

THE SHIFTING SANDS OF STAR WARS

On May 25, 1977 a science-fiction fantasy that redefined adventure premiered in about thirty U.S. theaters. Most exhibitors were reluctant to screen it. But the film proved unstoppable. A sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*, puzzled some moviegoers with its complete title—*Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. In subsequent years *A New Hope* became an accepted title of the original film, particularly among enthusiasts. After six years of no films, the franchise lost considerable momentum. But the 1991 launch of new Star Wars novels sparked a revitalization that extended into video games and memorabilia. The stage was set for the successful launch of the 'prequel' trilogy, beginning with 1999's *The Phantom Menace*. Star Wars is more than a movie, more than six movies; it is a veritable galaxy of entertainment, by which its creator George Lucas has profited handsomely.

The prequel trilogy, culminating with *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, has polarized the fan base. It has attracted legions of new, mostly younger, fans, some of whom consider the new trilogy superior to the old. For those who recoil from the newer films, their fight is to preserve Star Wars as they knew it in their formative years. Some are fueled by nostalgia, others (with opinions as objective as opinions can be) simply consider Lucas to have taken a wrong turn. Others try to go with the flow and reconcile the trilogies to each other. We will now consider the magnitude of their task.

By way of introduction, let us first take stock of six characters featuring in both trilogies. Chewbacca, in the Original Trilogy (OT), was Han's loyal sidekick, short-tempered, but a lovable lug nonetheless. Now we see him as a respected warrior, the years between trilogies shrouded in mystery. Yoda was a peace-loving guru, too cool to fight. Now he is more—a diminutive warrior who bears great responsibility for not checking the slide from Republic to Empire. Obi-Wan, who briefly appeared in the OT as a burned-out eccentric, now stands as the premiere Jedi of all six films—steadfast and wise, he's the giant slayer who cut up Darth Maul and Darth Vader, the latter of whom used to be a very mysterious, super-foreboding presence quick on the kill. He was also haunted by the vague memory of better days. After the prequels, in which Vader (Anakin Skywalker) plays the paramount role, he can be considered a deeply volatile man (not machine) whose emotions are still locked in the frightful passions of childhood. He's not fully in league with the Emperor's plans and he resents the suit that imprisons him—the cost of staying alive, and a continual reminder of his failure against Obi-Wan. The major villain of the OT, he was paradoxically embraced as the most popular character. Now, the prequels revolve around him.

Boba Fett became a cult favorite for his brief contribution to the stories of *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. He was a cold-blooded mercenary, the galaxy's best bounty hunter, a more formidable adversary to Han Solo than the quickly-dispatched Greedo. Now we

see him as Jango Fett's unaltered clone, and the death of "Dad" at the hands of the Jedi has left him embittered.

Finally we consider the Emperor. We know very little about the OT Emperor—he was Vader's slave master, cackling from the pinnacle of Dark Side power (best represented by the Force lightning). Like Yoda, he was too cool to fight. In the prequels, the Emperor plays a huge part, working alternately as Darth Sidious and Chancellor Palpatine to bring the galaxy under his dominion. He is the top Sith (a new term) and a master political manipulator. He corrupts Anakin, but also saves his life. Even so, he now stands as the chief villain of the six film cycle.

Perhaps inevitable, considering the order the films were made, little incongruities emerge in the OT after viewing the prequels:

- In their light saber fight, Obi-Wan calls Vader "Darth" like it's his first name, not a title. In this same fight Vader says, "When I left you I was but the learner. Now I am the master." Vader may have meant that he abandoned Obi-Wan's teachings, but it sounds like Vader is saying he left Obi-Wan behind. We know from *Episode III* that it was Obi-Wan who left Vader, smoldering and limbless.
- In her holographic message delivered by R2-D2, Princess Leia remarks to Obi-Wan, "Years ago you served my father in the Clone Wars." In *Episode III* we see these two men commiserate once the Emperor has taken control, but at this point the Wars are over, and we're never granted a portrait of Bail Organa as a military commander. Yet he was a most powerful senator of the Old Republic.
- In the intervening years, Artoo's skills have atrophied, particularly his ability to fly. This could be attributed to inadequate servicing.
- Obi-Wan saw the droids C-3PO and R2-D2 quite a lot in the prequels. He acts like he doesn't recognize them in *A New Hope*. This could just be an example of wily Obi-Wan pulling a fast one on Luke. After all, he does say, "I don't recall ever owning a droid. Very interesting...." We know now that Jedi were not permitted to own anything. More troubling from a continuity standpoint is R2-D2's response when Obi-Wan says that Ben Kenobi and Obi-Wan are the same guy. The droid whistles with delightful astonishment. But where C-3PO had his memory wiped and cannot recall the old times, R2-D2's memory is intact...supposedly.
- Along the same lines, Owen does not recognize C-3PO and R2-D2. C-3PO used to work on his farm! Forgetting Artoo is understandable, since probably millions of similar-looking astrotech droids exist. C-3PO also has innumerable identical counterparts throughout the galaxy—but each one is distinguished by a unique voice, as evidenced by the robot that serves Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon drinks in *Episode I* and the rude droid C-3PO runs across in Cloud City during *Episode V*.
- Obi-Wan says Luke's father wanted his son to inherit his light saber when he was old enough. We never see Anakin express that desire. Obi-Wan gives Luke the weapon he took from Anakin while the guy was on fire. But this is quite explainable—the films establish Obi-Wan as a liar, and here he is telling a tall tale

about Luke's Jedi father to inspire the boy to join the Cause.

- Returning to the light saber fight, one cannot help thinking that Obi-Wan and Vader have really slowed down in the years since their previous struggle. Vader is now mechanized, and Obi-Wan could be out of practice or in bad health. Still, it's a jarring contrast to the acrobatics of Mustafar.

So far we've discussed elements of the story, not its techniques. The idea is to explain the two trilogies by the story we're given, not the circumstances of their production. But for a time we'll digress slightly.

Lucas employs straightforward narrative storytelling in both trilogies—no flashbacks, almost no point-of-view shots nor slow-motion, and wipes are used to distinguish narrative threads and to connote the passage of time. The most frequently discussed difference between trilogies is the application of computer-graphics technology. When *Return of the Jedi* was released in 1983 computer graphics were still in their infancy. Models were used for the spaceships and any animation for laser blasts or light sabers was accomplished the traditional way.

Sixteen years later, *The Phantom Menace* introduced a new look. Entire sequences were animated by computer. Most of the visual effects, particularly as the prequels progressed, were convincing enough, but do stand in distinct contrast to the OT.

The prequel trilogy is rendered on a more expansive canvas—more characters on more planets. We involve ourselves with the private concerns of the main characters, see a lot of action, and are privy to political machinations, this third component unseen in the OT. Maybe Lucas felt liberated by technology to tell a bigger story. As it stands, the prequels give us a broad view, the OT a narrow one.

Lucas didn't go overboard and was prescient enough to save some surprises for Episodes *IV*, *V*, and *VI*. Still, some are lost, and some new questions confront viewers of the six-film saga.

Surprises of the OT left intact include the jump to light speed from the perspective of the cockpit; the big space battles are saved for *IV* and *VI*; the first snow planet we see remains Hoth, in *V*; we never hear about tractor beams nor blasters set for stun until *IV*.

Many surprises are lost or lose their significance in the prequels. Among these are the truth of Luke and Leia's relationship, the first foray into an asteroid field, the Force choke, the Death Star (plan in *II*, under construction in *III*), the binary sunset of Tatooine, and Jedi mind tricks. Three more demand additional scrutiny:

- Before, when Luke lit his new light saber in *Return of the Jedi*, we only knew of pink and blue. A green light saber seemed to signify a fresh start to the Jedi Order. Now Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan light their sabers at the same time, one blue, one green.
- The Emperor unloads all his vitriol through Force lightning, nearly killing Luke in *Episode VI*. It was a stunning surprise, but now we know it's coming, and we know Darth Tyrannus demonstrated the same skill in *Attack of the Clones*; thus it's

not so special anymore.

- Since we've seen Yoda in the prequels, his games with Luke leave us in suspense, wondering if he has gone insane all these years alone on Degobah, or if he's faking, testing Luke's patience before he'll reveal himself. He surely remembers that Anakin was impatient, too.

In many of the above examples, suspense has been substituted for surprise. The identity of Luke's father is the ideal example. Before, when Vader revealed himself after his duel with Luke, the effect was stunning, becoming the most famous moment of the saga. Now it has been relegated to a curiosity. There was a way out. Lucas could have shown Anakin slipping to the Dark Side, but not revealed his 'death.' Coincidentally, the Emperor introduces his new apprentice, the mysterious Darth Vader. Then in *IV*, when Obi-Wan tells Luke that Vader killed Anakin, we would believe him, just as Luke does. Even as the series stands, many questions remain for the first-time viewer:

- Where is Yoda? We don't see him go to Degobah at the conclusion of *III*. He isn't referred to in *IV*. Did the Emperor tell Vader and the galaxy that Yoda was dead? (This would explain why Vader only refers to Obi-Wan training Luke, even after he's killed Obi-Wan.)
- Are Luke and Leia going to stop smooching before things get too heavy? Don't they realize they're twins?! After all, a first-time viewer doesn't know if he's watching a tragedy or what.
- Similarly, is Luke going to kill his father without realizing who he is, only to bitterly regret his actions later?
- Will Qui-Gon make an appearance?
- Was the midichlorian discussion with Anakin just speculation on Qui-Gon's part? The Jedi Council looks down on him, so it makes sense that he would interpret the ways of the Force in a unique and controversial manner. So will Episodes *IV*, *V*, and *VI* resolve the mystery?
- Will the Rebels build a droid army to match the plethora of storm troopers wielded by the Empire? Or will the Rebels just appropriate the droid army from the Clone Wars? Anakin never did carry out the Emperor's request; he never insured they were destroyed.

On the whole, the prequels are enriching, planting new subtleties in the OT. Consider:

- Obi-Wan says to a doubting Han Solo, "In my experience there's no such thing as luck." Now we know he's an authority on such matters.
- Owen holds a grudge against Obi-Wan in *Episode IV*. His motivation is strengthened by the revelation that he knew Anakin's mother well—she was his step-mom! Since he knew her as a great lady who loved his father, he figures Obi-Wan is responsible for messing Anakin up. Consequently, he'll make sure

Obi-Wan won't get the same chance with Luke.

- Vader blocks Solo's laser blast with his right hand. This was the metal hand resulting from his unfortunate clash with Count Dooku in *II*. This may be the hand he favors and we can speculate that the metal is strong enough to block the laser.
- Anakin is lectured about attachment in Episodes *II* and *III*. His connection with Padme, by then his wife, contributes mightily to his fall from grace. In Episodes *V* and *VI* we find Luke very attached to Han and Leia. It even seems that as he is lured to Cloud City by the premonition of their deaths he will succumb to the Dark Side just like his father. However, by *Return of the Jedi*, attachment becomes Luke's strength, and by treating his father like a man and not a machine, he redeems him and topples the Empire. In the end, the Council may have been wrong about the dangers of attachment, but we can assess Anakin's desire to save his mother and wife as a manifestation of his selfish character, bent on control. All Luke wants is to save Han and Leia for Han and Leia.
- Now that we know the Sand People don't shy from torture and killing, their appearance in *Episode IV* is far more tantalizing and sinister.
- Originally, when Yoda dismissed Luke by saying he was too old to begin the training of becoming a Jedi, he seemed crass and egotistical. Now we know, after seeing what happened with Anakin, who was one-half Luke's age at the start of his training, that Yoda has the creeps about screwing things up again.
- After all six movies, the issue of victory through fighting is still cloudy. Obi-Wan and Yoda seem to have nursed a bloodthirsty animus against Vader. They think Luke's idea of converting him is preposterous. But Luke was right, and he couldn't defeat the Emperor (and save himself from the Dark Side) until he stopped fighting. Obi-Wan and Yoda want Luke to mop the floor with Vader, but despite their lack of vision, he is still the Chosen One. When Obi-Wan says, "You can't win, but there are alternatives to fighting," he may be thinking of Yoda's retreat from Palpatine in the Senate chamber, or the fact that all the years the Jedi fought the Clone Wars they were only helping the man that wanted them dead.
- Anakin wears dark clothes in *III*, just before he turns. So when Luke sports the same style in *Episode VI*, it's a bad sign. (He's particularly sinister when he's Force-choking the guards at Jabba's palace.)
- Trying to save his father, Luke implores, "Come with me...." Vader replies, wistfully, "Obi-Wan once thought as you do. You don't know the power of the Dark Side," which means that when Obi-Wan was imploring Anakin to stop his evil deeds, just before their titanic light saber clash, he was blind to Anakin's inability to turn the Dark Side off, like a switch. It controlled him. Even if he wanted to change, he couldn't.

Some new patterns emerge courtesy of the prequels:

- Sith overthrowing Sith / Anakin seeking a family helper (first Padme, then Luke)
- Anakin destroys the droid control ship / Luke bombs the Death Star
- Lots of extremities are lost
- Fighting a Sith seriously accelerates one's training—Obi-Wan vs. Maul / Luke vs. Vader
- Leia follows a path similar to her mother's—first film, big-time political leader, no time for private life; second film, she still has some power, but she's willing to let herself be swept away by a man; in the third film she's marginalized (Padme pregnant, Leia a slave girl)—but things are much easier for Leia since she doesn't have to worry about Han going to the Dark Side

Two major complications remain, thorny problems. In what used to be the best scene of the OT, Luke tells Leia he is her brother and Darth Vader is her father. Luke, thinking he is about to die, tries to learn about Leia's mother, her "real mother." She says she died when she was very young and she has nothing but images and feelings, particularly that this woman was very beautiful, kind, but sad. That description fits Padme to a tee, but their mother was dead before the twins were out of the womb five minutes. The Force could definitely aid Leia in her recollections, but as to why Luke doesn't remember anything...well, this is a persistent mystery.

Even more troubling to the integration of the two trilogies, after Luke leaves Degobah to take on Vader, Yoda says, "Told you, I did—reckless is he. Now matters are worse. Obi-Wan replies, "That boy was our last hope." Yoda: "No...there is another."

Before, we could assume Obi-Wan knew nothing about Leia's origins. He does address the issue in *VI*, but his oblique syntax indicates no interest in giving Luke the straight truth—typical Obi-Wan: "Hmm...to protect you both from the Emperor you were hidden from you father when you were born. The Emperor knew as I did, if Anakin were to have any offspring they would be a threat to him. That is why your sister remains safely anonymous."

So even with the benefit of this priceless nugget, we still don't know what Ben knew. Yoda hints in *V* that there is still one more Skywalker in the bullpen to take down dear old Dad. This worked well and generated a lot of suspense for *Episode VI*, regardless of how we interpret Ben's revelations to Luke.

But now any chance of explaining this away is gone. We know that Obi-Wan was present at the birth of Luke and Leia. He knows the whole story. If Yoda and Obi-Wan are talking about destroying Vader (and not the Emperor) their exchange makes little sense. Even if Obi-Wan dismissed Leia as not up to the challenge, Yoda would say, "No, there's still Leia." He wouldn't say, "No, there is another," because this implies someone Obi-Wan is not familiar with. Maybe they're talking about destroying the Emperor, and Yoda is gently hinting that Anakin could be redeemed, that he is 'the other.' But Yoda says in *Episode VI*, "You must confront Vader." He doesn't say you must reason with him. And when Luke tells Yoda that he knows Vader is his father, Yoda is discouraged—which only makes sense because he wants Luke to kill Vader, a task more difficult now that Luke knows too much. And if Yoda wants Luke to kill Vader, then he doesn't think Vader can be the mysterious 'another hope.'

What was one of the great mind-benders of the OT is now a sorry morass of improbability.

In time, all six films will probably be seen as a cohesive unit. Their origins will be forgotten, and they will stand on their own to be analyzed by new generations of film critics.

Still, whatever Lucas's intentions, his word is not cinematic law. Every movie is its own world and can (perhaps must) be interpreted without the burdensome knowledge of its origins. For those who detest the prequels, with willpower they can be forgotten, and personal speculation on what transpired before *A New Hope* can launch new flights of fancy with each viewing of the OT. Some others, a minority indeed, only enjoy the original *Star Wars* and see in its one film all the story they desire to know.

And exactly what is the story we're talking about, anyway?

We know what happens, but what it is all about has changed along with much else. The OT was about Luke—the callow farm boy turned brooding hot-head in *Episode V*, then the burdened new Jedi facing a certain death in *Episode VI*. It's a fascinating character arc. The PT is all about Anakin, and since Anakin does feature in the OT (in the guise of Darth Vader) and he does destroy the Emperor, the films are probably about him. Luke just helps his father fulfill his destiny as the Chosen One.

However, the powerful scoring of John Williams now enters our consideration. The famous *Star Wars* theme, heard over each film's opening crawl, doubles as Luke's theme. When he appears in *Episode IV* it is played and it is played to herald his arrival in *Episode III*, produced some 25 years later. Since the film score is, in effect, a built-in commentary on the direction of the story, the *Star Wars* theme is Luke's theme...so Luke is the hero of *Star Wars*. He got it right where his father went wrong, and though Anakin killed the Emperor, he couldn't have done it without the example of Luke's sacrifice. Without Anakin there would have been no Empire. Without Luke, the Rebellion against the Empire would have failed. This is what *Star Wars* is all about, and so it shall remain.