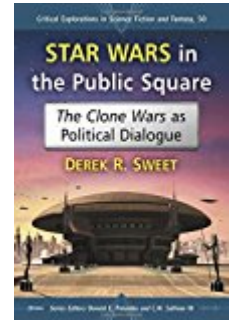**Derek R. Sweet.** *Star Wars in the Public Square: The Clone Wars as Political Dialogue.* Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy Series. Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 224 pp. $35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7764-7.

Reviewed by Nicholas Rudnik

I have often argued that science fiction is among the most telling literary genres to present a story. A model science fiction work offers a provocative drama in some faraway land, forcing us to suspend disbelief and weigh the issues inherent to a fictional people in another time and place. While the reader or the audience is captured by the ensuing, fantastic spectacle before them, they are simultaneously learning something valuable about us—humanity. Science fiction provides a medium where contentious and controversial issues from the public square can be impartially presented before an almost unwitting audience. Divorced of the normative judgments mass publics typically associate with extant social and political issues, science fiction empowers observers with agency to reflect on the universality of political issues, and by extension, fundamental questions of morality, with an open mind.

It is my belief that this understanding of the social meaning of science fiction is central to Derek R. Sweet's highly entertaining tome, *Star Wars in the Public Square: The Clone Wars as Po-litical Dialogue.* Sweet's book is grounded in the interface between public debate and science fiction, more specifically, the blockbuster *Star Wars* series. While naysayers might insist that popular culture books and films targeted for mass consumption like *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* are of little value to public discourse, Sweet disagrees, citing the contentious issues of genetic cloning, establishment violence, drone warfare, just war theory, and more that are grappled with in the 2008 space opera.

Following an introduction, Sweet lays out the normative framework from which he analyzes the discourse of *Star Wars*: the Bakhtinian dialogics. Central to the literary theory of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin is the notion that the written word is not static. Rather, there is a perpetual dialogue between a writing and other sources. Literary works are, then, engaged in an endless, unbounded debate where there is no final word—each work contributes to an ever-progressing discussion. In Sweet's own words: "what Bakhtin appears to be arguing here is that all hu-

man communication responds to previous utterances and, as such, is situated as part of a responsive, never-ending interaction made manifest in the present moment" (p. 29). The Bakhtinian dialogics are significant to the author's communicative epistemology, for the approach of Bakhtin is one of a universality of language where the written word is in a continual state of flux. In this flux, parallels can be drawn between utterances and intellectual interactions can form between seemingly dissimilar literary works.

Sweet then turns to the crux of his communicative exploration. First, he introduces the nuanced morality of the republic's storm trooper heroes and juxtaposes the clone troopers against a backdrop of late twentieth-century genetic cloning. Chapter 3 turns to the issue of torture, the Jedi code, and the case of Anakin Skywalker and his violation of the Jedi's code of respect and honor. Sweet draws parallels between the "dark side" and the use of torture by the Bush administration, specifically waterboarding and the atrocities committed during the Iraq War. The following two chapters are focused on the doctrines of just war and of a gendered just war theory. Here, Sweet reminds us of the Jedi's role as peacekeepers and the role of the United States and their Western, Atlanticist compatriots as "peacekeepers" in the postwar period. An astute analogy is drawn between early twentieth-century congresswoman Jeannette Rankin and Princess Padmé Amidala in the development of a feminist just war theory. Finally, among his most poignant chapters is a study of the interface between the droids of *Star Wars* and the drones and robotic technologies of our time. These ultimate questions of man versus technology, the promise and problems of contemporary technical advances, are well captured by Sweet's analysis.

The author's most penetrating analysis is found in his study of President Barack Obama and the inherent contradiction between Obama's commitment to continual war in the Middle East, pur-

portedly as peacekeeper, and the worldwide embrace of Obama, purportedly as peacemaker (in winning the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize). The tensions between the two poles—Obama as peacekeeper and peacemaker—are perceptively explained in chapter 4. Here, Sweet uses the ensuing drama of the *Star Wars* universe to implicitly ask the question: what does it mean to wage a *just* war? Is such a thing possible? His analysis begins with an answer from Jedi Master Yoda, where Yoda reminds us that "No longer certain that one ever does win a war, I am. For in fighting the battles, the bloodshed, already lost we have" (p. 96). The irony of Obama's Nobel acceptance is made clear by Sweet. The notion that a president who has significantly benefited from the civil rights legacy of 1964 Nobel laureate Martin Luther King Jr., who famously argued that "civilization and violence are antithetical concepts," abandoned that pacifistic vision of the world for a doctrine grounded in American economic, political, and military hegemony is, indeed, deeply ironic and troubling. [1]

While Sweet does provide broad communicative theory to understand the interplay between salient political issues and science fiction, generally, his approach is not without its shortcomings. While *Star Wars in the Public Square* is grounded in the Bakhtinian dialogical framework, what is not clear is how mass audiences do, in fact, respond to the political themes and social parallels portrayed in the *Star Wars* canon. Social scientists have repeatedly found that mass publics lack the requisite political sophistication to think in terms of ideology or place themselves on an ideological left-right continuum.[2] If this is true, how can we expect mass audiences to reach very complex and nuanced conclusions about the parallels between, say, Rankin and Padmé and their respective uses of a gendered just war theory? Stated simply, if we believe audiences are able to reach these conclusions, we should be able to demonstrate this empirically by survey research, focus groups, experimentation, or the like. Though, ad-

mittedly, this may be another research project in itself.

All told, Sweet's book is a significant development in communication and media studies, for this is an area too seldom studied. *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* is an important social artifact because the film can act as a public mirror: like other science fiction works, it can project the relevant issues of our day to otherworldly realms. While the clone troopers of the republic debate the very essence of their shared humanity, we can question the use of genetic cloning in our own time. Moreover, when Anakin turns to the dark side and embraces torture, his embrace of evil forces us to confront the violent images of this century and the previous—Abu Ghraib, My Lai, or even the Holocaust. Thus, Sweet's tome serves as both an affirmation of Bakhtinian dialogics and a reminder that meaningful science fiction is not merely an exploration of the sensational and unbelievable but a reflection of us. It tells the story of humanity in an appealing way to mass audiences. And for this, it is certainly a worthy area of scholarly inquiry, an area done an immeasurable service by Sweet's *Star Wars in the Public Square*.

Notes

[1]. Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harpercollins, 1991), 224.

[2]. See, for example, Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960); Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964), 206-261; John L. Sullivan, James E. Piereson, and George E. Marcus, "Ideological Constraint in the Mass Public: A Methodological Critique and Some New Findings," *American Journal of Political Science* 22, no. 2 (1978): 233-249; and John Zaller and Stanley Feldman, "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions versus Revealing Preferences," *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 3 (1992): 579-616.

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