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“Only a Sith Deals in Absolutes”: Dialogising a Single Truth

Star Wars: A New Hope for Visual Pedagogies in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

Fiona Westbrook | ORCID: 0000-0002-0744-6721

Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

fiona.westbrook@aut.ac.nz

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Abstract

Through a series of visual provocations from *Star Wars' Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*, this article contemplates the allure and danger of a singular truth. Anakin Skywalker's transition from Jedi to Sith Lord, Darth Vader, amplifies and breaks down notions of truth and lies, posing seductive simplicities and paradoxical tensions. These come to the fore in the battle which marks Anakin's final transition from Jedi to Sith, with his former Master Obi-Wan Kenobi's ironic, absolutist declaration “only a Sith deals in absolutes” (Lucas, 2005). This article explores how these scenes seduce viewers with the clarity of absolute thinking and undermine it through dialogic contradiction, signalling the allure and dangers of simplistic, idealised, certainty.

Keywords

Star Wars – absolutes – dialogism – Mikhail Bakhtin – *istina* – *pravda*



FEATURE Fiona Westbrook's article comprises three videos, which can be viewed [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

- This article is part of the special topic 'Star Wars: A New Hope for Visual Pedagogies in a Galaxy Far, Far Away', edited by Andrew Gibbons and Rene Novak.

1 Introduction

The allure and menace of certainty pervades the dichotomies of *Star Wars*, culminating in *Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* with the seduction and danger of a single truth. The saga stages stark binaries: Jedi versus Sith, light versus dark, harmony versus chaos, serenity versus anger, binaries that insinuate honesty versus deception, right versus wrong, truth versus lies. A positivist framing that contradicts the multiple dialogues spread across worlds and species, situated in their own lived experiences and received truths of this galaxy, far, far away. *Episode III* brings these tensions to an ambiguous head in Anakin's transformation from Jedi to Sith Lord, Darth Vader. His transition from 'goodie' to 'baddie' traces struggles and limitations with binaries, encouraging a questioning of why a single truth can seduce, especially in times of political and personal strife. This article traces what is lost when one succumbs to such a simplistic binary, signalling the inherent tensions, but also the ongoing need to keep questioning 'truth'.

Employing visual provocations from *Episode III*, in conversation with the Soviet Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin, this article dialogises notions of singular truths, such as 'goodies' and 'baddies'. In doing so, it seeks to unsettle the allure of certainty as monologic and reductive, signalling the possibilities of dialogic ambiguity. For Bakhtin (1986), a monologue can include many voices

when they pose a single truth that overlooks the other, materialising a limited reality. Diminishing the richness of lived experiences, "monologue pretends to be the ultimate word. It closes down the represented world and represented persons" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 293) for a single truth that poses a simple answer. This article engages with the considerable frustration that the refusal of a singular truth can pose, which promises simple answers to everyday complexities. While affirming the dangers of allegiance to absolutes, the article takes the ironic declaration "only a Sith deals in absolutes" (Lucas, 2005) as its central provocation, subjecting it to dialogic interrogation.

2 Multiple Truths: He's Got a Point

Episode III seemingly stages a simple tale of good versus evil, yet Anakin's transformation into Vader signals something more complex. His gradual transition throughout the film illustrates a struggle between received and lived truths as he negotiates his past, present, and future. This multiplicity of truth embodies Bakhtin's conception of *istina* and *pravda*.

Russian has no single word for truth, instead distinguishing between two concepts. *Istina* refers to "a context of theory of knowledge" (Ballestrem, 1967, p. 67), what Bakhtin employs as universal, theoretical truth that is unified and received (Sapienza, 2004). *Pravda*, translatable as "justice, righteousness" (Boym, 1994, p. 96), represents what Bakhtin (1981) utilises as the self's unique, lived truth. These received and lived truths coalesce and interplay within the time and space of the self as they dialogue with the other. Anakin's arc embodies this conceptual tension.

For Anakin, the received truth *istina* of his Jedi training collides with his lived experiences *pravda*. His past includes enslavement as a boy and separation from his mother who remains in servitude. In the present he navigates his forbidden marriage with Padmé Amidala, his ongoing Jedi training and covert counselling by Darth Sidious, who masquerades as Chancellor Palpatine. These lived *pravda* collide with his visions of losing his wife in an imagined/visioned future. This interplay across past, present, and future prompts the prophesied "Chosen One", who would "bring balance to the Force" (Lucas, 2005), to question the received truth *istina* he has received from any singular other, bringing the Jedi-Sith dichotomy into question.

Throughout Star Wars, the Jedi are characterised as selfless, altruistically keeping peace throughout the galaxy whilst seeking enlightenment, harmony, and serenity through the rejection of attachment, greed, anger, and passion. Oppositely, Sith are characterised by self-interest, fuelled by anger, fear, and



FIGURE 1 A Socratic questioning
MEME BY AN ANONYMOUS INTERNET USER,
REMIXED UNDER FAIR USE CONDITIONS ON THE
BASIS OF *STAR WARS: EPISODE III* (LUCAS 2005)
AND *THE EMPEROR'S NEW GROOVE* (DISNEY, 2000)

passion, seeking power through the embrace of attachment, ambition, and chaos. This dichotomy appears to establish a single absolute truth, typifying light versus dark, good versus evil. Yet Anakin's transition from Jedi to Sith illustrates his grappling with this supposed certainty. Darth Sidious challenges Anakin's singular received truth of the Jedi in the Figure 1 meme.

The meme is composed of three images, two from *Episode III*, where a single, absolute 'truth' is questioned by Darth Sidious in conversation with Anakin, and a third, displaying Kronk, from the film *The Emperor's New Groove*, alongside the text "Me realizing that Palpatine isn't entirely wrong". Through

this configuration, Figure 1 reflects memes layering of pop culture references, frequently through playful and coy forms, to prompt critical reflection (Westbrook et al., 2021). This humorous mirth is embodied by Kronk situated within a family-comedy genre. He is a simple-minded villain's assistant, who, through his lack of understanding continually questions 'truth', prompting thoughtful responses that unwittingly employ a Socratic dialogue. A method that questions certain 'truth' to expose contradictions and ambiguities, unsettling confident assertions (Westbrook, 2024). Bakhtin (1986) described how Socrates fostered truth, because his method of questioning made diverse voices “collide in a quarrel, and as a result truth was born”, making him a “mid-wife” of truth (p. 110), due to assisting with the birth of encounters among a diversity of worldviews.

Typifying this dialogue in Figure 1, a Kronk-like angel appears on his shoulder, encouraging him to see another's point of view by saying “No, no. He's got a point”. Out of frame lurks a matching devil figure, indicating the importance of hearing the divergent other's voice that upends notions of 'truth'. Through this satirical multi-layering of visualities, Figure 1's meme prompts critical reflection of truth by embodying Kronk's naive challenging to Jedi and Sith narratives. By questioning without reservation that which is 'knowable', new insights are signalled, unsettling the received *istina* of Jedi righteousness. This dialogue overturns the ready-made, single truth of Jedi as 'good' and Sith as 'evil', exposing the monologic rigidity the Jedi embody.

3 The High Ground of Certainty

The tensions of a single truth appears to apex in *Episode III* during the battle between Anakin and Obi-Wan, his Jedi master, with Bakhtinian ambiguity troubling this scene. Video 1 illustrates the final stages of Anakin's transition to the 'Dark Side' of the Sith.

Many have commented on the irony of Obi-Wan's comment, “only a Sith deals in absolutes” (Lucas, 2005), given the abolishment of an absolute, as *only* a Sith construct, is in itself an absolute (Kuiper, 2025). This play of words infers there is an allure in a single truth that poses a simple answer. Even those who abolish a singular simplistic response can simultaneously be drawn to this certainty. Bakhtin (1993) enshrined the 'two-faced Janus' to look in two opposing directions at once; lived *pravda* and received *istina* doing battle with the self and other. There is no 'ought-to' from this stance, only the self and other in a dialogical struggle (Bakhtin, 1993). Bakhtinian researchers do not contend there are answers and conclusions to research, nor research questions, rather a dialogic analysis aims to better understand the possibilities, tensions and



VIDEO 1 “Only a Sith deals in absolutes.” (See [here](#).)
LUCAS, 2005

consequences of everyday encounters. This lack of a single truth or answer can cause considerable frustration, with Bakhtinian dialogism not for the faint of heart, living instead in the rich ideological tensions that reflect everyday realities (White & Mahtab, 2025). From these implications, further questions are sought and signalled, reflecting the hopeful, ongoing nature of dialogue.

Even as dialogism resists singular truth, the allure of certainty is powerful. A single, absolute truth can enshrine the sense of being ‘right’ and infallible, arguably seen in the final battle between Anakin and Obi-Wan, when the master comments he has the high ground. This visuality can be seen as Figure 2 in the Graphics Interchange Format (GIF), containing a moving composition of images which displays the elevated terrain Obi-Wan stands upon. Anakin is positioned precariously surrounded by liquid lava, surviving alone on a raft, potentially illustrating the dangers and desolation of the ‘Dark Side’. Obi-Wan shouts “I have the high ground” (Lucas, 2005), a battle advantage that also insinuates the moral high ground.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, a claim to any single truth casts the other as a voiceless object, overlooking the pluralities of their lived *pravda* (Westbrook & White, 2024). Dialogism is,

counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to *possess a ready-made truth*, and it is also counterposed to the *naive self-confidence* of those people who think that they know something, that is, who think that they possess certain truths. Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.

BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 101, emphasis added



FIGURE 2 The high ground (animated GIF)
 GIF BY AN ANONYMOUS INTERNET USER, REMIXED UNDER FAIR
 USE CONDITIONS ON THE BASIS OF *STAR WARS: EPISODE III*
 (LUCAS 2005)

Obi-Wan’s proclamation implies the Jedi ‘possess a ready-made truth’. Their singular certainty infers they have access to the ‘right’ knowledge and answers. A dialogic reading suggests this simplicity is ‘naïvely self-confident’ for truth is a plural interanimation that is constantly evolving between the self and other. To silence the voice of the other, is to render them voicelessly objectified. Fostering a closing down of dialogue that can stagnate that which is placed beyond reproach. The danger of a single absolute truth resides within the diminishing of learning and knowledge, whilst simultaneously instilling a sense of superiority that can further silence divergent voices.

4 At an End Your Rule is (Not)

Master Yoda’s confrontation with Darth Sidious presents another Jedi absolute in *Episode III*. He announces, “at an end your rule is” (Lucas, 2005; see Figure 3), explaining he intends to wipe out the Sith to restore balance to the force. Another absolute is posed, that balance is found only through the Jedi. This kind of single answer has allure in its simplicity and direction yet poses considerable danger. A single, absolute truth that promises simple answers prompts questioning of whose truth receives allegiance, and whose is silenced. Such monologic certainty negates the multiple lived truths that exist within the discourse (Westbrook & White, 2024). Reflecting competing lived *pravda* and received *istina*, Master Yoda’s proclamation of truth in Figure 3’s GIF does not come to pass.

Whilst the moving images in Figure 3 show Darth Sidious withdrawing, this battle ends with Master Yoda retreating into hiding, having lost to the ‘Dark



FIGURE 3 “At an end your rule is” (animated GIF)
 GIF BY AN ANONYMOUS INTERNET USER, REMIXED UNDER FAIR
 USE CONDITIONS ON THE BASIS OF *STAR WARS: EPISODE III*
 (LUCAS 2005)

Side’. Yoda is often framed as the wisest of the Jedi, making his naïve over confidence a notable oddity. After this scene Darth Sidious’ rule stretches across the entirety of the galaxy, sharply contradicting Yoda’s absolute assertion. Yoda’s certainty appears to represent the oversimplified shortcomings, and blind spots of received *istina* when granted unquestioning allegiance, indicating how even the wisest can be seduced by monologic confidence.

5 Educational Truths and Their Tensions

These tensions in a galaxy far, far away that complicate a single truth have warnings for education. Appreciating how lived truth *pravda* differs from received *istina* appears essential to teaching. The notion of students as blank slates, or *tabula rasa*, has long been critiqued due to the delimiting assumption learners bring nothing to such encounters (Gallistel, 2004). Learners arrive with rich prior knowledge, lived experiences, and cultural frameworks that shape how they encounter new information (Gallistel, 2004). To treat students as empty vessels awaiting received truth overlooks the *pravda* they already possess. Yet educational systems can operate as though *istina* alone suffices, positioning curriculum as universal knowledge to be transmitted, rather than as one perspective among many to be dialogically engaged.

Placed on the ideological front lines of politics and policy, education becomes a battleground where competing truths vie for legitimacy (May, 2009). Successive governments prioritise opposing ideologies, each claiming their educational vision represents the ‘right’ approach. Standardised testing regimes promise measurable accountability, reducing learning to quantifiable outcomes (Au, 2009). Curriculum frameworks claim universality while

often privileging particular cultural knowledges. Pedagogical approaches are mandated as ‘best practice’ whilst they can simultaneously dismiss contextual variations. In each instance, the allure of singular truth offers clarity, but can come at the cost of silencing the multiple *pravda* that students, teachers, and communities inhabit.

Padmé’s observation that “this war reflects a failure to listen” (Lucas, 2005) indicates how conflict can intensify when divergent voices are silenced rather than heard. Teachers and policymakers often acknowledge diversity, context, and lived experience in principle, then implement standardised curricula, universal pedagogies, and singular assessment frameworks in practice. This gap between acknowledging multiple truths and maintaining monologic structures might reflect the persistent allure of simplicity. Obi-Wan’s contradiction embodies this tension. After recognising that “good is a point of view, Anakin” and declaring his allegiance to democracy (Lucas, 2005), he proclaims the absolute that “only a Sith deals in absolutes”, seemingly seduced by the very certainty he warns against. Education can replicate this pattern, when multiplicity is acknowledged rhetorically but certainty is maintained structurally.

This homogenising impulse appears particularly concerning in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, Tangata Whenua (people of the land) ways of knowing present different truths about learning, knowledge, and education. Whakapapa (genealogical connections that situate learners within ancestral and land-based relationships) rejects Western emphases on individual achievement detached from context (Penetito, 2010). Whanaungatanga (collective responsibility and reciprocal relationships) can challenge pedagogies centred on competition and autonomous learning (Bishop et al., 2009). Kaitiakitanga (intergenerational guardianship and care for environment and future generations) offers frameworks for education as responsibility rather than credential acquisition. When Western educational *istina* is posed as universal, these lived *pravda* can become positioned as supplementary or deficient, potentially rendered invisible by the very systems claiming to educate all children equitably (Smith, 2012).

Bakhtinian dialogism offers an alternative. Rather than seeking to resolve tensions between *istina* and *pravda*, dialogism encourages understanding the lived truths of the other, not with the intention to persuade, but to appreciate the time and space that fostered their ideology (Westbrook, 2024). This approach can prompt “ever newer ways to mean” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 326), facilitating consideration for diverse worldviews and what they offer. Applied to education, dialogism suggests that curriculum can become sites of encounter rather than transmission, where received knowledge enters into dialogue with lived experience. Pedagogy could become less about imparting correct

answers and more about creating spaces where multiple truths can coexist in productive tension.

6 The Allure of an Answer

The refusal to give a single truth that poses a simple answer can frustrate, especially within educational settings where learners expect the teacher to impart knowledge, as opposed to co-construct it. Blythe and Sweet (2015) identify this as productive dissonance, noting that students often experience discomfort when encountering ambiguity rather than definitive answers. This discomfort manifests in educational encounters where contemplative and subjective responses prompt further questions, with no absolute, simple answer forthcoming. The Bakhtinian Frank (2005, p. 967) explains

young professionals are taught that in order to be recognized as a professional, and to sustain the prestige of the profession in society, they must utter words that claim to be the last word, the definitive, finalizing word, about those who fall within their purview.

The desire for certainty is understandable. A single, clear answer offers direction, efficiency, and the reassurance of being ‘professionally right’.

As a higher-education teacher, I recognise this tension in my practice and education. In my PhD journey I remember desperately asking my supervisors for ‘the answer’, with considerable frustration and angst when it was not forthcoming. In the classroom, when responding to student work with questions rather than directives, such as “what do you think about it?”, I am asking learners to sit with uncertainty. This can feel unsatisfying, even frustrating, particularly when assessment and institutional structures reward clear, correct answers. Yet Blythe and Sweet (2015) argue that this discomfort serves a pedagogical purpose, encouraging the critical thinking that can come to be when simple answers are denied. The challenge lies not in eliminating this frustration, but in creating space where multiple truths can be held in tension.

Without such space, monologic truth can become self-perpetuating. Frank (2005) warns that when people are consistently positioned within singular narratives, they “come to expect to be spoken of in this way ... [they] forget to notice the falseness of the approach” (p. 967). A simple, absolute truth *istina* can continually propagate itself because it becomes invisible as ideology. Wholly embracing such truths comes at the cost of the lived *pravda* of the self

and other, silencing the knowledge that is promulgated from their encounters across the past, present and future.

7 Unusual Dangers, Unique Opportunities

These tensions between singular and multiple truths intensify during political crisis, when the allure of simple answers becomes more seductive. *Episode III* depicts the downfall of democracy as Chancellor Palpatine, or rather Darth Sidious, is granted increasing authoritative powers that dwindle the Republic's democracy. In the final battle between Palpatine and Yoda they literally pull down the seats of the Republic, or democracy, which they hurtle at one another. Video 2 shows Yoda and Sidious utilising the force to turn the Galactic republic's pews for democratic speech and deliberation into weapons. Each plays a role in destroying the infrastructure of dialogue itself, visually embodying what can lurk within absolutist thinking. Even those claiming to defend democracy can become its destroyers.

This destruction of democratic spaces resonates beyond the fictional galaxy. Recent years have witnessed what scholars characterise as a global decline of democracy, marked by the silencing of divergent voices across diverse political contexts (Gorokhovskaia & Grothe, 2024). Populist movements traffic in singular truths that promise simple solutions to complex challenges (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Economic anxiety becomes reducible to immigration policy (Goodhart, 2017). Historical injustice becomes dismissible through revisionist narratives (Assmann & Conrad, 2010). Climate crisis becomes deniable



VIDEO 2 The decline of democracy. (See [here](#).)
LUCAS, 2005

through selective evidence (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Educational crises become solvable through standardised testing (Au, 2009; Lingard, 2010). In each instance, the allure lies in the clarity of a single truth that poses a simple answer, the certainty of the solution, the comfort of knowing who is right and who is wrong.

Bakhtin, who lived through considerable hardship during the Soviet Union, offers possibilities even within the darkest of times. His response was not to construct new villains. Even those who sentenced Bakhtin first to death and then to internal exile were later praised by this thinker for their kindness to him and the commendable nature of their character (Gratchev, 2019). This refusal to finalise the other, to render them as irredeemably 'evil', models what dialogism encourages, problematising a singular truth, in spite of, or perhaps because of, challenging times. When democracy's seats are weaponised, as in *Episode III*, the response might not be to accept a singular saviour, whether Jedi or Sith, but to insist on the multiplicity of voices that constitute democratic dialogues. The question becomes not whether to resist received truth *istina*, but how to create spaces where dialogue can persist even as monologic forces seek to silence diverse voices.

8 Everything: What Is Lost and What Remains

This article has contemplated the allure and danger of singular truth as visibilised in *Star Wars Episode III*. Employing Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic concepts of *istina*, received truth, and *pravda*, lived truth, I have interrogated how absolute certainty seduces even as it silences. The refusal to provide a simple answer has been explored as a tension-laden yet possibility-rich response when singular truth presents itself as absolute. GIFs, memes, and video clips created from this film signal critical commentary on both the dangers of monologic certainty and our collective susceptibility to its appeal.

The allure of an absolute lies in its simplicity. A clear answer offers direction, efficiency, the comfort of being right. Yet allegiance to singular truth, which silences the other and forecloses dialogue, poses considerable dangers. When education poses a single truth as universal, it can enact a homogenising view that erases difference and potentially has a colonising effect. The refusal of singular truth, then, might become a political act of resistance against forces that would render all difference as deviation from naïve certainty. Like Yoda's failed proclamation, educational certainty that claims to know "the end" often proves oversimplified, potentially overlooking the complex *pravda* that persist even when *istina* claims victory.



VIDEO 3 “Teaching’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” (See [here](#).)
 FILONI, 2023

These stakes become visible in the Ahsoka series, where Anakin and his former padawan Ahsoka Tano confront the consequences of following absolutes.

In Video 3, Anakin flashes between his former self and the Sith Lord he became. Ahsoka asks what she will become, and Anakin responds with certainty, “that’s up to you.” Yet as he speaks, his form shifts, revealing Vader beneath. The visual oscillation between Jedi and Sith, mentor and destroyer, embodies the cost of accepting singular truth. When a simple answer is given, through a single truth, something profound can be lost in the seductive clarity of absolute certainty.

What emerges in Vader’s place is an authoritarian figure who executes orders without question, who has relinquished the capacity for dialogue with the self and other. His humanity diminishes. His empathy erodes. The lived *pravda* of his relationships, his love for Padmé, his bond with Obi-Wan, his care for Ahsoka, all silenced beneath the received *istina* that the Empire represents order, that the Emperor speaks truth, that absolute allegiance constitutes loyalty. The flashing between Anakin and Vader in this clip visualises what was lost in his acceptance of singular truth: “everything” (Filoni, 2023).

Yet Bakhtin’s framework resists finalising even Vader. The oscillation between identities in this clip suggests the ongoing struggle between *istina* and *pravda*, the dialogic battle that persists even within monologic structures. Anakin has not disappeared, he flickers beneath Vader’s mask, a reminder that lived truth remains even when monologic certainty seeks to silence it. This offers a tentative hope. If the self is never fully finalised, if dialogue can persist even in contexts of extreme authoritarianism, then the refusal of singular truth retains possibility.

The questions this article poses remain unresolved, as they must. What spaces can be created where multiple truths coexist without collapsing into relativism? How does one sit with the discomfort of ambiguity when institutional structures demand clear answers? Who decides which truths receive legitimacy, and whose lived *pravda* gets silenced in the process? These questions invite ongoing dialogue rather than conclusions. They signal the continuing need to question certainty, to resist the seductive simplicity of absolutes, to keep voices in play that might otherwise be rendered voiceless.

In times of political strife, when authoritarianism offers simple solutions to complex problems, the Bakhtinian refusal of singular truth becomes not merely academic but urgent. The stakes are high. What is lost when a single truth is embraced is not abstractions, but relationships, communities, ways of knowing. What peoples gain in refusing them, in maintaining dialogic openness even amid frustration and ambiguity, is the ongoing possibility of encountering the other, of being transformed through dialogue, of keeping truth alive as something born between people rather than imposed upon them.

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