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Darth Vader, American idiot

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NEW DELHI, India, May 28 -- Green Day's latest pogo-inducing shout-along, only recently arrived in India, is music the way Goddess Saraswati meant it to be: a loud rush that makes anxious anyone with an impressionable daughter. So what does it have to do with Hugh Miles biography of the world's naughtiest TV station, and George Lucas's study of the moral transition?

If you go by tempo, then you'd need Venn diagrams. American Idiot is so fast it curves the space-time continuum. (Where'd that hour go? You wonder). Al Jazeera is so information-heavy it moves at a geological pace. And Revenge of the Sith, like the other Star Wars prequels, alternates between fight sequences that outpace The Matrix, and a narrative that makes you want to go back to reading Al Jazeera.

Yet it's the emotional experience that ties them all together. It's all youth-oriented: al Jazeera's primary audience is demographically one of the youngest in the world; Green Day's songs are all youth-angst, about love and loneliness in a world run by war-mongering adults; and Revenge targets the unabashed child inside each viewer.

And, indisputably, youth's zeitgeist is rebellion: the higher your target, the more satisfying your yell. And what higher authority exists today than George W. Bush - Galactic Emperor, Sith Lord, the insidious Darth Sidius? It is he whom Yoda engages in a light-saber duel in the chambers of the Republic's senate (or was that the UN general assembly)? It is he for whom al Jazeera is the rebel fleet under Princess Leia. It is Bush about whom Green Day frontman Billie Joe Armstrong declares in Holiday: "Zieg heil to the president gasman/Bombs away is your punishment/Pulverize the Eiffel Towers/Who criticize your government".

What's wonderful is that they criticize. I don't think anyone does that in India. Al Jazeera, for instance, once aired a talk show with an Algerian dissident. Algeria's government was so worried that it shut off power to all cities for the hour the show was broadcast! It was Al Jazeera, not The New Yorker, which broke the Abu Ghraib story - from the inside, because its correspondent was taken and tortured there. When they spoke of the torture they were, as usual, rubbished as propagandists. Seymour Hersh proved al Jazeera is truly the world media's only light-saber. How I wish I worked there - even if the US bombed its Kabul and Baghdad bureaux during the two episodes of its War on Terrorism (as bad as the first two prequels to Star Wars).

Lucas's political criticism is shallow. Of greater interest is his moral relativism - there are no absolutes, Obi-wan says, and of course not, that would be too Hegelian, like the ideologies of fascism and communism. How ironic, though, in a saga whose first film was created to clarify concepts of good and evil in the confusing post-Vietnam era.

Indeed, while watching *Revenge*, I marvelled at the special effects - they were worth two prices of admission, at least. What craft, what devotion to detail - enough to make you feel story and dialogue are adult pretensions. But should Natalie Portman's only purpose be to produce babies? Shouldn't Anakin Skywalker's agony be more convincing? Shouldn't our children be taught to question authority, rather than go for the bad guy? Has Lucas crossed over to the Dark Side? And he repeatedly tells interviewers he's constructing modern mythology. Ha ha ha ha ha!

Most impressive is Green Day. Can you imagine any singer in India calling his leader an idiot? Can you imagine anyone questioning our brainless middle class aspirations? That's what's impressive about American culture - they tolerate internal dissent, even if, as Al Jazeera shows, they're loathe to tolerate defiance from abroad. And as we grow closer to the galactic empire, our culture evolving to accommodate theirs, why don't we also adapt the Western tradition of self-criticism?

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