

More on Star Wars

THE TIME OF THE STARS

by Denis Wood

Anne -

I found this, my third treatment of Star Wars, I thought
it my best, but it remains unpublished (since late 1978).
But maybe it's not worth reading.

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Larry Landrum has recently wondered why 2001 is treated as a Kubrick film, The Man Who Fell To Earth as a Bowie film, but Star Wars as a cultural phenomenon.¹ There isn't much to wonder about: despite the brouhaha continuing to surround 2001 like a congeries of slaving groupies, the film was not--by Star Wars standards--all that popular. Its gross of twenty-some million is, after all, a drop in the Star Wars bucket that threatens to overflow with more than five hundred million. And as for the Bowie film...

The immense popularity of Star Wars has attracted the attention of savants of every stripe: a film seen by the equivalent of every man, woman and child in the United States acquires a significance approximating if not transcending that of national events like presidential elections in which far fewer Americans participate. Explanations of this popularity, flowing faster than cheap wine at a rockfest, revolve around the ancient and presumably discredited dogma of the lowest common denominator, in this case (ignoring those like Fox and Lubow for whom it is a presumed instinct for fascism, racism or both²) that of a twelve-year-old: Lubow himself calls Star Wars "a boy's film";³ New York Magazine recommends the film to "those lucky enough to be children or unlucky enough never to have grown up";⁴ Boston's Real Almanac terms it an "adolescent daydream" and "a mighty good time for 12-year-olds of all ages";⁵ for Time the film, with "no message, no sex and only the merest dollop of blood," is aimed "at kids--the kid in everybody";⁶ while for anthropologist Conrad Phillip Kottak, "Star Wars appeals most directly to children, and--to use a cliché that happens to be true--to the child in all of us."⁷

While the most facile of these critiques imply that this labeling constitutes an explanation of the film's popularity (justifying its characterization as "banal," "hackneyed," "intergalactic cowboys and badguys,"

"simple-mined gibberish" and other things presumedly appropriate for "the kid in everybody"), the more interesting attempt more substantial cases. Kottak, focusing on the film's plot, argues that it shows ordinary people can solve their own problems and triumph against outside odds and as such "...retells a tale that spans thousands of years and diverse cultures. Star Wars is a visual fairy tale, a movie about heroism that invites comparisons with epics from all societies."⁸ Daniel Melia, a folklorist, attempts precisely that. Insisting that only plot is "capable of moving human beings of different ages, sexes, ethnic backgrounds and personal experiences," Melia makes a case for the plot of Star Wars being that of "The Dragon Slayer," an international folktale type of great anciency.⁹ While the only analyses seriously attempting to grapple with the film's popularity, both are deeply flawed, Melia's identification of the film with "The Dragon Slayer" being scarcely more tenable than Kottak's identification of folktales with children. As the sociology of folktales makes clear, where folktales are vital not only are they attributes of adulthood, they are distinctly not attributes of childhood;¹⁰ and although designed to convince us that Star Wars is "The Dragon Slayer," Melia's exegesis--undercut by his self-administered but valid criticism--ends by convincing us only of the opposite. In any case, identifying the film with another tale or with other media--such as pulp fiction or the comics--is to merely beg the question.

To insist that the identification of Star Wars with other tales or media is in and of itself void of explanatory power is not, however, to insist that such were without influence on the film. Nothing could be further from the facts. It is well known that Lucas initially intended to make another Flash Gordon film but that, stymied by his inability to secure the necessary rights, he ended by creating characters of his own. For

these he has repeatedly acknowledged his debts to both Alex Raymond's original comic strips and Universal's Flash Gordon serials, as well as to one of their primary sources of inspiration, the series of novels about John Carter of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs. An astute student of these genres, capable of discriminating between the science fiction downstream from Jules Verne and the science fantasy whose headwaters lie in Edwin Arnold, there can be little doubt that Lucas is fully cognizant of the formal conventions lacing them like the liquor in an Irish coffee, the plot structures, the iconographic vocabularies, the narrative syntax--of the serials, the pulps, the comics and presumably the serial and dime novels of the last century--as well as of their ultimate dependence on the popular oral traditions we preserve as folktales. There can be less doubt that his use of these conventions in Star Wars was anything but conscious and highly intentional.¹¹ And yet, having said this, little has been said. In the absence of compelling explanations of the popularity of Flash Gordon--or "The Dragon Slayer"--such comparisons only distance the issue of the popularity of Star Wars, begging it of them rather than of it. Nevertheless, due to the roots the film has in these traditions, much--though by no means all--of what is claimed here for Star Wars holds true for them as well. If this seems to reduce the film's claim to originality, so be it: the claim to significance that can be made by novelty per se is at very best short-lived.¹²

1. A Context for Analysis

Although not wrong, Kottak's and Melia's emphases on the folktales and their plots is misplaced. Despite telling similarities (clearly seen in the film's rejection of the dramatics of characterization for a drama of character, of individualism for communalism, and of a mannerist conformism for a style of spontaneity and genuine individuality; and its

insistence on the concrete and practical rather than the abstract and symbolic, on simple physicality rather than shame and guilt, and on the magical, incantatory and surreal rather than a pseudomaterialist realism), Star Wars is a film, a commercial venture contrived in an advanced industrial-capitalist society dominated by a middle class, not a folktale conceived and endlessly retold in a preindustrial society prior to the emergence of its bourgeoisie. Although underscoring the distance separating the tales and the film, these differences in social organization also highlight their point of greatest similarity, something inherent in neither, but rather in their fate in the net of the esthetique de la bourgeoisie: folktales and Star Wars have both been relegated to the nursery.

Such an aesthetic has arisen in all advanced societies, manifesting itself first in a rejection of their oral traditions, that is, in a rejection of what come to called (but only by the bourgeoisie) folktales. Linda Degh observes that in the course of the nineteenth century storytelling:

...became mainly an entertainment of the poor, of the socially underprivileged classes.... The well-to-do peasants in the village have little respect for the folktale. They will tell anecdotes during their get-togethers but only laugh at the long magic tale. The respectable peasant wants to hear something "true," a historical event; he reads newspapers and no longer listens to "lies." His way of thinking is rational. He has access to modern mass media, education, and a comfortable standard of living, and as a result is able to seek more than oral entertainment."¹³

Offended by an art reminiscent of his origins, the petite bourgeois arriviste buys into and helps elaborate an aesthetic constituting a denial of the folktale, that community-based narrative whose, drama, dependent on the interplay of archetypal characters, transpires in a concrete world of simple physicality, morality and magic. While folktales are, then, in Campbell's phrase, "symptomatic of fevers deeply burning in the psyche: permanent presences, desires, fears, ideals, potentialities, that have glowed in the nerves, hummed in the blood, baffled the senses, since the

beginning,"¹⁴ they are also--distinct from myths, legends and sagas--out-and-out entertainments, bald stories, less didactic than enthralling, less historic than compelling, less ethnocentric than universally human.¹⁵ Lacking patience for nude entertainment, the arriviste condemns the folk-tale--and Star Wars--to the oblivion of the cotter's hut and his own children's nursery, nursing the false hope that its psychic fevers will follow suit.¹⁶

Though only the bourgeoisie, in its admiration for newsweekly "truth" and disdain for the folktales's "lies", automatonically makes this connection between the tales and children (and other societal outcasts), it does so with reason, for the tales--and Star Wars--do offend against a number of truths of central importance to the middle class. While analyses such as Kottak's and Melia's might suggest that such offenses were limited to the plot, such in fact is not the case. The form of Star Wars no less than its story is a slap across the bourgeois face, since it is only the "fusion between style and content, between thing said and the way of saying it, that makes the two inseparable and at the same time creates something new" and threatening.¹⁷ That this should originally have been said of the cinematic poetry of Lindsay Anderson is appropriate for if the stories of If... and Star Wars seem superficially different, the means used to turn them into film are radically similar; and in both cases the results are equally threatening to bourgeois complacency.¹⁸ Among these means none are more critical than those involving space and time and of these time is paramount not just because--for the middle class--time is so deeply married to death and money, but because it was lack of time, among other things, that caused the bourgeoisie to turn its back on the "lies" and "irrelevancies" of the tales in the first place.¹⁹

2. The Time of the Movie

Nothing so firmly establishes the irrelevance of Star Wars as the temporal distance put between itself and its audience by the opening words, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." Almost, but critically not quite, the formulary used to open the archetypic folktale, its purpose is to establish a world which, in Degh's paraphrase of Jolles, "is not identical with the world of reality but with its desired for, better image, a world in which the elements of wonder are transformed into facts,"²⁰ and in which, temporarily unshackled from the laws of physics, human behavior is explored in its quintessential potentiality. Lucas's opening formulary is thus not only like Anderson's title with its similarly suggestive if and hypnagogic ellipsis, but the black and white footage he cuts into his film to "help create the necessary atmosphere of poetic license, while preserving a 'straight', quite classic shooting style."²¹ That Lucas's "long ago" must be taken in this poetic, rather than numbingly nostalgic, sense is made clear by his failure to complete it with "far away" as expected. Galaxy, a word that shouts "Future!" as distinctly as long ago screams "Past!", sets up a tension in these framing words that not only anticipates a whole film of such tension, that not merely suggests a spacio-temporal relativism in keeping with 20th century cosmology, but smoothly establishes the possibility that not of our time can refer to a time neither past nor future but sempiternal, to a time out of our time altogether, to events of historic irrelevance but broadly human relevance.²² Anderson, defending the narrowly historic irrelevance of If... put it this way:

The basic tensions, between hierarchy and anarchy, independence and tradition, liberty and law, are always with us. That is why we scrupulously avoided contemporary references (on a journalistic level) which would date the picture; and why it is completely unimportant whether its slang, its manners, or its details

of organization are true to the schools of this year or that. And this is why the film has been understood--recognized--by so many people, of so many ages, and so many countries.²³

Films of essentially topical relevance are constrained to anchor their content as deeply in space and time as possible, but Lucas, as if trumpeting the universality of his theme, goes further than Anderson to deprive his audience of any temporal anchor. Not content to frame his film in a distancing formulary and eschew topicality, Lucas attempts to positively disorient his audience.

Consider the incessant contradiction between the futurism of the mise en scène and the historicism of the score, a contradiction established when Lucas asked John Williams for "a dichotomy to his visuals, an almost 19th century romantic, symphonic score against these unseen sights."²⁴ Where are we? In the future of hyperspace travel? Or the past of Elgar and Brahms? In the end, neither, for the contradiction insists on itself, not past or future, but no time and any time. Such insistent contradiction pervades the film. How is the lightsaber--with its medieval iconicism but 21st century technology--to be read? Or the landspeeder--with its simultaneous reference to the cowboy's horse and the futuristic pages of Popular Mechanics? How are the camel-like legs striding, in silhouette, across the screen at Mos Eisley to be reconciled with the Millennium Falcon's leaping, a few moments later, into hyperspace? What historical sense can be made of the ancient game of chess being played on tomorrow's equipment? of tomorrow's liquor being dispensed in yesterday's saloon? of our parents' dance music being played by aliens that won't be encountered for who knows how many years? Referring not only to past and future, these each refer to pasts and futures at different distances from the present: here back a thousand years, here a hundred, here ten, here forward to tomorrow's consumer come-on, here to the next generation's research

horizon, here into the indeterminate future. With temporal contradictions multiplied by temporal inconsistencies, the film's time perpetually eludes our grasp.

For Lucas this is still not enough, so he juggles the near-time of our iconographic memories. The rollup following the film's title iconographically situates the film in the heyday of the serials; Luke's leap with Leia across the service shaft puts it in the milieu of Tarzan and Jane; the film's climatic dogfight drops it among the war pictures of the 'forties; Luke's discovery of his aunt's and uncle's skeletons in the westerns of the 'fifties; and the establishing shot of Tatooine just after the rollup in the science fiction of the 'sixties.²⁵ Potentially campy, initially bewildering, these iconographic crosscurrents end in liberation. If the temporal contradictions and inconsistencies pry the film loose from history, this iconographic freewheeling sets it free. Unlike iconographically consistent (and cynically campy) films like Altman's The Long Goodbye or Polanski's Chinatown--which will date themselves not by their similitude to the times they mock but by their iconographic mockery alone--it will be as difficult to see Star Wars as a film of the 'seventies as it will remain forever easy to see 2001 as a film of the 'sixties.

No contrast could be greater. In 2001 the sense of history is as palpable as the heavy breathing of an obscene phonecall. Kubrick, like Lucas, reaches into past and future, but unlike the invigorating bouillabaisse served up by Lucas, Kubrick dishes out a Puritanical boiled dinner of simplistic determinism--original sin divided by alien influence/all over environmental conditioning--whose pessimism is revealed not simply in the skimpy dialogue and absence of smiles, but in the longueur of the film's 141 minutes. Pretending to offer a prophetic view of things to come--"we may have to wait until the year 2001 itself to see how successful

we have been," crowed Arthur Clarke²⁶--the film labors to establish its historic credentials. The opposite of Lucas's verbal claim to other-worldliness is the pseudodocumentary "Dawn of Man" sequence, draping 2001 in newsweekly "truth" like a filmed version of the "science" section of Time. The film's middle sections are freighted with a titillating topicality--already dated--needed to establish temporal depth of field. The music is variously employed, but the Ligeti is mysterious modern music for a mysterious modern-looking monolith and the Richard Strauss is nothing less than a musical equivalent of Kubrick's own evolutionary determinism. The movie's chapters--dividing it into a deep past, and near and distant futures--are echoed in the montage: never has a cut been forced to carry the historicist significance of the match cut from the deadly bone to the orbital satellite and rarely has an audience been so visually cudgeled into line. A movie that preaches a dismal determinism it is--appropriately I suppose--itself rigidly deterministic. Nothing could be further from this frighteningly inhuman world than Star Wars. Nothing could be more liberating, nothing could be more demanding, than Lucas's refusal to articulate "the big picture," than his refusal to provide easy historic anchors, than his refusal to keep temporal order--even within the film.

3. The Time Within the Movie

Consider the passage of time: naturalistic and realist cinema demand that the amount an event consumes on-screen be equal to the amount it consumes off-screen. Departures from this convention are signaled by cut-ways, dissolves, wipes, closeups of calendar pages blowing in the wind and the rest of the panoply of temporal markers. Star Wars commences in this mode but soon debouches. Subsequent, in fact, to Luke's foray into the desert there is minimal notation of the passage of time. The obtrusively indicative wipes that have marked time to this point begin to disappear

as their significance is increasing compromised. Soon enough, Lucas is stretching and compressing--even twisting--time at will, as he practically denies its existence by whipping the flow of events to ever faster tempos.

The action commences inside a spaceship in a synoptic anytime outside our temporal framework, and without an internal framework of its own other than that imposed by the casual linkages of the narrative: without clocks, without indication of day or night, it is anytime and no time inside the ships. While the rapid action that follows reinforces the up tempo suggestiveness of the nearly incomprehensibly involved rollup, the dearth of temporal compasses reinforces the sense of othertimeliness promised by the opening formulary. No temporal benchmark appears until the film's first wipe reveals C-3P0 and R2-D2 in a desert, blindingly bright, presumably day. Two wipes later R2-D2 rolls alone into a ravine on what must be evening of the same day, an impression strengthened when the Jawa sandcrawler rolls off, R2-D2 in utero, into a crepuscular cragland. A fourth wipe returns us to desert brilliance--presumably morning of the second day--in which the stormtroopers explore the escape pod. Another wipe, not a minute later, plunges us back into the timeless dark of the sandcrawler's interior. This movement between the timeless interiors of spaceships (and sandcrawler) and the timeful surface of Tatooine goes far to underwrite the semantic relations of the peoples inhabiting them.²⁷ In the following scene R2-D2 and C-3P0 descend from the timeless dark of the sandcrawler to meet Owen and Luke ascending from the timeless twilight of the garage to set in motion the movie's only cycle of daily domesticity. Framed by Beru's "Luke! Luke!" and her request for a Bocce-speaking translator and Owen's "Luke! Luke!" and his threat of hell-to-pay if the condensing units aren't repaired, the period embraces Luke's work on the droids, supper, evening, nightfall, and the beginning of the film's third--and final--day. Yet even this most normal of the film's sequences is not quite

right. Although Luke moves directly from the shambles of his supper to watch the suns set, somehow the light manages to catapult from the raw brilliance of day to the ruddy glow of sunset; and although he then spends less than thirty seconds in the garage with C-3PO, full darkness has fallen by the time he re-emerges.²⁸ It is narrative logic that dictates the passage of time on Tatooine, not the ticking of distant clocks: sunset was needed to underscore iconographically Luke's dreams of another life, the night to allow R2-D2 to make good his escape.

The matinal scene that follows signals the beginning of the end of the brief period of cyclical, diurnal, familial, familiar time. With Owen and Beru's next appearance, as fire-charred skeletons, it is brought to a complete conclusion. So is the use of wipes, at least to annotate the passing of time. If the first seven wipes marked the passage of time, the seven that rapidly follow essentially enhance the sense of motion--of the Imperial fighters and Luke's landspeeder. While some of these wipes do imply the passage of some time, the convention has been seriously compromised. Counting the three that mediate the cantina sequence, two-thirds of the film's wipes have transpired prior to the selling of the landspeeder, Luke's last real connection to Tatooine and the cyclic time of his family life, a disconnection stressed by Luke's insistence that selling the landspeeder is "...all right. I'm never coming back to this planet again." Along with nearly every other convention that might help mark the passage of time, wipes are essentially absent in the long central heroic portion of the film.²⁹ They're not really needed: unlike the early parts of the film in which days of story time pass in minutes of film time, the heroic time that follows transpires in what is very close to real time. It comes as something of a shock to realize that Luke blows up the Death Star on the same day he sets out from his

uncle's farm to find R2-D2, that he loses Ben only hours after finding him, that mere minutes intervene between his rescue of Leia from the Death Star prison and Han's rescue of him from Vader's flying attack in the trench.³⁰ As the movie nears its climax in Luke's attack on the Death Star, time signs (voices intoning the time, images of clocks and wipes) reappear, but now to signal the fact that the film--far from running fast--is crossing the real time barrier and heading toward running slow: the seven story minutes before the Death Star clears the planet Yavin take place in five and a half minutes, the last three story minutes in three minutes and five seconds, the last minute of story time in a minute and fifty seconds, and the final thirty seconds in a minute and five seconds. Once the Death Star clears the planet story time is stretched toward infinity until--with the Death Star's destruction--it recoils into the fast time of the movie's beginning.

4. Heroic Time

But despite Darth Vader's: "This will be a day long remembered. It has already seen the end of the Jedi. It will soon see the end of the rebellion," it would be a mistake to see the central part of the film in time at all. From the moment Luke sets out to find R2-D2 there is little to indicate the passage of any kind of time, no hints of day or night, no clocks, few wipes, cut-aways or dissolves, no suggestion that anyone sleeps, pauses, rests or does anything but actively pursue a staggering succession of willingly shouldered but nonetheless obligatory short-term tasks whose payoff--if any--is literally out of sight: R2-D2 searches for Ben; Luke searches for R2-D2; Luke ferries Ben to Anchorhead; Luke joins Ben to take R2-D2 to Alderaan; Han eludes the Imperials; Ben instructs Luke on being a Jedi; Ben disconnects the tractor beam; Luke, Han and Chewbacca rescue Leia; the four of them escape the garbage chute; Han and Luke stave off the

Imperials; Han takes Leia to the rebel base; Luke takes on the Death Star; Han takes on Vader.... Each brief and essentially self-contained action, operating with a temporal logic of its own, leads to the next necessitous action. The long-term time frame of the "big picture"--a time frame that permits and indeed only exists to facilitate the consideration of consequences--, the time frame of Owen's and Beru's plans for the farm, the time frame of Leia's plans for Ben, of Tarkin's and Vader's plans for dominion, of Ben's plans for escape from the Death Star, this time frame is dissolved in a nontime of heroic action. Another long-range plan could little hope to ameliorate a situation made desperate by the very existence of long-range plans. Only heroic action, taken without planning, without heed of consequences but simply because it has to be taken, is capable of revivifying a galaxy stupefied by the effects of long-range plans in deathly competition.

Precisely because heroic action transpires in a nontime free of consideration of the longer view--without consideration of the questions: will I fail to be promoted? will I be fired? will I suffer? will I die?--it precludes the possibility of the sort of plot, ultimately predictable, that inexorably unfolds the consequences of historically unique characters interacting in historic time. These, basically tragic, character studies --the mainstay of the bourgeois narrative tradition--utterly depend upon, even as they inform and justify, the long-term time frame, for it is only in this longer view that character can emerge. The hero either steps out of his established historical character, and thus illuminates it--as in Hawks's Sergeant York--, or appears on the scene ab origine, a man from nowhere, without a past, without a character--as in Eastwood's High Plains Drifter. Without the developmental logic of characterization to organize movement in time, the plots of heroic films seem to leap and stagger

unpredictably and even arbitrarily. While Sergeant York's Stateside sequences fall within the purview of mainstream characterological predictability, the scenes of York in battle are continuously surprising: it's impossible to guess what he'll try next. Errupting without a past into the midst of town, everything the hero of High Plains Drifter does is astounding, from the early rape, through the painting of the town, to its desertion in its time of need. Heroes of both types appear in Star Wars. Luke steps out of his historic but-I-can't-get-involved-in-anything-like-that mewling adolescence--and out of the cyclic time of the wipes and the farm--into the heroic maturity of his affirmation that the assault on the Death Star is not impossible. Han forgoes his historic I'm-only-in-it-for-the-money materialist cynicism for the heroism of his assault on Vader. On the other hand, the droids have no characteristic history, at least not in the usual sense, and their behavior is consequently no more predictable than that of the hero of High Plains Drifter, especially to those within the film to whom the behavior of R2-D2 is a constant revelation. Since Star Wars has heroes its plot doesn't simply leap and dart, but continuously evolves into other plots: the resultant almost unravelable complexity deprives the viewer of still another anchor--that of historic cause and effect--plunging him into the necessitous immediacy of the action. Incapable of maintaining that Luke is only acting out his own personal history, the viewer--if only to preserve his bearings--identifies with Luke and becomes thereby, in his own right, heroic.

In this light the critics' unvarying insistence on the simple-minded qualities of the plot is quite revealing, for belying their glib attestations is the fact that nearly no one--especially after a single viewing--has any idea what the movie is about at the simple level of narrative sequence.³¹ Ask your friends to try.³² Or turn to a review. In its

Star Wars issue, American Cinematographer recapitulates this plot:

"...Leaving the small arid planet of Tatooine, Luke plunges into an extraordinary intergalactic search for the kidnapped Rebel Princess Leia from the planet Alderaan. Luke is joined in this adventure by Ben Kenobi..."³³ But in point of fact Luke leaves Tatooine accompanying Ben to take R2-D2 to Alderaan--not to find Leia--and to reconstruct what actually took place in the light of what eventually transpires is to falsify the record. It is possible to explain this behavior, without imputing malice, in a variety of ways. Certainly the true story ("...orphaned youth helps older man transport robot from one planet to another...") is duller, but it is also more complex. The problem lies in neither the critics' memories nor the film, but the mismatch between their expectations for a storyline that's a coherent, self-contained, characterologically unfolding tragedy and the one the movie proffers. Star Wars's plot, in its unending exfoliation forbidding recapitulation, actually resembles serials, comic strips or comedies on the order of Sleeper, Tit for Tat or A Comedy of Errors, the plots of which cannot be recalled by anybody. Less a plot than a string of plots serendipitously evolving from each other, it refuses to contain its future predictably in its present: characterologic, necessarily tragic, universes may be predictable; comic, heroic universes are not.³⁴ The original story, involving Leia's attempt to transmit the Death Star's schematics to the rebels while winning Ben to the side of the rebellion, is aborted in the film's opening scene. It rapidly exfoliates into the story of a droid's attempt to carry a seed of the plot to Ben who, being fertile, picks up the tale--and Luke Skywalker--and heads off to Alderaan and Leia's father. This story is abruptly terminated by the destruction of both father and Alderaan and a wholly new story, concerned with the escape of the Falcon from the Death Star, emerges phoenix-like

from its ashes. This story is concluded--with the loss of Ben--and the movie could have ended with the Falcon disappearing into a space-time warp. Instead it warps right into another story: Leia does end up bringing a hero to succor the rebellion though it is not to Alderaan and it is not Ben. If the film does, thus, terminate in a story related to that with which it opens, it in no sense resolves a story begun with the opening of the movie. The film opens and closes in media res, in the midst of a civil war which has started prior to the opening of the film and which will conclude--if ever (and Anderson's words quoted earlier suggest never)--after the movie's end. Nothing turns out quite the way it should because nothing turns out, because there is no anticipated outcome, because there are no plans, because there is no history, because there is no time: not only does a story that begins with Leia's attempt to deliver the Death Star schematics to Alderaan end in Luke's assault on the space station, but it does so within the space of three days.

This terrific compression of time--the effect of which is multiplied by the rate at which events transpire--increases the impenetrability of the plot not merely by preventing reflection but by juxtaposing places that are billions, even trillions, of miles apart; and by collapsing into seconds experiences--such as the development of the relationship between Luke and Ben--that ordinarily take place over long periods of time. But more is at stake in the speed with which hyperspace travel moves us from Tatooine to Alderaan, and Luke from puling adolescence to heroic maturity. Hyperspace travel, like the token in the folktale that permits instantaneous travel, removes the final impediment of space and time from the heroic possibility. Now the human actor is nude, to do or not to do, no longer sheltered by the permutations of procrastination. In the tragic world of time organized by plans, Owen insists that Luke "better have those

condensing units on the south ridge repaired by midday or there'll be hell to pay." Luke, bound to his uncle through his uncle's plans for him, echoes Owen when rejecting Ben's invitation to adventure with: "Alderaan!?? I'm not going to Alderaan. I've got to get back home! It's late. I'm in for it as it is... it's all such a long way from here." But in the heroic comic world of hyperspace travel the excuse is destroyed as the threat is emptied: Alderaan, and any place else, is just minutes away on the Millennium Falcon. Luke can succor a princess and destroy a battle station and still get the condensing units repaired on time. And so can anyone else: there are no excuses, no impediments, to the furious flames of necessitous action. Time, space, your uncle's plans: these are as nothing in the face of true desire, genuine need. If you will only do what you have to do, you'll have all the time in the world....

5. The Time of the Stars

It may not be all the time in the world, but Lucas spent six years making Star Wars and he did not deploy his considerable skills over this period merely to prove he had them. Like the engineers who exploit their knowledge in the construction of modern amusement park rides designed to rivet your attention on a single aspect of your being--and hence on all of it--Lucas has marshalled his resources to focus your attention on Luke Skywalker, if only by depriving you of anything else to hang on to. The opening formulary cuts the ties to your world by throwing you into an anomalous future-past beyond your experience. Little in the film that follows is useful in re-establishing the severed connection: there are no topical references to provide bearings in time or space or even to a lifestyle susceptible of recognition; bearings you might have maintained are rendered useless in the flood of temporal contradictions constituting the movie's mise en scene; and attempts to situate this are made ludicrous

by the film's iconographic free-wheeling. A lack of temporal signposts is complemented by an almost reckless pacing of events that picks you up like the first hill of a roller coaster, and hurls you down the slope into an unfolding of actions bewildering in sequence, act following deed, deed succeeding act in a plot difficult to keep track of, impossible to recall. Wherever we are, whenever we are, it is a space and a time we don't know. Without the predictable unfolding of character, without a manageable plot, there is nothing to hang on to except the seat called Han and Ben and Leia and the handbar called Luke. The film throws you into the characters, whams you into Luke with the force of a Flying Turns. To orient yourself in this crazy living serendipitous universe you turn into Luke--and thereby realize there is nothing, in this or any other universe, preventing you from being human each and every moment of your life.

At the movie's end you get up from your seat feeling good, excited by the potential for living, the possibilities of being human. Moving up the crowded aisle you let others emerge from their rows to proceed you. Your step, not as light as after a movie starring Fred Astaire, is nonetheless light and the smile on your face is mirrored in the faces of those around you. But already, as the shoving intensifies around the door, the demand of the film begins to grow clear: it would mean real living, consulting your feelings instead of your attitudes, your being instead of your position, your sense of humanity instead of your career line, throwing over the endless lies about a lack of time and too little room and what will uncle--or whoever--say. No, it's too much, you say, as you pull into the theater traffic, cutting off the guy beside you: too simplistic, too unrealistic. The acting wasn't so hot either, well, maybe Guinness was okay.... And that story: jeez, I've seen it a thousand

times--so banal, so hackneyed, so...? so stereotyped! But then the theme songs begin to roll out of your car radio and in the flourish of brass that is Luke's a little of your former euphoria is recaptured. You relent a little: but those special effects, that Wookie! Spectacular! Great stuff, great film for the kids....

I guess it is. A film that like a folktale stands outside the time of history to say something true throughout history necessarily eschews the characterologic truths that are not only unique functions of unique circumstances, but the sole foundation for the morality--and dramatics--of the middle class. That of Star Wars flows from the embodiment of moral postures that have not changed with time and that--however different the forms--hold sway in culture after culture: a man is a man by virtue of being a man, a man who does as he's obliged by being human, who does what he has to do, what he must, "by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, certainly without saying it"³⁵--as the dragon slayer in the folktales is a man, as Luke is a man, as you in your hearts of hearts are a man. And as Sam Spade is a man: trying to explain to Brigid O'Shaughnessy why he's turning her in, Spade says: "Listen. When a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it."³⁶ I suppose that's a pretty banal sentiment. It certainly is in the original meaning of the word:

4. The OF ban, an edict, has adj banal (1293), 'of or for obligatory feudal service', hence 'merely obligatory; perfunctory', hence (1778) 'commonplace, trite' (B&W), adopted, mid-C19, by E; the derivative banalite became E banality.³⁷

It's a measure of our loss that the obligatory has become the merely trite, that a speciated necessity has become a specious oblige.... Only children any longer are obliged, to do what they must, no ifs, ands or buts about

it, and this is why--in the refusal of the gift--we call the movie banal and relegate it to the kids. But we take them, again and again, not to escape but because we won't let go and because Star Wars, Lucas to the contrary notwithstanding, won't let us go. There is no escaping the time of the stars.

NOTES

1. Larry Landrum, "Science Fiction Film Criticism in the Seventies: A Selected Bibliography," Journal of Popular Film, 1978, VI,3, 287.
2. Terry Curtis Fox, "Star Drek," and Arthur Lubow, "A Space Iliad," both, Film Comment, July-August 1977, 20-23.
3. Ibid., 20.
4. In the "Movies Around Town" section (edited by Ruth Gilbert) of the December 19, 1977, New York Magazine, 18.
5. In the "Film" section of the March 25, 1978, The Real Almanac, 7.
6. "Star Wars: The Year's Best Movie," Time, May 30, 1977, 57.
7. Conrad Phillip Kottak, "Social-Science Fiction," Psychology Today, February 1978, 17.
8. Ibid., 12. Fairy tale is a grossly inappropriate term of which Reidar Christiansen remarks (Folktales of Norway, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964,xx): "The term fairy tale, used for folktale, is misleading and was coined in a milieu where fairies no longer interfered effectively in the life of man, but, by literary influence, figured as diminutive ballet dancers, removed at a safe distance into an imaginary world." In other words, it's a slap at folktales. Bruno Bettelheim's thesis, underwriting Kottak's, is vitiated by identifying folktales with fairy tales intended for children.
9. Daniel F. Melia, "A definitive analysis of Star Wars," Harvard Magazine, March-April, 1978, 49.
10. See, for instance, Linda Degh, Folktales and Society: Story-telling in a Hungarian Peasant Community, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1969.
11. No single source tells the whole story. For the foregoing see, among others, Paul Scanlon's long interview with Lucas in Rolling Stone, August 25, 1977; "Behind the Scenes of "STAR WARS" in American Cinematographer, July, 1977; and The Star Wars Album, Ballantine Books, New York, 1977. Among the media mentioned, comics seem to be paramount in Lucas' world: he is part owner of a store specializing in them.

12. As Hugh Honour puts it in his introduction to The Horizon Book of the Arts of China (American Heritage, New York, 1969, 10): "The Westerner tends to regard the history of art as an organic process of growth, decay and renewal, and places great importance on the originality of the individual artist. These notions are foreign to the Chinese, who show more interest in the individual work than in its historical position as a link in a chain of development. For them all art has a simultaneous existence, and the copy has never been despised in China as it has been in the West." Not that Star Wars is a copy....
13. Degh, op. cit., 81.
14. Joseph Campbell, "Folkloristic Commentary," Grimm's Fairy Tales, Pantheon Books, New York, 1944, 863.
15. According to students of the sociology of folktales, the tales were entertainments not merely in the sense that they weren't didactic, but in the sense spelled out by Joseph Losey when he defines an entertainment as "...anything that is so engrossing, so involves an audience singly or en masse that their lives for that moment are totally arrested, and they are made to think and feel in areas and categories and intensities which aren't part of their normal life." (As quoted in James Leahy's The Cinema of Joseph Losey, A. Zwemmer, London, 1967, 11.) This is certainly a description of what happens to most people watching Star Wars as a sensitive monitoring of audience reactions makes clear.
16. For a brilliant documentation of the utilitarian values underwriting bourgeois prose see Robert Adolph's The Rise of Modern Prose Style (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1968).
17. Elizabeth Sussex, Lindsay Anderson, Praeger Books, New York, 1969, 12.
18. Anderson is not dragged arbitrarily into this discussion. For one thing, he has explicitly acknowledged a folktale model for If..., writing, for instance, that "The problem of the script seemed to be to arrive at a poetic conclusion from a naturalistic start. (Like any fairy-story or folktale.)" (In his "Notes for a Preface," to Lindsay Anderson and David Sherwin, If..., Simon and Schuster, New York, 1969, 10.)

But more critical still is the similarity between the films, shocking to narrow-minded admirers of either film alone, which embraces both style and plot. A young man (Mick; Luke) whose potential for life is compromised (by the authoritative structure of society and school; by the Empire) is set upon (by the Whips; by the stormtroopers) in retaliation for an act or acts of rebellion (long hair, talking back, breaking bounds and the like; harboring a wanted droid): Mick is caned and Luke's aunt and uncle are murdered. In response, each Rebel (as both Anderson and Lucas call them) joins with others (mingling blood with Johnny and Wallace; joining Kenobi and Solo) including a woman (the Girl; Leia) in an active and violent attack on the locus of repressive authority (the School, especially the Headmaster; the Death Star, especially Tarkin). Both films end

in media res, though this is dramatically truer of If..., which is rendered correspondingly more "tough". Finer parallels also exist, as between Rowntree as chief Whip and Darth Vader as chief stormtrooper, and--astonishingly--both films have resurrections (of the Chaplain and of the voice of Kenobi), though their significances are altogether different. The films are not isomorphs of course (there is no Bobby Phillips in Star Wars and no father figure in If...) and there are consequent differences, though I shall argue that these do not extend to their styles which strike me as even more similar than the plots (a similarity enhanced by the similarities between the styles of Miroslav Ondricek and Gil Taylor). The essential differences seem to revolve around the mises en scene and our expectations of what might happen in each; as well as around the differences in the films' endings and their implications for revolution of any kind, implications which I feel most people find easier to ignore in If... than Star Wars.

19. As Adolph, referring to bourgeois prose (op. cit., 285), notes: "In this prose of Business everything must be accounted for. This is especially true of time. Something is always happening in Robinson Crusoe. All periods of time are 'filled in'.... This Puritanical and empirical reckoning is in complete contrast to Nashe."
20. Degh, op. cit., 139.
21. Anderson, op. cit., 10.
22. Andre Breton achieves a similar effect in an identical fashion in the title of his article "Il y aura une fois" ("...once upon a time there will be...") in the first (1930) issue of Le Surrealisme au service de la Revolution, a phrase, in the words of J.H. Matthews (The Imagery of Surrealism, Syracuse University Press, 1977, 264), which "significantly situates in the future the 'once upon a time' of fairy tales. In other words, it is imagination, surrealists are confident, that will resolve the antimonies thanks to its capacity for bridging the gap separating inner reality from the outer world." This is certainly Lucas'--oft-stated--position.
23. Anderson, op. cit., 9.
24. This is John Williams speaking in Charles Lippincott's liner notes for Star Wars: Original Soundtrack, 20th Century Records (2T-541 (0898)), Los Angeles, 1977.
25. While it is easy to assert the reality of these iconographic quotations it is more difficult to assess their effectiveness. The following, however--extracted from a letter sent me by a stranger in response to an earlier article (see footnote 27)--, is typical of the lobby-chat I've heard: "The first time, I was OK until the fighters began to roll out of the subterranean hanger on their mission against the Death Star. Whereupon I began to cry. All those World War II films I saw as a kid--'30 Seconds Over Tokyo,' 'Suicide Squadron' (remember 'The Warsaw Concerto?'), 'The battle of Midway,' 'The Fighting Lady,' etc., etc...flooded over me and the emotional punch of deja vu was overwhelming. To one who grew

up on such fare, the concept of a mission against hopeless odds has a powerful attraction." How much of the impact was due to memory and how much to involvement with the story is impossible to say, but clearly they work together.

26. Arthur C. Clarke, Report on Planet Three: And Other Speculations, Harper and Row, New York, 1972, 246. Carolyn Geduld also cites the remark in her Filmguide to 2001: A Space Odyssey, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1973, 28.
27. For a much fuller discussion of this point see my own, "The Stars in Our Hearts," Journal of Popular Film, 1978, VI, 3, 262-279.
28. In the adaptation of the script by E. Jack Kaplan and Cheryl Gard-Wornson for The Story of Star Wars (20th Century-Fox Records (T-550), Los Angeles, 1977), this radical compression of the day is blandly described as "Luke returns after his midday meal to discover that the little robot has gone off in search of Obi-wan Kenobi," but its effect is dissipated by ignoring the night that follows and so making it seem that the encounter with the sand people the next day takes place immediately after Luke's midday meal. This reduces the elapsed time in the story from three days to two, but makes the time "more normal".
29. Of the twelve remaining wipes, eight occur in two rapid-fire clusters near the film's end where they are used to support the film's movement into and out of slow time, five of them in the period surrounding R2-D2's debriefing, three of them after the Death Star's destruction. See the following text. There are only four wipes in the long heroic central stanzas of the film.
30. This is not just a personal intuition. Most viewers assume that at least a week of story time transpires in the film. Of some fifty undergraduate students formally surveyed, not one guessed less than a week passes from the time Luke sets out in search of R2-D2, actually less than a day.
31. As Melia, op. cit., 49, puts it: "It is evidence, I think, of an almost willful myopia on the part of film critics that in the reviews I have seen it is the alleged weakness of Star Wars' plot that has drawn heaviest fire."
32. Once again, the student survey (see footnote 30) indicates that this is more than a critics' problem. Most of them were unable to answer the easiest questions about plot structure, though they could accurately describe, for instance, the characters' affective relationships.
33. "Behind the Scenes of Star Wars," one of four articles on the film in American Cinematographer, July 1977, 700. This is, however, not the journal's own language. This particular synopsis, though set into the text without quote marks or attribution, is that appearing in full in the liner notes to the soundtrack (see footnote 24), and in part in the novelization of the script (George Lucas, Star Wars, Ballantine Books, New York, 1977, between pages 108 and 109),

in the "deluxe souvenir folio of music selections" (Star Wars, Columbia Pictures Publications, Hialeah, Florida, 1977, 10) and much other flackery.

34. Lucas had to intend the facilitation of these conclusions. He terminates the prologue to the novelization of the script with this putative quote from Leia: "They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Naturally they became heroes."
35. The final four phrases in this sentence are, of course, from Raymond Chandler's famous description of his kind of detective (in his "The Simple Art of Murder," in The Simple Art of Murder, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1950, 333). Chandler's novels had a lot in common with Star Wars: a strong hero, untemplated necessitous action, lots of action crammed into little time, incomprehensible plots and ultimately drew on the same sources: the pulps, the serials, the comics and the dime novels of the last century.
36. Dashiell Hammett, The Maltese Falcon, Aldred A. Knopf, New York, 1930, 262-263. With respect to his plot Hammett remarked (in his introduction to the 1934 Modern Library Edition): "If this book had been written with the help of an outline or notes or even a clearly defined plot-idea in my head..." and goes on to allow that it emerged from the squashing together of two earlier stories. Again: strong hero, too much action in too little time, incomprehensible plot, necessitous action...and roots in the pulps, comics and dime novels.
37. The etymology is from Eric Partridge, Origins, MacMillan, New York, 1959, 37.