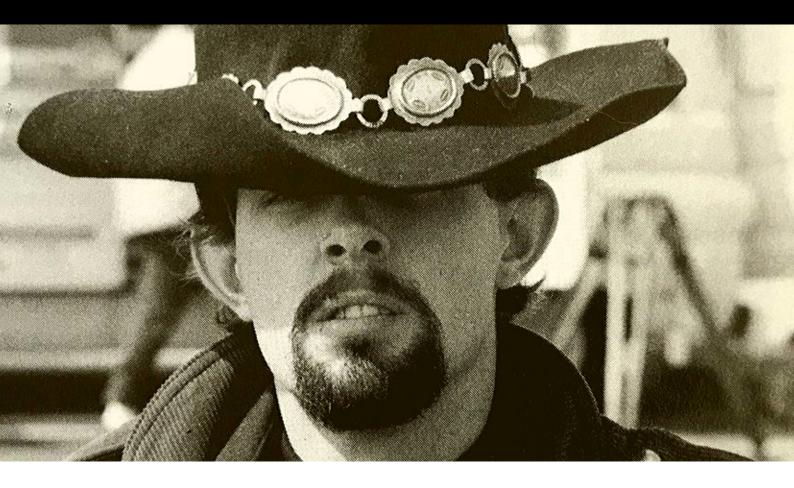
MAKING APOCALYPSE NOW

Episode 2: George Lucas Almost Directed 'Apocalypse Now' Instead of 'Star Wars'



Episode 2: George Lucas Almost directed 'Apocalypse Now' Instead of Making 'Star Wars'

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Forward: George Lucas' Apocalypse Now

BY CINEMATYLER

First, I want to take a moment to thank you for supporting CinemaTyler. These videos take an incredible amount of work and your support helps buy resources, pay bills, and soon (hopefully) hire on some editing help to allow me to complete these videos in less than a month. Thank you!

Episode 2 follows an Apocalypse Now that would never be made. For many many years, it was going to be George Lucas' vision of the war in Vietnam that we would have seen. But perhaps the most interesting (and substantial) difference that Lucas' film would have had would be a Vietnam War movie made DURING the Vietnam war. Remember, at this point, it was almost ludicrous to think of America losing a war.

Like everybody else, I enjoyed Star Wars as a kid, but I wouldn't consider myself a "fan." I had always thought of George Lucas as a guy who sort of fell backward into his success. It wasn't until I really began looking into George Lucas' life during American Zoetrope that I realized his vision extended way beyond any single movie.

If you watch the documentary Star Wars: Empire of Dreams, it is clear that almost no one involved in the making of the first Star Wars movie thought that what they were making was any good. Harrison Ford was just happy to work and Lucas had only gotten Alec Guinness because he had already accomplished everything he wanted to and was interested in playing a "wizard character" for fun.



Get me out of this franchise!

Now, there has been at least one Star Wars movie made every decade since the 70s, Industrial Light & Magic has caused SFX-filled blockbusters to dominate the box office, and I honestly don't know if that's good or bad.

What else would the studios throw hundreds of millions of dollars into? Disaster movies?



A disaster (of a) movie.

There has been a lot of fuss recently about this quote by Martin Scorsese on the success of the Marvel movies:

> I tried, you know? But that's not cinema. Honestly, the closest I can think of them, as well made as they are, with actors doing the best they can under the circumstances, is theme parks... It isn't the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being.

Recently, Francis Ford Coppola backed up Scorsese saying,

> When Martin Scorsese says that the Marvel pictures are not cinema, he's right because we expect to learn something from cinema, we expect to gain something, some enlightenment, some knowledge, some inspiration... I don't know that anyone gets anything out of seeing the same movie over and over again... Martin was kind when he said it's not cinema. He didn't say it's despicable, which I just say it is.

What do I think? I think it's complicated. I've actually seen every single one of the Marvel movies and I would say that I enjoyed a few, but I'm not in the demographic they are going for. Regardless of whether or not I enjoyed watching the Marvel movies, it is an incredible feat of cinema— 21 movies in ten years that were all planned and interconnected to tell an epic story in which the characters fulfill their arcs as the actors significantly age. Not to mention that they maintained their extreme popularity for a decade. It's fascinating as a concept, but is it cinema? Is it Tarantino's complaint of "TV in public?" * I think many people are interpreting the quote as Scorsese saying more or less, that Marvel movies aren't cinema because they are bad movies. Most responses I've seen are people defending the Marvel movies as cinema because they felt an emotional impact from the story, but you can get an emotional impact from many art-forms. Movies, television shows, and even video games seem to be slowly merging into one thing. Lots of people got an emotional impact from Breaking Bad. Would you consider Breaking Bad to be "cinema?"



You're flingin' flangin' right.

When Scorsese says, "It isn't the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being," I think he's referencing Auteur Theory. While I'll admit that there has been a lot of debate as what this theory actually means, I've always understood it as the idea that

cinema (as an art form) should be a singular vision communicated by the director to the audience. Did Jon Favreau direct Iron Man because he had a personal connection to the story and needed to communicate it through his eyes or was he just an employee of Marvel Studios? I don't know what kind of connection Favreau has to the story- he doesn't necessarily need one- but Favreau had the required taste and vision to pull it off. Nevertheless, I wouldn't say that it is his movie, after all, there were at least four writers on the film and each film in the series had to follow a general style regardless of who directed it. People tend to celebrate Guardians of the Galaxy and Thor: Ragnarok more than other Marvel movies because James Gunn and Taika Waititi were able to play up the style a bit more.

Speaking of James Gunn, he recently responded to Scorsese and Coppola saying,

Many of our grandfathers thought all gangster movies were the same, often calling them 'despicable. Some of our great grandfathers thought the same of westerns, and believed the films of John Ford, Sam Peckinpah, and Sergio Leone were all exactly the same. I remember a great uncle to whom I was raving about Star Wars. He responded by saying, 'I saw that when it was called 2001, and, boy, was it boring!' Superheroes are simply today's gangsters/cowboys/ outer space adventurers. Some superhero films are awful, some are beautiful. Like westerns and gangster movies (and before that, just MOVIES), not everyone will be able to appreciate them, even some geniuses. And that's okay.

I see what he's saying, but Ford, Peckinpah, and Leone's movies are essentially tied to those directors. Is Iron Man a "Jon Faverau" movie? Is Thor a "Kenneth Branagh" movie? Or are they "Marvel" movies? That's what's interesting about this debate. Is the Marvel Cinematic Universe an auteurist venture with Kevin Feige— president of Marvel Studios— as the auteur?

As for Coppola's comments, you'll see during this series on Apocalypse Now that Coppola loves walking out of a theater saying, "I've never seen anything like that." This is likely why he dislikes the Marvel movies (and probably most franchise movies). The big studios, despite having massive amounts of money to play with, generally refuse to take risks on things that are new and interesting.

Instead, they look at cinema from a business standpoint and try to make something that "can't fail." I think the real issue is that, first, Marvel movies have become successful enough to be something that will seemingly never end, and second, that the search for worldwide success has made studios cater to an even wider demographic (and censorship) causing the stories to become watered down to the point of sometimes being quite bland.

Scorsese was also quoted saying:

I think [the youth] can have those films; it's fine. It's just that that shouldn't become what our young people believe is cinema. It just shouldn't.

I'm inclined to agree. It's not that these movies exist, it's that it is pretty much one idea taking up so much space. Yes, it isn't *his* "cinema," but is Marvel's idea of "cinema" fostering personal and unique creative expression? There is some kid out there being inspired to become a director right now because of Marvel movies. Do they want to express themselves through the medium of film or do they want to be an employee of a dream factory?

I ambled around for a while after high school and went to film school much later and was older than most of the other students. For many of them, Marvel was why they wanted to learn about film. I also remember several classmates who seemed disappointed that blockbusters weren't necessarily the end goal of a film education. That's why it has been so difficult to show people world cinema. People generally reject unfamiliar things and Marvel's whole point is to become the most familiar thing for mass audiences to watch.

Personally, I think that this argument around Marvel limits what people consider "cinema" to simply a satisfying story that is told through moving pictures rather than a story that *must* be told through that particular medium.

Back in 2011, my dad tagged along with my mom and me to see Tree of Life in the theater. What I didn't realize was that he thought Tree of Life was just "the new Brad Pitt movie." By the end, he said he had wanted to light himself on fire during the movie to escape the boredom and confusion. Now he likes the movie.

Sometimes I feel like all I want out of a movie is for someone to play with the form a little. I try to watch a wide variety of movies and I often find that I like experimentation much more than refinement.

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I've left to go divect Stav Wavs and I'm Stav Wavs and I'm NEVER coming back!!!

Love, Lucas George Lucas

CHARACTERS



Francis Ford Coppola:

The Hero. A scrappy young film student with a dream of making personal art films with total creative control. Before long, he finds himself wrapped up in the giant machine of the film industry while still trying to remain true to himself and make art he can be proud of.



George Lucas:

The Side-Kick. After winning a contest, George Lucas met and eventually became the young protégé of Coppola. He's an idealistic yet practical young filmmaker with a passion for fast cars, science fiction, and a small project on the Vietnam War.



John Milius:

The Renegade. Milius is an out-there right-wing instigator. He's got a lot of crazy ideas, but they just might be enough to make cinema history. A surfer by heart, Milius will bring So Cal culture to the Vietnam War.



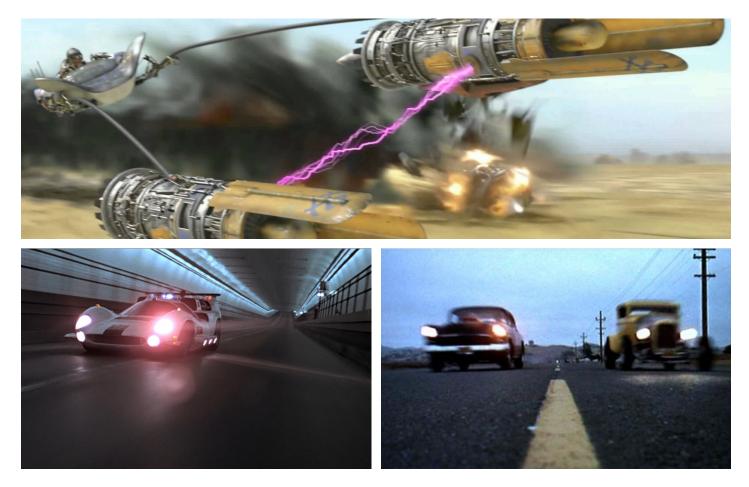
Walter Murch:

The Wizard. People called him Gerald McBoing-Boing after a cartoon character who would only speak in sound effects. Murch would bring a new dimension to Apocalypse Now, but we're not quite there yet.

Electronic Labyrinth THX: 1138 4EB GEORGE LUCAS' EARLY LIFE

George Lucas' short student film Electronic Labyrinth: THX 1138 4EB is probably the most important student film ever made besides maybe Spielberg's Schindler's List (look it up). Electronic Labyrinth jumpstarted George Lucas' career and thus has, for better or worse, become a seed of opportunity that allowed Lucas to transform the landscape of the Hollywood film industry into what it is today.

Electronic Labyrinth THX 1138 4EB is a dystopian science fiction short film made by George Lucas during his time as a grad student at USC film school. During high school, Lucas' dream was to become a race car driver.¹He would race "on the underground circuit at fairgrounds," but on June 12th, 1962, he was involved in a serious car accident when his Autobianchi Bianchina was broadsided and rolled many times until ultimately slamming into a tree. Lucas was ejected from the vehicle after his seatbelt snapped.¹The crash caused his lungs to become bruised after a severe hemorrhage and, as a result, he lost interest in racing.¹



It all makes sense now.

After high school, he studied anthropology, sociology, and literature at Modesto Junior College.¹Lucas and friends would go to screenings of experimental underground films and this started him on his journey into world cinema— seeing many Godard, Truffaut, and Fellini films.¹Through the French New Wave, Godard and Truffaut helped popularize Auteur Theory where a movie is the vision of a single artist instead of a studio head or corporate brain trust. It's not necessarily about the bottom line— it's about expression.

Lucas still went to the races, but this time he stayed on the sidelines, often filming the races with an 8mm camera.¹ It was at these races that he met cinematographer Haskell Wexler who was also interested in autocross racing.¹Wexler thought Lucas had a "very good eye" and offered to get Lucas jobs on film sets, but it wasn't that simple.¹

Lucas said,

All I really found out was that unions wouldn't let you into Hollywood and that was the first thing I found out and mainly because Haskell tried to get me in several different areas and every time the union stopped it. Even [as a] production assistant... it was a ridiculous situation on that film and so I eventually didn't end up on the film. And so I eventually turned my back on Hollywood and said, 'I'm not interested in that anyway, so I'll just go to film school and learn about film and I don't care.²



It was around this time that Haskell Wexler was working on Mike Nichols' Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Norman Jewison's In the Heat of the Night, and John Cassavetes' Faces. Could you imagine almost getting on those sets, but the unions wouldn't let you? He did get a chance to work with Wexler on American Graffiti where Wexler served as a visual consultant. It's interesting to think of an accomplished cinematographer helping out a kid working on a low-budget indie film after a

disastrous first film (THX 1138).

Wexler would go on to make Medium Cool, which as you'll remember, inspired Lucas' first iteration of the Apocalypse Now plan. In the same interview, Lucas goes on to say, "

> I didn't really get on a film set with Haskell, I mean he kept trying. That's the only thing I really found out was the door was completely closed and there was a solid brick wall at least twelve feet high around the whole thing."²



Make sure to film the cars driving...

It's hard to say how Lucas' career trajectory would have been affected if he had been allowed on those sets. He may not have fought to change Hollywood so hard if they had just let him in. So, he decided to get a film education in a strange new way school. He enrolled in the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, which was one of the first schools to offer a film program.¹ It was at USC that Lucas would meet Apocalypse Now collaborators John Milius and Walter Murch— the three men, and others would be nicknamed "The Dirty Dozen." ¹

John Milius would introduce Lucas to the films of Akira Kurosawa, which would become a major influence on his work.⁵You could say that Star Wars is simply a mixture of John Ford's The Searchers and Kurosawa's The Hidden Fortress set in space.



Pictured: R2D2 and C3P0

Lucas said,

The great thing that a film school did was that it exposed me to a lot of film and I was just enthralled... then you go the movies all day long. That's all you ever do there and that was really an experience... that's when I really got excited about film... because when I went in, I kind of ambled in. I went, "well, let's look and see what's behind this door.²

At USC, Lucas was exposed to, not just films themselves, but the theory behind them. He became interested in the use of "color, light, movement, space, and time" in film as well as the "kinetic energy inherent in motion pictures."¹

That said, perhaps his main interest was Pure Cinema, where an experimental approach is taken to make a film that is completely non-narrative as a way of creating a "pure" experience that relies entirely on what only film, as a medium, can do. Lucas made several "visual tone poems" on 16mm during his undergrad "defining himself as a filmmaker as opposed to being a director, and he loved making abstract visual films that created emotions purely through cinema."¹

Lucas graduated USC with a bachelor of fine arts in 1967 and then applied to be an officer in the United States Air Force, but was denied because of his many many speeding tickets.¹



He likes to go fast.

He was drafted to be a soldier in the Vietnam War, but was turned down again because he had diabetes.¹So, Lucas applied to grad school at USC's film program where he began teaching a class on documentary cinematography to U.S. Navy students.¹It was during this time that Lucas made the short film that would change his life— Electronic Labyrinth: THX 1138 4EB.

Electronic Labyrinth THX: 1138 4EB THE SHORT FILM

WATCH: CINEMATYLER.COM/THX

Electronic Labyrinth: THX 1138 4EB takes place in an underground city of the future where a man named THX 1138 4EB attempts to escape this dystopian society. The story unfolds mainly through security camera footage and from the perspective of those who monitor THX through many "computers and cameras" in an effort to keep him from escaping.³ The short film ends with the man breaking free from the society and government officials claim that he destroyed himself. At the screening, USC included a program guide where they wrote that the film is a "nightmare impression of a world in which a man is trying to escape a computerized world which constantly tracks his movements." ³Yeah... science "fiction."

When talking about the film, Lucas said, "Modern society is a rotten place thing, and by God, if you're smart, you'll get out and try to escape. Start an alternative civilization above ground, out of the sewer you find yourself in."⁴So the question is: did Lucas make a short film about wanting to break free from Hollywood to start an independent industry?



Pictured: Lucas sells his child for \$4.05 billion... not bad, right?

Electronic Labyrinth THX: 1138 4EB PRODUCTION

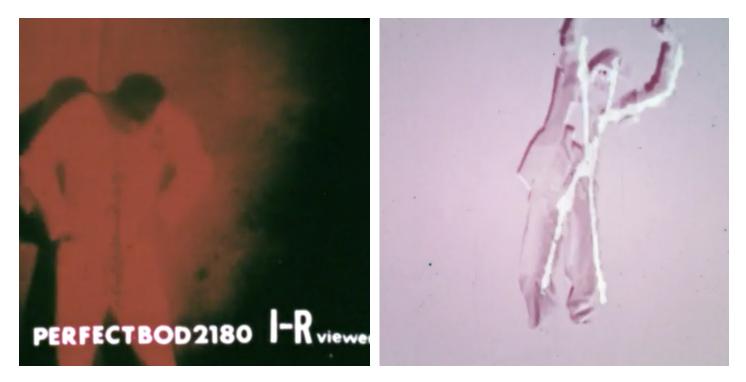
It seems like it would be very difficult for a student to make a science fiction short with no real budget. Lucas' idea was to take existing technology and re-contextualize it. Lucas said that he based the short "on the concept that we live in the future and that you could make a futuristic film using existing stuff."³ As you'll remember, during this time, Lucas was teaching a class to service members of the United States Navy — USC had a relationship with the Navy where "Navy filmmakers attended USC for additional study."¹ No one really wanted to teach the class because the Navy service members had a reputation for being close-minded about filmmaking, but the Navy, with its vast resources, provided the class with "unlimited color film, and lab processing costs."¹ Here was Lucas' opportunity— in exchange for teaching the class, he was allowed to film in otherwise restricted locations including: "the USC computer center, a parking lot at UCLA, the Los Angeles International Airport, and the Van Nuys Airport."³







The Navy students made up Lucas' crew and they filmed mostly at night and on the weekends for twelve weeks.³Lucas was also allowed to edit the short on the same Moviola he used in his day job editing "United States Information Agency films."³ The opening images of computer screens were "relatively familiar" to most people at this point, but Matthew Holtmier points out that, when the screen turns red at the end, this is an early hint at the origins of Industrial Light and Magic and Lucas' aspiration to use special effects to create new, yet believable worlds.⁴



You've just been THX'd.

Electronic Labyrinth THX: 1138 4EB RECEPTION

Electronic Labyrinth won first prize in the "dramatic films" category at the 1965 National Student Film Festival in Lincoln Center, New York.³ Apparently, Steven Spielberg was in attendance and enjoyed the film before ever meeting Lucas.³ From winning the top prize at the festival, Lucas was offered a six-month internship at Warner Brothers to see a film being made.⁵ He chose to assist the production of Finian's Rainbow directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola was a sort of hero to film students as he was the first film student to really "make it" in Hollywood. Lucas and Coppola became friends and, in 1969, Coppola began production on his fourth feature film— The Rain People. Lucas convinced Coppola to let him direct a short behind-the-scenes documentary on the making of The Rain People called "Filmmaker: A Diary By George Lucas."⁶

The short is available to watch on YouTube and I highly recommend checking it out to see, not only Coppola's early process, but the early careers of two dreamers who are destined to fundamentally change The Hollywood movie industry. In the documentary, we see Coppola's brilliant technique of incorporating things on the fly including re-writing a scene to "incorporate an actual local parade."⁶Lucas recorded all the images and sound himself and used his affinity for "pure cinema" to give a fly-on-the-wall account of a young filmmaker creating a personal project. Ron Colby, a



A rare, beardless Coppola.

producer on The Rain People said, "George was around in a very quiet way... You'd look around and suddenly there'd be George in a corner with his camera. He'd just kind of drift around."⁶

Lucas said that the experience of shooting this documentary was "more therapy than anything else" — he would spend the day with Coppola on the set and then go home to write the THX 1138 feature film.⁶ During this time, Lucas also worked as a cameraman at the infamous Rolling Stones concert that would become Gimme Shelter.⁵



As we've already discussed in the main series, THX 1138 was American Zoetrope's first feature film. The film's last act more or less contains the events depicted in the short film. The main difference in the aesthetics of the short versus those in the feature is that everyone in the society of THX 1138 has their heads shaved.³ Like what Lucas did for The Rain People, there was a short making-of documentary made for THX called "Bald: The Making of THX 1138" where we actually see the actors, including Robert Duvall, have their heads shaved for the film.



Lucky for Duvall, there wasn't much hair to lose ...

Of course, the film turned out to be a disaster because the studio just didn't get it and hated the film so much that they demanded Coppola pay them back the money they had financed the film with. The film only started making money on a cult level after the success of Lucas' next two features— American Graffiti and Star Wars.⁴

What's interesting is how different THX 1138 is from Lucas' other films. I can only imagine that the failure of the cynical, atmospheric, and experimental THX led Lucas to pivot in order to survive and what we get after THX, are fun, ultimately optimistic stories. Instead of the hope of one man (THX) to escape an evil and dominating society, we get one man (Luke) joining forces with many like-minded good characters to actually confront and destroy an evil and dominating society with the power of hope, friendship, and spirituality.



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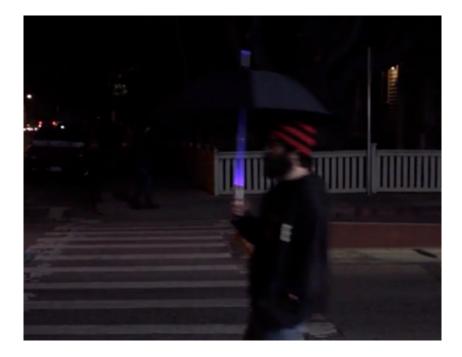
DysnomiaFilms

Apocolypse Now may, as you say, be an oddity in being a really big budget art film that isn't very accessible, and that is VERY rare. Bladerunner 2049 is probably another example but there will never be a more outlying example of this than 2001: A Space Odyssey. It's truly a miracle that got made. Anyway, your content is incredible as always. Keep it up man!

Thanks so much! We really didn't deserve Blade Runner 2049. I think we found out that the Blade Runner cult of fans is much less than we had thought. I made a little parody of Blade Runner a while back in college for the university television station. In the parody, the Blade Runner had to track down and "graduate" seniors who had stayed longer than four years to do double-majors and stuff like that. It blew my mind that most of the people I knew in the film major hadn't yet seen Blade Runner.

I did a little cameo with a full beard and one of those Blade Runner umbrellas.

I hope that 2049 has opened the door for more people to check out the original. But still, I'm just so grateful whenever we get a large spectacle that takes its time and tackles more thought-provoking themes.





Activated Complex

Easily the best film about the Vietnam War ever made. And I say that even as a great fan of 84 Charlie MoPic, which is great, but is also about an uncharacteristically talkative group of elite LRRPs, whose harrowing experiences even in real-life were anything but typical.

We mostly see the average grunt's life obliquely in Apocalypse Now, like tourists passing through the war zone. But we see them tired, bored, trying to stay alive, trying to stay dry, being more excited by the sight of a dancing blonde "round-eye" from back home than Full Metal Jacket's randy, swaggering marines are at the prospect of getting laid even as they haggle with a prostitute and her possible-VC pimp. We see them as eager to take out an enemy with a megaphone, so they can get some sleep, as Platoon's grunts are at the prospect of revenge against some villagers hiding weapons. It manages to be, simultaneously, more operatic and more grounded than either of those films.

Interesting take! I like how Apocalypse Now and Full Metal Jacket use the war to frame other ideas. Out of Platoon, Apocalypse Now, and Full Metal Jacket, Platoon's Oliver Stone was the only one who actually served in Vietnam. It's gripping how Platoon really goes into the horror of what happened, but I think I'm usually more interested when war movies are a frame for something else.



Said Toshimaru

Coppola never came back from filming Apocalypse now. He never got to be that brilliant again.



S

jamespfp

There's another way to describe this – it isn't easy to be creative and artistic, graded against a curve which is exponentially always getting better. In fact, this is Impossible, and Coppola probably recognized, I'll never be able to do anything more creative than I already have. George Lucas essentially had the same problem, and spend the years between Return of the Jedi and The Phantom Menace pretending he had a secret grand scheme that had not been revealed yet. The Truth is simpler – he knew he'd already effectively ended a series, and there was no reason to try to follow them up with SEQUELS, when the story had been successfully concluded.

So then! There's the problem. On one hand, Artistic Integrity and Vision; on the other, the need for Money-Making Sequels, which is why Lucas always liked his Serialized Concept.



jamespfp

Moreover – this is what sets apart "The Godfather Part 3" from the other 2 in the trilogy. The Industry insists on it being "Godfather Part 3" to capitalize on the Franchise, whereas the Filmmaker had a consistent vision for only a single character, that of Mike Corleone. Is it necessary for his Identity to be utterly consumed by that of his Job Title / Position?

That's an interesting point. It is strange to think that George Lucas would give up being a big-time director to produce. It's also strange to think that, despite having an insane amount of money, he hasn't made another experimental small movie like THX. Perhaps his reputation for creating the biggest movie franchise ever makes him apprehensive to put his name on something that might be (intentionally) divisive. I'd be really curious to see what Lucas' "Tetro" would be like.

If I remember correctly, Coppola didn't want to do Godfather Part 2 because he thought he had told the full story. It wasn't until he got the idea to frame it with two stories following a father and a son at the same age that he became interested. It really seems to flesh out the character of Michael even more and I often find myself favoring Part 2. I guess with Part 3, lighting didn't strike a third time, but I think you're right. The Godfather was always about Michael and Vito, but Part 3 got muddied up (in my opinion) by following Michael's children.



31webseries

Love this! Earlier this summer, maybe even when you were working on this I went through this whole deep dive on Apocalypse Now phase where I watched it, everything about it, the doc on the making of it (AWESOME!), reread the Conrad novella, saw all the other Vietnam war movies, etc. (this happens to me a lot, right now I'm going through a "Perfect Blue" phase). It was so fascinating because I never really got it before. When I first saw it I was too young and went in wrong, wanting to find out more about the Vietnam War as in what happened, which is not what this film does, Platoon or Full Metal Jacket are better for that. This film is what Vietnam WAS. The madness, the confusion, the experience of it, and my God as much as it was damn near driving crazy or killing half the people involved it was just a taste at that! So I'm definitely psyched for the whole series of this!!! Now, I've gotta go rewatch Black Swan in relation to what I now know about it's connections to "Perfect Blue" (Brilliant! SO ahead of it's time, see it!) cause apparently that's how I roll. ;)

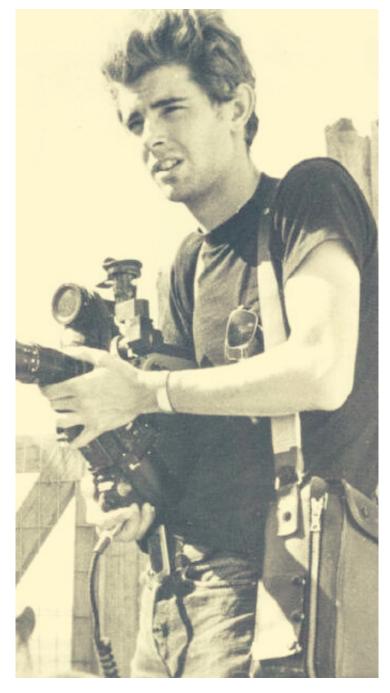
Thanks! I still need to see Perfect Blue! I hear it's fantastic. I totally agree— the thing that sets Apocalypse Now apart from other Vietnam War movies is the look inward as opposed to outward. By using the war as a device to look at the themes of Heart of Darkness, Coppola was able to explore some really thought-provoking concepts in a way that affects me on a level that most movies haven't been able to. I think, by working on this series, I'm getting closer to figuring out why it affects me so much and I hope to use that as an education in the ways I want to communicate with people through film.



Sources

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