

The third episode, or the sixth, or is this merely a zero?

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Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith, written and directed by George Lucas

This is a pretty dismal work. The sixth and presumably last episode in George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga, and the third in the recent series of 'prequels' (preceded by *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* [1999] and *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones* [2002]), *Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith* provides the personal and cosmic background to the events and characters who figured prominently in the original film released in 1977.

The first *Star Wars* (now officially and pompously renamed *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope*) with Harrison Ford, Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher and others, was relatively light-hearted fare. It was generally perceived at the time as a spoof of the genre or a throwback to the action/science fiction serials of another era.

The newest film is bloated and empty. It purports to tell the story of a good man's gravitation toward evil and a society's descent into dictatorship. Obvious parallels are drawn between the authoritarian regime in the film and the present administration in Washington. This is hailed by some wishful thinkers as a triumph of "anti-fascist" politics and a blow against the Bush crowd.

The central figure in *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen), is a warrior on a planet in some distant galaxy, who has already broken his apparent oath of celibacy by secretly marrying and impregnating Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman). Tormented by dreams about her death in childbirth, Anakin allows himself to come under the influence of the ruthless Supreme Chancellor Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), who claims to know how her life might be spared.

Anakin separates himself from his erstwhile colleagues, including his mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), and assists in the establishment of a dictatorship, for which he pays a heavy price. Padmé, a senator (and formerly a queen), observes her fellow legislators enthusiastically voting Palpatine sweeping powers and mutters, "This is how liberty dies—to thunderous applause." Anakin himself, as he becomes his dark "other," gets to paraphrase Bush, "If you're not with me, you're my enemy."

The film is largely a blank (despite all its frenetic activity),

dispirited, unmoving and unconvincing from every point of view. The actors who do not bring anything independently to the work, that is, their own enthusiasm or personal dynamism, are entirely lost: Christensen, Portman, Samuel L. Jackson, Jimmy Smits. What precisely is Lucas's function as a director?

Or as a writer. The dialogue is largely excruciating. A sample from a conversation between Anakin and Padmé: "You're so beautiful." "It's only because I'm so in love ..." "No, it's because I'm so in love with you." "So love has blinded you?" "Well, that's not exactly what I meant ..." "But it's probably true!" Between this puerility and the five-and-dime store "Eastern" wisdom of Yoda, the small green sage ("The fear of loss is a path to the dark side" and "Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose"), one is fairly well done for.

The nervous, ceaseless special effects leave me largely cold. Yes, astonishing things can be done with imagery at present. Indeed almost anything. However, for all that, cinema remains an essentially dramatic form. The investigation of significant conflicts and relationships between human beings still needs to be at the center of its efforts. In commenting on the first prequel in 1999, I suggested that Lucas perhaps more than anyone embodied the extraordinary imbalance that existed in Hollywood between technical genius, on the one hand, which was not in short supply, and ideas, depth of feeling and artistic principle, on the other, which were.

Too many critics and audience members alike ask for so little at the moment. (Although, in fact, I felt scant enthusiasm among the other spectators at the particular showing I attended.) By dint of inertia and media hype alone, *Revenge of the Sith* is guaranteed a massive response at the box office.

If Lucas were only pulling our collective leg, but, alas, one senses that he is dreadfully, hopelessly serious. In 1999 I noted the director's well-known attachment to the works of Joseph Campbell, the mythology scholar and popularizer. Campbell argued, according to an article by Brian D. Johnson in *MacLean's* magazine, that "basic narratives are hardwired into the human psyche. According to Campbell, all mythologies essentially tell the same story of an archetypal hero being transformed by a return trip to a supernatural world—and finding an identity with God."

I suggested that such half-baked Jungianism had definite

social implications: “If one is merely living out a pattern that infinitely repeats itself, whose driving force is something preternatural, then any attention paid to improving the circumstances of life is not only misplaced, it is an absurdity. Campbell remarked, for example: ‘Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world. We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy.’ Or, even more explicitly: ‘When we talk about settling the world’s problems, we’re barking up the wrong tree. The world is perfect. It’s a mess. It has always been a mess. We’re not going to change it. Our job is to straighten out our own lives.’

“The appeal of this to a wealthy, relatively self-satisfied Hollywood filmmaker should be obvious. Lucas, who currently sits on the board of the Joseph Campbell Foundation, has said, ‘I put the Force into the movie to try to reawaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people. I see *Star Wars* as taking all the issues that religion represents, and trying to distil them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct.’ This is pretty wretched stuff: congealed intellectual laziness and banality, joined to a comic book version of history and mythology, and adding up to a justification for everything one has done or is likely to do as the ‘life-centering, life-renewing’ working of the universe. In Campbell’s words: ‘The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.’ (Unhappily for the latter, he was born too soon to ever host his own daytime talk show.)”

The attempt to shape a drama, particularly one ostensibly centering on the social and political evolution of a given society (even if invented), to confirm such a shallow and wrongheaded view inevitably runs into certain difficulties: for example, the actual contour and substance of life. Since Lucas has no conception of the driving forces in American society, he is hardly in a position to reconstruct and restage them imaginatively in another solar system.

After all, the billionaire filmmaker may very well despise Bush and his anti-democratic warmongering, and it’s to his credit that he does, but his philosophical outlook flows through some of the same fetid channels as the US president’s. The *Star Wars* films, or at least the recent ones that began conspicuously to care about such things, revolve around an abstract struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ materialized in the different properties of the ‘Force.’

Why someone is pulled over to the ‘dark side’ or not remains a mystery. The explanation offered in *Revenge of the Sith* for Anakin’s pact with the devil is absurd: vague promises that premonitions about his lover’s death in childbirth will not materialize if he joins up with the conniving Palpatine. He is assured by the latter that with an adequate “knowledge of the dark side” he may be able to keep the ones he loves alive. Why should he believe such promises? Is the downfall of democracy seriously to be traced to these goings-on? It’s a little embarrassing to pose the question.

Anyway, if one takes Lucas at face value there is apparently nothing behind the machinations of the contending parties

except cosmically-ordained cyclical patterns, which human beings, in their folly, greed and sentimentality, inevitably set in motion. Nothing helpful or illuminating, or even greatly entertaining, is likely to come from such a work at this point in history.

Yet the film has its defenders, including the *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott. Incomprehensibly Scott writes: “This is by far the best film in the more recent trilogy, and also the best of the four episodes Mr. Lucas has directed. That’s right ... it’s better than *Star Wars. Revenge of the Sith* ... ranks with *The Empire Strikes Back* (directed by Irvin Kershner in 1980) as the richest and most challenging movie in the cycle. It comes closer than any of the other episodes to realizing Mr. Lucas’s frequently reiterated dream of bringing the combination of vigorous spectacle and mythic resonance he found in the films of Akira Kurosawa into American commercial cinema.” The best antidote to these claims is a viewing of the film.

Scott goes on to argue that with the film’s warnings about authoritarianism “Mr. Lucas is clearly jabbing his light saber in the direction of some real-world political leaders. ... You may applaud this editorializing, or you may find it overwrought, but give Mr. Lucas his due. For decades he has been blamed (unjustly) for helping to lead American movies away from their early-70’s engagement with political matters, and he deserves credit for trying to bring them back.”

This is nonsense. Whatever the easy political points, they are more than overshadowed by the essential banality and inanity of the project. While the computer-generated imagery may be state of the art, the human performances are wooden in the extreme and the drama sophomoric. A genuine culture of opposition in the US would announce itself in art above all by the *complexity* of its analysis. One could hardly be farther removed from such work in the present case.

Popular consciousness, above all, needs to be challenged today, even with humor, even in science fiction. The field is wide open. In its complacency and simplistic approach to every aspect of life, Lucas’s film only reinforces some of the worst aspects of American popular culture.



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