Ivan Matić[*]

Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade

STAR WARS, FROM THE JUNGLES OF VIETNAM TO THE DESERTS OF IRAQ AND BEYOND

Abstract

When discussing the famous Star Wars franchise, emphasis is usually placed on its spiritual, mithological, or technological elements; in this paper, we will draw attention to an oft neglected aspect of this modern mythos: the political. In the first part of the paper, we will deal with the basic (mostly apolitical) outline of the films: the hero's journey and how it was meant to prepare and inspire young teenagers for the life ahead. Having presented a basic overview of the structure of these films, we will delve into their political undertones by first examining how the original Star Wars trilogy from the late '70s and early '80s subtly critiqued the American war in Vietnam; then, we will move onto the prequel trilogy from the late early 2000s and examine how it gradually brought into the fore an artistically rebellious attitude toward the rise of the Bush administration and the ensuing "War on Terror". Finally, we will examine the sequel trilogy's milquetoast critique of capitalism and its heavy-handed push for 'equality'.

Keywords: *Star Wars, War in Vietnam, War in Iraq, War on Terror, George Lucas, George Bush.*

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[*] ivan090790@gmail.com

THE HERO'S JOURNEY:
A STORY FOR TWELVE-YEAR-OLDS

Despite garnering legendary status as the foremost science fantasy mythos of our time, Star Wars is, at its core, aimed at children and young teenagers taking their first steps into a larger world. It is, in the words of its author (writer and director George Lucas), "a story for twelve-year-olds",[1] dealing with simple yet timeless endeavors such as leaving the home of one's upbringing, broadening one's horizons both literally and figuratively, having to deal with trauma and loss and, ultimately, overcoming challenges and triumphing against great odds. As such, it is a universal, timeless story that achieved unprecedented success on a global scale due to its ability to inspire people regardless of culture or background.[2]

It is, at the same time, one of the most ambitious science fantasy franchises of all time in scope alone, creating an entire galaxy full of thousands of different planets and species, not to mention the wondrous technology, mythology and spirituality connecting it all (both physically, through light speed and spiritually, through the Force). Yet, despite the enormity of the Star Wars galaxy, many of its elements have singular recognizable features, such as the planets Tatooine, Hoth and the moon of Endor entirely being covered by deserts, snowy wastes, and forests respectively, or the two main factions at war always being some form of Republic and Empire with a clear democracy/tyranny dichotomy. This 'complex simplicity' could be argued to be one of the main reasons why Star Wars is both so accessible to audiences and so beloved at the same time.

Another crucial appeal of this franchise is the ever-permeating Manichean dichotomy in the form of the eternal struggle between Jedi and Sith and the respective light and dark sides of the Force, a unique and interesting interjection of spirituality into an otherwise predominantly technological world. It might be difficult to imagine such a distant, timeless, yet uncannily familiar place as a canvas for painting a critique of the foreign policy of our own world's 'Empire': this critique is therefore subtle enough for the casual viewer to miss, yet present enough to enable the attentive viewer to 'connect the dots'.

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[1] Chris Kempshall (2023), *The History and Politics of Star Wars*, London/New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 199.

[2] Chris Taylor (2016), *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe*, London: Head of Zeus, xiii.

While political critique could be viewed as a subtle background to the story of Star Wars, its inarguable foreground is the classical hero's journey. Luke Skywalker, our hero in the original trilogy, starts out as a farm hand in the middle of nowhere on a desolate, distant planet of Tatooine: his life with his aunt and uncle, up till then largely unaffected by the war of the Rebellion against the Galactic Empire, is severed by the Empire's attempt to recover the stolen plans to their secret weapon. A duo of sympathetic droids escape the ensuing fight and land on Tatooine, bearing the plans and sent by a princess in need of rescue, triggering a cavalcade of events that would result in the eventual destruction of the Empire.

The war of the Rebellion against the Empire, however, is only the backdrop to the story of Luke Skywalker, the 'audience character': his journey from simple farmhand to a Jedi Knight, a powerful wielder of the mysterious Force and heir to the once-proud legacy of his mentor's fallen order; his growing understanding of both the galaxy and the way of his spiritual forebearers, the Jedi, and, ultimately, the key role he plays in helping to bring down the Empire. Along the way, there are several milestone events and actions that define Luke's character arc.

The crucial steps in his journey are the death of his aunt and uncle at the hands of the Empire: the heinous act that leaves him with nothing and spurs him to action; his travel and early training at the hands of Obi-Wan Kenobi; his continued training by Yoda, his defeat at the hands of Darth Vader (both literal and figurative: discovering that Vader is his father), his recovery from his defeat (physical – implanting an artificial hand; and emotional – accepting the truth of his parentage), and, finally, his final confrontation with Vader and the Emperor in which his martial triumph against Vader is greatly overshadowed by his moral victory in refusing the Emperor's offer to take his father's place at his side.

If Luke's story in the original trilogy can be seen as an inspiration, his father's in the prequel trilogy is a cautionary tale: though destined to be the greatest Force-wielder of his age, Anakin's hubris ultimately leads to his downfall. At the beginning of the prequel trilogy, our protagonists have almost everything stacked in their favor: the Republic is at the height of its power, the Jedi order maintains peace throughout the galaxy and the greatest apparent threat is a small separatist movement that would eventually become the Confederation of Independent Systems that would wage open war against the Republic.

The real threat, however, are the Sith: ancient nemeses of the Jedi, whose current mastermind, Darth Sidious, means to play the Republic and the CIS against one another in his bid to create the Galactic Empire with himself as its head. It is against this backdrop that the young Jedi Anakin Skywalker faces his challenges and succumbs to his temptation. With his would-be master Qui-Gon Jinn facing death at the hands of Sidious' apprentice, he is left in the care of then-young Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi, who is unable to control and channel his Padawan learner's growing power. And while Anakin's skill in every field, from Force use to piloting, is exceptional, he fails the moral tests before him one after another.

Ignoring the Jedi code, he forsakes his duties on Naboo to save his mother on distant Tatooine: failing that, he murders an entire Tusken tribe in revenge; he nearly abandons his mission to track down the separatist leader Count Dooku so as to attempt to save his love, Padme, whom he later marries in secret; he impetuously engages Dooku only to end up losing half his arm. Eventually, he succumbs to a self-fulfilling prophecy: choosing to align himself with Darth Sidious in order to save his wife's life, he inadvertently causes her death. Thus, whereas Luke's story shows us that a person of strong moral character can triumph and persevere against great odds despite failure along the way, Anakin's story demonstrates that even a 'born' Jedi with almost everything stacked in his favor can fail if he lacks the proper moral character. Finally, we'll get to Rey's story in the final chapter, because, unlike the former two which only have politics in their background, the latter is almost explicitly political and all the worse for it.

Before taking a look at the contemporary political critique within Star Wars, it is worth taking a look at some of its historical and aesthetic inspirations: namely, one of the minor plot points in *A New Hope* revolves around the waning power and eventual dissolution of an inefficient senate: this is inevitably reminiscent of early Imperial Rome,[3] though the intentionality behind the potential inspiration is uncertain. Furthermore, most portrayals of the Republic (both old and new) depict it as slow, bureaucratic and corrupt.[4] Upon being confronted by Mace Windu and his accompanying Jedi, Palpatine exclaims "I am the Senate!", a line quite similar to Louis the XIV's famous statement "L'état C'Est à Moi!"[5]

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[3] Wetmore, Kevin J. (2005), *The Empire Triumphant: Race, Religion and Rebellion in the Star Wars Films*, McFarland, 20.

[4] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 68.

[5] Craig E. Harline (1992), ""L'état C'Est à Moi": Louis XIV and the State", in *The Rhyme and Reason of Politics in Early Modern Europe*, Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Finally, the parallels with Nazi Germany throughout Star Wars are many and varied: in fact, it has been argued that the politics of Star Wars began as a critique of U. S. foreign policy using Nazi imagery.[6] The design of Storm Trooper armor, especially the helmets, hearkens back to Nazi symbolism, particularly the Totenkopf;[7] the 'screams' of imperial Tie Fighters were inspired by the Jericho sirens of "Stuka" dive bombers; the Emperor's arrival on the Death Star mirrors Hitler's arrival in Berlin in *Triumph of the Will*.[8] Meanwhile, the symbolism and imagery of the First Order in the sequel trilogy is almost a one-for-one comparison to Nazi Germany, from its flag, across the Nuremberg rally-style military gathering, to General Hux's fiery speech regarding the decadence and disorder of the New Republic.[9]

YAVIN 4, HOTH AND ENDOR: VIETNAM IN SPACE

At first glance, the two 'Lucas' Star Wars trilogies don't really contain any political agenda, and the mostly WWII-inspired imagery led most casual audiences to not consciously realize that the original film was about Vietnam.[10] A deeper examination of the timeline of Star Wars, as well as many behind-the-scenes events, including explicit statements by George Lucas himself reveals a cleverly disguised contemporary political critique with broad real-world implications. In his book, *The History and Politics of Star Wars*, author Chris Kempshall provides a detailed timeline of real-world events against the various publications within the *Star Wars* franchise (film and otherwise).[11] The correlation is particularly notable with regard to the original trilogy's critique of the war in Vietnam and the prequel trilogy's almost prophetic outlining of the rise of the Bush administration and the ensuing "War on Terror".

For the original trilogy, George Lucas drew significant inspiration from the Vietnam war: as a political liberal who was generally opposed to America's Cold War foreign interventionism, Lucas saw the

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[6] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 12.

[7] Ryder Windham and Adam Bray (2017), *Star Wars: Stormtroopers beyond the Armor*, Harper Design, 13.

[8] J. W. Rinzler (2017), *The Making of Star Wars*, London: Aurum Press, 78-79, 102.

[9] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 47.

[10] Peter W. Lee (2016), "Periodizing a Civil War: Reaffirming an American Empire of Dreams", in: Lee (ed.) *A Galaxy Here and Now*, McFarland & Co., 165-167, 177.

[11] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 12-16.

presence of U. S. troops as fundamentally unjust;[12] he is quoted as saying that "The (Star Wars) films were always political."[13] However, his opposition to the war also had a more personal aspect: he was excused from the draft because of his diabetes, but feared being sent to war anyway if he flunked out of college.[14] In his approach to the critique of the war, Lucas was largely inspired by *Apocalypse Now*.[15]

In the original *Star Wars* (now *A New Hope*), the parallel to Vietnam is the clearest: a galaxy-spanning Empire is attempting to quell a rebellion whose main base of operation is the jungle moon of the planet Yavin.[16] Interestingly, the rebel base was originally to be placed on Wookie home world of Kashyyyk to further the parallel to Vietnam, but this was scrapped and left for Endor and the Ewoks in *Return of the Jedi*.[17] The Empire uses its more advanced technology and vastly greater numbers ruthlessly, even going so far as to destroy entire planets merely as a show of force. In fact, the Empire's ultimate superweapon, the Death Star, can be argued to be a parallel to the atomic bomb,[18] and Governor Tarkin's decision to use it on Alderaan due to Dantooine's being "too remote to make an effective demonstration" mirrors the U. S. Joint Chiefs of Staff choice of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as targets for nuclear bombing.[19]

Furthermore, in order to demonstrate the technological imbalance of the two warring sides, rebel spacecraft were deliberately designed to look like Republic-era junk fighters.[20] In *The Empire Strikes Back*, the opening battle on Hoth sees the Empire using the massive AT-AT walkers, which mirror the unwieldly U. S. hardware used in Vietnam.[21] However, as noted by Pike,[22] the parallels to the Vietnam war only go so far: unlike the Rebel Alliance in Star Wars, the Viet Cong wasn't a simple movement against tyranny, but one aiming to establish a completely

[12] J. W. Rinzler (2017), *op. cit.*, 2, 9, 69, 107-108.

[13] *Ibid*, 7-8, 16.

[14] Paul Duncan (2020), *The Star Wars Archives: 1999–2005*, Köln: Taschen, 12-13; Brian Jay Jones (2017), *George Lucas: A Life*, London: Headline Publishing Group, 72-73.

[15] J. W. Rinzler (2017), *op. cit.*, 7-8.

[16] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 103.

[17] Paul Duncan (2020), *op. cit.*, 51.

[18] Cass R. Sunstein (2016), *The World According to Star Wars*, William Morrow Publishers, 107.

[19] Phillips Payson O'Brien, (2019), "The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Atom Bomb, the American Military Mind and the End of the Second World War", *Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 42, no. 7, 971–991.

[20] Paul Duncan (2020), *op. cit.*, 183.

[21] J. W. Rinzler (2017), *op. cit.*, 55.

[22] Douglas Eugene Pike (1966), *Viet Cong: The Organization and Technique of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 32.

new social order.[23] In the last, the presence of Imperial bases and their disruptive activities on Tatooine, Bespin and the forest moon of Endor represent the Empire's colonialism,[24] and could be seen as mirroring the presence of hundreds of U. S. military bases throughout the world.

An important element of these films is that the science fantasy setting allowed any real-world parallels to be distilled enough to not appear immediately political, allowing audiences to immerse themselves in the world and story without any jarring references (an example of the opposite would be the Canto Bight sequence from *The Last Jedi* in the sequel trilogy). This also enabled audiences to misinterpret the parallels, inspiring the Americans, for example, to see themselves as the Rebels, harkening back to the revolutionary days of their Founding Fathers, and identifying the Empire with their then-British oppressors[25] (even though the Empire was inspired by their own country's contemporary imperialist policies).

Kempshall observes that "The original trilogy was designed to be understood as films sympathetic to the cause of the North Vietnamese and highly critical of the United States",[26] but, as Duncan notes, "nobody (in the audience) was aware of that".[27] The American involvement in Vietnam was based on the problematic "Domino theory": the idea that, should one country be allowed to 'fall' to Communism, countless others would surely follow, which is why an American intervention was 'justified' in every single occasion.[28] This theory was one of a number of so-called 'just war' theories.[29] The essential problem with this justification for American imperialism is that it didn't simply stop with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but rather *expanded*, with more countries joining NATO and U. S. and allied military bases gradually forming a stranglehold around Russia and China.

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[23] For a detailed overview of the Vietnam war, see: Pierre Asselin (2017), *Vietnam's American War: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; George C. Herring (2002), *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.

[24] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 31.

[25] This was taken a step further with the MMORPG game *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, where the inhabitants of the Sith Empire were given British accents, whereas those of the Republic were given American ones.

[26] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 16.

[27] Paul Duncan (2020), *op. cit.*, 252.

[28] Bruce W. Jentleson (2001), "Domino Theory", in *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, Oxford University Press.

[29] Michael Walzer (2000), *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, New York: Basic Books.

As for the Emperor himself, he was only mentioned in passing in episode IV, given a bit more prominence in V, where it's implied that he is a kind of Nixonian figure clinging to power, whereas around the time of VI, Lucas explicitly described him as "a politician. Richard M. Nixon was his name", saying that he "subverted the senate and finally took over and became an imperial guy [sic] and was really evil".[30] Further, Lucas specified that "the Vietnam War and Richard M. Nixon informed the development of Star Wars. At one point Nixon thought he might try to change the constitution so he could run for a third term. That set me off thinking about how a democracy falls, and doing research on all kinds of democracies from Greece to Rome".[31] Sunstein notes that "Nixon was never going for a third term, or trying to change the Constitution, but Lucas is a good storyteller".[32] The character and motives of the Emperor, as the decay of democracy in America were explored in far more detail in the prequel trilogy.

THE DEATH OF LIBERTY TO THUNDROUS APPLAUSE

The era of the prequel trilogy is significantly more complex: we have only to look at the countless criticisms of its "boring senate meetings" to discern that its complexity in some ways left many of the 'original' Star Wars fans behind. Where once we had a simple, straightforward struggle between the scattered, brave band of Rebels desperately trying to destroy the evil Empire and restore the Republic, we are now dealing with said Republic (and its guardian Jedi Order) at the height of its power and the brink of its downfall.

The key event that sparks the beginning of the end for the Republic is the CIS's blockade of Naboo. Encouraged by Darth Sidious, the Neimoidian separatists cut off Naboo's space routes and attempt to kidnap its queen. The intervention of the Jedi foils Sidious' plans in the short term, but the CIS was only ever his tool to indirectly obtain power and then be cast aside. Corrupt business played a crucial role in the fall of the republic.[33] Thanks to the Naboo affair, Palpatine is able to rise from a humble senator to the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic: from then on, his increasing control of the Senate and his

[30] J. W. Rinzler (2017), *op. cit.*, 20, 23-24, 69.
[31] Paul Duncan (2020), *op. cit.*, 259.
[32] Cass R. Sunstein (2016), *op. cit.*, 117.
[33] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 75.

shadowy leadership over the CIS allowed him to play the two warring sides against one another until the final blow was struck: he prompted the Jedi attempt on his life, then used it as an excuse to eliminate the Jedi Order and proclaim the creation of the Empire with himself at its head.

George Lucas often contemplated the fragility of democracy: "This idea of democracy being given up – and in many cases being given up in time of crisis – you see it throughout history, whether it's Julius Caesar or Napoleon or Adolf Hitler. You see these democracies under a lot of pressure, in a crisis situation, who end up giving away a lot of the freedoms they have and a lot of the checks and balances to somebody with strong authority to help get them through a crisis".[34] Also: "[In ancient Rome,] why did the senate after killing Caesar turn around and give the government to his nephew? … Why did France after they got rid of the king and that whole system turn around and give it to Napoleon? It's the same thing with Germany and Hitler. You sort of see these recurring themes where a democracy turns itself into a dictatorship, and it always seems to happen kind of in the same way, with the same kinds of issues, and threats from the outside, needing more control. A democratic body, a senate, not being able to function properly because everybody's squabbling, there's corruption".[35]

It's important to keep in mind that *The Phantom Menace* – the first film of the prequel trilogy came out in 1999, with the other two following suit in 2002 and 2005, respectively: there was a close correlation between the timeline of these films and George Bush's rise to power, which was marked by the War on Terror[36] and the War in Iraq.[37] The nebulous and elusive "War on Terror" in particular allowed George Bush to dramatically increase presidential power and governmental

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[34] Tony Keen (2012), "I, Sidious: Historical Dictators and Senator Palpatine's Rise to Power", in: Nancy Ruth Reagin and Janice Liedl (eds.) *Star Wars and History*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 125-149.

[35] David Germain (2005), ""Sith" Invites Bush Comparisons", *CBS News*, 16 May.

[36] For a detailed overview of the War on Terror, see: Jason G. Ralph (2013), *America's War on Terror: The State of the 9/11 Exception from Bush to Obama*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; David Holloway (2008), *9/11 and the War on Terror, Representing American Events*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Terence McSweeney (2015), *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second, Traditions in American Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[37] For a detailed overview of the War in Iraq, see: Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, (eds.) (2003), *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, New York: Touchstone; Tareq Y. Ismael, and Jacqueline S. Ismael (2004*), The Iraqi Predicament: People in the Quagmire of Power Politics*, London: Pluto Press; Thomas G. Weiss, Margaret E. Crahan, and John M. Goering, (eds.) (2004), *Wars on Terrorism and Iraq: Human Rights, Unilateralism, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York: Routledge.

authority at home,[38] so much so that many did not believe that the parallels between Bush and Sidious could have been by accident.[39] It's crucial to keep in mind, however, that the script for the entire trilogy was finished before 2001, so any substantial similarities, while seemingly prescient, were nonetheless accidental.[40]

It's undeniable, however, that even as he was making the prequel trilogy, Lucas inevitably drew parallels to contemporary politics. Of particular note is his description of former Supreme Chancellor Valorum as "a good but beleaguered man, a bit like president Clinton".[41] Palpatine's quick rise to power is an insight into Lucas' understanding of the collapse of democracy: "The second film is about the building of a secret army and going to war, which obviously turns the Grand Chancellor into an Emperor politically. The Senate gives up the Republic. It's still a Republic, but an Emperor rules it. Don't worry, as soon as things are fixed, he'll give it back [laughs]".[42] Interestingly, Machiavelli didn't see the formal function of Roman dictator as the problem, rather blaming the coalescence of popular support around powerful politicians for the downfall of Rome.[43] In *Revenge of the Sith*, Lucas' vision of democratic collapse crystalizes around the historical precedents set in antiquity, revolutionary France and the rise of the Nazis.[44]

The impact of 9/11 in particular on Star Wars has been studied in some detail,[45] especially since Lucas and his team used Star Wars characters and imagery in comparison to the Bush administration increasingly afterward: by 2009, Lucas explicitly said that Bush is Vader and [Dick] Chaney is the Emperor.[46] The image of the Jedi Temple burning with a long cloud of smoke over a morning cityscape in Revenge of the Sith also held a remarkably visual symmetry to the World Trade Center towers after the 11 September 2001 attack.[47] Lines in the script

[38] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 16.

[39] Keith R. A. DeCandio (2015) "The Madness of King George", in: David Brin and Matthew Woodring Stover (eds.) *Star Wars on Trial*, Dallas, TX: Smart Pop, 85.

[40] Mark Caro (2005) "Star Wars Inadvertently Hits Too Close to US's Role", *Chicago Tribune*, 18 May.

[41] Paul Duncan (2020), *op. cit.*, 105.

[42] *Ibid*, 81.

[43] Ivan Matić (2014), "Social Discord as the Foundation of Republicanism in Machiavelli's Thought", *Filozofija i društvo XXV* (4), 126.

[44] Tony Keen (2012), *op. cit.*, 125-149.

[45] Edward J. Carvalho (2011) "Star Wars and "Star Wars": Teaching Pre-9/11 Literature as Post-9/11 Reality", *Modern Language Studies* 1/2011 (vol. 41), 70–95.

[46] Maureen Dowd (2009) "Opinion | The Aura of Arugulance", *The New York Times*, 19 April.

[47] Chris Kempshall (2023), *op. cit.*, 78.

such as Anakin's declaration that "If you're not with me, then you're my enemy!" sounded remarkably similar to President Bush's warning that "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists!" after the 11 September 2001 attacks.[48]

Hasan notes that: "If there is a genius aspect to the prequels, then, it's in demonstrating how utterly achievable such a rapid transition from democracy to dictatorship is outside the "safe" boundaries of fantasy, and just how quickly such a transformation can occur".[49] In Padme's famous words: "This is how liberty dies? With thunderous applause." Had Lucas retained the rights to Star Wars and eventually made the sequel trilogy, the parallels to Iraq would have become overt – he is quoted as saying regarding the Bush administration: "you fought the war, you killed everybody, now what are you going to do"?[50] Unfortunately, he sold those rights to Disney and the end result was something vastly inferior.

THE POLITICS OF 'DISNEY STAR WARS'

Sadly, we can only imagine what Lucas' sequel trilogy would have been like: for one, we know he planned to use the original actors, having asked them back in the time of the original trilogy if they were willing to reprise their roles some thirty years later; another interesting aspect would have been the "Whills": mysterious beings within the Force that could have been seen as Lucas' synthesis between his original 'thesis' of the Force (as an mysterious energy field and spiritual power) and its 'prequel antithesis' (as a reductive power quantifiable by midi-chlorians). Finally, between his talent and penchant for weaving (particularly anti-war) politics into the Star Wars franchise, and his quotes regarding the Iraq war, it would have been most interesting to see how his opposition to U. S. imperialism would have been reflected in the new films.

Instead, the Disney 'suits' made a trilogy of films that is as politically vacuous as it is unoriginal and derivative in terms of themes and story. On that note, Lucas' own two trilogies (especially the prequels) came under a lot of criticism over the years: the frequent points of critique

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[48] David Germain (2005), *op. cit.*
[49] Zaki Hasan (2015) "Power, Politics, and the Prequels", in: Rich Handley and Joseph F. Berenato (eds.) *A Long Time Ago: Exploring the Star Wars Cinematic Universe*, Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Organization.
[50] Paul Duncan (2020), *op. cit.*, 583.

were the script, the setting, and the inauthentic special effects. One thing that could not have been justly criticized was a lack of artistic vision: it always abounded, even if its execution was imperfect. The sequel trilogy lacks not only that, but even something more fundamental: basic directorial consistency, with J. J. Abrams attempting to recapture the magic of the originals, and Rian Johnson trying to outdo Lucas himself, with no apparent collaboration between the two. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the story arc of the main character: Rey.

The former wanted to keep her parentage a mystery with the intention of gradually making a grand revelation: that she is the daughter of Darth Sidious himself, while the latter accentuated the desire to 'subvert expectations' by smashing the mystery apart and making her parents nobodies and junk traders. This inconsistency of origin is made all the worse through her 'character arc', which essentially consists in a long series of triumphs (both martial and moral) with barely an obstacle along the way, owing to Disney's warped understanding of progressive messaging (this is in dire contrast to both Luke, who had a long journey in developing both his ability, whose incredible ability is completely overshadowed by his moral failings at every turn).

The lack of consistency in directorial vision is made all the worse by the sequel trilogy's heavy-handed push for 'equality' (under quotation marks, because the 'creative team' at Disney seems to confuse actual equality representing female characters as being beyond flaw or reproach). Rey suffers especially due to this trend because, instead of being given a proper character arc that would involve her failing along the way, only to learn from her mistakes, evolve and eventually persevere and triumph, she starts out with both the necessary skill set and pristine moral purity that not only allows her to overcome basically every challenge with ease, but also enables her to teach figures like the now-old Jedi Master Luke Skywalker whom one would expect her to have a lot to learn from (Luke and Yoda and Anakin and Obi-Wan are good counter-examples).

The infamous and controversial *Last Jedi* is at particular fault here, because is heavy-handed political messaging extends to a jarringly immersion-breaking, but peculiarly milquetoast critique of capitalism with the aforementioned Canto Bight sequence that pays lip service to the evils of corporate greed without addressing its root causes. The hopeful and nostalgic *Force Awakens* tries to play the safest political hand imaginable, equating the antagonistic First Order with the Nazis

visually, but lacking the courage to use it as a canvas for any kind of political point. Gone is the subtle critique of U. S. (or, for that matter, *any*) imperialism: in its place are 'bad guys' who look like Nazis, hold Nuremberg-style rallies, rant against decadence and disorder, and that's about it. The universally panned *Rise of Skywalker*, being the desperate attempt to placate the now rightly angered fanbase that it is, unsurprisingly *has no politics*. With Rian Johnson having subverted expectations (and the story) to the point of oblivion, all that J. J. Abrams was left with was "Somehow, Palpatine returned".

With the reception of the final film being expectedly abysmal, Disney was forced to change its creative course. Hope rose from the ashes of disaster as the company first dipped their toe in producing stand-alone films, then switched its focus onto producing long-form series that focused on smaller stories of lesser-known characters and unexplored periods of the vast *Star Wars* timeline. Of particular note here is the *Mandalorian*, which has seen success in its three seasons (at the time of the writing of this article), that will hopefully encourage Disney to go further back in the timeline and unveil its many gems on the small (and perhaps, in time, the big) screen. From a political standpoint, though, the only particular standout is *Andor*: a show that was sadly glossed over by many audiences, while boasting some of the best writing and acting ever seen in *Star Wars*. Its daring delving into the varied minds and complex motivations of its characters results in a very realistic portrayal of the forming of a rebellion: a show of such amazingly high caliber can whole-heartedly be recommended even to people who have never heard of *Star Wars*.

What makes Andor such a stand-out is the fact that the Manichean dichotomy that the franchise is famous for mostly gives way to a kind of real-world portrayal of all factions and people involved. Gone are the Imperial 'bad guys' in grey officer suits and Stormtrooper armor: in their place are ISB agents that have to bounce ideas off one another and resolve complex plots in order to understand Rebel actions and predict their next move. Instead of a unified Rebellion, there are various factions, ranging from terrorists who care little about the cost of bringing down the Empire, across Machiavellian leaders trying to justify their own actions through hope in a brighter future, to disgruntled individuals seeing no purpose left in their lives other than to fight the Empire.

CONCLUSION

While films explicitly dealing with the topic of politics can rightly be seen as a strategic means of political communication,[51] films of the sci-fi and fantasy genre can have political critique cleverly woven into their plotlines without becoming the dominant element or even an immediately obvious one. Being an American liberal democrat, George Lucas was generally opposed to U. S. interventions and particularly suspicious of the motivations of Republican high officials. His political upbringing and education clearly left him with a kind of lamentable naivete with regard to the substantive similarity of 'Elephant' and 'Donkey' sides of the coin of American imperialism, but his heart on issues of foreign policy seems to have been in the right place, and his artistic expression of his politics was beyond reproach: subtle enough to not break the immersion, yet present enough to unravel upon careful analysis.

Originally conceived as a critique of U. S. involvement in Vietnam, the politics of Star Wars re-emerged with the prequels prescient depiction of the fall of democratic institutions under the pretext of defense. With the transfer to Disney, they degraded to merely using Nazi imagery and pushing heavy-handed 'progressive' messaging, but were then re-invigorated by the series format, allowing for deeper and more mature political themes to be explored in far more detail. With any luck, *Star Wars* will eventually find its way back to speaking truth to power, criticizing the faults of its own system of origin and inspiring its audiences to look beyond the obvious as they strive to understand our own world through the lens of the Galaxy far, far away.

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