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An academic *Star Wars* fan journal

The Saga Journal is a monthly on-line academic review dedicated to the in-depth study of the Star Wars saga as presented in George Lucas's six-film series. Our goal is to deliver one of the best collections of scholarly essays on the subject that the internet has to offer.

Here at the Saga Journal, we believe Star Wars is more than just an enjoyable space opera set in a galaxy far, far away. We recognize it as a modern myth, a cultural phenomenon all its own. We want to encourage the literary exploration of all aspects of the story as presented in the Prequel and Original Trilogy films.

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“A Failure to Listen”: Lucas’s Fable of the Fall of Democracy

by Matril

Few would dispute the notion that the original Star Wars trilogy presents a very simple political argument. From the very beginning of Episode IV we are introduced to “the evil Empire,” and there is little ambiguity throughout the films regarding the cruelty and tyranny of the Emperor’s oppressive regime. Plainly put, totalitarian rule is bad. Other touches, such as the aptly named “stormtroopers” remind us of such real life regimes as Hitler’s Nazi rule in Germany (which he himself named the Third *Reich*, or Empire), but the similarities are more of a subconscious than political level, creating associations with widely accepted icons of evil. Sophisticated political themes are not necessary in a tale of good versus evil, and for most of us the notion of opposing oppressive government is one we can gladly agree with.

But what of the prequel trilogy? With all its scenes involving the interworkings of a galaxy-wide republic, with the dialogue containing frequent mention of politics in some form or another, it would appear to embrace a much more in-depth exploration of political themes. Upon closer examination, however, the prequel films offer a message that is perhaps just as simple as that which is presented in the original films. If the original trilogy presents good people fighting against evil, the prequels are at their heart an examination of the fall of good things. On an individual level, we see Anakin turn to evil. On a galactic level, it is the fall of the Republic to a power-hungry Emperor. How does a Republic founded upon democracy and peace become a war-mongering, dictatorial Empire? It is summed up most aptly in a few words by Padmé Amidala, an idealist who is a symbol of what will be lost when the Republic dies. She declares, “this...represents a failure to listen.” A failure to listen: it is nothing more intricate or complicated than that. That is not to say that the message lacks depth or intelligence. On the contrary, it is a message which concerns not just a single instance of political thought, pertinent only to a particular era, place or situation. It may have been influenced by the political circumstances of the time, but instead of addressing those issues specifically and therefore rendering the films dated, their message inevitably becoming obsolete, Lucas offers a more general notion that has power to outlast one particular political climate. It is a universal theme, applicable to anyone who values justice, equality, and an interest in the common good.

The primary blame for the Republic’s fall can be placed on Palpatine’s shoulders, but each of his machinations to achieve the throne of Emperor are accomplished by exploiting people’s tendencies to stop listening to each other. If enough people had recognized the danger of this tendency, the demise of democracy could have been prevented in spite of every one of Palpatine’s insidious plots. The necessity of listening to each other is inherent to the definition of democracy: “a form of government for the people by the will of the majority of the people (based on conception of the equality of man)” (Webster 102). This definition of democracy is apparent in the prequels from Sio Bibble’s defiant words to Nute Gunray in Episode I: “We’re a democracy: the people have decided.” Their government is of the people, not any single person. The earliest recorded forms of what we call democracy originated in ancient Greece, where philosophers arrived at the following conclusions:

A State, I said, arises, as I conceive, out of the needs of mankind...as we have many wants, and many persons are needed to supply them, one takes a helper for one purpose and another for another...one gives, and another receives, under the idea that the exchange will be for their good. (Plato 241)

Their basic aim was the common good of all the people, achieved by mutual exchange. This can be taken literally in terms of physical goods, but it can also be taken to mean the exchange of words; communication. After all, how can the needs or the overall will of the majority of the people be known unless the government is capable of listening to the people's voice regarding that will?

When considering how this is accomplished in a galaxy-sized population, it would do well to acknowledge that a technical democracy is virtually impossible for the governing of a large group of people. Most would argue that even the real-life government of the United States, famous as the first modern democracy, cannot be officially defined as such; it is simply too large for the literal will of every person to be made known. Indeed, scholars have pointed out that the founding fathers of America were extremely wary of "the sort of direct democracy in which an emotionally aroused populace could be swayed to follow leaders like the violent Daniel Shays [the man who instigated a bloody rebellion during the time between the Revolutionary War and the Constitutional Convention]" (Brinkley 109). The modern, popular conception of democracy is usually associated more with the latter half of Webster's definition – "based on the conception of the equality of man" – than the specific workings of the government. It might more accurately be termed a republic based upon democratic principles, a republic being defined as "a state, without a hereditary head, in which supremacy of the people or its elected representatives is formally acknowledged" (Webster 314). Therefore it is quite appropriate for the prequel's grand government to be known simply as the Republic. The role of listening is just as essential in a republic as in a literal democracy, whether it be listening to the people themselves or to their representatives, such as the Senators in the Galactic Senate. The same founding fathers who shied away from literal democracy were quite willing to create a flexible system of government with specific details "left to be worked out later...[and] a fail-safe system of checks and balances to prevent abuses and concentrations of power wherever they might occur" (ibid). They trusted in the power of peaceable communication to solve their problems, they were aware of the dangers of rigidly ignoring any need for change, and they knew as well as anyone that when those who serve in the government no longer listen to those who need to be heard, a democratic republic cannot stand.

Anakin and Padmé have an intriguing conversation regarding this problem in Episode II, revealing their differing political views. At first Anakin presents a notion of government that appears quite democratic: "We need a system where the politicians sit down and discuss the problem, and agree what's in the best interest of all the people, and then do it!" When Padmé argues that that is exactly what the Republic aims to do, but "people don't always agree," Anakin retorts that "they should be made to." The tone turns darker as Padmé demands, "By whom? You?" and Anakin vaguely answers, "Someone wise." As we already know that he has formed a friendship with Palpatine, there can be little doubt that he is thinking of the Chancellor. But Padmé's response is that it "sounds an awful lot like a dictatorship to me." Indeed, that is the most ominous aspect of Anakin's political notion. They both agree that people are failing to listen to each other and that this problem needs to be resolved, but Anakin would go to such extreme ends as to do away with democracy entirely, to allow the will of one "wise" person to supersede the general will of the people.

Unfortunately, because those in the government are unwilling or unable to regain their ability to listen on their own, it is ultimately Palpatine who forces his will upon them. Their weakness opens the way for him to gain ultimate power. We are introduced to this weakness first in Episode I, when Palpatine's Sith alter-ego, Darth Sidious, assures the Trade Federation leaders who are terrorizing Naboo: "I have the Senate bogged down in procedures," and later, "I will see to it that in the Senate, things stay as they are." This state of static inaction is aptly portrayed later on in the Senate scene on Coruscant, when Queen Amidala's pleas for help are hardly acknowledged, drowned out by snidely indignant denials from the Federation representative, and droning references to bureaucratic procedure. In short, no one

listens to Amidala. Palpatine's hand in this, foreshadowed by Sidious's words, is clear from his all-knowing, almost smug expression each time Amidala is interrupted and disparaged: clearly, he has influenced these Senators and bureaucrats into disregarding the suffering of the Naboo. Certainly the decision to assist the queens' people should not be arrived at lightly, not when it would demand significant resources of the Republic, but Amidala is not even permitted to finish stating her plea for help. How differently would she have felt about the Senate if they had responded with compassion, if they had simply listened to her? Instead, she is so disillusioned by their dismissive response that she makes the motion to oust the current Chancellor from the Senate's head, little knowing that the man who will take his place only plans to deepen the bureaucratic mire into which the Republic is sinking.

The dire political circumstances engulfing the Republic have become far more widespread by Episode II. Instead of a single planetary conflict, hundreds of systems have become embroiled in violence and discontent. Referred to simply as "the Separatists," the leaders of these systems are threatening to break away from the Republic; why exactly, we are never told. Interestingly, and ominously, there is little mention of the possibility that this dissension could be resolved diplomatically; in other words, by listening to and addressing the Separatists' grievances. Already established in the opening crawl is the clamor to create "An army of the Republic." It is by force, and not by listening, that the majority of Senators hope to resolve the Separatist issue. When the Jedi are discussing this with Chancellor Palpatine, Mace Windu makes passing reference to the Jedi being "keepers of the peace, not soldiers," but with that statement he implicitly agrees that an army is the only solution. Palpatine's vague references to "negotiations" are not elaborated upon, nor can we expect that he is doing much to ensure their success. Unsurprisingly, it is Padmé Amidala and just a few others who oppose the creation of the army, still seeking a peaceful alternative. In a deleted scene taking place after the attempted assassination which killed her handmaiden Cordé, Padmé argues with great fervor that "if you offer the Separatists violence, they can only show violence in return." Once again her voice of reason is largely drowned out. Her own fellow from Naboo, Jar Jar Binks, is caught up in their rhetoric and convinced that Padmé would want him to pave the way for a grand army, believing that she would have had "the courage to propose such a radical amendment." On the contrary, there is great cowardice in the Senate handing over so much of their power to the Chancellor – cowardice, and selfishness, that Palpatine gladly exploits.

However, this failure to listen cannot be attributed to the Senate alone. The Separatists also seem little inclined to respond to diplomacy, which is hardly surprising once we learn that they are being goaded on by the Sith lord Sidious and his politically wily apprentice, Tyranus or Count Dooku. The seeds of violence were in the Separatist movement from the beginning; they are not interested in listening to anyone. It is also no surprise to see that representatives from the Trade Federation, and others motivated by selfishness and greed, form the bulk of the Separatist leadership. They prevented Amidala's pleas from being heard while Naboo was besieged; now they continue their Sith-inspired work of preventing peaceable communication. By the time Padmé and her companions have been summarily sentenced to execution after a mockery of a trial, attacked by a veritable army of droids, and finally drawn into an all-out battle on Geonosis, even she acknowledges that the time for a "diplomatic solution" has passed, replaced by "aggressive negotiations." That glib exchange between her and Anakin represents an ominous future for the Republic, when its greatest advocate for peace succumbs to the apparent necessity of violence.

By Episode III, the disintegrating Republic has been fully engaged in galactic war for some years. We are confronted with scenes of massive battles, both in space and on the surface of planets in every corner of the galaxy. Leaders, including Jedi warriors, plan strategies and issue military commands; diplomacy is the farthest thing from their minds. Mace's claim that the Jedi are keepers of the peace seems less and

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less accurate as they are seen leading soldiers forth into battle. The opportunity for listening to and communicating with the other side in this conflict has long passed. Meanwhile, in the Senate, there is only one person to whom most of its members pay any attention: the Supreme Chancellor. Palpatine himself is, of course, cruelly deaf to the needs of anyone who will not further his own quest for power.

The few who are wary of Palpatine's increasing powers, including Padmé Amidala and Bail Organa, are summarily ignored. Padmé intimates her concerns to her own husband, fearing already that "the democracy we thought we were serving no longer exists." She cites

the problem of a failure to listen and pleads with him to speak to the Chancellor personally so that he can "stop the fighting and let diplomacy resume." Anakin's response shows, on a small scale, the state of metaphorical deafness in which Palpatine has placed the Republic. Refusing to acknowledge that there may be truth to her words, he instead takes her words as a personal attack, drowning out her reasoning with an emotional outburst. What Padmé does not realize is that he is still stinging from the Council's unsettling intention of setting him up to spy on Palpatine. "Don't ask me to do that," he snaps. "Make a motion in the Senate where that kind of a request belongs." Unfortunately, the Senate is just as ensnared in the Chancellor's falsehoods as Anakin, and just as incapable of listening to Padmé's desperate call for diplomacy. Indeed, the only Senate session which occurs during Episode III is the one which marks the final death throes of the ailing Republic. "So this is how liberty dies," Padmé says numbly as Palpatine declares himself Emperor. "With thunderous applause." An apt choice of words to illustrate the problem she has identified earlier, for it is this applause, both literal and figurative, that has drowned out the voices which should have been listened to. Democracy has been silenced.

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Recommendation

A New Beginning

Title: The Making of Episode I :The Phantom Menace

Author: Laurent Bouzereau & Judy Duncan

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Publisher: Del Rey

Copyright: 1999



Reviewed by LadyAeryn.

Perhaps one slight drawback of as technologically elaborate and vast a production as a *Star Wars* film is that much of the currently published behind-the-scenes material on the films tends to focus more on the technical aspects of production, and less on the evolution of the story. *The Making of Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, which details the making of the first prequel film, is no exception to this trend. That aside, it's still an incredibly thorough and impressive account of the evolution of *The Phantom Menace* from storyboard to screen.

Following the introduction, the book is divided chronologically into three major sections, each focusing on a specific stage of production (and each taking their name from quotes from George Lucas about the process). The first section briefly overviews the story of the Episode I script before launching full-bore into the pre-production process: concept artwork, casting, location scouting, set design. Following sections detail the actual shooting (including the simultaneous joys and headaches of on-location filming in places like Tunisia) and the new special effects technology from Industrial Light and Magic, and how it gave Lucas the means to realize his vision for the *Star Wars* world more accurately and seamlessly than the technology of the time period of the original trilogy had permitted.

As mentioned earlier, the one major potential drawback of this book, at least for those more interested in the storytelling aspect of the films, is that it focuses very little on the development of the film's story and characters. But Bouzereau and Duncan's fondness and dedication to the subject matter still comes through clearly, making the book a fascinating and enjoyable read even for those who aren't as interested in aspects such as the rendering of CGI Gungan armor. The nearly staggering amount of detail in each page makes this book is a testament to the effort the authors' efforts, and makes "The Making of" perhaps the next best thing – on paper at least – to a walking tour of the film sets themselves.

And for those who simply prefer a visual medium to the textual, this book has a wealth of pretty pictures on nearly every page, which on their own provide a well-rounded summary of Episode I's making. The preproduction section, for instance, contains dozens of pieces of concept artwork covering everything from Queen Amidala's gowns to Trade Federation battle tanks to set design.

This book is an excellent addition to any *Star Wars* coffee-table book collection. It's still in print and easily locatable either at your local library, or online at bookstores such as Amazon.com.

Discovering *Star Wars*

Des

In some form or another, I have been a fan of Star Wars ever since I saw *The Phantom Menace* as a child. Qui-Gon Jinn's death, in particular, left a deep impression on me, and I would mentally replay the last moments of *that* climactic duel over and over again. Not only that, my sister and I would reenact that duel using rolls of vanguard sheeting as our "lightsabers." Three years later, in 2002, I picked up my best friend's copy of the 3-in-1 Classic Trilogy novelization, and my love of the Saga became irreversibly entrenched. Later that year, I discovered online Star Wars fanfiction, and it has since ruined my life.

I find myself drawn most of all to the characters and the dynamics of their relationships. I am fascinated by how Obi-Wan, Dooku, Qui-Gon, Anakin, all can exist as defined characters in their own right, and yet at the same time function as mythological archetypes and far-ranging metaphors in so many different ways.

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