

## **The Synoptic Star Wars**

*The fan club strikes back.*

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One by one, the students open up about an adolescent trauma they have in common. One is telling me about her first steps out of the closet.

“There was no way this thing could have lived up to our expectations. After the first time, I even lied to cover up my disappointment. I told my friends, ‘It was great.’ Everyone else was saying the same thing. But I was asking myself, ‘Is there something wrong with me?’ Finally we started asking each other, ‘Were you let down too?’ And it turned out that everyone felt the same way.”

These undergraduates are remembering their first experience of “Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace.” Some had camped out for days beforehand. All left the theater with the uneasy feeling that something had gone horribly wrong. Instead of being initiated into the mystical power of the Force, they had endured demythologizing lectures on “Midichlorians.” (These seem to be spiritual mitochondria.) Instead of a fumbling but earnest Luke Skywalker, they had met an irritatingly childish Anakin Skywalker. Instead of the comic relief of Han Solo and Chewbacca, they had met the dreadful wackiness of an amphibious donkey named Jar Jar Binks. Instead of being swept away to a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, they felt like they had just been taken in a minivan to a children’s pizza joint.

Cut to Santa Clarita, California, where a Blockbuster customer, watching “Episode I” at home, had a thought worthy of Stanley Fish: *Is there a film in this film?* He pulled out his PowerMac, started up Final Cut Pro, loaded in the video, and got to work. When he finished, the film (retitled “Star Wars Episode I.I: The Phantom Edit”) was twenty minutes shorter, and ten

years more mature. Jar Jar's follies were cut ruthlessly. Anakin's outbursts were trimmed, turning him into a quieter, more thoughtful youngster. Midichlorians were marginal. There was less patronizing and confusing talk about trade federations and senatorial politics. Scenes were tighter. The distracting Jules Verne-like undersea travel sequence was gone. And the film was much better.

New opening text, receding into infinity as before, tells the story:

*Anticipating the arrival of the newest Star Wars film, some fans, like myself, were extremely disappointed with the final product.*

*Being someone of the "George Lucas Generation," I have re-edited a standard VHS version of "The Phantom Menace" into what I believe is a much stronger film by relieving the viewer of as much story redundancy, pointless Anakin actions and dialog, and Jar Jar Binks as possible.*

*I created this version to bring new hope to a large group of Star Wars fans that felt unsatisfied by the seemingly misguided theatrical release of "The Phantom Menace."*

*To Mr. Lucas and those that I may offend with this re-edit, I am sorry :(*

*- THE PHANTOM EDITOR*

*thephantomedit@hotmail.com*

Soon rumors were circulating through Star Wars circles of an underground "corrector's edition" that was truer to the Star Wars tradition than the commercial version.

Movies have long been cropped for video and edited for television. Ted Turner gained infamy in the eighties for colorizing MGM classics. Even "fan edits" are nothing new. People have been excerpting films since the sixteen-millimeter era. "Metropolis" is available in color, with a rock-opera soundtrack. However, "The Phantom Edit" is more than just a fan edit. On behalf of the "George Lucas Generation," the Phantom Editor is asserting the community's authority over its own canon. He is claiming that he is better than George Lucas at telling the story.

A long time ago in a country far, far away, similar currents surged through a turbulent young community. There another anonymous disciple appropriated the work of others on behalf

of needy readers, and fueled a critical fire that rages today more than ever. Visualize the opening words of Luke scrolling into a starry sky:

*Anticipating the arrival of a narrative of the events fulfilled among us, some disciples, like myself, were extremely disappointed with the final product.*

*Being a member of the “apostolic generation,” I have re-edited a standard scroll into what I believe is a much stronger gospel by relieving the reader of as much needlessly complicated staging, awkward Greek, and disconcerting claims about Jesus as possible.*

*Having followed these things closely for some time, I created this version to bring new hope to people like you, Theophilus, who felt unsatisfied by the seemingly misguided distribution of “The Gospel of Jesus Christ.” To Mark and those I may offend with this re-edit, you had it coming. :)*

Like modern biblical scholars, Star Wars interpreters tend to cluster into several camps over Star Wars’ synoptic problem. One camp vests authority in the author, George Lucas. It affirms the copyright laws that protect intellectual property. It worries that fan edits are altering details that may be significant for episodes 2 and 3. In an article on TheForce.Net, Chris Knight demands that if editors “start tinkering with Anakin’s life journey then I seriously gotta question whether these guys understand Star Wars at all.” Elsewhere Knight defends Anakin’s virginal conception and the pseudoscience of Midichlorians, and even makes a plausible argument for the infuriating Jar Jar.

Purists like Knight would find allies among the biblical critics who have rediscovered the literary genius of Mark, fueling its remarkable comeback after centuries in Matthew’s shadow. When one sees how Matthew and Luke have softened Mark’s hard edges and obscured many of its most compelling features, one can sympathize with George Lucas. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46) instead of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mark 15:34)? Maybe Lucas knows what he’s doing after all.

Another camp vests authority in the community of serious fans. It thinks that the offensive material in “The Phantom Menace” doesn’t fit the authentic Star Wars vision (which it sees embodied in the original episodes IV-VI). It has become cynical about a series that has drifted into kiddie marketing and lost its focus. So it considers the Magisterium morally right to exercise eminent domain, and vindicated when an anonymous vigilante produces an edition at home that fans themselves find superior. As one of my undergraduate viewers puts it, “If Lucas can’t do it, let someone do it who *does* know Star Wars.”

These radicals are the Star Wars tradition’s true conservatives. The Phantom Editor would find allies among the centuries of faithful readers who preferred Matthew to Mark in its homilies, Luke to Mark in its Church year, and the Longer Ending to Mark’s abrupt original. A Jesus who *can* do very few miracles in his own country (Mark 6:5)? That doesn’t sound like the Jesus *we* know (Matt. 13:58).

A third, anarchist camp refuses to vest authority anywhere. It blames Lucas for using his exclusive ownership of the story to destabilize rather than protect his own texts. Several years ago Lucas issued new editions of episodes IV-VI. These were cluttered with digitally introduced creatures, bigger explosions, and new scenes. As fans watched helplessly, he effectively colorized his own films. If Lucas had improved them in the process, his community might be more forgiving. But the gimmicks crowded out the original charm. Jar Jar, clown-diving down the slippery slope, added insult to injury. And Lucas has promised to add *more* scenes into episodes IV-VI that tie them more firmly into I-III. Someday the USC film school may have to offer courses in source, form, redaction, and text criticism.

But he who lives by the splice will die by the splice. Star Wars fans speak of “canonical” texts, but Lucas’ “original autographs” have not yet been written. No one, not even Lucas, knows

the canon's eschatological boundaries. In response, fan editors mine the existing text to construct new ones. Suddenly "The Phantom Menace" looks more like a draft of Mark than a first edition, and "The Phantom Edit" looks more like the Jesus Seminar than Luke. Both groups of editors fabricate for faithfulness, and succeed only when they persuade. The deconstructionist camp would find an ally in the student whose word to me was, "It's just a movie." Shall we color that soliloquy red, pink, gray, or black?

When I ask my students whether the fluidity of these authorized and unauthorized editions is confusing them about where the real Star Wars story lies, one shrugs off my concern: "Look at all the editions of the Bible!" The belly laughs all around speak volumes. These postmodern evangelicals are sailing through a sea of biblical fan edits without sinking into anarchism. They understand the mixed motives behind the translations, critical editions, and niche marketed Bibles that all claim to tell the Church's sacred story. Knowing that gospel writers modified Mark doesn't send them on frantic quests for the historicist Jesus. They are neither anchored by original autographs nor drowning in chaotic texts. Yet to them Jesus is not "just a movie." Biblical pluriformity has not weakened their appreciation of the story's ultimate integrity. In fact, it may have strengthened it. Only an eternal story could shine so brightly through so many centuries of spin.

What happens now? Cut back to last summer, as new edits continued to appear: An "Episode I.II" that digitally garbles Jar Jar's lines and subtitles them with pithy words of wisdom. A Spanish-language version that rearranges the chronology of battle scenes and changes dialogue. The cat is out of the bag. Next stop, the Gospel of Thomas.

As things got out of hand, the formerly tolerant LucasFilm sent out the word that it would prosecute copyright offenders. This drove the edits off e-Bay and back underground, and won a published apology from the Phantom Editor himself. (He turns out to be Mike Nichols, director of “Wit” and other big budget pictures.) But it did not win over all the fans.

Some have argued that Lucas should buy “The Phantom Edit” and canonize it. Folk rocker Suzanne Vega reinvigorated her career in the nineties when she endorsed a British twosome’s unauthorized sampling of her *a cappella* “Tom’s Diner.” Later Vega even released “Tom’s Album,” an entire album of originally unauthorized fan edits.

My undergraduates favor such an approach. They respect the authority of both Lucas and the community he made. In “The Phantom Edit” they see a film that reflects Lucas’ own tradition at its best.

The apostolic churches of the Roman Empire, unencumbered by modern copyright laws and notions of intellectual property, followed that logic when, from among the many authorized and unauthorized fan edits of Jesus’ biography, they authorized a set of four reliable gospels. We can thank Mark for writing a gospel so compelling and irritating that it provoked at least two equally canonical responses (three if you also read John as an answer to Mark). We can thank his appropriators for rising to the challenge. And we can thank the Church that honored Jesus’ memory by refusing to make us choose between them.

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