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The *Star Wars* Saga: Comedy versus Tragedy

Why is it that some of the most fervent admirers of George Lucas' 1977 *Star Wars* have reacted so adversely to its 1980 sequel, the George Lucas/Irving Kershner *The Empire Strikes Back*, while others who greeted the original *Star Wars* with only moderate interest have become devotees of the 1980 film?¹ Why is it that when viewers of both *Star Wars* and *Empire* talk together about the two films, their conversation tends quickly to become a heated argument about the respective merits and defects of each work? The questions are worth asking because, as critical analyses of the two films proliferate, we are becoming more and more aware of the "serious" aspects (literary and cinematic allusiveness, mythic elements, psychological and religious implications, complex design, and so forth) of the *Star Wars* movies;² and moreover we now also know that over some 25 years George Lucas intends to create a total *Star Wars* saga of 9 interrelated films grouped into three trilogies—a daringly large-scale plan suggesting in itself Lucas' serious commitment (as he has also discussed in interviews) to his totally-created imaginative galaxy "far far away". Lucas has in fact called his work fairytale, epic, and myth,³ and has stated that "Fairy tales are how people learn about good and evil, about how to conduct themselves in society;"⁴ and his planned nine-episode narrative line (of a virtuous republic which becomes corrupt and falls [episodes 1-3], and then is ultimately rebuilt [episodes 7-9])⁵ also suggests—along with, for example, his stormtroopers, and criticism of impersonal capitalism (via *Empire's* Bespin)—a political dimension to his concerns.

The two *Star Wars* films released to date—the 1977 original *Star Wars*, now retitled *A New Hope* (episode 4 of the projected 9-episode series), and the 1980 *The Empire Strikes Back* (episode 5)—are of course very different from one another in plot and in design, while similarly relying in part for their success on innovative special effects, on archetypal characters and events, and on the imaginative creation

of new worlds. And, to some extent, general audiences and critics alike have approached the second film with certain preconceptions or expectations raised by *A New Hope*—and of course not all met by *Empire*—concerning narrative line, camera work, and the like, which have coloured their reactions to the sequel. The most basic answer to critical and non-critical disagreements about the two films probably lies, however, not in the relative merits of the two films on grounds such as plot line, cinematography, and design, nor in “bandwagon effect,” “success envy,” or any similar sociological or psychological explanation, but in the extreme philosophical difference between the two movies—for both films *do* have an underlying serious philosophy. Special effects, parody, nostalgia, sources, and the like aside—together with all other such interesting and complex aspects of the films which have elicited lengthy commentaries in both popular magazines and cinema journals⁶—the 1977 *A New Hope* is about mankind’s seemingly unlimited potential, above all emotionally, for goodness and for greatness. The film is indeed what Lucas has called it, “an intergalactic dream of heroism”.⁷ *The Empire Strikes Back*, though a part of the same *Star Wars* fairytale or myth, essentially reverses the philosophy of the first film, dealing soberingly with human limitations which are also above all emotional. The first film appeals to the enthusiastic optimist in us, the second, to our doubts nevertheless about what real-life heroes can achieve. In this, of course, the first film is more a child’s movie than the second: or, for adults, more an escapist movie than the second.

In the 1977 *A New Hope*, Luke Skywalker, a reckless and restless farm-boy on the desert planet of Tatooine, essentially learns how, when one emotionally chooses a known good and then acts upon one’s choice with courage and determination, success is the inevitable result. At first reluctant to “get involved” in anything beyond his immediate, limited interests, Luke is abruptly forced, by the destruction of his home and family by the evil Galactic Empire, into the camp of what is presented clearly as virtue: rebellion against the Empire. The film emphasizes Luke’s initial refusal to leave Tatooine with Ben Kenobi, before the destruction of his uncle and aunt’s homestead, as due primarily to moral disinterest;⁸ and this wrong “decision”, upon which Luke has spent no time or thought, fate promptly compels him to alter.⁹ Luke then quickly learns to trust his emotional impulses towards heroic action: for example, his growing hatred of the Empire, his interest in learning traditional ways of virtuous combat, his desire to rescue the beautiful Princess Leia from her prison cell in the Empire’s planet-exploding Death Star, his determination personally to destroy the Death Star. And accordingly, by the film’s end, Luke

has been emotionally and materially rewarded by the acquisition of a new family (the Rebel group), a love object (Leia), a new buddy (the cynical adventurer-with-a-heart-of-gold, Han Solo), a faithful droid helper (R2-D2), and a hero's medal. The little guy has triumphed over incredible odds—through personal strength and skill, good intentions, and above all emotional responsiveness and faith. This is a quintessential success story, and in keeping with the way in which Americans have traditionally regarded both the successes of their own historical past (as in their own eighteenth-century rebellion against an empire) and the potential for success in their present democratic political system.

Other characters in *A New Hope* go through a learning experience similar to Luke's. The Princess Leia, her entire home planet of Alderaan destroyed by the Imperial Death Star, continues to act with courage and conviction against the Empire, and thus in part effects her own rescue from the Death Star and is a direct cause, through the detailed plans she carries to the Rebel forces, of the Death Star's ultimate destruction. By the film's end she is heroine extraordinaire—also within the Rebel family, and with two heroic male admirers as well. Han Solo, the adventurer-individualist, fights for much of the film against his impractical impulses towards friendship and loyalty—but ultimately gives in to them and, having saved Luke and hence the entire Rebel base in the Death Star battle, finds himself a happy hero and a family member too. The film's final sequence—the ceremonial medal presentation within the Rebel group—is extraordinary in its mixture of the formal and the personal, the state and the “family,” principles and direct emotions. “Luke, trust your feelings,” Ben Kenobi has earlier told the central hero of the film;¹⁰ and when all trust their uncomplicated feelings, as opposed to what reason tells them is practical, all succeed, both personally and politically. Duty, friendship, potential romantic love, a good cause: all work together. Escapist entertainment? Yes, in part. But the film *does* speak a truth about what Denis Wood, a fervent admirer of *A New Hope*, has aptly called “growing up among the stars”.¹¹ Heroic aspiration, and an emotional commitment to humane values, *can* exist together in life, inspire us, and be a powerful force for the good. *A New Hope*, as David Brudnoy wrote in 1977, “is as old-fashioned and uplifting as Faith and Love.”¹²

The Empire Strikes Back, however, ironically brings us up with a jolt against almost the opposite view of human experience. In this sequel to *A New Hope*, with many sequences in part deliberately paralleled to ones in the earlier film (doubtless partly to heighten the philosophical contrast),¹³ feelings are no longer necessarily to be trusted, virtuous emotions are in conflict with one another, and heroic

impulses and friendship lead not to inevitable personal and political success but instead to frustration and anguish. Luke Skywalker, loyal to his Jedi father's memory and to his mentor Ben Kenobi, begins his training as a Jedi knight (a defender of virtue in the galaxy) on the primeval planet of Dagobah and learns that his own emotions (for example, of anger, hatred, and impatience) can be his worst enemies. The abstract magical tree-cave sequence—strikingly unlike anything in *A New Hope*—even symbolically suggests, in Luke's combat with a Darth Vader who turns out to be Luke himself, that the kind of evil represented by the Empire, in the person of Vader, consists of these emotions (especially hatred and fear) within all men, including Luke;¹⁴ and the film continually emphasizes not trusting one's feelings but controlling them. ("Control!" Yoda admonishes Luke on Dagobah. "Control! You must learn control!") Nor can Luke even safely follow what seem to be his positive emotions of love and of friendship. His Jedi teachers on Dagobah argue, when Luke wants to break off his Jedi training to go to the aid of his captured and suffering friends, Han and Leia, on the man-made space city of Bespin, that personal love and friendship can endanger and even destroy the virtuous Rebel cause; and moreover, when Luke emotionally chooses to go to Bespin, against his teachers' advice, his choice leads only to disastrous results. By the film's end Luke, in hand-to-hand combat with Darth Vader, has lost both his right hand and his Jedi father's light saber (the defensive weapon of virtue)—losses both literal and symbolic; he has been claimed by the forces of evil as their own (Darth Vader—literally or symbolically—calling himself Luke's father) and has almost succumbed to them (as he responds "Father" to Vader—his filial loyalty here turning him *away* from virtuous action); and he has indirectly caused his friend Han Solo to be deepfrozen by Vader (as Vader, upon Luke's approach to Bespin, tests the Bespin carbon-freezing unit on Han).

Luke's very trip to Bespin is implicitly presented, in fact, as a fall into temptation; Vader, in part a devil-figure in *Empire* (as in his "temptation" of Luke high above the lights of Bespin),¹⁵ causes it through an appeal to Luke's emotions both good (friendship, loyalty) and bad (anger, hatred, pride, impatience). Luke has acted in part on the same apparently "noble" impulses that led him to success in *A New Hope*: but with very different results. As Yoda puts it to Ben Kenobi, upon Luke's departure from Dagobah for Bespin, "Reckless is he; now matters are worse." In *A New Hope*, for example, Luke's impulsive, purely emotional decision, on the Death Star, to disregard Ben Kenobi's instructions to remain with the droids which carry the Death Star plans, and instead to attempt a rescue of the Princess Leia from

imminent death, is presented as clearly a correct decision: the rescue is successfully accomplished, with scarcely a glance by the film at the act itself of decision-making, and good is the ultimate result all round. Luke becomes a (somewhat parodied) superman hero, swinging across a chasm to safety with his princess; and thanks to Leia the Death Star plans are then carried to the Rebels, who use them successfully against the Empire. To follow one's emotions impulsively, against the practical advice of others, leads both to personal satisfaction and to admirable political results. In *Empire*, however, heavy emphasis falls on Luke's protracted and difficult attempt to decide between Yoda's and Ben Kenobi's advice to him to remain on Dagobah to finish his Jedi training, for the sake of the Rebel cause, and his own emotional wish to go to help Han and Leia on Bespin; and, as we have seen, when Luke chooses (as in *A New Hope*) to follow his apparently positive emotions, he both fails to help either Han or Leia (instead Leia must rescue *him*) and seemingly jeopardizes, through his own partial fall into evil, the ultimate success of the Rebel cause which is now (we are told) largely dependent on him. The film ends with a considerably less successful Luke than does *A New Hope*: it shows a Luke whose emotions, negative or positive, may mislead him, and whose greatest success thus now lies not in heroic action but in his growth towards self-knowledge and in his capacity for endurance (both physical and emotional) of what evil—both within and without—can do. Personal satisfaction is no longer inevitably joined with trusting one's feelings; dreams have turned to nightmares; and personal emotions and political cause have also now been sharply separated.

Similarly, Han and Leia in *Empire* learn the dangers and dissatisfactions of following the (uncontrolled) emotions. Han impulsively rescues Leia from Imperial forces in an initial battle on the ice planet of Hoth, as he did Luke in the Death Star battle at the end of *A New Hope*, but as a result becomes not a hero but a frozen effigy in enemy hands. Leia begins to acknowledge her emotional attraction to Han, and accordingly suffers terribly through his torture and freezing on Bespin. The siren's-chorus music as Han and Leia in the Millennium Falcon head for Bespin, for the first time in the two films in emotional closeness to one another, even suggests the potential destructiveness of romantic love; as in Lucas' earlier *American Graffiti*, but far more darkly, romantic love becomes a trap for those who succumb to it. Neither is friendship to be trusted; Han and Leia are betrayed to Darth Vader by Han's old "buddy", Lando: a character who, paralleled closely to Han, represents Han's alter ego, or dark side.¹⁶ And whereas in *A New Hope* Luke's trust of Ben Kenobi leads Luke to victory over Darth Vader, in *Empire* Leia's trust of Han leads only into Vader's

trap.¹⁷ Like Luke, Han and Leia in *Empire* follow their emotions, unknowingly, into evil—and their only real success then lies in growing self-knowledge and in heroic personal endurance of evil.

Luke, Han, Leia: all three in their emotional crises and troubled decisions, upon which the film focuses (rather than upon actions, as in *A New Hope*), are less “superbeings”, more realistically human, in *Empire* than in the first film. (A number of reviewers have commented on the development of characterization, beyond *A New Hope*, in *Empire*—though without seeing this development as based on human emotional limitations.) Like the Millennium Falcon, in the second film all the heroes are emotionally fallible—with the more practical aspects of their fallibility reflecting their emotional limitations. Han’s superb “modification” work on his spaceship in *A New Hope*, for example, which makes the Falcon virtually unbeatable, has become in *Empire* a complete inability to repair the Falcon’s hyperdrive system. And, significantly, even the formerly super-evil Empire is taking on a more fallible, human look in the 1980 film; as Denis Wood points out (though critically) in his *Film Quarterly* review,¹⁸ Darth Vader and company in *Empire* have become less expert in evil than they were in *A New Hope*; and Vader himself now seems, too, less one-sided—as his interview with the Emperor, and apparent determination to preserve Luke’s life, raise the possibility of his actually feeling a positive emotional bond with Luke. Does this too cast an ironic light upon seemingly positive emotions such as parental/filial love and loyalty? In his final defeat (for no one wins in this film except Boba Fett) Vader may even arouse our pity, as the Millennium Falcon speeds Luke away from him and, head bowed, he moves silently and alone past his men towards his own quarters. Dark Side and Light (Good) Side are no longer seen in separate characters, as more or less mutually exclusive; they co-exist emotionally within all men.

In thus viewing human emotions ironically, *Empire* may seem less than *A New Hope*, reduced in its scope and viewpoint; all emotions, and the resulting choices and consequences, are mixed and doubtful. For those, however, who are more moved by the tragic than by the comic view of life, *Empire* may seem greater than the emotionally uncomplicated *A New Hope*: more complex, more recognizably human in the emotions, problems, and courage it presents.

In short: where *A New Hope*, with an invigorating, child-like perspective, fills us with enthusiasm for emotions such as love and friendship, heroic impulses, and the potential for goodness and greatness—personal and political—in those “growing up among the stars,” *The Empire Strikes Back* challenges us with an altered picture of existence in which personal love and friendship can work against admirable

political goals and can cause anguish as well as joy, heroic impulses can lead to disaster, and the process of growing towards maturity can involve, above all, not emotional trust and daring battles for the good but emotional caution and resistant endurance of evil.¹⁹ No wonder many of the greatest admirers of *A New Hope*—of the exuberant optimism of its story, musical soundtrack, and comic effects—have felt betrayed by *Empire*. Act Two of the *Star Wars* central trilogy (*A New Hope* being Act One, and the sequel to *Empire* to be Act Three²⁰) is indeed, as Lucas has called it, an emotional tragedy,²¹ seemingly denying the redemptive, comic impulses of the first film. But, as tragedy, it has drawn into the *Star Wars* saga a number of admirers who found the optimism of the first film enjoyable but not of the stuff of greatness. And, in the light of the second film, the dark overtones of *Empire* can even be seen as foreshadowed in *A New Hope*: above all in the final medal-presentation ceremony, which, as a number of reviewers of the 1977 film commented, bears at points a striking visual resemblance to moments in Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 Nazi propaganda documentary, *The Triumph of the Will*.²² The ceremony hence perhaps suggests, even at the film's triumphant climax, a potential dark side to the seemingly positive emotions of both the film's characters and the movie-theatre audience (the latter identified, through camera work, with the Rebel audience at the ceremony²³)—a dark side to personal and political military heroism however good the cause. War is, for example, brutal and brutalizing—as when we see the young Luke casually heaving a guard's body about, in the Death Star detention-area fight to rescue Leia; and Leia's political loyalty (under torture) to the Rebel forces causes the Imperial destruction of her home planet of Alderaan. Faith, moreover, we may remember, in *A New Hope* is not only what Ben Kenobi expects from Luke but also what Darth Vader expects from Imperial adherents.²⁴

It remains to be seen whether Lucas, script writer Lawrence Kasdan, and the director of the next *Star Wars* episode (*Revenge of the Jedi*—planned for release in 1983) Richard Marquand, will return to comedy for Act Three of the *Star Wars* central trilogy, showing the emotional choices of *Empire* to have been in the end necessary for final (narrative) success, or will try for some sort of tragi-comic synthesis.²⁵ We can be sure only that the final ending will not be entirely tragic: for George Lucas is simply not that sort of filmmaker. Meanwhile, the heated controversy over the relative merits of *A New Hope* and *Empire* is bound to continue—in part on objective grounds but also in large part on subjective ones—since the films involve some of the most basic emotions, positive and negative, of those commenting upon them and upon (usually unconsciously) the philosophical life-views they present.

NOTES

1. See e.g. Denis Wood, "Growing Up Among the Stars," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 6 (1978), 327-341, and "The Stars in Our Hearts," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 6 (1978), 262-279 (both articles most admiring of the 1977 film), and "The Empire's New Clothes," *Film Quarterly*, 34.3 (1981), 10-16 (attacking *Empire*); also Richard Grenier, "Celebrating Defeat," *Commentary*, 70.2 (August 1980), 58-62, and Anne Lancashire, "Complex Design in *The Empire Strikes Back*" *Film Criticism*, 5.3 (1981), 38-52.
2. See e.g.: Andrew Gordon, "Star Wars: A Myth for Our Time," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 6 (1978), 314-326, and "*The Empire Strikes Back*: Monsters from the Id," *Science-Fiction Studies*, 7.3 (1980), 313-318; "Star Wars: The Year's Best Movie," *Time* (Canadian edn.), 30 May 1977, pp. 46-48 and 51; Gerald Clarke, "*The Empire Strikes Back*!" *Time* (Canadian edn.), 19 May 1980, pp. 48-52 and 54; "In the Footsteps of Ulysses," *Time* (Canadian edn.), 19 May 1980, p. 52; Stephen Zito, "George Lucas Goes Far Out," *American Film*, 2.6 (April 1977), 8-13; Conrad Phillip Kottak, "Social-Science Fiction," *Psychology Today*, 11.9 (February 1978), 12, 17-18, 106; David Singer, "The Empire: A 'Force' that Fails to Fill the Void," *Christianity Today*, 19 Sept. 1980, pp. 28-29; Aljean Harmetz, "The Saga Beyond 'Star Wars,'" *New York Times*, 18 May 1980, Sec. 2, pp. 1 and 23; Lancashire, *passim*; Alain Garsault, "Un Cosmos Tres Universel," *Positif*, 234 (Sept. 1980), 36-38.
3. Harmetz, "Saga," p. 23; Clarke, p. 54.
4. Harmetz, "Saga," p. 23.
5. See *Time*, 19 May 1980, p. 51.
6. See e.g.: *American Cinematographer*, 58.7 (July 1977), *passim*, and 61.6 (June 1980), *passim*; Paul Scanlon, "The Force Behind George Lucas," *Rolling Stone*, 25 August 1977, pp. 40-48 and 50-51; Vincent Canby, "Not Since 'Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe' . . ." *New York Times*, 5 June 1977, Sec. 2, pp. 15 and 33; Aljean Harmetz, "Today's Hottest Movie Stars—C3PO and R2-D2," *New York Times*, 5 June 1977, Sec. 2, pp. 1, 15, 25; *The Star Wars Album* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), *passim*; and also above, n. 2.
7. Philip Strick, "Star Tracks," *Sight and Sound*, 45 (1975-76), 151.
8. Ben Kenobi's dwelling sequence. "I can't get involved!" Luke says to Ben, who has suggested that Luke join the Rebels against the Empire. "I've got work to do! It's not that I like the Empire. I hate it! But there's nothing I can do about it right now. It's such a long way from here." Ben replies, "That's your uncle talking"—the uncle who, Ben has previously said, didn't hold with Luke's father's "ideals". In an earlier sequence, of course, Luke has been only too eager to leave Tatooine, and his aunt and uncle, to join the space Academy. (Dialogue quoted here and below, from both *A New Hope* and *Empire*, has been checked against the films themselves, as for neither movie is the published filmscript accurate.)
9. Interestingly, the later radio version of *A New Hope* (broadcast by the CBC in summer 1981) alters (radio episode 5) the emphasis of the film at this point and makes Luke's initial refusal of Ben Kenobi due above all to Luke's concern for his relatives: an emotional choice which, however, fate also at once reverses, so that no decision-making problem or blame attaches itself to Luke. Luke's additional radio dialogue runs, after Ben has said (on both radio and film) "You must do what you feel is right, of course": "What I feel is right? Ben, I'd like to help you . . . Do you think it's right to run out on Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru? They're all the family I've got, and I'm not going to let anything happen to them. And if that's not right, well I'd rather be wrong." Ben replies, "Yes, of course. Sometimes even the best intentions may be contradictory. Perhaps your answer lies with the Force, within you."
10. Death Star battle sequence: near the start. Ben Kenobi is here a disembodied voice only.
11. See n. 1, above.
12. "The Perfect Movie," *National Review*, 29 (1977), 839-840. See also especially Gordon, "Myth," on the positive, "guilt-free" nature of *A New Hope* (pp. 321, 323, 325). Lucas himself has spoken of the film as "a sort of wholesome, honest vision about the way you want the world to be" (Scanlon, p. 44).
13. See Lancashire, *passim*, and compare e.g. *A New Hope*'s Death Star escape with *Empire*'s Bespin escape.
14. See Lancashire, pp. 40-41, and Gordon, "Monsters", p. 314. Significantly, in *A New Hope* Luke's hatred of the Empire is an important factor leading to his final successes; but in *Empire* (departure from Dagobah sequence) Ben Kenobi counsels Luke not to give in to hate because it leads to the Dark Side.
15. Lancashire, pp. 44-45; Gordon, p. 314.

16. Lancashire, pp. 43-44.
17. Ben asks for Luke's trust in the Death Star battle sequence, Han for Leia's trust upon arrival on Bespin.
18. Wood, "Clothes," p. 14.
19. See also Gordon, "Monsters," *passim*, for a mythic and psychological view of the difference between *A New Hope* and *Empire*.
20. Harmetz, "Saga," p. 23.
21. *Ibid.*
22. See Canby, p. 33, and Arthur Lubow, "A Space Iliad," and Terry Curtis Fox, "Star Drek," both in *Film Comment*, 13 (July-Aug. 1977), 20-23.
23. The heroes turn and bow to the camera and Rebel audience together—so that the theatre audience becomes part of the applauding Rebel group.
24. See the Death Star conference sequence, immediately following the Ben Kenobi dwelling sequence.
25. Luke's fall, e.g., may ultimately be shown as a "fortunate" one—acknowledgment of one's own potential for evil being a prerequisite for final control of evil; but whether Luke himself will triumph in the end, in worldly terms, remains to be seen.