

THX-1138

A lost film

Plot Summary and Discussion by James Glettler

Note to the Reader

The plot summary has been included in this work to assist the reader in understanding the extreme and odd nature of this film. However, for brevity, those sections can be skipped.

Introduction

THX-1138 is a magnum manipulator. He works in operating cell 94107 along with hundreds of other people building policemen. He didn't choose this job; it was assigned to him. Actually, he was created for this job, literally.

The movie *THX-1138* was written and directed by George Lucas, the father of Star Wars. While at University of Southern California (USC), George Lucas produced a short film in 1976 entitled *Electronic Labyrinth: THX-113: 4EB*. The film won several awards, including first prize at the National Film Festival, introducing Lucas to the world. The young filmmaker, fresh out of school, was picked up by Frances Ford Coppola (*The Godfather*). Coppola was so impressed with *Electronic Labyrinth* that he pushed Warner Brothers to support a full-length version of the film. He assisted George Lucas in writing and producing *THX-1138* in 1970. Although *THX-1138* was mostly a flop at the box office, it is still almost beyond its time and definitely above the average science fiction. *THX-1138* is a fascinating and chilling science fiction that has been lost over the years.

What makes the film difficult to describe and amazing to experience is the focus on visual and aural detail, which contains most of the plot as opposed to the actions and words of the characters. In an interview, George Lucas describes his films as a 50/50 experience of both sight and sound. In the underground city in *THX-1138*, everything everywhere is white, stark, bleak, nothing. All the people are white, dressed in identical white clothing, head shaved bald, named by a prefix and a number. Everywhere is monitored by video cameras, computers record everything, and life is controlled. The only rooms that are not white are the control and surveillance rooms, darkened only in order to view walls and walls of video monitors. The film is a mixture of the stark white environment overlaid with the blueish-white glow of the video monitors and numerical computer read outs. But in contrast to the featureless sights are the deep layers of sound. The immense size of nothing can be heard as a deep hiss and echo. The distorted radio sounds of people talking about control and surveillance fills in the space between the drone and clatter of machines. Also, the film is filled with the portrayal of control and surveillance over the populous, but we never know who is actually in control. The final effect is both breathtaking and terrifying.

Plot Summary: Part I - Awakening

The plot of *THX-1138* breaks down into three main sections or acts, although they are not identified in the film: Awakening, Arrest, and Escape. The film begins with THX-1138 (Robert Duvall), asking his medicine cabinet for “something stronger.” As we soon see, THX has been having some problems maintaining concentration at work building the police robots. As he is working, a voice comes over the intercom congratulating THX and his fellow workers as there has been an accident in another sector that, “destroyed 63 personal, giving them a total of 242 lost to our 195,” in this work shift. This grim statement affects no one; everyone is complacent because economics control all decisions.

On his way home from work, THX stops by a store filled with yellow, blue and red shapes, one of the few splashes of color in the whole film. An announcement proclaims that, “blue dendrites are only 47 credits, buy now,” but THX purchases a red thing. Later when THX gets home, he throws away the red thing without any hesitation. Here we first shown the meaningless, hollow consumerism that makes up part of THX’s society where the products don’t have any meaning or function other than to be made and bought.

Before THX returns home however, he stops by an Omnichapel. He enters a small room that looks exactly like a public telephone booth. As the door closes, an image reminiscent of Jesus Christ is illuminated by florescent lights and a deep voice starts speaking, “My time is yours, go ahead.” The image is Ohm, the religious icon that all people pray too. THX starts describing his troubles saying he is disoriented, can’t concentrate, and believes that his roommate, LUH 3417 (Maggie McOmie) isn’t acting normally. He admits to needing more sedatives than normal. Throughout this, Ohm is saying, “Yes, yes I understand...Yes Fine...Excellent...Could you be more specific...You are a true believer, blessings of the masses, though art a subject of the divine, created in the image of man, by the masses, for the masses, let us be thankful we have an occupation to fill, work hard, increase production, prevent accidents, and be happy.” But as Ohm speaks, we see a tape recorder playing back his voice as an albino lizard crawls through a maze of wiring and electronics, showing that even God has no humanity. This gives us a glimpse into the reason how and why this society exists.

At home, THX starts watching a holographic form of TV. Interesting to note, this is the first film portrayal of channel surfing. What exists as entertainment in this controlled society is rather unnerving: video of a police robot rhythmically beating a man, a hologram speaking complex and intellectual words but with no context or meaning, pornography. In the background we meet LUH, THX’s roommate. Unlike the other characters, she actually shows emotions and looks both alone and afraid. While THX watches the methodical beating on TV, LUH is switching his sedatives for stimulants. We learn from the medicine cabinet that LUH, unlike THX is “birth born” and that changing the drug doses can result in arrest for “criminal drug evasion.” Using sedatives to stay calm and conforming isn’t an option, but mandatory.

As the drug imbalance takes over THX, he runs into more and more problems at work, going back to the Omnichapel, he tells Ohm how he is conforming while Ohm gives the exact same mechanical response with the change at the end of, “let us be thankful that we have commerce, buy more, buy more now, *buy*, and be happy.” THX finally breaks down and passes out in front of LUH. When he wakes up, it is revealed why LUH has been messing with his drugs. She just wanted him to care about her, to love her, to touch her. THX is torn because

although he didn't want to get involved in the first place, now off the effects of the sedatives, he does care for her. Seemingly free from control, they have sex, an even more serious offence than drug evasion.

At the same time, SEN 5241's (Donald Pleasence) roommate was destroyed by some unknown factor. He likes THX's sanitation rating and wants him as a roommate so he tries to get rid of LUH. It appears that SEN brags about being able to control the computers, but THX reports him because he wants to stay with LUH.

Plot Summary: Part II - Arrest

The problem with being off the drugs is that THX can no longer perform his duties at work. In the middle of a dangerous operation, THX drops some radioactive material. Instantly, those in control measure his biological signs and recognize that he has a severe sedation depletion, which requires a "mind lock and arrest." The short-term problem is that by putting THX in a mind lock, he can't pick up what he dropped and an explosion is imminent until they release the mind lock. As we see the various operations and steps involved in the process, it is very apparent that some administrative hierarchy exists but no one takes blame and no one is in charge.

At THX's trial, he is charged with drug evasion, malicious sexual perversion and transgression. Two lawyers debate the punishment, one calling for the "extermination of the source of sin" stating "economics must not dictate situations that are obviously religious." It is a debate of few words that ultimately is decided by a computer. THX is convicted, and is to be conditioned and held in detention. He is processed and drugged by all sorts of robotic medical machines while computers tabulate which organs are reusable. Finally we see THX sitting alone in a vast white room through a television screen. In the background two technicians talk casually about the equipment they are using, none of which makes any sense. As they play with the buttons and knobs, THX is thrown into convulsions and screams with pain while the technicians mildly talk about the different types of consoles they've used. This is in some respects funny, and it is the contrast to the pain they are causing here that makes this scene so powerful.

Plot Summary: Part III - Escape

Sitting alone, THX is found by LUH, who tells him that she is pregnant. But it is not to last because the police robots come again and THX is taken to a detention center. The detention center is an infinitely vast white room with a few other incurable offenders, including SEN who tries to be a leader. But THX wants to return to LUH and sets out, with SEN into the white void to find a way out. Along the way, they meet a hologram named SRT (Don Pedro Colley) and find that the exit is just a door with no alarms and no locks. The only thing keeping them prisoner was their lack of will to escape. But once outside of the isolation of the detention center, the loud rush of people is deafening and SEN gets separated from SRT and THX. When the administrators learn of the escape, they set up a primary budget to recapture the three.

SEN find his way through the maze of tunnels to a tram that takes him to the very edge of the city. As he looks out into the shell of the city, to absolute freedom, he is jarred by the horn of

the tram and goes running back. He realizes that he can't leave because without the system that he was raised in, he lacks the ability to function. However, back in the city, he is just as useless. As he sits quietly waiting to be arrested, he watches over a group of school children playing a game. One of the children comes over to him and asks for help because his IV line came off. The IV is attached to a small bottle that read "advanced primary economics." SEN tells the children of his childhood where primary economics was a ten-liter bottle and took a week of lying in bed.

Meanwhile SRT and THX are trying to escape from two chasing police robots. In one room, SRT helps THX use the computers to locate LUH, except LUH has been reassigned to a fetus in a test tube, implying the destruction of LUH. As SRT ponders science and technology out loud, he resigns himself the thought that "maybe holograms aren't supposed to understand that stuff." This is reinforced in the next scene where SRT crashes the car he finds while THX manages to drive through the tunnels. As THX reaches the end of the tunnels and begins to climb out of the city, the pursuing police call to him one last time to return saying they want only to help him and he cannot survive outside the city. But THX climbs on and the police return to the city because they have exceeded their budget on capturing him. And as THX-1138 emerges from the tunnel into the light of a setting sun, a bird flies overhead and he realizes that everything he has been told is a lie.

Discussion: Individuality

One of the main themes in *THX-1138* is the absolute loss of individuality or humanity by all of the minor characters. In fact, the entire society is driven by some internal force that has no leader. All activities are under heavy surveillance, others make all decisions, but no one is in charge. The robot police enforce the laws, lawyers argue the laws, but in the end, all the only decisions that are seen are computed. Mike O'Neal explains that they have built society of only followers with no leaders. No one is capable of independent action.

In this society, the law requires perfect conformity. The subjects are reminded that, "Performance perfect is perfect performance." Everyone is kept under heavy sedation through the use of severe mind-altering drugs. No one questions these drugs because it is not possible with implants in the body and cameras everywhere. If there is still any person that would question their place, the people are indoctrinated with the belief in Ohm. Ohm, is the constant reminder that individuality is wrong and all people are created for the masses. Through these uses of social and chemical and technological controls, each person is able to perform mindless and even useless tasks with stunning efficiency. No longer is society driven by the desire to make its subjects happy, but the need to be efficient. As referenced many times throughout the film, economics are the driving force behind any decision. In this way, *THX-1138* is an ominous reminder of the dangers of individuals giving up their freedom to a group, especially when the group has no freedom of its own. It is the fight against the faceless group for individuality that embodies the conflict THX goes through.

Discussion: Passivity

The theme of large-scale passive societies dominates George Lucas's films according to Scott Bukatman. *THX-1138* like many of his works portrays a future society where the subjects

of the society have given up their willingness to take active part in their lives. For instance, in the Star Wars movies, only a handful of Rebels stand against the mighty evil empire, which came to power through indifference. In *THX-1138*, THX escapes not because of his intelligence or strength, but because of his willpower to continue to fight against the rest of society. That makes THX just another “regular guy” with no special skills or training. LUH is the same, willing to break the law to not only have her individuality, but to give individuality to THX. Although in the end, LUH is unsuccessful at escaping the underground society, she proves she has the willpower to try and ultimately gives up her life and the life of her child.

It is interesting to note that in both the theatrical release of the film and in the VHS printing, *THX-1138* is preceded by a trailer for a *Buck Rogers* movie. *Buck Rogers* is an optimistic series from the 1930’s about the future set in the twenty-fifth century. Buck is just an ordinary guy (for the twenty-fifth century) with an incredible resolve to do the right thing. By contrast, *THX-1138* is a dark and deep outlook of the future, almost completely opposite of *Buck Rogers*, but with a main character that is strikingly similar. The conviction of THX to escape, the refusal to be passive, is what gives THX his individuality. It is what drives the conflict between society and the individual.

By contrast to THX and LUH, SEN wants his individuality but does not have the conviction to obtain it. Although he starts off with strength trying to arrange to be roommates with THX, it seems as if that was only a perversion. In the detention center he tries to be a leader among the other deviants but is falls into a pattern of a small society. When THX leaves and SEN follows, he bleats about going so far away from the comfort of the others. SEN is so controlled by his conditioning and society that he becomes short of breath as a psychosomatic symptom of his fear of breaking from society, even if his part of society is in detention as a criminal. Outside, deafened by the noise of people moving through the halls, SEN seeks comfort in Ohm at a TV studio. There he prays for another chance to contribute to society and asks for an explanation of why some things don’t make sense. When he is caught by a monk and knocks the monk out in front of a picture of Ohm, SEN knows he can’t return as a working member of society. SEN is further unable to escape from society because he is unwilling to leave the city, even though there is absolutely nothing to stop him other than his own fear of the unknown.

Discussion: Connections

The issues raised in *THX-1138* are by no means new or original. This caused some reviewers to view it in a very critical light. Bukatman provides some connections between the issues in *THX-1138* and other films and stories. The connections between the passivism in societies of the Star Wars series has already been drawn, but Star Wars came after *THX-1138*. Michael Foucault wrote an analysis of social control in the prison system and one of the issues was constant surveillance, almost exactly the same as in THX. Two major works that *THX-1138* obviously draws from are George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. However, it is in the details and the presentation that *THX-1138* is makes it mark as a horrible prediction. *1984* had an entity referred to as big brother that watched over society, where as *THX-1138* is completely devoid of a control entity other than the entire collective consciousness of the society, or just preprogrammed computer patterns. In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, life is controlled through drugs and genetic breeding, and society is driven by needless

consumerism. In this society, pleasure was required through both drugs and sex. Author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Philip Dick often wrote about scenarios where citizens were told to consume more, stay calm and “tune out,” as Bukatman words it. It would seem that *THX-1138* was not on the surface much more than an amalgamation of other previous works. However, it is not so much the narrative story that makes *THX-1138* so powerful, but the audio-visual context in which it is presented.

At the same time, it seems that *THX-1138* parallels some other people’s fears about the abandonment of individuality and the acceptance of a controlling technology. Theodore Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, wrote in his manifesto about what he considers the power process and surrogate activities and how technology is a more powerful social force than freedom. In his power process, people need to have some attainable goal they have to work for in order to be fulfilled. Without the need to work to survive, a surrogate activity is needed, one that is determined by others for the good of the society. The Unabomber comes to the conclusion that not only does technology take away man’s ability to control his own power process, but that it further prevents society from shaping itself. This is exactly what happened in *THX-1138* where each member of society gave up their individual freedoms to the technological society little by little until there were no individuals left. Although the Unabomber brought based his conclusions on his own reasoning, his viewpoint is horrifically illustrated by *THX-1138* although it his manifesto was published about a quarter of a century later.

Discussion: Racism

The issue of race is very blatant in *THX-1138*. There are only four black people in the entire course of the movie compared to hundreds and hundreds of very uniform white people. George Lucas seemed to use this not only as a tool for this film, but also as a critique of other filmmakers at the time who were segregating their casting. In *THX-1138*, only black actors were used for holograms using race to define a character type. The hologram SRT is portrayed in the movie as being ignorant and unable to learn. Yet, the holograms appear to be no different from the rest of the people, living and breathing with no need for any support equipment as would be expected. Because of this, Mike O’Neal suggests that the holograms really are just people who have been told by the system that they are holograms. They are controlled and segregated along with the rest of society and led to believe they are not real.

Conclusion

THX-1138 is a very surreal and frightening look into a possible future where everyone everywhere is controlled. Through indifference and passivity, society groomed itself into one conforming mass out of a sea of individuals. George Lucas portrays a very classic conflict of the individual versus society in an interesting and unique way. I recommend this film to anyone interested in technology and society, but be sure to watch it in a dark room with the volume turned up.

Sources

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