cause I was collecting everything about *Star Wars*, I was channeling myself into collecting something I liked. But I'm not the person who says: I absolutely want that! It's 3.000 euros, no matter, I will buy that!" Here there are things that I bought 'cause their price was reasonable or 'cause it was worth it. [...] I have built my collection little by little, and at the same time I like *Star Wars* no less."<sup>7</sup>

According to Appadurai's theories, "diversion strategies" in western collecting performances rework inherent values into a decontextualization process of meanings (Appadurai, 1986). The strategies enacted by the *Star Wars* fandom rework the original nexus between franchise and collecting. "La Bettola di Yoda" is recontextualized by the ambiguous meaning of "original" observed in Amedeo's stories. The heritage of props and costumes reveals a movement through different zones of commodity. Objects of economic value become "priceless treasures." The goals of a private museum are to "leave something important for the younger generations." But Appadurai observed that "such diversion is not only an instrument of decommodification of the object, but also of the (potential) intensification of commoditization by enhancement of value attendant upon its diversion" (Appadurai, 1986; 25-28). The "originality" of the collection, therefore, swings from characteristics of economic capital to those of cultural capital, from the values of the official franchise to those of the fandom.

According to John Fiske, the exchangeability between economic and cultural meaning in the context of fandom is connected to the logic of mass-production (Fiske, 1989). In industrialized cultural societies, the values of commodities are linked to the influence of economic worth. Just as the interpretation of the meaning of "originality" is ambiguous, "La Bettola di Yoda" is defined by its cultural worth, and its economic value is less relevant. In this case, the economic value depends on the cultural meanings of "originality," and so it may be convertible to economic capital "under certain conditions" (Fiske, 1992; 40). These "conditions" are strictly connected through a dialectical relationship between franchise and fandom; what Appadurai means by potential "intensification of commoditization" refers to franchise strategies; what he means by

"instrument of decommoditization" refers to fandom tactics. According to Jenkins, Fiske asserts that "poaching" the fandom world refers to the concept of "textual productivity." The tactics of productivity of the *Star Wars* fandom expropriate and rework values of the official culture:

"Fans produce and circulate among themselves which are often crafted with production values as high any in the official culture. The key differences between the two economic rather than ones of competence, for fans do not write of producing their text for money; indeed, their productivity typically costs them money. [...] There is also a difference in circulation; because fan texts are not produced for profit, they do not need to be mass-marketed, so unlike official culture, fans make attempt to circulate its texts outside its own community. They are 'narrowcast', not broadcast texts." (Fiske, 1992; 39)

As "narrowcast texts," the collection at "La Bettola di Yoda" gives deep significance to Amedeo and the entire official 501<sup>st</sup> fandom: through it, they become a textual meaning maker of "originality." The dialectical relationship is bottom-up; the collection has no price, but a deep cultural meaning.

The bottom-up "textual productivity" of the fandom is in a dialectical relationship with the franchise just as is the performance of costume-making. According to Fiske, "fan productivity is not limited to the production of new texts: is also participates in the construction of the original text and thus turns the commercial narrative or performance into popular culture. Fans are very participatory" (Fiske 1992; 40). Costume-making and participation in production are different between official and non-official events. In the JTK lab, we could observe the different mood between the 501<sup>st</sup> and the official events: in the

first case, we found an informal situation, where the attitude toward unknown people like ourselves was completely inclusive. The working group always seemed intimate: they had breakfast together every Saturday morning before they began working, and they offered us breakfast whenever we went there. The conversations centered on details and gossip about *Star Wars* and other fantasy topics. While they work, cooperation is the key-word; in the JTK, all members think together about new projects and ways to realize them. They collaborate through challenges in order to find new solutions to practical problems that emerge during the composition of the trooper armor.

In the 501<sup>st</sup>, however, an official costuming and performing club, there is a more defined code. During the performances, the members are detached from what we could call an everyday situation. The characters follow gestures and rules of behavior at the level of performance, conforming to the *Star Wars* universe and to the rules of the 501<sup>st</sup>. The fans create art using what is imposed by language-creating elites, in this case, LucasFilm's narratives and Disney's merchandising. This is an example of positive and creative revenge against the power of production that dominates the *Star Wars*-themed trade. Prop-making and costumes have no price imposed by the capitalization dynamics; these have values as a deep cultural meaning defined by the 501<sup>st</sup> code and they are—and have relationship with—*Star Wars* narratives.

But franchise strategies and fandom tactics have one distinctive and shared meaning: the value of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a recurring topic among the old members of the 501<sup>st</sup>, whereas, as Giovanni and Amedeo told us, new generations join the 501<sup>st</sup> without an authentic fascination, "but only 'cause it's cool and hip thanks to the new trilogy. When we start to organize events, they disappear and none of us knows about them anymore."

Nostalgia plays a huge role in the admiration of the Saga, both in involving new recruiters in the "Italian Garrison" and for veteran fans too, to allow them to grow to appreciate the new films, armor, collection artifacts, and franchise strategies in general.

### ***Conclusions***

The more we dealt with the 501<sup>st</sup> Italica Garrison, the Rebel Legion, and the JTK, the more we understood that they are mostly grateful to the Disney company. Besides the pride and the responsibility involved in being official costumers according to LucasFilm Ltd. and Disney, the most important thing that happened since Disney announced and released the new trilogies was that the fandom began to grow exponentially in number. Many young people were won over by these additions to the *Star Wars* Saga and joined the legions. This increase in fandom is much more important to veteran fans than, for example, their doubts about the plot of Episode VII.

The first reason for this is because people who were fans from the very beginning are too involved in the logic of the phenomenon to imagine something that doesn't work in *their Star Wars*. Being an "original" *Star Wars* fan also means having the feeling to take part in film narratives. This is why they look for hints in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, to interpret the clues in Rey's vision, or discuss whose daughter she might be. (They're also anticipating Episode VIII to solve the plot holes that some people in the fandom didn't like in Episode VII, because the middle episode is usually the most narrative of the trilogies.)

The second reason is that the benefits are so great. Since Disney put *Star Wars* in the spotlight again, those that have been in the fandom since the 1990's have seen an

enormous shift in the way the audience views fandom and its performances. At the beginning, as Amedeo and Giovanni told us, being a "nerd" was a social stigma, and it was very hard to be appreciated or even understood. At present, wherever you go, you can find fairs and people who have at least limited knowledge of the saga, and who may also wear *Star Wars* t-shirts or buy lightsabers for their children. It is mostly thanks to this new lifeblood that the *Star Wars* phenomenon in general can continue.

Finally, Disney's strategy in writing Episode VII, which recalls the plot and many elements of Episode IV, awakened a nostalgic feeling in the very first generation of fans that made them excited about *Star Wars* again. Unlike their experience of the Prequel Saga, with its political agenda and exaggerated special effects, Episode VII exceeded their expectations. These are the main reasons why the most involved fans support the idea that the saga must go on and tend to celebrate the Disney company for making it possible.

Since 2012, costuming, collecting, and prop-making performances have been strictly connected with the LucasFilm Ltd. franchise and the vocabulary of the official language. Considering *Star Wars* narratives as real frames embodied in popular fandom culture, we can broadly say that "popular culture is not consumption, it's culture" (Fiske, 1989; 23). According to Fiske, top-down narratives must be considered as being in a dialectical relation with bottom-up processes from fans to company commodities because "culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above" (Fiske, 1989; 23). *Star Wars* movies, costumes, and narratives are framed into the required syntax as an attempt toward a dialectical movement from micro to macro, and vice versa from Disney to the official fandom.

As it happens in the 501<sup>st</sup> with its charter and rules, the meaning of the costuming has been expropriated and reworked by the official fandom. Even if they have included elements from the most recent franchise, they are still heterogeneous within the extended *Star Wars* universe. They play out ambiguous performances with an unexpected meaning. LucasFilm Ltd. and the Disney company have commoditized nostalgia and used it to fuel the system of consumption in the market trade. In the end, in these stories of everyday life, as De Certeau asserts, there is surely something essential, indissoluble from the existence of the subjects who are the authors of the tactics and the actors of situational operations (De Certeau, 2001; 52).

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### Internet Resources

<http://www.501st.com>

<http://www.costume-stormtrooper.it>

<https://databank.501st.com/databank/LegionCharter>

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/bettoladiyoda/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/bettoladiyoda/about/?ref=page_internal)

<http://www.jtkprops.it>

<http://www.newsite.rebellegion.com>

<http://www.originalstormtrooper.com/our-story-19-w.asp>

<http://www.rebellegion.it>

<http://www.starwars.com>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Disney *Star Wars* events are similar to San Diego Comic Con (USA), Gunzburg Legoland (Germany), Milan Cartoomics (Italy), which dedicate great attention to *Star Wars*, and also to other comics and movies.

<sup>2</sup> I'm using the term "costumer" instead of "cosplayer" because all the people from 501st and Rebel Legion want to be called costumers. They told me that the term indicates more accurate and professional work on the costume, whereas in their opinion cosplaying is more just for fun.

<sup>3</sup> Battlefront II was released in November 2005 by LucasArt, the LucasFilm company that used to create *Star Wars* themed videogames. This game in particular filled a gap in the plot of the events between the Clone Wars (Episode II) and Palpatine's ascent to power (Episode III) by skimming through the pages of a clone soldier's logbook.

<sup>4</sup> ABS (acrylonitrile butadiene styrene) is a thermoplastic amorphous polymer easy to work with and modify compared to other plastic materials. ABS is used to build car bodies due to its toughness and flexibility.

<sup>5</sup> "Ho comprato le tre quattro cosucce che mi piacevano.. poi avevo il mio lavoro che mi permetteva di girare il mondo... mi ricordo che ho comprato delle scatole in Argentina... delle scatole le ho comprate anche... i Russia non ho trovato niente per esempio... [...] Le ho trovate in Germania, in Francia, ho portato via a casa... in Spagna... nel tempo libero, io andavo nei negozi di giocattoli e chiedevo se avevano cose di guerre stellari. E portavo a casa, quindi un po' alla volta, pian piano, tra i negozi italiani... i negozi stranieri... mi portavo a casa i souvenir che poi da dieci cento oggetti, poi si è arrivato a... di più! E lì, mi limitavo a piccoli oggetti. Poi finiti i piccoli oggetti, comincio a prendere quelli medi, da quelli medi quelli grossi, da quelli grossi a quelli che occupano molto più spazio."

<sup>6</sup> "Da quando ho iniziato a fare costumi, per me i film di *Star Wars* non sono stati più gli stessi. Guardo i film cercando i dettagli, tipo i pezzi sulla cintura di Obi Wan. Così posso migliorare il mio costume e riprodurli con cura."

<sup>7</sup> "Può sembrare strano, perché io ho collezionato, mi sono sfogato nel collezionismo, di un qualcosa che mi è piaciuto. Ma non sono quella persona che dice: "quello lo voglio!" costa tremila euro e lo compro. No! quello che io ho qui ho comprato perché aveva il suo prezzo, o perché l'ho trovato ad un prezzo che valeva la pena! [...] Io, me lo sono costruito e nel contempo, guerre stellari mi piace fino a lì."