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The Dialectic of Fantasy Displacement and Uncanny Allegory in the *Star Wars* Prequel Trilogy

David Christopher*

The science-fiction fantasy of George Lucas's now infamous *Star Wars* prequel trilogy has been largely overlooked as cinema that might merit critical scrutiny. The surprisingly scant scholarship that is concerned with the prequel trilogy has not adequately addressed it as much more than an example of digital hyperrealism or as a critical fiasco. Much like horror film prior to the 1970s, the ostensible low-calibre of the prequel trilogy's films has eclipsed any critical inquiry into their ideological underpinnings. This paper seeks to offer a preliminary corrective to this critical oversight by examining the prequel trilogy for its allegorical content and its uncanny reflection of American social, economic, and governmental politics in a process of fantasy that attempts to alleviate anxieties regarding America's self-recognition as a militaristic empire. This critical trajectory began with

Carl Silvio's "The *Star Wars* Trilogies and Global Capitalism," in which he explores "how the two trilogies that comprise this saga both express and diffuse latent cultural anxieties about the emergence of late capitalism while neutralizing the fundamental logic and assumptions that underpin this system" (53). Silvio is explicit in his design to "adopt a cultural studies model that analyzes [*Star Wars*] as a culturally and historically specific phenomenon" (Silvio and Vinci 3). However, in exploring the trilogy "as a site of ideological investment that both reflects and shapes late twentieth and early twenty-first century global culture" (Silvio and Vinci 3), he misses an opportunity to address the prequel films as a *specific* cultural allegory. He generalizes capitalism as a *global* advent and avoids the direct implication of American cultural politics in the trilogy's ideology. Silvio's reliance on the term "Global capitalism" glosses over the obvious allegory that references the Bush-

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Cheney administration and their apparently corrupt mismanagement of the Iraq war. The micro-allegories of racism and class stratification introduced in *Episode I* that code the social politics at play in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy as an American cultural landscape are, in turn, mapped onto the larger allegory that references the Iraq War in *Episode II* and particularly in *Episode II*.

In order to pursue this analysis, this paper pairs relevant understandings of the apparently contradictory ideological functions of *fantasy* (as theorized by Slavoj Žižek, Joshua Bellin, and Eric Greene) and *contemporary allegory* (as elucidated via Richard Porton's interpretations of Walter Benjamin's texts). By placing them in a dialectical relationship, this paper demonstrates how they respectively negotiate the masking and exposure of socio-political contradictions that generate anxiety.¹ Thus, as a point of departure, Annette Kuhn's analytical approach regarding the socio-political significance of science fiction is instructive as a governing framework. In the process of defining science fiction, she states that: "more interesting, and probably more important, than what a film genre *is* is the question of what, in cultural terms, it *does*—its 'cultural instrumentality'" (1).² I contend that the "cultural instrumentality" of the prequel trilogy is twofold. George Lucas valiantly attempts to represent America as the "good republic" that is threatened by the emergence of an evil

empire by displacing social anxiety surrounding contemporary American imperialism onto a fantasy scenario in which viewers are invited to identify with Jedi war heroes and a young, altruistic queen/senator. Allegorically, however, the "good republic" is exposed as a landscape of class and race-based inequalities, while the "evil empire" discovers no material equivalent but America itself. As such, America is already both the Republic and the Empire, and the third film in the trilogy observes America's lamentable recognition of its slide from one to the other. An ideological agenda to valorize America is superseded by the political reality that the movie cannot mask, but in fact reveals.

In this sense, Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic descriptions of the ideological mechanics of fantasy are particularly useful for understanding the prequel trilogy. Žižek's description of "*Fantasy as a support of reality*" (*Sublime* 47) finds its most comprehensive articulation in his *The Plague of Fantasies*, a neo-Lacanian extension of psychoanalytic theory which provides a particularly useful framework for the examination of how cinematic fantasy works to displace both repressed and explicit social anxieties. Žižek defines the psychological working of fantasy as a mechanism that maintains a distance between our perception of reality and the Real, while creating that which is desired, namely the elusive *objet a* of fantasy itself, in a process of

negotiating subjectivity (*Plague* 5-7). That is, fantasy works to provide comfort by way of obfuscating the horrors of a reality in which desires are in constant flux based on social intersubjectivity (*Plague* 9-11).

Inherent in Žižek's notions of the mechanics of fantasy are Sigmund Freud's concepts of the *unheimlich* (uncanny) and the *unbehagen* (cultural discontent/unease). Freud explains: "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes" (946). Moreover, the psychological experience of the uncanny as one in which "there is ... the repetition of ... the same crimes" (940). More importantly, Freud is emphatic that "The subject of the 'uncanny' is ... undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror" (930). It does not seem a stretch, then, to imagine the horror experienced by an American populace in the face of an uncanny reflection "of the same [war] crimes" committed by Palpatine and the Bush-Cheney administration (940). Indeed, "Freud wrote about *Unbehagen in der Kultur*, the discontent/unease in culture; today, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we experience a kind of *Unbehagen* in liberal capitalism" (Žižek, *End Times* ix). According to Žižek, "When faced with such

a paranoid construction, we must not forget Freud's warning and mistake it for the 'illness' itself: the paranoid construction is, on the contrary, an attempt to heal ourselves, to pull ourselves out of the real 'illness,' the 'end of the world,' the breakdown of the symbolic universe, by means of this substitute formation" ("Reality to Real" 345). In the prequel trilogy, the paranoid example of the uncanny allegories within its extended narrative presents as an ideological attempt to afford the American populace an opportunity to both heal and pull itself out of the reality of its socio-political nightmare.

Joshua Bellin agrees that, aside from its injurious reproduction of alienating social politics under the guise of innocence, the work of fantasy allows solace in the face of otherwise exposed social contradictions. "[T]o unmoor fantasy films from their social contexts—to dismiss (or laud) them as pure, innocent diversions—is fundamental to these films' social power; any social production that can so readily be denied *as* a social production can perform (or in the denial *has* performed) injurious social work" (Bellin 5). Similarly, in a language that seems almost poached from the *Star Wars* movies themselves, Eric Green expounds that

One of the characteristics of fiction is the ability to extract controversial problems from their social circumstances and re-in-

scribe them onto fictional, even outlandish, contexts. The acceptability of introducing new worlds and even new forms of life in science fiction and fantasy may make these genres especially flexible in this regard. Difficult issues can be located safely distant, even light years away, from the real ground of conflict and thereby rendered less obvious and less psychologically or politically threatening. Science fiction as distance provides deniability for both the filmmakers and the audience. (Greene qtd. in Bellin 8)

The prequel trilogy embeds micro-allegories within its fantasy narratives, which appear to attempt the realization of just such audience deniability as a result.

However, the prequel films' allegorical characteristics betray this ideological function of fantasy. One might be inclined to view the uncanny socio-political reflections within Lucas's prequel films as mere coincidence (the very work Bellin and Žižek claim fantasy accomplishes). However, Greene convincingly argues that

Even if artists do not consciously attempt to make "political statements," artists exist in a world of political and social relations. ... We can reasonably expect therefore that, consciously or not, political

realities, events, and themes will register in an artist's work. In fact we should be shocked if a country's political conflicts and social biases do not find their way into its cultural productions (Greene qtd. in Bellin 11).

In this light, the otherwise banal advent of allegory takes on a progressive ideological function.

According to anarchist cultural theorist Richard Porton, "[Walter] Benjamin acknowledged that allegory was usually denigrated as a product of periods of decay" (99). It is unclear in Porton's text from whom such denigration came, but more importantly, "Benjamin labeled allegory a 'natural history' of the past ravages, or what one commentator has called 'shards of memory that frustrate the oscillations of organic closure.' In other words, allegory resists narrative closure but does not, unlike the more rarefied examples of modernism, operate within an ahistorical void" (99). As I will demonstrate in the next section of this paper, which focuses on the films themselves, the fantasy within the prequel trilogy attempts to separate the Imperial tendencies of contemporary American foreign policy from its democratic populace, while the allegory works to resist such narrative closure, and implicates the democracy in the very vilification it so desperately attempts to evade.

The first of the prequel films might most readily be dismissed as allegorically coincidental considering its pre-9/11 production date. *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, released May 19, 1999, however, highlights the films' allegorical natures even before the narrative proper begins. The opening crawl alludes to ongoing trade disputes experienced by a recessive American economy. It informs the viewer:

Turmoil has engulfed the Galactic Republic. The taxation of trade routes to outlying star systems is in dispute. Hoping to resolve the matter with a blockade of deadly battleships, the greedy trade federation has stopped all shipping to the small planet of Naboo. (*Episode I*)

If read allegorically, this introduction might allude to America's long-term Softwood Lumber trade dispute with Canada—indeed, it is tempting to read the impeachment of Chancellor Valorum in the film as a metonymic reference to the 1991 reduction and demise of the softwood lumber *ad valorem* tariff. Similarly, as either an unintentional, prescient reference to the attempts by Republicans at impeachment following the Clinton sexual scandal or Clinton's troubled trade relations with the Japanese, the impeachment of Chancellor Valorum

in *Episode I* is certainly part of the film's allegorical project.

However, the trade embargo referenced in the opening crawl of *Episode I* is more plausibly a reference to the long-term trade competition and rising economic conflict between Japan and America that preceded the film's release.³ Certainly the alien species that populate the Trade Federation—the Nemoidians—is a thinly veiled reproduction of Japanese economic and ethnic stereotyping, complete with the incongruous voice-dubbing that American audiences have come to expect of mid-twentieth century Japanese film imports. *U.S. News* film critic John Leo claimed that the Nemoidians “are stock Asian villains out of black-and-white B movies of the 1930s and 1940s, complete with Hollywood oriental accents, sinister speech patterns, and a space-age version of stock Fu Manchu clothing” (Leo n.p.). An anonymous blogger on the popular communal weblog *Everything2* using the moniker “Inyo” agrees that “the Trade Federation of episode 1 obviously represents pre-WWII Japan and to a lesser extent, the merchandizing aspects of Japan today. According to the stereotype, the Japanese want to hoard trade rights unfairly and take monetary advantage of everyone” (“Star Wars Ethnic Stereotype,” n.p.). Although Inyo's description is non-scholarly in nature, it is at least indicative of the popular understanding of Japanese stereotypes that are

congruent with the representations in the film. Moreover, in the film's narrative, Darth Sidious, a political puppet-master, and his apprentice Darth Maul, who is an unambiguous visual stereotype of the Christian demon Satan, are working closely with the evil Trade Federation.

The "Japanese" Trade Federation is not the only example of racial stereotyping in *Episode I*. "[T]o cite only the most obvious case, the vilification of the Middle East endures in such films as *The Phantom Menace* [1999], with its rapacious Sandpeople, despotic Hut overlords, and hook-nosed slave traders opposing the pure-white heroes of the civilized republic" (Bellin 108). In the same vein, much has been written about the racism inherent in the character of Jar Jar Binks (almost universally panned by franchise fans old enough to be invested in the mythology of the original trilogy)—particularly, critics pointed out his resonance with minstrelsy and as a Stepin Fetchit character.⁴ However, little has been written regarding the ideological function of this media criticism to displace such a deeply entrenched marker of American social politics as racist towards African-Americans, or the more contemporary allegorical fear of the deadly exoticism of the Middle East, onto poor old George Lucas. Lucas is certainly guilty of these blatant and egregious representational oversights, but to pillory Lucas alone is a particularly extreme example of the displacement

of racism more universally endemic to American culture. Such vehement disdain against the Jar Jar Binks character can only plausibly arise, in psychoanalytic terms, from either the frustrated targets of the character's racist stereotyping at yet another offensive cliché cloaked in a patina of fantasy and comedy, or from white, privileged members of a liberal media and audiences' uncanny recognition of racial stereotyping so as to jettison it as not their own—one of Žižek's plague fantasies. When the experience of reality falls short of the ideal promised by ideology, fantasy steps in as a mediating psychological device of catharsis, a release valve in the order of repressive tolerance-based criticism. In this example, the fantasy is not diegetic; it is a social fantasy that an endemic ideology of racism exclusively belongs to Lucas (a fantasy that overlooks the otherwise complicit participation of African-American actor Ahmed Best) and that intimates the diegetic ideological project of the trilogy in which Bush becomes the scapegoat for widespread guilt experienced over contemporary American foreign policy.

While these visual stereotypes and micro-allegories explicitly encode deep-seated and pervasive American cultural beliefs immediately preceding the events of 9/11, they can hardly be deemed more than coincidental with any reading of the films as allegorical with the politics of the Iraq War in their otherwise specious

association to a conflict that had not yet begun. There is, however, at least one example of a fantasy attempt to code American military technology as benevolent and benign. Queen Amidala's royal yacht is almost inarguably based on the American Lockheed SR71 "Blackbird" which served with the U.S. Air Force from 1964 to 1998.



Fig. 1: Amidala's royal yacht



Fig. 2: Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird

Although not identical, the structural and visual similarity between the two is uncanny. As Greene contends, "We can reasonably expect ... that, consciously or not, political realities, events, and themes will register in an artist's work" (qtd. in Bellin 11). Evidently, the rising military zeitgeist that was as much a cause of the events of 9/11 as their effect informed Lucas's aesthetic choices for the film's spacecraft.

Amidala's yacht is a silvery post-modern reflection of the black original—a specific difference that is significant when read through the lens of the ideas in Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1988). Referring to the postmodern architecture of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, Jameson observes "the way in which the glass skin repels the city outside: a repulsion for which we have analogies in those reflector sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes and thereby achieve a certain aggressivity towards and power over the Other" (200). The spectacular skin of Amidala's ship, viewed in the glaring sunlight of midday Tatooine, might thus be read as a blinding, silvery "repulsion" of a material reality in which the machine is an instrument of war. Amidala is an ostensibly sympathetic protagonist who propagates peace and democracy. The narrative relevance of Amidala's ship is one of the most visually

obvious attempts in the films to re-signify the American military in a melodramatically positive light and to colour American war machines as vehicles for peace.

As visually apparent as these vehicular allegories and racial stereotypes are in *Episode I*, they were not the only social politics at play in these films. For example, *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002) represents stratified economic social class relations with another visual metaphor. One of the film's earliest scenes depicts two highly decorated graduates of the Jedi Academy, Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi, in an elevator shooting upwards to the ivory towers of the elite. At its height is Senator Padmé Amidala's luxury apartment, from which she overlooks an urban vista (with her black servant). In *Plague*, Žižek is clear that ideology is readily carried in architectural constructs (1-2), but, moreover, the fantasy identification with the narrative's protagonists on an emotional, melodramatic level distracts from audiences' complicity with the ideological project of normative racial and class stratification.

The heroic Jedi Knights proceed to pursue a rogue assassin into the seamy streets of Coruscant's urban heart, effecting a dramatic plunge into a working class industrial landscape. Piloting a hover car with Obi Wan Kenobi as his passenger, Anakin Skywalker executes a manoeuvre whereby he ascends nose down with blinding speed,

prompting the horrified Obi wan to plead, "Pull up, Anakin. Pull up!" His fearful reaction to an increased proximity to the lower class landscape is obscured by its conflation with his fear of the potentially tragic results of the dangerous manoeuvre. During the chase, the two heroes navigate a landscape replete with the fires of industry and monolithic industrial factories. They proceed to force the would-be assassin from the skies in an explosive crash landing that coincides with the transition of the mise-en-scene to a working class landscape, which spectacularizes "the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions" (Žižek, *End Times* x). On ground level, the ethnic and economic landscape is predominantly "alien." A racially diverse population crowds the city streets, which are adorned with electronic billboard advertisements featuring alien minorities. Obi-Wan and Anakin eventually end up in an explicitly "blue-collar" sports bar where they are depicted as awkwardly out of place. This sports bar is certainly a far cry from the cantina in *Episode IV* and the first time such a specifically American urban landscape has been portrayed in any of the films.

These introductory visual metaphors for class stratification find more thorough articulation in the social politics endured by the characters themselves. Already introduced in *Episode I* is the fact that slavery is a part of the socio-economic landscape. Shmi Skywalker and her prodi-

gal son are held in servitude at the threat of an explosive implant, an injustice against which even the “noble” Jedi have no explicit intention of intervening. In a moment of domestic idyll, Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn informs them that he is not actually there to free slaves. The use of slavery to code certain characters as victims and others as villains is an almost garish narrative device that reproduces class stratification as a normal side-effect of (intragalactic) commerce—one of the few conventions picked up by J.J. Abrams’ newest instalment, *The Force Awakens* (2016), in which the nomadic Rey must scavenge a harsh environment of derelict star destroyers to satisfy brutal wage-slavery.

Even the internal mechanics of the Jedi order valorize a social hierarchy of guild apprenticeship: young Anakin Skywalker apprentices with Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi as part of the Jedi’s rigid system of order promotion. The allegorical similarity to military hierarchy is made explicit as the members of the Jedi order are forced into military ranks to campaign on behalf of the Republic against evil separatists. The conflation of religious and military hierarchies, rendering the ancient order of Jedi Knights modern soldiers, is part of the larger allegory of the imminent contemporary Iraq War intimated in *Episode II*, and explicitly taken up by *Episode III*. Furthermore, Obi-Wan’s failing in *Episode III* as a patriarchal authority in a hierarchical position

above Anakin exposes the ways in which class relations are imbricated with patriarchal authority, and how the failing of either/both cause widespread social anxiety.

However, it is in the more bodily-psychoanalytic aspects of the narrative of *Episode II* in which the uncanny allegory finds its strongest articulation. Just as with the second film of the original trilogy (*Empire*), a young Skywalker suffers a severed hand/limb at the hands of a sabre-wielding patriarchal villain. One could hardly imagine a more Oedipal representation, but it is just as uncanny according to Freud’s almost identical example in his explication: “[T]he story of the severed hand in Hauff’s fairy tale certainly has an uncanny effect, and we can trace that effect back to the castration complex” (947). Similarly, it is just as uncanny on an extra-diegetic level. The unabashed repetition of a nearly identical narrative development from the original trilogy literalizes “the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations” (Freud 940). These uncanny effects work in concert to reveal an allegory of the castrating effects of an evil empire that will only explicitly affirm itself to be America in the third film.

However, *Episode II* begins the process of allegorizing the American military as part of an evil empire. The film

depicts an industrial-military factory in the hands of the ostensibly evil separatists. Silvio argues that in the original trilogy “we see little evidence of how these fascinating technologies could actually be produced by this fictional universe” (61). As such, the original trilogy features a Marxist understanding of commodity fetishism by parading such technological goods but effacing any evidence of the methods of their production. The prequel trilogy does just the opposite. *Episode II* features a lengthy sequence in which a wholly automated industrial-military production factory becomes the backdrop against which the heroes Anakin and Padmé must fight to survive. The factory lacks any evidence of human intervention. C-3PO astutely observes the Marxist *grundrisse* of “dead” labour when he exclaims, “Machines making machines? How perverse!” Here, the ideology of the film separates its *benevolent* humans from a mechanized evil with which they do not participate. Moreover, according to Silvio the original trilogy made technology look realistic and familiar (60). In the prequel trilogy, much of the technology is so digitally artificial that it eschews any plausible realism. The result is not a comforting familiarity but rather an alienating lack of realism that generates a shocking feeling of the uncanny, and further works to create a polarity between the alienating technology of the nascent empire and the benevolent human population within the film,

with which the audience is encouraged to identify/sympathize.

The vilification of industrialization represents part of the prequel trilogy’s substantial ideological project to generate a fantasy in which members of the American populace—the ostensible body politic—can distance themselves from the machinations of a corrupt administration. Nevertheless, the allegorical aspects of the narrative are far more cynical.⁵ *Episode II*, released 16 May, 2002, concludes with arguably one of the most prescient allegorical scenes in movie history, depicting a dramatic prelude to war. In the closing flourish, legions of armoured clone soldiers blanket the tarmac of a seemingly endless landing strip from which multiple, massive, industrial, and monolithic war ships, reminiscent of the Imperial Star Destroyers of the original trilogy, are launched into space. Less than a year after the release of *Episode II*—20 March, 2003—the war in Iraq would begin.

The political allegory of the failings and deceptions of the Bush-Cheney administration and of the Iraq War find their most compelling articulation in *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, released 15 May, 2005 at the International Cannes Film Festival and under conventional wide release on 19 May, 2005. *Episode III* was released two years after the weapons of mass destruction scandal became public. On 21 June, 2003, *The World Socialist Website* published an article entitled “Weapons of mass destruc-

tion in Iraq: Bush's 'big lie' and the crisis of American imperialism" ("Weapons"). The article states: "the Bush administration has been unable to produce any evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. It is increasingly obvious that the entire basis on which the White House and the American media 'sold' the war was a lie" ("Weapons"). The article goes on to report that "Bush warned repeatedly that unless the United States invaded Iraq and 'disarmed Saddam Hussein,' the Iraqi leader would supply terrorists with chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons to use against the American people" ("Weapons"). Similarly, in the war that begins at the end of *Episode II* and that is well underway at the beginning of *Episode III*, Palpatine uses the Separatist threat as his excuse for maintaining a standing clone army, and for retaining his power. It is clear that Chancellor Palpatine/Darth Sidious is manipulating both opposing factions of the war with lies. His latest apprentice, Darth Tyrranus/Count Dooku is charged with commanding the Separatist Army while Sidious as Palpatine presides over the Republican faction.

In the film the Emperor's deception is obviated by Obi-Wan Kenobi. In another melodramatically compelling moment he informs Amidala that, "Anakin has turned to the dark side ... He was deceived by a lie. We all were. It appears that the Chancellor was behind everything, including the war."

Obi-Wan highlights the corruption of the system he finds himself within with statements that uncannily echo media headlines accusing the Bush-Cheney administration of such lies.⁶ Allegorically, his statement might reference either the awakening of the American public to a false consciousness imposed upon the working class in a Marxist analysis of capitalism, or to the governmental manipulations of the Bush-Cheney administration that lied about weapons of mass destruction to justify an oil war. In either case, Obi-Wan betrays the ideological mandate to keep patriarchal corruption concealed, just as the "*Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud 933). In the process, Obi-Wan admits that he, too, was deceived, and seems to experience anxiety in the recognition, given his Jedi powers of intuition, that he, in fact, knew all along.

From weapons of mass destruction to commodity fetishism, the film laments a crumbling system and the global recognition of its increasingly untenable imperial agenda. In *Episode III*, all of this is coded as a fantasy of tragedy. Obi-Wan Kenobi, one of the highest graduates of the only recognizable educational system in the films, the Jedi academy, exposes the truth about the war and tries to remain loyal to a paradigm of democracy. He insists to Anakin: "I'm loyal to the republic, to democracy." The films, however, demonstrate slippage

in the definition of “democracy” and “republic” as the ailing republic shifts into imperialism. Silvio argues that “Coruscant is after all the center of a benevolent (if somewhat ineffectual) Galactic Republic, the very thing that Palpatine eventually supplants with his evil Empire” (69). However, this ostensibly benevolent republic is already the empire it becomes. In *Episode I*, Palpatine admits that the then democratic republic was already “mired in ... corruption.” In Gore Vidal’s 1986 article “Requiem for an American Empire,” he had already observed this characteristic of America: “[f]rom the beginnings of our republic, we have had imperial tendencies ... But the Empire has always had more supporters than opponents” (19). He goes on to observe that the American “republic [has begun] to crack under the vast expense of maintaining a mindless imperial force” (24), and sardonically opines that “[t]oday, of course, we are ... a nation armed to the teeth and hostile to everyone” (20). Similarly, in the films, the change in the narrative from republic to empire is mere semantic re-signification; ultimately it is the same body politic that maintains the same standing army. Amidala notes that as the Republic is declared an Empire by acclamation, the decision is met with thunderous applause, but nothing much else changes. It seems that the republic was already an empire, and the film depicts a fantasy of

celebratory acceptance by all but a few of the major protagonists.

It is not hard to see Bush as the emperor: working both sides of a war to satisfy the machinations of his own political design. In one of his most infamous quotes during an interview with congressional leaders on 19 December, 2000, he attempts a tongue-in-cheek trivialization of this nature of his political career. “If this were a dictatorship, it’d be a heck of a lot easier, just so long as I’m the dictator” (Bush, Jr.). The Bush-Emperor allegory only breaks down in the fact that Palpatine is an intellectually superior character within the narrative, while Bush was almost universally hailed as lacking in that regard—intellectually castrated by his own presidential father, as it were. The films can thus be read as an American fantasy of the revered intellect of their fearless leader projected onto the only one who needs such a projection. In the films, Sidious/Palpatine manipulates Anakin into committing the most heinous war crimes. In *Episode III* Anakin, as a fledgling Sith apprentice, murders all of the Separatist leaders, and, in a particularly troubling scene, a population of Jedi children. American war crimes were similarly egregious. In *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, Stephen Eisenman concludes that the torture exercised against Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison was the inevitable result of a severely repressed patriarchal

system supported by the highest ranking officials of the American military and the federal government. One of the most conservative estimates of the civilian death toll in Iraq places the number at over 65, 000 (Leigh), and the *iraqbodycount.org* website reports that “[o]f the 4,040 civilian victims of US-led coalition forces for whom age data was available, 1,201 (29%) were children” (“Iraqi deaths”). Also in *Episode III*, the Emperor attempts the genocide of an ostensibly oppositional religious faction. He executes what he refers to as “Order 66” and the clone armies turn on their Jedi leaders. In the film it is the Jedi who are nearly eradicated by the Sith. In American politics, an ostensibly Christian president attempts to eradicate, or at least wholly vilify Muslims and Islam; in this allegory, American Christianity is coded as a force of genocide, and participates with a battery of post-9/11 films that conflate Christianity with war and evil, such as *Religulous* (2008), *Legion* (2010), and *The Book of Eli* (2010), amongst others.

As the Republic in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy faced its inevitable dissolution into an empire of evil, it is depicted as rife with the militant and corrupt machinations of its governmental leadership and guilty of the most egregious war crimes, and it is exposed as an economic empire, still fully constructed as a racist and exclusionary patriarchy. One can only imagine

how this unforgiving, uncanny reflection of American political culture must have felt to the average American. In this respect, Silvio notes “the dissonance that many Americans feel between the supposedly benevolent and progressive nature of our new global economy” (67), whereby American dissonance from the Iraq War is referenced via the euphemism of a global economy, though it is undoubted that the American cultural landscape “does not always appear to benefit the middle or working classes of the country” (67). As early as 1986, Gore Vidal criticized Cold War economic policy for this reason.

We shall have an arms race, said ... John Foster Dulles, and we shall win it because the Russians will go broke first. We were then put on a permanent wartime economy, which is why a third or so of the government’s revenues is constantly being siphoned off to pay for what is euphemistically called defense. (18)

In a more specific reference to the Iraq War, in his 2007 article entitled “Bush Has Destroyed Iraq and America,” Paul Craig Roberts discusses the Bush administration in terms that could just as readily be applied to Palpatine’s double identity and his manipulation of both sides of the war in the films. Roberts highlights the malaise of

responsibility felt by the American public, stating: “Every American who voted Republican shares responsibility for the great evil America has brought to the Middle East” (Roberts). Anakin/Vader, the hapless and romantic dupe who was manipulated by the Emperor all along, expresses his emotion in an oft-ridiculed cinematic moment when he releases a lamenting howl: “Nooooooooo!” Scathing indictments such as Eisenman’s *The Abu Ghraib Effect* or the myriad headlines that criticized America’s role in the war must have caused substantial anxiety regarding the Iraq War and its consequences.

Episode III attempts to alleviate American social anxieties regarding responsibility for these war crimes by displacing them with fantasies of redemption. All of the responsibility for the war and its fallout is displaced onto Emperor Palpatine and the anonymous, corrupt bureaucrats of the senate, which can easily be read as an allegory, if not an analogy, of President Bush and the senate of the Bush-Cheney administration, respectively. The film invites the audience to identify most closely with the war heroes Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi, both of whom are redeemed from the Emperor’s evil design. Anakin’s transformation into Vader is coded as a form of tragedy, which already inherently carries the redemption achieved in the post-history presented in *Return of the Jedi* in 1983. In

the prequel trilogy, Vader acts as a fantasy that already indicates we can and will be delivered of the evils of the military-industrial complex—that in the hands of the next generation (in the original trilogy), all will be well. Obi-Wan Kenobi represents the dignity of an academic hierarchy in his efforts to remain loyal to the tenets of democracy and freedom. In doing so, he finds himself tragically alone and facing exile. In this narrative progression, the war heroes must either become complicit with the evil designs of a corrupt administration, or face banishment.

Such an attempt to dislocate the body politic from a corrupt administration only allegorizes the failings of presidential authority, thereby causing a schism in the patriarchal order, and rejuvenating the very anxieties it attempts to displace. Such ruptures in the mythology of the patriarchal-presidential authority have always been concomitant with deep social anxiety, perhaps best exemplified during the Carter administration. Indeed, the original *Star Wars* emerged as a feel-good valorization of anti-imperial forces in the wake of Watergate and the fall of the Nixon administration. Richard Porton’s words regarding Benjamin’s description of allegory are instructive in this regard:

Benjamin’s preoccupation with the ‘transience of human history’ and

the instability of meaning ... might seem irrevocably melancholy, but his superficially pessimistic emphasis on ‘the brokenness’ of the world is always tempered by radical optimism – ‘a visionary glance’ granted to the historian who, armed with the capabilities of a ‘prophet turned backwards,’ can ‘perceive his own time through the medium of past fatalities. (99)

However, the allegories in the prequel trilogy provide only a pyrrhic “visionary” perception of our “own time.” By coding America’s redemptive heroes as the tragic dupes of an evil administration, the films betray a malaise experienced by an American populace increasingly aware of and disillusioned by a corrupt leadership that continued to maintain an increasingly untenable military-industrial complex.

¹ In this context, and throughout the paper, “ideology” refers to culturally constructed notions of what is true and natural.

² Also quoted in Bellin (18).

³ In 1995, The New York Times reported that “[t]he United States and Japan brought their bitter trade dispute to the European Continent today, with senior representatives from both sides accusing each other of using misleading figures on Japanese imports of American autos” (Nash n.p.).

⁴ David Pilgrim observes that:

[c]ritics claimed that Jar Jar, a bumbling dimwitted amphibian-like character, spoke Caribbean-accented pidgin English, and had ears that suggested dreadlocks. Wearing bellbottom pants and vest, Jar Jar looked like the latest in black cinematic stereotypes. Newspaper editorials and internet chat room discussions repeatedly invoked Stepin Fetchit’s name (n.p.).

Stepin Fetchit was the stage name of African American actor Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry. Perry’s iconic and controversial Fetchit character reproduced stereotypes established by the 19th century minstrel tradition well into the twentieth century (Pilgrim n.p.). Pilgrim goes on, “This incident suggests that Fetchit’s legacy is to be remembered as a coon caricature: lazy, bewildered, stammering, shuffling, and good-for-little except buffoonery” (Pilgrim n.p.). Parodic assaults against Lucas’ ethnic profiling abound. In an October 1999 *MADtv* sketch, an ersatz George Lucas, played by Will Sasso, proudly introduces a new character to the *Star Wars* universe, a long-lost relative of Jar Jar Binks named “Aunt Jar-Jar-Mimah” (“Episode #503”).

⁵ Episodes II and III were both released following 9/11 and are substantially more cynical than *Episode I*, or any of the films of the original trilogy.

⁶ In addition to the “Weapons of mass destruction in Iraq: Bush’s ‘big lie’ and the

crisis of American imperialism” article listed above, media journalism reporting on the “lies” (and even quantifying them at exactly 935 as in CNN’s “Study: Bush, aides made 935 false statements in run-up to war”), have abounded since the end of the war, culminating in Donald Trump’s accusation during the 2016 Republican presidential debate in South Carolina.

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