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# ENTERTAINMENT

## The Lucas world, pre-'Star Wars'

### A return to 'THX 1138'

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**SAN RAFAEL, California (AP) --** In his most soothing voice, George Lucas has these important messages to share: **Work hard. Prevent accidents. Increase production. Buy more. And most important, be happy.**

Those mantras come from 1971's "THX 1138," Lucas' comparatively unknown first film, which he reintroduced to audiences with a limited theatrical release Friday, to be followed by its DVD debut Tuesday.

In a way, Lucas views this as the true premiere of "THX 1138," a dark sci-fi satire starring Robert Duvall as the title character, struggling to escape a dehumanized society whose inhabitants are mere numbers to a government that preaches boundless consumerism and keeps the population happy through mandatory sedatives.

"It's almost like it's a new movie, because a lot of people don't know about it," Lucas told The Associated Press over lunch at his 2,600-acre Skywalker Ranch. "And I think this time in terms of the way the release is going, it's much more the kind of release that it should have had in the first place, which is mostly for college students. It's kind of an arty film."

In 1971, distributor Warner Bros. did not have a clue about how to handle Lucas' avant-garde flick, so the studio hacked a few minutes out of it then dumped the movie into theaters, where few saw it. Warner gave it a rerelease in the late 1970s to take advantage of Lucas' "Star Wars" fame, but "THX 1138" still failed to find an audience.

Most who have seen it caught it on television or videotape in a bad full-screen format that spoils the effect of Lucas' carefully crafted wide-screen images. The new version is a director's cut restoring the footage Warner took out and giving the film a thorough digital restoration.



"THX 1138" was based on a student film George Lucas made at USC.

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The first film from Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope studio, "THX 1138" sneaked into Hollywood during the transition between the old movie-mogul days and the rise of corporate-run studios.

"Easy Rider" had proven there was a viable youth market, but studios had no idea how to exploit it. Without any real understanding of the projects, studios simply began tossing money at promising new filmmakers.

"'THX' was as strange then as it is today, and I think if I took this same movie in to anybody today, they would look at me and roll their eyes," Lucas said. "When I did 'American Graffiti' a few years later, they thought that was a far-out movie and that it was too avant-garde to be shown on the screen, so you can imagine what they thought about this one."

## Push by Coppola



In a detail from "THX," Robert Duvall (left) strikes up a forbidden relationship with LUH 3417 (Maggie McOmie).

Through Coppola's bullheaded persuasiveness, Warner agreed to back Zoetrope, and Lucas was left alone to make the film he wanted to make. The early communal optimism at Zoetrope, nicely captured in a documentary in the DVD package, was dashed when Warner executives screened "THX 1138" and came out totally befuddled.

Much of the film is told without conventional dialogue, the soundtrack filled with mechanical human voices and machine noises that Lucas calls a sort of "techno-poetry." The film's middle passage is set in an endless, snow-white expanse

without sets. The characters, women included, have shaved heads. (The DVD has archival footage of co-star Maggie McOmie, who plays THX's roommate, wincing tearfully as her long hair is shaved off.)

Instead of a traditional three-act structure, the film essentially tells the same story three ways. Duvall's character breaks society's mold in each section, first when his self-aware roommate cuts off his drug sedatives, second when he escapes from a prison for defective citizens, third when he makes a high-speed run from his underground city for the forbidden planet's surface.

Rather than a portrait of a grim tomorrow, Lucas intended "THX 1138" as a future-is-now metaphor of '60s complacency and mass consumption. The film came years before the prevalence of Prozac and other antidepressants, and it presents a twist on the drug war, with citizens subject to prosecution for "criminal drug evasion" if they fail to take their sedatives.

The themes are more relevant now than ever, Lucas said.

"George Orwell was right. There's no greater genius as far as I'm concerned in terms of understanding human nature," Lucas said. "I think that a lot of people just believe anything you tell them, and no matter what it is, they just go along with the program.

"They're perfectly happy to take their pill every day and do what they're told, and work and buy things, and work and buy things, and stay out of any complex emotional situations. And whatever the authorities tell them to do, they do, and whatever the authorities say is the truth, they believe is the truth."

## 'More of an ironic look'

"THX 1138" was based on a short film Lucas made as a student at the University of Southern California. While the feature-length version has a reputation as a dour, sober film, it is actually laced with wicked



humor. When people open their medicine cabinets, a concerned voice barks cheerily, "What's wrong?" Laborers are lauded by an announcement that their team has had fewer workers "destroyed" in accidents than a competing sector. Rather than stereotyped menacing heavies, the silver-faced robots that police the city are gentle giants that speak in cooing voices.



**Francis Ford Coppola (left) was key to the making of "THX," as well as its follow-up, "American Graffiti."**

"We always thought of it as being very humorous, but everybody else took it to be very serious," Lucas said. "It came out, 'Oh, this is a very dark and serious thing,' but it was really more of an ironic look at the way we were living, and we thought parts of it were very funny."

The title alone packs some whimsy. THX's roomie calls him "Thex," a rhyme with sex, one of the liberating forces he discovers after his medications wear off. The "1138" was chosen graphically to support that, Lucas said, the "11" representing masculine straightness, the "38" symbolizing feminine roundedness.

After "THX 1138," Lucas knew that if he wanted financial backing, he would have to do something more populist. Coppola challenged him to try a comedy.

"I dare you to do something that's warm and fuzzy," Lucas said Coppola told him. "'Why don't you just do a regular funny movie? I bet you can't do it.' I said, 'Well, uh, I think I can do it.'"

Lucas had an idea for a nostalgic car flick about cruising, which grew into "American Graffiti." The success of that movie gave Lucas the clout to launch one of the most enduring movie franchises ever.

That series concludes next summer with "Star Wars: Episode III -- Revenge of the Sith," the last of his six films chronicling the saga of the Skywalker clan.

Once he lays "Star Wars" to rest, Lucas wants to return to the point he was at right after "THX 1138" and make any stories he likes, without regard to their commercial prospects.

"Basically, what I've done is I've set up a situation where I have a fund that I've developed myself that is just for me to do whatever I want to do," Lucas said. "So now I can go back and do the 'THXs' of the world and not worry about whether they're going to be released or whether anybody's going to like them or they're going to play in 20 theaters, and I'll go to this film festival, and that'll be it.

"And everybody will go, 'Oh, what a failure he's become.' I've earned the right to be a failure and not be making mega-hits anymore."

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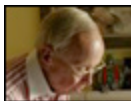
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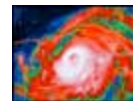


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