**Remarks on the 70-minute video critique of *The Phantom Menace***

By Dan Klein ([my homepage](http://economics.gmu.edu/klein/index.html))

I find fascinating the [70-minute video critique of *The Phantom Menace*](http://www.slashfilm.com/2009/12/17/watch-this-70-minute-video-review-of-star-wars-the-phantom-menace/) – evidently created by “Mike from Milwaukee.” The critique shows meticulous care and remarkable command of the material. But how could Mike not bother about obvious problems? The neglect of the obvious and important makes the critique a screed.

Mike never acknowledges that Episode I (*The Phantom Menace*) commences a new trilogy the central character of which is a super-powerful being who goes over to the Dark Side and in darkness triumphs, at least in terms of political power. The trilogy’s culmination was destined to be the emergence of Darth Vader, allied to the Emperor, exercising imperial power in service to the Dark Side. How does the man in charge make such a character a *protagonist*? Yet Mike faults Lucas for straying from the simple formula! Sure, let’s make a children’s movie about Hitler.

Somehow the predicament of opening a new trilogy bound to such fate escapes Mike.

Mike jumps to Episode III (*Revenge of the Sith*) and bashes the long fight between Obi Wan and Anakin. For me, that fight is one of the most moving and most sustained emotional film-watching experiences. Episodes I, II, and III lead up to the breakdown of everything good and hopeful between the friends and colleagues, figurative brothers. Lucas has us explore that tragedy and sadness for hours, really. When I watch any of the trilogy, it is all just protracted tragedy.

But the misery of the characters is merely the more obvious of the important tragedies. The schism and clash between Obi Wan and Anakin personifies the breakdown of what was presumably a fairly reasonable and enlightened republican political system. The viewer rightly takes the Jedi to be venerables of the government and sages of the civilization: Their confusion and dissension speak of a whole civilization in disintegration. All along the way, the impending doom is told by muddle and darkness – precisely what Mike complains of. The film is about a culture in decay and government in descent to dark forces. For Mike to overlook the remarkable novelty of the epic that Lucas had in his hands is bizarre. Lucas’s taking of it further and further must be one of modern culture’s most prominent examples of boldness and creativity. Everyone wishes that just one super-rich, super-successful mainstream artist would do something really super-original and super-focused. Lucas does it, and Mike misses it entirely.

So I agree with Tyler that [Mike does not understand the movie](http://www.marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2009/12/critique-of-the-phantom-menace.html). As for [Tyler’s take on the new trilogy](http://www.marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2005/05/the_public_choi.html), the suggestion that it is about the renunciation of, or refraining from, power is provocative and surely at least partly true. That the power themes are unresolved is a virtue. Tyler points out that at the conclusion of Episode VI (*Return of the Jedi*) there are no Jedi knights, no Jedi rule. But that doesn’t mean everyone in the galaxy lives happily ever after. There is nothing in the film to suggest the viability or even meaningfulness of a universal refraining from power. Tyler’s sentence, “Our possible safety lies in our humanity, not in our desires to transcend it or wield strange forces to our advantage,” is wonderful as a political message: let us degovernmentalize society, for government is the strangest force. But paradox returns as we remember that dismantling a governmental function is a function necessarily belonging to government.

In *Spiderman*, [Uncle Ben](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuOkwCcMjEc&NR=1) told Peter, “With great power comes great responsibility.” Yes. But what power does any individual have? Adam Smith told us that we have little power to augment our own happiness, and even less to augment that of others. Yet unhappiness knows great depths, and great is our power to destroy the happiness of ourselves and others. The individual can greatly affect happiness positively only if he can destroy the destructive power of a villain. But the will to heroics easily becomes delusional, hubristic, destructive of happiness. Thus [Tyler’s anti-heroic suspicion of stories](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoEEDKwzNBw). Without an unambiguous villain, and one who can be destroyed, the decent man is stoical and dull to watch from the outside. Qui Gon and Obi Wan of the new trilogy are pensive, unemotional, even scholarly. Lucas had a tragedy to make, a saga in which each individual failed against evil.

Mike somehow misses all this.