

Losing the Moral High Ground

An Analysis of *Star Wars—Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*'s Disruption
of the Heroic Male Archetype

BY COLE SMULAND
Kwantlan Polytechnic University

ABSTRACT

Revenge of the Sith (2005), the third installment in George Lucas's *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, follows Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen), a Jedi Knight destined to bring balance to the Force. Driven by fear and attachment, Anakin seeks the power to prevent the death of his wife, Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman). This obsession isolates Anakin from his mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), and leaves him vulnerable to the manipulations of the evil Chancellor Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid). As Anakin descends into darkness, the film exposes the weaknesses in the traditional image of the male hero. Through Anakin's pride, jealousy, and need for control, the story reveals how patriarchal values lead to destruction rather than strength. By showing Anakin's fall through visual contrasts of light and darkness, *Revenge of the Sith* challenges the idea of heroism and redefines what it means to be powerful.

Director George Lucas's *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (2005) walks its hero down a darkly unconventional path, ultimately calling the nature of heroism itself into question. The film tells the story of Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker's (Hayden Christensen) fall to the Dark Side of the Force. As Anakin grows increasingly distrustful of the Jedi Order, he is manipulated by the evil Chancellor Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), who lures Anakin to his side by promising him the power to prevent the death of his wife, Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman). As Palpatine enacts his plan to destroy the Jedi Order and gain dominion over the galaxy, Anakin joins him, betraying those he loves and ultimately transforming into the Sith Lord Darth Vader. In this way, *Revenge of the Sith* disrupts the spectator's ability to identify with its protagonist. As the film's central figure, Anakin Skywalker embodies the traits of a traditional male hero as defined by critic Laura Mulvey

in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." However, over the course of the film, Anakin's actions subvert the spectator's expectations of him as a hero. The film portrays Anakin's ideological corruption, contrasting it with the steadfastness of characters such as Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) and Yoda (Frank Oz). Through Anakin's moral decline, *Revenge of the Sith* exposes the flaws inherent in Hollywood's heroic male archetype: Anakin's pride, his desire for power, and his disregard for female autonomy are all partially responsible for his descent into darkness. The film also subverts conventional representations of heroism through mise-en-scène. For example, sublime settings and strategic camera angles are used to highlight Anakin's inner darkness. Visual contrast between the themes of good and evil further underscores Anakin's inner turmoil: in particular, light and dark are placed in opposition in order to illustrate Anakin's



Fig. 1 | Padmé stands in Anakin's shadow as they discuss their opinions on the Clone War in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 00:42:24. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.

gradual fall to the Dark Side of the Force. Through mise-en-scène, Anakin is depicted as a morally complex character who embodies the roles of hero, victim, and tragic villain. Anakin's nebulous heroism compels the spectator to reconsider the line between tragedy and true evil, ultimately disrupting preconceived notions about the male hero's role in cinema.

Mulvey contends that traditional Hollywood cinema reinforces patriarchal ideology. She argues that “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (11). “Phantasy” is defined by *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* as “an imaginative fulfillment of frustrated wishes” (Hayman 105). Therefore, women in traditional Hollywood films are portrayed through the lens of the male gaze, or rather as men wish them to be. Moreover, in Hollywood films, “man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power” (Mulvey 12). Mulvey's theory suggests that within film narratives, men control the fulfillment of their desires from positions of power. This representation of male control reinforces the patriarchal ideal of male dominance within society. Conversely, women in traditional film are “bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions” (7). While men have agency within traditional cinematic narratives, women are relegated to passive roles, often existing solely to satisfy male desires. Here I apply Mulvey's theory to *Revenge of the Sith*, in which the desires of the male protagonist, Anakin, revolve around and overshadow the character of Padmé Amidala. Throughout the film, Anakin becomes obsessed with keeping Padmé alive at any cost. This obsession controls Padmé's fate, thereby diminishing her autonomy and restricting her role to that of “[a] bearer of meaning [rather than a] maker of meaning” (7). Padmé's actions have little to no impact on the outcome of the narrative; instead, her character serves primarily as a means of showcasing Anakin's growing possessiveness. During a conversation with Anakin, Padmé can be seen standing in Anakin's shadow (Fig. 1). The lighting

and positioning of the characters in this shot symbolizes how Anakin's role in the film eclipses that of Padmé's.

By confining Padmé to her traditional cinematic gender role, *Revenge of the Sith* encourages the spectator to view Anakin in the light of his own traditional role as a stereotypical male hero. Moreover, Anakin's obsession with controlling Padmé's fate compels him to take action, thus fulfilling Mulvey's criteria that the male hero be “the active [character] forwarding the story” and “the representative of power [in the film]” (12). In his role as a male hero, Anakin has authority over both his own fate and Padmé's. Through this authority, Anakin exemplifies the patriarchal control which Mulvey condemns.

However, while Mulvey is largely correct in arguing that traditional Hollywood films reinforce patriarchal values, *Revenge of the Sith* endeavours to do the opposite. Through Anakin's slow moral corruption, *Revenge of the Sith* exposes the weaknesses of the heroic male archetype. In doing so, the film also criticizes the patriarchal values embedded in the paradigm. For instance, Anakin's actions—which are motivated by jealousy—reveal the oppressive nature of his attachment to Padmé. Anakin's “attachment” is not to be confused with “compassion,” which Anakin himself defines in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (Dir. George Lucas, 2002) as “unconditional love [that] is central to a Jedi's life” (00:35:20–00:35:40). Rather, Anakin's attachment to Padmé is marked by his selfish inability to relinquish her, even in the face of death. In *Revenge of the Sith*, Yoda asserts that “[this kind of] attachment leads to jealousy, [which is] the shadow of greed” (00:34:20–00:34:28). Anakin's jealous attachment to Padmé frames her as an object within his possession; this perspective illuminates the oppressiveness of patriarchal values, which fail to recognize women as individuals with autonomy. Anakin's misguided point of view is further reflected in his declaration that “[Obi-Wan] will not take [Padmé] from [Anakin]” (01:46:48–01:46:50), which illustrates Anakin's sense of ownership over Padmé. The film criticizes Anakin's patriarchal



Fig. 2 | Obi-Wan and Anakin fly into battle in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 00:02:20. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.



Fig. 3 | Palpatine orders Anakin to execute Count Dooku in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 00:14:11. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.



Fig. 4 | Dooku awaits Anakin's decision in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 00:14:20. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.

viewpoint by showcasing the consequences of his possessiveness. In his attempt to control Padmé's fate, Anakin falls to the Dark Side, ultimately losing his own autonomy in the process. This shift shapes the film's tragic resolution, highlighting the pitfalls of viewing women through the lens of reductive gender stereotypes. By emphasizing the flaws inherent in Anakin's role, *Revenge of the Sith* effectively criticizes the patriarchal values embedded in the heroic male archetype.

The film also criticizes patriarchal values when viewed within the larger context of the *Star Wars* saga. Padmé's lack of agency in *Revenge of the Sith* stands in contrast to her active role in the two preceding *Star Wars* films, which both portray her character as an agent of change. Likewise, Padmé's role in the film is juxtaposed with the roles of other female characters in the *Star Wars* universe—roles which typically subvert traditional Hollywood gender norms. For example, Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) acts as a preeminent leader and valiant warrior throughout the original *Star Wars* trilogy. The article "Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses" by media scholar Megan de Bruin-Molé argues that Leia's strength of character makes her "a powerful role model for gender equality" (229). De Bruin-Molé

highlights how actress Carrie Fisher's "name and likeness as Leia became a rallying cry among women" following the contentious United States election in 2016 (238). The article also examines the impact that other female *Star Wars* characters, such as Ahsoka Tano (from *The Clone Wars*, 2008-2020, voiced by Ashley Eckstein) and Sabine Wren (from *Rebels*, 2014-2018, voiced by Tiya Sircar), have had on mainstream society. De Bruin-Molé asserts that these characters are "part of a growing commitment [in mainstream entertainment] to female characters and to feminism" (225). The nuanced portrayal of Princess Leia and characters like her in the *Star Wars* saga represent a consistent theme of female empowerment. Padmé's role in *Revenge of the Sith* intentionally contradicts this theme, reflecting a deliberate storytelling choice on Lucas's part. By placing both Padmé and Anakin in recognizably traditional gender roles, Lucas is able to throw the dangers of those roles into sharp relief. The characters' tragic fates serve as a stark warning against the perils of adhering to restrictive stereotypes. Ultimately, both Padmé and Anakin suffer in service of *Revenge of the Sith*'s cautionary message to the spectator about the perils of tradition and attachment.

Throughout *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin's descent into darkness is meticulously portrayed through mise-en-scène. For example, during the film's opening sequence, Anakin and Obi-Wan fly into battle in perfect tandem (Fig. 2).

The characters' synchronicity reflects their shared history, as well as Anakin's moral alignment with Obi-Wan and the Jedi Order. The harmony in sound and motion between their starfighters conveys the idea that "together, [Anakin and Obi-Wan] are unstoppable" (Stover 21). However, as the film progresses, Anakin and Obi-Wan become increasingly divided, representing Anakin's disconnection from the Jedi and his shift toward the Dark Side. This division begins when Obi-Wan is knocked unconscious during the pair's duel with Count Dooku (Christopher Lee). From his position as an onlooker to the duel, Chancellor Palpatine—who is shackled to a throne-like chair—commands Anakin to kill Dooku (Fig. 3).

The chair's imposing design lends Palpatine an imperious air, suggesting his control over Anakin. Moreover, with Obi-Wan incapacitated, Palpatine's guidance remains uncontested, compounding his influence over Anakin's actions. This ominous mise-en-scène sets the stage for Anakin's inner darkness to emerge. At the conclusion of the duel, Anakin holds his own blue lightsaber and Dooku's red blade to Dooku's neck (Fig. 4).

The intense contrast in colour between the blades provides a visual representation of the choice Anakin faces: he can follow the path of the Jedi and let Dooku live, or succumb to anger and kill Dooku in cold blood. In the moment before Anakin's decision, the camera shifts to inhabit his point of view. By placing the spectator in Anakin's position, the film creates an opportunity for the spectator to experience emotional gratification: if Anakin chooses to spare Dooku, the spectator will share in Anakin's heroism. Instead, Anakin chooses to execute Dooku, thereby denying the spectator emotional gratification and violating their trust in him as a hero. This breach of trust disrupts the spectator's alignment with Anakin in his role as the film's protagonist. The mise-en-scène in this sequence also mirrors the climax of



Fig. 5 | Obi-Wan and Anakin clash on Mustafar in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 01:55:01. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.



Fig. 6 | Anakin duels with Obi-Wan in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 01:52:08. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.



Fig. 7 | Alexandre Cabanel's *The Fallen Angel*, 1847. Musée Fabre, Montpellier.

Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi (Dir. Richard Marquand, 1983), during which Anakin's son, Luke, faces a similar choice. In *Return of the Jedi*, Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) makes the heroic choice to spare Darth Vader's life. Anakin's decision to kill Dooku stands in contrast to Luke's act of mercy, thus highlighting Anakin's inner darkness.

At the climax of *Revenge of the Sith*, the growing divide between Anakin and Obi-Wan culminates in a duel. The duel takes place on Mustafar, a volcanic planet providing a hellish landscape. Mustafar's dramatic reds and oranges reflect the intensity of the conflict (Fig. 5).

The volatility of the environment heightens the spectator's sense of danger, and the operatic score stresses the duel's emotional weight. Additionally, Obi-Wan's defensive, measured approach to the fight is juxtaposed with Anakin's reckless aggression. This contrast in choreography encapsulates the ethical divide between the two adversaries; Obi-Wan's defensiveness reflects his commitment to the Jedi ideal of peace, whereas Anakin's aggression exposes his own malicious intent. The duel also features a shot (Fig. 6) that mirrors Alexandre Cabanel's painting *The Fallen Angel*, which depicts Lucifer after



Fig. 8 | Anakin's eyes turn Sith-yellow after his defeat at the hands of Obi-Wan in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 02:00:05. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.



Fig. 9 | Yoda offers his wisdom to Anakin in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 00:34:03. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.



Fig. 10 | Anakin grapples with premonitions of death in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 00:33:41. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.

his fall from grace (Fig. 7). This shot further emphasizes Anakin's ethical corruption.

The duel concludes with Anakin's defeat and dismemberment. After his loss, Anakin's eyes turn yellow (Fig. 8). The harsh colour of Anakin's eyes represents his submersion in the pain and anguish of the Dark Side, and the desolate volcanic background accentuates his suffering.

However, *Revenge of the Sith*'s mise-en-scène best captures Anakin's inner turmoil during his conversation with Yoda. The two characters sit in a dark room, lit only by sunlight filtering between half-closed blinds. While both of Yoda's eyes are illuminated (Fig. 9), half of Anakin's face remains in shadow (Fig. 10).

The conflict between light and dark across Anakin's face symbolizes his internal struggle between the Light and Dark sides of the Force. Meanwhile, the shadows encroaching within the room illustrate the Dark Side's growing influence over both Anakin and the galaxy at large. This imagery echoes Yoda's warning that "the Dark Side clouds everything" (*Attack of the Clones* 00:04:58–00:05:04), including Anakin's ability to discern good from evil. At the end of the scene, Yoda's



Fig. 11 | Anakin leads the attack on the Jedi Temple during Order 66 in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 01:19:41. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.

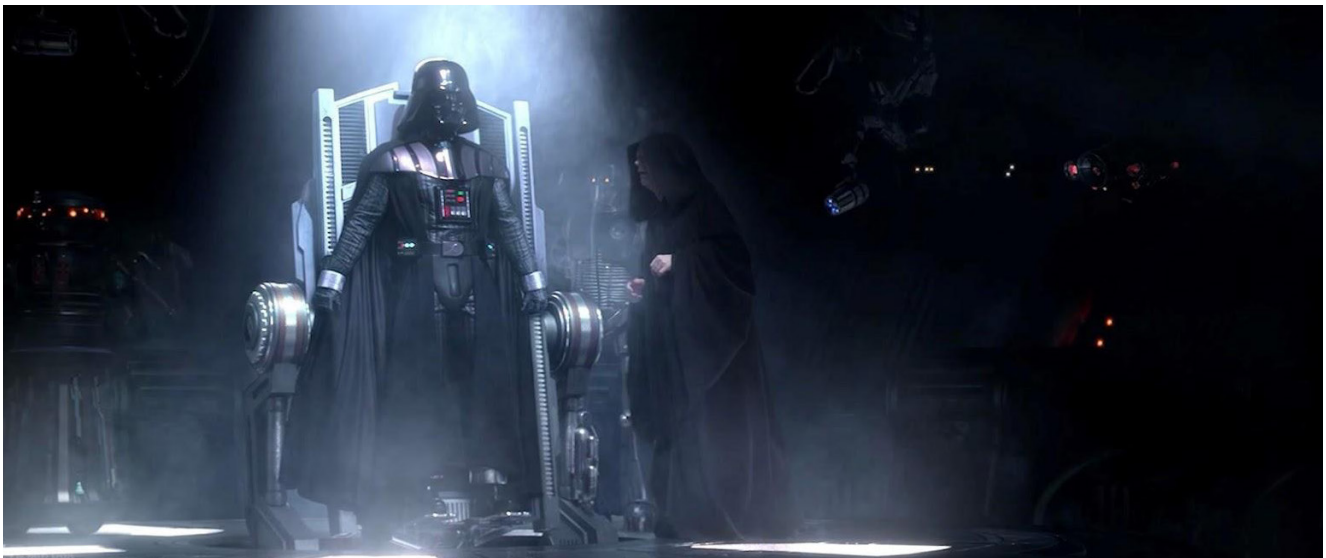


Fig. 12 | Darth Vader is born in Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*, 02:07:57. Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.

eyes remain in the light, signifying his commitment to the Jedi path. Conversely, Anakin's eyes descend into darkness, foreshadowing his fall to evil. Light is also used to isolate Anakin from the Jedi after his turn to the Dark Side. For instance, during his assault on the Jedi Temple, Anakin marches into a single beam of light (Fig 11).

The light from the Temple emphasizes Anakin's lone figure, illustrating his separation from the Jedi who dwell within. The impression of separation is heightened by Anakin's cowl, which shields him from the light and evokes the same Gothic undertones as Darth Vader's armour. By isolating Anakin from the Jedi, *Revenge of the Sith* forces the spectator to split their sympathies. This division of loyalty challenges Anakin's status as the film's hero, further problematizing his connection with the spectator.

The disconnect between Anakin and the spectator reaches its peak during the final phase of Anakin's transformation to

evil. In this scene, the camera looks directly down upon Anakin's mangled form, showcasing his vulnerability. Around Anakin, lights embedded in the floor outline the iconic Imperial insignia. By positioning Anakin against the backdrop of the Imperial symbol of oppression, the film implies that Anakin is at the Empire's mercy. This notion evokes a feeling of helplessness from the spectator. This feeling is magnified by the audience inhabiting Anakin's powerless point of view as a cybernetic mask descends to cover his face. The subsequent shot depicts the mask closing over Anakin's face from above, separating him from the spectator entirely. Throughout the scene, the spectator can hear the sound of Anakin's heart beating steadily. As Anakin is fully encased in armour, his heartbeat stops, suggesting the death of his character. A sinister rendition of composer John Williams' "The Imperial March" echoes in the background, and a single rasping breath issues from the mask as a new heartbeat begins (Williams). The rasping breath and renewed heartbeat hint at

the creation of a new life. Altogether, the *mise-en-scène* in this sequence conveys the symbolic death of the film's protagonist, Anakin Skywalker, and the birth of a notorious antagonist—Darth Vader. Instead of a heroic transformation, Anakin undergoes a horrific metamorphosis. By transforming its hero into a villain, *Revenge of the Sith* reveals the darkness lurking beneath the polished surface of the heroic male archetype. This revelation challenges conventional ideas about male heroism, consequently redefining the spectator's notion of traditional heroism in film.

As the revelatory scene nears its conclusion, Darth Vader rises into a solitary beam of light (Fig. 12).

Vader's bound form, the oppressive surrounding darkness, and the sinister figure of Palpatine all create a sense of entrapment. At the same time, mechanical arms reach out like grasping claws, and the red and orange lights of medical droids glow ominously in the background. This foreboding *mise-en-scène* solidifies Vader's status as a villain bound to evil against his will. While the spectator retains a sense of sympathy for Vader's plight, their connection to him as the film's hero is

ultimately severed.

By disrupting the spectator's straightforward connection with its hero, *Revenge of the Sith* invites the spectator to reflect on the nature of heroism itself. This reflection revolves around Anakin's uncertain moral standing. Anakin is no mere anti-hero: his transformation into Darth Vader requires him to commit acts of true evil. However, despite Anakin's unforgivable crimes, the spectator still relates to his motivations. Moreover, the film's *mise-en-scène* reminds the audience that Anakin remains a victim of both Palpatine's manipulations and his own vulnerabilities. Anakin's moral complexity makes him relevant to real life in ways that conventional heroes are not. His journey serves as a warning against the dangers of power and jealousy, thus highlighting the pitfalls inherent in patriarchal roles. By disrupting the spectator's alignment with its hero, *Revenge of the Sith* transcends its own role as an entertainment piece. The film offers viewers a critical lens on the dynamics of personal identification with heroes, ultimately illuminating the darker aspects of Hollywood's heroic male archetype. ■

WORKS CITED

- Cabanel, Alexandre. *The Fallen Angel*. 1847, Musée Fabre, Montpellier.
- De Bruin-Mole, Megan. "Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses: Star Wars and Popular Feminism." *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*, edited by Sean Guynes and Dan Hassler-Forest, Amsterdam UP, 2018, pp. 225-40.
- Hayman, A. "What Do We Mean by 'Phantasy'?" *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, vol. 70, no. 1, 1989, pp. 105-114. Abstract. PubMed, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2737819/.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." 1975. *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18. *Oxford Academic*, doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.
- Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*. Directed by George Lucas, performances by Hayden Christensen, Ewan McGregor, Natalie Portman, and Frank Oz, Lucasfilm Ltd., 2002.
- Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*. Directed by George Lucas, performances by Hayden Christensen, Ewan McGregor, Natalie Portman, Ian McDiarmid, Christopher Lee, and Frank Oz, Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005.
- Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi*. Directed by Richard Marquand, performances by Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher, Lucasfilm Ltd., 1983.
- Stover, Matthew. *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*. Del Rey Books, 2005.
- Williams, John. "The Imperial March." *Star Wars: Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*, RSO Records, 1980.