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She / Her

***Watching a Galaxy Far Far Away  
(Some Things Star Wars Taught  
Me About Cinema And More)***

(CW: some graphic images, racism, sexism, homophobia, fascism and horrible people.)

From a talk at Nine Worlds 2017.

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***Let me tell you a story.***

A long time ago in a galaxy far,  
far away....

## *Episode IV: A Big Picture*

The Italian dubbing of *Star Wars* was *not exactly thorough*. One of the most *interesting* points was “the Clone Wars” - it was translated as “La Guerra dei Quoti” - something like “The Quoto War”.

Nobody actually noticed it.

To notice the error would have required

- 1) Seeing the movie in the original version
- 2) Speaking English
- 3) Knowing enough sci-fi to know that “clones” were a thing

In 1977, watching a movie required a movie theatre, a very expensive roll of film (actually, a couple of those)...

Learning a language was expensive.

Communicating with people who had very different experiences from your own was almost impossible.

*“You can type this shit, George,  
but you can't say it!”*

(Harrison Ford, ca.1977)

But, in general, words are not the strong point of *Episode IV*, the first *Star Wars* movie.

*A New Hope* is a very **visual** film.

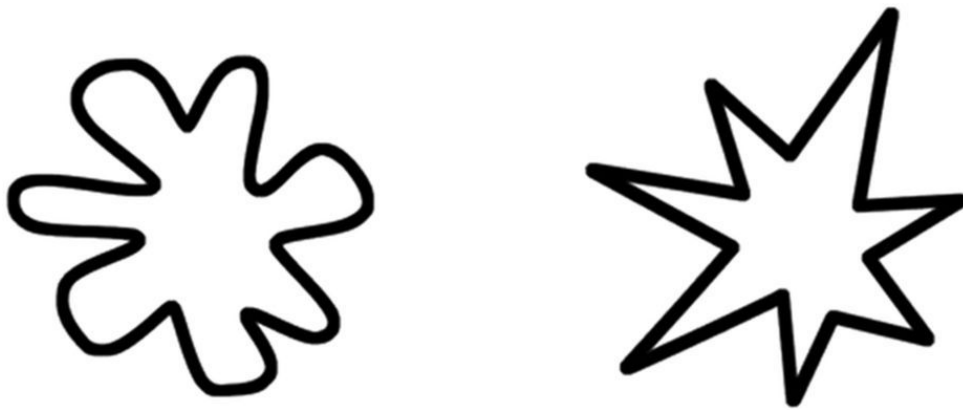
It shows very much how George Lucas was a film student; even more, a film student who had done mostly experimental art movies (BTW, they're all on YouTube, and some [e.g., *Freiheit*] show an actual talent for action storytelling, a good proof of how “experimental art” doesn't mean “pretentious and boring”). He was very conscious of the “theory” that's behind getting audience reactions from an image.

*By God, **I want to see it.** That image is in my head, and I won't rest until I see it on the screen.*

(George Lucas)

And he was clearly obsessed by **what you see.**

Dig deep



Most people associate the figure on the left with the word Bouba and the one on the right with the word Kiki. There's no reason for that, but it happens.

Wolfgang Köhler in Tenerife, 1929 (Baluba / Takete)  
Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and Edward Hubbard,  
using American college students and Tamil  
speakers in India, 2001

On the other hand: responses of non-neurotypical  
people don't show a strong preference.

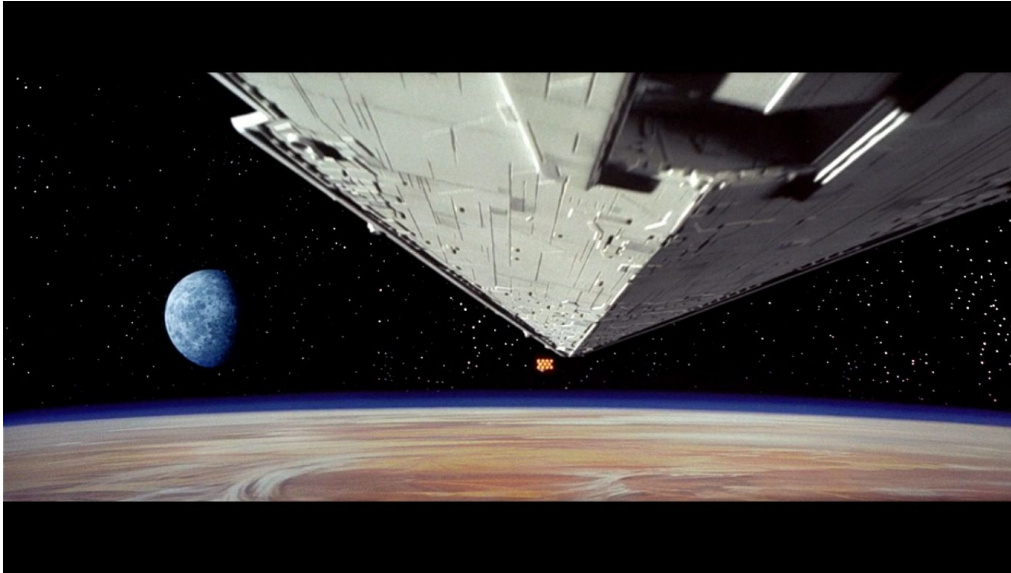
But, in general: **there are some shapes / colours  
that elicit instinctive responses.**

Pointed = dangerous, Rounded = safe

Red = dangerous, Green / Blue = relaxing

It makes sense: being scared of sharp things and fire  
is a good idea, if you want to survive.

Guess which ones are the Bad Guys.





Guess the alignment.



If you tap into the collective unconscious...



(George Lucas, 1977)

There might be a minor issue...

...someone might have done it before.



(*The Searchers* – John Ford, 1956)

Once again: George Lucas was a film student. To count the “homimages” to classic Hollywood movies in *Star Wars* would take hours.

It's not a coincidence, though, that he references Western a lot: the great American epic, that he tries to revive in space. “There was no modern mythology to give kids a sense of values, to give them **a strong mythological fantasy life. Western were the last of that genre for the Americans.**”  
(George Lucas)

But don't worry...



*(The Hidden Fortress – Akira Kurosawa, 1958)*

And as film student, Lucas had access to films that were “exotic” and definitely rare to find for an average American (or even European!) audience.

...you won't get caught.



(George Lucas, 1977)

Once more: in 1977, or even just before the www, it was hard to access to a lot of knowledge that today you can discover easily. You didn't even **know** that some things could exist. The chances of meeting someone who loved Akira Kurosawa, or could explain you the cultural context of his films, were tiny – now they're a few tumblrs away from you.

This could lead to a debate about “cultural appropriation through the ages” - but this is for another time.

Back to *Star Wars*: the trick of *Episode IV* is to aim at the absolute, at the timeless...

## All You Need Are Archetypes...

*When all the archetypes burst out shamelessly,  
we plumb Homeric profundity.*

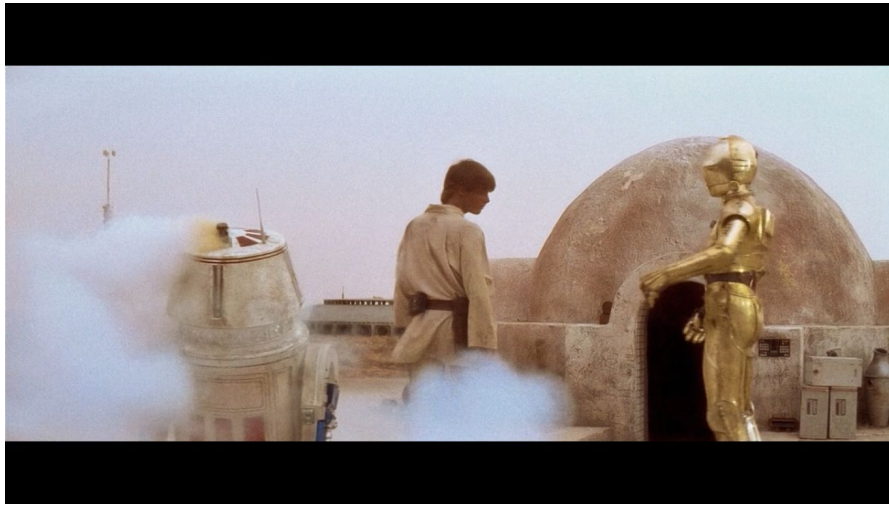
***Two clichés make us laugh but a hundred  
clichés move us, because we sense dimly that  
the clichés are talking among themselves,  
celebrating a reunion.***

(Umberto Eco, 1984)

...and this works is because it goes for your gut reaction **all the way**. You get mesmerised by shapes that speak to your instinct, you don't really question what a "Quoto" is.

The article by Umberto Eco uses *Casablanca* as **the** example of cult movie, but it applies to any cult movie.

The Force is a *Deus Ex Machina*.



(And you don't explain The Force.)

Example: the Force.

There's a plot point you want to solve. Who you're gonna call? The Force.

That's how The Force works



Finn was right. Maybe because he's a Millennial who's spent too much time on TvTropes and he's become *genre-savvy*.

[Who, me? I'm not a Millennial.]



## ...and a MacGuffin

*In crook stories it is almost always the necklace,  
and in spy stories it is most always the papers.*

(Alfred Hitchcock)

If you consider *ANH* by itself, as the film that came out in 1977 – you can see how the plot is based on a MacGuffin: the screenwriter's Deus Ex Machina.

*There are two men on a train. One man says, "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?" And the other answers, "Oh, that's a MacGuffin".*

*The first one asks, "What's a MacGuffin?" "Well," the other man says, "it's **an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.**" The first man says, "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands," and the other one answers, "Well then, that's no MacGuffin!"*

*So you see that **a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.***

(Alfred Hitchcock)

See: *Hitchcock: A Definitive Study of Alfred Hitchcock*, by François Truffaut (1967). If you love cinema, in general, read it.



– What's so important? What's he carrying?  
– The technical readouts of that battle station.

The papers.

## The surprises are reassuring

*It's totally uninterested in anything that doesn't connect with **the mass audience** [...]*

*Star Wars might be the only movie in which the first time around **the surprises are reassuring**.*

*(Pauline Kael, *The New York Times*, 1977)*

But if the surprises are reassuring, what's left to watch?

How come that the movie is watched over and over again, and that has spawned seven other movies, and an incredible amount of tie-in novels, tv shows, comics, videogames...?

I believe that one of the reasons behind the obsession with *Star Wars* is hidden exactly behind this “reassuring”. **You already know everything that really matters**, and you plunge into the world...

## The universe is a used space

*What are the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a **cult object**? [...] It must provide a **completely furnished world**.*

(Umberto Eco)

*Expand world = **behind every man there must be a complete world**.*

(George Lucas, ca. 1975)

*He had been struck by how dirty the Apollo missions had been when they returned from space. [...] His catchphrase was "**used space**".*

(Garry Jenkins)

So, you explore the world. One of the reasons why SW is a cult: as Eco says, it provides a completely furnished world.

There's a not so irrelevant detail: in those two hours of movie, you won't be shown everything about that world. That's why in *Star Wars* (at least, in the 1977 movie) it's immaterial if Obi-Wan served in the Clones or in the *Quoto* wars: what matters is a hint of "about 20 years ago there was a war, maybe that brought on the Empire like WWI helped the rise of Nazism".

*Lucas had his own specific experience of watching Kurosawa in mind: an immersion inot customs that the characters understand, but that we, as visitors to the culture, must piece together. (Will Brooker)*

*Episode V: The Screenplay  
Strikes Back*

But people are curious, and fans are fanatics, and fanatics obsess over knowing more details, over advancing in the hierarchy of mysteries...

People start talking.

Maybe that's why *The Empire Strikes Back* has a better screenplay than *A New Hope*. Or maybe Lucas wanted to do something else, or it just happened – go figure...



That's the set of *The Big Sleep*, by Howard Hawks, after Raymond Chandler, with Bogart & Bacall... The lady over there is (I think!) Leigh Brackett, who co-wrote the script for "The Big Sleep" and – many years later – the first draft of the script of *TESB*. Leigh Brackett wrote space operas, and more than a few "Hawks women": Lauren Bacall in "To Have and Have Not" and "The Big Sleep", Angie Dickinson in "Rio Bravo"... Hawks women are characterised by being both very feminine and "one of the boys" when it comes to holding their ground – especially in dialogues that often have sexual undertones. Does it remind you of Leia in a cave?

Much of Leigh Brackett's script for *TESB* got changed, but something remains. One thing's for sure: the screenplay of Episode V is much better than the screenplay of Episode IV, despite the sanctimonious Yoda parts.

## It's not just quotable material



[Personal story time: when I was 15, I had the money for exactly one VHS of a *Star Wars* film in English – a rare thing, import and all. The price was more or less the equivalent of £100 now. The choice was of course between *ANH* and *TESB*. *ANH* was “the mythical one”, but I picked *TESB*, mostly because of Leia and Han (hello, 15-year-old bisexual geek girl). Comparing the Original and the Dubbed version (I knew both by heart) taught me a lot about musicality and precision of language.]

## It's character development



In *The Empire Strikes Back*, the characterisation is no longer given just by “she's dressed in white with the hair buns” “he's in a seedy saloon and shoots first”: it's “they can't stop bickering, they always want to have the last word because they can't let go of each other”. And each word of that bickering matters – its implications, even its rhythm, just like the shots and the shapes in *A New Hope*.



It tells you a story...



These lines matter. They describe, and imply, something that isn't shown: Vader is trying to convince Luke to switch to the Dark Side.

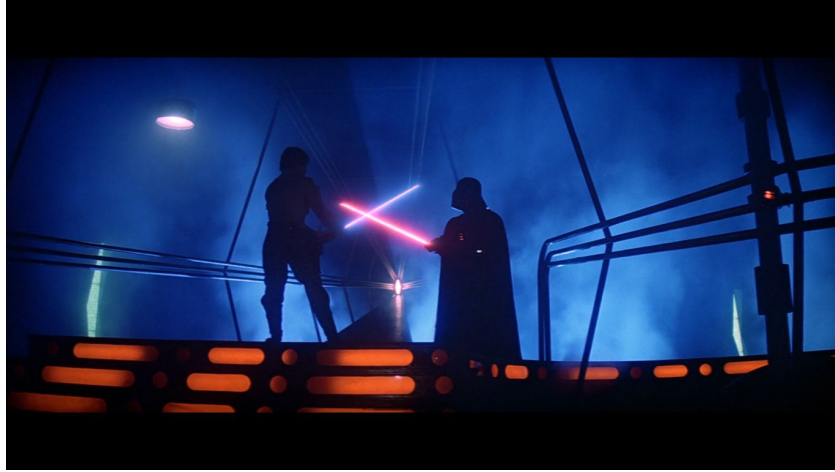
*"If you strike me down, I'll become more powerful than you could possibly imagine"* - it's quotable, but the fact that Obi-Wan's body disappears is enough to tell you that "death is not the end of a Jedi".

...one that matters.



The montage has a perfect rhythm as well, following the pace of the dialogue...

And there are still perfect shots



The photography in *TESB* is even more complex and (especially the colours) more thoroughly researched than in *ANH*. Whether this is good or bad it's a matter of taste, of course...

An interesting difference: in *TESB* it's the colours, more than the shapes, that are employed to create "instinctive" reactions – see above: It's not just the red and blue lightsaber, it's a room where there's a very alarming red, a blue that makes it stand out, but it's also filled with dark corners and smoke...

See also: the scary white of Hoth that's destroyed by the Empire's attack, the dark green of Dagobah, the soft but slightly disorienting light of Bespin...

The shapes are less important, though still beautiful.

## The Force is sight and sound



(Sophocles sends his regards from 429 BC.)

And then you have The Big Reveal – which is a line,  
not a shot.

## *Episode VI: Cult of the Jedi*

And here our troubles begin. With a bunch of muppets, as Kevin Smith[\*] put it.

[\*] *Clerks*, by Kevin Smith, 1994. *The* indie film of my generation, possible beginning of the *geek chic* phenomenon. Content warning for *everything*.

This space is being used for a test

*It must provide a completely furnished world so that **its fans can quote characters and episodes** as if they were aspects of the fan's **private sectarian world**, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that **the adepts of the sect recognize each other** through a shared expertise.*

(Umberto Eco)

There are many bad things in *Return of the Jedi*: the direction is sloppy, the plan to save Han from Jabba the Hutt is a mess that requires **a lot** of suspension of disbelief (it's basically the opposite of “redundancy”: so many things are planned to go wrong but “wrong in the right way”...), there's the transformation of Leia from kick-ass leader of the Rebellion to a sexual (for Jabba) or sentimental (for Han/Luke) object...

But the worst thing that *ROTJ* does to the *Star Wars* saga is not the Golden Bikini. It begins the shift from a thorough worldbuilding to a lazy fanservice.

The name of the game is “cleaning” the used world, and making it shiny and new.

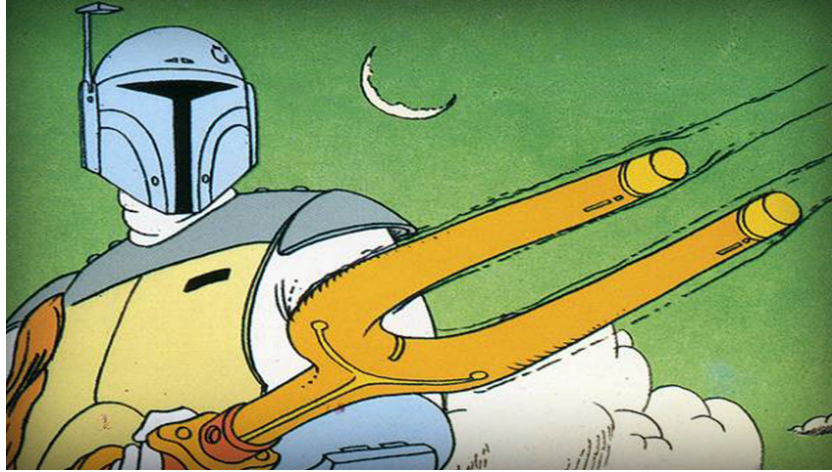
## A Case Study: *Boba Fett*



Nobody has said Boba Fett's name so far. Not in the movies.

So, how do you know that's his name? How come he deserves so much attention?

What's the attraction of Boba Fett?



You should have watched the *Holiday Special*.  
Which, of course, doesn't exist.

So you must have talked about it with your fellow fans.

Incidentally: sci-fi fanclubs tend to be “boys' clubs”.  
The early 80s see a backlash[\*] against the “strong independent women” of the sexual revolution of the 70s. Could this be one of the reasons behind the transformation of Leia's character?

[\*] see: Susan Faludi, *Backlash*, 1991

[Fan note: why the f\*\*\* is Han the one leading the ground team on Endor? A **pilot** who's just spent the last movie saying that **he wanted to leave?**)



## It's Boba Fanservice.

**GET A FREE BOBA FETT ACTION FIGURE**  
WITH PURCHASE OF ANY FOUR STAR WARS ACTION FIGURES  
(Boba Fett-not available in any store)

- Purchase any 4 Star Wars Action Figures.
- Remove proof-of-purchase seal.
- Send seals with your name and address to:

**Boba Fett Offer**  
One Industrial Drive  
Box 2520  
Maple Plain, MN. 55348

Offer expires 5/31/79 • Allow 6-8 weeks for shipment

Sure, selling dolls & becoming “cult” has saved Lando from becoming the Black Character who Dies Heroically to pay for his past sins. Which is... nice. One point for capitalism and *pecunia non olet*.

Was it really worth it?

[Fan note: he's a bounty hunter, cool. He got to Han because Han used an idea so “original” that was guessed by **another** bounty hunter too. Now he's stuck in the palace of Jabba the Hutt. Not exactly a winner.]

*The Overcrowded Edition*

Speaking of cleaning up the world...

Do you really need it?



That dewback aged terribly, btw.

I don't need to see any identification



In this shot there's only the essential – a menacing soldier. It's underlined by that edge of the house behind it, parallel to his profile, too.

I was not looking for that droid



Here there's this droid literally hovering in the middle of the picture. You're interested in it only if don't care so much about the story (which you already know in detail) but about the bonus material – and the more material the better, you can have more trick questions in your tests.

I was looking for a cleaner picture and a better sound quality. That's all.

Lucas shot first.

And we should have known since the Golden Bikini...

## The movie is becoming the Complete Encyclopedia



Notice the Rodian too. Just because Greedo had some nice lines ("*oota toota, Solo?*" is easy to pronounce) there's no need to fit a Rodian everywhere.

(What's the population of Rodia anyway?! No, seriously... There are Rodians everywhere!)

## *Episode I: The Fanservice Menace*

And here we get to the top of that:

Now, I believe that there are parts of the Prequels that can – even must – be saved.

The first one: a more complex world. To explore how this complexity leads to something “simply” evil is a very good question.

[Fan note: actually, it's the plot of “Bloodlines” by Claudia Gray, which isn't a bad book but... – see? I'm a fan who likes the tie-ins, but movies shouldn't be only for people like me.]

But in the prequels, this “complex” is just “complicated.”

Nobody cares about that menace



Really?

You want to go epic: “turmoil” - yay! “engulfed” - great word! “Galactic Republic” - double yay!

*“The taxation of trade routes to the outlying star systems is in dispute.”* - This is a question in your macroeconomics exam. One which you're probably going to fail.

[Film lover note: a tungsten cartel was the MacGuffin of *Gilda*[\*], but this goes beyond the nod to a classic.]

[\*] *Gilda*, by Charles Vidor, 1946. Filmed under the Hays code, which forbid any reference to sex, it has some of the most explosive sexual tension in the history of Hollywood, and a masterclass in queercoding. CW for domestic violence.



## We don't talk about Midichlorians



YOU DON'T EXPLAIN THE FORCE. We already talked about this. The Force is God. Leave the proof of the existence of God to the Middle-Age scholars, or to the fundamentalist YouTube channels.

Midichlorians are the perfect example of “filling in gaps” and taking away “dirt” “used world” - to replace it with only the trivia for initiated.

Like: “at what minute of *TESB* does C3PO say the line *'I'm not sure this floor is entirely stable'?*”

[Fan note: that's 45' 30".]

A bargain: never been used



The world of the prequels is shiny.

It's filmed in digital.

Ironically, it's a digital that hasn't aged well, also because the definition was something like 1080p, so now it's actually more fuzzy than the Original Trilogy...

Do we have to talk about this?



Personal story time: in 1999 I found out what the American racist stereotype of a Jamaican was like. This wasn't common knowledge, if you had been raised in a non-Anglo-Saxon country – see above about “speaking English and having access to foreign media”.

But in 1999 people finally had the internet, the fandom started interacting on a global base, and there was less and less space to hide your bigoted stereotypes...

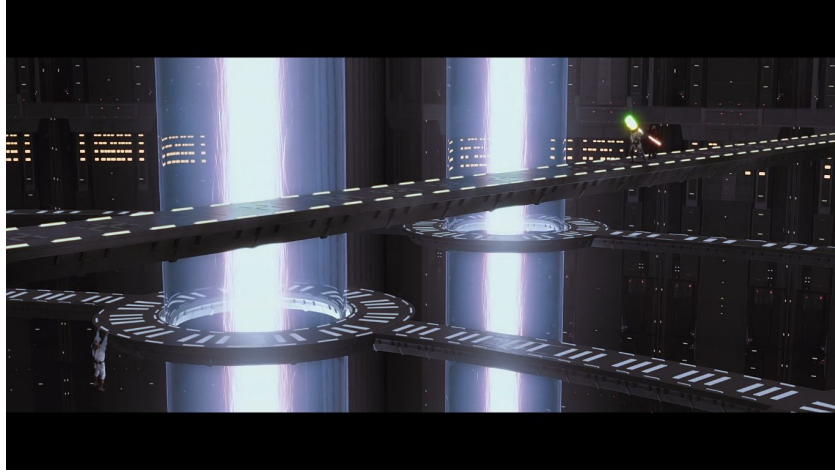
## The trade routes



Unpopular (?) opinion: I don't think that art means “not selling”. I think that good art isn't afraid that “the masses and the money will corrupt it” (compromising too much is another issue – again, something for another talk!).

But there is a thing like too much product placement. This shot of all the action figures comes right after the line “ascension guns!” - made just to tell you for which toy to ask in the shop for Christmas. And all the figurines with all the costumes are straight out of a licensed shop.

So many wasted opportunities



There are so many potentially good scenes. Three duellists on more levels with force fields and The Force: that can be powerful.

It's not enough.



Hi, Darth Maul. Epic makeup. Goodbye, Darth Maul.

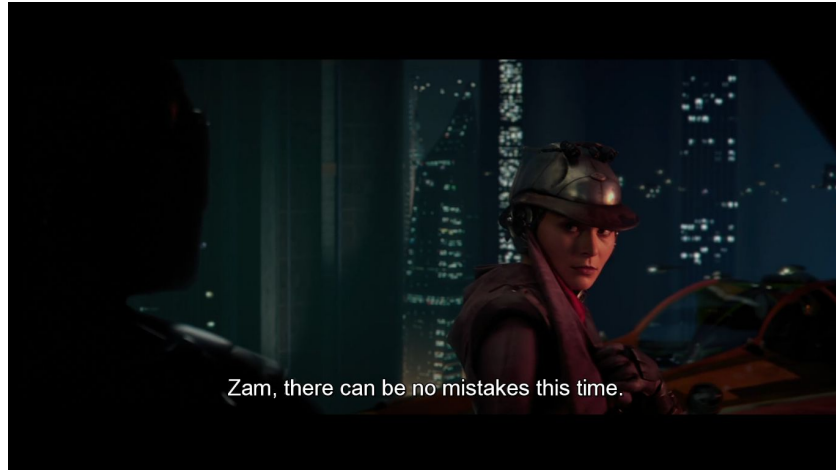
## *Episode II: Attack of the Icons*

In *Episode II*, things start to get better, thanks to an interesting mix:

1. it tries not to do **only** more of the same *Star Wars*: it mixes up genres and tries to tackle complex ethical dilemmas
2. it recognises and relies on the role of the iconic imagery that the original trilogy has created in the public unconscious.

The first idea can be seen a precursor of *Rogue One*, the second one of *The Force Awakens*.

Nice try



It also marks the first attempts at representation. It doesn't work so well (the woman is actually a shapeshifter, there's the line "*he is a she*" - which today is cringeworthy). At the time, though, it was actually very cool, they even had an action figure!

[Remember: the 90s were not as great as the Twitter hashtags tell you.]



## An original remix?



The subplot of Kamino is a detective/noir story, with Obi-Wan as galactic Philip Marlowe (including getting caught and – eventually – not managing to stop the real evils of the world).

Dex Diner is a reference (even in the colours!) to the diner in *American Graffiti*, the most popular Lucas' work outside of *Star Wars*.

Interestingly, *American Graffiti* was sold as a nostalgic memory of the 60s, but it's actually a very dark movie, where the protagonists will eventually end up dead (physically or spiritually) or in exile. (Does it remind you of...?) Will Brooker writes about (and supports) Lucas' theory that it's an “experimental” movie hidden under a layer of mainstream, just like *Star Wars*.

## Shades of absolute



There's an attempt of reintroducing the “dirt” - not so much in the world, but in the plot and in the characters. After all, it's the story of a fall from grace.

Unfortunately, something like that needs a dialogue that deals with nuances of grey, not something that sounds like “I vote Jill Stein because they're all the same”.

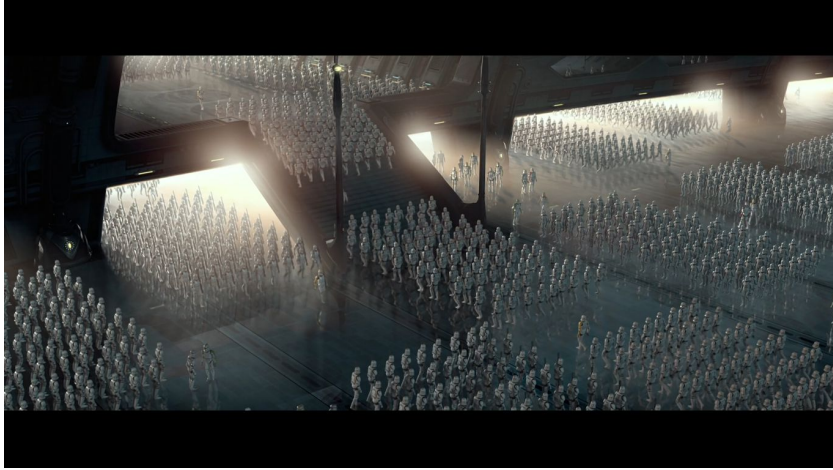
# Icons



And here's the thing that works: finally Lucas seems to realise that **the Force is in the icons** that he has created – icons that have become archetypes, just like Raymond Chandler's Marlowe has become Rick Blaine by way of Humphrey Bogart and Rick has become Han Solo by way of a seedy cafe. And **icons are, etymologically, visual**. So we no longer have just a bunch of illustration next to too many words. We **see** a plot – and, most important, the foreshadowing that's at the core of the Prequels trilogy.

(Note: the article by Umberto Eco, cited above, analyses how archetypes create archetypes. It also includes an analysis of the impact on the storytelling techniques of movies referencing movies, and it uses *ET's* nod to *The Empire Strikes Back* as the most significant example of the phenomenon.)

That's where the magic is.



Here's where the Empire hits the fan.



And the audience finally rejoices in its glory.

[Well, at least I did.]

We finally see the heart



Anakin's shadow that resembles Darth Vader's mask is a perfect example of visual foreshadowing. And this shot has even more in its composition: the woman (from stage right – as the Good; dressed at her most simple), the home (where Anakin won't come back and that will be destroyed by Darth Vader)...

(That's how you make an inside reference: it's not necessary to remember it.)



One of the best poster I've seen, ever. Simple and to the (scary) point.

## Lost in a shelf of action figures



This should be the turning point of the “war” part of the saga – the birth of the Alliance. Palpatine looking down on his troops from a balcony, like every dictator; in profile, like a Communist icon of Lenin and Stalin. Bail Organa is the only one looking away, almost dispirited but angry (punching that parapet, because Jimmy Smits is wonderful)...

But the photography is flat, as if everyone on that a balcony had the same importance – a balcony that's (once again) way overcrowded: we don't even know who the two characters behind Bail Organa are. Even Coruscant in the background is in focus as much as Palpatine, Organa, Palpatine's secretary and the two Useless Guys.

And of course one of the useless figurines is a Rodian.



## *Episode III: Revenge of the Saga*

In *Episode III*, the idea of trying different genres is abandoned, and every effort is concentrated on the epic, with a use of “classic adventure” tropes (where “classic” means *Flash Gordon*, the adventure romances for boys of the 19<sup>th</sup> century...)

This fits the role of the movie: the moment where the Bad Guys win.

In going for the epic side of a world that doesn't need to be explained anymore, finally, the storytelling becomes fully visual again...

Some icons are better than others  
(this rescue plan is not one of them)



...unfortunately, some tropes are a bit outdated. This cunning plan [AHEM] makes less sense than Luke's plan to save Han.

Some icons are better than others  
(and tidying up the plot is a mess)

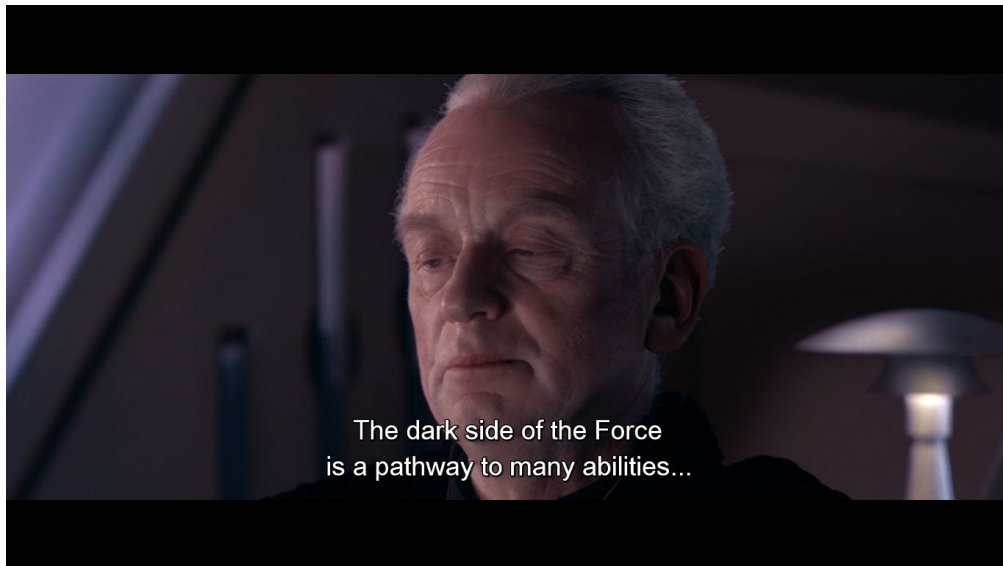


[Tarzan Yell.] Please. Good savages everywhere.

Chewbacca is everywhere too – another lazy fanservice that takes place of thorough worldbuilding.

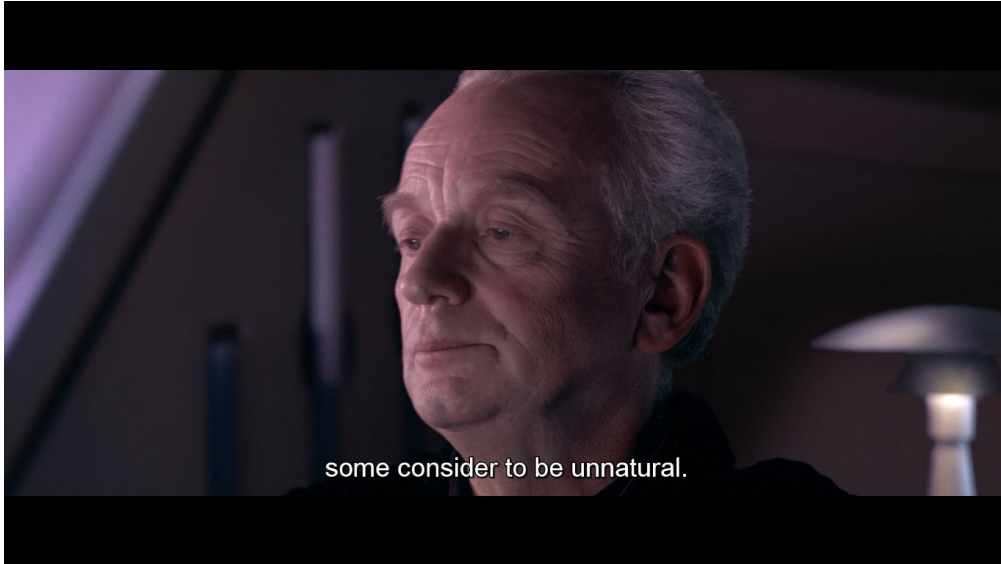
Meanwhile, the confusion cause by five “political” threads (Jedi v Sith, Clones, Palpatine becoming Emperor, the Trade Federation, the Separatists, the droids...) is taking time from the plot that really matters...

Some are more problematic than others



...and some tropes are at least problematic. As much as the Seduction of the Innocent has some merits, as much as it's a pleasure to watch Ian McDiarmid chewing the scenery, the queercoding here is...

Some are more problematic than others  
(straight from the days of the Hays Code)



...embarrassing. (They're even **at the opera**. All the interactions between Palpatine and Anakin are straight out of a gay movie, and not in a good way.)

The Hays Code was a set of rules set by Hollywood producers to ensure that movies were not “immoral”:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion\\_Picture\\_Production\\_Code](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion_Picture_Production_Code)

During the enforcement of the Code, most Hollywood directors/producers found ways to circumvent the bans by creating a series of “conventions” – e.g., blowing smoke in the face was code for sex...

For a story of LGBTQ+ representation under the Code, see *The Celluloid Closet*: there's a good documentary that takes the title from the (long) book by Vito Russo (which you might not have the time to read).

But it's a family reunion...



Finally, the family epic. Family of blood and elective family.

Interestingly, the evil guy that corrupts the protagonist is a putative father figure; but the conflict is also against a mentor that's an older brother – not a father. The idea of clash inside a generation, and not just between generations, will be a fundamental part of *The Force Awakens*...

...and we're not afraid to discuss politics



This is George W Bush in 2003, declaring that the operation in Iraq against the Saddam Hussein regime was a “mission accomplished”. The invasion of Iraq was notoriously supported by dubious proofs; it was often seen as a propaganda operation for a less-than-popular President who exploited the 9/11 attacks to move the Overton window to the right – including stricter controls “to guarantee our security” at risk of restricting the citizens' freedoms.

[I'm being euphemistic, yes.]

It's not subtle...



This is Senator Palpatine declaring the Empire “to protect the Republic from terrorists”. Or something like that.



...but it's epic...



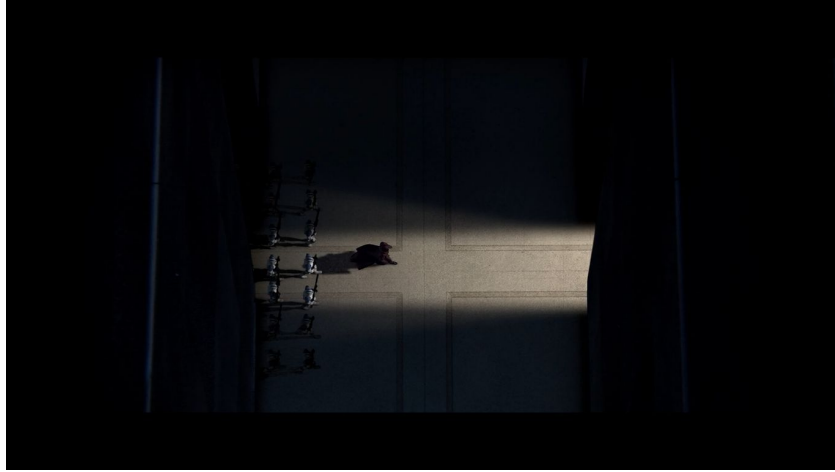
*This is how liberty dies, with thouderous applause.*  
It's pompous (the shortcut of epic), but it's quotable  
and (tragically) useful.

...and a film.



There's more purely visual storytelling, and more “perfect shots”, in the last 15 minutes of *Revenge of the Sith* than in all the Prequels.

Take this sequence...





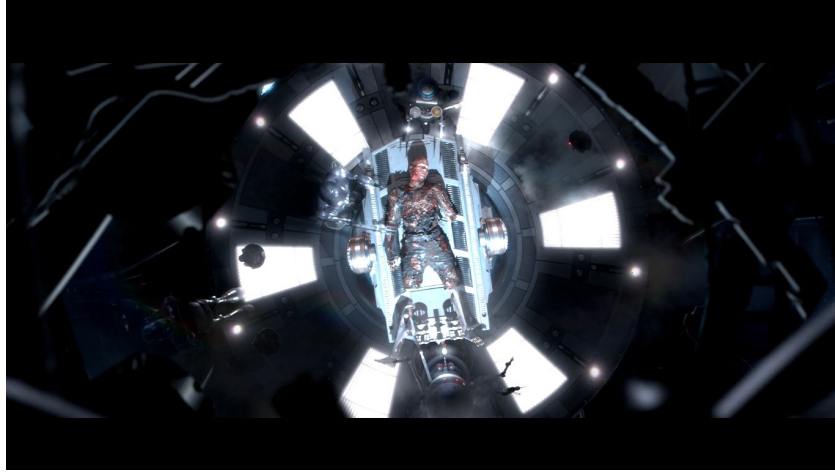
You don't need words



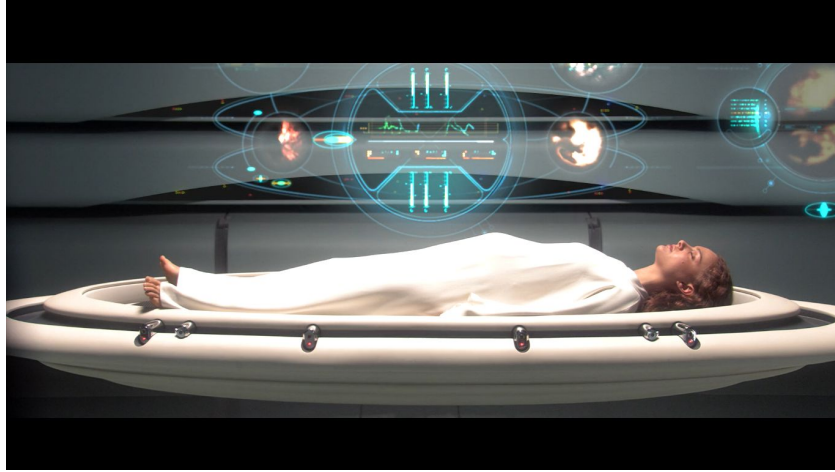
...this cut...

There's no need to see the massacre. The scene of Obi-Wan watching the surveillance video is a painful slide back into “explain everything twice” (the fact that the line “I can't watch anymore” can be used for very meta jokes doesn't help to take it seriously).

You need a montage



Lucas seems to remember that his first passion was montage: the obvious parallel of the deaths of Anakin and of Padmé is made by juxtaposing the two operating tables (one in a white, one in a black room: we're back to basic colours used to signal moods and messages).



THIS



And we come to the reason behind these three movies: how Anakin Skywalker becomes Darth Vader, “more machine than man”, and the question of whether there can be any actual redemption for him.





He surely looks scared.



The evil red and black.



Mesmerising symmetry, mechanical breathing, black and white.



Finally.





Too little, too late?

*Episode VII: The Millennial  
Awakens*

We wanted archetypes,  
we got midichlorians



How do you get over that?



## Back to Sphere One!



It's Bouba-8!

Don't you love him already? It was the second shot in the teaser trailer for a reason...

There's something else at play: BB-8 is a special effect, not a digital one. TFA is filmed on actual film, not digitally: this means a different quality of image, and a very carefully planned direction that's very "classic" (an old-style camera is heavy; film is incredibly expensive, whereas digital is cheap...)

There is only one one-take that's relatively complex (when Finn looks at Poe flying his X-Wing during the battle at Maz Kanata place), but it's not nearly as complex as (e.g.) the one in Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* climatic battle.

But it's not your old story anymore



Come on, he's a collector/hoarder who's angry because a girl and a Black guy stole his rare action figure.

The first shot in the teaser trailer was a Black guy in stormtrooper gear.

To take Star Wars back to its origins, *The Force Awakens* takes it away from the "old" fandom, from the boys' club. After all, the 1977 film was a game-changer...

## A screaming toddler

*The rage that white men have been expressing, loudly, violently, over the very idea that they might find themselves identifying with characters who are not white men, [...] the basic idea that **the human story is vast and various and we all get to contribute a page** - that rage is petty. It is aware of its own pettiness. Like a screaming toddler denied a sweet [...]*

*The people who are upset that the faces of fiction are changing are right to worry. **It's a fundamental challenge to a worldview that's been too comfortable for too long.***

(Laurie Penny)

Of course, backlash was inevitable. And, possibly, expected, even welcome.

*Only a story. Only the things we tell to keep out the darkness. Only the myths and fables that save us from despair, to establish power and destroy it, to teach each other how to be good, to describe the limits of desire, to keep us breathing and fighting and yearning and striving when it'd be so much easier to give in. Only the constitutive ingredients of every human society since the Stone age.*

*What to do when you're not the hero anymore*, by Laurie Penny, *The New Statesman* (2016)

<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2015/12/what-do-when-youre-not-hero-any-more>



Next on Kylo Ren YouTube channel: a rant against  
FAKE JEDI GIRL!!!

Seriously: he's a poster boy for worshipping toxic  
masculinity...

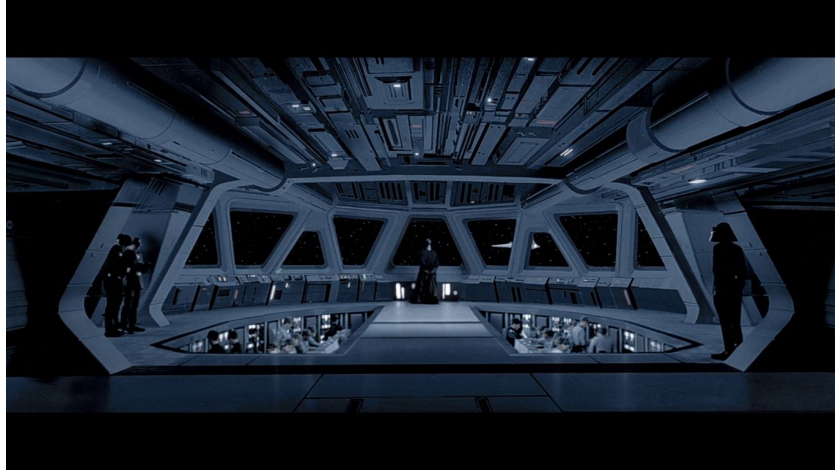
Let go of the past...



...he's literally got an altar of his grandfather at his most toxic.

Not realising that the more Darth Vader seemed to be powerful, the more he was a slave of the Dark Side.

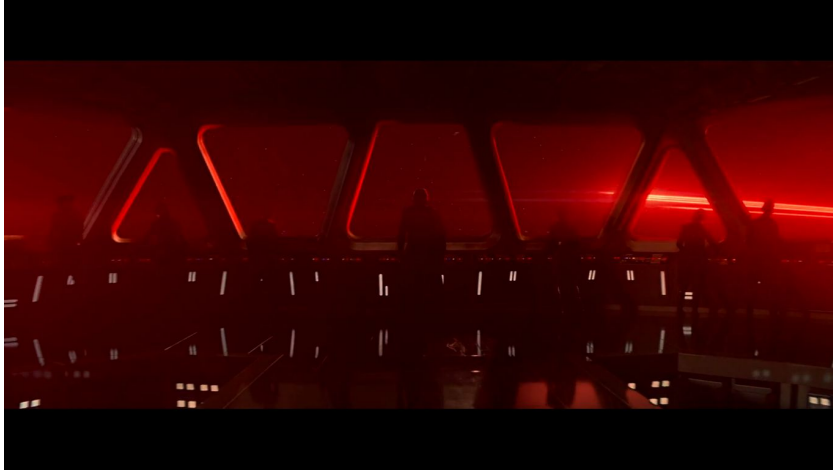
It's the only way...



The “then and now” become a game of  
“contaminated” nodes too.

The “original” shot...

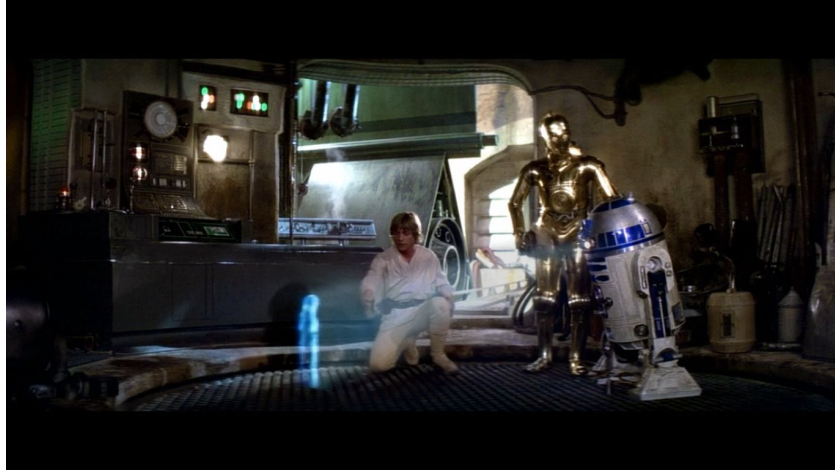
...to respect it...



And its callback.

It's not an exact copy: you can see the “flare” typical of JJ Abrams's films. It's a much more contemporary photography, for a new story.

...and keep it alive.



The old story begins...



*Who lives, who dies, who tells your story*



...and ends.

[This might be my favourite shot in all Star Wars movies (so far).]

It looks like a movie theatre. The new generation is watching the end of the old one from the projectionists' booth. Finn and Rey are the ones in charge of changing the narrative.

[The title of the slide is a quote from *Hamilton*, by Lin-Manuel Miranda. Maybe you already knew it.]

Don't change the world



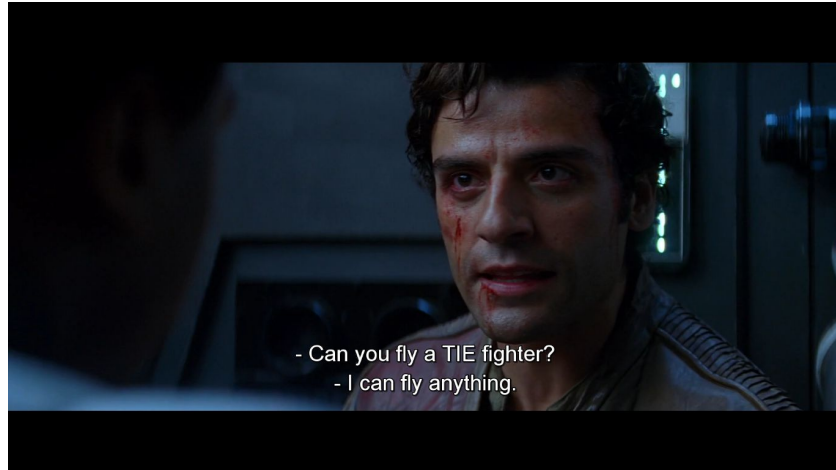
The “classic” world is seen under a new light, and its limits are judged, but it's also celebrated with pleasure.

## Don't change the epic



*"The only fight: against the dark side."* We go back to the fundamental clash between good and evil.

## Don't change the love



The daring and dashing pilot, an incarnation of our fandom dreams (he *always wanted to fly a TIE fighter!*), ready to be loved and shipped (he clearly played the “jacket” scene knowing that the audience would read a romantic subtext).

[Fan note: I'm not shipping a Poe/Finn romance, and I believe that there's no such thing as “just” friends. YMMV.]

## Change the relationship



The heroes support each other – not just in the battle, but in the struggle to become heroes. There's no risk of “getting *cocky*”. They're not afraid to show tenderness and enthusiasm for each other's success; they no longer compete for the girl...

The heroes are *sharing* their power: both can hold Luke's lightsabre.

[Fan theory: this is getting towards something like the finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. We no longer need the Jedi, the Force belongs to everybody. It would also fit with the “choral” structure of *Rogue One*, where the Force is more faith than power...]

## Change the teachers



The more experienced character that sets the hero free (and even gives him a name) is no longer a white grandfather in a cloak; it's a Latino older brother...

## Change the mothers



Our mothers no longer die in childbirth. Our mothers survive, and they become Generals in the fight against Donald Trump – sorry, the Dark Side. Even when they're on their own, they are no longer either slutshamed: they are generals, holding together everything that's left.

As for the fathers: they left when things got tough. Not unlike Obi-Wan and Vader, of course: but here it's seen as cowardice as much as tragic mystery.

The future is female...

## Change the villain



And, as the fathers are no longer there, the villain is the brother. The conflict is no longer between generations, it's between genders – and worldviews: sharing or competing, democracy or fascist oppression.

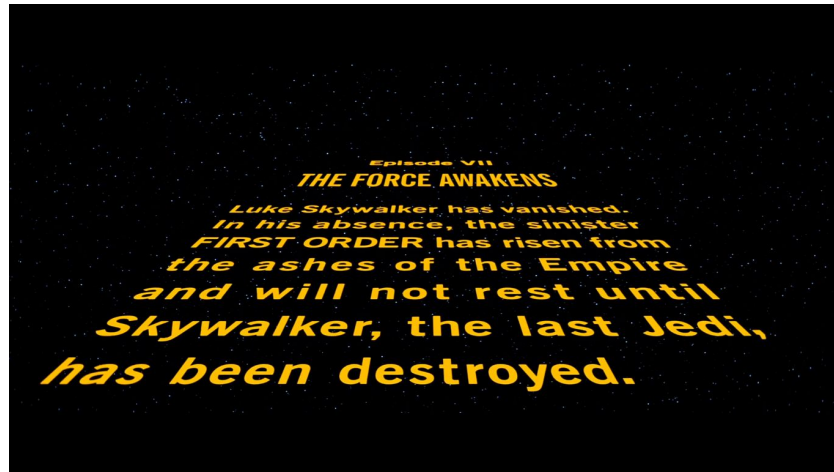


(but not the evil)



(The Leni Riefenstahl imagery always work.)

## The weight of the world



38 years later, it's given for granted that people who come to a movie like this will know at least “the basics” of the universe. The improvement of the production values of tv series (which in 2005 were still relatively low, on average), and the on-demand consumption of media (so the possibility to “catch up” quickly enough), might have played a part in this decision.

But there's a risk of sliding again into “fan only” territory – which could be the hardest challenge for the new episodes.

[Fingers crossed]



(This first line is very meta.)

[Of course, everything I've said about *TFA* can be proven horribly wrong in a few months.]

## Intermission: A Tale of Three Bedrooms

The differences between the three trilogies can be seen in the three introductions of the protagonists' bedrooms.

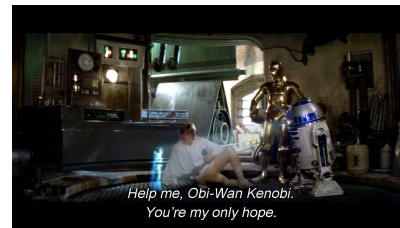
## Part 1: The Hero and His Plot



In the Original Trilogy, we see

1. the characterisation of Luke as a boy who wants to go away
2. the characterisation of the droids (the whiny C-3PO, the efficient R2-D2)
3. the plot development of Leia's message
4. Luke immediately falling in love with the princess, as per archetype
5. introduction of Obi-Wan/Ben
6. of course R2-D2 will escape

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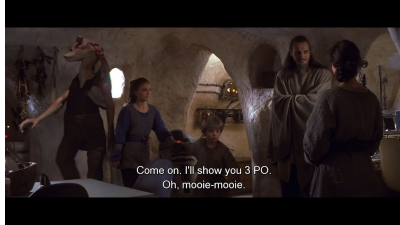
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## Part 2: Product Placement



In the Prequel trilogy we have

1. unresolved sexual tension between Qui-Gon Jin and Shmi (that won't go anywhere)
2. a room full of stuff (and Anakin's a slave!)
3. an ad of the new toy: the first version of C-3PO (a slave who needs a protocol droid – that's a bit far-fetched too)
4. building of a creepy sexual tension (and repetitive dialogue)
5. a non-explanation that's supposed to be an advancement of the plot
5. a totally gratuitous callback to the original trilogy [it's in a previous slide]
6. a terrible joke about naked robots



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## Part 3: The Hero and Her Identity



The Sequel Trilogy is absolutely silent, and it tells you everything there is to know about Rey:

1. she tries to find beauty in a desolate place,
2. she's still a child,
3. she's been waiting for a long time,
4. she's methodical,
5. she makes do with what she's got,
6. she dreams of faraway places and past heroes...

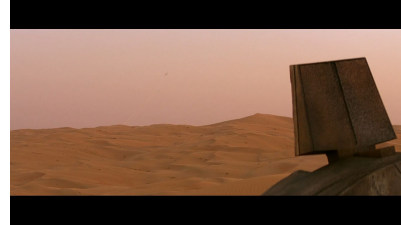
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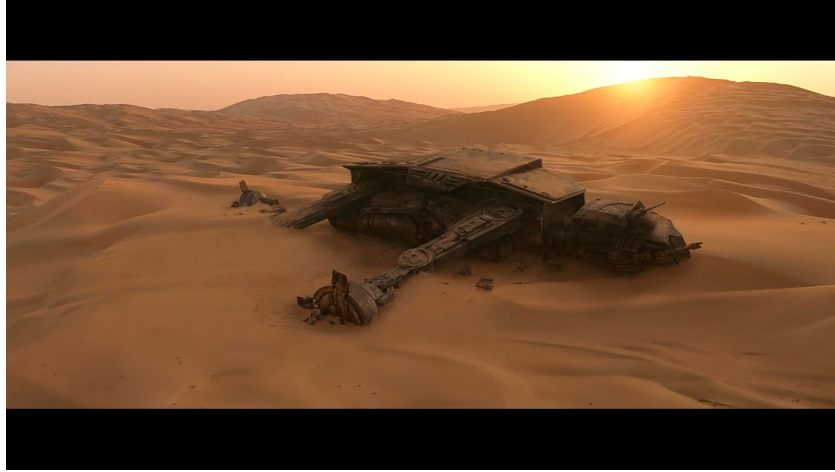
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## The shadow of the past



...and she lives in the shadow of a past that won't come back. Like all of us.

## *Rogue Film*

*Rogue One* almost feels like a different medium – a tie-in novel or comic. It looks like an “experimental side project” (which, in a way, it is).

1. the direction, photography... follow a completely different style (we're back to digital, btw)
2. the focus is no longer a near-perfect hero, but morally flawed characters; even the villain is a petty bureaucrat who gives the order to fire without the poised grace of a Tarkin
3. this goes together with a representation of “minorities” – also due to an attempt to aim for a wider market
4. the plot tries (with mixed result) to convey the unpredictability of real battlefields
5. and explores the issue of being in a moral grey area: is it necessary? Is it justifiable?

Yet, in some – essential – aspects *Rogue One* marks a return to the origins.

It could have gone horribly wrong.



The plot could have been just “filling in a tiny gap in original plot” – another attempt to “clean the world”.

It didn't.



But it exploits its unique position to do something unique.



## There were some issues



The fanservice spoils part of the movie.

Some scenes require a knowledge of the universe that, more than ten years after the Prequels, isn't common anymore. Most people have forgotten what's the importance of Mustafar – most people have forgotten the Prequels (for some reason...). And most people don't know who Bail Organa is.

## Some fanservice



And too often the nods to the classic trilogy just break the rhythm and the mood.

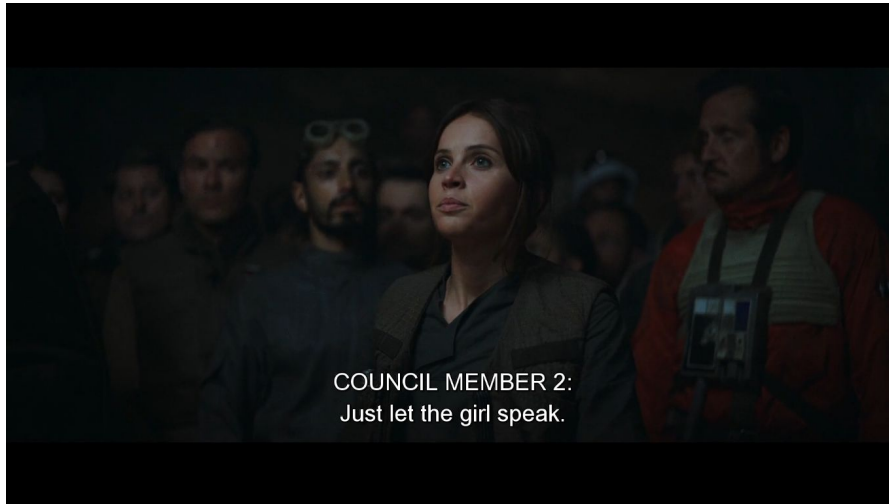
## The used



One of the points in which *Rogue One* is incredibly faithful to the original trilogy is the “used space”. The décor is even “dirtier” than the one in *A New Hope*, in keeping with the black-and-grey ethics of the characters.

This is particularly strong in some cases of Imperial uniforms: the ones transferring Jyn to the labor camp, Bodhi (especially after the torture at the hands of Saw Gerrera), K-2SO and, most important, Jyn and Cassian infiltrating the base at Scarif.

## The new?



A break with the tradition, as mentioned before, is the almost-ensemble cast; most noticeably, it's in the “identity politics”: the heroes are non-white or a woman; the villains are white males fighting for a bit of power inside a system of oppression (that oppresses its enforcers too – at any level: from the “less than upper-class” Krennic who gets sidestepped by RADA-style acting Tarkin, to the dirty soldiers fighting on the ground).

A factor in this decision is certainly tied to the attempt to expand Hollywood's market outside the US, in particular in China: the importance of the roles of Chirrut and Baze, played by cult actors/directors Donnie Yen and Jiang Wen, makes this almost obvious. Unfortunately, this expansion into countries where, e.g., LGBTQ characters are forbidden by law, might also stifle other forms of representation, in an intersectional dilemma.

## Infiltrating the Empire

*In the [Episode IV]'s second act, the Rebels infiltrate the Death Star and subvert it from the inside on multiple levels: its architecture, its communication, its formal structure and uniform, but also in terms of the camerawork associated with the Empire. Lastly, the Rebels undermine the Death Star from the inside again, not by attacking it directly but by sneaking torpedoes into its exhaust port*

(Will Brooker)

And, paradoxically, *Rogue One's* choice of representation also becomes a way to get back in contact with *Star Wars* – the 1977 movie.

A good part of Will Brooker's analysis of *Episode IV* is centred on the contraposition between the “dirt” of the rebels and the “clean” aesthetic of the Empire. He also draws a parallel between these two aesthetics and the two film styles that Lucas tries to balance:

*The Rebels are associated with documentary improvisation, customisation and make-do camaraderie of the Hollywood war film and Western; the Empire draws on a colder, more disciplined use of human figures in formal patterns, enjoying technology for its reflective surfaces rather than for the creative potential of its inner workings [...] Lucas is rooting for both sides.*

## Infiltrating the Empire



A Latino (with an almost-stereotypical moustache) and a woman who's spent most of her life hiding her identity, infiltrating an Imperial facility, looking for the way to destroy the Empire's perfect weapon: a fault that's been planted by someone who pretended to be a collaborator.

## The fog of war



The most interesting way in which the “dirt” makes its way into the plot is the acknowledgment of the “fog of war”.

*War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty.*  
(Carl von Clausewitz)

The Rebels must continuously adapt their plans, they deal with flawed intelligence and struggle with carrying on “wrong” orders; they even fall victim to friendly fire.

And, of course, they die without knowing whether their mission was successful, whether the Force exists.

Maybe it's just an effect of rewriting the screenplay multiple times: but it's a very positive side effect.

## Getting your hands dirty



Finally, the two questions that has no reason to exist in the “regular” movies, the ones focused on heroes who are “intrinsically” one one side or the other: what's the point where an sympathiser becomes a fighter? What's the line between Empire and Rebellion?

Jyn is a former fighter with an extremist who's trying to look out only for herself. She ends up being a hero who sacrifices everything, but there's not a specific moment where she becomes the latter – it almost happens by chance. The issue of proving Galen Erso's allegiance is central to the plot.

The answer might be given by the moment in which Bodhi “officially” becomes a rebel: the moment when he's ready to kill for the cause. It looks like the fighter is the one who gets his hands dirty.



## Getting your soul dirty



The “hands” that get dirty can be moral ones too:  
Mon Mothma becomes the (almost absolute) leader of the Rebellion at the outbreak of the battle for which she was hoping. And she smiles – as “her” troops go into a fight that's likely to be a massacre.

## Worth it



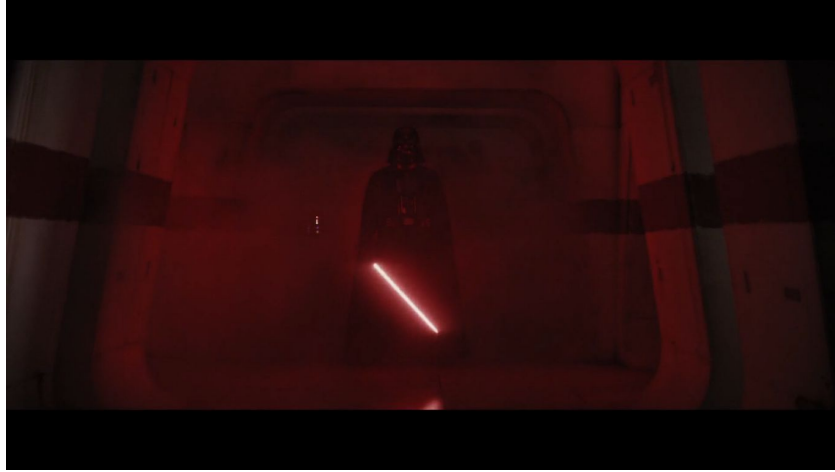
As for the line between Rebellion and Empire, it seems slightly blurred, at least for most of the movie.

Jyn attacks Cassian's willingness to carry on the order to carry her father by accusing him to be "like an Imperial".

The "mainstream" Rebels (maybe not Saw Gerrera, almost certainly Senator Bail Organa) want **restore** the Republic. They take military action, becoming "terrorists", only when it's inevitable.

So: what makes the Rebel cause "the right one", the one for which it's justified to shoot a wounded comrade-in-arms in the back?

## Why we fight



The Empire is evil. It doesn't matter whether the single Imperials are tired and dirty foot soldiers on an insignificant planet, or perfect and ruthless machines in an iconic sequence...

**The Empire is an absolute evil that cannot be allowed to win.**

[The title of this slide is taken by a series of WWII propaganda films by Frank Capra. The story behind their production, and behind most WWII American propaganda movies, can be found in the (wonderful) documentary *Five Came Back*. It's also interesting how some scenes of these propaganda movies will be influence the battles in the original Star Wars films, especially the X-Wing dogfights.]

And so we go back to the origins...



All that we have, is stories...

[Archetype: the Princess]



...the hint of a universe...

[The MacGuffin]



...and what really matters...

[What does it really stand for?]



...doesn't take many words.

[The highest ideal.]



Extensively used source:

*Star Wars*, by Will Brooker, BFI Film Classics (2009).

A film scholar's analysis of Episode IV: short, accessible and full of funny anecdotes (like: George Lucas' first car – aren't you a bit curious, now?)

Also:

*Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage*, by Umberto Eco (1984). Here's a free version:

<https://goo.gl/QxKFiC>

Two inspiring political analyses of *Rogue One*:

By Kieron Gillen:

<http://kierongillen.tumblr.com/post/159633528652/a-lex-goddamn-paknadel-instructed-us-all-to-see>

By Alessandro “Avvocato Laser” Villari [in Italian]:

<http://www.avvocatolaser.net/2016/12/29/amare-rogue-one-a-star-wars-story/>





h/t for technical details:

Mattia / Nanni Cobretti for pointing me to the Will Brooker book and posting a scan of the Pauline Kael review on Facebook.

Gareth Harfoot at Nine Worlds for the “insider” information on the digital quality of the Prequels and the use of film in *The Force Awakens*.