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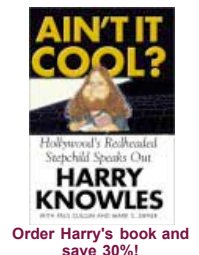
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## Alexandra DuPont Is Back and Listening To The THX-1138 DVD!!



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Who is Alexandra DuPont? Imagine Naomi Watts crossed with Scarlett Johanssen, taller, smarter, cuter, more scantily clad, and without the crazy.

Convinced for a time that her breakthrough experimentations with coherent light and the human genome project were somehow more important than reviewing new DVDs, young Lexy now only reviews projects tied to her oldest and most reviled archnemesis, a bloke named George Lucas.

KEYWORD SEARCH:

(Do NOT be surprised if Lexy turns up again VERY soon looking at a new box set from 20th Century Fox.)

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Thanks as always to The DVD Journal for the regular loan of the comely Ms. DuPont's fabulous prose!

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### Review by Alexandra DuPont

*"What we were interested in doing is making a film from the future rather than about the future. We're looking at a film from a foreign country, whose custom and habits and cinematic language we're really not familiar with.... This did make for a little confusion in the audience that did see it — but that was, to a certain extent, part of our intent."*

— Walter Murch

*"The film's about a hero who lives in an anthill and dares to go outside."*

— George Lucas



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For such a tiny movie, *THX 1138* certainly wreaked a lot of havoc when it was released in 1971.

George Lucas' stunning first feature is a deeply allegorical science fiction film about a guy (Robert Duvall) trying to escape a mind-numbing underground dystopia. It's dark, challenging, absurd, abstract, darkly funny, and features an avant-garde soundtrack that's brilliantly designed, but also designed to monkey with the viewer.



It is not, let's face it, the best film to lead with when you're trying to sell a major Hollywood studio on funding your stable of hot young filmmakers. But that's exactly what Francis Ford Coppola tried to do circa 1970. The future *Godfather* director had formed a production company, American Zoetrope, amid dot-com levels of hype — and Warner Brothers, wanting to get into the Coppola business, had loaned him \$300,000 to start Zoetrope and fund such films as *THX*,



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*Apocalypse Now* (then to be directed by Lucas), and *The Conversation*.

Unfortunately, *THX 1138* — an expanded, slightly more viewer-friendly version of a 15-minute student film Lucas made at USC — was the first completed project Coppola presented to Warner Bros. execs. The suddenly skittish studio cut five minutes from the film (a crushing blow to the quietly maverick Lucas) and barely supported its theatrical run. Lacking critical, financial, or public support, it was widely considered a failure.

*THX*'s muted box-office thud pulled the rug out from under the manic Coppola — launching Zoetrope's legendary roller-coaster of hubris, brilliance, and debt that saw the creation of both *Apocalypse Now* and *One from the Heart*. It drove Lucas (on a dare from Coppola) to make a crowd-pleaser, *American Graffiti*, followed by an even bigger crowd-pleaser, *Star Wars* — which enabled him to walk away from the studio system forever, but also pulled him away from the sort of experimental, visually driven filmmaking that had excited him to begin with.

And so we find *THX 1138* — the movie itself, taken as a story and a work of cinematic art — lost in the morass of (a) its own troubled history and (b) the subsequent successes and failures of its director and producer. Even hard-core Lucas apologists and *Star Wars* geeks tend to have skipped a viewing of *THX* — told by critics and peers and other second-hand sources that the movie is "difficult" and "pretentious" and "boring."



Well, it isn't.

With any luck, this lovingly restored DVD release of *THX 1138: The George Lucas Director's Cut* (to be released by Warner Home Video on Sept. 14, 2004) will spark a new discussion of the film's artistic merits — including its surprisingly dry sense of humor — and maybe even inspire a few geeks to conclude that it's the Flannelled One's best, most ambitious movie. I'm going to try and make a quick case for it below.

\* \* \*

### Okay, but first: How "Special Edition"-addled is this "Director's Cut"?

Well, the "George Lucas Director's Cut" (as opposed to what? The "Hart Bochner Director's Cut"?) is a gorgeous restoration — revelatory to anyone who's only seen the soft-beige pan-and-scan VHS copy of the film. You know, blah blah edge enhancement film grain contrast Dolby 5.1 flutter blah blah blah. It's bitchin'.

And yes, this is a full-on George Lucas Special Edition, filled with dozens of CGI-enhanced exteriors and small fixes that are barely mentioned in the DVD's own press kit. (Did they think we wouldn't notice?) Scale has been added to the industrial accident that opens the film, and periodic mall shots now make it abundantly clear that this is a massive underground society. Personally, for the most part I found it all surprisingly discreet and organically woven into the film — until the film's climactic car chase, which features a new action-packed driving sequence that brings THX's stolen car from a parking garage into the empty BART tunnel, a tunnel now filled with extra digital gates and scaffolding for our hero to crash through.

And then there is the matter of the digital mutant monkeys. That's right: *digital mutant monkeys*. Duvall now throws one of these shell-dwelling animals to the ground just before he makes his final climb to freedom. It's only a couple of shots, and it hardly ruins the film, but these final additions — combined with the likely eternal disappearance of the 1971 cut — will divide geek audiences on their merits for years to come. I personally was too delighted by the overall restoration to mind, and don't think it will matter much a century from now, despite Lucas' stealth assault on posterity; 22nd-century film historians will probably just say it took him 33 years to finish the movie. As long as you don't ask how THX becomes a NASCAR-caliber driver between the garage and the tunnel, and sort of squint when confronted with the shiny fakeness of a wicked shell ape, you'll be too

blissed-out to care.

\* \* \*

### Huh. Okay. Make your case.

*THX* tells an almost primally simple story, and it tells that story — about a guy making an escape attempt — three times, in three different ways. (Spoilers to follow.)

I tend to think the movie gets its "difficult" tag because of its opening few minutes — which, like Lucas' original USC student film, just drop-kick you into a strange new world without much orientation. (It was a device Lucas would use to far more popular effect in *Star Wars*.)

First we see a trailer for a vintage "Buck Rogers in the 20th Century" serial. It hints that what follows is, on some level, a hero's quest of equal simplicity, but it also serves as an ironic lead-in:

*"By turning the little dial to project us ahead in time, we're able to be with Buck and his friends in the wonderful world of the future — a world that sees a lot of our scientific and mechanical dreams come true! You know, there's nothing supernatural or mystic about Buck — he's just an ordinary, normal human being who keeps his wits about him!"*

After this silly little intro, the movie goes to black, a low rumble fills the screen, green credits scroll by in a jarring downward direction — and Lucas and sound designer/co-writer Walter Murch bathe us in a montage of old-school computer readouts, POV views from video monitors, and jargon-spewing radio voices giving bad advice and asking open-ended, meaningless questions like, "Are you now? Or have you ever been?"



We're three minutes into the film, and already we're off any comfortable cinematic charts.

Eventually, a picture of a world rises out of the dissonance. THX 1138 (Robert Duvall) and his platonic female housemate LUH (Maggie McOmie) live in a massive underground city packed with observation cameras. People shave their heads and work in insanely dangerous factory jobs without making a peep of protest. Sex is forbidden. In creating this world, Lucas and Murch try to have their cake and eat it too, smashing together the disparate totalitarian approaches of *1984* and *Brave New World*: People are beaten by jack-booted robot cops and obsessively spy on each other — but revolt is quelled by a constant regimen of soma-like drugs, autoerotic sex machines, and holographic television that has distilled "entertainment" to its barest essence. Lucas and Murch came up with this last concept in the days before cable TV, and in many ways it feels like the most prophetic concept in the film: There's a "sex" channel where nude African-Americans dance suggestively; a "violence" channel where a cop beats a man endlessly with a stick; a "comedy" channel where people stand around and spew nonsense over a laugh track; and a "smart" channel where people blather on endlessly in sentences that sound intelligent but contain no meaning (kind of like the *Phantom Menace* script).

Escape Story Number One kicks off when THX is secretly taken off his meds by LUH — who for some reason has awakened from her stupor and fallen in lust with her roommate. Lucas gets a bum rap for having written an emotionless movie in *THX*, a rap that I'd argue is wildly unfair: Duvall and McOmie play their parts like glazed idiot children because they're just discovering how to feel, and they behave like flummoxed, irrational fools for most of the film because they have no reference points.

Into this little love nest blunders SEN, quietly played in house-rockingly bugfuck-nuts style by Donald Pleasence. SEN is a hacker of sorts who decides he wants THX as his roommate — so he arranges to have LUH transferred out of the apartment. For my money, this is a career performance by Pleasence, who manages to radiate insanity, craftiness, fear, and vague homosexual menace

while barely raising an eyebrow. THX reports SEN to the authorities (using a handy informant suggestion box) just before causing a near-fatal industrial accident thanks to his lack of medicated focus. Soon, both he and SEN are sharing a prison cell — with several other "free thinkers," catatonics, and congenital idiots — in an all-white, seemingly boundless jail without walls.

This kicks off Escape Story Number Two — a highly allegorical middle section that earns the movie its biggest charges of pretentiousness. THX finds himself sitting, mute, among a gaggle of philosopher-idiots who blather endlessly about "choosing a leader" and escaping. (None of them, of course, actually *do* a damned thing — Lucas' early cinematic middle finger to critics and intellectuals who have, of course, never directed a film themselves.) The whole thing is kind of obvious, deeply silly and beautifully shot, a real piece of idea-driven sci-fi that plays like what might result if Rod Serling wrote "No Exit."

Finally, THX just starts walking — trailed by a reluctant SEN and joined by a giant man-boy (Don Pedro Colley) who thinks he's a hologram — kicking off Escape Story Number Three, a straight-up action film that features pursuits through electronic labyrinths, a terrific moment where SEN reveals his complete lack of stones, a funny subplot where we see that the pursuit of THX will be called off as soon as it exceeds its allotted budget, and a final car chase that's a total indulgence of Lucas' race-car fetish. There's some fantastic action cinematography here — and a lingering final shot utilizing a 1000-mm lens that's always suggested to me that THX has absolutely no idea what he's going to do once he escapes.



(Parenthetically: In the VHS pan-and-scan version of *THX*, you couldn't see the credits playing on the far-right corner of the screen as this final shot played on and on and on; I thought for years that this was an audacious final image, wordless and increasingly uncomfortable as it kept rolling for something like a minute and a half. Frankly, I was disappointed when the widescreen DVD revealed that the shot is held that long because of the end credits. It's quite possibly the only instance in cinematic history that pan-and-scan made a film *better*.)

\* \* \*

### **Now. What the devil did we just watch here? And was it crap?**

Certainly, it was strange and distancing — thanks to editing and sound mixes that are purposely designed to jar you out of complacency. And yes, it's certainly true that the subject matter and execution make the film's pleasures more visual, intellectual and conceptual than they are emotional. The same could be said of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It isn't terribly cathartic, and if you can't get past that, I can't help you.

I personally can't dismiss *THX*, despite its low emotional temperature; like "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom," it's just too much of a cinema bomb to shrug off. The white-on-white cinematography (shot with natural light, if this DVD's supplements are to be believed) is weird and careful and perfect. During the prison-philosopher sequence, Lucas places multiple characters in the frame with an asymmetrical assurance; it excites me the same way Johnny To's "The Mission" does when To packs his widescreen frame with bodyguards.

*THX* is also really, really funny — but in an extremely dry, dark way that avoids obvious punchlines. The pervasive radio chatter is full of nonsensical code words. The jackbooted robots have soothing FM-radio voices. THX steps into an automated confessional with an electric Jesus who offers pre-recorded platitudes. People buy colored tetrahedrons that they promptly take home and throw away, unused. In a scene that plays like a deadpan *Brazil*, THX almost causes a nuclear meltdown because it takes so long to navigate the bureaucracy that can free him from a paralyzing "mind lock." And, in the movie's funniest bit, a couple of unseen technicians put THX through a series of painful Pilates poses as they try to figure out how to work some sort of mind-control device — a perfect (if unsubtle) metaphor for the dangers of turning your care and feeding over to

the state.

The sound design by Murch (which receives a huge amount of attention in the DVD supplements) does a wonderful *pas de deux* with the visuals; combined with Lalo Schifrin's score, I think a strong case can be made for *THX*'s soundbed being among the most innovative in film history. And finally, *THX 1138* is just interesting as a sort of ur-text of Lucas' future themes, obsessions, and filmmaking techniques. The director would essentially tell the story of a man leaving home two more times, in *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars* — and you can certainly hear echoes of Murch's aural influence during the Death Star raid radio chatter in *A New Hope*.

\* \* \*

### Gee, thanks for the plot summary. So how about those extras?

All in all, the special features are terrific and make a stirring case for the film. You *can* buy *THX 1138* as a single-platter package — but the two-disc edition has a lot of meat on its bones, with nary a video-game promo in sight.

(However, that said, between this and the near-simultaneous release of *Star Wars* on DVD, yr. hmbl. crsp. has now officially watched far too many minutes of George Lucas and His Amazing Gray-Whiskered Friends sitting and talking in tastefully appointed Skywalker Ranch settings — using words like "storyteller" and "visionary" as they calmly remind us that the man behind the *Star Wars* prequels has been and will be, yes, an important and artistic filmmaker in addition to being the powerful businessman behind, in case you hadn't heard, Lucasfilm Ltd. and Industrial Light and Magic. Mr. Lucas is, by all accounts, a proud man — and the near-infomercial levels of testimonial PR being rolled out over these few weeks suggest that five years of prequel-bashing have taken their toll.)

Anyway. The best special feature is a **commentary track with director/co-writer/editor George Lucas and co-writer/sound designer Walter Murch**. It's a remarkable commentary for two reasons: (1) George Lucas sounds vigorously proud of, and engaged by, the film and its ideas; and (2) the commentary is positively awash in talk of themes, avant-garde editing tricks, and conceptual approaches. Anyone who's listened to Lucas' half-awake team commentaries for the *Star Wars* prequels — in which he sounds alternately clueless, diabetically sleepy, and bored — is going to be shocked by his vitality here. It's film-school-essential listening, and I'd imagine Murch has a lot to do with how inspired Lucas sounds on the yack-track.

Also, in the final moments of the commentary, Lucas drops a wee atom bomb that supports something I've suspected for a while: He's making the *Star Wars* prequels (and the "Star Wars" TV series he's planning to produce after that) to score a big fat pile of fuck-you money that will fund more films like *THX 1138*. To wit, his final words, with key passages in italics:



Fortunately, I've never made a film I don't like to watch. I enjoy this film; I had a great time making it; it was really my sensibility at the time; it's *still* a lot of my sensibility. I've just gone off on this strange path that is not at all what I thought I was gonna be. This is really the kind of filmmaking I started doing, and *it's probably the filmmaking I'm gonna go back to someday. It's a much more interesting style of filmmaking than I currently find myself in.* I mean, I enjoy doing the more traditional, Hollywood-style movies, but I started doing them just to see if I could do it. *But these more sort of slightly offbeat movies are really where my cinematic heart is.*

Wow. Just. Wow. How do you *Star Wars* fans feel now?

Soundtrack geeks will also plotz over a couple of extremely cool features:

- **"Theatre of Noise"** — a music- and sound-effects-only track that removes principal dialogue to showcase Walter Murch's sound bed and Lalo Schiffrin's excellent, versatile score (a score that, for my money, doesn't get near enough love on this platter — surprising, given the ongoing Lucas-sponsored hagiography of one "Johnny" Williams).

- You can also watch the film with a branching-video feature titled **"Master Sessions with Walter Murch"**. When turned on, the film can be interrupted, "White Rabbit"-style, to view 13 short video segments (totaling almost 30 minutes of video) in which Murch riffs on the film's audio tricks. These are all pretty damned geek-great and, I think, required viewings for aspirant sound artists: One segment, titled "I Think I Ran Over A Wookiee," reveals that the name for Chewbacca's species came out of the improvised radio chatter that fills the soundtrack; in another, Murch says Schiffrin wrote the score as an almost literal adaptation of Murch's temp tracks.

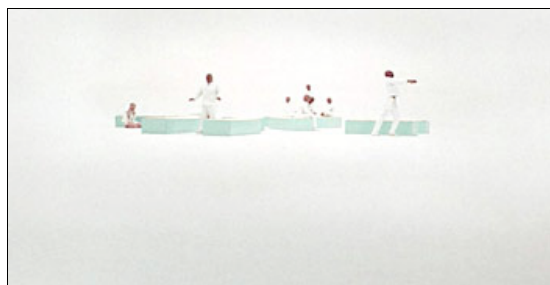
The centerpiece of Disc Two isn't a documentary about *THX 1138*, but rather one about the production company that *THX* pretty much chopped off at the knees. **"A Legacy of Filmmakers: The Early Years of American Zoetrope"** (63 min.) — despite having quite possibly the single most boring title ever — ends up being a nifty little talking-head exegesis about the mania of Francis Ford Coppola and his infamous, trouble-plagued filmmaking collective.

Coppola convinced Warner Bros. to bankroll American Zoetrope in the wake of *Easy Rider's* success — and Gary Leva's doc, narrated by Richard Dreyfuss, basically features everyone that Peter Biskind made fun of in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* getting all misty-eyed as they tell their side of the story, which tends to be less about coke-mania and more about the work. It's a pretty sweeping document — tracing the USC/UCLA film-school rivalry; showing clips from a few Lucas student films; describing with apparent honesty the complexities of the Lucas-Coppola friendship; describing the way Coppola bought enough equipment to start his own studio and then sold unwritten Zoetrope scripts to studio heads; and dishing on the heartbreak that ensued when Zoetrope's first production, *THX*, utterly failed to set studio hearts aflutter.

It all plays out a bit like a dot-com failure, only with actual ego-blasting talent behind the wheel, and even in this defanged talking-head recollection — which features extensive sound bites from Coppola, Lucas, Murch, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Robert Duvall, Carroll Ballard, John Milius, Caleb Deschanel, John Korty, Willard Huyck, and others — it's a pretty damned depressing tale. Special hilarity props go to the notoriously libertarian, gun-loving Milius, BTW, who keeps making fun of "hippies" and drawing military analogies while a bronze eagle sculpture displays its talons behind him, and also to Deschanel, the exceedingly bright and talented cinematographer behind *The Right Stuff*, *The Black Stallion*, and *The Passion*, who offers the following:

"Motivations changed in the '80s and '90s — where people would go to film school and it became necessary to make a film that would become a calling card so you could get a job. Whereas with no prospects to work in Hollywood, you made the films you wanted to make — and those were films that you cared about, and you're telling stories that you thought were important. And so I think that a lot of the films that came out of that era may have been better — although I'd hate to look back and find out that that wasn't true." *[laughs uneasily]*

The rest of Disc Two focuses on *THX*. **"Artifact from the Future: The Making of THX 1138"** (31 min.) was obviously shot at the same time as "A Legacy of Filmmakers" and features many of the same people speaking with a smidge less enthusiasm about *THX*, which they all (sans Lucas, Murch, Frank Darabont, and maybe Spielberg) obviously respect but don't necessarily love. The Lucas/Murch commentary touches on all the thematic stuff with greater fervor, and the production itself seems to



have been largely stress-free, with recollections by the actors rarely extending beyond "he/she/it was fun to work with"-style observations. Given the essential strangeness of the film — and the horrifying near-train-wreck production stories behind the first "Star Wars," detailed in next week's DVD box — it's all kind of a letdown, to be honest (except for the bits where a motorcycle stunt goes horribly wrong and Maggie McOmie talks about how she "really liked" getting her hair cut — which they rather puckishly play over archival footage of McOmie near tears as they took the shears to her pate).

Is it perverse of me to want gran-mal tales of struggle and angst in every "making-of" documentary I ever watch? Perhaps. There is, however, one significant beef I legitimately have with this doc, and with the DVD set in general: *Not one tiny word is said about the special-edition CGI tinkering or the restoration.* It's a bit lame to watch a bunch of gray-faced fellows talk about how progressive and important their 1970s film is over shots packed with 21st-century CGI tweaks, however discreet — and it leaves me worried that Lucas has destroyed the original negative, or stashed it in a vault next to Jerry Lewis's *The Day the Clown Cried*, or otherwise scotched any chance we'll ever see a pristine version of the 1971 cut of the film.

Next up on Disc Two is "**Electronic Labyrinth THX 1138 4EB**" (15 min.) — Lucas' award-winning USC student film that, incredibly, someone with money thought could be expanded into a hit studio feature. Serious Lucas-geeks have already seen this on one of those terrific *SHORT* discs (*SHORT 10*, actually) — and personally, though I appreciate it as an exercise in editing and cinematography and typography, I'm barely able to sit through the thing.

Maybe it's the sheer endlessness of the shots of the student-edition hero (Don Natchsheim, who looks like nothing so much as a stretched-out Rowan Atkinson) jogging down white hallways with "1138" stenciled on his forehead like some "Red Dwarf" Rimmer manqué. Maybe it's the stupid milk-carton hats the controllers wear over their eyes. Watching this well-shot little abstraction always reminds me of an event I once attended where Oliver Stone showed one of his student films — which featured a college-age Oliver Stone pacing back and forth in his apartment before flash-cutting ... to a tiger pacing in a cage! Audacious? Maybe — but also chock-full of its own cine-piss.

Next up is "**BALD**" — a semi-hilarious eight-minute promotional short from 1971. Dear. Lord. This is a hell of a fun thing to watch — fun like that "Dirty Dozen" featurette where you follow Lee Marvin around Mod London and the narrator keeps telling you he's an "action guy." Shaving one's head, apparently, was the scariest thing a woman could do to herself in the late '60s; it all kicks off with Coppola and Lucas talking on a porch, with Coppola asking, "How are you gonna ask some girl with long beautiful hair to shave off all her hair?" — followed by shots of McOmie and two other actresses having mini-meltdowns as they get their heads shorn on-camera. The best moments come from the actress who played the catatonic fuck-puppet in the all-white prison; she laughs, jokes, rages, and cries like a complete bubblehead over the course of eight deeply odd minutes in the history of advertising. EPK producers, take note!

There are also six trailers — including the **original 1971 trailer**, which features both toplessness and narration that has absolutely nothing to do with the film's actual story. For example, the narration over Duvall and Colley running down a hallway intones: "All-Earth Council, in its infinite wisdom, has decided these two numbers are to be disposed of! The Biochemical Forum has demands to make on their parts, however...." Um, okay. There are also **five slick new trailers for the re-release**, which really seem to "get" the essential absurd humor of the film.

\* \* \*

### Any Easter eggs?

I found one: Click to the second screen on Disc Two and wait for the Jesus face to show up. Click on it to read "**Breakout**" — "the original 2-page treatment by Matthew Robbins, USC classmate and friend of George Lucas. This was the basis of Lucas's 1968 student film *THX 1138 4EB*." (It's fascinating, and maybe telling, that Lucas thought a 10-digit serial number was a preferable title to "Breakout.") Anyway, Robbins' treatment is a stripped-down, almost primal little piece about, well, a guy running around.