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Escaping Modesto: George Lucas, Film Auteur, and the Alteration of Movie History

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Escaping Modesto:
George Lucas, Film Auteur, and the Alteration of Movie History

Krister Persson

Senior Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation from
The William O. Douglas Honors College
Central Washington University

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Accepted by:

Thesis Committee Chair (Justin Daering, Lecturer, Film)

Date

5-13-22

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ABSTRACT

This video essay analyzes the early filmography of George Lucas as a critique of auteur theory. Dissecting *THX 1138* (1971), *American Graffiti* (1973), and *Star Wars* (1977) based on their autobiographic qualities, this short documentary investigates the advantages and disadvantages of viewing a complicated cinematic work through the lens of an individual author. Analysis focuses on Lucasfilm founder George Lucas and his reputation for controversially altering his works through special edition re-releases, calling into question the sanctity of theatrical releases and the confines of a film auteur. Does a filmmaker, particularly one whose films are drawn from personal experience, have the right to restrict access to their original works by substituting theatrical releases with director endorsed re-edits? Through filmic analysis, *Escaping Modesto* posits that the tendency of Lucas to revise his films is in itself what defines his auteurism. George Lucas is a revisionist as an author, with a history of outspoken support for authorial freedom over theatrical purism.

Keywords: Film Auteur, Movie Alteration, Biography

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Acknowledgement should also go to the subject of the documentary, filmmaker George Lucas, whose cinematic visions and pioneering history inspired and built this project.

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Appendix A

ESCAPING MODESTO FILE SOURCE FOR VIEWING

The MOV video file for “Escaping Modesto: George Lucas, Film Auteur, and the Alteration of Movie History” is available for private viewing on DropBox at the following link:

[https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/2rp97dhfb2rxrkorrse1/h?
dl=0&rlkey=e51y85pmr5zwiki0171up1vhqc](https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/2rp97dhfb2rxrkorrse1/h?dl=0&rlkey=e51y85pmr5zwiki0171up1vhqc)

“Escaping Modesto: George Lucas, Film Auteur, and the Alteration of Movie History” is also available for public viewing on the “Escaping Modesto” YouTube channel at the following link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-PoHMO_q_4

Timestamps for specific chapters of the video are listed below.

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| ESCAPING MODESTO..... | (00:31) |
| FILM AUTEUR..... | (01:13) |
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Appendix B

NARRATION VOICE OVER SCRIPT / SCREENPLAY

The following script was written for the purpose of voice over narration recording. It is the base of the spoken dialogue in the final documentary, and is written in an essayist style with the intention of presenting natural spoken word. The use of contractions, idioms, and informal dramatized language is intentional and prevalent in the document.

The script was written by Krister Persson in the Final Draft screenwriting software, and is presented in traditional industry standard narration-based screenplay formatting; including typewriter font, sluglines, and parenthetical descriptors.

ESCAPING MODESTO
George Lucas, Film Auteur, and the Alteration of Movie History

Created by
Krister Persson

05/01/22

FINAL DRAFT

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<title card fades in>

A LONG TIME AGO...

<second half of title card fades in>

IN MODESTO, CALIFORNIA.

<zooms down through space, lands at Lucas family home>

NARRATOR

It was a quiet town in 1944. With little more than orange groves and empty streets, the nearest skyscraper hours away, there wasn't much for a young boy to do but look to the stars and dream.

<TITLE CARD>

ESCAPING MODESTO - GEORGE LUCAS, FILM AUTEUR, AND THE ALTERATION OF MOVIE HISTORY, BY KRISTER PERSSON

NARRATOR

Visionary filmmaker, technical pioneer, storytelling icon. All apt descriptions of the Hollywood heavyweight who revolutionized the movie industry and introduced the world to the fantastic universe of Star Wars -- George Lucas. But this billionaire celebrity director wasn't always a tycoon of cinema.

He was once a hopeful film student, a rebellious teen, and an imaginative small town kid. George Lucas is an auteur filmmaker who imbues his movies with personal meaning that reflects his early life and the culture he grew up in.

But what does it really mean to be an auteur filmmaker?

<TITLE CARD: "FILM AUTEUR">

Auteur film theory was first proposed in 1940s France as a critical method of analyzing a film based on the amount of authorial intent instilled into the work by a single "author." The technical competence, distinguishable personality, and interior meaning are dissected as components that one filmmaker imprints across their filmography.

From writing to production to editing, auteurs craft a film to their tastes and specifications, creating works that spawn from a personal identity and consistent style.

Auteur theory credits artistic ownership of a film to an individual director rather than a producer or a studio.

<TITLE CARD: "CHAPTER ONE: HOT SHOT, '64">

NARRATOR

The year is 1964. The University of Southern California is one of the best film schools in the country, and George Lucas has just arrived. From a town of 40,000 to the city of 2 and a half million stars, he is immediately smitten by the possibilities Los Angeles promises.

He rents a run down house on Portola Drive for \$80/month watches dozens of films a week. He is able to get hold of a movie camera - and he makes good use of it.

With tone poems, experimental films, and award winning shorts, he quickly becomes the star student of the class of '67. He creates stories based on his passions: driving, speed, science fiction, radio, and current events that earn him scholarships and special opportunities to work on film sets. He's USC's wunderkind of the decade.

Like most college students in the sixties, Lucas is a jaded young person with the aspiration to influence political change. Anti-war messaging, themes of freedom, and cautionary tales about the rise of authoritarian societies feature heavily in student films like Look at Life, Freiheit, 1:42.08, and in Electronic Labyrinth: THX 1138 4EB. This short catches the eyes of future collaborator Steven Spielberg and newfound friend Francis Ford Coppola, with whom he makes the move back to the San Francisco-Bay Area to found independent film company American Zoetrope.

Here they plan to establish 'Hollywood North,' breaking away from the old fashioned studio system, with revolutionary ideas about the freedoms auteurs deserve to realize their visions.

They strike a \$300,000 deal with Warner Brothers to develop seven screenplays for distribution. The first film the troupe plans to make, and the one that will determine the success or failure of the American Zoetrope endeavor, is written, directed, and imagined by George Lucas.

<TITLE CARD: "THX 1138">

NARRATOR

THX 1138 is a 1971 dystopian 'social science-fiction' movie. The film follows the titular THX 1138, a factory worker in the year 2187, as he tries to escape the subterranean society that humans are forced to live in under government mandated drug-induced compliance. After breaking free of his mind control with the help of his government-assigned mate, LUH, THX discovers liberty and love in a stark oppressive hell. Forced into captivity and tormented for his transgressions, he teams with fellow prisoners to attempt a daring escape, fleeing surveillance officers and robotic policemen for a chance at freedom.

<music ends, tempo slows as analysis begins>

NARRATOR

Based on his student short THX 1138 4EB, George Lucas's debut film was a daring choice for a young filmmaker who had a lot to prove.

Taking inspiration from films like Alphaville and Fahrenheit 451, this movie deals with themes of authoritarian control, techno-dystopia, mind control, and more depressing subjects of societal collapse. THX is the ultimate amalgamation of Lucas's college angst -- disillusioned by the Vietnam War and the Nixon administration, he channeled his political and cultural frustrations into a sci-fi reflection of the world he saw unfolding around him. Lucas's predilection to escapism, both from a sheltered and shallow home as well as from a turbulent social climate, is embedded in this movie.

The ultimate theme: you don't have to participate in repressive society. "You can just walk out."

Evidently, it was a risky move for a guerrilla film production company in need of a hit.

Despite the unwavering support from mentor/producer Francis Ford Coppola, and the top talents of actor Robert Duvall and sound effects mastermind Walter Murch, Warner Bros was confounded with the final result.

Finding the film bizarre and inaccessible to general audiences, the studio not only cut five minutes against Lucas's passionate protests, but cancelled the \$300,000 American Zoetrope deal altogether.

THX 1138 was the proving grounds for a highly venturesome and revolutionary concept, and it proved to be the death of that dream. Coppola had to agree to take on a film adaptation of Mario Puzo's "The Godfather" in the hopes of recouping the costs, and Lucas now had the burden of proving he was more than just a cold, unprofitable eccentric.

<TITLE CARD: "CHAPTER TWO: REBEL, '62">

NARRATOR

The year is 1962, and George Lucas has just purchased his first car. An Autobianchi Bianchina: an unassuming Italian minicar based on the Fiat 500. Though it doesn't look like much, Lucas loves it.

George delves deep into the cruising scene around Modesto's 10th and 11th street loop, spending time with what many close to him consider to be "the wrong crowd." With leather jackets, long slicked back hair, and filthy Levi's jeans, he rolls around town in the company of ruffians and cruisers such as the notorious local gang "The Faros"; going to the popular burger joint "The Round Table," trying to pick up girls, and listening to the disc jockey personalities on the radio spinning both records and inter-cut stories. George is teased by the mystery of who these DJs are, and can't help but experience more of a connection to some of the on-air personalities than he has with any of his peers. But he doesn't just love cars for the cruising and music culture. He's in it for the speed.

He enjoys his ride as a hot rod racer, and soon, he's entering track and drag races, and doing well. With a small, light driver in a small, light car, he can fly around sharp corners much faster than any of his opponents. He begins to take home trophies for his efforts. If he isn't cruising or racing cars himself, he's serving as pit crew on the local race car circuit. This is his passion. His obsession.

It's now 1962, the evening of July 12th. George Lucas is just three days from graduating his senior year at Thomas Downey high school, if he gets his D+ grades up, that is... unsure of exactly what his future holds.

He's driving in his souped up Fiat after spending an evening frantically studying at the library, on the road that leads back to his home, the same road that he and his peers cruise regularly. At this very moment, a classmate of Lucas's, Frank Ferreira, tries to pass him on the left going 87 miles per hour. George doesn't see him, as he takes the turn into his family's driveway...

Ferreira's heavy Chevrolet Impala broadsides the driver's side of George's tiny racer. The Bianchina rolls. On it's third flip, the heavy racing-belt restraining a now helpless Lucas snaps, flinging him from the open-roof vehicle. It rolls a total of seven times before wrapping it's chassis around one of the Lucas family's walnut trees. The screeching of tires and smashing of metal comes to a halt. A bystander rushes to the scene, pulling a mangled teenager mere feet from the wreckage of a little Italian car.

<silence, and then: life support beeps>

Miraculously, Lucas is revived. Despite the paramedics not being able to find a pulse on the scene, once in the Emergency Room the doctor finds a sign of life. George's lungs have been pinched and collapsed, his ribs crushed.

While his classmate, Ferreira, walks away completely uninjured, Lucas is now in a near comatose state fighting for his life. His condition is grim. He gets his high school diploma delivered to his bedside, along with a traffic violation ticket for making an illegal left-turn in his beloved Bianchina, now just a hunk of metal being hauled to a junkyard. After intensive care in critical condition for two weeks, the doctors release him.

The next four months are spent recovering at home. It gives George plenty of time to think about his life, and the borrowed time he is now living on. He makes the decision not to pursue a racing career: after coming so close to death, he realizes it's just not worth it. His own mortality is now all too real.

Looking to the uncertain future, and after falling in love with movies during his bedridden state, perhaps film school is the answer to his worries.

<TITLE CARD: "AMERICAN GRAFFITI">

NARRATOR

American Graffiti is a 1973 coming-of-age comedy film. In 1962 Modesto, California, a colorful group of high school friends spend one final night out on the town before going on their various life-defining paths. Cruising the streets, listening to pop-rock music, and getting into antics is the cool and rebellious John Milner, dorky Terry the Toad, sweetheart Steve Bolander, and the conflicted Curt Henderson. Though the film follows each character on their separate journeys throughout the night, it is Curt who stands as the de facto lead, wrestling with whether or not to leave his sleepy town for university across the country, all while chasing after a mysterious girl in a white T-Bird.

<music ends, tempo slows as analysis begins>

NARRATOR

After the critical and financial flop of THX 1138, Lucas was encouraged by Francis Ford Coppola to prove he wasn't all doom, gloom, and techno-babble, and could make a lighthearted comedy that appealed to mass audiences.

It was only natural to reflect back on fond memories of his high school days cruising the Modesto strip.

Lucas based the story on his childhood growing up in Modesto, California as a rock and roll-loving car cruiser. He based three of the most prominent characters on himself from different stages of his high school years. Terry "the Toad" Fields represents who Lucas was as a kid: a scrawny, timid, and nerdy guy who didn't really fit in with the popular crowd.

After a few years Lucas grew an interest in drag racing, becoming a cruiser who cared about nothing more than picking up girls and driving fast, represented by hot-rod John Milner in the film. Finally, Lucas wrote the character of Curt Henderson, portrayed by a young Richard Dreyfuss, to fill in as his most developed phase: the conflicted high school graduate who is grappling with whether or not to fly to the East Coast for college or to stay in his familiar town. Looking at the cast of American Graffiti as the filmmaker's self-image split into its various phases in his life is fascinating as it exemplifies the concept of a director as an "author." This behind-the-scenes background gives the movie an unparalleled honesty, giving even the most outlandish jokes and gags a lived authenticity.

American Graffiti is auteur "New Cinema", focusing on the relatable coming-of-age teen comedy genre in a very sophisticated way while telling an intensely personal story. With its technical innovations, broad appeal, and embrace of the filmmaker's voice, American Graffiti is one of the most recognized films of the early 1970s.

But like with THX 1138, the studio didn't believe in Lucas's film. Despite an astounding test screening, where the preview audience reportedly roared with laughter and adored every moment raucously, studio executives obstinately saw the film as a mess. Due to one producer's personal hatred for the movie, Universal chose to cut multiple scenes. The lack of control enraged Lucas.

He would go on to say of the experience, "They were simply coming in and putting a crayon mark on my painting and saying, 'Hey, don't worry about it. It's just a crayon mark.' It's just an arbitrary exercise of power. And it irritates me enormously."

Despite studio doubts, American Graffiti became one of the greatest returns on investment in Hollywood history, making over 257 times its budget at the box office. Audiences loved the comedy, music, and comforting nostalgia of the early sixties, and it made George Lucas a household name.

Lucas proved he had the potential to strike gold and win over the hearts and wallets of the public. With reinforced confidence, he vowed to never relinquish creative control to the studio again.

<TITLE CARD: "CHAPTER THREE: FARM BOY, '55">

NARRATOR

Modesto is so quiet. Too quiet.

Unbearably quiet. It's the type of town that's dullness ignites an inescapable lifelong habit: imagination.

And a 10 year old George Lucas's runs wild. He escapes into paperback adventure novels and ten cent sci-fi comics. He creates backyard amusement parks and puts on mock-plays for his family. He draws pictures and writes short stories. But most formatively of all, every night at 6:00 PM he lays in front of a box of light and sound and travels to a galaxy far, far away...

<flash gordon intro>

The dynamic images and tales of Flash Gordon will stay in his mind for decades to come, transporting him away from his quiet walnut ranch with the dream of escaping to bigger worlds.

<TITLE CARD: "STAR WARS">

NARRATOR

Star Wars is a sci-fi, fantasy, space-opera epic unlike anything before it. In a far away galaxy, a young farm boy from a desert planet learns of his family legacy of Jedi Knighthood. He sets out to save the princess of the Rebel Alliance from the evil Galactic Empire, holding her on their treacherous planet-destroying space station, the Death Star.

<music ends, tempo slows as analysis begins>

NARRATOR

What can be said about Star Wars that we haven't already heard?

It all began as a pitch for a low budget Flash Gordon movie adaptation that no studio wanted to touch, and evolved into the world's biggest film franchise.

With a lead character whose name was a shortened epithet of his own, Star Wars combined elements from all of Lucas's life up to that point in one mythic story.

A hero living in the middle of nowhere, spurred to leave his home for the greater good -- finding himself and fighting oppression.

As a metaphoric criticism of the Vietnam War, a callback to his high-speed youth, and a realization of childhood dreams, Star Wars touched on Lucas's core. And that personal story became a film phenomenon.

But it wasn't an easy road to reach that point. To accomplish the lofty ambition of cinematically building a universe of galactic proportions, Lucas had to spend five years in writing and development, shoot the entire film on a small budget with an unsupportive crew in just a few weeks, and build an entire special effects house from the ground up.

After having wrapped shooting on the live action portions of the movie, he returned to Van Nuys to oversee the work of visual effects house Industrial Light and Magic, which needed to have 350 shots completed before release. In his absence, they had finished just three.

Lucas began having panic attacks. His stress rose through the roof, he felt chest pain, and then heart palpitations.

The overworked director checked himself into the hospital where he was diagnosed with stress-induced hypertension, and was urged by his doctors to remove all stressors immediately.

With release just a few months away and his movie in a shambles, Lucas refused.

Though it nearly killed him, Lucas eventually released Star Wars and had a runaway hit - one that he had total control over. It became the epitome of blockbuster success. But that didn't mean his highest ambitions had been met.

<TITLE CARD: "CHAPTER FOUR: FORCE OF CHANGE">

NARRATOR

Escape.

George Lucas had escaped Modesto just like THX escaped his subterranean society. Just like Curt had escaped his own Modesto. Just like a hopeful Tatooine farm boy had looked to a far-off binary sunset, and realized his ambitious dreams.

And with the unprecedented worldwide success of Star Wars, he had even escaped from restriction. No studio executive or producer would ever take their crayons to his paintings again. He has absolute control.

With creative control as powerful as that, George Lucas went on to create two Star Wars sequels, an entire Prequel trilogy, and multiple animated shows -- as well as co-creating the Indiana Jones films and producing movies such as Willow, Labyrinth, Red Tails, and Howard the Duck. He sponsored a Disneyland ride, cut deals for novelizations, comics, video games, and myriad fortune-making action figures, t-shirts, and lunchboxes.

But his ambitions haven't been limited to releasing new projects and merchandising. To take back control of his old films from outside influence or technical limitations that prevented him from fully realizing his ultimate ambitions at the times they were released, Lucas re-cut old movies to his liking.

American Graffiti, though largely spared, saw most of its changes in 1978 when scenes cut by the studio were added back in once Lucas had the weight of Star Wars to enforce his original version. There was also a minor digital enhancement in 1998 with a composite sky replacement.

Though 5 minutes cut by the studio were added back to the film in 1977, THX 1138 saw its major changes in 2004, when Lucas completely overhauled many sequences with computer generated imagery. Robot police, racing vehicles, and monkey creatures were all replaced with CGI copies. The factory line and underground highway set-pieces were practically changed past recognition.

But it is Lucas's first foray into 'director cuts' that earned him his infamy for recutting.

The 1997 Star Wars Special Edition ushered extreme visual alterations to the film and its sequels. Color re-timing, changed sound design, CGI additions, replacements, and enhancements, and deleted scenes now added, altered with CGI, and then altered again.

Star Wars has been subjected to these changes repeatedly over the past 25 years to the chagrin of fans and purists. Re-releases in 1997, 2004, 2011, and 2019 all proved to be critically condemned (though far from unprofitable).

But most contentiously, none of these films have ever been released for high-definition home viewing on physical media or through streaming in their theatrical states, with fans growing desperate enough to fund multiple unofficial fan-created restorations of the original movies in the name of film preservation.

This dark chapter in Lucas's legacy has led to him being criticized as inflexible, egotistic, and revisionist, essentially erasing film history and obscuring his now classic movies behind late 1990s and early 2000s visual effects which many feel lack the charm of the originals, and in some ways feel more dated than the practical effects of the 70s and 80s.

In 1988 alongside Steven Spielberg, Mr. Lucas went to Washington to speak in front of a subcommittee, vouching for something close to his heart: film preservation and the prevention of altering classic cinema.

During this time, media magnate Ted Turner had purchased the rights to 1.2 billion dollars worth of classic movies. He began re-airing acclaimed black-and-white films in gaudy colorized remasters across his syndicated networks.

This created an outcry from Hollywood filmmakers, critics, and cinephiles alike, and with the persistence of celebrities like George Lucas, ultimately encouraged the Library of Congress to establish the National Film Registry - a collection of films selected for their historical, cultural, and aesthetic contributions to cinema, all preserved in their original format.

Electronic Labyrinth, American Graffiti, and all three original Star Wars films have been inducted into the registry. In part due to his preservation efforts and its historic importance, Star Wars was one of the first films inducted into the registry. Despite this recognition, Congress has yet to receive an unaltered theatrical film print of any one of them.

<TITLE CARD: "AUTEUR DETOUR">

NARRATOR

Auteurism is one of the most debated topics in movie criticism. After all, movies are made by hundreds if not thousands of people, and ascribing the output of all of their efforts to just one person could be considered dismissive of the filmmaking process.

But with Lucas, there is a through line in his filmography that inextricably links himself to his art: escape.

Tracking the theme of escape that has followed him through his life, filmography, and career, Lucas finally escaped the burden of fan criticism when he sold Lucasfilm Ltd to Disney in 2012 for \$4 billion, relinquishing the micro-managing level of control over his movies that he had enjoyed for 35 years.

As a creative force who has always valued intense control over the sci-fi, comedy, and fantasy stories that couch his intimate personal background and worldview, it is unsurprising that he would wish to tighten that hold.

He has described these movies not only as his paintings, but as his children. To cut five minutes from a film would be like cutting off a finger. To a studio executive its a trim for runtime, but to Lucas it's an assault.

This attitude has seemingly left him impervious to criticisms on what he does with his art, and perhaps rightfully so.

This is someone whose movies were picked apart and recut by studios, who nearly died trying to finish a film, who was given absolute power upon entering major success after being barred from it, and who finally was able to release his ultimate versions of the movies as he always wanted them to be, only to be derided by the fanatical audience he had fostered.

But if we are to describe his movies as precious works he wants to shelter from harm, his own attacks suddenly seem most malicious. He has shared these paintings with the public, made the world fall in love with them, and then took his crayon to them.

But it is his own crayon.

Auteur theory encourages us to analyze consistent themes, visual marks, technical flourishes, and maybe even theorize about autobiographical through lines. And in this case, the revisionism is Lucas's auteurism.

His legacy as a filmmaker is one as a revisionist who reaches for perfection, not by anyone else's standards but his own.

In 1988 during those congressional hearings, it seemed that George Lucas was acting as the spokesperson for theatrical purism against the future alteration of movies. But that wasn't his intention at all.

He spoke that day as a filmmaker, on behalf of all filmmakers, to protect the rights of an author's control over their own art. He proclaimed that outside forces should not have the ability to adulterate the works of the original filmmaker. But George Lucas is not an outside force to his own films.

Tied to his identity, from THX to Star Wars, is an auteur filmmaker with a foundation for personal creative freedom.

It's easy to say that George Lucas is an egomaniacal billionaire who refuses to listen to those around him, but it is just as easy to say that he's a dreamer grasping at control over his personal stories, promoting the freedoms of auteurs to imagine without limits.

Technical limitations, creative limitations, limitations of power... Lucas has never let any of these stand in his way.

Whether through the innovations of filmmaking technology, the pushing of storytelling boundaries, or the liberating action of creating his art as he wishes, his contributions to filmmaking, popular culture, and the dreams of inspired audiences are undeniable.

Because if there is anything that George Lucas has proven, it's that every now and then we should all turn our eyes to the stars, let our imaginations run wild, and escape.

<slowly moves up into a field of stars>

<text quote fades onto screen>

"People who alter or destroy works of art and our cultural heritage for profit or as an exercise of power are barbarians.

Art is a distinctly human endeavor. We must have respect for it if we are to have any respect for the human race.

Our cultural history must not be allowed to be rewritten."

- George Lucas, 1988

<quote fades out. new quote fades in>

"Everyone seems to think that digital technology devoids the medium of content, but that is not true at all. If anything, it broadens the content.

It's like this is the movie I wanted it to be, and I'm sorry if you saw half a completed film and fell in love with it.

But I want it to be the way I want it to be."

- George Lucas, 2004

CREDITS AND SOURCES