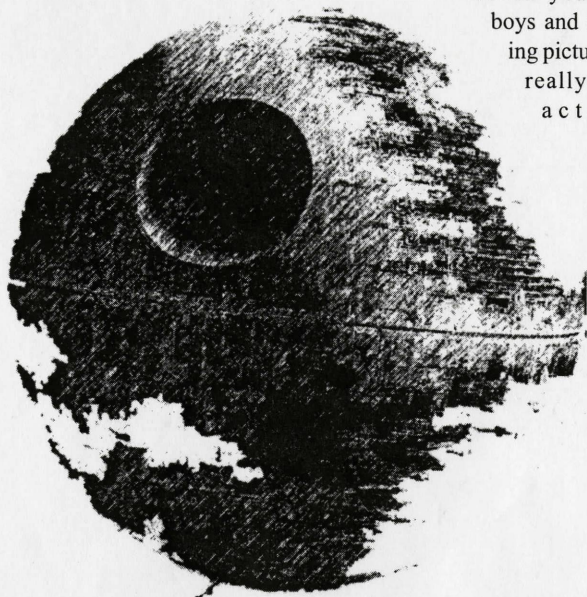


A few years back, I shared an apartment with a guy named John. John was a Star Wars fanatic. Before moving into that apartment, I'd seen all three Star Wars movies a few times and liked them, but I never thought too much about them. Right after the original Star Wars had come out, I had a baby-sitter who had sketched Luke Skywalker over a hundred times. Most of the sketches showed Luke holding the light saber in front of his face, blue eyes staring intently, hair feathered perfectly. After that, I thought of Star Wars fanatics as pimply, teenage girls who couldn't get dates so they'd spend Friday nights yelling at seven-year-old boys and drawing pictures of really bad actors.



John, though, helped me to see the light.

John was definitely an atypical Star Wars fanatic. He was an ex-Marine, a veteran of the Gulf War, and the most competent man around women who I've ever met. To call John a womanizer or a player would demean his artistry. John never lied to or misled women. He was never cruel or condescending in any way. He dated more women over the course of two years than most men date in a lifetime, and I never heard any of them call him an asshole. He was just a cool, confident guy who never passed on an opportunity to ask out an attractive woman. He was kind of like a living Fonzie, only without the whole 30-something man-hanging-out-with-high-school-kids creepiness about him. Yet, he still had a three-foot plastic Darth Vader in his closet. - in the original packaging, next to a box full of Obi-Wans, Stormtroopers (regular and white-caped for the snow), Luke Skywalkers (regular and Jedi-robed), Princess Leias, Boba Fetts, and so on. He hung Star Wars posters on the walls of our living room. He watched the trilogy with women whom he thought he might get serious with. He watched the movies alone. Often. It baffled me. I had to understand. I started watching with him. I asked questions, and he filled me in on the back story. He knew all the trivia about every sound effect and every planet and every character. Gradually, I came to understand.

Before written languages, oral cultures passed down epic tales. Everyone in the culture memorized the epic and, in that way, the culture passed its values down through the generations. We also can learn a great deal about ancient cultures by studying their epics. Humanities classes help us through the Iliad and the Odyssey and, through them, we learn about ancient Greek values. We understand ancient Greek navigational patterns and sexual practices and warring tactics. We understand ancient Greek governmental systems and religions. We can then move on to the Aeneid and figure out what the Roman Empire copied from the Greeks and what they held important on their own. We can learn a great deal about Middle Ages England from Arthurian legend. If we do enough research, we can find similar epic tales that existed everywhere from Ireland to Japan. But no true American epic ever existed. Longfellow tried it with his poem Hiawatha, but it didn't really catch on. And some could say that the Bible is our defining epic,

but I'm talking about epics that people not only know, but memorize, and how many people in our culture really know the Bible? If people say they do, ask them about the part where Rebecca lies on her back with her servant on top of her and her husband fucking her servant. I guarantee they won't recognize that part of the book. For a while, it looked like America would never have its Iliad or Odyssey. Then, in 1977, Star Wars came out. Everyone saw it. Everyone memorized it. It exemplified American values and allowed those values to be passed down through generations. Now we can study it and understand what those American values really are.

The first Star Wars movie is easy to dissect. A lot has changed in our society since 1977, and hindsight brings lucidity. The plot is classically American. You have an all-American kid, blond hair, blue eyes, working on a farm. The farm is on a planet called Tatooine. I'm not sure what

## I've Got A Bad Feeling

*The Phantom Menace* and the *Star Wars*

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language the word Tatooine comes from, but I know that it's a place with wide open spaces that make everything look dead. The people there struggle to grow food in overworked soil. Weird people drive around in big, rust-colored trucks and sell junk farm equipment that often breaks down before you get it home. And dangerous people live in the hills and they may just shoot you for driving through their towns. All of this leads me to believe that Tatooine translates to the stereotype of the Midwest. So in this stereotypical Midwest is this all-American boy who just wants to go into town to buy power converters (which may or may not be a Holley carburetor), when, out of nowhere, a war is thrust upon him and he has no choice other than to fight it. First, he needs a team, so he joins up with a small time punk who has a fast ride and loves to work on it, and the punk's buddy, a long-haired guy who doesn't say much, just hangs around and helps out in fights. The Midwest farm boy and his two greaser buddies then go off to war.

The bad guy is Darth Vader. You can tell he's a bad guy because he's trying to take over the Midwest, just like the Soviet Union was trying to do in the '70s (according to most people who lived in the Midwest in the '70s). So the blue-eyed, blond farm boy and the two greasers pick up a broad, fuck around in their hot rod for a while, then get down to the business of killing everyone in the evil empire. It's a simple Cold War tale. It reads like a National Security Council document from the 1950s. Good is purely good. Evil is purely evil. Everyone leaves feeling happy that the good guys spent all their money buying elaborate weapons.

The Empire Strikes Back continues the Cold War myth, going so far as to begin on a planet that is all ice, and ending with a main character frozen. Return of the Jedi admits that the Cold War has begun to thaw. Out of the ice surfaces cuddly creatures that appeal more to the lucrative children's market, and we all get stuck watching what seems like a Disney ending. It was a fitting way to swing us into the Reagan years full of national pride, lots of weapons, and unbridled consumerism. Hindsight makes all of this easy to see. What seemed to be hidden deeply in the camouflage of the day is now glaringly obvious in the same way that it's glaringly obvious now that Ronald Reagan wasn't really a president as much as he was an actor who the Republican Party hired to play president. The values of the *Phantom Menace* may be hidden as deeply in the



camouflage, but as a kid who has grown up on the first three Star Wars movies, and as an adult who has experienced the secondhand Star Wars fanaticism, I'm more prepared to see what's going on underneath the Phantom Menace.

Shortly after the Phantom Menace came out, I ran into an old friend of mine, Todd. Todd and I had gone to graduate school together, and we currently write for the same magazine. We tend to agree on most political and social issues, so when something new surfaces, we like to approach the subject and compare notes, to check to see if the opinions we have formed separately are still similar. Running into Todd last summer and finally getting a chance to sit down and chat with him, one of the first things he asked me was, "How did you like the new Star Wars?"

"I liked it," I said, because I did. I don't want all of my criticism in this article to give you the impression that I hated the movie. I liked it.

lous coincidence or a sign that something is seriously corrupt with the electoral process if a country elects a ruler based on who her parents were? This threw me off right away last summer. Now, one year later, I'm living in a democracy where supposedly no royalty exists and bloodlines have nothing to do who gets elected as the ruler, yet, after the first Tuesday in this coming November, my ruler will either be the son of a former president or the son of a former senator from Tennessee. So now Queen Amidala really pisses me off because she translates as either King George W. (and remember, it was a King George from whom Americans first fought to free themselves) or King Al Jr.

I could've accepted the plot parallels between the Phantom Menace and the WTO riots if they'd existed by themselves. I could've accepted the parallels between an elected queen and an American election ruled by royalty if those parallels had existed by themselves. When I

combined the two, I became mildly obsessed, went down to my local library, checked out the Phantom Menace, and proceeded to look for more insight into our modern society. What I found shocked and amazed me.

The first very telling thing about American culture came when the Jedis found themselves on Tatooine. The Trade Federation had already landed on Naboo and took over the people there. The people of Naboo were suffering greatly. The Gungans, hidden in their underwater ghetto, were in a great deal of danger. The Jedis and

Queen Amidala were on their way to the Senate to clear everything up when the hyperdrive generator on their ship blew out. The Jedis and the queen landed on Tatooine and found a trader, Watto, who had the hyperdrive that they needed. Watto, however, wouldn't accept the currency that the Jedi offered him. This launched the Jedis and the queen into a long, complex, and extremely risky plan that included putting a young boy's life in extreme danger. The likelihood of the plan actually working was also very low, but the Jedis and the queen (and the young boy's mother) saw no other choice, so they went through with their plan. Now, I understand that all of this is necessary, in the context of the movie, for the advancement of the plot. I accept that. My problem, though, is that I see another choice. They have money. Watto just won't accept it. The part that they need is right in front of them. Watto's ownership is the only thing that kept them from taking it, fixing their ship, ending the suffering of half the people on a planet, and preventing the other half of the planet from being taken over. Doesn't it make a hell of a lot more sense for the Jedis to just take the part, fix the ship, and leave the planet? Yes, they would be stealing the part, but, ethically speaking, what's more important: paying a man the proper amount of money for something in his possession, or ending the suffering of the masses and protecting the life of one young boy? The answer is clear in America. It's more important to pay for property. Money always takes precedence over the well-being of the masses. That's the way the system is set up. America is not a humanitarian country. It's a capitalist country. The great majority of laws and legislation are geared towards protecting property at the expense of the people. That's why it's the only industrialized nation in the world that doesn't have a universal health care system. That's why law enforcement and prisons siphon so much money away from education. That's why no dole exists for the downtrodden, but McDonald's gets millions of dollars to bring Chicken McNuggets to China. That's why unions have been crushed. Qui-Gon Jinn knows this, so he doesn't even contemplate taking the hyperdrive generator. Instead, he puts a boy's life at stake and leaves everyone else to starve. And when it's all said and done, they pay the man. Like good Americans.

The precarious plan that the Jedis and queen subject the boy to involves a pod race that's straight out of NASCAR, right down to the

## About This:

**Trilogy as an Extended Allegory for the American Midwest**  
*Phantom Menace* and the WTO riots if they'd existed by themselves, an elected queen and an American election ruled by royalty if combined the two, I became mildly obsessed, went down to and proceeded to look for more insight into our modern soci-

by Sean Carswell

"Really? I had real problems with it," Todd said.

I asked him what the problems were. He answered by asking me to describe the plot to him. "You've seen it?" I asked.

"Yeah. I just want you to put the plot in your own words."

So I thought about it for a while and said, "A greedy Trade Federation forces a trade embargo on another planet which causes that planet's people to starve, so a couple of Jedi nights go to the greedy planet's leaders and try to work out a settlement and when they can't, they bring the queen of the second planet before a Congress that does nothing so everybody fights in the end." I paused, thought about what I'd said, and said, "That's pretty much it, isn't it?"

Todd nodded. "Not a very good plot, is it?"

Well, no, it's not a very good plot. But I didn't want to admit that, so I scowled and shut up and waited until Thanksgiving weekend, when the leaders of a greedy trade organization got together to force embargoes which would result in people starving and our leaders and congress did nothing about it, so everyone fought. This time, though, it was no movie. It was a protest against the World Trade Organization, and it was very exciting. I couldn't help drawing parallels between the Battle in Seattle and the Phantom Menace. I called up Todd and finally made my counterpoint. He called me a fanatic but agreed to watch the flick again when it came out in video.

I, myself, was slow to rent the movie again, mostly because I don't rent movies all that often, and usually when I do, I like to rent things I haven't seen yet. Also, I'll admit it, I was afraid of genuinely becoming a fanatic.

Then, I saw a picture of Natalie Portman on the cover of some magazine. It sat in a rack next to a magazine with George W. Bush on the cover. It reminded me of something that had bothered me about the movie when I saw it in the theaters last summer. What bothered me was Queen Amidala, Natalie Portman's character. It didn't bother me that the nation was ruled by a 14-year-old girl. I could suspend disbelief on that. What bothered me was that she was both a queen and an elected official. I couldn't understand that. How does a democracy have royalty? Isn't everyone equal in a democracy? Shouldn't a person's bloodline have nothing to do with her ability to rule a country? And if that's the case, then isn't it either a ridicu-



smarmy, catch-phrase-obsessed color commentator, the fat guy in the sky box, and the dangerous hill people hanging out in the infield. Essentially, Qui-Gon Jinn bets his ship and the future of the people of Naboo on the pod race. They enlist the help of the slave boy, Anakin Skywalker. The fact that Anakin is a slave brings about two interesting parallels. First, the queen responds to Anakin's slave status by saying that she didn't think slavery existed anymore. But she's a queen. Shouldn't she be up on foreign affairs? It reminds me of the time Kathie Lee Gifford supposedly first heard that her line of clothes was made in Southeast Asian sweatshops. Kathie acted as if she hadn't known all along, as if she couldn't possibly share in the blame. But she sponsored those clothes. Shouldn't she have known something was up when she was paid millions of dollars to endorse clothes that sold for 10 bucks, retail? Of course slavery still exists in the galaxy. It doesn't matter if it's Naboo, Tatooine, or Manhattan, if people live in castles and don't have to work, of course there's a slave whose work fuels that economic inequality.

Qui-Gon Jinn and the queen tell Anakin that they're not on Tatooine to free the slaves. They're more interested in affairs at home, which, in all fairness, need their immediate attention. Qui-Gon Jinn does free Anakin, though, after Anakin wins the pod race. The rest of the slaves in the Tatooine ghetto, though, the slaves who don't demonstrate a proficiency in pod racing, are left to wallow in their poverty, doomed to a crushing fate if they try to escape the ghetto. Again, this is awfully similar to American ghettos where kids who show some proficiency in a spectator sport are freed from their impoverished fate while the rest of the poor are left to wallow helpless in the ghetto. The rest of the poor in American ghettos also tend to be doomed to a crushing fate if they try to escape (unlike the internal bomb the Tatooines use, Americans use the prison industrial complex).

The last, glaring America/Tatooine parallel comes with Anakin's freedom. Qui-Gon Jinn is incredibly impressed with Anakin. Anakin has volunteered his pod and his pod race talents and asked for nothing in return. Anakin's spectator sport success directly aids Qui-Gon Jinn on his mission. Anakin proves to be a smart, good-natured and selfless kid. His unique talents make him a perfect candidate for Jedi training. Qui-Gon Jinn even believes that Anakin is the chosen one. Yet, before Qui-Gon Jinn barter for this amazing kid's freedom, he gives the kid a blood test. How representative of the '90s is that? In a society so obsessed with the contents of a person's blood and urine that the results of a blood or urine test are more important in the hiring process than a person's intelligence, good attitude, work ethic, unique talents and education, I guess it just makes sense that our heroes and saviors should have to stand up to a blood test, too. I guess it's not so absurd if the practice started long ago in a galaxy far, far away.

The parallels between Tatooine and America are most likely unintentional. George Lucas, when writing the Phantom Menace, probably tried to create a bizarre and imaginative world, and to make this world believable, he anchored it in the society surrounding him. It is not my contention that Lucas was attempting to suggest to his viewers that money is more important than people; that royalty generally maintains power, even in a democracy; that most kids in the ghetto won't make it out of the ghetto unless they're great athletes; or that blood and urine tests are the best ways to screen employees. More likely than not, these are all cases of a society's values being so ingrained in a writer that he doesn't realize he is promulgating them.

When the main characters reach the Senate, though, Lucas is clearly taking overt political jabs. Shortly after arriving on galactic capital of Coruscant, Queen Amidala is informed, "There is no civility, only politics... the Senate is full of greedy, squabbling delegates. There is no interest in the common good." Also, the Supreme Chancellor (the president) has "little real power. He is mired by baseless accusations of corruption." This isn't subtle. This isn't a hidden meaning. This is authorial intrusion. The movie even goes on to show the actions of the Senate, which essentially amount to a group of bureaucrats who respond to crimes against humanity by appointing a committee whose job it is to do nothing. The bureaucrats are all on the payroll of the Trade Federation. This isn't just a parallel to the legislative and executive branches of the Ameri-

**So I put this equation together: forced to live in crappy, unnatural conditions plus receiving all the negative aspects and none of the positive aspects of a global economy equals working class. So, of course, when it all comes down to the battle, who has to actually fight it? Is it the poor, invisibly suffering Naboo middle class? Of course not. It's the Gungans. The working class fighting a war to keep the rich in power.**

can government. This is a direct attack.

It's probably no coincidence, either, that the man who turns out to be the purely evil force in the galaxy is a politician battling for free trade.

What really breaks my heart about the parallels between the Phantom Menace and the society I live in, though, is the battle at the end. More specifically, what breaks my heart is the role of the Gungans in the battle at the end. When Jar Jar Binks first entered the movie, I noticed his Jamaican accent. I wondered at first if the Gungans, then, were supposed to relate to the Jamaicans in the same stereotypical ways that the greedy businessmen of the Trade Federation had Japanese accents and the gangster/junk merchant had an Italian accent. I also thought that the Gungans might be Jamaican because their ears look a lot like the hairstyle of a rasta guy who lived in my old neighborhood in Atlanta. The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized that a direct line couldn't necessarily be drawn between the Jamaicans and the Gungans. The Gungans relate to a broader demographic.

The Gungans are innocent bystanders forced into a battle, unlike either the people who live within the Trade Federation or the people of Naboo. Throughout the movie, we are told that the people of Naboo are starving and otherwise suffering, but we don't ever see any of the people of Naboo, with the exception of their politicians. We have no idea what a town in Naboo looks like, what the customs of Naboo are, or what the overall quality of living in Naboo was before the Trade Federation came along. All we know is that the people of Naboo are starving due to an invasion by the Trade Federation. Therefore, in the context of the movie, the Trade Federation is bad. But we don't know anything about the Federation, either, except that two of their leaders are unethical men. But is there more to the actions of the Trade Federation? We don't know. It reminds me of the popular American reaction to the bombing of Yugoslavia last year (right around the time the Phantom Menace hit theaters). We knew that the people of Kosovo were starving and otherwise suffering, but we didn't ever see much of them. The mainstream media didn't explain much about the Kosovar refugees, what their lives were like, what their customs were, or anything like that. Likewise, the people of Yugoslavia and the nature of their conflict with the Kosovars was completely ignored. The mass media presented only one important bit of information: that Milosovic was the next Hitler. Therefore, we knew that the Kosovars were good and the Slavs were bad. The movie, the American government, and mass media demanded that we not ask any more about the situation. Good is purely good. Evil is purely evil. There is no room in between for questioning the powers that be. I know this, though. I know that the leaders of Naboo, the Trade Federation, Yugoslavia, and America all let people under their jurisdiction starve. All of them do. I know this, too. I know that Yugoslavia, at least, has universal health care.

I digress. We're talking about the Gungans, here, and what breaks my heart about their part in the battle. The Gungans, unlike the people of



Naboo and the Trade Federation, are suffering. We can see that. We can see that the Gungans have been forced to live underwater even though they are clearly not aquatic creatures. And this is before political disputes between the Naboo and the Trade Federation bring on the invasion. We can also see that the resolution of the trade disputes won't make life any better for the Gungans, but their quality of life will continue to get worse until the disputes are resolved. So I put this equation together: forced to live in crappy, unnatural conditions plus receiving all the negative aspects and none of the positive aspects of a global economy equals working class. So, of course, when it all comes down to the battle, who has to actually fight it? Is it the poor, invisibly suffering Naboo middle class? Of course not. It's the Gungans. The working class fighting a war to keep the rich in power. Queen Amidala's plan couldn't be more transparent, too. Essentially, her plan calls for the Gungans to walk out into a field and get shot at and die until she can get back into her castle. What the hell kind of plan is that? Where are the middle and upper classes of Naboo? They benefit from the global economy. Why don't they stand out in the field and get shot? They're the ones who are so dependent upon trade that they can't even feed themselves on a lush, green planet like Naboo. Why the hell don't they fight their own fights? Why do the poor bastards who get nothing from the government always have to die for the government? Why is it always the working class?

Queen Amidala gets into her castle, though. She remembers the Gungans. She treats them well. The movie ends before she can force them all back into the swamps. This allows me to calm down and remind myself that, by and large, it's just a movie.

All of this begs questions about life imitating art and about the intentions of the author. Neither of these questions interests me too much.

As I mentioned earlier, I don't believe most of these parallels are intentional constructs of George Lucas. The subtle ideas hidden in the Phantom Menace exist in the movie because they exist all around us. By and large, they are rarely articulated notions that lead to a number of the problems that our society faces today. The solutions to these problems exist just as subtly, though, in all four Star Wars movies. They're packed in a little frame and given a number: R2-D2.

Think of that little guy. In the first movie, he introduced Luke to Obi Wan. He delivered the blueprints of the Death Star to the rebel forces. Then, he rode shotgun on the ship that destroyed the Death Star. He even stopped the trash compactor from crushing all the protagonists. In the second movie, he drove Luke Skywalker to Yoda and went through Jedi training with him. In the third movie, he helped spring Han Solo and Princess Leia from the grips of Jaba the Hutt, and he picked the lock to the shield generator, which allowed Lando Calrissian to blow up the Death Star again. In the fourth movie, he restored the protective shield to the escape ship, he jacked up the hot rod pod, and he made it possible for Anakin to blow up the droid ship, thereby disabling all the warriors who were killing the Gungans. Basically, of all the protagonists of all the Star Wars movies, R2-D2 was the hero. He saved everyone's ass and no one saved his. And no one ever really acknowledged him as anything more than a cute bucket of metal. R2-D2 teaches us, though, that the unrecognized little guy has all power. He builds and fixes things. He's a courier, navigator, mechanic, student, radical and electrical technician; he's a laborer and a grunt. His ability to do the actual work and apply himself to a cause allows him to win his freedom. To hell with the soldiers and politicians. Everything depends upon that little guy. ★

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