Review of Star Wars

By Jim Sherry

Outside: traffic jams around the theater, block-long lines of people at the ticket counters, and box office phones that won't stop ringing. Inside: cheers from the audience even before the film begins, and more cheers, applause and laughter as the story unfolds. These are just some of the effects of a movie that seems to have taken over southern California with a spirit-like force out of its own fantasy world.

The movie is Star Wars, written and directed by thirty-three year old George Lucas and produced by Gary Kurtz. Hailed by both critics and movie-goers alike, Star Wars is fast on its way to rivaling that whale of a fish story Jaws as the greatest box office success of all time. Even now, during its first run, Star Wars has attracted the kind of camp devotion in its followers that most classic movies take years to create. And though new fans continue to pour through the doors and fill up the seats at every performance, a growing percentage of Star Wars current audience consists of second and third time viewers. One Orange County youth claims to have already seen the film seventeen times.

Of course the most obvious and publicized attraction of Star Wars is its dazzling special effects—its brilliant and wholly convincing creation of a fantasy world where intergalactic grotesques hobnob in space-age nightclubs, and where rebel star-ships dog-fight against backdrops that are simply out of this world. The creations of Stuart Freeborn, John Barry, and Rick Baker (who also did the make-up for King Kong), the cast of space oddities includes google-eyed Sand People, an eight foot

"wookie" who looks like he just stepped off the set of <u>Planet of the Apes</u>, assorted robots and mobile computers, and a whole menagerie of reptile-like creatures who are perhaps only too appropriate to the amphibious world of a port city in any galaxy.

The scenes in outer space--particularly the climactic battle sequences--invite comparison with those in Stanley Kubrick's <u>2001</u>, but only to surpass them. For while Kubrick had to rely upon what are called composite opticals for most of his outer space shots, Lucas and his special-effects crew of John Dykstra and John Stears were able to exploit more recent computer technology to develop faster and less expensive methods of photographing the necessary visual elements which allowed them to achieve nearly ten times as many special effects with only a fraction of the trouble.

But while <u>Star Wars</u> is certainly a triumph of technical and technological skill, the technology of the film is not perhaps the primary reason for its success. After all, a world of death stars, robots, and whirring computers could just as easily have proven too alienating and disturbing for a large part of the audience. The charm, the wonder of <u>Star Wars</u> is that it presents us with a world that is at once wholly strange and exciting and yet altogether familiar and comfortable. It humanizes its futuristic world in a way that continually reminds us of what we already know.

The robots and computers of <u>Star Wars</u> are not simply machines, for instance; they possess an almost human life. They groan, complain, get scared ("Now we're done for. They'll

catch us and melt us down for sure."), and, in general, behave with all the familiar foibles of their human counterparts. When the cylinder shaped computer Artoo Detoo (R2-D2) gets zapped by an enemy ray gun, he doesn't just stop functioning or explode, he reels on his two stabilizers and falls over dead...at least for the moment. And in the memorable scene in the spaceport nightclub, a large part of our enjoyment stems from the recognition that bars are, in fact, much the same in whatever galaxy you travel.

The same sort of recognition of the familiar in the strange operates on the level of plot and character. As Lucas has acknowledged in a recent article in Time magazine, Star Wars is a melting pot of classic adventure figures and situations. "It's the flotsam and jetsam from the period when I was twelve years old. All the books and films and comics I liked when I was a child." Movie fans will recognize the tin woodman of The Wizard of Oz in Lucas' gold plated robot Threepio (3PO) who complains of frozen joints. And comic book buffs will feel right at home with lines like these spoken by Princess Leia when she is captured and delivered to the villain's giant "death star" satellite: "I thought I recognized your foul stench when I came on board, Governor Tarkin." The hermit-hero Obi-Van Kenobi (Alec Guinness) is a combination of Tennyson's wise old Merlin and John the Baptist in the desert. And Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) is the spunky adolescent hero familiar to many of us from the Tom Swift and Hardy Boys adventure series.

The satisfaction and enjoyment of Star Wars do not depend

upon the recognition of these specific borrowings or inspirations, however. The plot of the film is the plot of almost every romance-- the rescue and recovery of freedom and innocence from the dark powers that have temporarily usurped and now threaten to destroy them. We know from the very beginning that Luke and Han Solo (Harrison Ford) will be able to rescue Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) and save the solar system from tyranny. Even the villain himself acknowledges the power of "the Force," its capability of righting wrong. The fun is in seeing how the expected and familiar conclusion is worked out under the circumstances.

"Fun," according to Lucas, is finally what Star Wars is all about. Not simply the fun of recovering childhood memories of comic books and old films, but the fun of regaining a bit of childhood itself--its simple satisfactions, its guiltless freedom, its wholesome fantasy. "The Trouble with Darth Vader," the wise man Kenobi explains, "is that he listened only to the dark side of the Force." Like most adults he forgot the bright side he knew in his youth. If Star Wars is successful, it may be because it reminds us that such a bright side is still there, hidden in the child in all of us. All it needs is rescuing.