When Did Darth Vader Turn Cuddly? Phenomenology and Fandom

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Abstract
Fandom and celebrity consume a lot of attention in our culture. In this paper, I undertake a Foucaultian historical analysis of Heidegger's understanding of art as world-creating phenomena. The hero is a cultural fabrication engaged by fans, a reflection of values and aspirations. Myth is a means of setting out the terms according to which discourse can proceed. In my analysis, Darth Vader as a cuddly crib toy is a means of deploying power, of establishing an engagement with possibilities for Being that resonate with the character of the *Zeitgeist*, which seems to be more aligned with empire than democracy.

Key Words: Cultural analysis, Foucault, Heidegger, imperialism, literature, celebrity, Star Wars

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> Nothing in the world is the way it ought to be. It's harsh, and cruel, but that's why there's us. Champions. It doesn't matter where we come from, or what we've done, or suffered, or even if we make a difference. We live as though the world were as it should be. To show it what it can be.[1]

This line, spoken by a character in a once-popular TV show about a vampire with a soul, speaks to the topic I'd like to discuss with you today: fandom as a manifestation of world-creation through discourse and the celebrity or celebrated fictional character as phenomenological hero. It cannot be denied that fandom and celebrity consume a lot of attention in our culture. Setting aside for a moment the fans who go to extremes, most people are fans of some band or some television program or some superhero or some sports team or other. Fandom is not simply hero-worship, although it may well entail that. It is, rather, one means of establishing conditions of change in our culture. My thesis is that in Being-a-fan, we re-present possibilities for the way our world might be by engaging an idealized world and projecting it into the future. I am not arguing that fandom is a foundational ontology, but instead undertaking an analysis of how we might read fandom, and particularly the change in how one character is understood, through a Foucaultian-style historical analysis of Heidegger's understanding of art as world-creating phenomena.

In "On the Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger identifies great art as that which "discloses a world," and in *Being and Time*, he puts forth a notion of world as "context of Being." (I should also add the caveat that where Heidegger

only insisted that great art is world-creating, I make no claims to know what art is great and what art is not, and so am sticking with popularity rather than greatness as a standard.) In works of art, among other sources, we can find an organizing principle, a way of understanding our world, that allows us to make sense of what we experience ourselves. A world, in the phenomenological sense, is a self-creating and self-sustaining context within which things have meaning. As Heidegger so maddeningly puts it, "The *world worlds.*"[2] It always has, and modern fandom is one chapter that shows us how this occurs. It happens to be our chapter, and no doubt the ComicCons of today will puzzle the schoolchildren of the future as much as the frenzy of saints' cults in the Mediaeval period puzzle students today. The predominant features of any cultural phenomenon have their own ideological conditions and celebrity culture is no different. Any world is shaped by expectations, by what we understand it to be, and as Foucault has so famously demonstrated, by the discourses we deploy to describe and live in it. If we speak of sex in the terms deployed by medical and religious discourses, for instance, then we create a world in which sex is a medical and religious issue. What we pay attention to is important, but so is the way we pay attention.

Celebrities, of course, are celebrities because we pay attention to them. There are many reasons we pay attention: some celebrities provide a display of talent, while others are simply members of a family that receives a lot of attention, such as the Windsors or the Kardashians. As Fred Inglis asks in *A Short History of Celebrity*, "If it is a cliché to say that modern identity is made by the form of consumer society, the question is then, what are we worth to ourselves if we pay such attention to celebrities. And then one asks, what may celebrities do for us in return?"[3] This is an important question and leads us to investigate just what sort of world we are building with all of our attention-giving and celebrity-chasing. This attention need not even be given to a real person to have an impact on how our world is shaped – the fan may be a fan of a particular celebrity or may be a fan of a fictional character or world. What is it that we gain from fandom, what keeps us coming back for more? And I ask, what does it say about us when we put Darth Vader plush toys in the crib with our children?

It is not such a great leap to understand that when we give our attention to fiction, we are engaging in something akin to myth, to uttering the word that discloses, that establishes what matters. As Heidegger points out in his lectures on Parmenides, "*Mythos* is the Greek for the word that expresses what is to be said before all else."[4] What we are doing in *mythos*, in storytelling, is nothing less than establishing the context in which things relate to one another in meaningful ways. This we must do prior to reason; *logos* may be the way true statements are identified, but truth is *disclosed* by the relationships of things to other things, to the whole, to us as the beings to whom they matter, by *mythos*. Take medicine, for instance. When we practice medicine, we rely heavily on logic and reasoning. But neither the field of medicine nor of logic can establish why it is we believe life is

good and worth preserving and pain is worth avoiding when possible. Without these underlying premises, however, the practice of medicine would be rendered meaningless. We believe that life is good because we have established by other means than sheer rationality that it is good: we love one another and have built kinship structures to facilitate our desire to foster life and avoid death where feasible. We share stories and create deities to express and show one another the wonder of life and how we value it. Others hear our stories and learn something about how we understand our world and we learn about their worlds from their stories. Artists disclose worlds, as Heidegger tells us. I respond that fans engage those worlds, making key points of them a possibility. Nobody is suggesting that Oompa Loompas have actual existence, but it is the rare individual who has read or seen Roald Dahl's story who does not smile at the thought of them. Our familiarity with the Oompa Loompas of *mythos* influences our idea of what justice is, what a workplace can be like. (I've even seen some of their fashion sense showing up in my classrooms!) It's all always tidier in fiction. But then, a signpost is also always tidier, more abstract than the attraction to which it points.

And the central character of the myth, the hero? We need our heroes, real or fictional, to be authentic ourselves, to be the protagonist of our own story. Heroes and the stories about them are how we formulate the underlying meaning that creates a kind of cohesion in our lives. The call to authenticity, to individuate and become engaged with our facticity, disturbs our everydayness, our involvement with our world and our tools, disrupts our peace of mind, and forces us to take a stand. The image of the hero can help, as a "*reciprocative rejoinder*"[5] in the face of the moment of vision, a disavowal of the *Angst* with which the call to authenticity so uncannily, so uncomfortably disrupts our life. We are always futurally oriented. In the moments when we are called to act, to take a stand of one sort or another, it is the image of the hero that guides us. Never as mere repetition of the hero's actions and story, because our facticity is always specific to *this* time and *this* place in which we find ourselves. It is rather a harkening back to the meaningfulness in the narrative of the hero as we understand it, a variation on the themes that guide the hero's actions, played out in the messy, only partially understood present in which we are so abruptly thrown.

The creation of meaning in story and our identification with the central character is the difference between our having a fate and having a destiny, as Heidegger understands the distinction. All living things have a fate; something will befall us, we will die, our Being is finite. But since we are by nature Being-with, and because of our "co-historicizing," we can have a destiny, an underlying meaning that creates a kind of cohesion and thus meaningfulness for any given life.[6] Heroes and villains in general shape the possibility for destinies; there is reason in what they do, within the context of the worlds they occupy, and they are to be understood in terms of this reason and this world, through a lens that shapes them into narrative cohesion. An individual who chooses to emulate even Auden's

Unknown Citizen has a destiny, a guiding principle that guides her choice to live in this way rather than that one. Even real-life heroes fall into a narrative structure, though their actual historical facticity may make them fit only awkwardly at times. Still, the stories told about historical figures are generally well edited and packaged for popular consumption. There may even be differently packaged versions: Protestant children learn about how generous Martin Luther was to students, whereas Catholic children learn what a rabid anti-Semite he was. The man was human, and managed to be both. But Martin Luther-as-hero or -villain is required by narrative structure to be a good deal more coherent than living human beings tend to be.

In this sense, of course, the hero need not be the good guy. As a paradigmatic anthropomorphic personification of possibilities understood as a theme that can be varied by living beings, a hero may well be the villain or supporting character of any given piece of art. What matters in this sense is that the character's narrative destiny be available to those who would repeat its possibilities for Being in another context, playing out that destiny with the appropriate variations on its themes. At times, the erstwhile villain may even become a hero, as fans engage his possibilities in new ways.

So, where does Darth Vader come into all of this? Sure, the hero is a cultural fabrication, engaged by fans, and a reflection of cultural values and aspirations and myth is a means of setting out the terms according to which discourse can proceed. My question is, when did we start regarding Darth Vader, dark lord of the Sith, evil factotum of an oppressive emperor, casual exterminator of entire planets, slaughterer of children as a soft plush toy suitable for an infant's crib? What are we, as Inglis asks, getting in return? What is it that we are teaching our children? That Darth Vader is . . . cuddly? Not so bad? Our Leader, so we may as well get used to it? It is important to note that it is not Anakin Skywalker who is a popular children's toy, but Darth Vader in full techno-Samurai regalia and creepy breathing mask. That this state of affairs has stolen up on us during the last decade, a decade the United States has spent in constant war, policing the activities of nations that do not conform to its values, in fear of terrorists and insurgents, and profiting from devastation is no mere coincidence. Darth Vader as a cuddly toy is a means of deploying power, of establishing an engagement with possibilities for Being that resonate with the character of the imperialist, of comforting children with the reassurance that they are on the side that is stronger. Not right, but stronger. The 20th century is marked by four phenomena of interest here:

1. a tendency to bureaucracy that elides differences in individual citizens,
2. dual drives to conformity and heroic individuation,
3. unprecedented optimism with regard to human agency (space race, rise of the middle class), and

4. the unprecedented ability to kill ever more people while also conceiving of the state as the agent responsible for the care of its citizens.[7]

Heidegger, Orwell, W. H. Auden, Foucault, and Spielberg all lived and wrote in this *Zeitgeist* and they seem to be writing on the same themes. Foucault and Spielberg, coming later on, but still within the period, can see the connections a little more clearly and point the way for us to see them. Darth Vader embodies these markers of the century: he is the leader of an imperial bureaucracy, a hero among the uniformed (indeed, largely faceless) military, building the most elaborate technological wonder ever attempted, which also happens to be a weapon of mass destruction on a planetary scale. The *Star Wars* mythos clearly places Darth Vader in the camp of the evil lord. He is redeemed, to be sure, but not until he is also stripped of his mask and is seen as human. This is the extraordinary Darth Vader, the redeemed soul. The everyday Darth Vader, the one who has wielded power for a decade and a half, is the one who remains hidden within his breathing apparatus. Everydayness is where the meaningfulness of things finds its fulfilment. *Mythos* gives us the context and language for understanding our everyday world, but the parameters of the world are achieved in the way we dwell in it, day in and day out. As Heidegger puts it, "Everydayness is determinative for Dasein even when it has not chosen the 'they' for its 'hero.'"[8] Everydayness is how we know the "proper opinions for the time of year."[9] What is it that we are taking for granted in our everydayness, as evidenced by the rise in popularity of these toys?

Everydayness may seem simple, but in many ways it's the hardest thing for us to see. "That which is *ontically* so familiar in the way Dasein has been factically interpreted that we never pay any heed to it, hides enigma after enigma existential-ontologically. The 'natural' horizon for starting the existential analytic of Dasein is *only seemingly self-evident.*"[10] This is to say, our own attitudes and ways of thinking can creep up on us unnoticed, their only indication appearing in regions that seem unimportant, such as our choices of entertainment. Human beings, even the cleverest and most guarded of us, are subject to the collective *mythoi* we bandy about. Questions have started to show up in our discourse in a different shape than they did before. Nobody is asking anymore whether it is wise to have the National Guard patrol the New York subway system. Instead, citizens cynically note that the only stations patrolled are the ones in areas that receive high tourist traffic. Education has once again become prohibitively expensive, a hallmark of oligarchy. Parents used to ask about how their children's schools would prepare them for life. Nowadays the clearest danger in schools is armed attack. Today we assume that we are being filmed or photographed everywhere we go; we live in the Panopticon and objections are met with the implication that the objector cares nothing for safety. At the same time, our government has made it legal to use drones to gather information to be used against its own citizens, a clear contradiction of this promise of safety!

These changes in our collective way of thinking, in our *Zeitgeist*, go generally unnoticed until something strikes a false chord and makes us sit up and take notice. We in the 21st century US are no longer optimists with regard to human agency. We fear cleverness and innovation, regarding them as the means that will be used to infiltrate our safe spaces and do us harm. Instead of a rhetoric that establishes such worthy and difficult goals as reaching the moon or eliminating poverty, ours has become a nation that turns inward to avoid being besieged by terrorists. The income gap yawns ever wider even as we are exhorted to consume more and more. The United States has reached the point that Plato warned us a democratic system will lead us – we have become so fearful for our safety that we turn, if only symbolically, to the tyrant to make us secure. Darth Vader is a "safe tyrant" to love, as he exists as an idea only so far, but the danger is that he is a mythical representation of that to which we as a nation aspire.

There is no stable tyrant in the governmental system of the United States. The Republic has not been overthrown or undermined entirely, though that state of affairs may yet arise. Any democratic system has such a great deal of instability built into it. Our leader still changes every four or eight years. The stable tyrant in whom we seek our salvation is emerging not out of politics, but out of Wall Street. We measure all value in dollars and confirm these values in how we spend our dollars. As fans, we establish the worlds of fandom in the marketplace. We orient ourselves toward certain ways of thinking, certain ideas that shape who we are and who we might become, and in so doing, consume the commodities that align with these aspirations. We create our worlds, even out of what the marketplace offers, but we can only buy what is being sold. Safety and stability are a powerful motivator of sales; is it any wonder that in such an unstable time, our heroes are the powerful imperialists and that plucky, penniless upstarts who bear striking resemblance to Luke Skywalker or Han Solo appear to us as threatening? A world in economic decline is frightening. One in economic stability, even if that stability is more feudal than capitalistic, more imperialistic than democratic, may well be what we, emerging from the charnel house of the 20th century, aspire to.

Notes

[1] Steven S. DeKnight, *Angel*, "Deep Down," Television Broadcast, directed by Terrence O'Hara (WB Network; 28 November 2006, 20th Century Fox).
[2] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell, ed., Albert Hofstadter, trans. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), 170.
[3] Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 18.

[4] Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz, trans. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 60.
[5] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), 438; H. 386.
[6] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 435-436; H. 384.
[7] Michel Foucault, "The Political Technology of Individuals," in *Power*, James D. Faubion, ed., Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 (New York: The New Press, 1994), 405.
[8] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 422, H. 371.
[9] W. H. Auden, "The Unknown Citizen" *Another Time* (New York: Random House, 1940), 96.
[10] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 423, H. 371.

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