

In Defense of the Star Wars Prequel Films

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When *Star Wars* was originally conceived, its creator George Lucas was an American New Wave film director, a member of the so-called New Hollywood cohort establishing themselves in the 1970s. Lucas had already directed *American Graffiti* (1973) and the dystopian science-fiction feature *THX-1138* (1971). *Star Wars* (1977) was something of a departure from his earlier films, but still part of that New Hollywood style. So were his subsequently written but Steven Spielberg-directed blockbuster *Indiana Jones* series of films and television series *The Young Indiana Jones*. Lucas gave up directing *Star Wars* for the follow-up films of the original trilogy, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1981) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), but returned nearly 20 years later to direct the prequel series of films, *The Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*, 1999–2005.

The Show Business of Film Art

Star Wars has always been a great marketing boon for not only the films and related media but perhaps even more significantly for merchandise, especially toys. Lucas has been accused of being not a filmmaker so much as a toy seller. What this neglects is the relation between the toys and the films. The toys were designed on the spaceships and other technology of Lucas's imagined universe, and these were actually done with their cinematic character first and foremost in mind. From the very opening scene of the first *Star Wars* film slowly revealing the terrifyingly huge Imperial Star Destroyer pursuing the heroic Rebel ship of Princess Leia, the spaceships have been a major visual compositional element of the films, with their basic shapes, colors and overall designs forming the basis for the style of the films cinematographically, as well as helping to organize the direction and editing of shots. This recalled comic book graphics and had a deliberately old-fashioned feel, including Lucas's resurrection of obsolete optical effects such as "wipe" transitions between shots, which would otherwise be seen in the greater culture only in old cartoons. Often the spaceships themselves are used cinematically as such visual transition devices.

Especially the Starfighters but also the capital spaceships recalled depictions of WWII films from Lucas's childhood in the 50s and 60s, in which military vehicles served as strong visual devices: battleships sailing, tanks rolling, fighter planes diving, as well as cars speeding across the screen. This evoked the entire high industrialized world against which Lucas's Baby Boomer generation rebelled in the 60s and 70s New Left that preceded and paralleled the New Hollywood. Imperial architecture such as that of the iconic Death Star echoed the International Style skyscrapers and Brutalist architecture of high 20th century cities, which were merely Art Deco buildings stripped of their ornate facades — the latter furnishing the style for the Republic in the prequel films. Significantly, in the climactic battle of the first *Star Wars* film, the Rebel X-Wing Starfighters launch from massive jungle-engulfed temple ruins on the remote and seemingly otherwise uninhabited planet Yavin IV where they had made their base — straight out of the genre of early to mid-20th century adventure comics and films.

What has been called the “used future” aesthetic of *Star Wars* departed significantly from the preceding style of antiseptically clean depictions of *Star Trek* and other sci-fi productions. But this was reversed in the prequel trilogy, as the Republic was shown at a height of manicured perfection — if however shadowed by a noticeable seamy underside. In this way, the Republic looked like the pre-1960s and 70s cities of the zenith of industrial society, for instance as depicted in *noir* detective and melodrama woman-in-trouble films. Lucas’s prequel trilogy films partake of this full range more than the original *Star Wars* films do.

The prequel trilogy series of films had an even more aggressive marketing campaign for their associated products than the original trilogy that had already been path-breaking in the movie business. The prequel films exploded with a seemingly endless assortment of new spaceship and other vehicle designs — evocative of the decadent and baroque quality of the overgrown Republic on the brink of crisis and collapse. Such a bountiful harvest of products seemed to emanate organically from the 1990s boom era, very much like the merchandise catalogs and showrooms of the 1950s era of US prosperity that was the essential backdrop for the 1960s New Left rebellion.

Style of Humor

A key part of Lucas’s cinematic humor has been in the spaceship designs as well as the costuming and even the hairstyles with which they harmonized, if however jarringly juxtaposing high technology and the *haute couture* of the *Anci en R gime*, perhaps most notoriously that of Princess Leia in the first *Star Wars* film, and taken to new heights with Queen Amidala in the first prequel film, *The Phantom Menace*. Conversely, the transition from Republic to Empire in the film series is signaled by the stripping of the vivid color paint (a primary-color palette of deeply royal crimsons, golds and blues) from the ships of the Republic, in favor of their bare metal gray in the Empire.

This gives the prequel and original series trilogies the character of juxtaposing the pre-industrial 1700s with what Charles Baudelaire called the more modern and grim post-Industrial Revolution “funeral *cort ge*” style of the 1800s. This is what contemporaneously Marx had called a world which summons humanity to witness with its “sober senses.” What is missing and elided from Lucas’s *Star Wars* transition is the Neoclassical Republic style of the American and French Revolutions that came between them, with Lucas skipping directly to the 19th century Empire style for that of his Galactic Republic. This superimposition of old and new is an essential characteristic of Lucas’s depiction of the world on the verge of being overthrown.

An anticipation of the coming Empire is offered in the Clone Wars of the second prequel film, *Attack of the Clones*, in which the Republic’s Clone troopers’ white uniforms, like the later Stormtroopers, and their gray transports, like the later Star Destroyers, are initially rushed off the assembly line into action unpainted. (In the third prequel film, *Revenge of the Sith*, and *The Clone Wars* television series, the Clones’ armor is painted according to military unit and specialized purpose.) The overall aesthetic tone of the prequel films’ cinematic universe, especially that of *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones*, contrasted shockingly with that of the original trilogy.

Nothing had prepared viewers for this significant shift in style, and it was undoubtedly part of what provoked a negative reaction from established fans of *Star Wars*. Especially as, in the two decades between the original films and the prequel trilogy, so much sci-fi genre popular culture had slavishly imitated the first *Star Wars* style and its dystopian characterization of the “future” (despite *Star Wars* being set “long ago, in a galaxy far, far away”) of more advanced technology. Interestingly, technology in *Star Wars* had a certain static quality of having been established, developed, and plateaued seemingly (and then, in later fiction, described literally) thousands of years prior. This resonated with the “end of history” tone of the late 1990s and early 2000s in which the prequel films were produced.

In the time between the original film series and the prequels, in the 1980s and 90s, Lucas supervised an “Expanded Universe” of stories, told in various media, including novels and video games, set in the same period as the original films and sharing their overall imaginative parameters and aesthetic style. There, some innovations were tentatively explored by Lucas & co. but still within the confines of the familiar original *Star Wars* cosmos.

Later on, concurrent with and following the prequel series, Lucas also created several animated television series in the 2000s and 2010s, *The Clone Wars*, set in the same Republic-era *Star Wars* universe, as well as the Dark Times (early Empire) series, *Star Wars: Rebels* (which proved to be his final *Star Wars* production effort). All these later productions demonstrate the effects of the modification of style first evinced in the prequel films, which was thus shown to be irrevocably part of the *Star Wars* universe, however much the old fans and other viewers might have desired for return to the aesthetic tone of the original trilogy films. *Star Wars* became fully fleshed out as a complete universe with the full arc of its internal historical trajectory in the decade after the prequel films’ initial release. *Star Wars* was established as an undeniable commercial and cultural success in its new phase, despite any criticisms.

Then, suddenly, Lucas sold the rights to the *Star Wars* franchise to Disney, and stopped participating in its creation. Reportedly, Lucas stepped away because of the fury that had been expressed against the prequel series. In the end, Lucas abandoned *Star Wars* back to the Old Hollywood.

Disneyfication

Disney infamously inaugurated the sequel series of films released between 2015 and 2019, the “Skywalker Saga” of *The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker*. These films were mostly the creation of director J.J. Abrams (who was also responsible for the no less criminal *Star Trek* “reboot” film series starting in 2009). Disney has also produced the “anthology” standalone films *Rogue One* and *Solo*, as well as the follow-up early Empire-set animated television series extension of *The Clone Wars*, *The Bad Batch*, and *Star Wars: Resistance*, set in the same New Republic era as the sequel films. Most recently, they have also produced new live-action television series *The Mandalorian*, *The Book of Boba Fett*, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, and the upcoming series *Andor* and *Ahsoka*, as well as several others still in development. The stage has been set for an endless proliferation of *Star Wars* productions. But this all began not with the original but rather the prequel trilogy.

The *Star Wars* prequel series proved to be the beginning of simultaneously the largest profit-generating and thematically controversial era of the franchise, a line drawn between the original three films and what came after (except the pre-*Phantom Menace* Expanded Universe stories). In some respects, an even more drastic further line could be drawn between the original 1977 *Star Wars* film, retroactively titled *Episode IV: A New Hope*, and everything produced afterwards, all of which has been more or less dismissed by cultural commentators and critics as primarily a money-making enterprise rather than in any way an authentic artistic endeavor by Lucas.

Strangely, however, every new *Star Wars* production has generated nostalgia and a retrospective reappraisal and increased estimation for the preceding efforts. This now, after the Disney takeover, has even affected the notorious prequel series itself, which is shown greater estimation in retrospect. Is this merely Millennials' nostalgia for their films of childhood? It is only as adults that we can truly appreciate our enjoyments of youth.

From Republic to Empire

So it bears consideration to reflect on the substance of the most controversial turn of Lucas's *Star Wars* career. Especially as he actually considered it to be the achievement of the real aim and ambition of his entire *Star Wars* creation, namely, the depiction of the Galactic Republic that came before the Empire.

Lucas said that he was held back from realizing his original vision for *Star Wars* only by the technical limits of what could be convincingly depicted on film. However, his vision was eventually made possible with the advent of adequate Computer-Generated Imagery CGI special effects, which Lucas ended up pioneering through the prequel series, much as he had done earlier with the "practical" optical effects in the original films (establishing for this purpose the special-effects production company Industrial Light and Magic, whose creations left their stamp on many other films and television series, such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and its sequel series and feature films).

What was Lucas's original concept for *Star Wars*, then, and how was it realized in the prequel films?

This was the story of the Galactic Republic and its descent into the Galactic Empire, through the Clone Wars and the betrayal of the Jedi Order and victory of their old enemies, the Dark Side wielders of the Force, the Sith. It was the obscure background to the original *Star Wars* films that Lucas wanted to tell.

It has mostly been received as a parable about the fascist overthrow of democracy. The Empire had always been interpreted by viewers as a stand-in for Nazism, with the Rebels like the plucky individualistic American heroes defying the nasty SS officer-led Germans from the films of the 1950s and 60s of Lucas's youth as the principal model. Recall *The Guns of Navarone* (1961) and similar films of Lucas's formative period of childhood. (There were also, significantly, the post-WWII Japanese *auteur*-directed Samurai films as a model, given the Jedi lightsaber sword-fighting motif. Such films were inspirational for international New Wave cinema more generally, suffused with a certain noble if melancholic tone — an interesting resonance with the defeated

Imperial Japan and its history. Another significant Japanese genre inspirational for Star Wars were the *Godzilla* movies, in which Japan seemed to rehearse its trauma of devastation by Allied bombing in WWII.) If one needed any further clues, the Imperial troops were called Stormtroopers and wore helmets that imitated the shape of WWII German military gear.

The original films had a fairly simple “good-guy vs. bad-guy” plotting, with apparently no overt moral ambiguities whatsoever — a characteristic that returned even more egregiously in the post-Lucas Disney sequel series. The prequel series, by contrast, was focused on the fundamentally ambivalent character of its central protagonist, Anakin Skywalker, who everyone knew was destined to turn to the Dark Side of the Force and become Darth Vader. Anakin’s descent into darkness paralleled that of the Republic, and its political events were the circumstances for his own tragic fate, as he is at the center of the intrigues of the Jedi and the Galactic Senate. Knowing the outcome, viewers could now watch how it unfolded. It was not a straightforward story.

Critical Failure?

The prequel films were decried by critics for being too cerebral and difficult to follow in their “political” plotting. They were considered too nerdy and “inside baseball,” or what was pejoratively termed “fan service,” at the expense of addressing a more general audience not already in the know, rather than considered as a deepening complexity of an immersive cinematic universe for viewers to inhabit. But this spoke more to the critics’ own concerns about rating Hollywood films’ commercial success, desperately trying to peg this to artistic achievement, with which it usually has little if any relation. “Good” films are generally judged to be so purely on technical grounds: a well-executed performance of a predictable formula.

Lucas deliberately defied such expectations, and this was his old 1970s New Hollywood ethic coming back to the fore. The prequel series was actually very well realized, with the same pastiche in-jokes of cinematic medium-reflexivity driving almost the entirety of dramatic script and visual imagery in the films — at least for anyone who could view them at this level. But Lucas invited viewing his films this way. It was a precondition for New Wave cinema that viewers were already well versed in a variety of film styles and how they carried over from and into other popular and commercially widespread media.

An assumption of the cinematic form is its dream-like “subliminal” character, in which viewers are pre-consciously (“subconsciously”) aware of implicit meanings barred to explicit consciousness. Good filmmakers compose their productions at this level, showing much more visually in their films than can be consciously apprehended. The Frankfurt School Marxist Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno called this their “mimetic” character, imitating unconscious processes of cognition, which allows film to become art at all.

This is in contrast to other art forms, however intuitive in nature, in which conscious recognition is essential to their formal aesthetic achievement and meaning, by presenting aesthetically something that is otherwise pre-conscious. This is what makes cinema what Adorno called “psychoanalysis in reverse,” in that, rather than making conscious what is usually unconscious, as in post-Renaissance bourgeois art, the potential conscious recognition is rather actively made

unconscious and repressed in the experience of film and related media. All too successfully. For precisely the element of conscious play with aesthetic form that is the hallmark of historically bourgeois art is usually lacking in popular cinema. This means that film does not perform aesthetic education as other art forms do, but rather encourages infantile regression and evasion of consciousness.

The antidote to this, however, is not to resist it but rather to go full-tilt, all the way into it. For film to function self-critically would mean to proceed immanently in its established tendencies of popular consumption. Lucas — like other contemporary filmmakers such as David Lynch (as in the 1984 adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*) — does this to an absurd degree, taking his films to its uncomfortable limits. Indeed, since Spielberg was unavailable, Lucas considered David Lynch and David Cronenberg to direct *Return of the Jedi* (1983). Other directors subsequently followed this postmodernist style with gleeful abandon, for instance, Paul Verhoeven (director of *Robocop*, *Total Recall* and *Starship Troopers*, the latter two based on stories by Philip K. Dick and Robert Heinlein, respectively, as well as *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls*). But this is not restricted to certain *auteur* filmmakers, but was in fact more or less explicitly the prevailing dominant ethos of late cinematic art — that is, until very recently.

The first *Star Wars* film and the others in the original series were so conceived, as were Lucas's authored *Indiana Jones* films, and these as well as his colleague and often-collaborator Steven Spielberg's films are rightly considered the first clearly "postmodernist" cinema. In this way, they actually fulfilled the critical function of the post-WWII New Wave cinema from which they had originated as directors, broadly popularizing what would otherwise be niche or countercultural filmmaking.

One early remarkable aesthetic choice by Lucas in the original *Star Wars* films was to eschew the synthesized electronic music usually associated with the sci-fi genre in favor of old-fashioned large orchestral soundtracks, composed by John Williams, borrowing from late 19th and early 20th century high art classical music. This was another harking back to the preceding older Hollywood film style. The juxtaposition and contrast between sound and image not only echoed the combination of fantasy and science fiction genres that Lucas deliberately mixed up in *Star Wars*, but also created a running critical commentary between them. Williams greatly expanded the musical palette of *Star Wars* with the prequel film soundtracks, especially in *The Phantom Menace*, opening additional vistas of the aural world of the Republic as Lucas had done in the film visually. There is also a great deal of humor as well as pathos in Williams's music, recalling early Hollywood silent films — whose musical accompaniments in turn influenced a great deal of 20th century composition and arrangement. This choice of classical orchestral soundtrack music had become, as so much else in *Star Wars*, naturalized by films that followed, such as the *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* film (1979), with soundtrack composed by Jerry Goldsmith, which came out two years after the first *Star Wars* film.

Classical Hollywood cinema from the 30s, 40s, and 50s has generated an infinite regress of inferential self-reflection, paradoxically ratcheting up the stakes of the medium, right up through the 70s and 80s and beyond. That is at least until currently, when Generation X directors (such as the aforementioned J.J. Abrams) seem to have lost the plot of history and severed the meaning, losing the very substance of filmmaking as an art form in the process. Even "artistic" directors

have been reduced to stale imitations of past cinematic achievements, having no critical capacity for reflecting on the medium itself, which has instead been naturalized and performed rotely.

The *Star Wars* sequel series produced by Disney, for instance, are not especially bad popular films of their time per se, but stand in stark contrast to the earlier *Star Wars* productions by Lucas, in both form and content. How to specify this exactly has proven elusive to commentators, however. This useful study in contrasts is salutary for a certain critical recognition. Missing from recent cinema is the specifically filmic element of aesthetic play, which is often delivered with the wicked humor of extremely dry wit, and very perversely. Alfred Hitchcock's films are perhaps the paradigmatic exemplars for this, of which Lucas among other filmmakers proved to be excellent students. Not only in Hitchcock's films, but especially there, viewers are provoked to contradictory opposite feelings at the same time. *The Birds* (1963) for example is simultaneously horrific and hilarious, and we watch the characters pecked to death, by animated avians that seem to emerge from the celluloid projection itself, with both sadistic and masochistic voyeurism, our eyes glued to the screen. Where has this humor of unabashed play (if also wild emotional oscillation) gone? The contrasting paucity of recent filmmaking in precisely this vital core of the cinematic art form is striking. What we have now instead is a furious noise of effects on screen without any dramatic effect. Is everything to become not artistic play with aesthetic form but rather what Kant called mere "charm" or fascination, or empty sublimity— at best/worst, a variety of ASMR?

The spaceships and other technology depicted in the *Star Wars* films formed visual gags cinematographically that are only amplified by their proliferation with the further succession of films in the prequel series, as the new spaceships became gags on the old ones. Like historical Surrealist visual art and subliminal techniques in advertising, Lucas plays with extreme contrasts of scale for the different visual elements, graphical designs and iconography in the films. Not only are the shapes of huge space cruisers echoed in small Starfighters, but even in ornamentation of buildings and detailed articles of clothing, these iconic shapes recur throughout the films. This creates a world of endless objects and motifs of visual fascination for viewers, who are thus transported into the experiential state of small children awestruck and agog at everything around them. Again, this recalls early cinema. (The creature designs were of course also — more obviously — visual jokes, usually of the most vulgar possible kind.)

The issue is the play and humor involved in Lucas's deployment of such devices as opposed to the more straightforward and unaware stylistic choices of the younger filmmakers who have picked up the reins of the *Star Wars* franchise since Lucas's departure. The latter have created a dreadfully unselfconscious, slavish imitation parody of *Star Wars*. But the earlier films, especially the prequel trilogy, were also experienced as such autistic repetitions, a repulsive fugue-state of cinematic regurgitation that viewers found difficult to tolerate. The question is the spirit in which it is done and received. This is what seems to be lacking now.

The Death of Cinema and Death of Politics

What more recent movies show is that the lifeblood of cinematic history has been drained entirely out of filmmaking. For those with the eyes to see — namely, everyone — Lucas's *Star Wars* prequel series hence might stand as among the very last really authentic films in history.

Not for reasons of Lucas's own artistic genius, however considerable, but rather due to history — and its apparent end in recent times. The sense of the tragic and comedic ironies of history has been lost. This has affected all art forms, but perhaps cinema, as the late-capitalist cultural phenomenon *par excellence*, most of all.

How so? It has to do with the prequel films' political content as well as their artistic form. For we are clearly living at the end of a historical era. Whether or not this augurs a social, cultural and political renaissance in response is a question that will only be answered by the future. For now, however, certain things are clear — painfully so.

The *Star Wars* prequel films depict the terminal phase of a decadent Republic that had lasted a “thousand years” — a hyperbole evoking historical rather than ordinary (for instance, one's own life) time. The Republic had been protected under the tutelage of the Jedi Order, whose Knights had kept the peace, both civilly and militarily, for this estimable — perhaps unfathomably sublime — history.

In this sense of long historical permanence, the Republic was more like the Ancient Roman Republic (or any classical ancient civilization) than modern liberal democracies. There was also to be found such an elaborate explicit hierarchy of society and politics, and there was a core and periphery to the Republic that measured a scale of civilization — of lawfulness and lawlessness. But it is in this latter character that the Republic's capitalism, by contrast to the Ancient world, is marked. Here, Lucas's social and political imagination is, not surprisingly, lacking. Capitalism is for Lucas merely a matter of private greed and government corruption — very much a mid-20th century Fordist conception of what capitalism essentially is.

The original *Star Wars* film trilogy, although clearly modeled on WWII and anti-Nazi resistance, was actually more an allegory for the 1960s New Left, whose imagination was itself based on the popular culture of that Boomer generation's formative time in the 50s and 60s, and in response to — and reaction against — it. The Rebel Alliance to Restore the Republic was the multicultural (multi-species) Rebellion against the evidently human-chauvinist — and hence racist — Empire. (The Empire was also apparently sexist, as its leaders and troops were all men, whereas those of the Rebellion including its very top leadership — its head was Senator Mon Mothma, a character revealed in *Return of the Jedi* — included women prominently.)

This New Left expression in *Star Wars*, while most evident in the original film series, can be found in the prequels as well, in the representation of the world of the Republic that had been suppressed by the Empire — the preceding world that had seemed repressed in bureaucratic-administered state-centered capitalism of the mid-20th century. The Republic appears as both a pre-First World War international capitalism of high imperialist colonialism and an ancient or medieval pre-modern traditional civilization.

For example, Naboo, the home-world of both Padme Amidala and Sheev Palpatine, is portrayed as a placid Victorian world divided between humans and a native Gungan population who, it is asserted, coexist in a “symbiotic” relationship, yet live apart, and seemingly — implausibly — have nothing to do with each other, suggesting simultaneously both a colonial and pre-colonial condition. Tatooine is also depicted as a frontier planet of limited human settlement (dominated

by the non-human off-planet crime syndicate, the Hutts) living among indigenous communities that are either separate or hostile (Jawas and Tusken, respectively). For a high-tech space-faring civilization, the Republic appears as an expansive universe of more or less remote isolated communities, even on the same planets (for instance, the underworld of the capital planet, Coruscant, appears in such terms, as a world apart). This is in keeping with the inspirational source material for Lucas, namely, the children's adventure stories from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Westerns, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Tarzan, Tintin, Babar, et al., which were still popular for Baby Boomers in their childhood — showing a world that they imagined had ended definitively in the mid-20th century with the end of the Second World War and the ascent of the US-dominated global order. The condition of Lucas's pre-Empire Republic recalls the pre-WWI British Empire-dominated world.

Lucas's Republic is a bustling galaxy teeming with a wide variety of intelligent life, while at the same time full of endless by-ways and backwater locales in which one might get lost. The nostalgia and yearning for such a lost world informed the New Left's view of their own society and its ills, which they considered to be closed and homogenous, stuffy and oppressive, to which the exotic offered escape. The post-1960s neoliberal era, especially in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War, seemed to have been a return to such a heterogeneous vitality and open-ended, seemingly limitless diversity of cultures and ways of life. At least for a moment, before 9/11 and the War on Terror "unified" and foreshortened the world again. But Lucas's vision for the prequels was less of the time of its production as might appear than of his personal cultural origins from a preceding period, specifically the culturally prevalent images of the time before his own: Lucas offered a nostalgia for an even further nostalgic imagination.

Yesterday's Parable for Today

Ironically, the *Star Wars* prequel series has ended up being more prophetic for current political events rather than a commentary on its own late 1990s – early 2000s moment. The prequels, twenty years later, seem to depict the apparent decline and potential collapse of the American Republic and Empire today. Especially as the *Star Wars* universe overall and that of the prequels' Republic era specifically still serve as fruitful for the continued production of new storylines. The story of the fall of Republic into Empire remains compelling. How could Lucas have anticipated this so well?

One could simply say that the apparent threat to democracy and collapse of liberalism has been of recurrent and even perennial concern in the modern capitalist epoch — going all the way back to the original Industrial Revolution era of the 1800s. But this would neglect the particular texture of this preoccupation in our time today. Specifically, *Star Wars* is a phenomenon of the American Century — however long or short that post-WWII "century" turns out to be: it is still less than 80 years old today. It is in this sense that Lucas and his vision can serve as paradigmatic for our culture, up to today. This might appear to be an obvious point, but it can be deceptively so. The question is how and why the American Century is in crisis now, and how the present crisis could be seen already coming long before.

Was the Galactic Empire actually not the Nazis in WWII but rather the US in Vietnam? Were the grim gray-uniformed Imperial commanders not Germans but Americans, one step removed? Was

the fall of the Republic into Empire, not Weimar becoming the Reich, but the American republic becoming an oppressive if beleaguered empire after WWII? Were the Rebels not *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) but the Viet Minh? And were the seeds for this sown not recently but a long time before — by the British and French Empires whose mantle the Americans had inherited? This speaks to how viewers relate to speculative dramas, whether of historically displaced or “futuristic” sci-fi or “fantasy” narratives. American viewers of Nazis depicted in films set in WWII see the Germans not as such but as projected Americans, as evil doppelganger versions of themselves. It is in the nature of the medium itself that this is so, for it is based on narcissistic identification and counter-identification with the characters on screen.

At a more conscious level, the 1960s generation confronted a disturbing reversal of fortune that shook their sense of morality and politics: What if (“white”) America was on the “wrong side of history” in the Civil Rights Movement? What if the US had been on the “wrong side” in the Vietnam War? And what else did this imply? There were certainly no easy answers. And, indeed, it was no simple matter of switching “sides” — as was made clear by the end of the 1970s, with the “killing fields” of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Sino-Vietnamese war and resulting Boat People refugee crisis.

War as Prelude and Postscript to the End of History

What was it that had changed and come into crisis between the end of WWII and its accumulation of history up to the 1970s, which created the desire for such heroic rebellion in Lucas and his audience for *Star Wars* in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the aftermath of Vietnam — and then again after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s? How did this moment place all preceding history of the US and indeed of the world in doubt? The rot of Lucas’s imagined Galactic Republic seemed to run deep. How were we then supposed to understand the “progress” of history in the modern era of our real capitalist world?

The central events of the prequel series, the Clone Wars, were posed in terms of the American Civil War, with a Grand Army of the Republic mustered to defeat a Separatist Confederacy, whose motives were only venal, but whose secession served to consolidate centralized power in the Republic against which the Secessionists were rebelling. This — even as an elaborate Dark Side plot manipulated by the Sith — was shown to be already the beginning of the end for the Republic and the Jedi’s “thousand-year” peace. But the Millennials’ experience in the War on Terror was the actual immediate context for the Clone Wars, and the latter took its essential cues from that.

The way war is portrayed in the prequel series is decidedly unheroic. It is taken from Vietnam War experiences and depictions, but also goes back to the gritty realism of WWII films produced in its aftermath. Unlike the original *Star Wars* trilogy films, which are solidly WWII in orientation, with Starfighters breaking formation to dive-bomb the Death Star in exact imitation of WWII fighters, the Republic Gunships imitated Bell-Huey helicopters from Vietnam as portrayed in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). When the new Clone Army is deployed to rescue the heroes held captive on Geonosis in *Attack of the Clones*, it is clear that the indiscriminate slaughter of the natives as well as the droid army of the Separatists is a cold technical operation, directed no less by Yoda himself. In the preceding film, *The Phantom Menace*, by contrast, the

droid army bearing down on the Gungans on Naboo (and more generally, with the Trade Federation's initial invasion) is a Romantic portrayal of more or less hopeless but valiant resistance to imperialist violence and oppression. But by *Attack of the Clones*, the good guys were clearly to become the bad guys, as the cavalry coming to save the day exterminated the vermin. That they are clones of a duplicitous villain, the bounty hunter Jango Fett, and were ordered up for the Republic by the fallen Jedi and covert Sith, Count Dooku, makes their treacherous nature clear, even before Order 66 turns them all into the Imperial Stormtroopers in *Revenge of the Sith*.

In *Revenge of the Sith*, in which the arc of the prequel films comes to fruition at the end of the Clone Wars, Yoda observes that Anakin's fulfillment of the prophecy of the Chosen One expected to "restore balance to the Force" might have been misinterpreted — that a thousand years of Jedi rule in the Republic now stood to be counterbalanced by a resurgence of the hitherto repressed Dark Side of the Force. Yoda hints that with the Clone War, "the shroud of the Dark Side has fallen," and that the Jedi, through their role in the war, might have brought about not only their own undoing but the unleashing of the Dark Side they were thought to control through their wise counsel as well as chivalrous defense as warriors of the Republic — a role explicitly disclaimed by Qui-Gon Jinn during the Trade Federation invasion of Naboo in *The Phantom Menace*. In the ultimate confrontation between Anakin and Obi-Wan Kenobi in the final scenes of *Revenge of the Sith*, Skywalker says that he thinks the Jedi are evil, to which Obi-Wan can only respond, "Then you are lost." But what if Anakin was right, that the Republic had become harmful in its decadence, and hence ripe for — even demanding — overthrow?

Millennial Generational Transition

The present crisis of American and world politics in recent years seems to have gone awry from this original post-1960s vision shared by Lucas and the greater culture. For all the fears surrounding him, for example, Trump does not fit the familiar image of totalitarianism fostered by the post-WWII generation that still informs politics up to today. He does not conform to the picture of a Hitler or Stalin in this venerable popular imagination cultivated by the Boomers after WWII. Perhaps Trump is frightening precisely in his unexpected character.

No Chancellor and then Emperor Palpatine can be seen emerging in current events, but a decadent democracy in crisis is indeed evident now. Not the crisis of Nixon in Watergate or LBJ in Vietnam, but something more vague and pervasive. It is all too convenient — and evasive — to lay this all on Trump. Indeed, the present seems afflicted precisely by "phantom" menaces, whose reality is hard to discern.

When Anakin's secret wife Senator Padme Amidala criticizes the Clone Wars as resulting from a "failure to listen," is this that of the progressive liberals' incomprehension of the deep and justified discontents expressed by Trump's supporters? When she laments, "So this is how liberty dies, with thunderous applause," it may not be in hearing the acclamation of the allegedly "insurrectionary" Republican Party of Donald Trump, but rather that of the complacent self-congratulatory Democrats of Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi. The evil may not be that of the covert Sith Lord hiding behind the unassuming, beneficent if doddering face of Sheev Palpatine. The real faces of the septuagenarian leadership of the Democratic Party

today might be what Padme described in the Republic, descending into a however soft totalitarian state, akin to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* rather than George Orwell's *1984*, but just as unable to tolerate any dissent whatsoever: "What if the democracy we thought we were serving no longer exists, and the Republic has become the very evil we've been fighting to destroy?" To which Anakin quickly retorted, angrily but defensively and confusedly, "I don't believe that, and you're sounding like a Separatist!" — his path to becoming Darth Vader all but complete. As Yoda comments, the Dark Side was on both sides of the Clone Wars civil war.

But, as we know from the original film series, Anakin, while serving a pivotal role in Palpatine's ascent — with his crucially preventing the Chancellor's extra-judicial assassination by the noble Jedi warrior Mace Windu — and the suppression of the Jedi in the rise of the Empire — his leading the raid on the Jedi Temple at the head of Clone troops and his personally massacring the innocent Padawan apprentice children there — ultimately redeems himself by turning against the Emperor at the end of the series in *Return of the Jedi*, bittersweetly returning in death to Yoda and Obi-Wan through the immortality of the Light Side of the Force.

Childhood Imagination and Historical Lessons

The first *Star Wars* films prompted the complaint that nearly all blockbuster Hollywood films are aimed at an audience of prepubescent boys — as I myself was such an age at the time. The prequel films, although tracking the life of Anakin Skywalker from youth through adolescence to adulthood, and stylistically reflecting the universe in his eyes, through these various stages of maturation, with each successive film becoming progressively less childlike in worldview, are, starting with the first, *The Phantom Menace*, actually quite adult in content and substance by comparison with the more conventional action-adventure original trilogy *Star Wars* films. The prequel films follow a parallel plot structure of stories alongside Anakin's own, namely those of the adult Jedi, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan's battles with Darth Maul, Obi-Wan's tangos with Jango Fett and Count Dooku, and Obi-Wan's defeat of the Separatist General Grievous, each of which provides counterpoints to Anakin's pivotal moments.

The message of Lucas's *Star Wars* prequel films is much more difficult and challenging than the original *Star Wars* trilogy: It shows that the path of apparent "good and evil" in politics and society is a very convoluted one, involving many reversals and surprising twists of fate — one might even say that it is "dialectical." It is "beyond good and evil" and not at all ever what it first appears to be. This is a lesson from the Boomer experience of the 20th century's dramatic wars and revolutions that the Millennial generation, as viewers in their youth, were not adequately prepared to receive let alone contemplate from Lucas's films — and remain deaf and blind to today. Even as they stand at the precipice of learning it now.

The proleptic foreshadowing of Empire and its Galactic Civil War of the Rebellion, as given in the late Republic universe depiction of Lucas's *Star Wars* prequel trilogy films and associated animated television series, their portrayal of cynical bureaucratic maneuvering and duplicitous "democratic" processes and forebodingly empty political rhetoric, bears attentive if disturbingly prescient reconsideration now. For the crisis is not "long, long ago and in a galaxy far, far away," but is manifestly at hand today.

And, as in Lucas's *Star Wars* stories, whose prequel series ends with the birth of Padme and Anakin's / Darth Vader's children — the fateful Skywalker twins Luke and Leia — our society seems destined not to emerge from its coming Dark Times for another 20 years or more, with any future successful revolutionaries, who might come out of the impending maelstrom, perhaps being born only now. What, awaiting their distant arrival, from Lucas's 20th century historical lesson of the fatal end of the Republic, must we, like the old Jedi Masters Obi-Wan and Yoda — even as we sacrifice ourselves to the transmission of such fragile and fleeting “ancient” knowledge and wisdom — be prepared to teach them? As Lucas tried to teach us.