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The Star Wars Trilogy; THX 1138: The George Lucas Director's Cut (Variety)

Scott Hettrick, STAFF

Say what you want about Lucas' penchant for tinkering and tweaking his pics with updated CGI effects, these landmark titles -- ranging from 21 to 33 years old -- all look and sound contemporary. Unlike many effects-laden pics, these revised DVD versions do not require the viewer to judge them in the context of the technological limitations of a different era. That distinction will become increasingly important to future audiences of the two "Star Wars" trilogies released over a 27-year span and produced in reverse order.

Film purists and Star Wars cultists are complaining the unaltered 1977 version of "Star Wars" and the other pics aren't included as an option on the DVD, as [Steven Spielberg](#) did on his DVD of "E.T." But, really, it's not that important to be able to see the original opening title shot without the subtitle of "Episode IV: A New Hope," to see Han Solo shoot Greedo in the Cantina bar in cold blood rather than the politically correct version that has Greedo shooting first, or to see the late stage actor Sebastian Shaw (who made a cameo as the unmasked Darth Vader) standing with Yoda and Alec Guinness/Obi-Wan Kenobi instead of Hayden Christensen, who has now been digitally inserted in the near-final ghostly shot of "Return of the Jedi."

It was Lucas' B&W 15-minute short as a USC film student 1970, "THX 1138: 4EB" -- included as a bonus feature on this two-disc set -- that first caught the attention of fellow film students across town, including Spielberg and Francis Ford Coppola, and led to the formation of the grand experiment called American Zoetrope for maverick, independent-minded filmmakers. (THX also would be used on a license plate in "American Graffiti" and as the name of a film and homevideo sound quality system.)

But a year later, Lucas' feature-length version of the movie starring Robert Duvall in a relentlessly grim depiction of a sterile future was such a commercial disaster that it ended Zoetrope's deal with Warner to develop and produce six more scripts, including "Apocalypse Now" and "The Conversation," and it nearly forced Zoetrope into bankruptcy.

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Lucas, Coppola, John Milius and others at Zoetrope went spinning off in various directions. Coppola grudgingly agreed to direct "The Godfather," at the urging of Lucas, for the sake of generating much-needed cash. Lucas, at Coppola's urging, made "American Graffiti" before going back to the sci-fi/high-tech world two years later with "Star Wars."

The centerpiece, and the most compelling component of the entire set, is Gary Leva's one-hour doc "A Legacy of Filmmakers: The Early Years of American Zoetrope," narrated by Richard Dreyfuss; it's included with "THX 1138." It includes new interviews with the filmmakers noted above, plus historical context and dozens of compelling anecdotes that should be enormously engaging to even the casual film fan.

TELEVISION

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In the audio commentary with writing partner and sound designer Walter Murch during the closing shot of "THX," Lucas notes he is so proud of the movie, which brings back such fond memories, that he plans to return to this kind of offbeat movie for his next projects because that's the direction he always intended to go.

The visual and audio brilliance of the pic has never been in dispute. Those elements hold up and blend well with the relatively seamlessly integrated new CGI effects. Whether modern audiences find "THX" any more engaging than did the previous generation remains to be seen.

PRINT

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Newspapers &
Magazines

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"THX" also includes a wickedly funny, seven-minute archival promotional featurette that starts with a casual discussion between Lucas and exec producer Coppola about the challenge of getting actors to shave their heads and then shows each one grimacing as he goes under the blade. There is also a notable new 30-minute mini-docu by Leva on the making of the movie, and an optional interactive feature integrated into the film where viewers can click on an icon that pops up at various intervals and be taken momentarily from the movie to see and hear Murch describe the fascinating stories behind his innovative sounds and the score.

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The "Star Wars" trilogy includes a 2½-hour Kevin Burns docu, "Empire of Dreams: The Story of the 'Star Wars' Trilogy," which is a perfect companion to "Legacy," creating a sort of unofficial 3½-hour docu miniseries on Lucas across two special editions of his movies.

Highlights of "Dreams" are the extensive behind-the-scenes footage; fascinating trivia tidbits such as the last-minute change of title from "Revenge of the Jedi" to "Return of the Jedi"; the charming screen tests of Kurt Russell and William Katt, among others, for the roles of Han Solo and Luke Skywalker, respectively; and the numerous amusing anecdotes from the likes of Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher and Harrison Ford and nearly every member of the cast and crew of the original three films, more than 40 in all.

Burns, who won the DVD Exclusive Award for his

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GAMES

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Video Games

exhaustive two-hour docu on the "Cleopatra" DVD, has fashioned a documentary that feels at times like a "Frontline" or "60 Minutes" investigative piece. The camera zooms in on key sections of original financial documents to illustrate comments from Lucas and former Fox studio chief Alan Ladd Jr. (who resigned abruptly over the deal he struck for the studio with Lucas that gave the filmmaker unprecedented control and revenue from the franchise). We see contracts revealing everything from the original budget (\$8.2 million) to Lucas' fees (\$50,000 for writing, \$50,000 for producing, \$100,000 for directing) and the controversial control of sequels and ownership of merchandising rights. The docu also discloses the details about the \$250,000 fine levied against Lucas by the directors and writers guilds for not putting his name and other credits at the opening of the film, which led Lucas to permanently resign from the unions.

The bonus features here also include a peek into the future, with a 9-minute segment on the re-creation of the Darth Vader costume for Hayden Christensen, who, it is revealed, will wear the outfit himself as opposed to having a body double like David Prowse.

Leva also weighs in with a couple of fun featurettes on "Star Wars Trilogy," on the challenges of the lightsaber and on the myriad characters that populate the movies.

The menu design by Van Ling is innovative and stellar as always, as are the well-edited audio commentaries crammed full of fascinating comments by many of the cast and crew. Maybe the additional hours of original movie trailers and TV promos, a full level of a new "Star Wars" videogame, and many still photos and a Web site link to even more content will mollify fans still unhappy about not getting those few unaltered film frames.

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A Lucasfilm/20th Century Fox Home Entertainment release of the 1997 special editions of the 1977/1980/1983 Lucasfilm/Fox releases of "Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope," "Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back" and "Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi. Created and produced by George Lucas. Directed by Lucas, Irvin Kershner and Richard Marquand. THX 1138: A Warner Home Video release of the 1971 Warner Bros. release of an American Zoetrope production. Directed by George Lucas.

Cast: The Star Wars Trilogy: Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher, Harrison Ford, Alec Guinness, Billy Dee Williams, Anthony Daniels. THX 1138: Robert Duvall, Donald Pleasance, Don Pedro Colley, Maggie McOmie, Ian Wolfe.

The DVD debut of the "Star Wars Trilogy" is nothing less than a major milestone for the format and something of a cultural event. With the release of the "Indiana Jones" and "Godfather" trilogies and most other cinema classics in the recent years, it represents the last major franchise to make its way to DVD. Timed to coincide with the director's

cut release of George Lucas' feature debut, it is the quintessential film series for the core DVD consumer -- young and middle-aged men who love effects-laden action films and covet the nuances of the score and sound effects through their digital surround-sound home theater systems. (Not surprisingly, there already have been complaints from such hardcore followers relative to sound remixes, which Lucasfilm says change with each new remastering and involve "deliberate creative decisions" relative to the format.)

Gorillas

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