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## 1 Before *Star Wars*

Before *Star Wars* was *The Emperor*.

In the revised chronology of Lucas's completed saga of course, *Star Wars Episode IV* is preceded by *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005), but in real terms Lucas had made nine short films and three features before 1977, including *The Emperor* (1967), a celebration of local DJ Bob Hudson.

Lucas's student films at the University of Southern California, where he was enrolled as an undergraduate from 1964–6, and then as a postgraduate during 1967, included vérité and formalist experiment, animation and conventional action-movie editing, sometimes in the same short project. *Look at Life* (1965) is a rapid-paced, stop-motion montage of magazine images, cut to a frantic beat. *Herbie* (1966) offers, in the words of the title card, 'moments of reflection'<sup>14</sup> that focus on the polished surface of a car at night, shot in cool black and white with a jazz soundtrack. *Freiheit* (1965) is a vignette about a young man racing for an unidentified border, mown down by a uniformed guard at the last second, while *1:42.08* (1966) tracks a bright yellow racing car around its circuit. The short *6.18.67* (1967) is Lucas's "desert poem",<sup>15</sup> a distant observation of another film, J. Lee Thompson's *Mackenna's Gold* (1969) during production, and *filmmaker* (1968) records Lucas's experience of working on Coppola's *The Rain People* (1969). His 1967 *anyone lives in a pretty (how) town*, loosely adapting verse by e.e. cummings, animates human beings in a coldly whimsical fable. Finally, the most significant work of Lucas's early career is *THX 1138: 4EB* (1967), which combines picture and sound distortion with a science-fiction escape thriller.

These films, despite their variation and diversity, are grouped together in the official history of Lucas's career – one constructed to

an extent by the director himself, but also supported by his friends and colleagues – as his ‘experimental’ period. This history, as repeated across biographies, interviews and behind-the-scenes documentaries, is that Lucas was an experimental film-maker who went radically off-track with the mainstream space opera of *Star Wars* and has never achieved his frequently stated aim to get back to this earlier, more challenging and alternative mode. It is often implied that this failure represents a loss to cinema of a genuinely original, innovative film-maker, rather than a purveyor of family fantasy, computer-generated imagery (CGI) concoctions and corporate merchandising.

For example, Lucas’s friend and collaborator John Milius spoke in 1998 of the ‘great loss’ that ‘George stopped making movies, and got interested in the sort of stuff that Lucasfilm puts out. Because he was a really dynamic filmmaker.’<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Francis Ford Coppola, Lucas’s one-time mentor, told the BBC’s *Omnibus* team in 1997 that

George was one of the most talented American film directors of that time, and somehow, with the great success of *Star Wars*, we were deprived of those films he was going to make, and might have made, and instead we have an enormous industrial marketing complex.

The cut to obese crime lord Jabba the Hutt at this point seems deliberate. Coppola goes on:

I do hope that George Lucas the *filmmaker* finally emerges ... and goes his own way, against perhaps the wishes of George the entrepreneur. No matter how many billions of dollars *Star Wars* could earn, and no matter how valuable that franchise that they call is [sic] it isn’t worth a tenth of what he’s worth as an artist, and what he’s capable of doing.

Rick McCallum, producer of the *Star Wars* saga, echoes Coppola: ‘I think once we’ve finished these prequels, [Lucas] will start to do the more interesting experimental films he’s always wanted to do.’

Perhaps surprisingly, Lucas agrees that *Star Wars* represents a diversion from his previous, ‘experimental’ cinema – although, like the *Star Wars* films themselves, his retelling of his personal history has undergone revisions during the last three decades. Even in 1974, when his space fantasy was still in production as *The Star Wars*, *Film Quarterly* reported that Lucas ‘hopes to do more experimental work in the future’, yet ‘does not feel he is compromising in making more straightforward entertainment movies’.<sup>17</sup> By 1980, with the release of *The Empire Strikes Back*, Lucas had decided it was time to return to the USC mode of film-making. As he told *Rolling Stone*:

I loved shooting *cinéma vérité* and thought I would become a documentary filmmaker. [...] I don’t want to be a businessman. My ambition is to make movies, but all by myself, to shoot them, cut them, make stuff I want to, just for my own exploration, to see if I can combine images in a certain way. My movies will go back to the way my first films were ...<sup>18</sup>

A year later, struggling with the script for what was then *Revenge of the Jedi*, he confirmed in an interview with *Starlog* that when he enrolled at USC:

I wanted to be a cameraman ... my first films were very abstract – tone poems, visual. [...] I decided to go back to graduate school ... and did many more movies, but still non-story type films. I was interested in abstract, purely visual films and *cinéma-vérité* documentaries.<sup>19</sup>

However, while acknowledging that his life had taken a surprising path, the George Lucas of 1981 seemed sanguine about having ended up in mainstream, blockbuster film-making.

My goals were to make bizarre abstract movies, and I expected to end up a documentary film-maker and work for a television station or something. I don’t know if I’d have been completely happy at it ... I just sort of overshot

my target – in a rather major way. [...] As corny as it sounds, the power of positive thinking goes a long way.<sup>20</sup>

At this point, despite the trials of the ongoing production, *Star Wars* is presented confidently as an achievement beyond Lucas's expectations; it was not his original goal, but it arrived as a combination of happy accident and 'positive thinking'.

By 1983, according to Michael Kaminski, 'the small-town experimental filmmaker had grown into the biggest movie mogul on the planet and the Lucasfilm kingdom occupied his every waking hour'.<sup>21</sup> In May of that year, Lucas bitterly admitted to *Time* that

the sacrifice I made for *Star Wars* may have been greater than I wanted ... it's an interesting choice I made, and now I'm burned out. In fact, I was burned out a couple of years ago, and I've been going on momentum ever since. *Star Wars* has grabbed my life and taken it over against my will. Now I've got to get my life back – before it's too late!

But of course, Lucas failed, once again, to abandon *Star Wars* and return to his previous, small-scale and alternative mode; instead, he returned to the original trilogy and revamped it with new scenes and CGI effects. In 1998, when the Special Editions were released in cinemas, Lucas was contemplative, expressing doubts about his career trajectory but seeing it as the result, for good or bad, of his own artistic choices. 'Ultimately, my life has taken a very funny twist from where I expected to go ...' he told *Omnibus*, 'and I'm not sure why, other than I did what I wanted to do, and I was making the movie I wanted to make.'

Seven years later, Lucas had finished directing the second trilogy of 'prequels', and the saga was finally complete. A 2005 *Wired* feature by Steve Silberman, based on an extensive interview, presents the director once again 'at a crossroads', regretting his detour from experimental work and preparing to return to his roots. 'I like *Star*

*Wars*,' Lucas muses, 'but I certainly never expected it would take over my life.' Silberman consults former colleagues and mentors, who – like Coppola and McCallum in the 90s – express concern about Lucas's recent path. Walter Murch, Lucas's sound designer from the early 1970s, wagers that 'if George were here and we could wrestle him onto the carpet, he'd say, "Yeah, I've gotten into that box, and now I want to get out of that box."' Lucas's former cinematography instructor, Woody Omens, is

proud of George, but I'm worried about him. He was trying to speak a different cinematic language at an early point in his career, and he's still trying to get to that. If he wanted me to mentor him again 40 years later, I would say, 'Let go. Do something that explores the non-narrative side of human expression from the perspective of a master and a veteran ...'.<sup>22</sup>

'For the past couple of years,' Silberman reports, Lucas has 'been telling interviewers that the breakout popularity of *American Graffiti* in 1973 "derailed" him into the business of mass-market filmmaking and that his career was "sidetracked" by *Star Wars*'.

Lucas and his contemporaries came of age in the 1960s vowing to explode the complacency of the old Hollywood by abandoning traditional formulas for a new kind of filmmaking based on handheld cinematography and radically expressive use of graphics, animation, and sound. But Lucas veered into commercial moviemaking, turning himself into the most financially successful director in history by marketing the ultimate popcorn fodder.

Now he has returned to the most private place in his universe to reinvent himself. He could spend the rest of his life capitalizing on *Star Wars*' legacy. Instead he's trying to dream up a second chance to be the rebel filmmaker he aspired to become a long time ago.<sup>23</sup>

In Silberman's account, Lucas's rebellion was first crushed by the Old Hollywood studios – 'the Empire struck back' when Warners insisted on making cuts to *THX 1138*, and Universal threatened not

to release *American Graffiti* – and then subsumed by his ‘inner Vader’, a reading suggested by Lucas’s admission during a 2004 documentary that as the head of a corporation, ‘I have become the very thing that I was trying to avoid. That is Darth Vader ...’

This history of Lucas’s career relies on three interlinked premises: first, that Lucas’s student films were exclusively experimental in their use of *cinéma vérité* and abstract form; second, that *Star Wars* consists of ‘popcorn fodder’, offers nothing but unadventurous, mainstream storytelling and represents a significant departure from Lucas’s student films; and third, that the radical shift from the first type of cinema to the second began with *American Graffiti*.

In the main body of this study, I will demonstrate more fully the continuities between Lucas’s student films and *Star Wars*. His USC work is, without a doubt, more obviously experimental than the features, but I will show that Lucas’s entire early oeuvre, from 1966 to 1977 – the USC films, the first two features and *Star Wars* itself – combines conventional, classical Hollywood technique with approaches inspired by French, Japanese and Soviet cinema, *vérité* documentary, and the formalist *avant-garde*.

As suggested above, the ‘experimental’ work that Lucas, according to his own testimony as well as those of his friends, supposedly abandoned during the mid-1970s, already exhibits elements of mainstream technique. *Freiheit*, though it concludes with distorted voiceovers discussing the meaning of freedom and depicts the climactic shooting through a quick-fire montage of still images, is skilfully cut for suspense and employs conventional Hollywood form to draw the viewer immediately into the story: the boy’s sprint through the forest is constructed of quick, varied shots (a crash zoom, a whip-pan, a snatched close-up of feet splashing through a puddle, a long shot to establish the scene) joined through matches on action, and we are invited to identify with the protagonist through point-of-view shots of the border coupled with close-ups of his wild-eyed, anxious face. Similarly, though *1:42.08* is cited by John Baxter

as an example of Lucas's cold preference for machines over humans – 'the film has no character except the car'<sup>24</sup> – its rapid editing also draws us into an identification with the driver through point-of-view shots and close-ups of his face that are clearly, causally linked to long shots of the vehicle: a glimpse of the driver's hands wrenching the wheel to the right cuts to a shot of the car rounding a sharp bend, and the driver's grimace precedes a frustrating spin-out. The short film shows an expert understanding of Hollywood action film editing, reminiscent of the World War II movies Lucas studied and re-edited in preparation for the *Star Wars* dogfights.

Similarly, it is too easy to see the feature film *THX 1138* as the last gasp of Lucas's experimental spirit, and *American Graffiti* as his shift into optimistic, light-hearted and commercial movie-making. This, again, has become accepted as the official history. Garry Jenkins's biography of Lucas describes *THX* as 'a bleak, Orwellian mood piece. Science fiction it may have been, *Star Wars* it was not.'<sup>25</sup> By contrast, Alan Ladd, head of production at Twentieth Century-Fox, compared the Anchorhead scenes from *Star Wars* to 'American Graffiti in outer space', suggesting a bridge between the second and third features.<sup>26</sup> Lucas himself, looking back, links *THX* to his USC work rather than to *Star Wars*:

My vision was not to do a normal story. I wanted to do something that was abstract, much more like a student film than a [conventional] drama. Obviously, to get it through the studios, it had to be a drama, but by this time *Easy Rider* had come out, so we thought, 'Maybe we can get away with a really wacky, avant-garde film.'<sup>27</sup>

Dale Pollock's biography, *Skywalking*, presents Lucas's decision to make *American Graffiti* as a deliberate attempt to change the way he was perceived as a director – 'Lucas wanted to make a movie that would dispel his image as a technobrat, a cold, mechanical filmmaker devoid of warmth and humor'<sup>28</sup> – and Lucas suggests that the film was made in response to a challenge from Coppola.

I was getting a lot of razz from Francis and a bunch of friends who said that everyone thought I was cold and weird and why didn't I do something warm and human ... I thought, 'you want warm and human, I'll give you warm and human'.<sup>29</sup>

*THX*, according to Lucas, gave him a reputation as 'a cold, weird director, a science-fiction sort of guy who carried a calculator.'

So I thought, maybe I'll do something exactly the opposite. If they want warm human comedy, I'll give them one, just to show that I can do it. *THX* is very much the way I am as a film-maker. *American Graffiti* is very much the way I am as a person – two different worlds.<sup>30</sup>

This interpretation suggests that – rather than Lucas breaking cleanly away from his previous work with *American Graffiti* and abandoning the approach of *THX* for a 'warm and human' tone that then goes on to influence *Star Wars* – the director's first two features directly inform the opposing sides of *Star Wars*, shaping two very different worlds in conflict. The youthful optimism of *American Graffiti* would, in this analysis, feed directly into the raw energy of the Rebellion, and the colder, more clinical environments of *THX* would become the Imperial Death Star.

This is a more accurate reading, but we should not be led to exaggerate the difference between Lucas's first two features, and in doing so, simplify them both. While the full-length *THX* does inherit the formalist foregrounding of abstract imagery – CCTV interference, computer digits filling the screen – from *THX 1138: 4EB*, it also expands on the short film's underlying chase-and-escape structure, with its climactic bike pursuit (shot and cut, like 1:42.08, with the panache of conventional Hollywood) serving as a clear precursor not just to *Return of the Jedi*'s speeder bikes and *The Phantom Menace*'s pod race, but also the light cycles of *Tron* (1982) and the chase scenes in mainstream, commercial SF like *Judge Dredd* (1995), *Minority Report* (2002) and *I, Robot* (2004). Moreover, it shares with *American Graffiti*

(and Lucas's previous films like *6.18.67*) a documentary approach, its distant cameras allowing the actors to improvise naturalistic dialogue: though the social structure depicted in *THX* is restrictive and repressive, the film is about the failure of that society to fully control rebellious energy, and Donald Pleasance's performance in the White Limbo prison zone includes hesitations, slurs and swallowed words.

*American Graffiti*, in turn – while it aims throughout for easy, careless naturalism – also drops the viewer into a community whose customs and vocabulary are initially alien, and like *THX* the film involves extensive, experimental play with sound montage and distortion: each rock'n'roll track was 'worldised', re-recorded by Lucas and Walter Murch so it warped and echoed across streets and dance-halls.

As Lucas predicted himself prior to its release, *Star Wars* would mesh elements of his two previous features. 'Take the first two and combine them with another side of me that hasn't been seen yet and you get this new film.'<sup>31</sup> *Star Wars* represents the synthesis of Lucas's film-making at that point in his career: the surveillance culture of the Death Star is inherited from *THX* and the teen banter from *American Graffiti*, but the sound montage, the *in medias res* immersion in a strange culture, the fascination with machines – both their shiny surfaces and their inner workings – the underlying theme of escape, and the documentary approach, with its implications for naturalistic, improvisational performance, are common to both – and all these elements can be traced back in turn to aspects of the student films.

Yet *Star Wars* is not quite like the two previous features; it adds something new, and like *American Graffiti*, it was – according to Lucas – a deliberate challenge to push himself into unfamiliar territory. 'I thought before I retire,' he told *Starlog*, 'I want to make one real movie – you know, on sound stages with sets, the way they used to make movies.'<sup>32</sup> While not the radical departure from his earlier cinema that some histories imply, *Star Wars* did – as Lucas suggests here – draw more extensively on classical Hollywood than his previous work; that is, it paid greater homage to the films he

enjoyed on TV when he was a child, rather than the experimental, avant-garde, documentary and international cinema he had first encountered at USC.

The real difference, though, lay not just in the budget and the shift away from guerrilla shooting ‘in the streets, using absolutely nothing’<sup>33</sup> to the more ambitious and lavish methods of classical cinema. As he explained to *Écran*:

I come from experimental cinema, it's my specialty ... *THX 1138* was a non-narrative film, a film without a framework. *American Graffiti* was similar; it was a juxtaposition of different sequences rather than one coherent story. On the other hand, *Star Wars* is a classic story, an old-style narrative ... I wanted to know if I could do it. I wanted to explore this creative field that I had consciously avoided. It's really what I wanted to do: be the sole architect of a traditional story where everything was linked by cause and effect.<sup>34</sup>

The one element that *Star Wars* genuinely introduces to Lucas's work, and that his previous films, from shorts to features, all lack, is a direct, linear and conventional storyline, created through the condensation of several earlier adventure stories into a powerful narrative structure: the simple fable of a young man leaving his home, finding his destiny, assembling a team and taking up the fight against an enemy. Its explicit aim was to provide a modern fairy story for a generation that had grown up without them. ‘And kids need fairy tales – it's an important thing for society to have for kids.’<sup>35</sup> As Pollock summarises:

Lucas wanted to return to more traditional values that held a special appeal for our rootless society. He needed a timeless fable that could demonstrate, not pontificate on, the differences between right and wrong, good and evil, responsibility and shiftlessness.<sup>36</sup>

‘There was no modern mythology to give kids a sense of values, to give them a strong mythological fantasy life,’ Lucas confirmed.

‘Westerns were the last of that genre for Americans.’<sup>37</sup> *Star Wars* was made to fill that gap. As a fable, a story of simple and readily understood oppositions, it creates a clear distinction between the good guys and the bad, and the aesthetic of the Rebels is, for the most part, visibly different from that of the Empire. The film’s central theme of escape, rebellion and destiny is common also to *THX 1138* and *American Graffiti*, but the earlier features, with no claims to be modern-day fables, offer subtler shades of grey in place of *Star Wars*’ black and white; THX himself is a part of the society that seeks to control him, whereas *American Graffiti*’s Curt has to struggle against his doubts and fears, rather than cops and street gangs.

To make *Star Wars*’ battle lines immediately clear, Lucas ranges elements from his previous films on each side of the galactic conflict as if lining up pieces on a chess set. The Rebels are associated with documentary improvisation, customisation and the make-do camaraderie of the Hollywood war film and Western; the Empire draws on a colder, more disciplined use of human figures in formal patterns, enjoying technology for its reflective surfaces rather than for the creative potential of its inner workings, and returning to the bleak structures of both *THX* films, which in turn draw on the European SF of *Alphaville*.

What should now be obvious – and what makes *Star Wars* a more complex piece of work than even the director seems to realise – is that in this supposedly clear-cut conflict between good and evil, *Lucas is rooting for both sides*.