



Fumanchu on Naboo

JOHN LEO

John Leo is a regular columnist for U.S. News and World Report. In this essay, Leo takes George Lucas's The Phantom Menace to task for its heavy reliance on negative stereotypes and outdated ethnic caricatures.

Everyone's a victim these days, so America's touchiness industry is dedicated to seeing group slights everywhere. But sometimes even touchy people are right. Complaints about the new *Star Wars* movie, for instance, are valid. *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* is packed with awful stereotypes.

Consider the evil Neimoidians. They are stock Asian villains out of black-and-white B movies of the 1930s and 1940s, complete with Hollywood oriental accents, sinister speech patterns, and a space-age version of stock Fu Manchu clothing. Watto, the fat, greedy junk dealer with wings, is a conventional, crooked Middle Eastern merchant. "This is a generic antisemitic image, Jewish if you want him to be, or Arab if you don't.

Law Prof. Patricia Williams says Watto looks strikingly like an anti-Jewish caricature published in Vienna at the turn of the century—round bellied, big nosed, with spindly arms, wings sprouting from his shoulders, and a scroll that says, "Anything for money." Perhaps Watto isn't supposed to be Jewish. Some people thought he sounded Italian. But by presenting the character as an unprincipled, hook-nosed merchant (and a slave owner, to boot), the movie is at least playing around with traditional antisemitic imagery. It shouldn't.

The loudest criticism has been directed at Jar Jar Binks, the annoying, computer-generated amphibian who looks like a cross between a frog and a camel and acts, as one critic put it, like a cross between Butterfly McQueen's Prissy and Stepin Fetchit. His voice, the work of a black actor, is a sort of slurred, pidgin Caribbean English, much of it impossible to understand. "Me berry, berry scayyud," says Jar Jar, in one of his modestly successful attempts at English. For some reason, he keeps saying "yousa" and "meesa," instead of "you" and "me." He is the first character in the four *Star Wars* movies to mess up Galactic Basic (the English language) on a regular basis.

This article first appeared in *U.S. News and World Report*, July 12, 1999, p. 14.

Racist Caricature

Fractured English is one of the key traits of a racist caricature in America, from all the 19th-century characters named Snowball down to Amos 'n' Andy. Whether endearing or pathetic, this trouble with language is supposed to demonstrate the intellectual inferiority of blacks. Childlike confusion is another familiar way of stereotyping blacks, and Jar Jar shows that trait too. He steps in alien-creature doo-doo, gets his tongue caught in a racing engine, and panics during the big battle scene. He is, in fact, a standard-issue, caricatured black who becomes hopelessly flustered when called upon to function in a white man's world.

A stereotype on this level is more than an insult. It is a teaching instrument and a powerful, nonverbal argument saying that racial equality is a hopeless cause. If blacks talk and act like this movie says they do, how can they possibly expect equal treatment?

What is going on in this movie? George Lucas, director of the *Star Wars* movies, says media talk about stereotypes is creating "a controversy out of nothing." But many visual cues support the charge that stereotypes are indeed built into the film. Jar Jar has head flaps drawn to look like dreadlocks. The ruler of his tribe, Boss Nass, wears what looks to be an African robe and African headdress. A Neimoidian senator named Lott (Trent Lott?), representing the evil viceroy Nute Gunray (Newt Gingrich?) wears a version of a Catholic bishop's mitre and a Catholic priest's stole over a dark robe. This can't be an accident. It duplicates, almost exactly, the appearance of a real bishop. It's a small reference but an unmistakable one. So Catholics, along with Asians and Republicans, are at least vaguely associated with Neimoidian treachery.

Lucas is a visually sophisticated and careful moviemaker. In a TV interview, he said that he researched imagery of Satan in every known culture before deciding on how the evil warrior Darth Maul should look in the film (tattooed, with horns). A *Star Wars* book, *The Visual Dictionary*, that came out with the movie describes in detail almost every image used in the film. So it's hard to believe that all the stereotyped imagery just happened.

One of the keys to Lucas's success is that his movies are made up of brilliantly re-imagined scenes from earlier films (World War II aerial dogfights, cowboys and Indians, swashbuckling sword fights, a *Ben-Hur* chariot race, etc.). After three very inventive *Star Wars* movies, the not-so-inventive fourth seems to have fallen back on some tired Hollywood ethnic themes he mostly avoided in the first three.

So *The Phantom Menace* offers us revived versions of some famous stereotypes. Jar Jar Binks as the dithery Prissy; Watto, a devious, child-owning

wheeler-dealer; as the new F the inscrutably evil Fu Manchu version of the Frito Bandito. Let's put all these characters

Questions for Critical Thinking

1. Did you see *Episode One* any of the stereotypes there? Should they have? Why?
2. The film's defenders told it's only make believe, the defense for the movie's

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wheeler-dealer, as the new Fagin; the two reptilian Neimoidian leaders as the inscrutably evil Fu Manchu and Dr. No. What's next--an interplanetary version of the Frito Bandito? The *Star Wars* films deserve better than this. Let's put all these characters to sleep and start over in the next movie.

Questions for Critical Thinking and Discussion

1. Did you see *Episode One: The Phantom Menace*? If so, did you notice any of the stereotypes that Leo identifies? If yes, did they bother you? Should they have? Why or why not?
2. The film's defenders told critics to "lighten up." It's only entertainment; it's only make believe, they said. Does this strike you as a reasonable defense for the movie's use of these unflattering stereotypes?