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Critical Psychosis: Genre, Détournement, and Critique in Mr. Plinkett's 'Star Wars' Reviews

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Abstract

When Harry S. Plinkett uploaded a review of *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* to YouTube in 2009, he became a brand of internet celebrity. It is difficult, however, to detach “review” from rather large scare quotes. Plinkett is a fictional character (an insane, wheelchair-bound centenarian), voiced by independent filmmaker Mike Stoklasa and produced by Stoklasa’s Milwaukee-based RedLetterMedia. This essay situates Plinkett within various cultural reactions to the *Star Wars* prequels, then puts his reviews in dialogue with emerging internet genres such as mash-up and video essay. By recontextualizing behind-the-scenes footage and other materials, the Plinkett reviews are a subversive response to an overcommoditized film industry. Ultimately, because Plinkett is depicted as insane, the essay argues that his psychosis becomes the basis for both catharsis and critique—a parody of hyperbolic fanboy film reviews, but at the same time a *détournement* of cultural texts which problematizes the logic of consumerism.

KEYWORDS: Mr. Plinkett, Star Wars, Red Letter Media

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Critical Psychosis: Genre, *Détournement*, and Critique in Mr. Plinkett's *Star Wars* Reviews

Benjamin Kirbach

Who's the more foolish, the fool or the fool who follows him?
—Obi-Wan Kenobi

When Harry S. Plinkett uploaded a review of *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* to YouTube in 2009, he became a brand of Internet celebrity. It is difficult, however, to detach “review” from rather large scare quotes. Posted in seven parts, Plinkett’s rant is as smart as it is genre-bending. Yoking audio commentary to film theory, the review ostensibly takes the shape of a nonfiction video essay: a detailed, scene-by-scene analysis of the CGI-saturated *Star Wars* prequel. But simultaneously, as if unable to sustain the necessary level of repression, the review fractures into the narrative of Plinkett himself—a wheelchair-bound centenarian who murders his wives, actively abducts people, and offers to mail Totino’s Pizza Rolls to viewers who comment on his “webzone.” Plinkett is a fictional character, voiced by independent filmmaker Mike Stoklasa and produced by Stoklasa’s Milwaukee-based RedLetterMedia. RLM’s website boasts many short films and webseries, but the Plinkett reviews are among the most highly anticipated.¹ Plinkett’s takedown of *The Phantom Menace* alone has received more than five million views on YouTube, and was even screened at the CPH PIX film festival in Denmark (“Mike’s Coming”). Through Plinkett, Stoklasa stitches his reviews together using schizophrenic metalepsis and intentionally awkward editing. Overlaying tropes from video essay, mockumentary, mash-up, and even horror, Plinkett blurs the line between art and armchair criticism. And at seventy minutes, *The Phantom Menace* review is, by most accounts, a feature-length film unto itself. By recontextualizing supplemental

footage and other *Star Wars* marketing material, Plinkett is a subversive response to a garishly overcommoditized film industry. His reviews are evidence that cultural producers do not possess ultimate control over the identities of their products. Stoklasa moreover uses a “deranged” mind as the template for defamiliarizing the hegemonic logic of consumerism. Psychosis is figured as a form of catharsis in response to the colossal disappointment of the *Star Wars* prequels, but it is simultaneously a form of critique. By fictionalizing his critic, Stoklasa reveals the lengths to which criticism is not merely derivative, but generative—a “productive mutation,” as media critics Anne Burdick et al. might call it (11), *détourned* from extant cultural forms and morphed into an eclectic performance of argument.

“*Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* was the most disappointing thing since my son,” Plinkett begins. “And while my son eventually hanged himself in the bathroom of the gas station, the unfortunate reality of the *Star Wars* prequels is that they’ll be around. Forever” (Stoklasa, *Episode I*). These opening lines of *The Phantom Menace* review attest to the indelible inscription of *Star Wars* upon our cultural imaginary, just as the figure of paternal authority might enroll us into a drama of imminent castration. But how could a *Star Wars* film be so disappointing? Speaking only from personal experience, I do not remember watching the original trilogy for the first time. My identity is premised on having always already seen it. I suspect this is true for many people born after the 1970s. And yet, even if you have never seen *Star Wars*, you probably know that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father, just as you probably recognize the quip, “May the Force be with you.” Over the last half-century, *Star Wars* has been exalted amongst American mythoi, its narratemes quilted into the backdrop of shared cultural experience. One could therefore argue that when George Lucas set out to create a prequel trilogy in the 1990s, there was simply no way it could live up to fans’ expectations.

Indeed, there has been no shortage of ire slung at the newer films. The fully CGI character Jar Jar Binks, for example, has been the focus of much derision, as has the postulation of midi-chlorians as the material basis for Force-sensitivity.² Lucas himself, seemingly responsible for this letdown of galactic proportions, has also come under attack. Alexandre O. Philippe explores the phenomenon of Lucas-bashing in his 2010 documentary *The People vs. George Lucas*, asking what it is that prompts fans to claim “George Lucas ruined my childhood” (*People*). The implication seems to be that Lucas’s repeated attempts to exploit the original films are tantamount to overwriting fans’ cherished memories.³ In a different vein, independent filmmakers Mike Litzenberg and Bridge Stuart construct a fictional trailer for an unmade film, *George Lucas Strikes Back*, which parodies the plot of Chan-wook Park’s 2003 Korean thriller *Oldboy*. *George Lucas Strikes Back* rationalizes Lucas’s more questionable creative decisions by showing him to have been kidnapped in the ’80s and imprisoned for twenty years while an imposter helms Lucasfilm. The true Lucas ultimately escapes, seeking revenge (Slick Gigolo). The prequel trilogy has also proven inspirational for fan editors—amateurs who attempt to salvage the films from Lucas’s perceived missteps. The first and arguably best known recut of *The Phantom Menace* is Mike J. Nichols’s *Episode I.I—The Phantom Edit*, which began circulat-

ing in 2001. Nichols's major elision is that of Binks, who is totally absent from his version. He also reinserts deleted scenes, limits expository dialogue, tightens the pacing, and eliminates any mention of midi-chlorians (Hoberman). Actor Topher Grace has also produced a fan edit, titled *Episode III.5—The Editor Strikes Back*. Screened only once, Grace's version condenses all three prequels (together, totaling nearly seven hours) into a single eighty-five-minute film. Grace's method almost completely dispenses with *Episode I*. He opens with the climactic lightsaber battle between Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson), Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), and Darth Maul (Ray Park) at the end of *The Phantom Menace*, then leaps immediately to the opening scenes of *Attack of the Clones*. Binks and midi-chlorians are again expunged, as is the idea that the stormtroopers are all clones (Sciretta). These fan editors seem to share the tacit understanding that Lucas's source material is fecund but somehow lacking stylistically. And unlike Plinkett, they are typically silent about their contributions. Aside from minimal exposition in the opening text crawl, Nichols and Grace's work is presented as a sort of forced collaboration with Lucas—edits that could (or perhaps *should*) have been seen in theaters. Plinkett is much more about overt rejection, that no amount of creative editing can redeem the prequels' deep-seated problems.

These various responses are evidence, not only that the original *Star Wars* films are intensely cathected, but that the prequel trilogy marks the site of a kind of trauma. A banal, internet-fueled trauma, perhaps, but one whose symptoms are nonetheless discernible.⁴ Plinkett, then, is a vehicle in which to literalize nerdy overstatements like "George Lucas ruined my childhood." Stoklasa distances himself in this regard by fictionalizing his critic. "I don't want to use the cliché that George Lucas ruined my childhood, because I don't care about it *that much*," he says. "[B]ut it is that sort of thing" (qtd. in Sarlin, emphasis original). While it is perhaps easy to point to bandwagon complaints like Binks or midi-chlorians, Plinkett expresses fans' collective disappointment with acuter precision. The films, in his esteem, fail for more damning reasons. Unlike the spirited, hard-won success of the original trilogy, the prequels feel like passionless and alienating corporate cash-grabs. As Plinkett puts it, "the *Star Wars* prequels are nothing more than carefully crafted products to appeal to as many movie-goers as possible" (Stoklasa, *Episode II*). Plinkett's running thesis is that there was no *artistic* impetus to make the prequels; there was only a *financial* one. And once the (by the '90s) legendary Lucas had obtained total creative control, pretense of making "art" must be interpreted through this lens. Plinkett's popularity, a full ten years after *The Phantom Menace*'s release, is likely a result of the "working through" he facilitates (in part cathartic humor, but mostly careful delineation of what, precisely, is wrong with the films on a formal, technical, and narrative level).

Plinkett's fictional intercessions into his own review are most obviously a form of comic relief. "I started to record it in my normal voice and it was just horrible and dull," Stoklasa says. "So I decided to do it in character to make it more palatable, especially since my goal wasn't to just give a cursory review, but rather to get really detailed" (qtd. in Jeffries). Benjamin Sarlin of *The Daily Beast* describes Plinkett's deadpan delivery as "a cross between Dan Aykroyd in *The Blues Brothers* and *The*

Silence of the Lambs' Buffalo Bill" (Sarlin). Stoklasa himself suggests that Plinkett also serves as a plot device. "The idea that people don't know what's going to happen next keeps them interested," he says (qtd. in Sarlin). Plinkett's very existence may be symptomatic of online viewing trends, a concession that entertaining YouTube viewers for over an hour is a feat in itself. Thus, on the surface, Plinkett is all shtick, a distraction from the intensity of the analysis. "Basically, [the review] ended up being 70 minutes because the movie was that bad," Stoklasa says further. But "[p]eople's attention spans have drooped a lot, . . . so you have to do stuff like that to keep it fresh" (qtd. in Sarlin). The character was originally portrayed by RLM actor and stagehand Rich Evans in Stoklasa's short film *You're Invited! The Olsen Twins Movie*. The short splices together a fictional telephone conversation between Plinkett and the Olsens (and, due to the Olsens' preexisting script, explains from where the name "Plinkett" derives). Like RLM's later work, the editing in *You're Invited!* is awkward, and the comedy oscillates between psychedelic horror and slapstick (Stoklasa, *You're Invited!*). Today, while the onscreen Plinkett is usually performed by Evans (notably on the webseries *Half in the Bag*), Stoklasa intones the character for the reviews. It is doubtless Stoklasa's writing and talent as a voice actor which has earned Plinkett such a following.

Jon Carroll of the *San Francisco Chronicle* calls Plinkett "sophomoric in places" and even "offensive," but admits that Stoklasa himself is "very smart about movies" (Carroll). Indeed, in its nonfiction mode, *The Phantom Menace* review boasts many profound insights. For one, Plinkett argues that the film lacks a central protagonist (which he mispronounces "prota-goan-ist"). He claims that it's neither of the two Jedi, Qui-Gon Jinn or Obi-Wan Kenobi, nor is it Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman). "You might be thinking that it's Anakin, 'cause he was like a slave and saved the day at the end by accidentally blowing up the starship," Plinkett continues. "But the audience doesn't meet Anakin until forty-five minutes into the movie. And then the things that are happening around him are pretty much out of his control or understanding" (Stoklasa *Episode I*). Plinkett argues that *The Phantom Menace* doesn't contain a Luke Skywalker analogue—a down-on-their-luck, fish-out-of-water main character who serves as a proxy for the audience's tensions and desires. Not only is such a character a staple of popular storytelling, but he or she is often essential for a narrative set in a complex science-fictional (or fantasy) universe. The protagonist's ignorance of the alien locale is a stand-in for our own, a structural excuse for exposition. Yet Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd) seems to have no concept of what's going on or what's at stake. And "[i]f a protagonist has no concept of what's going on or what's at stake," Plinkett avers, "then there's no real tension or drama. Without that, there's no story" (Stoklasa, *Episode I*). This flattening of tension is made all the more poignant since—as the title of *The Phantom Menace* implies—there is apparently no real antagonist either.

Plinkett also engages in formal analysis. For example, he looks at the first shot after the opening text crawl in *A New Hope* in which a looming Star Destroyer gives chase to Princess Leia's ship, the Tantive IV (fig. 1). Plinkett claims that, from this single iconic shot, the audience immediately gleans

a sense of how small and ill-equipped the rebels are and how large and powerful the Empire is. The low angle implies dominance, and the length of the Star Destroyer implies the long reach of the Empire. This shot says everything we need to know without saying one word. In fact, this is so genius, I have a feeling that George Lucas had nothing to do with it. (Stoklasa, *Episode I*)

As such, more than just parroting trite complaints, Plinkett's major criticisms point to deep, structural issues with the films. What emerges is an image of the *Star Wars* prequels as groundbreaking exercises in special effects but with little or no narrative substance—films that seem to fundamentally misunderstand their own source material. As Plinkett says in his review of *Revenge of the Sith*, “[t]he irony in [the prequels] is that even though we see the most vast and open scenery generated by a computer,” the suspension of disbelief is shattered if the audience doesn't care about the plot or the characters (Stoklasa, *Episode III*). Lucas's special effects scenes are indeed incredibly dense and meticulously crafted. The imagined camera is free to float unrestrictedly throughout a virtual environment, and we are privy to complex action amidst vistas of high incomprehensible grandeur. Yet the human element feels stifled and soulless. Scenes in which characters exchange dialogue drag on the otherwise free-flowing action. As Plinkett says further:

[These] scenes typically have the blocking of a soap opera, something that's shot for efficiency reasons rather than artistic. They are so dull and unimaginative, it's almost a contradiction given the amazing environments they're set in. Film is a visual medium, and Lucas is praised for being a pioneer of film visuals because he revolutionized special effects. The irony is, now when he's given two humans and some dialogue, it's a boring disaster on film. It's fairly apparent he just wants to get these scenes out of the way to get us back to the action. (Stoklasa, *Episode III*)

The dialogue scenes in all three prequels frequently play out in textbook shot/reverse shot. At a completely flat angle, characters will walk nonchalantly across a computer-generated set and invariably look out a window or sit down on a couch. Over and over, Plinkett picks out these scenes, and in their juxtaposition the listless repetition is made comically obvious. Admittedly, this isn't something the average viewer is likely to detect consciously. You might not have noticed it, Plinkett is fond of saying, “but your brain did” (Stoklasa, *Episode II*).

In one of *The Phantom Menace* review's most brilliant moments, Plinkett challenges four “real” people to discuss characters from both the original and the prequel trilogies. His only stipulation:

Describe the following *Star Wars* character without saying what they look like, what kind of costume they wore, or what their pro-

fession or role in the movie was. Describe this character to your friends like they ain't never seen *Star Wars*. (Stoklasa *Episode I*)

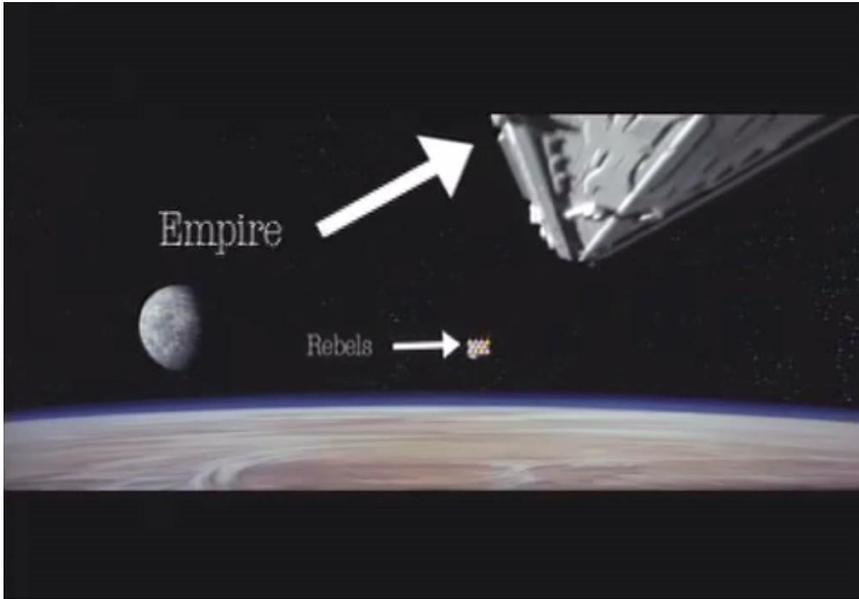


Figure 1 Opening shot of *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope*, complete with Plinkett's un-subtle labels. (Stoklasa *Episode I*, reprinted with permission)

Plinkett's hypothesis is that, "[t]he more descriptive they could get, the stronger the character" (Stoklasa, *Episode I*). Han Solo, for instance, is confidently described as "roguish," "smarmy," "cocksure," "dashing," and as "a thief with a heart of gold." Of the prequel trilogy, however, Qui-Gon Jinn elicits looks of confusion, if not laughter. To Amidala, one person (Rich Evans) chortles, "That is going to be fucking impossible because she doesn't have a character" (Stoklasa, *Episode I*). This line of questioning, as amusing or revelatory as it may be, has also proven portable. A Google search for "Plinkett Test" reveals that a similar injunction—describe a character without reference to their appearance or role in the narrative—has been applied to numerous non-*Star Wars* films. The so-called Plinkett Test's popularity as a kind of critical dowsing rod might bear a family resemblance, if in name only, to something like the Bechdel Test (derived from Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which asks whether a work of fiction features at least two female characters who talk to each other about something other than a man). While the Bechdel Test is a feminist critique of gender bias, and Plinkett's is merely one of character roundness and memorability, the co-optation of either attests to the need to understand Plinkett's (like Bechdel's, probably unanticipated) contribution to a broader critical landscape.

The modality for these criticisms could ostensibly be called "audio commentary," as Plinkett provides voiceover for segments of the film. But whereas audio commen-

tary arises primarily as a promotional gimmick to be included as a DVD supplemental, Plinkett in his burlesque style is closer to something like film “riffing.” The 1980s cult television series *Mystery Science Theater 3000* helped to usher forth the subgenre, indeed the subculture, of riffing as such.⁵ The premise of the show is that a human character and his robot cohorts are stranded on a space station by an evil scientist bent on world domination. The scientist forces his captives to watch B-movies in order to determine which of them can be weaponized to spread a kind of viral psychosis. The only way to stay sane: riff off of the films’ badness. The verb itself—to riff—has jazz reverberations, meaning to improvise or expound upon a melody (“Riff”). In *MST3K*, the film-text is the melody, taken as the basis for, and the subject of, a kind of comedy routine. Framed as always already unwatchable, the films are lampooned for their cheesy special effects, their bad acting and writing, their technical failings, and pretty much anything that can float a procession of pun-laden punchlines. In more traditional commentary tracks, the commentator’s voice is disembodied, hovering somewhere above the text. But in *MST3K*, the puppets and human characters form a frame narrative. Broadly speaking, a frame is a conceit which enacts a pretense for the telling of the tale. Aside from exposing narration itself as a kind of performance, a frame allows for an internal distancing from narrative content which can serve as the space for critique. *MST3K* makes use of the frame metaphor through its campy allusions to the sf megatext: flimsy modular set pieces, the “mad scientist” trope, sentient robots, etc. But *MST3K* also literalizes the frame metaphor by projecting the characters onto the screen. Their silhouetted heads bobble in the corner as if seated a few rows ahead of us in the darkened theater. By superimposing the frame narrative onto the frame of the actual screen, the films in *MST3K* are mediated by a telescoping mise-en-scène which crosses two distinct diegetic levels. The characters thus mediate between the audience and the text. They become an audience-by-proxy, a buffer to the films’ badness.

The phenomenon of riffing suggests that funniness can be therapeutic, rendering the previously unwatchable watchable again. But *MST3K* does not arrest the forward-motion of the films it riffs off. The commentary is laid strand-over-strand with the films’ running-time. Plinkett, however, re-edits the prequels into a secondary work. He rearranges chronology to fit his own critical narrative, he overlays music, intercuts with images and found footage, interjects scenes with George Lucas, actors, producers, and fans, and even “switch[es] the cameras” to reveal original footage shot by RLM (Stoklasa, *Episode 1*). We might view this as a type of bricolage, or mash-up. Not unrelated to sampling in early hip-hop, mash-up edits video elements together (often from disparate sources) in order to construct a new text whose originality or intent is to be found in the editing itself. Mash-up performs an amped-up version of Sergei Eisenstein’s aesthetics of “collision,” suturing together filmic metaphors through incisive cuts.⁶ Much of Plinkett’s subtler humor plays out in this way, the rapid-fire montage eliciting subversive comparisons. The image of George Lucas might be juxtaposed to the floppy-jowled, four-armed alien Dexter Jettster from *Attack of the Clones*, for example. But more commanding is something like when producer Rick McCallum tries to plug the film by claiming “[i]t’s so dense, every

single image has so many things going on” (Stoklasa, *Episode I*). Plinkett positions the clip vis-à-vis a series of cacophonous action sequences, arguing that the density McCallum mentions is tantamount to simply “showing more shit on the screen”—a move, impelled by the overreliance on computer technology, that is neither artistically motivated nor aesthetically engaging (Stoklasa, *Episode I*).

Aside from mash-up, probably the closest generic approximation is the video essay. Film critic and *RogerEbert.com* editor Matt Zoller Seitz, in fact, characterizes Plinkett as a uniquely internet-based hybrid of the two forms—what he calls “an emerging format that’s often more entertaining than the work it cannibalizes” (Seitz). Video essays tend to be more ruminative and sincere than mash-up, and they are most obviously related to documentary (though they are typically more analytic than journalistic). Filmmaker Ben Sampson has uploaded visual analyses of Spielberg’s *A.I.* and Orson Welles’s *F for Fake* to YouTube—shorter videos that mirror Plinkett’s close-reading but with a serious tone (Sampson). Filmmaker Steven Boone’s *Low Budget Eye Candy #1* on Vimeo analyzes Lucas’s first film, *THX 1138*, arguing that multi-million-dollar computer graphics are not necessary in order to create convincing special effects (Boone). And then there’s filmmaker Damon Packard, whose five-part *Untitled Star Wars Mockumentary* on YouTube takes footage of Skywalker Ranch and, via parallel editing, inserts fictional characters to create a Christopher Guest-like behind-the-scenes exposé. *Untitled Star Wars Mockumentary* is a hallucinogenic pastiche of gore and pornography, and its narrative positions Lucas as an insane cult leader. Indeed, the *Mockumentary*’s “Bonus Clip” casts Lucas in the role of Col. Kurtz from *Apocalypse Now*, his radio confession about CGI characters overheard incredulously by Martin Sheen et al. in Vietnam (Packard). Packard describes his own work thusly: “It’s as if somebody like Spielberg had never had a successful career and instead ended up on YouTube. It’s the failed Spielberg” (qtd. in Seitz). This comment is telling of a web 2.0 turn in which the strategy of tent-pole, high-end-special-effects filmmakers like Spielberg and Lucas is problematized. Failure to have a “successful career” seems to imply financial gain or studio backing, not that the filmmaker himself is lacking in raw talent. The irony is that, today, independent filmmakers like Packard and Stoklasa can, for exceptionally low budgets and oftentimes zero profit, still reach a mass audience.

Boone’s *Low-Budget Eye Candy* criticizes Lucas’s refusal to acknowledge his own limitations. Packard’s *Mockumentary* satirizes Lucas as a filmmaker who’s gone beyond the pale of conventional morality. But Stoklasa levels criticism directly at Lucas’s flagrant ineptitude. Footage of an overweight Lucas on-set, perpetually sitting, sipping coffee, comparing *Star Wars* to platitudes about poetry, surrounded by an incalculable number of “yes men”—Plinkett takes what ought to be *Star Wars* marketing material and re-interprets it as a narrative about a lazy, out-of-touch, and thoroughly unchallenged filmmaker. Unchallenged is crucial, in Plinkett’s esteem, as the original *Star Wars* in 1977 was fraught with production problems. It was a film that nearly everyone believed would flop. Plinkett thus advocates for a theory of “art from adversity”: the idea that *collaboration* and *limitation* force an artist to work within certain constraints, and it is only within such constraints that art can truly

flourish (Stoklasa *Episode I*). In the wake of *Star Wars*' unprecedented success (both as a film and as a vehicle for an endless parade of merchandise), Lucas was, by the 1990s, virtually constraintless. Plinkett's Lucas is the same Lucas we see in the Special Feature vignettes, just given a novel interpretive framework. This interpretive framework is subversive, and as such can be thought as a kind of Situationist *détournement*—what Guy Debord defines as “the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble” (Debord)—by turning the expressions of the culture industry against themselves. Not that the Plinkett reviews are avant-garde, per se, but as Debord writes further, *détournement* “has a peculiar power which obviously stems from the double meaning, from the enrichment of most of the terms by the coexistence within them of their old and new senses” (Debord). Thus, when Lucas tries to justify the recycling of iconography from film to film by claiming “it's like poetry, so that they rhyme,” Plinkett focuses not on the footage's intent—the seeming profundity of what Lucas is saying—but rather the perplexed and fearful stares of his unquestioning staff (Stoklasa, *Episode I*). This tactic allows the footage to persist in a “double meaning” by revealing the blatant attempt to frame Lucas as an auteur, on the one hand, and what he actually says as vacuous nonsense, on the other. Stoklasa thus rejects the premise that the prequels (or their paratextual propaganda) ought to be passively consumed, but rather that they ought to be dismembered and manipulated. They are then repositioned as a shameless, self-indulgent, and uninspired corporatization of the imaginary.

But the question remains: why do the reviews need to be undercut by psychopathology? Superficially, Stoklasa's juxtaposition of expert film knowledge alongside Plinkett's insanity is, as he says, a “wink, wink” element, a way to avoid coming across as “either someone with no life at all, . . . or someone who's a big armchair critic [who] thinks he knows everything” (qtd. in Jeffries). Indeed, things like mispronouncing “protagonist” (as well as misattributing the names of actors and historical events) are a kind of populist gesture, a prophylactic against pedanticism. But Stoklasa's representation of psychosis is also a conceit that, perhaps not unlike many YouTube reviewers, you would have to be “crazy” to watch a movie this way. In his review of *Attack of the Clones*, Plinkett shares an exchange with a woman he's abducted (later named Nadine) while they watch the film:

Nadine: This is awful. Just awful.

Plinkett: But I need to share my pain. I need to make others understand.

Nadine: Pain? It's just a movie, mister.

Plinkett: No, it's not. It's more than that. It's . . . it's the most disappointing thing in cinematic history. I have a duty to the human race to explain why in detail.

Nadine: Wow, you really are crazy, mister.

(Stoklasa, *Episode II*)

Catherine Grant, publisher of the blog *Film Studies for Free*, writes that Plinkett “masters a very clever attack on a certain kind of dumbass fanboy style of film reviewing” (qtd. in Seitz). Indeed, the lone crank with a webcam is precisely the type of personality we would expect to upload a frenzied review of this kind. Stoklasa’s style of craziness is therefore self-referential, if not self-defeating, injecting an ironic distance into the text. Nadine as such is foil to Plinkett’s obsession—the sane captive of his nerdy rant.

It is interesting, though, that Plinkett himself is never shown onscreen. The reviews proceed in video-essay-like montage, save for the original footage shot by RLM. This footage—of Plinkett’s interactions with Nadine, of him pulling Pizza Rolls out of his oven, digging DVDs out of his cat’s litter box, and so on—is almost exclusively filmed in first-person point-of-view. As a trope, the POV shot is often aligned with the subjectivity of the stalker or deranged mind in the horror genre. John Carpenter’s original *Halloween* in 1978 opens with an extended POV sequence, for example, and the *Friday the 13th* franchise is littered with shots from the vantage of Jason Voorhees.⁷ Franck Khalfoun’s 2012 remake of *Maniac* proceeds almost entirely in first-person, and the malevolent “force” (an interesting nomenclatural overlap with *Star Wars*) in Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* franchise careens through the woods in the same way. POV also features prominently in the *cinéma vérité* stylings of found footage in horror, from *The Blair Witch Project* to the more recent *Paranormal Activity* and its progeny. But the trope also seems to pay parodic homage to the voyeuristic camera of Hitchcock, or more significantly to something like Michael Powell’s 1960 slasher *Peeping Tom*. In *Peeping Tom*, protagonist Mark Lewis nearly literalizes the male gaze by filming women as he murders them. As a child, Lewis was the subject of ethically questionable experimentation (with film, no less) by his psychologist father. Lewis’s psychosis is thus an overtly Freudian cocktail of sex and filmmaking. The late great film critic Roger Ebert writes of *Peeping Tom*, in fact, that “movies make us into voyeurs. We sit in the dark, watching other people’s lives. It is the bargain the cinema strikes with us, although most films are too well-behaved to mention it” (Ebert). Powell’s film fully exposes this bargain, forcing the audience to come to terms with its own scopophilia.

Well-behaved is also not a modifier we could easily ascribe to Plinkett. In *The Phantom Menace* review, for instance, he combs his basement in search of his grandchildren’s *Star Wars* merchandise, only to allow the camera to pan casually across Nadine, bound, lying on the floor (fig. 2). Plinkett barely seems to notice until Nadine pipes up. “Mister,” she says, “Mister, please just let me go,” to which Plinkett responds comically, “Quiet, I’m making my YouTube *Star Wars* review” (Stoklasa, *Episode I*). This type of misogynistic humor is obviously tongue-in-cheek. The reviews clearly do not condone Plinkett’s actions, and the texts’ ironic attitude towards their own content implies the moral certitude of the viewer. Nadine herself,

a recurring character, ultimately exacts revenge in the *Episode III* review's "Epilogue." While this and other depictions of violence against women in Plinkett's oeuvre can be scrutinized, and rightfully so, they yet again dramatize the oppressive mark of paternal authority. Plinkett becomes the figure of a consumer culture that has been force-fed Hollywood schlock beyond its carrying capacity. Like Lewis, whose father subjects him to exploitative experiments on the nervous system, Plinkett represents the effects that exploitative experiments with *Star Wars* can cause in its audience. The prequels are indeed a trauma that "will never go away," as Plinkett laments (Stoklasa, *Episode I*). The father, here, has merely been replaced by Lucas. Framed as such (Nadine's bosom receding into the background behind a Darth Maul figurine), Plinkett's gaze itself literalizes the detachment of sexual aim from sexual object. This also explains why he shies away from Nadine's sexual advances in his review of *Episode II*: as Freud himself writes, erotic desire "becomes pathological when the longing for the fetish . . . actually *takes the place* of the normal aim" (20, emphasis original). Plinkett's libidinal investment in movies has supplanted any kind of normal sexual gratification, giving way to a limitless metonymy of murders and abductions.



Figure 2 Plinkett's POV as he rifles through *Star Wars* toys in his basement. Nadine is visible in the background, apparently unnoticed by Plinkett. (Stoklasa *Episode I*, reprinted with permission)

Plinkett is intensely affected by the films he reviews. Unlike the characters in *MST3K*, he doesn't riff off of the movies in order to stay sane—he riffs off of them because he's already insane. As he bewails during his review of *Revenge of the Sith*: "Oh, God. All I hear is *Star Wars* inside my brain. Someone help me. Help me. My brain is collapsing inside itself" (Stoklasa, *Episode III*). Plinkett can embody this

kind of fanboy hyperbole since he is as much *produced by* the films he reviews as the reviews are produced *by him*. The Plinkett shtick is thus revealed as a collapsed or inverted narrative frame: unlike *MST3K*, without a riff track to mediate between himself and the texts he analyzes, Plinkett's reviews are constantly undermined by unintended cuts, leaps in focus and attention, and the resurgence of repressed images. None of this is truly unintended—as we know—since it's all constructed by Stoklasa. “Over the years I've mastered the art of intentionally awkward editing for comedy purposes,” he says (qtd. in Jeffries). But unlike Packard or Litzenberg and Stuart, each of whom construct a fictional *Lucas*, Stoklasa constructs a fictional *critic*. It is in this sense that Plinkett can body forth a kind of catharsis: he legitimates our nerd-rage by literalizing it. The marriage of POV shots to the procedural of a video essay also reframes the entire *mise-en-scène* as Plinkett's stream-of-consciousness. What we see is what he sees; the deranged montage *is*, in effect, Plinkett's mind as he works through to the etiology of his symptoms. There are no puppet silhouettes in his Cartesian theater.

Plinkett therefore hyperbolizes a certain *Star Wars* fanbase that had sprung up around the young, rebellious Lucas of the 1970s but had been castrated by the old, rapacious Lucas of the 1990s. It is amusing that Lucas's rise and fall can be so easily mapped onto the lead of his prequel trilogy—Anakin Skywalker—who, through the hubristic desire to control all of the events in his life, succumbs to the dark side of the Force. Plinkett's admittedly unfair analogy is *Citizen Kane*, the story of Charles Foster Kane's fall from youthful idealism to unloved curmudgeon (Stoklasa *Episode III*). As such, the Plinkett reviews offer a strikingly plausible reading of Lucas the human being. And Lucas the human being cannot possibly live up to Lucas the author-function, foisted retroactively onto the corporate behemoth which has supplanted him. But Stoklasa's major conceit—that someone would have to be “crazy” to watch movies the way Plinkett does—also implies a barely hidden inverse: that the film industry has induced a consumerist fantasy in people who *don't* watch movies this way. Plinkett's obscenity and jokiness are without a doubt designed to garner viewership, but they are also Stoklasa's apology for—or defense against—a culture that already construes his level of passion as pathological. This central irony leads us to question what is actually more insane: the consumer who rejects the expressions of a massive culture industry, or the massive culture industry itself. Plinkett satirizes the kind of consumer such a system generates: psychotic, sexist, homicidal. Indeed, this brand of critique is something that has been present in Stoklasa's style since the beginning. Even in *You're Invited! The Olsen Twins Movie*, the Olsens' films are shown not only as jejune capitalistic ventures, but so insulting in their lack of substance that they are aligned with a kind of insanity. The voyeurism and sexual fetishization emanate less from Plinkett than they are implied to be endemic to the culture industry itself.

Plinkett's insanity is therefore positioned as the voice of a kind of truth, not unlike the fool as an early modern literary figure whose cryptic demeanor is a guise for wisdom. Perhaps this is what Foucault meant when, in the conclusion to *Madness and Civilization*, he writes that “through the mediation of madness, it is the world

that becomes culpable . . . in relation to the work of art” (288). Within a hegemonic and ubiquitous culture industry, madness may be the only remaining space for criticism. The related implication that it is “madness” to reject the culture industry also jibes with Foucault’s earlier observations that, after the middle ages, insanity came to signify someone who couldn’t *labor*. If capitalism is everywhere, then madness occupies its cracks and interstices. Formally, Plinkett riffs through these cracks by *détourning* preexisting commodity forms. And critically, he does not riff from the vantage of an Ebert-like metalanguage. His reviews are instead caught up in a decentered process of schizophrenic digression. One of the most compelling things the Plinkett reviews expose is therefore the nature of critique as such. They immanently question the voice through which a critique can be articulated. Žižek is insightful here. He argues that the “flabby poeticism” of a good deal of poststructuralist writing is a *performance* of the idea that there is always a gap between what one means to say and what one actually says, that “no utterance can say precisely what it intended to say, [and] that the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance” (173-74). It is in this way that Stoklasa’s riffing parodies the critic’s ability to speak literally or directly. It is not, as Žižek writes, a “simple gesture of taking distance, of placing oneself outside” of the discourse (173). Plinkett is thoroughly incapable of taking such a distance, or indeed of placing himself outside of the prequel films.⁸ *Star Wars* is knitted into his very subjectivity. The “place” from which Plinkett speaks (the place of madness, of *détournement*) is an interstitial “no-place.” Through Plinkett, Stoklasa is able to *perform* this argument, and in so doing his reviews emerge as aesthetic objects in their own right. They evince what I might call a “Plinkett poetics”—a mash-up, not only of Eisensteinian image-metaphors, but of generic criticism itself. It is worth noting that Žižek, too, takes the opportunity to insert his commentary (and himself) into popular films in Sophie Fiennes’s twin video essays, *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* and *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*.⁹

Plinkett therefore becomes more than just a shtick, more than just a simple “wink, wink” element. As Anne Burdick et al. argue in their recent *Digital Humanities*:

YouTube lectures, podcasts, audio books, and the ubiquity of what is sometimes referred to as “demo culture” in the Digital Humanities all contribute to the resurgence of voice, gesture, of extemporaneous speaking, of embodied *performances* of argument. But unlike in the past, such performances can be recorded, disseminated, and remixed, thereby becoming units of polymorphous exchange and productive mutation. (11)

Whereas the original *Star Wars* trilogy has been profoundly cathected, the prequels, in contrast, appear insipid and uninspired. By re-editing a feature film into a derivative work, Stoklasa countermands these social relations of life under capital. “Productive mutation” can be thought as a tactic for imbuing the prequels with meaning outside the arena of market exchange. Indeed, this comes close to what Michel de Certeau describes in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: that the producers of mass con-

sumer goods employ top-down, universalizing *strategies* in order to maintain control of their products, while consumers employ bottom-up, individualizing *tactics* in order to maintain control of their lives and bodies. And yet, in the milieu of bidirectional internet media, the Plinkett reviews seem to be evidence of a kind of feedback loop. On that point, media critic Henry Jenkins writes specifically of *Star Wars* fan films that the “Web represents a site of experimentation and innovation, where amateurs test the waters. . . . In such a world, fan works can no longer be understood as [merely] derivative of mainstream materials” (*Convergence Culture* 148). While Stoklasa’s work is partially derived from extant texts, it must be understood as a kind of mutation: editorial (genotypic) variations that effectuate generic (phenotypic) form.

But the Plinkett reviews are not exactly fan films. Plinkett does not exist within *Star Wars*’ diegetic space, although he is the depiction of a fictional fan. Stoklasa’s reviews are thus a sort of hybrid, inserting authorial agency not into the *Star Wars* universe, but rather into the critical discourse surrounding it. Is it therefore possible to read the Plinkett reviews a type of “meta” fan fiction? Jenkins argues elsewhere that fanfic is a subgenre of what he calls “transmedia” narratives, narratives in which “integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels” (“Transmedia”). He writes:

The encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts often results in what might be seen as gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story: that is, they introduce potential plots which can not [sic] be fully told or extra details which hint at more than be revealed. Readers, thus, have a strong incentive to continue to elaborate on these story elements, working them over through their speculations, until they take on a life of their own. Fan fiction can be seen as an unauthorized expansion of these media franchises into new directions which reflect the reader’s desire to “fill in the gaps” they have discovered in the commercially produced material. (“Transmedia”)

This fic-of-the-gaps definition gestures toward the generative potential that story-worlds offer, particularly those of fantasy and sf. Plinkett, though, is fanfic in its most literal incarnation: what happens to a mentally unstable fan upon the reception of a commercially produced text. In this sense, although we typically invoke “megatext” to refer to the intertextual constellation of tropes and generic conventions—what sf scholar Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. calls “the shared subcultural thesaurus of [a] genre” (275)—I wonder if it can’t be extended to include reading practices, fan communities, internet subcultures, and indeed the critical reception of a text. This megatextual landscape could include a text’s lasting cultural cachet, not as mere sociological datum, but as a text in its own right—*context*, as it were, writ large. The perceived “gaps or excesses” are thus productive, not simply of fanfic and other transmedial articulations of *Star Wars* narratives (e.g. videogames, novelizations, the

animated *Clone Wars* series, etc.), but of a variegated critical dialogue starring Plinkett as its crotchety antihero.

I do not think that Stoklasa (or even Plinkett) would claim that filmmakers owe it to their fans to give them what they want.¹⁰ Filmmakers merely owe their fans a competent story—something that Lucas has failed to deliver. It is, in this sense, not Lucas's genius but precisely his *failure* at unfolding a story by which we can measure the generative potential of the *Star Wars* prequels. The assertion that cultural producers do not possess ultimate control over their products might seem like a pedestrian insight in the wake of audience and reception studies. But Plinkett's eclectic genericity is unique. His psychosis defamiliarizes the dominant logic of consumerism, and in this way, riffing off of the *Star Wars* prequels provides him with a surface on which to inscribe both humor and intellectual analysis. What, then, do we make of the Plinkett reviews as the instantiation of a feedback loop? As a film reviewer whose reviews are films themselves? Jon Carroll writes that Plinkett is "the sort of thing that could only appear on YouTube" (Carroll). Sarlin argues that Stoklasa "would never have found an audience in an earlier decade—let alone millions" (Sarlin). Stoklasa might not have been published elsewhere, yet the fact that Plinkett's reviews have been recorded and disseminated to millions of viewers makes them units of "polymorphous exchange," as Burdick et al. suggest. Might this invert de Certeau's categories, when *détournement* can bounce back the strategy of its original producers? Does the preponderance of user-generated content on the web complicate or even reverse the relationship between strategies and tactics? As Stoklasa himself says, "It's bizarre to me that some guy like me could make this and potentially George Lucas could see it. The gap really is closing" (qtd. in Sarlin). Perhaps the only true test of Plinkett's influence is to see, now that Disney has purchased Lucasfilm, whether the next instalment in the franchise—*Episode VII*, directed by J.J. Abrams—will distance itself from the tarnish of *Episodes I-III*. In the meantime, the Plinkett reviews are indicative not only of the "failed" Spielbergs, but the refusal of the passivity of consumption: a critique that emanates from the gaps within capital as madness emanates from the gaps within reason. Plinkett exposes the *Star Wars* prequels as exploitative corporate products, and it is this exposure which serves as a kind of catharsis. Whether or not Lucas actually is one of Stoklasa's five million viewers, the Plinkett reviews are a parodic performance of killing the father. Plinkett lets us know that it's okay to reject the *Star Wars* prequels, and he does so by subsuming the insanity into himself. This ironic, Christ-like transference lends us agency in the face of vast, impenetrable marketing machines like Lucasfilm. And so, to end with the words of Plinkett himself: "I'm here to help. I'm here to bring closure to everyone so we can all move on" (Stoklasa, *Episode II*).

Notes

¹ To date, in addition to all three *Star Wars* prequels, Plinkett has reviewed the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* films, James Cameron's *Avatar* and *Titanic*,

the J.J. Abrams *Star Trek* reboot franchise, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, and two more anomalous (by comparison) films—John Hughes’s *Baby’s Day Out* and John Murlowski’s inexplicable *Cop Dog*. While these reviews are predominantly negative, Plinkett recognizes the virtuosic storytelling evident in *Titanic*, and he gives the most praise to Abrams’s 2009 *Star Trek*. RLM also produces two flagship webseries which showcase more straightforward reviews: *Half in the Bag* of popular new releases, and *Best of the Worst* of old DVDs and VHS tapes that represent the dregs of what RLM has come across (B-movies, instructional videos, child safety promotions, etc.).

- 2 Jar Jar Binks has become a kind of shorthand for Lucas’s creative blunders, a buffoonish character seemingly designed to sell merchandise. Midi-chlorians are another hot-button issue for *Star Wars* fans. Not once mentioned in the original trilogy, Qui-Gon Jinn explains in *The Phantom Menace* that these microscopic organisms reside within all living cells and, if present in high enough numbers, permit their host to detect and even manipulate the Force. It is even suggested that Anakin Skywalker was conceived by the midi-chlorians in messianic fashion. The contention by some fans seems to be the generic tilt toward hard(er) science fiction: what was originally a vague and spiritual Force is now given a “scientific” explanation. But more than that, the postulation of midi-chlorians limits Force-sensitivity to individuals with a certain biological predisposition, instead of allowing the ability to remain more mysterious and egalitarian. It is interesting that the eugenics of Force-sensitivity is not taken up as more of a central theme (as, for instance, the distinction between magic-users and muggles is in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series). As ubiquitous as these two complaints are, though, both Binks and midi-chlorians receive relatively little attention in Plinkett’s oeuvre.
- 3 There is a sense in which the prequels might retroactively diminish the quality of the original trilogy. But the phenomenon of Lucas-bashing is rooted in Lucas’s earlier endeavor, the “Special Edition” re-releases of *Episodes IV-VI*, which were not only digitally remastered but injected with new computer animation and previously deleted scenes. The Special Edition changes are largely inane, but arguably the most egregious is when Han Solo kills Greedo in the Mos Eisley Cantina in *A New Hope*. Whereas in the unaltered film Solo is the only character to visibly fire his blaster, the Special Edition has Greedo shoot first, missing at close range, after which Solo fires in retaliation. This fundamentally alters Solo’s character, spawning the appearance of “Han shot first” as a kind of T-shirt slogan for fans who contest the change. Thus, the claim “George Lucas ruined my childhood” refers to the fact that Lucas has actively sought to overwrite even the original films.
- 4 While distaste for the prequels seems to be the vocal majority, particularly on the internet, I do not wish to give the impression that the films are universally hated. Stoklasa has his detractors, the most well-known of which is arguably Jim Raynor, a messageboard user who penned a one-hundred-eight-page,

point-by-point rebuttal to Plinkett's *Phantom Menace* review. I have been unable to find a full version of Raynor's tome online (it seems the file was originally hosted by the now-defunct *Megaupload.com*), but Germain Lussier of *Film* excerpts a few choice passages. Mainly, Raynor calls Plinkett's arguments "massively overrated, and simply wrong and even dishonest on numerous points" (qtd. in Lussier). Since I do not have access to the full document, I will take Raynor's claims at face value here, although it is curious that a fictional character be called "dishonest." It is true that many of Plinkett's more nitpicky points are sometimes rather silly, but I suspect that Raynor is unable to distinguish between Stoklasa's honest criticisms and what, via the Plinkett shtick, is clearly hyperbole or satire. Simply put, Raynor could be guilty of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

- 5 *MST3K* is but one example in a long line of parodic readings of cultural texts in the twentieth century alone (e.g. *Mad Magazine*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Onion*, "Weird Al" Yankovic, etc.). It would be misleading to aver that this type of performative critique exists in a vacuum. However, riffing as such (real-time commentary vis-à-vis the original unaltered text) is relatively unique, akin to something like the fabled VH1 series *Pop-Up Video*. Comedian Patton Oswalt cites *MST3K*, in fact, as an inspiration for his own comedy aesthetic. "It reminded me a lot, before I could articulate it, of the kind of things being done by comedians I was hanging out with at the time," he says (qtd. in Berube). A more contemporary example (though one that is not real-time commentary) might be something like *The Daily Show*, which, in its current form, is almost wholly dependent upon *détourning* content from Fox News.
- 6 A recent example of mash-up is a YouTube user who takes the music video for Taylor Swift's 2012 song "I Knew You Were Trouble" and, when Swift would hit a high note during the chorus, splices in footage of a shrieking goat. Another YouTube user re-edits scenes from Kubrick's *The Shining* into a trailer for a lighthearted family comedy, and another re-edits scenes from Disney's *Mary Poppins* into a trailer for a horror film. Eisenstein's "collision" aesthetics can be described as the juxtaposition between two independent shots, which sparks an implicit comparison (as the shuttling between two independent nouns does in a verbal metaphor). Cf. Eisenstein's *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (Harcourt, 1949).
- 7 Or, in the case of the original *Friday the 13th* (1980), Jason's mother.
- 8 Žižek is critical of poststructuralism in this respect, arguing that such poietism is superfluous (if not disingenuous): the adoption of a more literary style, he contends, "masks the annoying fact that at the root of what post-structuralists are saying there is a clearly defined theoretical position which can be articulated without difficulty in a pure and simple metalanguage" (173-74). While it is important to footnote this criticism (and surely we have all, at one point or another, lamented the obscurantism of many a poststructuralist), it does not so obviously apply to the Plinkett reviews in that the

Plinkett reviews are *parody*. Stoklasa himself does not necessarily evade a “theoretical position which can be articulated without difficulty”; many of his critical insights are spoken quite plainly. The distinction between Plinkett and some poststructuralist writers, then, might be the former’s conflation of high-brow theory and low-brow humor.

- 9 In *The Pervert’s Guides*, Žižek pontificates frenetically against the backdrop of different film sets and locations, but his analyses are relatively directionless—nothing like the bullet-pointed lists of Plinkett. One can only imagine if Žižek did all of the editing himself.
- 10 I am reminded of the more recent concern over George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its adaptation into the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. The series has all but caught up to the books, and many fans worry that Martin’s output of new material won’t be able to keep up with demand (or, more morbidly, that Martin will actually die before finishing the story). The question seems to be what Martin “owes” his fans and what he doesn’t, and how much the economic impetus of the television series ought to influence his creative process. Not to elicit too much of a comparison between Martin and Lucas (the former can unquestionably write better characters).

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