

Star Wars

By Matt Zoller Seitz

"The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films," 2002

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Of all the films of the 1970s, none was more influential than "Star Wars." Other landmark works from that era could rightly claim to be more complex, more challenging, more adult, but none could be claimed to be more widely seen and enjoyed. (Many saw it more than once.) This mythic adventure about a gee-whiz farm boy rescuing a princess and saving the galaxy proved that a primitive fairy tale with high-tech effects could thrill moviegoers the world over, regardless of language, cultural difference, even age. It made stars out of its unknown leads — Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher, Harrison Ford — and spawned a spinoff industry peddling tie-in merchandise, from toys and T-shirts to comic books and trading cards. It introduced new visual effects and sound technology that would change how films were produced. Its unprecedented financial success — the top grossing film of all time with \$250 million in box office and \$1 billion in merchandising — convinced the studios to abandon their old financial model, wherein lots of money was earned by lots of films, and embrace a new model, wherein ever-increasing amounts of money and effort were devoted to developing more movies like "Star Wars."

The film's detractors (they are numerous) often forget that on paper "Star Wars" seemed weird and uncommercial. Lucas, an intense, detail-oriented film-school grad, wanted to make "Star Wars" for years, but the major studios kept turning him away, fearing audiences still shaken by Vietnam, Woodstock, and Watergate would laugh an earnest space fantasy right off the screen. Lucas finally got financing from 20th Century Fox thanks to the success of his nostalgic, critically acclaimed youth drama "American Graffiti."

The result, the first installment in a hoped-for trilogy, opened with a printed introduction backed by a trumpet blast and got cornier from there. A sci-fi reworking of Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's 1959 samurai folktale "Hidden Fortress," about a group of mismatched heroes trying to rescue a kidnapped princess, "Star Wars" felt at once contemporary and primitive, knowing and innocent — a pop-culture polyglot swashbuckler, with bad guy in shiny black armor (body by David Prowse, voice by James Earl Jones); an earnest hero (Hamill) who learned from a wizened



Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress.

mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness); Princess Leia (Fisher), a tough-talking, straight-shooting diplomat-spy who knew the whereabouts of plans that could defeat the empire; Han Solo (Ford), a cocky space smuggler with a seven-foot-tall nonhuman sidekick named Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew), who looked like a cross between Bigfoot and Benji; and two androids, R2-D2 and C3PO (Kenny Baker and Anthony Daniels), who bickered the way Laurel and Hardy might bicker if Hardy wore a gold tinfoil body suit and Laurel delivered his lines in Esperanto while locked inside a trash can.

Although "Star Wars"'s panoramic dreamscapes were created with processes more complex than the ones devised for Stanley Kubrick's landmark "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1968) — including computer-controlled cameras and some of the most sophisticated makeup yet created — the film's rescue-a-princess-and-save-the-universe storyline was far simpler. Lucas told the tale with a calculated naïveté

that baffled art-house hipsters and thrilled kids of all ages. Released two years after the end of the Vietnam War and three years after Richard Nixon resigned his presidency in disgrace, Lucas's space opera avoided politics, psychology, social commentary, and every other fashionable movie subject and got back to the basics: good guys vs. bad guys. But if Star Wars story and mood were willfully primitive, its conception was sophisticated. Lucas designed the film to push subconscious buttons. Lucas's jargon-filled screenplay was full of mythic notions shoplifted from the words of bestselling myth-explainer Joseph Campbell. The movie's orchestral score (by John Williams, who scored Steven Spielberg's 1975 shark tale "Jaws" and many other blockbusters) was romantic, propulsive, and relentless. Cinematographer Gilbert Taylor's eye-popping Cinemascope compositions – nearly every one storyboarded in advance – were packed with references to Lucas's favorite genres, westerns war flicks, pirate pictures, creature features, samurai epics, and Saturday morning serials, which advanced their pulpy plots in hammer-blow chapters that typically ended with the hero getting tossed into a shark tank or spiraling to earth in a burning plane.

It was, in the words of "Time" magazine Richard Schickel, "a subliminal history of movies." There were nods to "The Wizard of Oz," "The Searchers," and even Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will." References to one genre opened up into references to another genre like doors in a house of dreams. Luke's desert homeworld, Tatooine (actually Tunisia) was photographed like a Technicolor western from the 1950s; it was a place where farm boys screamed across the horizon in battered hovercars, bandaged-up Sandpeople scavenged like mutant Comancheros, and beasts of every shape and species drank together in dingy spaceport hubs. (Live jazz nightly; bring your own blaster.) The bad guys zipped from solar system to solar system inside a space station the size of a small moon, pulverizing planets with a death ray. Darth Vader, the empire's most powerful general, was a wheezing biomechanical dark knight who could strangle disrespectful underlings with a gesture of his black-gloved hand. Vader's former teacher and sworn foe, Kenobi, was a tender-voiced hermit who lopped off enemies limbs with his light saber and spoke in crypto-Zen riddles about "the Force – a living energy field that bound the galaxy together. It was the kind of movie where he hero and heroine escaped enemy soldiers by swinging across a ravine with a grappling hook, and the cocky smuggler who deserted the rebel in their hour of need because he didn't believe in causes reappeared during

the final battle to help the hero save the day.

"Star Wars" drew rave reviews from a few influential critics (including Roger Ebert, who gave it four stars). It earned several Oscar nominations, including best picture and director. It made more money (adjusted for inflation) than any film since 1939's "Gone with the Wind". It was followed by two sequels: 1980's "The Empire Strikes Back," widely considered the best of the series, a darkly elegant fable that introduced the tiny green Jedi master Yoda and revealed the true nature of Luke's relationship to Vader; and 1983's "Return of the Jedi," a dull, clunky finale full of slobbering reptiles and pudgy teddy bears that fans saw twice anyway. Twenty-two years later, Lucas wrote and directed a prequel, "The Phantom Menace," the first volume of a new trilogy explaining how Vader succumbed to the dark side of the Force. As of this writing, all four chapters occupy slots on the list of the top grossing movies ever made.

Yet Lucas's triumph was viewed by some critics and historians as a step backward for movies and for American popular culture in general. ("Heartless fireworks ignited by a permanently retarded director with too much clout and cash," groused "Time Out.") "Star Wars" was blamed for dispelling the adventurous, artistic mood that had built up in a Hollywood since the late 1960s, emboldening young, film-literate directors to make such grownup blockbusters as "Bonnie and Clyde," "The Graduate," and "The Godfather" (directed by Lucas's mentor, college chum, and sometime coproducer Francis Coppola). Sure enough, major studios fell all over themselves to produce movies with similarly broad, simple appeal – everything from science-fiction epics (including the "Alien" and "Star Trek" franchises) to comic-book adaptations ("Superman," "Batman," "Spider-Man"). Lucas gave his foes ammunition by retiring from film direction for two decades while producing a string of preadolescent fantasies – including "Howard the Duck," "Willow" and the cliffhanger-derived Indiana Jones movies, which starred Ford and were directed by Lucas's friend Steven Spielberg, a more adventurous pop storyteller with an equally boyish sense of spectacle.

By the mid-1980s, some media critics said Lucas's pre-Vietnam attitude toward morality and war helped pay the way for the return of archconservative politics in American (President Ronald Reagan named his proposed missile defense system "Star Wars"). By 1997 – the year a digitally revised Star Wars was released, grossing another \$200 million worldwide – "Esquire" film columnist David Thomson wrote a

piece titled "Who Killed the Movies?" His answer: Spielberg and Lucas.

Such charges wounded Lucas, a devotee of postwar European art films who modeled his debut feature, the bleak science fiction parable "THX-1138," on Jean-Luc Godard's "Alphaville," and its follow-up, "American Graffiti," on Federico Fellini's "I Vitelloni." He considered himself a freethinking visionary – a can-do maverick who built his own self-contained, privately owned dream factory, Marin County-based Lucasfilm, to stop the suits from standing between him and his dreams. He seems torn between saying he shouldn't be held responsible for the dumbing-down of a whole medium and insisting there was no dumbing down to begin with. During the publicity tour for "The Phantom Menace," Lucas's PR reps offered reporters documents that purported to prove that more independent films had been made since "Star Wars" than in the years leading up to it.

No matter: the debate over the film's influence has not eclipsed its appeal. With the re-release of the original trilogy, the arrival of the prequel, and an accompanying tsunami of media coverage, a generation of moviegoers not yet born in the 1970s embraced Lucas's vision of good and evil squaring off a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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