



Star Wars: A consideration of the great new S.F. film

by Samuel R. Delany

My first reactions as the final credits rose on the screen? “Now what happens?” - which is to say George (*American Grafitti* and *THX-1138*) Lucas’s *Star Wars* is about the fastest two-hour film I’ve ever seen: I thought I’d been in the theater maybe twenty-five minutes.

THX, if you’ll recall, looked like it was sired by *Godard’s Contempt* out of the space station sequence in Kubrick’s *2001* – i.e. it was basically white, white-on-white, and then more white. What is the visual texture of *Star Wars*?

Two moons shimmer in the heat above the horizon, and the desert evening fades to purple rather than blue; into the starry black, huge and/or hopelessly complex artifacts flicker, flash, spin, turn, or merely progress with ponderous motion; indoors is all machinery, some old, some new; while plastic storm troopers and dull grey generals meet and march; circus-putty aliens drink in a bar where what appears to be an automatic still gleams in the background with tarnished copper tubing; some of the spaceships are new and shiny, some are old and battered (and you get pretty good at telling the difference between the two).

Motion: that’s the feeling you take away from the film more than any other. People tramp, run, sprint; sand skimmers skim; spaceships race, chase, or careen off to hyperspace. One ship explodes – cut to cloaked figure striding ominously forward, as if out of the explosion itself. The door to a prison cell falls – cut to a booted foot falling on a light griddled floor.

Intelligence and invention have been lavished on keeping the background of this film coherent and logical. (This is perhaps the place to mention that – to get the film down from two and a quarter hours to a flat two – some sequences have

been hacked out: two with young Luke and his friends at the beginning, during which one friend goes off to join the rebel forces, and one at the end where a space pilot tells Luke about his father. In the middle too, we've lost a few aliens. I hope Lucas is one of those guys who sends a complete copy of his films to the Paris Cinemathique before the distributors *et al* start chopping.) The foreground is rather shaky. But in this sort of science fiction, the job of the background is to *be* coherent; the job of the foreground is to be fast. In that sense both do their job admirably.

This film is going to do very well, if not phenomenally so, and I can see a lot of the elder statesmen in the sf community intoning: "*That's* because it's got a good, solid story!" *Star Wars*, as far as I can tell, has no story at all – or rather there are so many holes in the one it's got you could explode a planet in some of them (about a third of the way through, one does); but it goes so quickly that the rents and tears and creaking places in it blur out.

You know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are: you get told, in an introductory ribbon of text that diminishes towards the screen top – a homage to the *Flash Gordon* chapter synopses from the twelve-part Saturday afternoon serials of another age. The main good guy is the dissatisfied young farmer, Luke Skywalker, played by an engagingly naive Mark Hamill. Etymologists take note: the relation between Lucas and Luke is obvious. But more too that the name George comes from the greek word *georgos*: farmer, *i.e.*, "earth man" or "earth walker." George Lucas/Luke Skywalker, dig? The film is a blatant and self-conscious autobiographic wish fulfilment on the part of its ingenious director.

That Main Good Guy never gets a really direct encounter with Main Bad Guy (the towering and bemasked Lord Darth Vader, played by a sinister and practically invisible David Prowse) is the shakiest part of the plot. Perhaps it's just an oversight. Or maybe material for a sequel. The rumour, at any rate, is that a sequel is under way. Good Show.

The dialogue in *Star Wars* is conscientiously heavy handed – that kind of humour where what's so funny is the attempt at humour that falls so flat. But

sometimes it's just clumsy: when Han Solo, talking about the speed of his ship comments something to the effect, "I made the Kessel run in under three parsecs," the preview audience with whom I saw the film groaned in unison. (A parsec, like a light-year, is a unit of distance, not time, i.e. 3,248 light years.) But despite the groaners – and *Star Wars* has its share (*turbo-lasers*? I assume that's light that's both coherent and turbulent at the same time ... ? Well there're always "wavicles.") - we loved it.

A film is made in tiny, tiny, extremely complicated bits and pieces – and experienced as an almost total gestalt. Very rarely can you locate any element from the gestalt in one and only one of the bits. Nevertheless, some of the gestalt elements that worked extraordinarily well are worth nothing: the particular way the Unadulterated Mysticism of the film interweaves among all the blasters and spaceships and general machinery is very effective. The variation in locations, planetscapes, starscapes, here desert, there deep space, over here jungle, over there urban spaceport, is what makes us believe in the vastness and the completeness of this universe. And the glorious special effects, that are the entrance way into each of those varied views, are too effective even to be described.

Thanks to those special effects, the worlds look big enough to be worlds. For those who haven't seen it yet, some advice: try to catch this one in a theater with a fairly big screen where you can sit pretty close. With some films it doesn't matter much, but on the purely visual level, *Star Wars* is all about size – relative size, variations in size, the way the very big can make the ordinary seem very small. And a smaller screen will mute this quality.

Lucas, like his fellow American Bogdanovich and the Italian, Bertolucci, is aware specifically of the history of film. *Last Tango in Paris* had its little recalls of Vigo and Godard; *What's Up, Doc?* Paid its loving tribute to Howard Hawks and Mack Sennett. Lucas's gestures to the science fiction film as historical genre may make somebody a Ph.D. some day. Chewie's marvelous head is for those of you who loved *Planet of the Apes*. The robot C-3P0 is the "Maria" robot from Lang's silent *Metropolis*, R2-D2 is first cousin to the little fellow trundling

after Bruce Dern in Trumbell's *Silent Running*. I believe I recall the unextended-bridge sequence from *Flash Gordon*. Certainly the last time I saw those alien clarinetists they were taking much more sinister roles in *The Island Earth*; and the Death Star interior, where Kenobi (played wisely by Alec Guinness (sic)) deactivates the Whoseywhatsit, makes a most reverential bow to that shafted city of *Forbidden Planet*.

Also, I suspect Lucas rather likes Frank Herbert's novel *Dune* ("... to the spice farms!") a lot.

But however many films and other allusions there are, they don't intrude. They are there for those who enjoy them; those who wouldn't would probably never know they're there. From beginning to end, the movie is always colorful, visually energetic, and immediate.

Could it possibly have been any better?

You bet! But to talk about how we have to talk about the real accomplishment of the film, which we haven't till now touched on; and also show how the places where it falls short of that accomplishment show a lack of imagination, a lack of invention, a lack of engagement. For that, we have to delve into a little theory, and talk about what's been holding the "serious" sf film back till now.

Somewhere around *Brave New World* and 1984 time, the Hollywood picture making mentality got fixed in its notoriously unsubtle, collective noggin that science fiction – all science fiction – had one and one message: In the Future, Things will be Flat, Uninteresting, Repressive and Inhumanly Dull. Now there are only so many films you can make about the flat, uninteresting, repressive, and dull. After awhile it makes very little difference whether you call it *Alphaville* or 1984, whether you make it pretty or stark, whether the dull gets overthrown at the end or endures. How many times can you spend ninety to a hundred and twenty minutes where the filmmaker's intention is to show you that things are dull and/or meaningless. (This is not to be confused with the film the *audience* may find dull or meaningless because they can't follow what the *filmmaker* finds

interesting. That is something else entirely, my friend!)

Lucas's is the first sf film in a long while whose basic assumption – in spite of the flatness of the evil Bad Guys and pure-hearted Good Guys (and tender-tough Good-Bad guys, like Han Solo, played almost antiseptically by Harrison Ford) is that the future will be more interesting than the present. When something is interesting, pretty or colorful in Lucas's film, we are not (as we are, say, in *Logan's Run* or *Rollerball*) supposed to take it automatically and with no thought as a clear and precise sign for the Superficial, Meaningless, Meretricious and Tawdry.

In addition to the play Lucas makes on his own name to generate Luke, the very texture and play of the film tells us Lucas would like to live in that future. Whatever the lessons this future has to teach us, about good and evil, about growing up or accepting courage, no matter how painful or unpleasant those lessons, this future is seen as a good place to learn them, a place where one will have a chance to apply them. It is not the future so many sf films depict, where things are so inhibited that, even if we learn something about life, we will never have a chance to utilize that knowledge short of the place's falling completely to pieces within seventy-two hours of our learning it. And assuming we are lucky enough [to] survive. In short, there are many ways in which *Star Wars* is a very childlike film. This is to the good.

As frequently, however, it is also childish. And the childishness, whether in the dialogue or in the general conception, *doesn't* work. It is not interesting. And it doesn't come close to being exciting. Sometime, somewhere, somebody is going to write a review of *Star Wars* that begins: "In Lucas's future, the black races and the yellow races have apparently died out and a sort of mid-Western American (with a few South Westerners who seem to specialize in being war ship pilots) has taken over the universe. By and large, women have also been bred out of the human race and, save for the odd gutsy princess or the isolated and coward aunt, humanity seems to be breeding quite nicely without them. ..."

When those various review surface, somebody will no doubt object (and we'll

recognize the voice; it's the same one who said, earlier, "...it's got a good, solid story!") with a shout: "But that's not the point. This is entertainment!"

Well, entertainment is a complex business. And we are talking about an aspect of the film that isn't particularly entertaining. When you travel across three whole worlds and all the humans you see are so scrupulously (sic) caucasian and male, Lucas's future begins to seem a little dull. And the variation and invention suddenly turn out to be only the province of the set director and special effects crew.

How does one put in some variety, some human variety? The same way you put in your barrage of allusions to other films, i.e., you just *do* it and don't make a big thing.

To take the tiniest example: wouldn't that future have been more interesting if, say, three-quarters of the rebel pilots just happened to have been Oriental women rather than just the guys who didn't make it onto the Minnesota (sic) Ag-football team. It would even be more interesting to the guys at Minnesota (sic) Ag. This is science fiction after all.

No more explanation would have been needed for that (They came from a world colonized by Chinese where women were frequently pilots? Possibly they came from a dozen worlds and volunteered because they were all historically interested in the Red Guard? Or maybe it's just because there are, indeed, lots of Chinese women?) than we get for why there just happens to be an Evil, Nasty, Octopoid Thingy in the Death Star garbage dump. (It was busy metabolizing garbage? Maybe it was an alien ambassador who felt more comfortable in that environment? Maybe it just grewed?) That kind of off-handed flip is what you can do in science fiction. In the film world in the present, the token woman, token black, or what-have-you, is clearly propaganda, and even the people who are supposed to like that particular piece of it smile their smiles with rather more tightly pursed lips than is comfortable. In a science fiction film, however, the variety of human types should be as fascinating and luminous in itself as the variety of color in the set designer's paint box. Not to make use of

that variety, in all possible combinations, seems an imaginative failure of at least the same order as not coming up with as interesting sets as possible.

In any case, *Star Wars* is a delight. (For those people who like literary parallels, it brings the sf film up to about the Lensman stage.) But perhaps the most delightful thing about it is that it brings so forcefully to the imagination the possibility of sf films that are so much better in precisely the terms that *Star Wars* itself has begun to lay out.

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