Familiarity is the Path to the Dark Side

Domesticating Political Problems with Star Wars

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In 1999, *MAD Magazine* riffed *Star Wars* and the Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton scandal with a "Starr Wars" poster based on the original 1977 theatrical art. In *MAD*'s version, Bill Clinton was transformed into Luke Skywalker to Ken Starr's Darth Vader.[1] In 2008, *The Hollywood Reporter* similarly parodied the 1977 *Star Wars* poster as "Hillary Strikes Back," with Hillary Clinton now taking the role of Luke and Donald Trump taking the place of Vader.[2] Henry Jenkins referred to such images as part of the "grassroots appropriation of *Star Wars*" (2006, 551), which was prominent as "part of the huge media phenomenon that surrounded first the release of the digitally enhanced original *Star Wars* trilogy in 1997 and the subsequent release of *The Phantom Menace* in 1999" (2006, 551).

Such grassroots appropriation became more pronounced in the United States during the Donald Trump administration, from the start of his candidacy in 2015 to his departure from office in 2021, advanced by the co-option of Star Wars iconography in the 2017 Women's March. As Clarisse Loughrey (2017) noted in *The Independent*, the combined timing of Trump's election, Carrie Fisher's death, and the release of *Rogue One,* whose message was "rebellions are built on hope," merged to make Princess Leia and her fellow Rebels powerful symbols of protest (for more, see Knopf 2019). With Trump's dissenters adopting the symbols of the "Rebel scum" in Star Wars, Trump was often depicted on the side of the Empire, particularly in political, or editorial, cartoons. Though such an allusion was logical under the circumstances, it is not unproblematic given cultural attraction to villains and the redemption arcs afforded to the likes of Darth Vader and Kylo Ren.

With a focus on images created between 2015 and 2020, this article approaches the use of metaphor and allusion in political satire according to the interaction view of metaphor developed by philosopher Max Black (1977) and the concept of domestication offered by Erving Goffman (1979) to argue that the meaning attached to Dark Side allusions in political cartoons is dependent on not only the audience's familiarity with and knowledge of Star Wars canon, but also on its particular relationship with the franchise and individual characters – recognizing that familiarity may breed complacency.

Political Cartoons and Cultural Allusions

Political cartoons typically refer to "topical outbursts of image and text," traditionally found in newspapers, that communicate attitudes or summary snapshots of situations (Worcester 2007, 223). They may be multi or single paneled. These cartoons may provide political anecdotes that seek to bring order to government actions with biting partisan comment on

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[1] Viewable online at https://www.madmagazine.com/blog/2014/05/07/monica-lewinsky-in-starr-wars (June 27, 2021).

[2] Viewable online at https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/politics-news/hillary-clinton-as-luke-skywalker-916841/ (June 27, 2021).

current events, or they may offer social commentary, designed to help audiences cope with their world (Press 1981; Davis 2009). They are part of the composite of political messages received by voters and constituents, and they have been embraced by political campaigns, which, as Joan Conners (2005) argues, "confirms their legitimacy in the political arena of media" (280). By drawing on various cognitive mechanisms, conceptual integration, and cultural models, political cartoons can use humor as a form of criticism or commentary, and they can present a new vision, or frame, of a personality or event, often captured in a single image (Ioniţă, Suciu, Suhalitca and Voitovici 2011; Marín-Arrese 2008; DeSousa and Medhurst 1982).

One rhetorical means used by cartoonists to achieve these ends is the engagement of cultural allusions: well-known historical or literary figures, ideographs like the Iwo Jima flag-raising, sports and games – especially horse races and boxing matches, children's literature, brand names and advertising, films, and holidays or special events (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981; Edwards and Winkler 1997). Such allusions are often ephemeral but at the time of publication they provide readers in-the-know with a shortcut for processing and identifying with the cartoon message (Conners 2005). As editorial cartoonist Steve Benson explained, "In the milieu of current politics and culture and fads, we try to symbolically and instantaneously relate to our audience. [...] I use images that linger" (quoted in Conners 2007, 262).

As argued by Bernard Grofman (1989), allusions in political satire often work as metaphors and, according to Black, there are three commonly held views of metaphor: the *substitution view*, the *comparison view*, and, the *interaction view*. The substitution view makes meaning into a "code" or "riddle" for the audience to unravel; "The author substitutes M for L, it is the reader's task to invert the substitution by using the literal meaning of M as a clue to the intended literal meaning of L" (Black 1962, 32). The comparison view treats metaphor as "a condensed or elliptical simile" (Black 1962, 35), creating an analogy in which L is like M in some way. The interaction view recognizes that audiences effectively select characteristics of both the primary (L) and secondary (M) subjects of the metaphor to emphasize and suppress, creating an interpretive isomorphism (Grofman 1989; Black 1977).

In other words, when political cartoonists blend the likeness of Donald Trump with the likeness of Darth Vader, in a metaphor relying on a pop culture allusion, the image can be interpreted as Vader standing in for Trump and thus providing some clue as to Trump's character or motivations, or as Trump being Vader-like in some respect. But either approach depends on the audience first knowing the characteristics of Darth Vader and, second, knowing what characteristics of Vader are to be attributed to Trump.

E. H. Gombrich's (1971)"The Cartoonist's Armoury" referred to this sort of visual representation as the process of *combination*: the blending of elements and ideas from different domains into a new composite – such as politics and horse racing.[3] Combination works both as metaphor, by showing parallels between the unrelated things, and as metonymy, endowing people, events, or ideologies, with the respective traits of the other elements the cartoonist introduces. Early Star Wars allusions in political cartoons were enabled by Ronald Reagan's "evil empire" speech and "star wars" missile defense program. The process of *combination* is effectively captured by "Reagan's Evil Empire" speech, and subsequent political cartoons covering it, which set up the Soviet Union as analogous to The Empire,[4] both sharing "totalitarian darkness." Since then, it has become common for cartoonists to frequently invoke the Dark Side to comment on a range of political and business leaders and organizations. For example, Mark Luckovich depicted the National Rifle Association as Darth Vader, wielding a light saber of "gun violence" – to which the United States, represented by Yoda, Leia, and

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[3] See an example online at https://www.loc.gov/item/2008661285/ (June 27, 2021).
[4] See an example cartoon by DER online at
https://ahistoryaddict.wordpress.com/2015/02/18/evil-empire-speech-reagan-1983/ (June 28, 2021).

Chewbacca, surrendered. The 2015 cartoon was titled "Now Playing – The Force Snoozes."[5] Darth Vader works both metaphorically, comparing the NRA to The Empire, and metonymically, imbuing the NRA with Vader's egomaniacal cosmocratic influence.

Ray Morris adds nuance to Gombrich's work by applying Goffman's notion of *domestication*. Morris argues, "Cartoons frequently present persons and situations that are remote from the skimmer's everyday experiences" and about which the skimmer, or viewer, has little knowledge. (1993, 200). The process of *domestication* takes such unfamiliar, abstract, or distant ideas, persons, and/or events and converts them "into something close, familiar, and concrete. It translates what is novel and hard to understand into the commonplace by highlighting mutual elements and masking unique ones and by focusing on repetitive patterns to minimize novelty and mental adjustment" (Morris 1993, 201). For example, Saddam Hussein was largely unknown to the general U.S. public until the United States declared war on his regime in 1991, at which time he was presented as the new Hitler to justify the invasion in a way that American audiences could understand. Such a process is arguably at work in the myriad of editorial cartoons that use Star Wars allusions to simplify, make accessible, and re-frame complicated political processes and personalities. As a prime example, the complexities of the 448-page Mueller Report, and the associated Donald Trump impeachment which took nearly three years, were often simplified into single Star-Wars-inspired images. Nick Anderson,[6] Mike Thompson,[7] and KAL,[8] for instance, all combined the image of Attorney General William Barr with that of Jabba the Hutt, holding justice hostage.

Critics note that the gap between image and reality in domestication lead to, or exploit, popular misunderstanding of a person, event, or ideology (Shapiro 1988), and that if a lack of previous knowledge or familiarity exists in the public, domestication may trivialize the seriousness of the issue (Corcoran 1979). Such trivialization may, for example, be perceived in a cartoon that transforms Donald Trump into Jabba the Hutt with a nearly-naked Leia in the chains. In the cartoon, by Benson,[9] "Donald the Trump" proclaims "I cherish women!" even while his female captive is clearly miserable. While the cartoon is *meant* to highlight Trump's sexualization, objectification, and subjugation of women, the popular familiarity of the *Star Wars* scene invoked actually makes Trump's chauvinism playful – the same way that Carrie Fisher's Gold Bikini photoshoot with *Rolling Stone*[10] made Leia's sexualized enslavement playful. Similar trivialization, even degradation, of women's objectification is suggested by another Jabba cartoon that used Jabba the Hutt as a metaphor for soft money enslaving U.S. political parties. This 2002 cartoon, by Nick Anderson,[11] suggests that both parties are beholden to soft money, but that Republicans "enjoy it." With the GOP elephant standing in for Slave Leia, there is a secondary message that some women "enjoy" sexual objectification and abuse.

The focus of this discussion is, accordingly, on the complications of Dark Side allusions in political satire – how comparing regimes, ideologies, personalities, and behaviors that are truly reprehensible to Jabba the Hut, Darth Vader, Darth Sidious, and the Empire actually downgrades the seriousness of the real-world implications. For example, a 2019 cartoon by John

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[5] Viewable online at
https://www.realclearpolitics.com/cartoons/2015/10/25/mike_luckovich_mike_luckovich_for_10252015.html
(June 27, 2021).
[6] Viewable online at
https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-for-friday-from-times-wire-services-20190509/
(June 27, 2021).
[7] Viewable online at https://www.businessmayor.com/help-from-joebi-wan-biden-todays-toon/ (June 27, 2021).
[8] Viewable online at https://twitter.com/kaltoons/status/1228688744682860544?s=20 (June 27, 2021).
[9] Viewable online at https://democraticunderground.com/10027897877 (June 27, 2021).
[10] See images from the spread online at
https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/photography/carrie-fisher-s-rolling-stone-beach-shoot/.
[11] Viewable online at
https://www.cartoonistgroup.com/cartoon/Nick+Anderson%27s+Editorial+Cartoons/2002-02-12/4940 (June 27, 2021).

Darkow[12] depicted Trump joining the ranks of Hitler, Bin Laden… and Darth Vader (amusingly depicted in armor with a built-in AM/FM radio). The cartoon is indexed at Cagle.com as "Trump Loves Dictators," which makes clear its critical point. However, the juxtaposition of a militant terrorist mastermind and the leader of the Third Reich with a *fictional* character, who was actually a puppet of a greater evil (and who is illustrated farcically), not only minimizes the real-world pain of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Holocaust but also works to make Trump look like a buffoon, rather than a threat. In this case, not only is Trump's potential villainy domesticated to be acceptably familiar through the presence of Darth Vader, an easily recognizable character from a beloved media franchise, but it is also made laughable – and plausibly deniable – through the satirical use of parody within its allusion.

Polyvalence of Parody

While traditional comedy may be thought of as escapist and laugh-inducing, satire is perceived as engaging reality in ways that are controversial and not always "ha-ha" funny (Thompson 2009). Satire is, by its nature, anti-authority. Jeffrey P. Jones (2010) describes it as "a hard-knuckled critique of power" (83) that "exposes some aspect of reality to ridicule in the form of aesthetic expression" (238) and passes judgment on perceived wrongdoing. It playfully distorts the familiar in order to evoke expressions of amusement and disdain. Satire depends on the audience devoting sufficient intellectual and emotional engagement to understand the message – rejecting its literal meaning, recognizing its incongruities, and seeking alternative interpretations (Booth 1974; Burke 1945). One particular technique of satire is parody, which requires that audiences recognize both the subject matter of the message and the focus of its criticism (Hill 2013; Hess 2011; Shugart 1999; Bennett 1985). Parody is a self-conscious duplication of some part of the communicative act, using embellishments to transform imitation into caricature, or employing techniques such as irony and sarcasm to offer clearly critical commentary (Hariman 2008; Hill 2013).

Margaret Rose defines parody as "the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material" (1999, 52). *Combination* and *domestication* are both techniques that refunction preformed artistic material to make sense of political culture, using images and formats "easily recognized and understood by the general public," guaranteeing "access to a large and diverse popular culture audience" (Gring-Pemble and Watson 2003, 136). But this wide appeal also opens the text to a wide variety of interpretations. For example, a 2009 study by LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam on biased message processing of political satire in *The Colbert Report*[13] found that viewers saw what they wanted to see, and so conservative viewers were more likely to believe that Colbert's pro-conservative persona was sincere, while liberals were more likely to interpret that persona as satirical. In other words, how we interpret comparisons of politicians to Darth Vader, for example, depend on both our pre-existing interpretations of Vader *and* those of the politician in question. Thus, when cartoons put actual politicians with real power that has real consequence in league with fictional villains, the messages received by readers are varied, and may include understandings that the politician is a villain, or fake, or powerful, or redeemable, or admirable, etcetera.

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[12] Viewable online at https://www.cagle.com/john-darkow/2019/03/trump-loves-dictators (June 27, 2021).
[13] Star Wars-related segment of *The Colbert Report*, as sample of the media, available online at https://www.cc.com/video/umsrnb/the-colbert-report-lightsaber-controversy (June 27, 2021).

Welcome to the Dark Side

Cait Coker and Karen Viars (2017) argued in *NANO* that a <u>*Saturday Night Live* sketch</u> that imagined Kylo Ren playing the *Undercover Boss* on Starkiller Base[14] provided the villain "with a platform that makes his violence humorous" putting him "at the center of the narrative," and normalizing "his unconscionable choices," and that this served as part of the mainstreaming of the Empire, and its representation of white patriarchal superiority. They noted that the fact that the "majority of fandom appears to be more interested in adopting the accouterments and characters of the oppressors rather than the rebel heroes speaks to a broader problem in our culture." This attraction society has to baddies has been explored by scholars of popular culture, politics, organizations, and psychology. The attractiveness of villains, scoundrels, autocrats, and toxic leaders has been variably described as "hypermasculine charisma" (Brock 2016, para. 2), a "rise of strongmen" (Nai and Toros 2020, 3), and the desirability of men of "action" (Lipman-Bluman 2004, 22).

Popular and political culture are both rife with fantasmatic figures of action who exude strength and sexuality – most often in the form of villains, anti-heroes and autocrats who fit "Dark Triad of personality," exhibiting traits of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, which comes across to others as charm, confidence, and success (Jonason et al 2012). Accordingly, there are multiple reasons we may identify with the Dark Side: We may simply like the character or actor, or we may identify with some aspect of their situation, struggle, or characteristics. Or, we have Machiavellian personality traits ourselves – such as a distrust of others, a desire for control, or a desire for status (Black et al, 2019). We might find reassurance in someone who takes action to address the problems that plague them (Barber 1992; McDermott 2016). Indeed, we might simply admire their abilities.

Moreover, as Chris Deis (2013) noted, the primary distinction between heroes and villains is socio-political context and a matter of perspective. Or, as suggested by the likes of actor Tom Hiddleston and writer Christopher Vogler, among others: eEvery villain is the hero of their own story. And audiences are bringing these assorted standpoints with them when they engage with political satire and editorial cartoons. Therefore, Keenspot's comic book parody *Trump's Titans vs. Fidget Spinner Force* could cast Hillary Clinton ally <u>George Soros into the role of Darth Sidious</u>[15] plotting *against* Donald Trump just as easily and aptly as a political cartoon by Alex Smith could cast former White House Chief Strategist <u>Steve Bannon into the role of Darth Sidious</u>[16] plotting *with* Donald Trump: the villain changes depending on which side of the conflict one positions themselves. As Amy Sturgis stated in her discussion of *Star Wars* and indigenous peoples for the <u>*Unmistakably Star Wars*</u> podcast,[17] "We are the Empire." Our interpretation of the Dark Side in Star Wars is dependent on our positions on sexism, racism, and fascism in real life. This idea is captured succinctly in a <u>2016 cartoon by Patrick Corrigan</u>[18] in which Trump happily Tweets that Darth Vader and a Stormtroopper are the perfect picks for his cabinet.

Conclusion

As outlined by Grofman, "satirical allusions are implicit arguments that must be 'decoded'" by the audience (1989, 166). As such, they may be often understood at more than one level,

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[14] Sketch available at https://youtu.be/FaOSCASqLsE (June 27, 2021).

[15] Sample page available at https://img.fireden.net/co/image/1533/72/1533727042036.jpg (June 26, 2021).

[16] Viewable online at https://sketchymcdrawpants.wordpress.com/2017/01/30/1326-dont-get-cocky-kids/ (June 27, 2021).

[17] Episode 107, archived online at https://podknife.com/episodes/episode-107-comparing-indigenous-peoples-in-star-wars-to-the-real-world (June 27, 2021).

[18] Viewable online at https://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorial_cartoon/2016/12/16/patrick-corrigan-trump-cabinet.html (June 27, 2021).

depending on the audience's sophistication and knowledge of both the object of the satirical criticism and of the allusion. Moreover, Grofman adds, "for an allusion to be fully successful it may not contain elements that appear to contradict the satirist's central thrust" and "some allusions are 'richer' and more apt that others" (1989, 166). This is the ~~Darth Sidious~~ insidious threat of Dark Side allusions in political cartoons. The comfortable familiarity of Darth Vader, Darth Sidious, Darth Maul, Kylo Ren, Stormtroopers, and Jabba the Hut belie the uncomfortable political realities on which cartoonists are commenting through their allusions. Domesticating political corruption in the guise of familiar fictions makes the corruption commonplace. In making it comprehensible, it oversimplifies it. And in using such popular villains, it makes it desirable.

During his term, President Trump was depicted as or in consort with Darth Vader numerous times, arguably positioning him as a potentially redeemable dictator who was doomed to fail. Nonetheless, when cartoons compared Trump's combover-pompadour to Vader's helmet, as in a 2017 cartoon by Trevor Irvin,[19] the farcical imagery was not so different from Rick Moranis's lovably naïve performance as Lord Dark Helmet[20] in Mel Brooks' *Spaceballs* (1987), effectively downplaying the potential threat of a real autocratic leader. In *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace* (1999, George Lucas), Yoda memorably imparts the words, "Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." Here, we might argue that that familiarity is the path to the Dark Side. Familiarity leads to acceptance. Acceptance leads to hardness. Hardness leads to suffering.

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[19] Viewable online at https://www.cagle.com/trevor-irvin/2017/03/darth-and-donald-vader (June 27, 2021).

[20] See character image and biography online at https://spaceballs.fandom.com/wiki/Dark_Helmet (June 27, 2021).

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