

STAR WARS, EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE STUPID

By Don Feder

What can you say about a movie whose most engaging character is a two-foot tall, pointy-eared, green alien? “Star War III: The Revenge of the Sith” is heavy on special effects, sparse on drama, romance and emotion.

It’s also filled with director George Lucas’s muddled thinking. And, yes, it’s science fiction in the service of Michael Moore’s worldview.

Despite its record-breaking opening, the last Star Wars installment is bad cinema. The light-saber duels are fun. The alien creations are cool. The attempts to portray passion or the corruption of the human spirit (how a man loses his soul) are pathetic.

In Christensen and Portman, Lucas has found a romantic duo who belong in a remake of “Beach Blanket Bingo.” As Anakin Skywalker, Hayden Christensen is a sulking, pretty boy who scowls a lot and attempts to project angst. His transformation from the basically-decent-but-flawed Jedi Knight to the evil Darth Vader is Faust Light.

As former Princess, now Senator, Padme (Anakin’s secret wife), Natalie Portman seems perpetually bewildered. (A condition that probably results from reading too much Jedi philosophy – “Thus Spake Yoda.”) Her expressions span the spectrum from looking moonstruck to being perplexed over her husband’s increasingly erratic behavior.

Then there’s Anakin’s less-than-credible conversion to the Dark Side of the Force. The sinister Chancellor Palpatine seduces our young Jedi by promising to give him the power to save his beloved wife from death (of which Skywalker has graphic premonitions). Then, in the climatic scene – believing Padame has betrayed him -- Skywalker/Vader tries to strangle his pregnant spouse. “Luke, I’m your father – and I’m confused as hell!”

That’s about all the space the plot deserves.

Let us then consider the film’s quasi-spiritual/political overtones.

What the heck is the Force, anyway? A New Agey invisible power “that binds the universe together,” we were told way back in 1977. What of a Supreme Being, morality, the eternal battle twixt good and evil?

Apparently, ordinary people can’t wield the force (or connect with it – like, say, the God of the Bible?). The Force is the province of an elite (the Jedi or their counterpart, the Sith) who learn to control it – allowing them to bend minds, foretell the future, project a force field and defy gravity.

When Lucas tries to go beyond that, he's caught in the quicksand of ideas – and quickly sinks below the surface. Apparently, the Force embraces both morality and moral relativism – self-defense and flower-child pacifism.

In his climatic battle with Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin growls: “If you're not with me, then you're my enemy.” To this Obi-Wan sadly replies that “only a Sith Lord deals in absolutes.” So the Jedi are relativists, who discern shades of grey where the less enlightened see black and white?

But then, so are the Sith. During his seduction of Skywalker, Chancellor Palpatine says Anakin needs to embrace the Dark Side of the Force, thus rejecting the “narrow, dogmatic” views of the Jedi, whose conception of the “good” is just a point of view.

Only an evil Sith Lord deals in absolutes, meaning there are no absolutes, right? (Is Obi-wan absolutely sure of that?) Then why do Ewan McGregor's character and the other Jedi knights act as if they were operating in a moral universe – protecting the innocent, trying to stop a power-mad politician from destroying freedom, etc.?

When Obi-Wan learns that Anakin has killed the Jedi child- apprentices, he's horrified. Did his protégé commit an act of pure evil – or was his slaughter of kids merely a bad choice? After all, only Sith Lords deal in absolutes.

The politics of “Episode III” could be called “Revenge of the Kerry Crowd.” The film is anti-Bush polemic at its dumbest. It's the war on terrorism viewed through a MoveOn.org lens.

You don't need the mind powers of a Jedi master to get what's going on here. Newsweek's movie reviewer David Ansen trills, “It's hard not to feel that Lucas's engagement with the story has a contemporary urgency, as line after pointed line invites us to see a parallel with today's wartime climate.”

The New York Times review by A.O. Scott contains the following: “Revenge of the Sith' is about how a republic dismantles its own democratic principles, About how politics becomes militarized, about how a Manichaeian ideology undermines the rational exercise of power. Mr. Lucas is clearly jabbing his light saber in the direction of some real-world political leaders At one point, Darth Vader...echoing the words of George W. Bush, hisses at Obi-Wan, ‘If you're not with me, you're my enemy.’” This refers to Bush's post-9/11 admonition to foreign leaders, “Either you're with us, or you are with the terrorists.” (Only Sith Republicans deal in absolutes.)

“Revenge of the Sith” combines pacifist cliches with leftist paranoia about a conspiracy that uses war to extinguish liberty.

Speaking of the Republic's struggle with the rebellion, Padme ruefully comments, “This war represents a failure to listen” – the cry of the Dean Democrats. (If only they'd

given sanctions a chance. Just imagine what Hans Blix and the UN weapons inspectors could have done to disarm General Grievous.)

But this begs the question: Listen to whom – about what? What was Osama bin-Laden trying to tell us that we failed to hear? (I want to kill you and annihilate your civilization, in the name of Allah, the most merciful.) What was Hitler trying to tell us? (I want living space. And I'll kill anyone who gets in my way.) Khrushchev? (We will bury you.)

We have been listening. The Islamacist message has come through loud and clear. That's why we went to Afghanistan. That's why we're in Iraq. We heard them in the cries of those dying in the Twin Towers (effects not courtesy of Industrial Light and Magic). And they heard us – in the sound of bunker-busters.

“So this is how liberty dies – to thunderous applause,” Padme-Pelosi says as the Senate votes Chancellor Palpatine emergency powers. Presumably, we're expected to believe that The Homeland Security Act will make Bush the Evil Emperor W.

Blathering at the Cannes Film Festival (something celebrities do well), Lucas said he conceived the Star Wars saga in the early 1970s, when the Emperor Nixon threatened to extinguish the republic. (Actually, it was the Democrats who used Watergate as an excuse to usurp executive power.)

But, according to its creator, the Star Wars' message just keeps getting more relevant -- honest Jedi.

Lucas discovered that, like hack directors, history repeats itself. Lucas: “It tends to follow a similar patterns. Threats from outside leading to the need for more control; democracy not being able to function properly because of internal squabbling.” (Aside: Try to imagine a democratic government without internal squabbling.)

When asked whether there were intentional parallels between the storyline of “Revenge of the Sith” and the Iraq war, Lucas replied” “When I wrote it, Iraq didn't exist. We were funding Saddam Hussein and giving him weapons of mass destruction (*light sabers? Death Stars?*). We were going after Iran. But the parallels between what we did in Vietnam and what we are doing in Iraq are unbelievable.”

The only “unbelievable” parallels here are that Lucas opposed Vietnam and opposes Iraq. You see, going to war against thugs who are intent on subjugating on us represents “a failure to listen” and results in the death of liberty.

Actually those recurring patterns Lucas discerns are a bit more complicated. American liberty was forged in the fires of war. (Did the Revolutionary War represent a failure to listen to George III and the Tories?) The French Reign of Terror was less a response to a perceived threat from abroad, than a typical ideological attempt to establish utopia by eliminating unassimilable elements.

Nazism wasn't the Weimar Republic's reaction to an imagined foreign menace. The violence was internal. If the Republic had dealt with it by applying force against brown and red revolutionaries who were creating chaos in the streets, the Third Reich never would have happened.

The Cold War wasn't an attempt by wicked anti-communists to use the perception of a foreign threat to diminish liberties. The threat – Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua and Soviet expansionism – was all too real. Over the past century, American freedom (control of our lives, income and property) has receded thanks to the advance of the welfare state – which Lucas and his Hollywood friends adore – and not due to war.

Lucas is almost as bad an historian as he is a filmmaker. His final Star Wars installment (thank God!) should be subtitled, "Revenge of the Stupid." It's pure pap – uninspiring, unconvincing and cinematic pandering to those who think the World Trade Center attack was part of a vast intergalactic conspiracy to give the Sith Lord W. the power to turn our republic into a Republican empire.

Amused we are not.