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Writing About Film

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Good or Evil, there is an In-Between.

"Never give up hope, no matter how dark things seem" (Warner Bros. 2008). This sentiment rings true through all of George Lucas's Star Wars films — none more clearly than *Return of the Jedi*. The main hero, Luke Skywalker, saves his friends from the evil empire multiple times on different planets. They reunite with the rest of the rebels to take down the empire. At the lowest point of the film, Luke is forced to watch his friends slowly die, helpless, before the emperor's number one, Darth Vader, miraculously changes sides and helps Luke, losing his own life in the process, and the day is saved. This idea of Darth Vader having an internal struggle is on display throughout the film without the use of dialogue or actions. Darth Vader's infamy is created through his costume's glossy black contrast — which makes him stand from other character like the Storm Troopers — and his masked face that the viewer is expecting to come off and reveal his true character. These ideas are supported in paralleling scenes between the empire and the rebels. Through color and contrast, Vader is set up as a character of interest, and because of his mask, his true character is hidden, creating the complex figure that is Darth Vader.

Darth Vader's importance is setup from the opening scene; the scene establishes itself with a wide angle shot of the star destroyer base (Fig. 1). This shot has a noticeable lack of color with high glossy contrast; the commanders and storm troopers are reduced to simple objects

because there are so many of the same moving in a military fashion. A bleak emotion is evoked. This is where Darth Vader begins to stand out — he is the only one in all glossy black and he wears a cape and armor, giving the first hint that Darth

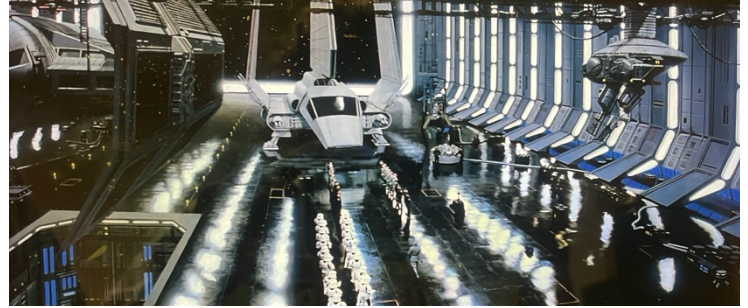


Figure 1

Vader is a super trooper (Fig. 2). Darth Vader is not meant to fade into the background; the glossy black will stand out in any scene he is put in and yet in the star base he fits seamlessly into the shot. The high contrast armor signals to the viewer that he is evil. This idea is solidified when the next scene is established.



Figure 2

Another wide angle shows the droids in a desert (Fig.3). A complete turnaround from high contrast star base; every color is muted — tans and warmth envelope the shots which jars the viewer. The tans, blues, and off whites becoming very apparent when paralleled with the high contrast of the star base. In this setting the movie introduces our heroes, the rebels, who have a stereotypical “dirty” look instead of the pristine order that is the empire (Fig. 4). The most significant of which is Luke Skywalker, the protagonist of the film. In every shot the rebels stand out from the empire through the lack of conformity and contrasting colors; when a



Figure 3



Figure 4

color stands out like the orange jumpers or the green skin of Yoda, it is never black or white. The dirty muted colors paint the heroes as scrappy while the empire operates through order.

To further emphasize order in the empire, nearly all the character including the storm troopers and Darth Vader is masked. In the opening scene, the camera cuts to follow the commanders' eyes; he's looking at the doors to the spaceship in anticipation. To emphasize the nervousness of the commander a closeup shot is employed after, showing fear in the eyes and a gulp (Fig. 5). The doors open, and the viewers get their first glimpse of Darth Vader, and it begins at his feet. The camera tilts up, extenuating his large figure — while all others were made to be small and impersonable — until the camera is at his masked face; this is the same shot that the commander had a closeup on the face with the shoulders still in frame (Fig. 6). The key



Figure 5

difference is the viewer does not humanize Darth Vader the same way they can with the commander because of the mask. There is no emotion to Darth Vader's character in the same way that storm troopers follow orders, Darth Vader is seen to be the emperor's puppet. Yet, through the movies use of close-up shots and contrast the movie makes Darth Vader stand out and the viewer becomes fixated on taking off his mask.

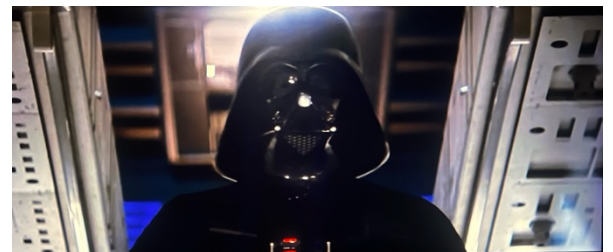


Figure 6

The importance of taking off a mask and revealing a face is marked during Leia's introduction. With the camera employing medium shots of a masked figure, the audience is left in the dark about the intentions of this figure (Fig.7). The movie continues to see this character

“sell off” a Wookiee, a character that is part of the rebels, to gain access to Han Solo. At which point the mask comes off revealing Leia. It becomes apparent to the viewer that using the Wookiee was a part of the plan. The viewer starts to associate masks and especially unmasking as not only humanizing but also connects the masks to heroes (Fig. 8). This idea



Figure 7

is further enforced throughout the film from notably Luke Skywalker's introduction. The movie sets up two opposing ideas, that Darth Vader is a simple puppet of the emperor and that because Darth Vader is masked his intentions cannot be assumed.



Figure 8

The dueling ideas puts Darth Vader under a spotlight. Without any of Vader's actions or past knowledge of who he is, the viewer is keen on him and is waiting for him to take off the mask. There is a hope that he will revert and reveal who he truly is, which would be different than the emperor servant. This same feeling does not exist to the emperor; his face is only ever cloaked with most of the time being shown — he is a stagnant character. The storm troopers, while masked, are also not set up with the same hope for change. This is due to their uniformity they blend with each other, as in the opening scene they are reduced to a uniform mass. Darth Vader, due to his contrasting black colors, stands out. This standing out, through color and contrast, is like the rebels, the lack uniformity creates individuality in character that creates intrigue which is not the case for storm troopers. This further causes intrigue in Darth Vader that is not there for any other character.

Darth Vader's turn from being the simple puppet of the emperor to helping Luke in one last dying attempt is iconic. This change is set up by the director without actions or dialogue. Darth Vader's character is shown to be complex through mise-en-scène in the color and contrast,

and by masks. The movie does an excellent job of parallelling the empire and the rebels through similar shots, with differing levels of contrast and colors. Darth Vader, dressed in all glossy black, will contrast any scene he is put in, especially in the highly ordered shots showing the empire. From the first scene, the viewer is knowledgeable that Darth Vader is evil. Yet, as the movie progresses and the view becomes intrigued in Darth Vader, they do not dismiss him as one dimensional. This is because of his mask. Darth Vader's mask, as any mask does, hides his emotions, his true character. This idea is reinforced through multiple face reveals by the rebels, putting Darth Vader in the same box as the hero's puts pressure onto his character without him saying or doing anything. By the film's end, when Vader's mask is removed, the audience is given a glimpse of the man behind the mask, completing his arc from villain to hero.

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