

Mind the Machines

By Josh Larsen

If computers “got” irony, they would likely smirk at the re-release of George Lucas’s first film, a dystopian science-fiction tale from 1971 called *THX 1138*.

In this new director’s cut, Lucas hasn’t changed the original narrative, a bleak portrait of a future society in thrall to machines; he’s added a slew of sleek and modern computer-generated images—an ironic form of improvement for a sci-fi flick about soul-killing computers.

In a sense, Lucas’s career has been a gradual refutation of the central theme of *THX 1138*—the dehumanizing effects of technology. Aside from the character-driven nostalgia piece, *American Graffiti* (the anomaly in his filmography), Lucas has largely concentrated on his vast *Star Wars* series, movies that have become more technically wondrous, and technology dependent, with each new installment. Though they still retain much of their adventuresome charm, the latest *Star Wars* pictures feel less the fruit of a creative mind and more the product of the computer systems at work in *THX 1138*.

One of those decades-old sci-fi films that feels more prescient with each passing year, *THX 1138* centers around a human worker—the title is the serial number that serves as his name—toiling in a cruelly efficient society. Anything that interferes with production, be it emotions, sex, or religion, has been either outlawed or catered to in the most basic of ways. When THX (Robert Duvall) opens his medicine cabinet, a robotic surveillance system inside asks, “What’s

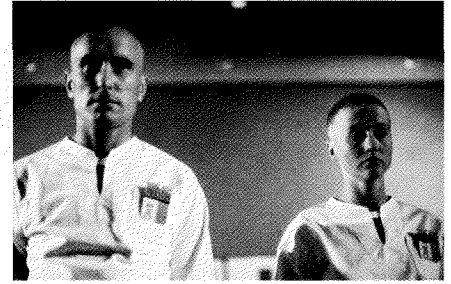
wrong?” and then prescribes the appropriate combination of sedatives. When THX stops taking his pills and feels true emotions for the first time, he begins an eye-opening odyssey toward freedom.

Even before its recent retooling, *THX 1138* was a technical marvel. Working with co-screenwriter and sound-design master Walter Murch, Lucas creates much of the sterile, computerized world through simple, off-screen aural effects. Machines bleep, robots whirl, and speakers drone emotionless commands like so many HAL 9000s.

The visual design is as arresting as anything in Lucas’s *Star Wars* films. Much of it, in fact, foreshadows the look of his better-known work, from its metallic corridors to its shiny-faced robots. Yet there are also images that are far more surreal and unsettling, often making *THX 1138* feel like a sadist’s version of the *Star Wars* universe. When THX is captured, he and a group of detainees are abandoned in an endless and undefined white space, where the foreground and background can hardly be distinguished from each other—infinite expanse as the ultimate prison.

After THX breaks free from this computer-monitored—maybe even computer-generated—holding area, each step he takes towards freedom leads him further and further from technology. From the sleek, metallic corridors of the underground city, he makes his way to the surface, where the barren landscape reveals a burning sunset—and hardly any man-made objects at all.

Lucas’s filmmaking, unlike THX, has



Robert Duvall plays THX 1138, and Maggie McOmie is LUH 3417.

been chasing after the latest technology ever since. Aesthetically, this has all been for the good. There is no doubt that the computer-generated images added to the director’s cut of *THX 1138* (new robot effects and background scenery) make for a more fully realized vision. What previously looked like a shoestring production, as it largely was, now bustles with the busyness of an actual world.

But does this necessarily make for a better movie? What’s disturbing about Lucas’s increasing reliance on technology isn’t so much the results, but the philosophy behind them. He no longer sees computers as aids—just another cinematic tool—but as correctives, ways of “fixing” past movies. Thankfully both the original and the director’s cut of *THX 1138* are available on DVD. Fans of the first three *Star Wars* films haven’t been so lucky. Recently only the “special edition” versions, full of even more drastic computer-generated tinkering, have been released on DVD.

There is significance here beyond the legitimate complaints of purists who want to own the films as they were originally released. What Lucas is ushering in, aside from new technology, is a new way of approaching movie history. By reworking his past films without making their original formats available, he is in effect replacing, rather than building upon, our shared movie culture. It may be inevitable that the future belongs to computers; must they also take over the past?



BookTalk

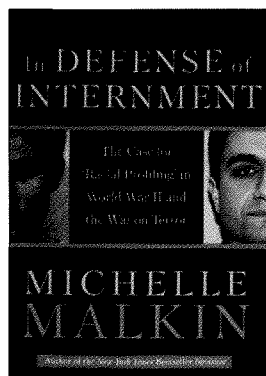
ABSOLUTE THREAT

By Karina Rollins

In Defense of Internment: The Case for "Racial Profiling" in World War II and the War on Terror

By Michelle Malkin

Regnery, 376 pages, \$27.95



No, despite what the title of her new book might lead you to believe, Michelle Malkin does not want to round up

Muslims and

ship them off to fenced-in camps in the desert. She does want to infuse the debate over national security and civil rights with a much-needed dose of reality—always guaranteed to offend members of the Left. When it comes to World War II, *In Defense of Internment* means exactly what you think: Malkin defends the evacuation from the West Coast, and the relocation or internment, of tens of thousands of ethnic Japanese.

How could she possibly do so? By digging through mountains of primary documents at the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and research facilities in Seattle and Berkeley, and unearthing what few children are taught in school and what few adults know: complete history.

Much of *In Defense* is a straightforward narration of historical events.

For many readers, including this reviewer, the book provides first-time insight into the towering scale and immediacy of the threat posed by the Japanese.

Meticulously, she presents the contents of intercepted top-secret Japanese diplomatic "MAGIC" cables, Japanese-language newspapers in the U.S., transcripts of interviews with Japanese spies, and U.S. government memos to reveal the success of the Japanese in building a spy network in the United States, and of their extensive monitoring of American ships, planes, soldiers, and facilities.

The evidence not only of widespread *Issei* (native Japanese living in the U.S.) but also *Nisei* (American-born ethnic Japanese) collaboration with the enemy is shocking, and the number of Japanese military successes based on such collusion, staggering. The Pearl Harbor bombing itself was facilitated by a Honolulu spy cell that "monitored ship movements, water currents, and available support systems.... [The cell] also provided Japan with detailed maps, copies of which were found in the cockpits of downed Japanese fighter planes following the attack."

The evidence is there for the viewing: Nearly half the book is a collection of appendices and notes containing copies of deciphered Japanese code messages, internal U.S. government correspondence, tables, and photos of key war figures and life in the camps ("neither luxury resorts nor barbaric prisons"). Part of a MAGIC cable from Los Angeles to Tokyo, dated May 9, 1941, reads: "We shall...maintain close connections with the Japanese Association, the Chamber

of Commerce, and the newspapers.... We have already established contacts with the absolutely reliable Japanese in the San Pedro and San Diego area..." (There were 117,000 ethnic Japanese living on the West Coast, within close reach of 88 vital U.S. military installations.)

Not only is such information virtually unknown, it has become taboo to even have a debate on potential legitimate reasons for the internment. Schools, universities, Asian-American organizations, the media, even the U.S. Congress, which granted \$1.65 billion in reparations to 82,000 of Japanese ancestry in 1988, promote today's popularly accepted—and only acceptable—version of WWII internment as unfounded American hysteria and sheer racism. (No mention that almost 11,000 Germans were interned in the same camps as the Japanese; that *Nisei* who lived outside the West Coast were not required to move; or that other countries, including Canada, Britain, Germany, Australia, and Mexico, also interned enemy suspects in wartime.)

While it remains arguable that uprooting droves of American citizens from their homes was wrong, Malkin has convincingly documented that "FDR's internment measures were based not on anti-Japanese racism...but on common-sense *nationality* distinctions in time of war."

Kudos to her, but why this book now? Because "civil liberties absolutists have invoked the World War II evacuation and relocation of ethnic Japanese to attack virtually every homeland security initiative aimed at protecting Americans from murderous Islamic extremists." Because