



OPPOSITE George Lucas on the set of *James Cameron's Story of Science Fiction*. Photo Credit: Michael Moriatis/AMC

GEORGE LUCAS

INTERVIEW BY JAMES CAMERON

INFLUENCED BY THE WRITINGS OF MYTHOLOGIST JOSEPH CAMPBELL, the cinema of Japanese master Akira Kurosawa, and the movie serials of his youth, George Lucas created the most popular and enduring science fiction saga of all time, *Star Wars*. The initial film, simply titled *Star Wars* (1977), was Lucas's third feature—following his debut, the dystopian sci-fi feature *THX 1138* (1971) and 1973's Oscar-nominated coming-of-age comedy *American Graffiti*. Following the immense pressures of bringing *Star Wars* to the screen, Lucas brought in other filmmakers to direct the sequels *Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), but took a strong hand in overseeing the creation of both films. Having founded the legendary visual effects company Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) during the making of the first *Star Wars* film, Lucas would become a pioneer of digital effects, pushing the boundaries of technology in a way that would have an indelible impact on the future of filmmaking.

In 1999, Lucas returned to the director's chair for his *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, writing and helming each of the three installments: *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*, and *Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith*. In 2012, Lucas ended his hands-on involvement with the saga, selling his company Lucasfilm to Disney for \$4 billion and marking a new era for the franchise.

Here, Lucas—who, with Steven Spielberg, created *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—explains how his personal passions for history and anthropology helped shape the worlds of *Star Wars*, the precise relationship between midi-chlorians and the Force, and the importance of compassion and empathy as humanity prepares to navigate an increasingly complex future.

JAMES CAMERON: I would submit that you single-handedly revolutionized science fiction in pop culture with *Star Wars* in 1977. It had been three decades of downer stuff, dystopian stuff, apocalyptic stuff, and science fiction was making less and less money every year. You came along with a vision of wonder and hope and empowerment—and boom.

GEORGE LUCAS: I come out of anthropology. In college, I was going to get a degree in anthropology, in social systems. That's what I'm interested in. In science fiction, you've got two branches. One is science and the other is social. I'm much more of the 1984 kind of guy than I am the spaceship guy. . . . I like spaceships, but it isn't the science, aliens, and all that kind of stuff that I get focused on. It's the, how do the people react to all of those things? And how do they accommodate them? That's the part that really fascinates me. I've already said that *Star*

Wars is a space opera, it's not science fiction. It's one of those soap operas, only in space.

JC: Yeah, but it's more than that and you know it is. It's a neo-myth. It fulfills the role that myth played in society.

GL: It's mythology and mythology is the cornerstone to a society. In order to have a society, you start out with a family. The dad's the boss, and everybody obeys the rules. Then as you get bigger, it comes to a few hundred people when you start adding in all the aunts and uncles and brothers-in-law. . . . Then you have two or three families together, which is a tribe. Once you've got a tribe, you got this problem that you have to get a social mechanism by which you can control them. Otherwise they just kill each other.

JC: You're taking these ideas of social structure and blowing them up on this vast canvas.

GL: But at the same time in society, you have to have a reason why thou shalt not kill. We believe in the same gods. We believe in the same heroes. We believe in the same political system. Once you got those, then you can actually put a whole bunch of people together and have cities and have civilization. That's the thing that drove me: Why do we believe the things [we do]? Why do [we] move on the cultural ideas that we have? It gets more complex as we get older. I thought we had reached a stable point after World War II, which is when I grew up—

JC: And through the '60s.

GL: [The] '50s and '60s. Well, [the] '60s we finally came to the conclusion that the government wasn't all that it said it was. [It's like] *The Wizard of Oz*. They open the curtain, and we looked and said, "Oh my god. This is terrible, and I'm going to get sent to Vietnam and die. Well, I'm not going to do this." So, that changed a huge covenant we had with our government and with ourselves and with our society and what we [thought] we were. But we still believed that we were right, that we were saving the world from Communism. They were terrible and Stalin, at least, was terrible. So, it's easy to see the good guys and the bad guys. [Our shared] mythology, the last step that it had taken was the Western. The Western had a real mythology—you don't shoot people in the back. You don't draw first. You always let the woman go first.

JC: It was a code of honor.

GL: A code of honor. Then [the genre] got very psychological, and the Western went out of favor. It was really that that led me to *Star Wars*. But before that I [was], I don't know, an angry young man who was saying, "This is terrible. We're living in the future." Everything you say is bad about the future, 1984, it's all real. It's right now, and I'm going to make a movie about right now.

JC: Which was *THX 1138*.

GL: Which was *THX*. It looked like the future, but it wasn't.

JC: So, you weren't a child of the '60s. You were a touch before that. But your maturation as a filmmaker, as an artist, came in the late '60s, so it seems to me *THX 1138* was a direct response to these ideas of oppression and the rise of technology as a means of oppression.

GL: Well, yeah, and it was also based on a concept—again, a lot of things that are in those movies are based on social concepts—but the main theme of that movie, which also goes over into *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars*, is one that I learned early when I was in high school. I didn't do well in high school. I was in a car crash, and I reconsidered my life, how I was going to handle myself. Well, I'll go to college. I didn't think anything was ever going to come of it. But what happens is you start going in a particular direction and opportunities present themselves. You just keep pushing forward. And if you push forward, you realize that the only limitations you have are in your mind. That's *THX*. You're in a white limbo. You can go out anytime you want, you just won't. You're afraid to.

JC: So, your metaphor [is] the prison of your own mind.

GL: Right. You're imprisoned by your vision—if you can't imagine it, you can't do it. So, use your imagination. And think outside the box. It's the same thing in *American Graffiti*: "I'm just going to go to school here and go to junior college. I'm not going to go to all those big schools because I could never do that." If you say, "I can, I'm going to try," you can succeed. It's the same thing—"Oh, I can't make movies." I wasn't going to make theatrical films. I was going to make artistic, tone-poem kind of things. [Experimental filmmaker] Stan Brakhage stuff. But whatever opportunity presented itself, I wasn't so single-minded, which a lot of the kids at school were.

OPPOSITE Theatrical poster for George Lucas's dystopian classic, *THX 1138* (1971).



Visit the future where love
is the ultimate crime.

THX 1138

Warner Bros. presents THX 1138 • An American Zoetrope Production • Starring Robert Duvall and Donald Pleasence • with Don Pedro Colley, Maggie McOmie and Ian Wolfe • Technicolor® • Techniscope® • Executive Producer, Francis Ford Coppola • Screenplay by George Lucas and Walter Murch • Story by George Lucas Produced by Lawrence Sturhahn • Directed by George Lucas • Music by Lalo Schiffrin

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ABOVE Robert Duvall and Maggie McOmie in *THX 1138*.

JC: You broke out of the pack early right in film school.

GL: I was very fortunate. When we were there, everybody was pretty liberal. I mean, there were some people [who said], "I want to do art films [like] Godard." [Or], "You like Kurosawa? Go do Kurosawa. And then John Ford." They were very open-minded. At some of the schools—I won't mention names—it [had] to be artistic. My feeling when I was in film school is I'll do anything. Give me commercials. I can do commercials. I love the medium. I love to play with it.

JC: That's what it was like working for [legendary B-movie director] Roger Corman when I

started out. We didn't care if it was a night nurses film or a science fiction movie with giant maggots. As long as you got to make a film, it was cool. There was no Cahiers du Cinéma in the discussion.

GL: I love Godard and I love Kurosawa. Kurosawa especially. And Fellini. It's funny because we don't have that milieu anymore. It's funny the way it's dissipated. But you find, just as you do, say in the Renaissance or in Paris in the '20s, a group of talented people who were outcasts come together for whatever reason. They all find themselves in the same place at the same time, and they all meet each other because it's a small world. Then all this stuff comes out of that. It's like, oh, the '70s, that

was such a great [time]. That was just us. We weren't doing anything special.

JC: But there was a rebel spirit, an antiauthoritarian spirit. To me, *THX 1138* was a science fiction manifestation of that kind of counter-culture zeitgeist. I saw it in '71. I think I was a senior in high school at the time.

GL: The only people who really saw it were hallucinating.

JC: No, I was straight. I didn't do drugs until later.

GL: *THX* fell into the beginnings of the 2001 syndrome, which is people go around saying, "Man, that film was so great if you're stoned."

JC: It also fell into the 2001 syndrome in the sense that it wasn't recognized in its time. It was recognized later.

GL: They said, "It's not a space film. It's a hallucinogenic movie."

JC: When I saw it, I saw the through line from *Brave New World*, 1984, all of the dystopian classics just elevated into a more technological setting. The chrome cop in *Terminator 2* is a direct outgrowth of the chrome cops in *THX*.

But I think it's interesting when you think of *Star Wars*, which is a very mythological end of the spectrum in action/adventure and heroism, and *THX* on the other end of the science fiction spectrum, on the dystopian side. The through line is that you've got a rebel main character who comes to a kind of enlightenment or a different view of the world.

GL: Sort of blossoms into their own potential to say, "Well, I can't do that. I can't leave my stepfather or my uncle. I got to stay with the fields." And it's all about, hey, you don't have as much impact on the world as you think you do. That's Obi-Wan Kenobi: "Well, if that's what you want." It's not that [the characters' fates are] preordained; you can put two and two

together and say, "Don't go back in that burning building because it's way too late."

JC: You're on to an interesting thing there. So many of these movies have started to reinterpret this kind of mythic element of the one, the predestined hero, the hero who must be something, whereas your heroes are heroes by choice. They get to a fork in the road and they take the fork and it's choice. It's not predestination. At least I don't think that's what you're saying.

GL: Predestination in my mind is... your genetics. Your genes are your destiny. It's biological. People say, oh, don't put the biology in it... But we all have talent. And those of us that have talent know that we're different than other people. We know we can do things that other people can't do. Talk to any filmmaker, artist, or anything, you have this sense in your head of what works and what doesn't work. Sometimes you're wrong. It's not foolproof. But at the same time, it's something that's innate in your genetic code that makes you look at things in a particular way.

JC: You're only wrong if your film doesn't make money.

GL: Or you're only wrong if it looks stupid.

JC: There's no absolute arbiter of that in art, you know?

GL: Yeah, I'm a very strong believer that art is in the eye of the beholder. But I'm also a very strong believer in the fact that art is an emotional communication. And if you can't communicate emotionally, it's not art. The concept that if it's popular, it's not art, and if it's art, it's not popular is not right at all. That's just completely bogus. If you're able to appeal emotionally to millions of people, that's a wonderful thing.

JC: Let's go back to what your influences were that fed into the creation of *Star Wars*. Obviously, some of them are from the science fiction world, and some of them are from the

worlds of sociology and anthropology. Can we draw out those roots? As much as *Star Wars* seemed to just leap from your forehead fully formed, it had roots that anybody in the science fiction world knows.

GL: Nothing in this world pops into your head fully formed. And for artists that are struggling with a vision—and I use the word *artist* liberally—you have an idea in your head, and you're trying to make it real.

JC: Ed Wood was struggling with a vision.

GL: Everybody does. You get this idea of something that you think would be cool, and then you struggle to make it real. It's real in your head, vaguely, but when you actually put it down [on paper], you say, "Oh, that isn't at all like it was in my dream."

JC: Exactly. So, was it comics? Was it books?

GL: I read comic books when I was little because I grew up before television. There wasn't anything else to do. I liked all different kinds of comic books—this was way before the big-time action/adventure comic books. This was more in the Little Lulu stuff. Television came in when I was about ten years old. I had Superman and Batman, but I didn't get obsessed by them or anything. It's the same thing about science fiction. I like science fiction. I read it, but I wasn't a fan. I really liked *1984* and really liked *Dune*...

JC: *Dune* is a great reference point because I think a lot of people have forgotten what a big influence it was on all of us during that time.

GL: Same thing with *Lord of the Rings*—the concept of creating a world that has its own laws, its own reality. It's fascinating. That's really what I like to do.

JC: Government systems, lineages, guilds, organizations—

GL: The whole organization of societies and how they work. That was what I really liked rather than science fiction. I liked Ray Bradbury. I liked Asimov. Mostly what I read was history. As I discovered when I was an early teenager, the history that I was being taught in school—this is the date, this is what happened—it's not history. History is learning about the psychology of the people who were doing [things in the past] and the problems they were having. Why they did it, and what they were thinking. What incidents early on in their life [influenced them]. What was Josephine's role in Napoleon's craziness? That's what's fascinating.

JC: You're thinking like a storyteller writing from a character and using that as your lens into history.

GL: It's the same thing in Homer. It's really about Hercules and Ajax. It's about the characters, not about the wars. How they turned on each other. They couldn't stay true to their beliefs. Alexander the Great, Ramses. It's not that much different than what's going on today.

JC: There are references to cloud cities going all the way back to Aristophanes. This idea of the shining city in the sky is something that is handed down.

GL: It's Olympus. It's not a mountain. It's actually up there in the clouds somewhere. And it's heaven. In college, I studied Campbell. I became very interested in comparative religions and in how these mythologies all interworked. It was Joseph Campbell that showed me that all these great mysteries have the same psychological roots. Even though they're told all over the world over thousands of years, they all come back to the same psychological roots. What I did is I took what I was learning from Joe, and then did a whole bunch of research.

JC: Did you actually mentor with him?

OPPOSITE Theatrical poster for *Star Wars* (1977).

