

LOVE, 25TH CENTURY STYLE: REMEMBERING “THX 1138” ON ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY

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*“What’s fun about seeing **THX 1138** now, after 50 years, is to see how George Lucas took the rather dark themes and dynamic visual storytelling of his first film and found a way to infuse them into the Saturday matinee style films of the **Star Wars** series. **THX** is not his best film, but it’s fascinating to see the seeds of his future work within it.” – Gary Leva, director of **Fog City Mavericks***

The Digital Bits and **History, Legacy & Showmanship** are pleased to present this retrospective commemorating the golden anniversary of the release of **THX 1138**, George Lucas’s feature-length adaptation of his award-winning 1967 USC student film **Electronic Labyrinth THX 1138 4EB**.

Released two years before **American Graffiti** and six years before **Star Wars**, Lucas’s first motion picture starred Robert Duvall (**Apocalypse Now**, **Tender Mercies**) and Donald Pleasence (**You Only Live Twice**, **Halloween**) and was about a dystopian future where love and individuality are forbidden.

THX 1138 was released to theaters fifty years ago this month, and for the occasion **The Bits** features an interview segment with a group of documentarians, film historians and science-fiction authorities who reflect on Lucas’s visionary first film five decades after its debut.



THE Q&A

Gary Leva is a documentary filmmaker with dozens of credits including **A Legacy of Filmmakers: The Early Years of American Zoetrope** and **Artifact from the Future: The Making of THX 1138** (both included as Value Added Material on the **THX 1138** DVD and BD releases) and **Fog City Mavericks** (2007).



Chris Barsanti is the author of several books including **The Sci-Fi Movie Guide: The Universe of Film from Alien to Zardoz** (Visible Ink, 2014).



Craig Miller was the original Director of Fan Relations at Lucasfilm and is the author of **Star Wars Memories** (Fulgens Press, 2019).



The interviews were conducted separately and edited into a “roundtable” format.

Michael Coate (The Digital Bits): How do you think **THX 1138** ought to be remembered on its 50th anniversary?

Chris Barsanti: As not just one of the modern era’s masterpieces of science fiction but as a twentieth century masterpiece, full stop.

Gary Leva: Well, I guess a big, red-carpet theatrical event is out of the question at the moment, so let’s remember it as the debut film of one of the seminal artists of the medium. It gave audiences a taste of George’s talents that would be revealed more fully in his future films. The cinematic virtuosity of the filmmaking is nothing short of astonishing for a first film.

Craig Miller: **THX** was remarkable. A small film – made for a surprisingly small budget, even for that time (around three-quarters of a million dollars) – it had the look of a major film. It created an entire world and made you think.

Coate: When did you first see **THX 1138**?

Barsanti: It was on a crummy VHS transfer sometime in college. I remember feeling as though a door had been opened in my brain. Like many of my generation, I had a fixed idea of George Lucas. It was based on the incredible impact he had on so many kids like myself when **Star Wars** came along in 1977 and changed forever how we saw the movies and our sense of what the art form could do. Now, a lot of that was due to his skill at reengineering this mix of

mythology, cruddy B-movie tropes, and old serials into what we know now as the blockbuster. But when I saw **THX 1138**, it added an entirely new layer to how I saw Lucas as an artist. It was like finding out that before he shot **Jaws**, Steven Spielberg had made **Un Chien Andalou**.

Leva: I believe I first saw it at UCLA when I was in film school. I found it dazzling visually, but it also didn't seem like something that was impossible to achieve as a young filmmaker. We would watch films like **The Deer Hunter** or **Lawrence of Arabia** and those seemed so beyond anything we as young film students could hope to achieve. But **THX 1138** had an experimental quality to it that made it feel like something we could aspire to.

Miller: I saw the film in Hollywood its opening week. I went with my girlfriend of the time, her sister, and a guy she was seeing. I was blown away. I thought it was terrific. I'm a film fan and a science fiction fan and this was something you didn't see back then: actual science fiction that isn't just a standard adventure story that happens to take place in the future. This was a dystopian world that required you to think about what you were seeing. And it wasn't spoon-fed to you. You were dropped into a world and had to run with it.

Coate: In what way is **THX 1138** a significant motion picture?

Barsanti: It presages the wave of dystopian futurist cinema that dominated the decade's science fiction output until Lucas again took it in an entirely different direction with **Star Wars**. **THX 1138** lays out many of the tropes that would be used by many cheap imitators throughout the 1970s to signal the future: bleak architecture, uniform clothing, oppressive sameness, a kind of industrial totalitarianism that translated just how little control people at the time felt they had over the direction of their lives or in fact of the human race.

Leva: Beyond its significance as George's first film, I think you can see its influence in quite a few science-fiction films and television series in more recent years. More than once I've seen a depiction of a dystopian universe and been immediately reminded of **THX**... the mood, the sterility of the world, even the use of sound. Walter Murch's innovations in the soundtrack of **THX** may be as significant as any other aspect of the film.

It's also significant as a harbinger of what's to come in George's future films. It's the story of a man trying to escape a repressive regime bent on controlling the populace. It's freedom versus tyranny. These themes will be revisited and more fully fleshed out in a much more accessible way in the **Star Wars** series.

Miller: It was one of the few indie movies of the period that wasn't a straightforward contemporary story. Unlike so many films of the period, which all seemed to end "and then they all got run over by a truck," it actually had a

positive – if open-ended – ending. It launched – and almost killed – George Lucas’s career and almost killed Francis Coppola’s.



Coate: Can you discuss the lead casting choices and their performances?

Barsanti: It is not a criticism of the film to say that in many ways the acting is beside the point. In this case it is mostly true. Robert Duvall is empathy-inspiring in the lead and Donald Pleasence is otherworldly creepy in that way which he mastered and used in so many lesser movies. But what if Lucas had cast some other member of his and Francis Ford Coppola’s stock company, like Harrison Ford or Gene Hackman, in the Duvall role? They would have worked just fine. No matter its allusions to literary sources (it always reminds me of E.M. Forster’s story **The Machine Stops**), the movie is closer to purely visual Stan Brakhage-style minimal cinema than narrative storytelling.

Leva: The performances are all superb, down to the smallest roles. And I think that’s often a barometer of a young filmmaker’s potential. The performances in this film and in the one to follow it, **American Graffiti**, are all flawless. George is primarily a visual storyteller, but he found the time in these films to nurture outstanding performances.

Miller: I think the performances were, pretty much overall, extremely good. Robert Duvall and Donald Pleasence seemed perfectly cast for their characters. Maggie McOmie brought a reality to her character. They’re all good actors and seemed natural; you didn’t see them “acting.”

Coate: In what way was George Lucas suited to direct **THX 1138** and where do you think the film ranks among his body of work?

Barsanti: One of Lucas’s many gifts as a filmmaker is his ability to create worlds that feel real no matter how fantastical their attributes. That became much less true in his later CGI-overkill movies in the second **Star Wars** trilogy. But in this

phase of his career, he was far more of an analog artist. This underground world, with its fascist torture TV and drugged minions slogging through their sleepwalking lives, is like nothing viewers have experienced and yet they understand it and feel it instantly. It is the only movie he made except for **Star Wars** that matters.

Leva: I think **THX 1138** has to be viewed as the end of the first arc of George's career. This film is the culmination of his film school projects and his desire to use film to tell stories visually, with as little dialogue as possible. His love for avant garde cinema and experimental artists like Bruce Conner culminates in **THX 1138**. The commercial failure of the film, and its role in the demise of the company that produced it, American Zoetrope, was a terrible blow for George. He made a conscious decision after that experience to turn his attention to more popular forms of filmmaking. And what's fun about seeing **THX 1138** now, after 50 years, is to see how George took the rather dark themes and dynamic visual storytelling of his first film and found a way to infuse them into the Saturday matinee style films of the **Star Wars** series. **THX** is not his best film, but it's fascinating to see the seeds of his future work within it.

Miller: George isn't really a "people" person so a film that has at its core the idea that there are too many people and a desire to get away from them seems perfect. It's also about forces acting on a society that I think he felt were at work on our society. As to how it ranks... taking the films he directed (as opposed to produced) I think it's in the top three. **Star Wars. American Graffiti. THX.** As much as I love **THX**, it's not a "feel good" film and I don't think I could watch it as often as the other two. That said, I've actually seen it more often than **American Graffiti**. I think **THX** is definitely better than the **Star Wars** prequels.

Coate: How does the feature film compare to Lucas' film school short on which the feature was based?

Leva: I haven't watched the student film in several years, but my memory is that the feature is very similar in tone and overall story. But of course, the student film is confined to a much smaller, more claustrophobic world, which is why George wanted to expand it into a feature.

Miller: You can certainly see **THX 1138 4EB** (the title as made; **Electronic Labyrinth** was a new title for the short hung on it at Warner Bros.' request when they funded making the feature) in **THX 1138**. It's clearly the seed and many of the ideas are in there. But it's got even less story than the feature and less drama. It's almost all emotion and feeling. It is, of course, more crudely made because of the difference between the facilities available for a student film and a studio-backed feature.

Coate: Can you share any thoughts on Lucas's 2004 revised cut?

Barsanti: The tweaks that Lucas added for the new edit were less distracting than those that he somewhat strangely inserted into the first **Star Wars** trilogy. But given that they were primarily (based on my memory at least) effects shots at the end showing a little more detail about the tunnels **THX** is fleeing through, the change is not particularly noticeable.

Leva: I was lucky enough to be working with George during the time he was revising **THX 1138**, as I was simultaneously producing my documentaries, commentaries and special features about the movie for Warner Bros. I spent quite a bit of time at The Ranch interviewing George and showing him cuts of my documentaries, so I remember quite clearly the process he was going through. His key desire was to open up the world of **THX** just enough to give it more scope. I remember him telling me that it doesn't take much to do that – just a few shots here and there. In a way, I think he was doing the same thing he has done with the **Star Wars** films over the years – revising them to bring them closer to the film he wanted to make in the first place, but because of budget or technical limitations, could not.

Miller: I'm of mixed feeling about the "Director's Cut" version of **THX**. Some things were improvements. Some of the images were sharpened up. Some additional shots of things like the robot construction help sell the idea. A few reaction shots were moved around and that, too, helps the storytelling. The few places where he "built out" the sets, making the locations seem bigger, I think actually hurt the film. The original film had a very claustrophobic feel that helped to heighten the dystopic feel of the situation. But, overall, I don't think the changes were too significant to how the film is perceived. Though the cleaner, sharper video is always nice.



Coate: Where do you think **THX 1138** ranks among the science-fiction genre?

Barsanti: For me it is one of the most significant science-fiction movies of all time. Its minimalism, claustrophobia, the rhythms of its druggy editing scheme,

and that stunning final shot which doesn't try and say anything more than it needs to, would still be fresh in my mind even if I had not seen it for decades. Also fresh in my mind? The unfortunate memory of the gay panic subplot in which SEN's (Pleasence) desire for another man is portrayed as somehow the final straw that causes THX to flee this unnatural subterranean world.

Leva: It's hard to call the film seminal in the way **2001: A Space Odyssey** was because it was not popular at the time it opened in theaters. Before the restored DVD release in 2004, few people other than hard-core sci-fi fans or George Lucas fans were familiar with the movie.

On the other hand, filmmakers have always held **THX** in high regard. When we interviewed directors for our documentaries, everyone from Steven Spielberg to Martin Scorsese remembered being dazzled by the film when it came out. So I think you have to rank it up there with the great films of the genre. For myself, the film's visual storytelling, its editing and its soundscape are all so extraordinary that I think few sci-fi films have ever matched it.

Miller: Hard to make such a broad statement. I know it's not everyone's cup of tea. Some people dislike dystopic films, especially ones that don't have big, sweeping endings where the dystopia is fully overcome. And, of course, it's hard to come up with every good movie, even every good science-fiction movie off the top of my head. But I certainly think it rates quite high. Top 25 of all-time territory. There are lots of great SF films. **Star Wars. The Empire Strikes Back. Forbidden Planet. Alien. Aliens. Blade Runner.** But **THX 1138** is, at least for me, in the top ranks.

Coate: Gary, do you think **THX 1138** has been adequately represented on home video over the years? Would you like to see **THX** released on 4K UHD along with your supplemental material from the DVD and BD releases ported over and/or would you like to produce new/additional supplemental material?

Leva: Yes, let's please produce more documentaries about **THX 1138!** I was very happy with the 2004 George Lucas Director's Cut DVD release. It was a seminal experience for me and the documentaries we produced for that disc, though early in my career, remain some of my favorites. **A Legacy of Filmmakers: The Early Years of American Zoetrope** is still the documentary I show to film students when I'm asked to speak. It's so much fun to see 20-year-olds watch Lucas and Coppola crash and burn early in their careers. It opens their eyes to the fact that these guys were not just crowned as icons fresh out of film school. They had to struggle and fail just like everyone else.

Of course, it would be extraordinary to take a fresh look at **THX 1138** in the political and societal context of the past few years. Themes of self-expression, repression, conformity and tyranny are as fresh today as ever. Let's do it!

Coate: How would you describe **THX 1138** to someone who has never seen it and/or someone who has expressed a dislike for science fiction?

Barsanti: There are no lasers, no aliens, and no space battles. Also, everybody is bald and takes drugs that suppress all their human urges. There might have been a nuclear war above ground, but we'll never know because nobody talks. It's like if Big Brother in **1984** had realized it could narcotize its citizens into subservience and not have to resort to propaganda and torture to keep them in line.

Leva: It's a film about risking your life to escape repression. Though the genre is science fiction, the human story, the love story, is the beating heart of the movie.

Miller: I'd tell them it's in the category of **1984** and **Brave New World**. If that's too much science fiction for them, then they likely won't like this. But it's about a future society where the Powers That Be control people through drugs and religion and then, one day, one person stops taking his drugs and realizes he wants something more.

Coate: What is the legacy of **THX 1138**?

Barsanti: The knowledge that a filmmaker like George Lucas can start out as an avant-garde maverick making his weird experimental critique of the coldness of the modern world in the BART tunnels with a bunch of shaved-head extras, then turn around six years later to make a space opera extravaganza that changed moviemaking forever. Anything is possible.

Leva: You can see **THX**'s legacy in the acting career of Robert Duvall, the careers of two men who changed cinema forever – George Lucas and Walter Murch – and the science fiction films that have been made over the past 50 years that have been inspired by it.

Coate: Thank you – Chris, Gary and Craig – for sharing your thoughts about George Lucas's **THX 1138** on the occasion of its 50th anniversary.

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SOURCES/REFERENCES:

The primary references for this project were regional newspaper coverage and trade reports published in **Boxoffice**, **The Hollywood Reporter** and **Variety**, and interviews conducted by the author.

All figures and data pertain to North America (i.e. United States and Canada) except where stated otherwise.

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