Making (Non)Sense: The Perils and Possibilities of Figurative Language in Contemporary Political Discourse

Part One:

“The Metaphor is the Message,” or: How to Undermine Reasonable Argumentation with Imprecise Symbolic Language

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Were I delivering this as a public address, I would begin with this request: Would all those who adhere to Ptolemy’s flat-earth cosmology please raise your hands? My apparently absurd inquiry is intended to start us off, I hope, from a uniformly-shared perspective: that not all possible representations of reality are equally deserving. The implicit corollary is that the less credible models of reality are also ultimately displaced (again, one hopes) by the empirical application of evidence in keeping with the principles of what we call logocentric discourse.

But this may not always be the case, and in the domain of contemporary political letters, the most vexing examples that confound this reasonable expectation arise from those discursive forms and tropes which dance at the edge of
empirical accountability. Specifically, in this age of the sound-bite, we are increasingly using the rhetorical devices of metaphor, analogy, and symbol to explore novel perspectives on phenomena, and to propose and test new relationships between ideas, movements, artifacture. But as Pynchon wrote in *The Crying of Lot 49*--a novel that spends much time problematizing exactly these rhetorical devices--any determined reflection upon the use of metaphors and their kin reveal that we have experienced them as “a stab at truth and a lie--depending upon where you were . . .”¹

The challenge--and opportunities--presented by these provisional stabs at new meaning and insight have never been more crucial, and at issue, than today. To profoundly rework the title of one of Derrida’s signal essays, contemporary investigations that might start as reasonable missives have a dire propensity to transmogrify into polemical missiles aimed at one group or another. The cause (and ultimate political significance) of this worsening situation goes beyond the immemorial oratorical tricks of double-valenced semantics, beyond purposive terminological indeterminacy, and even beyond the cultural and epistemological struggles that undergird and energize

Thomas Kuhn's proposition of ever-warring dominant paradigms of knowledge and the cosmos. Fortunately, Kuhn's seminal recounting of how the Copernican model of the universe ultimately toppled Ptolemy's "flat-earth" version does provide a useful point of entry into an examination of how today's symbolic discourse seems vested with an increasing (and unwarranted) power to shape actual public opinion. It is on this cautionary note that we shall commence our assessment of how contemporary figurative misprisions in this growing war of words have also become key weapons in the growing war between worlds (both discursive and actual).

As scholars and commentators, we regularly employ metaphor, analogy, and allusion as a means to explore new perspectives on cultural artifacts and articulations. However, these same rhetorical devices are also the media through which innocent misstatements—or, worse yet, intentional misrepresentations—frequently distort politically urgent discourse. Specifically, contemporary commentators from both ends of the political spectrum have used these rhetorical devices to construct celebrated, yet dangerously flawed or limited, paradigms that purport to explain our current international situation. Pop-culture
allusions are arguably the most insidious culprits, because they dance away from rigorous accountability. Like sound-bites, their inherent informality functions as a Teflon slickness that shrugs off incisive criticism, and makes any serious interrogator of them sound like a terminally un-hip curmudgeon who just can’t lighten up and enjoy a harmless play on words.

But how harmless are these plays on words? Brevity requires that one example must suffice for an answer. In 1983, Ronald Reagan warned that Soviet Russia was an ‘evil empire’--but the perfidious object of his imperial allusion clearly was not Rome, nor any other historical polity. No, appropriate enough for a B-movie actor, Reagan’s allusory corpus was the Star Wars franchise. And although scholars and newshounds may remember that Reagan’s boldest attempt to check the actual Soviet empire--a hemisphere-spanning ICBM shield--was actually known by the acronym SDI (for Strategic Defense Initiative), most recall it by its eponymous label, ‘Star Wars’: a pie-in-the-sky dream of nuclear invulnerability that was as contentious and politically destabilizing as it was phantasmagorical.

Or was it? To many at that time, it certainly seemed an unachievable fantasy, and the press and responsible scientists used Reagan’s own fondness for the fanciful
'Star Wars' label as a not-so-subtle way of reminding us that this Pentagon scheme was at least as unrealistic as the films that gave it its name. But although Star Wars eventually faded away, it kept reappearing in new guises—the technology with a thousand faces. Under Bush senior, parts of it resurfaced in slightly altered format (e.g. Brilliant Pebbles), which were then side-shuffled into the BMDO, and from there, split into separately funded programs. None of those programs enjoyed the dubious distinction of pop-culture monikers. They bore typically dull acronymic labels such as THEL, ABL, THAAD—all of which are now approaching operational maturity. The immense space-based laser arrays of the Star Wars fantasy invited facetious dismissal—but in succumbing to the temptation to decry the whole scheme, we may have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Today’s less-flashy, but operationally-reasonable, ‘strategic threat mitigation systems’ have now generated new, well-publicized rifts between the US and Russia, and are creating another awkward moment in European politics, in which the European Union decries American militarism out of one side of its mouth, while the other side remains largely silent as anti-missile defense systems creep toward continental deployment.

Consider the thorny issues surrounding the EU’s complicity in every aspect of the US intervention in the Balkans, as devastatingly critiqued by E. Balibar in "At the Borders of Europe".
How has it come to this? There are many contributory factors, but one must be singled out as strictly rhetorical in nature: once these technologies were labeled “Star Wars,” all of them—and their offspring—became, de facto and permanently, ludicrous. To later suggest that some of these systems needed to be taken seriously, warranted ongoing scrutiny, could ultimately alter strategic balances, was to invite the same contemptuous dismissal that became the politically vogue reaction toward Reagan’s first, grandiose scheme. Just as judging a book by its cover is inadvisable, we may have judged the complete content of this technological initiative by its bowdlerizing title—and are now late in coming to appreciate the variform, and very powerful, effects it could have upon either the attainment or the undermining of world peace.

Of course, there’s not much peace in our time to start with—and the current conflict in Iraq affords sad evidence that the US commenced the conflict with a far greater plenitude of smart weapons than smart orators. I am not referring to the obvious and alarming examples of how the administration elected to “advertise” the conduct of the war: “decapitation strikes” and “shock and awe” seem to
have taken their unfortunate inspiration from an earlier lexicon that included “Blitzkrieg” and “Schrecklichkeit.”

Subtler (but arguably more embarrassing) misprisions and lexical misuses played a significant role, as well. Consider, for instance, the rather gob-smacking misappropriation of the term “hegemony,” which in 2006-7, was briefly raised from the murky depths of academic usage by administration spokespeople who apparently reconceived it as a blunt and nuance-free synonym for “political control” or “monopoly.” Almost daily, official spin-doctors spoke of their intent to “achieve hegemony” in Iraq. One can only imagine Gramsci and Williams spinning in their graves. However, given the backdrop of war, death, starvation, and dislocation, nothing could have made academics seem more ineffectual, out of touch, and morbidly self-involved than had they started quibbling over semantics. And after all, there can be no law against changing definitions (much less contextual valencies) of terms or phrases. You might as well try passing a law that caterpillars shall not transmogrify into butterflies. But if we fail to see the

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3 *Schrecklichkeit* is reasonably translated from the German as “terribleness,” but arguably (and significantly) contains more of a semantic gesture toward the root source-word of “terror” than its English equivalent.

4 The term “hegemony” as popularized within a Marxist context by political and cultural commentators Gramsci and Williams, refers to supranational matrices of power and influence that transcend material dominion and extend into the realms of culture, tradition, linguistics, media, and more.
syntactic metamorphosis, or to register its significance, then our discourse must ultimately become as impoverished as the media’s. If this still strikes you as a quibble, then I suggest a careful rereading of George Orwell, who, in 1984, presented Oceania’s Ministry of Truth as employing the same means to simplify language and thereby streamline, pacify, and control general political discourse. Readers who do not welcome policed (and thus, diminished) debate should think twice before dismissing the misappropriation of words (such as “hegemony”) as a mere “quibble.”

While on the topic 1984, Orwell warned against the onset of yet another form of social control (in this case, the designation of enemies) that relied upon yet another species of strategic rhetorical misprision: specifically, the simplistic amplification of subtle or nuanced cultural differences into grossly polarized opposites. It is hard to think of a better, or more widely disseminated, example of this principle in contemporary practice than Robert Kagan’s 2003 assertion that, after all, Americans are from Mars, Europeans from Venus. The titular pop-culture resonances that Kagan’s book took up from John Gray’s buzz-word coffee-table tome would, on the surface, seem to

promise a political work that is more parodical than provocative. However, Kagan’s earnest theorizings invite a reader to wonder if the author himself might be from another planet—even though he does begin with a variety of historically sound and culturally useful observations. Certainly post World War Two America has had a comparatively quick militaristic trigger finger. It is also true that U.S. media, hero formation, and national vision is more generally suffused with images of and emphases upon violence or the military. And Kagan reasonably draws explicatory connections between American militarism and the onerous defense burdens it had to shoulder in the early years of the Cold War, largely due to its global reach and comparative abundance of material resources in the wake of World War Two. However, from these potentially useful observations, Kagan constructs a worldview that some have convincingly characterized as nearly hallucinatory. In Kagan’s depiction, Americans are meat-eating he-men who patrol the margins of a dangerous world, making possible the paradise enjoyed by quiche-loving (and apparently lotos-eating) European effétes. This startling paradigm ultimately evolves into an apologia for the unipolar interventionism that is Kagan’s neoconservative desiderata. However, beyond the dubious
objectivity of Kagan’s formulation, there is also the unresolved matter of how Martian America’s counterpart--Venusian Europe--came into being so swiftly and so completely. Or, to put it another way, just when did Europe manage to perform a sex-change operation upon its political self? Because the past century would suggest that Kagan’s European Venus has, until recently, been obsessed by making war, not love.

‘Peaceful’ Venusian Europe has had a rather violent past 100 years. Two World Wars; major civil wars or coups in Spain, Greece, and the Balkans; post-war insurgencies in the Basque regions, Northern Ireland, Italy; brutal Cold War occupations in then-Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and analogous control practices employed by indigenous regimes in Romania and Bulgaria. Colonial wars of subjugation, oppression or reprisal so numerous that there isn’t enough space to list them here. And if the number of intrusions and crass opportunism of European Imperialism diminished in the post-World War Two epoch of colonial divestiture, that reduction was counterbalanced by the ferocity of the separatist insurgencies which arose in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Northern Ireland, India, Palestine, Egypt, Algeria and much of sub-Saharan Africa. Given the plenitude and diffuse chronologies of these
violent events, Kagan’s attempt to causally and temporally affix Europe’s purported Venusian transformation to the traumas of two world wars is not merely insufficient, but Olympian in the scope of its presumption that these changes are in fact durable, and that these warlike behavior patterns--reinforced by several millennia of almost constant warfare--can be so quickly and completely shrugged off.

Kagan is not the only right-leaning commentator who has made a media splash by employing a dubious analogy as the basis of an even more dubious string of serious assertions. Samuel Huntington’s model of a world poised on the brink of unremitting culture wars also emerges out of some compelling kernels of truth. However, these promising seeds quickly burgeon into a riot of improbably extreme claims and paradigms. Gargantuan either/or fallacies and pronounced examples of card-stacking distort the sound, initial observations into vast and sweeping assertions that handily divide the world into eight discrete civilizations. How did Huntington arrive at such a neat and definitive whole-world model? In large part, by sawing off the parts that did not fit; the corpus of often-confounding (or downright contrary) cultural evidence was selectively butchered by the procrustean saws of one *reductio ad*
absurdum after another. Brevity precludes any detailed recounting of all the alternate models or ignored perspectives that commentators have cited in the process of critiquing Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* (although Jared Diamond’s anthropologically-oriented *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is one high-profile example), but in sum, Huntington’s dubious paradigm seems to be, at best, the result of an acute myopia of ideological enthusiasm, or, at worst, an exemplar of intentionally and dangerously selective argumentation.

Another celebrated book that ultimately depends upon special pleading based upon false analogies comes from the other side of the political spectrum. Hardt and Negri, in their celebrated rehabilitation of the Marxist world-view, assert that their eponymous Americentric “Empire” may be overthrown by the diverse global throng that they label the Multitude, which is both the subject and title of their follow-up volume. They repeatedly aver that the Multitude’s innate insurgent impulse will ultimately bring down the Empire. However, this victory will not be achieved through a cataclysmic revolt, or a correspondingly disruptive series of smaller revolutionary spasms, but through the irresistible erosion inflicted by the
Multitude’s incessant and decentralized “swarm” attack. They explain that the insurgent Multitude should:

“Be imagined like a swarm of ants or bees—a seemingly amorphous multiplicity that can strike at a single point from all sides or disperse in the environment so as to become almost invisible. It is very difficult to hunt down a swarm. [For whereas a typical] guerrilla organization has many heads, . . . the swarm has no head at all.”

“Consider, for example, how tropical termites build magnificent, elaborate domed structures by communicating with each other; researchers hypothesize that each termite follows the pheromone concentration left by other termites in the throng. [--thus--] The intelligence of the swarm is based fundamentally on communication.”

However, there are crucial--and disqualifying--discrepancies between any metaphorical ‘human’ swarm and the actual ecology of true swarm attacks. As most of us will probably recall from basic zoology, the attack of a

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8 Ibid, p. 91.
bee or a wasp is necessarily an act of simultaneous self-destruction: since the stinger cannot be withdrawn, the insect’s disengagement is also self-disembowelment. And indeed, given the ability and determination of Empire to identify, isolate, and eliminate its attackers—large or small—an almost uniform suicidal commitment to ultimate victory might indeed be a prerequisite for any decentralized human insurgency.

However, this leads to the first and fatal analogical fallacy at the root of the Multitude’s ‘swarm attack’: Hardt and Negri propose that, collectively, average humans will wear down Empire with just such attacks, and that no amount of swatting at this Multitude will stop, impede, or even slow its relentless assault. But genuine swarms are only successful and unstoppable because they lack the instinct for self-preservation that is ubiquitous among humans, causes us to flinch away from mortal threats. No human mob has ever been so utterly and universally self-sacrificing as a true swarm, and it seems reasonable to propose that none ever will. Furthermore, the individual creatures of a swarm reflexively and unerringly obey a collective impulse that guides and coordinates them with a near-absolute infallibility. No human ideology or belief (or organization) can even begin to provide a pale
equivalent of such a command-and-control system. Indeed, not only does the human Multitude lack a true hive’s encoded and reflexive attack-plan, but its constituent members may be unable to productively coordinate their actions at all. Although Hardt and Negri assert that “the intelligence of the swarm is fundamentally communication,” they paradoxically claim that their Multitude will also be comprised of persons of radically different cultures, languages, methodologies. Exactly how they are all to communicate with each other is never addressed. In short, the swarm analogy is not merely flawed, it is dangerously, even perniciously, misleading. Any insurgents unfortunate enough to be inspired by Hardt and Negri’s paradigm would soon discover the truth of the oft-proven anti-insurgency axioms of this and every prior Empire: divide and conquer, or--if the adversary has been so obliging as to divide itself already--defeat in detail.

And no, Al Qaeda is not in any way an exemplar of Hardt and Negri's spontaneous and ubiquitous swarm. Indeed, rather than being an effective undermining force, Al Qaeda and analogous organizations are, in fact, guarantors not only of Empire’s continued existence, but its increasing consolidation of power. Specifically, Hardt and Negri explicitly state that the modern Empire depends upon,
encourages, and fuels, a constant state of war.\textsuperscript{9} Thus, having insufficient power to completely overthrow Empire, Al Qaeda (and its kin) can only serve to keep it in, or poised for, the perpetual state of war that it requires. We already have ample evidence of how militant radical Islam has provided the Empire with multiple pretexts for conventional conflict, extended anti-insurgency campaigns, covert and counter-intelligence operations. Practically speaking, then, the Empire has its perpetual war, complete with the built-in vindication of battling an implacable, inscrutable, and inexhaustible enemy.

Unquestionably, there has always been, and always will be, dangerous potentials for imprecision in figurative rhetoric. Whichever semiotic or linguistic models we might use as our critical bases, all share the same theoretical touchstone: that words—and the metaphors, analogies, and paradigms that arise from them—are as innately and profoundly imperfect as they are indispensable. There is always a gap, a slip, an absence, between the signifier and

\textsuperscript{9}As they write, the end of modernity "has given rise to a proliferation of minor and indefinite crises, or, as we prefer, to an omni-crisis." (189). This is Empire's necessary—and normative—state of perpetually reductive and integrative being because "Imperial power is founded on the rupture of every determinate ontological relationship . . . In the ontological vacuum, corruption (the perpetual act of 'breaking down' discrete ontological entities—\textit{auth.}) becomes necessary, objective. Imperial sovereignty thrives on the proliferating contradictions . . . It is stabilized by its instabilities." (202). \textit{Empire}, ibid.
the signified, for--just as we cannot see an object from all angles simultaneously, cannot apprehend it all in one moment--so too is it that no term ever maps completely unto the object it assays to define.

At best, then, words point to things, but cannot encompass them--a phenomenon in which commentators, scholars, and educators are all well-versed. Happily, we are keenly aware of how this can engender any number of innocent rhetorical mistakes, oversights, or inescapable imprecisions. We are no less ingenuous about the rhetorical opportunities it provides to surreptitiously and strategically mismatch signs and symbols, to traffic in the chicanery of false analogies, to misappropriate metaphors and craft misleading allusions, and to make points by sly insinuative similes rather than responsible argument.

However, it is the inevitable slippage between the quantitative and the qualitative, the proven and the postulated, the evidentiary and the entertaining that lies at the root of much, perhaps most, of today’s inadvisable rhetorical allowances. Many of the examples cited in this essay may be innocent illustrations of this phenomenon at work. And often, the worst of these occur when the author is reaching for a snappy soundbite, rather than a provocative proposition. Responsible commentary and
scholarship all too often succumb not to sloppiness but the seductive siren-song of broader media play. Our editors, publishers, press agents, lay peers all offer the same fond advice: our work could be so much more accessible, well-known, profitable—if only we are willing to make it a little more catchy. Give it a pop-culture twist, trade the dry facts for dry wit. One must wonder how many of the works cited herein, and how many others, slid down that slippery slope.

All the more sad because they need not have done so. None of these metaphors, analogies, parodical labels are wrong in and of themselves. Figurative language is inherently imprecise because it does not work by narrow, objective assertions and proof; rather, it operates on us by suggesting broad associations between, and even parodies of, subjective experiences. It is only when the commentators fall under the seductive influence of their own semantics, when they allow figurative examples to masquerade as arguments, that these rhetorical devices become suspect or even perniciously misleading.

However, it is just as true that such rhetorical misprision always warrants notice and cautionary comment. Unless, that is, we wish to slide into a gentler, but more insidiously seductive version of Orwell’s 1984, a future
where Minispeak and the soundbite might ultimately synergize, convincingly telling us that War is Peace, Black is White, Right is Wrong.

And Nonsense is Good Sense.