



The Empire's New Clothes

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nau, Von Sternberg and others. When Buñuel was a student in Paris he would go to see German films all of the time, and he still talks about them a lot. So that helped a lot. Then, when we were preparing to do the script, we began looking at old newspapers from both Danzig and Germany during the war years, as well as documents and photographs. This was a very precious experience for us. It enabled us to reconstruct the whole period, and to understand the kinds of people we were dealing with. It was great to see these old photographs of weddings and first communions and other things. It was like meeting the old German cinema.

So this whole confrontation with the German world became something new and unexpectedly interesting. After all, I have a very Latin temperament. My cultural ties are all Spanish, French and Italian. So I now see *The Tin Drum* as having opened me to Northern and Slavic influences. In fact, my next project is with Wajda and is based on a play written by a young Polish writer about the French revolution. The writer was a woman who killed herself in the thirties and the play is *The Danton Case*: it's about the last weeks in the life of Danton.

*What is it like when you work with Buñuel?*

It's a very surrealistic ambiance, in that we are coming up with all kinds of fantasies. The trick is to select the fantasies that can work on paper, and discard the others. It's hard to explain why certain fantasies work. It's probably because they correspond directly to a very subterranean reality. We never ask, "What does that mean?" For example, in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, we were putting together that scene with the gypsy woman. Buñuel said, "What if she carries a little pig in her arms?" I don't know how he got the idea, but it immediately seemed right. Humorous as well as realistic in a certain sense. So I said yes. We each have a veto power. If one doesn't like an idea, the idea is discarded. The process could be described as dreaming together and then writing down our dreams. Of course, there is always the professional requirements—the technical insights, etc. But we also try to have fun. We try to avoid getting bored. Sometimes we're laughing all the time. Buñuel claims that when we haven't laughed during an entire workday, then the day should be considered as lost. It is the precise yet unpredictable quality of my work with Buñuel that I try to bring into my involvement with films such as *The Tin Drum*.\*

DENIS WOOD

## The Empire's New Clothes

During the summers of 1977 and 1978, reviewers for the slicker film journals, the national newsweeklies, and the urban dailies prostrated themselves apotheosizing *Star Wars* as mindless entertainment. In the summer of 1980, the same reviewers intoned a rather different chorus in paean to *The Empire Strikes Back*, taking their cue from George Lucas, the film's author, sometime scenarist and executive producer, who frequently stated "It's going to be different and I think some people are going to say: 'I want it to be like the first one.' I couldn't do that. I just can't do the same formula over and over again. It would bore me silly."<sup>1</sup>

Watching the film through Lucas-prescribed lenses, most critics indeed saw a more "human," more romantic, and more serious film, one in which the "cardboard characters" of *Star Wars* had been given three dimensions and in which its "comic-book verve" had been supplanted (though some said "enriched") by an overt and portentous philosophizing reminiscent of Carlos

\*For persuading Jean-Claude Carrière to agree to an unusual transatlantic telephone interview, an expression of gratitude is extended to Anatole Dauman of Argos Films, the French coproducer of *The Tin Drum*.

THE  
EMPIRE  
STRIKES  
BACK



Castaneda at his most sophomoric. Socially oriented pundits actually predicted an improvement in moral tone as the preachings of Yoda pervaded the consciousness of American youths (who, despite the hype, have refused to take the dessicated dwarf to their bosoms), and serious debates revolved around the implications of Darth Vader's—to me, at least—unbelievable fathering of Luke. Treating the new film with the seriousness ordinarily reserved for Bergman or Fellini and comparing it to everything from Job to Dante, the critics managed to overlook the fact that it was nothing but a trivializing, if vastly more expensive, remake of the earlier film they'd laughed their way through. To the extent that the films tell Luke Skywalker's story, they are not merely similar, they are essentially identical. Only a perverse sort of willful blindness can explain the widespread failure to observe this reality.

You don't for example, have to be a structuralist to see the seering sands of Tatooine in the savage snow of the planet Hoth; nor do you have to have excessive perspicaciousness to note that Luke lives underground on an isolated outpost in each environment. The wilderness surrounding each compound is appropriately inhabited, that of Tatooine by the benign Jawas and the deadly Tusken Raiders,

that of Hoth by the useful Tauntauns and the monstrous Wampa. Both are places littered with the skeletons of large creatures, half-buried in the sands of Tatooine, frozen into the floor of Wampa's cave. Luke's involvement in *Star Wars* begins when an escape pod containing two droids lands on the desert floor; in *The Empire Strikes Back* when a pod containing an Imperial probe droid hits the powdery snow. Pulled into the wasteland by a droid in both films—to recover R2-D2 in the first, to investigate the Imperial probe in the second—Luke is attacked, dragged off and left unconscious by both the Tusken Raiders and the Wampa. In the earlier film, Luke is saved when Ben Kenobi appears on a ridge, howling like a Krayt dragon; in the subsequent film just after Ben Kenobi materializes in the distance urging him to visit Dagobah. In *Star Wars* this encounter with Kenobi is soon followed by Luke's discovery that Imperial troopers, on Vader's quest, have destroyed his aunt and uncle's farm; in *The Empire Strikes Back* it is soon followed by the successful attack by Imperial troopers, under Vader's command, on the Rebel base. Bereft of home in each case, Luke sets forth on Kenobi's errand, with Kenobi in the first film to return R2-D2 to Leia's father, at his behest in the second film to work with Yoda. In

the first film Luke is instructed in the ways of the force en route to the Death Star, which has replaced Alderaan in the Alderaan system; in the second film, he is instructed in the ways of the force on Dagobah, a waystop, as it turns out en route to the Cloud City.

Any two films are bound to manifest similarities, but the Death Star is a spherical metal city floating in space, while the Cloud City is a disc-shaped metal city hovering in the clouds. Although Tarkin is in nominal control of the former, and Lando Calrissian of the latter, it is Darth Vader that makes the real decisions in both places. Sucked into the Death Star by the chain of events (materially aided by a tractor beam) and into the Cloud City by a complicated plot (activated through the force), Luke rushes through confusing corridors in both places firing his blaster. Shortly after his arrival in each place, Leia is freed from Vader's dominion; and shortly after that Luke leaps to escape Imperials, across the chasm in the first film, out of the carbon-freezing chamber in the second. In *Star Wars* Luke's culminating duel with Vader takes place above the Death Star in an X-wing fighter based on a moon of the planet Yavin; in *The Empire Strikes Back*, it takes place on foot within the Cloud City hovering over the planet Bespin. Again, you don't have to be structuralist to see that the jungle-clad moon of Yavin is to the empty desert of Tatooine as the gaseous planet of Bespin is to the frozen hulk of Hoth.

Nor are the duels dissimilar. Chasing Luke down the trench on the Death Star, Vader remarks, "The Force is strong with this one"; greeting Luke on Bespin, Vader says, "The Force is with you, Luke Skywalker." Harrowingly alike are the films' conclusions. At the end of *Star Wars*, Luke is saved when the Millennium Falcon knocks Vader from the trench; at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke is saved when the Millennium Falcon rescues him from the underside of the Cloud City. As it hurtles toward the trench above the Death Star, the Millennium Falcon cuts across a brilliant star, flaring its light into a halo; as it commences its return to the Cloud City, the Millennium Falcon rolls around a bank of luminous clouds, silhouetting itself against the flaming ether. In the first film's epilogue, Luke is honored by Leia with a medal around his neck; in its successor, he is

honored to put his arm around her shoulder. Both films close *in media res*, an Imperial base having been destroyed in the former, a Rebel base in the latter . . .

This is hardly exhaustive. Any number of scenes have been transported with only minor alterations from the first film into its successor. There is, for instance, little difference between Luke's refusal to heed Ben's plea to join him and begin his training in the first film, and his refusal to countenance Ben's insistence that he remain on Dagobah and complete his training with Yoda in the second. There is still less difference between the scenes in which Luke attempts to convince Uncle Owen to let him join the academy, in the first film, and Yoda to take him on as a student, in the second film. Not only is his tone of exasperated and disappointed pleading identical, but both efforts occur at mealtime in the presence of a placatory third party—Aunt Beru in the first case and Ben in the second, both of whom take Luke's side. And there is really no difference at all between the scene in his uncle's garage in which he peevishly tries to scrape away the carbon scoring around R2-D2's large "eye"; and that in his "camp" on Dagobah in which he plaintively removes the mucky ooze from the same sensory organ. "I'll never get out of here!" he groans on Tatooine. "What am I doing here?" he moans, on Dagobah.

But if in both these latter scenes Luke is petulantly poking his finger around R2-D2's eye, the meaning and weight of that poking in the one scene is essentially unrelated and unrelatable to the meaning and weight of that poking in the other. In the scene in *Star Wars* our attention is focused on the droids. It is, after all, the droids who have been the center of the film, the threads that have held together the blindingly rapid exposition, and, at this point, as far as we know, it is their story, not Luke's. Luke has been on the screen less than five minutes, and has not been presented as entirely likable: he has whined and complained to his uncle and treated the droids like dirt. The encounter in the garage, then is fraught with tension. Who is this kid? What kind of person is he? How will he treat the droids? What will he do with them? This sense of apprehension has been constructed not only out of our extrapolation forward from the sequence of unexpected events

preceding it, but out of C-3PO's dialogue. "We've stopped!! We're doomed!" he cries in the Jawa crawler. "Do you think they'll melt us down?" That Luke's intentions toward the droids is, at this moment, the film's only concern invests his behavior with significance. His changing tones of voice, his simplest gestures, are data toward the resolution of a tension that gives the film a *thematic* structure enabling it to project its narrative and dramatic structures out of the theater into the world.

Nothing could be farther from the case than the parallel scene in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Here our attention is focused on Luke. The film opens with Luke in heroic action and paints him as loved by Han, Leia, and the rest of his fellow rebels. This adulation would seem to be well merited: he is apparently selfless, kind, and considerate of everyone. Unfortunately, his character is so thoroughly painted that there is no room left for growth, least of all in his relationship with R2-D2. Their mutual devotion would seem to be quite real, but where in *Star Wars* it developed on Luke's part from scorn and disdain through admiration and trust to something approaching friendship, here it is coyly presented as a stable master-servant relationship, where fondness, not friendship, dominates. It is symptomatic, for example, that on the flight to Dagobah, Luke does not share with R2-D2 the *purpose* of the trip, although the droid is evidently anxious to understand why they are doing what they are. While this minor anxiety does dramatically fuel what is doubtless one of the film's finest scenes, its essential quiescence underscores the fact that for Luke and R2-D2 the narrative line of the earlier portion of the film has definitely concluded.

Thus, instead of exfoliating continuously as *Star Wars* does, *The Empire Strikes Back* is forced to move forward in brief, narratively sequential but independent episodes which prevent the dramatic structure of the film from building. It is not, as so many have complained, that the film has no "real" ending, *but that it has no significant middle*. It is not that Luke's rescue by the Falcon does not release us from the tension of his encounter with Vader, but that this release is local, circumscribed by the episode itself, precisely as Luke's dialogue with R2-D2 is circumscribed by the literal

boundaries of the dialogue. Consequently, unlike the scene in the garage in *Star Wars* in which extra-scenic elements endowed it with significance for the *film*, and thus freighted Luke's actions with meaning, these scenes in *The Empire Strikes Back* are constrained to depend solely on the intrinsic qualities of the scene's dialogue in isolation and on Hamill's person and skill as an actor. Since these latter are not negligible, the scene in the fighter on its way to Dagobah is worth watching, but it, like nearly every other scene in the film, could be deleted without affecting any other.

The early scenes on Dagobah are similarly isolated, set pieces without narrative, dramatic, or thematic connection to those which precede or follow. When, in *Star Wars*, Luke is pulled beneath the liquid in the garbage chute, Han's "Luke!! Kid!!" is freighted with dramatic significance: it is his first admission of the affection for Luke, heretofore masked beneath his bantering and distancing disdain, which will cause him to rescue Luke in the film's climax. But when in a similar scene R2-D2 is sucked into the swamp on Dagobah, Luke's "R2!! R2!!" reveals and adumbrates nothing not already known. Significantly, the scene is ultimately played for laughs, and we finally recognize that it represents little more than a one-line joke, closed in its completeness like a Bob Hope throwaway. When, finally, Luke begins to clean R2-D2 by scooping the muck from his eye, the scene is effective because of the poignancy with which *Mark Hamill* is able to invest it, not because Luke's action has any relevance to the rest of the film. With no narrative function, with minimal dramatic role, and thematic significance—if any—so elusive as to be next to nonexistent, Luke's words and gestures are weightless, and since nothing plus nothing is nothing, incapable of combining with his other words and gestures—howsoever intrinsically beautiful they may or may not be—to make a thing greater than a collection of its parts.

It is, in fact, the narrative identity of the films that actually dictates such dramatic and thematic differences. After all, the dramatic structure of *Star Wars* resolves around Luke's evolution from a self-centered jerk to a selfless hero, an evolution played out through the development of Luke's ability to distinguish the truly living from the walk-

ing dead, and the growth of his capacity to humanely determine the limits to which he can legitimately make others an extension of his will. By the film's end he has learned these lessons and become a whole and living human being. The story he is made to repeat in *The Empire Strikes Back* gave him in *Star Wars* opportunities for affirmations: here it gives him opportunities only for re-affirmations. The difference is the difference between an immigrant from Paraguay saying the Pledge of Allegiance at his naturalization ceremony and a jaded seventh-grade suburbanite saying the Pledge of Allegiance at a school assembly. The problem is that Luke has long since ceased being a jerk and is well on his way toward canonization. Instead of becoming a hero, he has become a hero; instead of being tested, he is merely vexed. This was not lost on the screenwriters, who attempted to recoup the lost dramatic energy by testing Luke at every turn of the projector's reel. Sadly, most of the tests are simply physical—surviving the destruction of his snowspeeder, for instance, or climbing, running, jumping, swinging, and standing on his hands—feats of endurance more appropriate to a bionic man than the hero of a moral epic.

What were intended to pass for the serious tests, or rather retests—the episode in the magic tree and the rejection of Vader revealed as his father—are either unapproachably symbolic or all too easy. Vader has been portrayed as so heinous that his claim to be Luke's father—if it can be believed—is no claim at all, and Luke's rejection consequently constitutes no test at all. Comparison of Luke's rejection of Vader, revealed as his father, with Kenny Dantley's acceptance of McGrath, revealed as the thief of his car (also played by Hamill in Robbins and Barwood's *Corvette Summer*) is instructive. Robbins and Barwood, as it were, demonstrated the power of the dark side of the Force *dramatically*, by permitting Dantley to be seduced; Lucas and Kershner remark its impotence by forcing Luke to remain—unheroically, since the choice is forced upon him—pure. Nor do they succeed in their attempt to dramatize its power through the episode of the magic tree. Although in the context of the film's objective perspective and realistic *mise en scène* I find the sudden switch to slow-motion, eerie music, and

grainy texture highly out of place, it would be dogmatically narrow-minded to object to it only on those grounds. The scene fails not because it impugns empiricist materialism, but by virtue of its incomprehensibility, its impenetrable ambiguity, its opaque allusiveness. Before the scene can connect dramatically with its audience, it must make clear what Luke is facing and how—and we now have only Yoda's word for this—he fails. Could it not, in fact, be possible to interpret the episode as Luke's triumphant exorcism of the Vader within him? It could, but before any reading is possible, it is necessary to have some understanding of what is going on: does the magic tree generate the image? or does Luke project it? is Luke battling the dark side of the Force? or himself? We, no more than Luke, are permitted to know, and when Luke asks, Yoda rejoins with, "No more questions!" But it is not Luke alone who demands the answers: in their absence the scene is only bewildering, further sapping the film of dramatic cogency and thematic coherence.

Nor is it with respect to Luke alone that the film fails: more impressive but essentially similar cases can be made for Han, Leia, the droids, and Vader. All reprise travesties of their earlier roles. For all the glib talk about the exposition of character in *The Empire Strikes Back*, those of Han and Leia suffer limited development. That they achieve a rapprochement is undeniable, but that this reveals anything about either character is not. The droids, for whom Lucas claims special affection, endure a far worse fate. As inappropriate as was their Laurel and Hardy tag with respect to the first film it is now grotesquely out of place. The droids have degenerated into the Edward Everett Hortons and Eric Blores of thirties musicals—amusingly squabbling body servants. The dialogue accompanying their initial appearance makes this obvious: R2-D2 has soaked Leia's wardrobe by raising the temperature in her bedroom! Vader, less powerful than the Emperor, less cunning than Boba Fett, is only marginally more adept than the young kid from Tatooine. The only ruthlessness he displays ends in a comic routine that perfectly parallels the Falcon's inability to leap to hyperspace: just as we come to realize that the Falcon will *not* take off, so we soon come to accept the recurrent throttling of Imperial commanders.

When the Falcon finally does disappear, Vader predictably fails to kill his sacrificial admiral. With Vader in a nearly comic role, with the droids playing Horton and Blore to Han and Leia's Fred and Ginger, with Luke frozen on the verge of his canonization, the film never quite takes off either, but hangs there like a Johnny Carson monologue, entrancing as long as the promise of another joke remains, but utterly dead when it's done.

It may be recalled that Lucas had problems making Vader convincing in *Star Wars*:

I was struggling with the problem that I had this sort of climactic scene that had no climax about two-thirds of the way through the film. I had another problem in the fact that there was no real threat in the Death Star. The villains were like tenpins; you get into a gun fight with them and they just get knocked over. As I originally wrote it, Ben Kenobi and Vader had a sword fight and Ben hits a door and Vader is left standing with egg on his face. This was dumb . . . ?

The resolution, as is well known, was the decision to kill off Kenobi, something communicated to Alec Guinness in the very midst of shooting. It was, as Marcia Lucas felt—who apparently originated the idea—perfectly outrageous. Yet, however nervy, it did solve her husband's problem. It is evidence of precisely this sort of nerve, the very kind Lucas showed when he conceived of and pushed the idea of *Star Wars* in the first place, that is missing from *The Empire Strikes Back*. It took nerve to do science fiction when science fiction was dead. It took nerve to drive the narrative at its dizzying pace. It took nerve to insist on the dialogue when even the actors were claiming to gag on it. It took nerve to kill off Kenobi. And it took nerve to bring him back.

But it took more than nerve to bring him back *as a voice*. It took acumen. Nothing so certainly distinguishes the first film from the second as the treatment of Kenobi in death. The spectral voice that spoke to Luke alone could be taken a thousand ways, as Kenobi's "soul," as the music of the spheres, as Luke taking Kenobi's part in interior debate. The polysemy, far from being confusing, was Empsonian, positive, and enriching, the very essence of popular art. Kenobi's appearance in *The Empire Strikes Back*, enwreathed in flicker-ign blue halos like the Virgin appearing to Bernadette Soubirous, sweeps all that away in the point-less concretization of an interesting mystery.

Instead of exploding possibilities, we are presented with a cheap chromolithograph, a vision revealing its loss of vision, its loss of nerve, its loss of daring, its loss of verve. It is a loss that pervades every frame of the film, vitiating not only the characterizations, the narration, the drama and any sense of thematic cohesion, but the composition (as, for instance, of Lando, Leia, Chewie and the droids racing to save Han, the camera belly down on the stage floor for who knows what reason), the lighting (softened, bounced, and diffuse, reducing the film's sense of immediacy), the set design (as in the Cloud City interiors, parodies of the dinner clubs catering to high school proms), matte work (as in the backgrounds on Dagobah or the exteriors of the Cloud City, patently matte work, and ripped off from some Deco vision of the twenties city), model construction (especially of the Walkers), animation (as of the Tauntaum returning to the base)—in a word, the *direction* of the film.

If any contemporary film can be said to be the work of one man, *Star Wars* is such a film. Lucas wrote the story and the screenplay, directed, helped edit and produce the film, and actively involved himself in every phase of the production. However you felt about this film, you felt the strong voice of a single individual speaking through it. It is a voice that does not speak through *The Empire Strikes Back*. Arguing that he could never make a film as good as *The Seven Samurai*, though in the opinion of many he already had; that he was only interested in making pure film, though one of the great joys of *Star Wars* was its brilliance as elemental cinema; and that he was a poor director of actors, though this is not supported by his exemplary direction of *American Graffiti* or *Star*

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*Wars*; Lucas bowed out as director of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Had he wanted to test the importance of direction to the making of a film, he could scarcely have designed a better experiment: with the same story, the same cast, the same producer, and much of the same creative crew, a film was made that had everything in common with its predecessor but conviction, verve, and bazzazz, the very unreproducible elements that made *Star Wars* a success in the first place. In a sense, *The Empire Strikes Back* constitutes an ironic commentary on Lucas's fate. The daring young man with nothing to lose wrote himself into the first film as the selfless hero to whom he gave his name. The name's the same but the game is different. The gutsy kid battling the Hollywood system in the name of all creative spirits is now the aging wonder battling his individual success, for it is success that is the dark side of the Force, and

it is success that holds Lucas in thrall. His protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, he has in *The Empire Strikes Back* done "the same formula over again." The differences between the films are sufficiently negligible that had anyone else made *The Empire Strikes Back*, Lucas could have sued for plagiarism and won—plagiarism of everything but the point of the enterprise, the only thing he couldn't copy. It is the essence of my sense of betrayal not that he didn't copy himself, but that he did.

#### NOTES

1. Quoted in John May, editor, *Star Wars—The Empire Strikes Back*. Paradise Press, Ridgefield, Connecticut, 1980, 62
2. Quoted in Paul Scanlon, "The Force Behind George Lucas," *Rolling Stone*. August 25, 1977, 48.

NOEL CARROLL

## NIGHTMARE AND THE HORROR FILM: THE SYMBOLIC BIOLOGY OF FANTASTIC BEINGS

Whereas the Western and the crime film were the dominant genres of the late sixties and early seventies, horror and science fiction are the reigning popular forms of the late seventies and early eighties. Launched by blockbusters like *The Exorcist* and *Jaws*, the cycle has flourished steadily; it seems as unstoppable as some of the demons it has spawned. The present cycle, like the horror cycle of the thirties and the science fiction cycle of the fifties, comes at a particular kind of moment in American history—one where feelings of paralysis, helplessness, and vulnerability (hallmarks of the nightmare) prevail. If the Western and the crime film worked well as open forums for the debate about our values and our history during the years of the Vietnam war, the horror and science fiction film poignantly expresses the sense of powerlessness and anxiety that correlates with times of

depression, recession, Cold War strife, galloping inflation, and national confusion.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the basic structures and themes of these timely genres by extending some of the points made in Ernest Jones's *On the Nightmare*.<sup>1</sup> Jones used his analysis of the nightmare to unravel the symbolic meaning and structure of such figures of medieval superstition as the incubus, vampire, werewolf, devil, and witch. Similarly, I will consider the manner in which the imagery of the horror/science fiction film is constructed in ways that correspond to the construction of nightmare imagery. My special, though not exclusive, focus will be on the articulation of the imagery horrific creatures—on what I call their symbolic biologies. A less pretentious subtitle for this essay might have been "How to make a monster."