Collective Terror in Imaginary Worlds: Cinematic representation of a post-9/11 America in Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith and War of the Worlds

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COLLECTIVE TERROR IN IMAGINARY WORLDS:

Cinematic representation of a post-9/11 America in *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* and *War of the Worlds*

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Introduction

In the summer of 2001, audiences all over the United States were ecstatic when New York's most iconic fictional superhero appeared on the big screen in a teaser trailer for Sam Raimi's upcoming blockbuster movie *Spider-Man*. The teaser, which aired before other big summer blockbuster films such as *Jurassic Park III (Johnston, 2001)* and *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within (Sakaguchi, 2001)* featured a group of robbers pulling off a heist on a bank in downtown New York, after which they make their escape by helicopter. The cash-loaded helicopter does not make it far, though, as it is first stopped mid-air and then yanked backwards and further up into the air. When it comes to a standstill, the camera zooms out to reveal a huge spiderweb spun in between the Twin Towers, the helicopter caught in the center of it, resembling a fly.[1] Classic late 90s/early 00s action movie music started playing as audiences were greeted with the first live action appearance of the titular hero since 1981's *Spider-Man: The Dragon's Challenge (McDougall)*.

But that summer, drastic circumstances changed the world forever. It was September 11 when two hijacked passenger airplanes flew headfirst into the Twin Towers, their subsequent slow deterioration and eventual collapse witnessed by thousands of spectators in the streets. The terrorist attack, which I will spend more time on later in this thesis, killed almost 3000 people. Two days after the collapse of both 1 WTC and 2 WTC, Sony Pictures, the film's distributing company, released a statement saying that out of respect for those involved with the attacks, they pulled the aforementioned teaser trailer from theatres.[2] Furthermore, early posters for the film that depicted a close-up of Spider-Man's face, with the

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1. YoshiKiller2S, "Spider-Man (2002) Banned Teaser [4K 35mm] (ORIGINAL UPLOAD)," July 19, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPL7UWN_hcM.

2. "Spider-Man in Limbo after New York tragedy," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2001/sep/13/september11.usa.

Twin Towers being reflected in one of his mask's eyes, were also recalled. Since the film had already moved far into the post-production phase by the time of the teaser trailer's release, Raimi and his team had a lot of unexpected work on their hands: they set about to remove any depictions of the Twin Towers from the final film, either editorially (such as cutting the heist scene shown in the teaser from the final film) or digitally (erasing the Towers from overview shots of Manhattan).

But dealing with the trauma of the 9/11 attacks through their upcoming blockbuster turned out not to be just a matter of cutting and erasing: Raimi's crew shot additional photography as well. As a result, the final film features ordinary New Yorkers helping Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire) out during his final battle with the film's villain, the Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), bombarding the latter with debris while one of them yells: "You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!"[3] The scene was specifically added to lift up the spirits of New York audience members, underlining the strong and resilient spirit of the city often called upon in the post-attack period of mourning.

Just like Raimi and his crew, many other filmmakers developing films at the time were suddenly faced with an entirely different world to release their picture into. Director of *The Time Machine (2002)*, Simon Wells, faced a similar dilemma as Raimi did and decided to eliminate a particular part of the H.G. Wells adaptation in which a meteor shower rains down on New York City. Famous filmmaker James Cameron had his entire perspective on future projects shift after the attacks. After the success of *True Lies (Cameron, 1994)*—an action comedy inspired by Claude Zidi's 1991 film *La Totale!*—in which Harry Tasker (Arnold Schwarzenegger) fights a terrorist organization called the "Crimson Jihad," a sequel was not unimaginable. When Harry Knowles from *Ain't It Cool News* reached out to Cameron to ask

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3. *Spider-Man*, directed by Sam Raimi, (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2002), 1:44:25 to 1:44:50.

about the rumors he had heard about a sequel, Cameron responded: "[S]ince September 11, I've never felt comfortable generating laughs with nuke-toting Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. *True Lies*, even though it has a cautionary thread underneath the pratfalls, is in a strange way a product of a more innocent time."[4]

This research project considers to what extent the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent US political milieu have helped shape the Hollywood film landscape of the early 2000s. I will draw a clear connection between these real-world events and the events that take place in the imaginary, fantastical worlds featured in Hollywood films. Worlds that are far removed from our reality, at that. I focus on the way in which Hollywood science fiction films from the year 2005 have been shaped by the cultural shift in the United States resulting from the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the nation-wide political and cultural sentiments that followed. I limit this research to the two biggest science fiction blockbuster hits of 2005, *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (Lucas, 2005)* and *War of the Worlds (Spielberg, 2005)*.

The research question central in this project is: what do the two highest-grossing Hollywood science fiction films from 2005 reflect about the shifting cultural perspective on the War on Terror in early post-9/11 America? I choose the year 2005 because by that time, the initial shock of the 9/11 attacks had worn off, and reactions to the Bush Administration's hawkish response had become clear by this point. Further details on the historical context will follow in my second chapter. I steer away from the most obvious and direct examples that deal with the Twin Towers attack itself. Films like *United 93 (Greengrass, 2006)* and *World Trade Center (Stone, 2006)*, in my opinion, have more of an intrinsic retelling purpose rather than anything else. Although they are very much useful examples of films that deal with collective post-9/11 trauma and help cement cultural ideas arising within this period, they do

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4. Harry Knowles, "TRUE LIES 2 to shoot in 14 months - not according to James Cameron...," *Ain't It Cool News*, August 3, 2009, https://legacy.aintitcool.com/node/41919.

not demonstrate how deep the aforementioned cultural shift has seeped into American culture.

This thesis presents a much stronger argument for how deep the 9/11 attacks cut within the art of filmmaking in Hollywood, by locating reflections of this collective trauma and new modes of thinking within films that do not directly address the attacks itself. This is my main motivation for choosing to analyze science fiction works. These type of films feature worlds that are distanced from our reality, and therefore offer filmmakers an opportunity to steer away from real-life referents while telling their story. With that in mind, if one has the chance to completely distance a film's reality from our reality by having it take place in a fictional universe, then how dire—how omnipresent and deeply rooted—do recent real-life developments have to be to make their way into that universe? One science fiction film might be closer to reality than the other, but both still take place is an imaginary world dealing with outlandish events, technology, and concepts. For these reasons, both *Revenge of the Sith* and *War of the Worlds* serve as neat examples to dive into.

This research project could be viewed as an unofficial add-on to the collection of essays *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, which features papers constructed with similar methodology. Editor Terence McSweeney states early on in the book that the films produced in the early post-9/11 timeframe "function as a uniquely telling and resonant cultural battleground in which conflicting ideologies were projected for all to see, but were also able to shape the cultural imaginary of post-9/11 America in a range of compelling ways"[5], a statement I hope to further strengthen through this research project. Zooming out even further, McSweeney expresses his wish to, in turn, contribute to a larger body of works within film studies that "examines the symbiotic exchange between national identity and the

5. Terence McSweeney, "Introduction" in *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, ed. Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1.

politics of cinematic representation,"[6] calling upon the works of Siegfried Kracauer and Robin Wood. My project can, due to its similarities in topic and methodology, be considered to be a part of this greater academic framework of exploring the relationship between cinematic representation and society. McSweeney acknowledges that within the collection of essays in the book, many films deal with "explicit dramatizations of the 'War on Terror'," [and that] some turn to "allegorical films which emerge just as, if not more, impactful than those which directly represent the conflict."[7] As stated earlier, my thesis falls within the latter category: I focus on films that deal with allegorical representations of the political milieu of the United States in the year 2005.

By offering narrative and formal analyses, I will examine the two films and highlight the relationships to their respective contemporary cultural contexts. I explore the thematic and stylistic choices that were made by the filmmakers that are representative of the cultural and political shift that took place in early post-9/11 America. Similar to one of the writers in McSweeney's book, Vincent M. Gaine, I will argue how the films I discuss are intrinsically connected to the post-9/11 world, as he does with the *James Bond* movies starring Daniel Craig. Adam Knee, yet another scholar featured in McSweeney's book, focuses on the genre of the action/adventure film in relationship to a post-9/11. Since I also focus on a specific genre, this research project might be closest in methodology to his essay, in which he highlights the relationship between masculinity and the War on Terror in the films *Unstoppable (2010)* and *Source Code (2011)*. Like Knee, I will focus on the variations present within the genre when addressing the War on Terror. After all, not every film within a genre codes its messages in the exact same manner.

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6. See note 5 above.

7. McSweeney, 6.

Also similar to Knee, I will utilize a method of comparative analysis. Not to only map out the variations used for interacting with the War on Terror within the genre by comparing the two films to each other, but also to highlight the intrinsic connection advocated by Gaine between these films and their predecessors. After all, *Revenge of the Sith* is the sixth feature length movie in the *Star Wars* film series, and the only one that was produced after the 9/11 attacks had taken place. The story of *War of the Worlds* has also been told in filmic form earlier in history. A comparison between the two would therefore be fruitful to cement the film as a true product of its post-9/11 time period. For my analysis of *War of the Worlds*, I draw—in part—upon the work of Denison University professor Kirk Combe, who suggests a refreshing postmodern reading of the role of monsters within film.

On top of this, the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's reception theory also looms over this project, as it arguably does with every essay belonging to the field of film studies. In his 1973 paper "Encoding and Decoding the Television Discourse," Hall states that "Before [a] message can have an 'effect' (however defined), or satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully de-coded. It is this set of de-coded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences."[8] In terms of filmmaking, this implies that filmmakers try to convey meaning through their works by encoding messages on screen. For example, this might be done through formal practices such as lighting, blocking, make-up or costume design. The meanings itself are not objective, though, for they are decoded by members of the audience in a rather personal manner. Using their own cultural frameworks, the audience gives meaning to that what is seen on screen.

8. Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." (Birmingham, University of Birmingham, 1973), 3.

Hall differentiates between three modes of decoding. First, there is the possibility that the audience exactly decodes a message in the way the filmmakers intended it to be decoded. In that scenario, Hall speaks of a "dominant or hegemonic code"[9] inside which the reader is operating. In a different scenario, that of the "oppositional code,"[10] readers reject the message encoded within the text in the way the filmmakers intended. It is the opposite of the dominant code scenario. A third scenario, that of the "negotiated code,"[11] has readers fall in the middle. In this scenario, readers understand and decode the messages they see on screen, but might reject the intention of the filmmaker and subsequently interpret elements of the film in a unique and personal way. In the essay "The Death of the Author," French philosopher Roland Barthes introduced the idea that the interpretation of a text by readers is more important than the meaning that is intended by the text's author.[12] Drawing upon this theory, all three ways of reading introduced by Hall could be deemed as equally legitimate. Although I do agree with this hypothesis, I would not take such a radical approach as Barthes did regarding the intended meaning of a text. I do think the author's intention is very important, and would not hierarchically place it beneath an audience's interpretation. In my eyes, the two are more on an equal level of importance.

Before I start to analyze my body of works, I first require to know what I am looking for within these films. I need to determine what can be expected from blockbuster sci-fi films developed in a post-9/11 America. There are several themes and expressions that I think are most likely to show up in post-9/11 films that interact with their environment. First of all, an

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9. Hall, 16.

10. Hall, 18.

11. Hall, 17.

12. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image Music Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142-148.

atmosphere, or mention of, panic and distrust between different groups of people is expected. Feelings of fear and paranoia would neatly mirror the general disposition of the US public in the post-9/11 period. Furthermore, critique on Bush's rhetoric (the aforementioned Bushspeak) and on the invasion of Iraq, a country that had nothing to do with the attacks on 9/11, are also to be expected.

By 2005, the US had moved past blind support for the War on Terror, as I demonstrate in chapter 2 of this thesis. I therefore also expect the national soul-searching that took place after the revelation of the Abu Ghraib incidents to be a major theme in these films. Thought experiments about what is good and what is evil, and about what amount and form of violence is accepted in order to serve a seemingly greater good, undoubtedly kept intellectuals awake at night after gruesome revelations about how the War on Terror was being fought became known to the public. Of course, these are all general expectations. It is up to the films to see if, and in what manner, they represent these issues. However, it is important to keep in mind that nothing in these films, unless mentioned, is a direct representative of a real-life person, concept, or event. The parallels drawn are often fluid rather than rigid, and can acquire multiple different meanings throughout the films.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I provide the reader with the necessary background information on the relationship between film and culture. I use the legendary Japanese monster film *Godzilla (Honda, 1954)* as an example of how film can interact with its contemporary political milieu and how it can reflect dominating fears or sentiments within national societies. The second chapter will be dedicated to the historical context of the time period I am researching. I provide background information on the cultural shifts that took place after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent response by the Bush Administration. I demonstrate what the War on Terror entails and how support from the populous started out strong but waned after US troops were deployed in the Middle East. Exemplary reasons for

this decrease in support are discussed as well. This overview of the time period will not be extensive due to the limitations that come with the scope of this research project. However, the summary suffices in the context of this essay and offers the required knowledge necessary to continue reading.

The remaining portion of this thesis is reserved for film analyses. In my third chapter, I analyze George Lucas' 2005 sci-fi epic *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* from a viewpoint of cultural analyses of early post-9/11 America. I highlight the narrative and formal elements that serve as connections to the contemporary political milieu and decode them as reflections of the American zeitgeist of 2005. In the fourth chapter, I utilize the same methodology to analyze yet another sci-fi blockbuster, Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*. Again I highlight narrative and formal elements that connect the film to its contemporary milieu of a post-9/11 America, and compare the film to its 1954 predecessor to draw comparisons and strengthen the argument that Spielberg's film is characteristic for the time period in which it was produced. All findings are summarized in a conclusion at the end.

Chapter 1 - The Relationship Between Film and Culture

Film as an artform has the ability to accurately encapsulate the manner in which people at a certain point in time interacted with—amongst other things—the culture, politics and gender norms that surrounded them. As Alison Landsberg mentions in the aforementioned book *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, "All films […] are ideological, and in that sense they present a distorted reality, and yet they index the very real anxieties and social contradictions of their moment of creation."[13] This suggests a complex relationship between cinema and culture that goes beyond merely films "reflecting the time in which they were made."[14] In context of post-9/11 American cinema, the book demonstrates that its objects of study "not only function as a uniquely telling and resonant cultural battleground in which conflicting ideologies were projected for all to see, but were also able to shape the cultural imaginary of post-9/11 America in a range of compelling ways."[15]

What this entails is essentially the notion that the relationship between film and culture is not a one-way road: films from Hollywood can be shaped, to an extent, by certain events or political milieus, but the films themselves help cement a certain collective memory or shared consciousness for the audience about said event. In context of post-9/11 films, it is as if the medium of film channels the public chaos and mourning that was rampant after the attacks. This does not limit itself to Hollywoodian blockbusters, but also encompasses 'home video' or news footage of events. Filmed images contributed greatly to 9/11 becoming a "nation-wide" trauma, because people who were not in Manhattan on that day still could see

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13. Alison Landsberg, "Foreword" in *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, ed. Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), ix-x.

14. McSweeney, 1.

15. See note 14 above.

what happened on television or on the internet. Furthermore, it is, what Alison Landsberg describes in her essay "Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture," the "unique capacity of film and other technologies of reproduction to generate empathy."[16] Audiovisual media are therefore such effective tools to move, impress and convey modes of thinking. One only has to look at the amount of social media consumers today, and the way in which content is consumed, to know this statement to hold true.

But this two-way relationship between film and culture is catalyzed by a certain real-life event that causes a cultural shift. New modes of thinking that come with this cultural shift can then be found within artworks conceived in the shadow of said event. With film, this is usually done both on a narrative level (by telling stories that reflect on certain events, public sentiments or political changes) and on a formal level (by use of color or certain camera techniques or by incorporating distinct elements within the mise-en-scène). Both levels are interconnected, and arguably equally as important when placing a work within its respective cultural context. A frequently used example of how films narratively reflect the fears, hopes and other sentiments from the public within a certain place in a certain time period is the Japanese 1954 horror sci-fi film *Godzilla*. The successful monster film became a staple of early Japanese cinema, and can be neatly contextualized within its contemporary milieu of post-World War II panic.

In the film, a huge, ancient creature emerges from the Japanese sea after being disturbed by underwater hydrogen bomb testing, and wreaks havoc across the mainland. *Godzilla*'s filmmakers, having witnessed the wrath of atomic weapons during the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of WWII, created a narrative storyline that underlined a

16. Alison Landsberg, "Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture" in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 148.

fear shared by the entire Japanese population during this postwar period. Further development and use of nuclear weaponry was generally seen as something deeply immoral and irresponsible by the Japanese people. This is not only reflected by the fact that Godzilla is awakened by the practice of hydrogen bomb testing, but also by the sacrificial nature of the testing program's head scientist. The scientist who accidentally unleashes the monster is also the film's hero, defeating Godzilla using an invention called the 'Oxygen Destroyer.' The scientist, "guilt-ridden for unleashing a force as destructive as the atomic bomb, chooses to die alongside Godzilla rather than risk letting his Oxygen Destroyer fall into the hands of war-makers."[17]

Director Ishirō Honda stated that the idea for *Godzilla* came from the Japanese wish for the US and USSR to both "abolish nuclear weapons."[18] A direct reference to real-life events is also made within the film: at one point, before the monster has shown itself, a fishing boat is destroyed at sea, leaving only one survivor. It references an incident that took place in March of 1954, when the crew of fishing boat *Daigo Fukuryū Maru* became contaminated with nuclear radiation near Bikini Atoll. While fishing for tuna, a US hydrogen bomb test took place underwater nearby, causing acute radiation syndrome for the entire crew. The surviving crew member, Kuboyama Aikichi, eventually passed away due to complications. On the formal level, we also find parallels with the destructive force of atomic weaponry. Many of Godzilla's victims die off screen, alluding to the indiscriminate nature of killing the use of an atomic weapon results in. Not only do military targets get destroyed, but so do innocent civilians. The documentary-style filmmaking and its implied realness further emphasized the urgency of the problem the world was facing at the dawn of a new, nuclear

17. Steve Ryfle, "Godzilla's Footprint," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 81, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 45. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26441723.

18. Ishiro Honda, quoted in "Godzilla's Footprint," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 81, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 62. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26441723.

age. The role of the fictional monster as a harbinger of warning against science meddling with the elements is something author Jeffrey Jerome Cohen cemented as one the seven underpinning characteristics seen in monsters throughout our culture. In his book *Monster Theory*, he states one of these characteristics to be "the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes."[19] In the case of *Godzilla*, the monster functions as a warning against the development and the testing of nuclear weapons, and therefore borders the line within science between the known and the unknown, suggesting that venturing further into new territories might have catastrophic effects. A theory founded on the horrors of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Bikini Atoll.

Examples of how films interact with culture in a certain contemporary setting, like with *Godzilla*, are numerous within the field of film studies. Evidently, these examples are not limited to just the post-WWII world or the post-9/11 world mentioned above, but also surface within other distinctive periods in history and come in all shapes and sizes. Think of how *Her (Jonze, 2013)*—a science fiction drama in which the protagonist (Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with the A.I.-based virtual assistant of a new operating system—deals with a world in which the lines between technology and humanity are rapidly blurring. Or think of how Todd Fields' 2022 film *Tár* addresses (sexual) abuse perpetrated by people in positions of power, a theme still as relevant today as it was after the infamous Weinstein allegations of 2017. I myself am more interested in the rather subtle representations of how films interact with their political and cultural environment. Think, for example, of how the 1972 thriller *Deliverance (Boorman, 1972)*, about a group of colleagues on a canoeing trip in the wilderness being tormented by mountain men. On the surface, the film stands on its own as a contained story of survival and drama. However, through interpretation, connections to the (at

19. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (The Seven Theses)" in *Monster Theory*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 12.

the time of the film's release still ongoing) Vietnam War are not difficult to make. A group of Americans enters a to them unknown area full of thick vegetation. They have to put up a fight against the locals, who try to drive them out of their territory. It mirrors the way in which US troops invaded South East Asia during the war, and fought against the Viet Cong defending their territory.

But *Her*, *Tár* and *Deliverance* can hardly be called blockbusters. They carry not the promise of a two-hour entertainment spectacle—crafted with state-of-the-art technology—that is usually enjoyable for the whole family. Because that is what blockbusters are. An intrinsic characteristic is to mainly tell an enthralling story through visual spectacle as a means of entertainment. As Charles R. Acland states in his book *American Blockbuster*: "[m]ore than any other single quality, blockbusters promise to be entertaining."[20] However, Acland continues, entertainment value does not indicate a lack of meaning or cultural significance. In fact, he states, we "can use popular works to detect anxieties and uncertainties about the world we share."[21] Which is precisely what I set out to do in this thesis: highlight the connections between a post-9/11 America and the two biggest sci-fi blockbusters of 2005. Blockbusters are the tentpoles of the capitalist Hollywood film industry, and are expected to bring in as much revenue as possible. A connection with audiences has to be made in order to do so. This connection is many-faceted, but can definitely include the film capturing themes or anxieties that keep everyday people busy, similar to how small-budget fiction films do. I would like to stress that claims about the supposed 'artlessness' of blockbuster films are irrelevant to the point I am making. Even if the films I discuss were made without a vision, or idea (a hypothesis I do not subscribe to),

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20. Charles R. Aclan, *American Blockbuster: Movies, Technology and Wonder* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.

21. See note 20 above.

they would still have the potential to incorporate the anxieties and reflections of the contemporary political milieus they were produced in.

Chapter 2 - Historical Context: The Aftermath of the 9/11 Terror Attacks

The coordinated terrorist attack on the Twin Towers that took place on September 11, 2001, is undoubtedly the most pivotal event in recent American history. Millions witnessed, either through their television sets, through the internet, through radio stations, or in-person, how two 110-story tall symbols of American wealth and power came crumbling down after being hit by two separate hijacked passenger airplanes. Amidst the ensuing mass confusion, panic, fear and grief, the Central Intelligence Agency determined the attack to be orchestrated by the militant pan-Islamist organization al-Qaeda, spearheaded by Osama bin Laden. A cultural turning point was reached as Americans dealt with the national trauma, a turning point with many facets. In terms of security, everything, especially air travel, was tightened. A highly criticized Patriot Act was passed by Congress, publicly protested by civil liberty groups who declared that "it gave law enforcement the power to overrun each individual's privacy."[22]

In the eye of the public (partly due to efforts made by the news media) and the government, the term "terrorism" became directly linked to people with Muslim backgrounds, sparking a new flame of domestic racism. Even those that were regarded as potentially associated with the Middle East became victims of this new sentiment. As Michelle D. Byng from Temple University, Philadelphia states in her analysis "Complex Issues: The Case of Muslim Americans After 9/11" about how the 9/11 attacks have "reshape[d] the meaning of religious minority identity for Muslim Americans"[23]: "Muslim Americans' social inequality is structured by political policies and legislation that target them

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22. Cary Stacy Smith and Li-Ching Hung, *The Patriot Act: Issues and Controversies* (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas Publisher LTD., 2010), 152.

23. Michelle D. Byng, "Complex Inequalities: The Case of Muslims After 9/11," *American Behavioural Scientist* 51, no. 5 (January 2008): 659. doi: 10.1177/0002764207307746.

for surveillance by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies."[24] Not only did this new anti-Muslim sentiment define itself through policy, though: in the essay "Anti-Muslim Retaliatory Violence Following the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks," Barbara Perry states the following.

> Visitors, immigrants, and U.S. citizens of Middle Eastern descent bore the brunt of a violent backlash as evidence mounted against Osama bin Laden and his followers. In towns and cities across the country, Americans lashed out against those they associated with the perpetrators. Arab centers, mosques, and private individuals reported death threats, vandalism, and other forms of violence. The murder of a Sikh store owner in Mesa, Arizona, just two days after the attacks, was identified as the first of several murders thought to be retaliatory hate crimes.[25]

Meanwhile American President George W. Bush vowed to crack down on terrorism from now on, and promised the public a metaphorical and literal war on the forces responsible for the tragedy of 9/11: the War on Terror. It was a necessary tactic according to the President, for the fundamental differences in world views between the 'democratic' Western world and the 'savage' world of al Qaeda. In an address to a joint session of Congress, the President stated: "They hate what we see right here in this Chamber, a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."[26] This codified the war on terror as a war between ideologies rather than a war between nations. A war between the democratic world and everything else.

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24. Byng, 663.

25. Barbara Perry, "Anti-Muslim Retaliatory Violence Following the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks" in *Hate and Bias Crime: a Reader*, ed. Barbara Perry (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2003), 183.

26. George W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11" (speech, Washington, DC., September 20, 2001), *The American Presidency Project*. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-united-states-response-the-terrorist-attacks.

Even though the President stated that the perpetrators of the attacks were practicing a "fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics,"[27] examples of anti-Muslim discrimination after the 9/11 attacks demonstrate that this nuanced view has not been taken to heart by every American citizen. Bush further stresses that the enemy is not "our many Muslim friends" or "our many Arab friends."[28] Rather, the enemy is invisible. They are overseas, plotting against the very idea of a free, American lifestyle. What is coming is a battle of 'good' versus 'evil'. It is no surprise, then, that this War on Terror came to be more of a constant state of warfare than a single literal conflict based on retaliation, and that it has been spanning for over twenty years now. The first conflict under the umbrella term is the US invasion of Afghanistan, dubbed Operation Enduring Freedom. In a poll released by the Washington Post in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, it clearly shows how the public was craving a retaliatory attack and how they approved of the Bush Administration's decision to go to war with Afghanistan.[29]

But Afghanistan was not the only target. Republican Secretary of State Colin Powell gave a PowerPoint presentation to the United Nations Security Council on the 5th of February in 2003, during which he rationalized the decision to go to war with Iraq. The presentation included, as analyzed by American communication scholar David Zarefsky, three rationales for going to war: the prospect of overthrowing Saddam's dictatorial regime, the notion that Iraq was harboring al Qaeda terrorists, and the need to put a stop to Iraq's development of

27. See note 26 above.

28. See note 26 above.

29. "Post-ABC Poll: Terrorist Attacks," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/vault/stories/data091401.htm.

weapons of mass destruction.[30] Public support for an invasion grew, with large amounts of people even believing Saddam to be behind the 9/11 attacks.[31] High approval ratings can be found when looking at a February 2003 poll from the Pew Research Center concerning an attack on Iraq and the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein. A month before the US invasion of Iraq, 66% percent of participants were in favor of the use of military force in Iraq in order to end the dictator's regime.[32]

On the 20th of March, 2003, the US eventually did invade the country. But after a months of fighting, public opinion started to shift. As the graph from Pew Research Center below (fig.1) indicates, support for the war waged in Iraq started to wane after 2003. There are multiple factors that contributed to this decline in endorsement and the longing for American troops to return home. One of these factors was the revelation that the rationalization by Powell had been based on false or inadequate information. There were no WMDs in Iraq, and ties between Saddam and the supposedly harbored al Qaeda terrorists have never been found. Explanations for the actual reasons for going to war with Iraq vary depending on the source. Most common are explanations regarding economic interests—the US moving into the Middle East to secure valuable oil resources—and explanations regarding (geo)political interests—for example, George W. Bush needing a boost in approval ratings in order to secure another term, or heavy lobbying within US politics by Israel.

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30. David Zarefsky, "Making the Case for War: Colin Powell at the United Nations," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 276. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41940146.

31. See note 30 above.

32. "U.S. Needs More International Backing," *Pew Research Center*, February 20, 2003, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2003/02/20/us-needs-more-international-backing/.

Another substantial factor for a decline in pro-war sentiment has to do with technological innovations. At the turn of the century, the world was introduced to new innovations within the world of digital media. Digitally recording and spreading (moving) images became more and more accessible to people all over the world. Two collections of media belonging in this category of 'home footage' greatly shifted the American public's opinion on the state of affairs in 2004. The first one is a collection of images taken in Fallujah, Iraq, in which four dead American private contractors can be seen dragged through the streets and hanged from a bridge.[33] The desecration of the corpses was carried out by civilian locals, a fact that indicated a deeply rooted anti-American sentiment living amongst the Iraqi public. The notion that the Iraqi public did not want American troops in their country slowly started to cement back within the borders of the US. A second collection of images hosts what is arguably the most infamous picture publicized during the war. It is taken in a prison in Abu Ghraib, in which Iraqi prisoners were being tortured and humiliated by American troops. The picture features Iraqi prisoner Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, with a bag over his head, standing on a box, electrical wires attached to each of his hands. He was told by US troops to stand on the box for an hour on end. Falling off would result in him being electrocuted. More pictures from Abu Ghraib started to make their way onto the internet, further discouraging American citizens from prolonging their support for having American troops abroad.

Even the troops themselves started to have doubts about what they were doing in Iraq, as beautifully exemplified by Army Reserve civil affairs officer Oscar Estrada, who sent in a letter to the Washington Post in June, 2004. In it, Estrada ponders his function as a CA

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33. Colin Freeman, "Horror at Fallujah / SAVAGE ATTACK: Bodies dragged through street, hung from bridge 4 U.S. contractors killed in ambush hours after 5 soldiers slain in Iraq," *SFGate*, April 1, 2004, https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Horror-at-Fallujah-SAVAGE-ATTACK-Bodies-2772639.php.

officer, describing the hatred Iraqi civilians feel towards the presence of American troops in their country. He writes: “I see our good faith efforts to provide medical care lead to disappointment and resentment when we have neither the medicine nor the equipment to cure or heal many ailments. And I see how our efforts to introduce representative democracy can lead to frustration.”[34] He recalls a specific situation in which, based on a supposed shot fired from a date palm grove, multiple units of American troops started to shoot at an invisible enemy. When the smoke cleared, someone went over to the grove and found only a farmer, in shock and upset with the only casualty in this whole ordeal: his cow. It keeps Estrada awake that night. A striking microcosm of the invasion of Iraq, indeed, but also a true story that exemplifies the resentment the Iraqi people felt towards the arriving American troops, causing some of the latter to wonder if the supposedly humanitarian mission they were sent on did more harm than good.

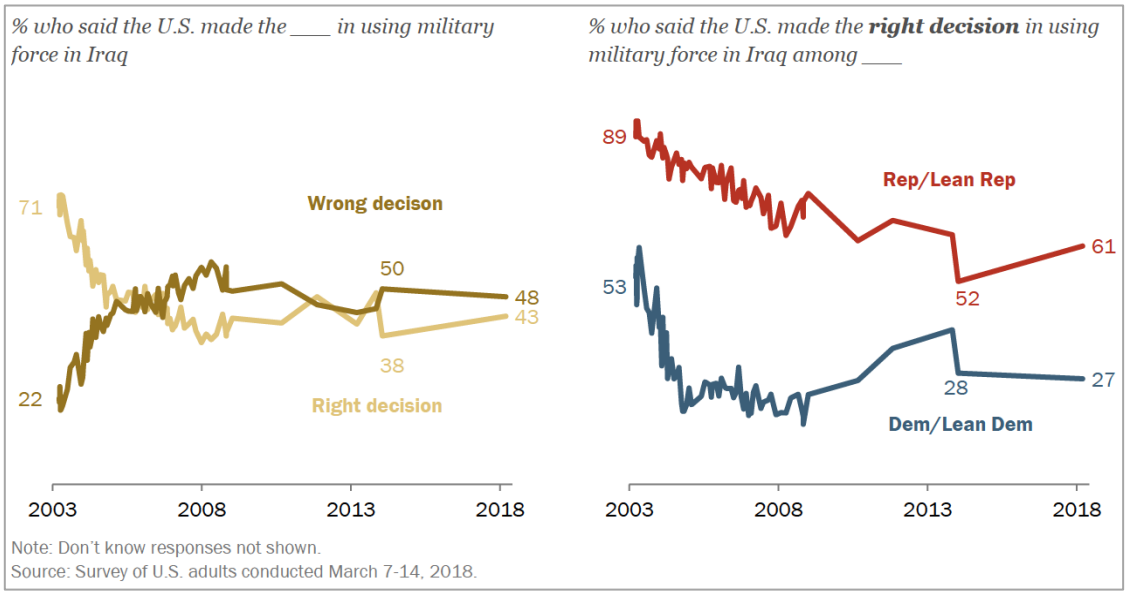

Fig. 1: Support for the war in Iraq wanes in the months after deployment of US troops.[35]

34. Oscar R. Estrada, “The Military: Losing Hearts and Minds?,” *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2004, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2004/06/06/the-military-losing-hearts-and-minds/5eb0d8ed-387b-417d-92fd-5e58e5c11047/.

Before the Fallujah and Abu Ghraib pictures made news headlines in the US, George W. Bush narrowly landed another term in office after a controversial election period haunted by claims of voter fraud, in which he won 50.7% of the popular vote.[36] This meant four more years of overseas warfare, occasional misinformation and a fertile ground for artists to express their anti-Bush sentiment. Although disapproval ratings of Bush's regime were high and anti-war protests had become common, his victory can be explained by the party loyalty engendered by wedge issues such as the Iraq war. During his campaign, "Bush insisted that, regardless of mistaken assumptions about Saddam's WMD or complicity in 9/11, the war in Iraq was central to the war on terrorism," whereas his opponent John Kerry "argued that the Iraq invasion had unwisely taken resources from the pursuit of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda terrorists who, unlike Iraq, had actually attacked the US."[37] Even though the Bush Administration somewhat acknowledged their mistakes and hastily-drawn conclusions, Republicans were determined to vote for their candidate. With his rhetoric, dubbed "Bushspeak"[38] by American philosopher Douglas Kellner, Bush managed to present to the public an "enthymeme of evil"[39] in order to remain a strong Republican voter base.

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35. Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, *As Iraq War Continued, fewer Americans endorsed the initial decision to use force*, graph, Pew Research Center, July 14, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/03/14/a-look-back-at-how-fear-and-false-beliefs-bolstered-u-s-public-support-for-war-in-iraq/.

36. "2004," *The American Presidency Project*, November 2020, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/2004.

37. Gary C. Jacobson, "The Public, the President, and the War in Iraq," in *The Polarized Presidency of George W. Bush*, ed. George C. Edwards III and Desmond King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 275.

38. Douglas Kellner, "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the "War on Terror"," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (December, 2007): 622.

39. Craig Allen Smith, "President Bush's Enthymeme of Evil: The Amalgamation of 9/11, Iraq, and Moral Values," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no. 1 (September 2005): 32-47.

Bushspeak heavily relies on rhetoric methods such as othering (us-versus-them rhetoric), absolutist statements and, to put it bluntly, falsehoods. After the falsehoods about the pre-text for invading Iraq became known, anti-war protests ensued, including an international day of protest described as "the largest antiwar demonstrations since those against the war in Vietnam."[40] Alas, the decision to go to war had already been made, and the protests were ignored by policymakers.

It is due to these reasons that 2005 seems like a fitting year to research in terms of big sci-fi film productions. Not only has the chance been presented to filmmakers to interact with the events of 9/11 and the initial responses by the Bush Administration, but a subsequent common disapproval of these responses was now also on the table, ready to be worked and interacted with. The graph in *fig. 1* clearly shows how, for the first time since the deployment of troops as a response to 9/11, the amount of anti-war voices among the public surpassed the amount of pro-war voices in the period between 2004 and 2006. The year of 2005 could therefore be seen as exemplary for this time period in terms of how newly formed cultural phenomena manifested themselves in sci-fi blockbuster movies.

40. Joris Verhulst, "February 15, 2003: The World Says No to War" in *The World Says No to War: Demonstrations Against the War on Iraq*, ed. Stefaan Walgrave and Dieter Rucht (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 1.

Chapter 3 - Analysis: *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*

In recent years, almost twenty years after release, the *Star Wars* prequel films have become the subject of a positive revival within certain corners of the internet. It might be the nostalgic feeling the film invokes for the now young adult content creators that saw the film upon release when they were young. Or it might be a re-appreciation for writer and director George Lucas' vision of the Star Wars universe, sparked after fans found themselves disappointed with the direction *Star Wars* media had been taken in after Lucas sold it to Disney in 2012. Whatever the reason, opinions on the three films—*Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace (Lucas, 1999)*, *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones (Lucas, 2002)* and *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*—are now drastically different than they were right after their release. Most of the criticism came from film critics and those who grew up with the original *Star Wars* films, and was aimed at the films' poor story, tonal inconsistencies, clunky dialogue and an over-reliance on CGI (computer generated imagery).

The story told in the prequels, the story of Anakin Skywalker becoming Darth Vader, mattered little to those who grew up watching the original *Star Wars* trilogy. The films were simply unable to capture that classic *Star Wars* magic, which was deeply rooted in mythical storytelling—with themes of adventure, discovery and destiny—groundbreaking (practical) special effects, relatable characters and iconic music. With sizable portions of the prequel trilogy being focused around politics and love, the question who the films were made for became urgent for critics. Lucas himself has stated that he did not write the films with a particular audience in mind.[41] The original trilogy did include nods to real-life conflicts such as World War II (the very fact of a rebellion fighting the evil Empire is enough to draw the

41. George Lucas, "George Lucas: The Star Wars Prequels Interview," Interview by Ian Freer, *Empire*, September, 1999, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/star-wars-archive-george-lucas-1999-interview/.

parallel) or the Vietnam War (*Return of the Jedi* features a battle in which the indigenous population of a forest moon overthrows the present Imperial troops), but the underlying politics were never at the center of the story. Instead, it was the adventure as well as the relationship between characters that functioned as pillars for the now legendary sci-fi trilogy.

My aim for this thesis regarding *Revenge of the Sith* is to spot the bridges Lucas tried to build between his third *Star Wars* prequel and the contemporary sociopolitical milieu the films were developed and released in. As we will see, Lucas had a rebellion on his mind, conveying a message of anti-post-9/11 US imperialism. Both critics and audiences agreed on the third and last of the prequel films, *Revenge of the Sith*, to be the best out of the three. This is demonstrably reflected in the film's score on the two most popular media review-aggregation websites, Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes, which is higher than the score for the earlier two prequel films. The film's domestic box office revenue of 380 million dollars (which is 78 million dollars more than its predecessor made) could also be viewed as a testament for an improvement of quality compared to the other films.[42] Although fans have now publicly professed their love for the prequel films, not many people have taken to the task of placing them in their contemporary political and social contexts in the spirit of the essayists featured in *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*. The main subject of study for this chapter will therefore be *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, which was released in May 2005. In this chapter, I argue that the ever-growing public disapproval for the war in

42. Although *The Phantom Menace* made 431 million dollars domestically, this high number can be easily explained by the fact that audiences did not yet know what to expect of this new *Star Wars* trilogy: it was the first *Star Wars* film to hit theaters since the conclusion of the original trilogy in 1983. Both critics and audiences generally disliked the film, according to aggregate website Rotten Tomatoes.

Iraq—and by extension, the expansion of the war on terror in general—around the time of the film's release are reflected on screen both formally and narratively.

The film starts off with a classic *Star Wars* 'title crawl,' accompanied by John Williams' iconic score. The text tells us that the Republic, a galactic union of different star systems, all represented within the Galactic Senate by democratically chosen senators and led by a democratically elected chancellor, is crumbling. A war between the Republic Army and an opposing force of Separatists that erupted in the previous film has been raging for three years now. We read that one General Grievous (voiced by Matthew Wood) of the Separatist Droid Army has captured Chancellor Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid) from the Republic's capital planet and is making his escape. The title crawl then ends, and we are flung into a space battle being fought near the capital planet, Coruscant. Two Jedi Knights, Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen) and Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) are in pursuit of Grievous and manage to infiltrate his ship amongst the chaos. They manage to find the chancellor, but are ambushed by the leader of the Separatist forces, Count Dooku (Christopher Lee). A flashy lightsaber fight ensues, in which Obi-Wan is knocked unconscious. Anakin disarms Dooku, literally, and is then spurred on by Palpatine to kill him. After hesitating for a minute, Anakin decapitates Dooku. After Obi-Wan regains consciousness, the three make their way to the ship's bridge, where they confront General Grievous. Grievous makes his escape, and the ship makes an emergency landing on Coruscant.

The opening action set piece to kickstart the story is over, and we already have something to work with in terms of parallels to post-9/11 anti-war criticism. But some context is needed. The organization that Anakin and Obi-Wan are part of—the Jedi Order—can be described as a religious group of beings from different alien races all connected to the Force. In simple terms, the Force is the source of a Jedi's power. This powerful metaphysical energy field can be called upon by Force-sensitive beings, and can be used for good or evil. The Jedi

Order vowed to use the good, or Light Side, of the Force, and are in allegiance with the Republic in hopes to bring the war to an end. Their strategic center is the Jedi Council, on Coruscant, where the wisest of Jedi discuss the organization's active role in the war. In contrast, the Dark Side of the Force is the power wielded by Count Dooku. As mentioned earlier, the Jedi have a set of principles, one of which apparently is the sparing of unarmed prisoners during wartime.

I would argue that the rules for warfare encased within the Jedi Code are modelled on the real life Geneva Conventions. The treaties and protocols of the Geneva Conventions have been upheld in international court since World War II, guiding judges to determine whether or not factions involved with armed conflicts have been guilty of committing war crimes. These humanitarian laws make sure to set in stone the rights that are reserved for non-combatants during wartime. In the official document released by the International Committee of the Red Cross—which neatly lists the contents of the Geneva Conventions in its entirety—we read, in Article 3 of the "Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War," that "persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, color, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria."[43] The text then further emphasizes that this entails a prohibition of "violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture"[44] when dealing with

43. "Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War," *United Nations*, 12 August, 1949, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/geneva-convention-relative-treatment-prisoners-war.

44. See note 43 above.

those who have been injured in war. It also states that "the wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for."[45]

It is not hard to see similarities between the Geneva Conventions and the Jedi Code as it is portrayed within the film. After Anakin cuts off Dooku's hands, the latter falls to his knees. For all we know, Anakin could have knocked Dooku out after disarming him in order to take him in as a prisoner. It is only because of Palpatine's words that Anakin is convinced to abandon his moral code for a second (which serves as a significant step towards him completely abandoning his values and leaving the Jedi Order behind later in the film[46]). After killing Dooku, Anakin is troubled. Palpatine tells him Dooku was "too dangerous to be kept alive." "Yes, but he was an unarmed prisoner," Anakin retorts. He stresses that he should not have killed Dooku, for it is "not the Jedi way."[47] Especially the use of the term "unarmed prisoner" echoes the laws of Article 3 in a strikingly similar matter.

The stories accompanying the aforementioned pictures of Abu Ghraib were a huge factor in the wavering US civilian support for the war in Iraq. Stories of torture, humiliation and murder of unarmed Iraqi prisoners had made their way onto the news, appalling the public. Abu Ghraib, in essence, became the embodiment of the notion that the US Army did not have to necessarily be operating within the boundaries of a respectable moral code. The Geneva Conventions were clearly abandoned during the events that unfolded within the prison, and thus the moral codes embedded within them were waived away. The film mirrors

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45. See note 43 above.

46. It is not something Anakin hasn't done before: in *Attack of the Clones*, he angrily slaughters a tribe of 'Tusken Raiders' after finding out they killed his mother. However, Anakin is still in training at that point in his life.

47. *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, directed by George Lucas (20th Century Fox, 2005), 0:14:39 to 0:14:48.

this abandonment of a set of principles applied in wartime leading to moral confusion and an eventual 'fall from grace' in an unambiguous manner. Anakin's decision is wrong, and it is a key moment in his transformation into one of the most evil men the Galaxy will ever know: Darth Vader.[48]

It should also be noted that it is Palpatine who orders Anakin to kill Dooku, when he says "do it" before Anakin cuts Dooku's head off. Interestingly, it became known quickly after the release of the Abu Ghraib photos that torture methods had been authorized from the top of the chain of command, which includes Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and President Bush himself. This accusation, of course, was countered by the President in a speech in which he apologized for the horrors that took place in the prison.[49] Still, the film's portrayal of the murder of Dooku draws yet another parallel we will revisit later in this analysis: that of Palpatine being an allegorical representation of the Bush Administration. After all, it is his direct order that makes Anakin abandon the Jedi Code and kill an unarmed prisoner. Similarly, it was the executive order of the Bush Administration to abandon the Geneva Conventions and torture, humiliate and murder unarmed prisoners. It is Palpatine who, after the killing of Dooku, says: "It was only natural. He cut off your arm, and you wanted revenge."[50]

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48. It is worth noting that the Code is not limited to rules that apply in wartime. It deals with personal and emotional themes as well. For example, the previous installment in the franchise dealt with the struggle between Anakin and his love interest forming a romantic relationship, despite Anakin being not allowed to due to the Code. Revenge of the Sith does not introduce the idea of Anakin going against the Code as a new idea. But what is important, is the way in which it is represented. Anakin so clearly oversteps certain boundaries concerning humane treatment of prisoners of war, that a parallel with the Geneva Conventions is unmistakably there, cementing a link with the Abu Ghraib revelations.

49. "Bush 'sorry' for abuse of Iraqi prisoners," Central News Network, May 7, 2004, https://edition.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/05/07/bush.apology/index.html.

50. *Revenge of the Sith*, 0:14:49 to 0:14:54.

He rationalizes Anakin's misstep by reminding him of what happened in *Attack of the Clones*. In that film, Dooku slices off Anakin's right arm, forcing him to replace it with a prosthetic. This revenge-driven rhetoric insinuates that Dooku himself is a warrior fighting on the wrong side of the conflict, not unlike how James Inhofe, then-member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, dismissed the outrage about the Abu Ghraib scandal. In May 2004, he said about the tortured prisoners: "they're murderers, they're terrorists, they're insurgents,"[51] in an attempt to rationalize the US Army (and chain of command) abandoning the Geneva Conventions. Zooming out, a revenge-driven mindset was never too hard to find while looking at speeches given by the President after the 9/11 attacks, another notion that ties Bush to Palpatine.

The theme of overstepping moral boundaries is again very present in the most pivotal scene of the film. Palpatine has just told Anakin in private that he is a Sith Lord, and that only he has the power to save his pregnant wife Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman) from dying in childbirth, something Anakin has been having prophetic nightmares about. He wants Anakin to join him, telling him the Jedi are planning to betray the Republic. Shocked, Anakin runs to Jedi Master Mace Windu (Samuel L. Jackson) and tells him what he has learned. Windu rushes to confront Palpatine, and manages to disarm him. As Anakin arrives (having followed Windu), Windu announces he is going to kill Palpatine. He says he is too dangerous to be left alive: he has control over the Senate and the courts (note that after the 2004 elections, the US senate consisted of a Republican majority) and is too powerful to take down using diplomacy. Anakin insists Palpatine must stand trial, referring to the Jedi Code. Windu ignores this and decides to do what is best for the greater good. He prepares to strike, but Anakin intervenes

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51. Ed Henry, "GOP senator labels abused prisoners 'terrorists'," Central News Network, May 12, 2004, https://edition.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/05/11/inhofe.abuse/.

and cuts off his arm. Palpatine then kills Windu using the Force. By disregarding the Code, Windu forced Anakin's hand.

A metaphor for how letting go of moral codes could potentially lead to disaster. Anakin, in disbelief of what he has done, pledges allegiance to Palpatine and is christened as "Darth Vader." Anakin's new master than explains that "[e]very single Jedi, including [Anakin's] friend Obi-Wan Kenobi, is now an enemy of the Republic."[52] This absolutist rhetoric seems to capture the spirit of a speech made by George W. Bush on September 20th, 2001. In it, the President declares that "any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."[53] Similar to Palpatine's rhetoric, there is no place for nuance.

This unnuanced rhetoric has been playing with Anakin's mind for a while at this point. Earlier in the film, Palpatine tells Anakin in private that the Jedi Council does not trust the Galactic Senate, the Republic, and for that matter, democracy as a concept. Palpatine codifies the Galactic Senate (which he is head of) as being synonymous with democracy, creating a connection that would render anyone who is critical of Palpatine as being against democracy. These leaps in logic in the spirit of Bushspeak lurk around the corner every time Palpatine is present within a scene. At one point, Palpatine tells Darth Vader to carry out his mission of wiping out the Jedi in order bring peace to the Galaxy.[54] This justification of Vader's actions under the moniker of bringing peace rings another bell. Many justifications Bush has given for his administration's actions have been based on a promise of peace and security for not only the US, but for the Middle East as well. On the day of the Twin Towers

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52. *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:17:47 to 1:17:57.

53. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session."

54. *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:37:37 to 1:37:46.

attack, Bush declared: “America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism.”[55] Accordingly, in 2003, the Iraqi people *had* to be liberated from their oppressive dictator Saddam Hussein and it was being made clear that his (non-existent) WMDs posed a threat to worldwide peace. Disguising aggression as the bringing of peace, security, freedom and stability is yet another feature of codifying your own side as the ‘good’ side. It is classic Bushspeak, and during the film it becomes Anakin’s way of rationalizing his choices.

In the final act of the film, a tragic final confrontation between former friends takes place in all its blockbuster spectacle. Obi-Wan confronts his former student Anakin (now Darth Vader) to stop him from completely destroying the Jedi. Before they fight, they have a short argument in which Anakin says that he has “brought peace, justice and security to [his] new empire” and that if Obi-Wan is not with him, he is against him.[56] Obi-Wan replies with: “Only a Sith deals in absolutes.” These lines are such a clear example of how Lucas has written this last *Star Wars* prequel to be the embodiment of the uncomplicated rhetoric used by President Bush in various speeches, criticizing its absolutist nature. The rhetoric is represented through the character of Anakin as confused, lost, and even traitorous. The line echoes a quote from Bush’s September 20th speech, in which he declared: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”[57]

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55. George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks” (speech, Washington, DC., September 11, 2001), The American Presidency Project. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-terrorist-attacks.

56. *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:47:18 to 1:47:48.

57. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session.”

As we have seen, these kind of absolutistic statements are characteristic for his rhetoric. “It assumes a binary logic in which “we” are the forces of goodness and "they" are the forces of darkness. Such discourse legitimates any action undertaken in the name of good, no matter how destructive, on the grounds that it is attacking “evil.”[58] Bush specifically characterized the war on terror as a war of “freedom against fear.”[59] freedom, of course, being embodied by the American coalition. By this logic, the war on terror became a simple black-and-white conflict of good versus evil: freedom versus oppression, civilization versus savagery, democracy versus dictatorship. The USA, through Bush’s post-9/11 rhetoric, had been codified as good, and anyone who disagrees as evil. It is a useful tool in the efforts of disregarding any skepticism towards the administration’s foreign policy as unpatriotic,[60] as un-American, and as anti-democratic. Obi-Wan wins the fight and leaves Anakin gravely injured at the banks of a lava river. In an emotional speech, he tells Anakin he was supposed to destroy the Sith, not join them. That he has become the very thing he fought so hard against all his life.

The theme of transformation from good to evil is concluded with this scene at the end of the film, but it is present throughout its entirety. After Count Dooku has been killed, Anakin is summoned by Palpatine to talk in private. The two discuss the concepts of good and evil in their relationship to the Jedi and the Sith, and Palpatine concludes the two ways of life are not so different: the Jedi and Sith both seek power, and it is up to individuals to decide who is using their power for good. It is a way of saying that evil deeds might justify the need

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58. Kellner, 628.

59. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session.”

60. Philip M. Taylor and Nancy Snow, “The Revival of the Propaganda State: US Propaganda at Home and Abroad since 9/11,” *The International Communication Gazette* 68, no. 5-6, (October 2006): 397.

for a good power to rule over an evil one, not unlike the statements of James Inhofe in regards to the Abu Ghraib victims or the memories of CA officer Eric Estrada that were revealed in his letter.

The question of what defines something as "good" or "evil" lingers over the film in the same way it lingered over American history in the early post-9/11 period. At one point, Anakin has a talk with his wife. The connections between this scene and the contemporary real-life political environment of the Bush regime are unmistakable. Anakin fears that "the war is destroying the principles of the Republic."[61] This circles back to the reservations people had about the war in Iraq, especially after the Abu Ghraib pictures made headlines. What if the good guys turned out to employ practices that are supposed to only be utilized by the enemy? Again, Estrada's letter is full of anecdotal examples that exemplify this contradiction. Estrada, lying awake at night, thinks of himself and his fellow soldiers pointing guns into cars, causing the children inside to start crying. Is that really the best method to use in a supposed fight against fear? He thinks of a family showing him bullet holes inside their home. He specifically remembers photographs in the household, photographs of a safer life under Saddam's regime.[62] But was it not he and his fellow troops who were supposed to bring about a safer environment? Instead, Estrada has encountered nothing but unhappiness, fear and destruction.

It is not surprising these conflicts played out within Estrada's heart and mind, as he was set to believe the reality of the situation was different than the one he later saw with his own eyes. His very own President continuously defined a few core American values to be resolve, faith, justice, love and freedom. His administration, and various media outlets, went

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61. *Revenge of the Sith*, 0:41:29 to 0:41:33.

62. Estrada, "The Military: Losing Hearts and Minds?"

out of their way "to highlight the goodness of the United States against the scourge of terrorism, using completely binary discourse."[63] The conversation between Anakin and Padmé continues with the latter asking Anakin whether he has ever considered that maybe they are on the wrong side. "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?" she asks.[64] The dark irony of the Bush administration and media outlets employing fear tactics and othering rhetoric in an attempt to garner public support in favor of a supposed war against fear itself is the first thing that comes to mind. And later, after Iraq was invaded, the supposed inherently savage lifestyle of those on the other side had to make way for mental images of American troops sodomizing Iraqi inmates at Abu Ghraib. Padmé further states that the war represents a failure to listen, and that Anakin must ask Palpatine to stop the fighting and let diplomacy resume.[65] But Anakin angrily tells her he will not. This signifies the voice of the post-9/11 anti-war movement in America, including those that took to the streets on February 15th, 2003, after the decision to go to war with Iraq had already been made. Their protests fell on deaf ears as diplomacy was no longer an option for policy makers.

The way Anakin becomes angry with Padmé upon her request to talk directly to Palpatine is a result of his feelings of confusion and fear. He fears his wife will die in childbirth, and has become obsessed with finding a way to save her. After she asks Anakin what is wrong, he lies and says it's nothing. She then tells him not to shut her out.[66] This atmosphere of uneasiness can be felt throughout the entirety of the movie. It all starts when,

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63. Kellner, 626.

64. *Revenge of the Sith*, 0:41:33 to 0:41:49.

65. *Revenge of the Sith*, 0:41:55 to 0:42:03.

66. *Revenge of the Sith*, 0:42:12 to 0:42:19.

after Dooku's death, Palpatine asks Anakin to become his personal representative on the Jedi Council, so he can rely information from the Council to him. He is essentially asking Anakin to become a spy. When Anakin requests a seat on the Council, they grant it to him. However, Obi-Wan—who is on the council as well—later tells Anakin in secret that the Council only gave him the position so that he could spy on Palpatine for them. The audience is then reminded of something that happened in the previous installment of the saga: Palpatine was granted extended emergency powers by the Galactic Senate because of the coming war, which gave him the ability to create an army for the Republic. This way, he has managed to stay in power long after his term had expired. The Jedi don't trust this overextension of power, and want to secretly keep tabs on him. Obi-Wan tells Anakin this in secret, for this mission is supposed to be off-record.

What Obi-Wan says about Palpatine could be viewed as a reflection of what a large part of the American public thought about Bush securing a second term in 2004: his rule was overdue. This, of course, is only true from an ideological standpoint, as Bush was democratically voted into office. The film acknowledges this. Anakin replies saying "the Senate demanded that he stay longer,"[67] nodding to the electoral vote that dragged Bush's victory over the finish line. Obi-Wan then says probably the most striking line on the matter of political power relations that mirror those of the Bush's second term: "Yes, but use your feelings, Anakin. Something is out of place!"[68] This might relate not only to the ideological standpoint judging Bush's second election to be unjust: it might also allude to the then-ongoing investigations into voter fraud claims. Many at the time presented pieces of evidence

67. *Revenge of the Sith*, 0:39:47 to 0:39:55.

68. *Revenge of the Sith*, 0:39:55 to 0:39:59.

that, according to them, would prove the elections of 2004 were rigged or influenced in an unfair matter. These claims have never been proven with conclusive evidence, though.

Besides allusions to American post-9/11 political power, this development of the story also creates an aura of uneasiness and paranoia. Even the Jedi Council starts to operate off the records at this point and asks one of their own members to do something against the Jedi Code: spying on the chancellor. I do not argue the Jedi Council is a direct metaphor for a real-life entity or demographic, but if Palpatine is a loose representation of the Bush Administration, this plot-point obviously mirrors a real-life mutual distrust between those in power and those who are not. The public, and part of the military fighting overseas (this connection gets slightly strengthened by the fact that the Jedi effectively are soldiers in this war), is growing increasingly suspicious of their leader, and approval ratings are falling. There is also distrust between Americans themselves, as I have given examples of anti-Muslim hate within US borders in the second chapter of this thesis.

Another scene that mirrors the sphere of political power relations of post-9/11 America happens after Anakin has pledged his allegiance to Palpatine. While his new ally is on his first mission, Palpatine calls in a special session of congress. As we will see, the scene is heavily inspired the speeches made by Bush after the 9/11 attacks. Palpatine informs the Senate of the "betrayal" of the Jedi and that an attempt on his life has left him "scarred and deformed" (he refers to his face getting burned during his fight with Master Windu).[69] This detail does not feel out of place in a historical context in which American society had just been irreversibly scarred by an attack on domestic soil. An attack that Bush has defined as an attack on America's "way of life."[70] The next line is even more striking, as Palpatine assures

69. *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:35:12 to 1:35:20.

70. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks."

the senate that his “resolve has never been stronger.”[71] Similarly, Bush stated in the same televised prime time address right after the 9/11 attacks that “[t]hese acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”[72]

Almost every line Palpatine speaks is met with applause, as was the case with the speech held by Bush on the 20th of September, 2001, in which he declared the war on terror. In that speech, Bush emphasizes he “will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people,”[73] implying all the measures that will be taken from now on, no matter how drastic, will be for the benefit of the security of the country. Similarly, Palpatine declares that, in order to ensure a safe and secure society, the Republic will now be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire. As the senate erupts in applause, Padmé, present because she is a senator, turns to her colleagues and says: “So this is how liberty dies. With thunderous applause.”[74] In this scene, she represents the reaction of the rest of the world to the Bush Administration’s planned strategy for their war on terror and the initial reaction of the US Congress. Kellner states the following in his paper on Bushspeak:

> While Congress wildly applauded Bush's jingoistic and aggressive speech, the rest of the world was stunned by the irresponsibility of Bush's simplistic "axis of evil" doctrine. *The Guardian* cited Bush's "Hate of the Union" and escalation of militarist rhetoric, and an editorial in the paper chided "George Bush's delusion" that the September 11 tragedy gave Bush a free hand to lead the world into infinite war. The Russians complained that their allies were being included in the axis and that the improving relations with Washington would be subverted if Bush expanded the field of war. Close allies Germany and Japan were put off that Bush used the loaded word "axis," which evoked World War II and the crimes of the Third Reich and the Japanese, events that their countries had tried to overcome. And, of course, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea were shocked that Bush had collapsed them into "an axis of evil," which inadvertently strengthened the hands of hard-liners within these regimes to

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71. *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:35:21 to 1:35:30.

72. Bush, “Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks.”

73. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session.”

74. *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:35:47 to 1:36:35.

> resist accommodation with the West and especially a U.S. government that was threatening them with extinction.[75]

With this in mind, Padmé's reaction to Palpatine's speech can be read as a representation of the disapproving reactions mentioned within this summary by Kellner. She appears to not let herself get lost within the hawkish linguistics of her new Emperor, and maintains a critical stance towards his rhetoric. The rest of the Senate applauds Palpatine, whereas in our reality, the rest of the world's countries—apart from a few close US allies such as Britain or Israel—listened to Bush's speech with amazement. The Galactic Senate is therefore more of an allegory of these specific states (and American policymakers as well) that supported Bush's hard line rhetoric that laid as a foundation for his War on Terror.

Film is a visual medium. It is therefore unsurprising to see Lucas included some visual imagery that mirrors the tragedy of the 9/11 attacks. Anakin's first mission under his new master is to lay waste to the Jedi Temple, the epicenter of the Jedi way of life. It is a place where Younglings (underage Jedi) are trained and where Jedi meditate. It hosts an archive that stores all the knowledge collected by the Jedi over thousands of generations. Together with a battalion of soldiers, Anakin marches on the Temple and kills hundreds of Jedi indiscriminately. This includes children, as well. Images of home video and news footage from Iraq spring to mind, in which dead or wounded children can be seen alongside their mourning family members. Images like these are gruesome, and are therefore found only when one really looks for them, such as in the documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11 (Moore, 2004)* or in the documentary series *Once Upon a Time in Iraq (Bluemel, 2020)*.

It is one of the most interesting turning points in the film, for Anakin has now truly become a villain. It is at this point when *Revenge of the Sith* truly cements itself as a film that goes against the hegemonic narrative that "America's responses to 9/11, whatever they may

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75. Kellner, 633-634.

be, were legitimised [sic] due to the nature of the crime that had been perpetrated against it."[76] In his book *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second*, Terence McSweeney states that "American films produced after the 9/11 attacks played a central role in propagating this hegemonic narrative, both in explicit (yet fictionalized [sic]) depictions of 9/11 and the war on terror and in allegorical accounts."[77] Let it be known that *Revenge of the Sith* is an exception to this rule, another argument for its unique position in the repertoire of post-9/11 science fiction films.

While these images of mass murder remind the audience of footage from the war in the Middle East, the specific inclusion of child murder in this part of the film show how far Anakin is going to save his wife. How far he strays from his moral code, and how evil he has become in order to save something he loves. A tragic allegory for the reasons why support for the US military dropped in the years after the invasion of Iraq. But there might be more: the killing of children also symbolizes the psychological trauma inflicted upon the children of Iraq after its invasion. In late 2003, it was estimated that 50% of Iraqi children suffered from PTSD[78], a number that has undoubtedly grown in the years that came after. Infrastructure, schools and facilities have been destroyed during the war, leaving many children roaming the land, looking for work to support their families.[79]

Another visual reference to of home footage is invoked when we see a shot of Padmé watching the Temple burn through her bedroom window (fig. 2). The burning Temple

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76. Terence McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 10.

77. Terence McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film*, 10.

78. Shereen T. Ismael, "The Cost of War: The Children of Iraq," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 344. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41604150.

79. Ismael, 348.

unmistakenly resembles the burning World Trade Center towers before their collapse (fig. 3, fig. 4), thick clouds of dark smoke emerging from both. In addition, the shot from Padmé's window gives the viewer the idea that thousands of other citizens in the city are also able to see the Temple from inside their homes. It invokes images of home video shot by citizens who filmed the World Trade Center before after they were attacked, videos that have been repeated by news stations and documentaries time and again. The one particular video that comes to mind for me is one by New York University student Caroline Dries. In it, we see how Dries and friends watch the Twin Towers smoke after the first plane's impact had woken them up. To their horror, a second plane soon followed. Confused and terrified, the group of friends leave the apartment for a second, but cannot find any answers on the streets below. They head back up and decide to drink apple juice and vodka cocktails. Then, the towers collapse, soliciting a reaction of extreme terror on the face of her friend (fig. 5). Like Padmé, Dries and her friends watch the tragedy unfold from inside their apartment, just like many others did on that day.

Fig. 2. Padmé watches the Jedi Temple burn from inside her apartment.[80]

80. *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:24:10.

Fig. 3: The Jedi Temple burns during Darth Vader's massacre.[81]

Fig. 4: A second plane hits the towers.[82]

81. *Revenge of the Sith*, 1:24:23.

Fig. 5. Megan Hodges, a friend of Caroline Dries, yells in terror as she watches the Twin Towers collapse.[83]

Evidently, *Revenge of the Sith* is more than the action-packed summer blockbuster it is sometimes reduced to. It mirrors imagery and themes prevalent throughout early post-9/11 America, including direct references to President Bush's rhetoric and the US invasion of the Middle East and its horrific results as a response to the terrorist attacks. On top of a direct visual representation of the burning Twin Towers in form of a burning Jedi Temple, there are many visuals that speak to the imagination of the viewer as well: the hundreds of slaughtered

82. Chao Soi Cheong, *Smoke billows from one of the towers of the World Trade Center as flames and debris explode from the second tower*, photograph, Associated Press, September 11, 2001, https://apnews.com/article/september-11-photos-80f1c7348e93ea7532a23e1afc23eacf.

83. Caroline Dries, "Student shoots video of WTC on 9/11 A former NYU student ...," uploaded by CNN, September 12, 2001, news broadcast containing original home footage, 1:53. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qiVBOqNiOs.

children in the Jedi Temple confront viewers with the children suffering in the Middle East as a result of US foreign policy, as does the transformation of a once noble, humane Anakin into a ruthless semi-robotic killing machine named Darth Vader. The Bushspeak rhetoric omnipresent during the post-9/11 period is called upon many times, and is mainly utilized by the evil power-hungry character of Palpatine. In a few instances, lines of dialogue even semantically echo lines spoken by Bush in his speeches. When Palpatine speaks of "strong resolve" or "bringing peace," the allusions to Bush's speeches are difficult to miss.

The general sense of distrust and confusion rampant in this period of American history are captured within the movie's plot, as the political power struggle between Palpatine and the Republic (and Jedi) causes a sense of distrust between the two as well as a sense of impending doom. The mythical journey of a once heroic and peace-keeping institution spiraling into darkness is represented through the character of Anakin. This is substantiated by making the character abandon his moral code and fall for the lies and manipulation of Palpatine. The notion often cited by critics of the War on Terror, the "tragedy […] that the struggle against evil engenders further evil,"[84] is central to the film's plot: instead of saving his wife Padmé, Anakin becomes a servant of evil, and the main villain in the next part of the story (the original trilogy).

To truly determine how much of an impact the 9/11 attacks had on the film's production, it is important to compare *Revenge of the Sith* to its two predecessors, *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones*. Both *Phantom Menace* and *Clones* were developed before the tragedy of 9/11, but are also different films in general. The bridge between our reality and the *Star Wars* universe is less noticeable. It is true that Palpatine's

84. Hans-Juergen Wirth, "9/11 as a Collective Trauma" in *9/11 as a Collective Trauma and Other Essays on Psychoanalysis and Society*, trans. Ingrid G. Lansford, Ph. D. (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2014), 16.

rise to power has been one of the main plot points spanning throughout the prequel trilogy, but it is only in *Revenge of the Sith* when blatant parallels are drawn between his manipulative tactics and the rhetoric of George W. Bush. This, combined with the other findings presented in this analysis, gives one the necessary arguments to label *Revenge of the Sith* as an unmistakable post-9/11 film.

We could go even further in terms of comparative analysis and compare *Revenge of the Sith* to the original trilogy. Released between 1977 and 1983, the three original *Star Wars* films were not as overtly political as *Revenge of the Sith* is, and also do not tackle a certain zeitgeist like that film does. Essentially a fairytale set in space, the story is more straightforward than that of the prequel films. It is a hero's journey of a young, down-on-his-luck farm boy named Luke Skywalker who, by overcoming hardships with help of his new friends, grows into a powerful Jedi Master. The development of the characters and story took the forefront in these movies, whereas in *Revenge of the Sith*, the representation of the then-current real life political dynamics seems to be just as important as the development of the characters and story.

Still, the original trilogy is also a product of its time in terms of the political story that is being told. There is a clear distinction between good versus evil, as an army of rebels fight the evil fascist Galactic Empire. It is, in some sense, a fantastical representation of World War I and/or II. The (visual) similarities are everywhere, from Imperial foot soldiers being named "Stormtroopers" (after the German "Sturmtruppen" who fought in World War I) to the designs of the weapons they use (most were modelled after actual weapons from WWII). Furthermore, it is the evil Empire that is defeated in the end, just as German forces were eventually defeated in both world wars. However, using modern history's two biggest conflicts as a backdrop for a fairytale story in space hardly compares to the, for lack of a better term, soul-searching that *Revenge of the Sith* does. *Sith* becomes more philosophical by

looking inwards: by looking at what the identity of the US as a world power is. It asks questions about one the perceived “good side” of the conflict, a thought exercise spurred on by the political milieu the film was produced in.

Chapter 4 - Analysis: *War of the Worlds*

Let us now take a look at the second highest grossing sci-fi picture of 2005, Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*. Although Spielberg has stated in an interview with *Far Out Magazine* that he "tried to make [the picture] as open for interpretation as possible, without having anybody coming out with a huge political polemic in the second act of the movie,"[85] he also acknowledges that there are indeed politics underneath its spectacle. And indeed, the film has been read in different ways over the past years. Through the lens of cultural analysis, reading *War of the Worlds* as a post-9/11 film for some reinforces a contemporary sense of revived patriotism and trust in the paternal figure of George W. Bush.[86]

In the book *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality*, author Christine Cornea even uses the film as an example of how, after 9/11, cinema was a "central component in an organized cultural response that sought to remember a unified and coherent American society fighting against a clearly opposed Other."[87] Cornea's notion of film bringing Americans together after 9/11 is not wrong—as illustrated in the introduction of this thesis—however, *War of the Worlds* would not be a fit example to support this statement, in my opinion. From my point of view, the film offered a rather anti-Imperialist, anti-Iraq War message, and I would definitely classify War of the Worlds as yet another post 9/11 film that captures the chaos, fear and trauma of the attack on the Twin Towers and subsequently

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85. Steven Spielberg, "Steven Spielberg explains how 9/11 informed the making of 'War of the Worlds'," Interview by Calum Russell, *Far Out Magazine*, October, 2023, https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/steven-spielberg-explains-how-9-11-informed-the-making-of-war-of-the-worlds/.

86. Mark E. Wildermuth, *Alien-Invasion Films: Imperialism, Race and Gender in the American Security State, 1950–2020* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 230. doi: doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11795-4.

87. Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 266. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r28mq.

criticizes the Bush Administration's response. As is the case with *Revenge of the Sith*, a balance is struck between imagery that evokes the trauma of 9/11 and a narrative that addresses the US invasion of the Middle East. It is not surprising the two blockbusters respond to the circumstances of a post-9/11 America in an almost identical way: Lucas and Spielberg have been great friends since the late 1960s, and have worked together on many occasions.

It should be taken into account that *War of the Worlds* is an adaptation of H.G. Wells' 1898 science fiction novel in which Martians attack planet Earth. The book heavily criticized the reach of the British Empire at the time and is regarded as one of the most influential works of science fiction ever. Over the years the novel has seen many adaptations, both within visual and auditive media: if we look at the many adaptations that have been made over the past century, we see not only films and TV series, but also radio dramatizations, video games and comic books. Even though the filmmakers of the 2005 blockbuster have given life to their own vision of said novel, it is still fact that some elements of the film have been directly copied. For example, the fact that we are dealing with an invasion narrative alone is not enough to categorize *War of the Worlds* as a unique post-9/11 sci-fi picture, since invasion is simply is at the core of the source material.

Furthermore, invasion narratives are everywhere in film. They are not only a rich source for tension-building and action, such as in *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers (Sears, 1956)* or in *Independence Day (Emmerich, 1996)*, but also have the potential to "proffer stories where a dominant imperialist and nationalist power is conquered or invaded by an alien invasion force which in the process of the narrative can implicitly raise questions about the status of that nationalist power with regard to its strength, viability, and capacity to act as an

ethical agent in the course of pursuing its role as an empire."[88] Even though some lines of dialogue or plot points are directly lifted from the source material, this does not mean they are insignificant for our analysis. If anything, it begs the question: why was this anti-imperialist science fiction story retold on this particular moment in American history?[89]

For example, the film starts off with a narration by Morgan Freeman, who essentially reads lines from the book, addressing the current state of humanity on planet Earth both in the film and in real-life.

Freeman narrates:

> No one would have believed in the early years of the21st century, that our world was being watched by intelligences greater than our own. That as men busied themselves about their various concerns, they observed and studied. Like the way a man with a microscope might scrutinize the creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro about the globe, confident of our empire over this world. Yet, across the gulf of space, intellects, vast and cool and unsympathetic regarded our plant with envious eyes. And slowly and surely, drew their plans against us.[90]

The words "No one would have believed in the early years of the 21st century that our world was being watched by intelligences greater than our own" resonate profoundly when reading the film through a lens of post-9/11 cultural analysis. As does Freeman's line about humanity having an "empire over this world" for a long time now. It mistakenly refers to US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Images of different cities from all over the globe are seen on screen, including New York City. The alien attack has not yet taken place, and a feeling of

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88. Wildermuth, 3.

89. Was America experiencing a period of fin-de-siècle, the collective notion that the world was going to end soon, in the same manner Great Brittain experienced one in the late 19th century?

90. *War of the Worlds*, directed by Steven Spielberg (20th Century Fox, 2005), 00:01:21 to 00:02:31.

peace and human coherence is invoked. We do not see the hungry, the poor, or the ostracized. We only see the affluent, the modern, or, to call upon the concept of othering, "the civilized." This is reminiscent of a mythical image of a pre-9/11 America, or, even, a pre-9/11 American empire: the simplistic idea that the world knew peace and order before the attack on the Twin Towers. Also interesting is that the narrator mentions Earth's soon-to-be enemies to be situated beyond the "gulf of space." The word gulf stands out to me. The line is a direct copy from H.G. Wells' original work, where it must have been a play on the colonies of the British Empire overseas. However, in the context of 2005, "gulf" carries with it not only a reference to the overseas power of the US, but also to the Second Gulf War, a name often used to describe the Iraqi War that started after the invasion in 2003.

Stuart Hall's reception theory, about the notion that film has no inherent objective meaning of itself, and that only through audiences decoding the encoded meanings, meaning is given to what is being seen on screen, comes to mind here: the word "gulf" has gotten a new connotation after the invasion of Iraq. A connotation that was not there in either 1898 or 1954. Within Hall's model, I would file this reading under the category of the negotiated code: as an audience member who is aware of the fact that the word "gulf" is simply copied from H. G. Wells' original story, I see that the filmmakers might not have intended the word to be a reference to the Gulf Wars, but yet I assign this profound meaning to the use of the word since I approach the text from a point of analysis on the relationship between film and culture. Lastly, the notion that "others" were watching from far away, enviously scheming a plan of attack sounds eerily similar to the rhetoric of the aforementioned Bushspeak, which utilized othering and absolutist statements in order to spark feelings of fear, distrust and anger. For example, in a November 2001 address to the United Nations General Assembly,

the President said that "the terrorists are planning more murder—perhaps in my country, or perhaps in yours."[91]

Not soon after the intro monologue, we are introduced to our protagonist Ray (Tom Cruise), a divorced blue-collar working man. Just after Ray receives his two children—his teenage son Robbie (Justin Chatwin) and pre-school daughter Rachel (Dakota Fanning)—for the weekend, a lightning storm suddenly appears above the city. Effectively serving as an EMP (Electromagnetic Pulse), all technology within the storm's area is turned off. When Ray goes to investigate one of the streets a lightning bolt has struck, the ground bursts open. A huge alien war machine—a *Tripod*—emerges from the divide and starts to indiscriminately shoot at civilians, turning them into ash. It is interesting that Spielberg made the creative decision to have the threat emerge from within Earth itself rather than have the aliens arrive from the heavens, as is the case in the original novel and the 1953 film adaptation (called The *War of the Worlds (Haskin)*). It is later even explained that the Tripods were buried on Earth a long time ago, and that the aliens transported themselves into their pilot seats using the lightning bolts. The threat, in a sense, therefore comes from Earth itself. Although I previously painted "humanity" as being allegorical for the US in the opening monologue of the film, I think it is far more interesting to shift perspectives from time to time instead on lingering on a rigid assignment of allegorical roles for the film's characters.

The film truly becomes an anti-US imperialism film after determining the alien invaders as a loose allegory for the US Army. When the Tripods emerge from the ground with technology and shielding that far outmatches anything humanity has in store, a link can be made between the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, in which the far less technologically

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91. Bush, George W, "Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City" (speech, New York City, November 10, 2001), The American Presidency Project. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-city-1.

developed countries were overrun by American troops sporting the deadliest weapons and piloting the most advanced vehicles of war. The indiscriminate killing alludes not only to the attacks of 9/11 itself, in which many innocent civilians died, it also alludes to civilian deaths in the Middle East as a result of the US invasion after the 9/11 attack. This tension between visuals and (meta)narrative is common when reading the film as a reflection on post-9/11 America: whereas the imagery often directly references the 9/11 attack, the narrative as well as the characters' motivations reference a critique on early post-9/11 foreign policy.

This type of reading is not unprecedented within film studies. It is a type of reading that springs from the postmodern, as Professor Kirk Combe from Denison University writes in his essay "Spielberg's Tale of Two Americas: Postmodern Monsters in *War of the Worlds*." According to Combe, "[p]ower forces us to condemn and dismiss the ''evildoer'' out of hand. Being alert to the possibility of postmodern monsters, though, means thinking matters through far more attentively."[92] What Combe means by this is that the most straightforward reading of the film, that of the alien invaders being evil monsters that need to be defeated by the good forces of humanity, lacks a kind of postmodern depth that is necessary to reach any meaningful interpretation of the work as a reflection of the fears present within American society. Combe essentially builds upon—or even surpasses—Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's notion of the monster as a profound representation of our own fears, and instead reads the monsters (alien invaders) in *War of the Worlds* as "postmodern monsters as opposed to mere monsters, giv[ing] them the ability to depict the unsaid, the uncomfortable what's-not-supposed-to-be-spoken."[93] The aliens in *War of the Worlds* represent the faction within the War on Terror that had been predominantly described to be the "good side" within post-9/11 America. They are

92. Kirk Combe, "Spielberg's Tale of Two Americas: Postmodern Monsters in *War of the Worlds,*" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 5 (October 2011): 935.

93. See note 92 above.

"the gaps in the ongoing construction of Truth by power and thus able to communicate to us obliquely, in a kind of sign language."[94]

Combe draws upon two French cultural theorists for this: Louis Althusser, who states that art "will pack an emotional punch that begins to move us in the direction of that fuller intellectual comprehension of the powers that shape us,"[95] and Pierre Macherey, who maintains that "by giving ideology a determinate form, by fixing it within certain fictional conventions, art is also able to reveal to us the limits and faults of that ideology."[96] These notions are similar to Allison Landsberg's notion of the relationship between film and reality, but put more eloquently into words the relationship between film and ideology mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. Althusser and Macherey build upon this notion by saying that film can, in essence, make us look *from the outside* at the ideologies that underpin our reality. Its flaws become clear, and we experience the potential consequences they might lead to.

Another example of reflective imagery is when Ray returns home after the encounter with the Tripod. He is completely covered in ash from the dead civilians, reminding viewers of images of dust-covered bystanders who were in the direct vicinity of the Twin Towers as they collapsed. Later in the film, posters of loved ones missing can be found pinned to walls, a visual reminder of the missing poster flyers that could be found all over Manhattan after the 9/11 attacks. The panic amongst the citizens captures the panic of New Yorkers after the planes hit the Towers well. Chaos, confusion and emotional outbursts are prevalent. Ray himself has trouble grasping what has happened as well. After he returns home, he tells his kids to pack some food and get into the only working car on the street. As they drive away

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94. See note 92 above.

95. See note 92 above.

96. See note 92 above.

through the panic, Rachel and Robbie frantically ask their father if it is terrorists attacking. Terrorists, of course, have never been referred to in earlier adaptations of the novel. Again, this is one of those elements that makes this interpretation of *War of the Worlds* a film that reiterates the fears of the time and context in which it was made. Its relationship to post-9/11 America is similar to the relationship between the aforementioned *Godzilla* and post-WWII Japan. A similar touch can be seen when Ray and his family arrives at his ex-wife's empty house in Boston. While taking cover in the basement, Ray wakes up to see a plane has crash-landed on top of the house. This, again, is unique to this interpretation of the story, and fits well in a narrative made within the context of a society recently traumatized by an airplane-based attack.

The revenge-driven mindset that sparked a new wave of patriotism within the US after the 9/11 attacks is also addressed in the film. It is personified by the character of Robbie, Ray's son. At one point, a convoy of US Army soldiers passes the family and Robbie wants to be taken with them. The soldiers deny his request and leave the three behind. Robbie expresses his wishes to fight against the Tripods, but Ray and Rachel plead him to stay with them. It is not unfathomable to think that conversations like these must have taken place in real life American households after 9/11. Young men willing to sign up as a result of a newly developed sense of patriotism, wanting to get back at the ones responsible for the terrorist attacks, while loved ones struggle with their determination. It is later on when Robbie and Ray even physically fight as the former tries to join up with yet another group of soldiers. Robbie says Ray has to let him go, and Ray eventually does so to take care of Rachel (who is being dragged away by panicking citizens). Not soon after, the entire perimeter is engulfed in flames, leading Ray to believe Robbie has died. At the end of the film, it is revealed Robbie is still alive, which causes an emotional reunion between him and his father and sister which reminds audiences of videos of soldiers returning home after rotations abroad.

Scenes like these are contrasted with a particular scene centered around Robbie, which takes place in the middle of the film. When the family arrives at a ferry that is evacuating citizens—a nod to how many New Yorkers were evacuated via ferries after the attacks on the Twin Towers—they barely manage to sneak on board while others are left behind due to the ferry being overcrowded already. When Robbie sees a few desperate stragglers jumping on top of the ferry's ramp while it is moving away from the shore, he is inspired to help them out. Ray and Rachel now look in awe as Robbie performs this heroic deed. It is as if the film tries to convey the idea of heroism as being a helpful hand to those in need, as opposed to fighting for revenge, which only leads to tears for family members. The US Army's weapons do not damage the alien invaders anyway, making the battle literally futile and useless to join. Through this, the film offers a critique on the US invasion of the Middle East, but also an interesting, nuanced take on the American soldier. The American soldier is heroic in essence, but due to giving in to feelings of revenge and hopelessness, is in danger of opting for wrong decisions.

It is reminiscent of how in Bong Joon-ho's monster sci-fi film *The Host (2006)*, the American Army's presence in South Korea is heavily criticized. Yet Bong inserted a scene in which an American tourist heroically fights the monster. Like Spielberg, Bong criticizes the US military as a system, even though Bong makes a point of portraying an ordinary American as a hero. Likewise, Spielberg excuses the young, confused and angry patriots as misguided, possibly due to misinformation campaigns, misleading rhetoric and a vast consumption of mind-numbing TV shows rather than educational media.[97] At one point in the film, Ray survives a deadly encounter with a Tripod and even manages to destroy it due to the help of

97. Jaap van Ginneken, "9/11 as a Trigger for long-term Shifts in World Public Opinion," *The International Communication Gazette* 69, no. 4 (August, 2007): 327. doi: 10.1177/1748048507079005.

ordinary citizens. As he is hoisted into the mouth of a Tripod, he takes a cluster of hand grenades with him. It is a US solider who then initiates the action of pulling Ray back out of the Tripod. Citizens around him join and eventually, Ray is pulled back to safety, but without his hand grenades. The grenades go off inside the Tripod, killing it. Again, The US soldier is portrayed as heroic and helpful in a personal way, adding nuance to the film's overt critique of military operations.

Distrust is one of the main themes of the film. Right before they get on the ferry, the family is still in possession of a working car. When they drive past a sizable stream of refugees, they get jumped, beaten and threatened. The scarcity of a working vehicle motivates the citizens to claim it for their own. Barbara Perry's observation of retaliatory violence against Muslim Americans after 9/11 is well-captured in this scene, for the situation actually spirals into an altercation including physical violence. It is only when Ray draws his gun that the refugees start to back away. The situation seems under control, until another man draws a gun and points it at Ray. Ray is forced to drop his gun and walks away with his two children, forfeiting the car. As the three enter a diner to take shelter, outside the fight continues. Someone picks up Ray's gun and shoots the new owner of the vehicle, insinuating a perpetual loop of violence. It is evident how this message holds true in the context of post-9/11 foreign policy: to put it bluntly, it is no longer a secret that the US reaction to go to war with Iraq and Afghanistan—and the following destabilization of the region—eventually paved the way for a new generation of terrorists to rise up[98] (including violent groups such as ISIS). Once again, a profound twist on a scene that was essentially borrowed from the 1953 depiction of the story. In the 1953 film, the protagonist is robbed of his car as well by panicking civilians. However, after being punched in the face, the scene ends. Rather than demonstrating the idea

98. Noam Chomsky, *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2007), 18-19.

that violence begets violence, it shows how panic causes ordinary citizens to commit acts of violence, bringing up the worst in them. The scenes therefore differ drastically in a rhetorical sense.

These themes of unjust power relations, othering, fear, revenge and pacifism all come together in the final act of the film, as Ray and Rachel (at this point, Robbie is supposed dead after joining the military) find shelter inside the basement of one Harlan Ogilvy (Tim Robbins). Harlan has his own perspective on the invasion. He tells Ray that this is not a war, but an extermination. He sees no other option than to fight against the Tripods with all he has. And he wants Ray to join him.

Over the course of the night, Harlan says:

> [We are n]ot gonna be exterminated. We're gonna fight them, Ray. They gotta have a weakness. […] Somehow they killed a few of these things in Osaka. That's what I heard. You telling me the Japanese can figure it out but we can't? We can do it. We can get them. We can figure it out. […] Now we'll be the ones coming up from underground. When the time is right, we'll take them by surprise, the way they took us. We'll take them by surprise.[99]

Harlan is madly enthusiastic to have Ray join him in a fight against the invaders, wanting to take them "by surprise" in the same way they did to planet Earth. His mind is set on revenge, and Ray starts to become sceptic about his stay. Harlan uses the same 'we must defeat them over there before they attack us here' rationale as was prevalent in early post-9/11 America with regards to al Qaeda.[100] And he has a point: there has just been a major attack on Earth, and nobody knows how this situation will end. It is also worth noting that Harlan exclaims his disbelief that people in Japan took down a Tripod while the US still has not taken down

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99. *War of the Worlds*, 1:17:16 to 1:18:44.

100. Taylor and Snow, 397.

one. It refers to the aforementioned patriotic belief in US hegemony, which is built around the notion that the US is the strongest nation on Earth in every sense of the word.

That night, a tentacle featuring an eye on its end enters the basement. It looks around for humans, forcing Ray and Rachel to be very quiet and to stay out of sight. Harlan is nowhere to be seen. As they maneuver their way through the basement, using random objects as cover, Ray is eventually met eye to eye with Harlan. Harlan picks up an axe from the wall and holds it high, preparing to strike at the tentacle, which is just beside him. But instead of striking it, Ray's heavy gesturing convinces Harlan to put the axe down again. Harlan joins Ray and Rachel, and together they manage to evade the tentacle until it retreats back out of the basement. The attempted cutting of the tentacle would have undoubtedly caused a violent scene to take place. One which could have meant the end for not only Harlan, but for Ray and Rachel as well. Soon after, three alien creatures enter the basement and look around. Harlan now has his shotgun ready and loads it with a shell. Ray grabs ahold of the gun, trying to keep Harlan from firing. They struggle inaudibly, but Harlan is much stronger than Ray. He eventually manages to push Ray away. However, just before he fires, the aliens are called back to the surface. Again, it is Ray's insistence on a non-violent solution that saves the three from a nasty encounter.

Not only are these scenes a neat callback to the 1953 film, in which the protagonist and his love-interest also face a reconnaissance tentacle—from which the end containing the eye is cut off by the protagonist with an axe—and an alien creature, it also once more stresses a call for pacifism in an era of American history that has been saturated with grief and violence. Although, as demonstrated in the first chapter, support for the war in the Middle East was waning amidst American citizens at the time the film was released, the film offers a retrospective on the premature, hawkish reaction of the country as a whole to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Policy makers as well as ordinary citizens were prepared to strike back

violently at those responsible for the trauma, a course of action that has brought nothing but suffering, death, instability and more violence. Harlan is driven by emotions and wants to get his revenge on the aliens, even though the fight would be futile in the end and would mean the certain death of him and his new companions. Whereas Harlan functions as an allegorical actor for this early post-9/11 revenge-driven sentiment, Ray instead represents the more level-headed manner of viewing the situation that became more and more prevalent within US society after the initial invasion of the Middle East. Ray sees the bigger picture, whereas Harlan's decisions are blindly motivated by emotion.

With this in mind, the scene that takes place afterwards might come as a shock. When Harlan starts to loudly dig a tunnel whilst rambling on about how history has taught humanity that occupations always fail, a nod to the US occupation of Iraq after the 2003 invasion, Ray tries to stop him. Harlan hits Ray with his shovel and Ray decides he has to protect his daughter. He reluctantly decides to kill Harlan. Although it might look as if the film now veers into the direction of justifying retaliatory violence, I think there is more to it. Harlan has lost his mind due to fear and paranoia, and Ray killing him represents the filmmakers' wish for reason trumping fear-based panic, since the latter will eventually lead to more innocent casualties (personified in the film by the character of Rachel).

Let us conclude our *War of the Worlds* analysis with a short mention of its style. Spielberg opted for a gloomy visual tone, using dimmed colors and dark lighting that seem to ground the picture in reality. Further grounding the film is its use of handheld camera as opposed to static shots, which reminds spectators of home footage, which was, as mentioned earlier, an important technological innovation around the turn of the century. It stylistically creates a bridge between the world of the film and the world we live in. The style therefore compliments the reflexive nature of the film with a sense of realness, further amplifying its messages about the post 9/11 American landscape. It contrasts *Revenge of the Sith* in that

way: Lucas' *Star Wars* universe is so far removed from ours that any sense of realness is lost. However, a similar sense of urgency to convey a message is present in both films. In *War of the Worlds*, the urgency comes from the similarities between the film's reality and ours, whereas in *Revenge of the Sith*, the urgency is less direct. The urgency does not come from a feeling of visual recognition rather than from a cognitive process. I once again stress: if one has the chance to completely distance a film's reality from our reality by having it take place in a fictional universe, then how dire—how omnipresent and deeply rooted—do recent real-life developments have to be to make their way into that universe?

In this chapter I have shown that Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* is yet another example of a sci-fi blockbuster from the post-9/11 period in American history that reflects the contemporary shifting cultural milieu the film was released in. On several occasions, I have compared the film to earlier iterations of H. G. Wells' story, and have concluded that the different socio-political milieu of the early post-9/11 world has had a huge impact on the way the story has been told in the 2005 film. Some outright references to terrorism are made, such as Rachel and Robbie asking their father if the ones attacking them are terrorists. On top of that, visual imagery mirroring the 9/11 attacks and its fallout are present throughout the film as well. Think of the dust Ray is covered in after the initial alien attack, or the posters of missing people that can be seen afterwards. The film seems to convey an urgent call for pacifism, and thus critiques the US Army's presence in the Middle East. It critiques revenge-driven patriotism and the urge for retaliatory violence, but does it in a nuanced matter that eliminates any personal insults to soldiers or supporters of the War on Terror. This is the main function of the character of Robbie, who joins the military to fight the alien invaders, despite his actions of helping out stragglers on an evacuation ferry are perceived as much more fruitful and heroic. The struggle that Americans from all political sides of the spectrum faced after 9/11 is made palpable, especially when the audience enters Harlan's basement. Two

ideologies seem to clash down there, with the level-headed Ray trying to dissuade the hawkish Harlan from using violence against the invaders, something that would result in certain death for all of them. The film warns the audience against the potential vicious circle of violence and the nagging persistence of fear and panic. In that sense, *War of the Worlds* is not too dissimilar from *Revenge of the Sith*.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have demonstrated that the two highest-grossing science fiction films from the year 2005—George Lucas' *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* and Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*—reflect and reveal a changing public perception with regards to support for the War on Terror. Both on a narrative and formal level, the films address the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, and capture the anxiety and panic that had American society in its grasp in subsequent years. Through formal and narrative analyses, I have fleshed out the parallels between the films and the contemporary political milieu they were developed in, and have made links between the two. Both films use imagery reminiscent and inspired by the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers on 9/11, and convey a constant atmosphere of uneasiness and paranoia. On a narrative level, not only is there an evil force that attacks a bastion of order (whilst originating from, or operating from, inside that order), the actors within said bastion are turned against each other as well. Both films include a plot point in which a character presented to us by the film as 'good' has to reluctantly turn on an ally due to the fact that this ally has given in to feelings of fear and revenge instead of listening to reason. In *Revenge of the Sith*, this cumulates in a fight between Obi-Wan and Anakin and in *War of the Worlds*, it is Ray fighting Harlan.

I have presented examples that illustrate how *Revenge of the Sith* particularly deals with post-9/11 America losing sight of its moral compass by drawing parallels between the Geneva Code and the Jedi Code. Furthermore, the film presents the rhetoric utilized by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks as manipulative and evil, and warns against its efficiency in garnering support in exchange for corrupting the good at heart. The grizzly results of the War on Terror in the Middle East are represented in scenes in which the fallen hero, Anakin, indiscriminately murders children at the command of his new demagogue master, Palpatine. *War of the Worlds* essentially calls for peace, and even though

it does not condemn violence completely, it makes the audience think of how well-thought out, non-violent, diplomatic options might be a better solution than haphazardly firing guns. It critiques the military response to the 9/11 attacks in this manner, but makes a point to state the individual soldier is not inherently evil.

These findings represent how actively both films interact with the changing political milieu of 2005 America. A widely supported step towards retaliation had been made right after the 9/11 attacks, but citizens changed their minds as new knowledge, mostly communicated through brand new consumer technologies, about the war in the Middle East became widespread. This self-reflexive nature of this period in American history is well brought to light in the two films I discussed, as both deal with characters who are continuously soul-searching and coming to terms with their changing environments. Both the characters of Anakin Skywalker and Harlan Ogilvy, to once again call upon Cohen's monster theory, are harbingers of what is to come when one completely loses oneself to feelings of fear and helplessness, warning the audience against a constant stream information based on paranoia and revenge.

As with any significant historical event, one is bound to encounter representations of, or reactions to said event in art that followed it at some point in time. The two films I have analyzed in this thesis are but a small portion of the works that can be defined as films that reflect and address a new post-9/11 American society through fictional stories. More films dealing with urgent themes at the time can be found both in the genre of science-fiction (such as *Æon Flux (Kusama, 2005)* or *Children of Men (Cuarón, 2006)*) and outside of it (such as *Kingdom of Heaven (Scott, 2005)* or *300 (Snyder, 2006)*. This body of work has only grown in the years following the 9/11 terror attacks. However, it is important to realize that over time, the films that deal with the aftermath of 9/11 through a fictional story become less and less relevant for a thesis such as this one. After all, Hollywood—America—the world, moves

on. The perspective on the events and its response in terms of US politics has changed. On top of that, the collective fear and panic after the Twin Towers collapsed are intrinsic to the 9/11 attacks, and they can never be re-created. That said, it could be interesting to use this given as a basis for a research project concerning how the cinematic representation of the event and its consequences has changed over time, as America society slowly has come to terms with the traumatic experience.

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