

Warner Bros.

The Overdeveloped Society: THX 1138

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THX 1138. Warner Bros. presents an American Zoetrope Production starring Donald Pleasence and Robert Duvall with Don Pedro Colley and Maggie McOmie. Directed by George Lucas, Executive Producer Francis Ford Coppola, produced by Lawrence Sturhahn, screenplay by George Lucas and Walter Murch, story by George Lucas, music by Lalo Schiffrin.

Science fiction cannot be taken seriously without accepting it on its own terms—as entertainment. Some serious thinkers have used it as a way of making serious points (George Orwell, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley), but the corpus of works in the genre is more significant than the individual attempts to exploit it for a political or philosophical message. It obviously

lends itself especially well to utopian thinking, to emphasizing long-term consequences of current trends and to commenting on the relation of technology to human life. But when the message precedes the expression in science fiction terms, the result rarely swings as well as when involvement in the world of “sci-fi” generates a message.

The genre, as opposed to any particular creator within it, has an implicit logic and set of themes and issues which are interesting in themselves. The ingenuity and insight which may impress the casual audience with a serious lesson will strike the aficionado as quite conventional, familiar from many previous examples of simple escapism. This is the “error” of

crediting to a particular specimen the excellence of the type. Thus, there can be no discussion of a heavy specimen which is not based on a knowledge of the context.

Familiarity begins with an appreciation of the special appeal of science fiction, which is an experience not completely reducible to analysis. Anyone who doesn't have the taste for it will find it hard to like *THX 1138*. I have the taste, and I liked the movie; that is the premise of this discussion. It was a pleasure to sit and watch the movie. Not everyone will feel that way, and anyone who doesn't is unlikely to find any other kind of significance it may have redeeming.

As in the classic detective story, the most important feature of science fiction is neither narrative nor character. The literary surface is imposed on what is basically a mental exercise. The starting point, of course, is an interest in science (usually but not always in the sense of technological innovation) and its unforeseen consequences. The fun part, though, is the process of generating the innovation and consistently following out the logic implied by it. The creator invites his audience to join him in a hypothetical game of "What if . . . ?" What matters most is starting with a provocative and novel hypothesis and milking it for all the surprising and ingenious things that would then probably be true. As in other such ventures (locked-room murder stories, code and cipher stories, crossword puzzles), the worth of the achievement is judged by the difficulty of the problem undertaken. Impressive science fiction therefore has to wrestle with mind-benders like time travel, parapsychology, cosmic history, new forms of energy or the mysteries of hyperspace. Finding a different kind of animal life on Mars is not the kind of thing that gets the science fiction fan very excited any more, unless it includes some very novel twist of biology or social psychology.

Such mental games should be based on science. This proceeds from the desacralization and objectivization of nature and feels no compunction about rearranging things and imagining

alternatives. People who enjoy the hypothetical activity of science fiction are close to understanding the character of scientific detachment, more a matter of temperament than philosophy. Thus, among the newer applications of science fiction are school exercises in functionalist sociology, architecture and city planning. This playful quality of science fiction is transformed by the addition of one element, a stake in the premise, which produces "message" science fiction. "What if . . . ?" becomes "Wouldn't it be wonderful if . . . ?" (utopianism like *Looking Backward*) or "Wouldn't it be terrible if . . . ?" (jeremiads like 1984). The imposition of messages is similar to the contemporary concern with making technology more responsive to humane values and social control. We have yet to suggest a way of reconciling the moral constraints on technical development with the self-fulfillment of the unfettered scientist. Both science and science fiction are aristocratic pursuits, and we can understand why mathematicians are such whimsical people.

As science fiction matured, it became somewhat surfeited with the possibilities of material technology and more curious about social organizational consequences. The rise of this "social science fiction" has also accompanied the growth of social science in this century. Increasingly, science fiction has explored institutional arrangements and personality structures in its hypothetical futures. This has made it more interesting literarily (*Slaughterhouse Five*), more relevant politically (*Stranger in a Strange Land*) and more easily confused with ordinary fiction. It has also made it more difficult, in the same ways that social science is more difficult than the "hard" sciences. But since degree of difficulty is a positive value in science fiction, it has also gotten better.

If science fiction is an exploratory game, then there are good reasons why it is better when the morals emerge at the end than when they are imposed in front. If it has a value beyond itself, it is in the possibility that it will make clear the results we should have a

moral opinion about. The values we insist on before we begin cannot, unfortunately, be discovered at the end. Just as in sociological theory, our value-premises may shape the possibilities we allow ourselves to see. An unexamined assumption about the future will confirm itself in the science fiction written on that assumption. So if we have such predispositions, we are always well advised to announce them, in science fiction as well as in science.

Science fiction is first of all a written form. Its most pleasing accomplishment is often nothing more than a language structure for describing events which are concretely unimaginable or meaningless in ordinary terms. First-rate science fiction often includes lengthy passages with no referential content, describing nonexistent theories or deriving logical conclusions from absurd axioms by preposterous rules. Paradoxically, the less content such an account has, the more impressive it is to the science fiction reader. Nothing pleases him more than the elaboration of a hypothetical reality based on a (for the time being) scientific absurdity.

Film science fiction presents substantively different problems from the written form, but it is comparable in the way it appeals to its audience. It is at once easier and more difficult. Science fiction movies are also based on the joy of working out "What if . . . ?", but in cinematic rather than wordy ways. It is easier because the eye is more easily pleased than the imagination. The visual realization of, say, the docking of the shuttle at the space station in the second segment of *2001* was satisfying in a way the verbal telling could not be. On the other hand the production of that image is a prodigious feat for the film-maker, while it is a small problem for the writer to indicate in a few sentences. Thus the shattering experience of the final segment of *2001* remains visually anticlimactic, in spite of Kubrick's best technical gimcrackery. So when the science fiction fan sees a movie, he looks for the same kind of excellence, but in a different form. It is the production, the creation of a concrete image of the impossible out of avail-

able techniques, that is the crucial factor. Film critics make the same error with such movies that literary critics make with science fiction novels. They dismiss too easily the mechanical problem-solving aspects and make demands of camera artistry, character, plot and theme. So *2001* has been the most underrated and most overrated of recent films because both critics and cultists believed that it was really about all those wordy apologies.

In a way, the science fiction movie is one of the most purely cinematic of genres, depending for its life on the creation of a concrete reality in sight and sound. Whether this is done in a philosophical void, like a George Pal production, or in service to a humane theme, as in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the final judgment rests on the emergence of meaning from the constructed reality of concrete images. For most of film history, success or failure has been the responsibility of set designers, special effects men, sound engineers and animationists. It is possible for a good movie to lack these contributions, just as a good novel about the future could be uninteresting to the science fiction reader. But it would then have to be considered as not belonging to the

genre in any important sense. And a book or movie could be good both in science fiction and in literary terms, but there is no particular connection between the two achievements. In fact, a work that tries to do both is less likely to be wholly satisfying as either.

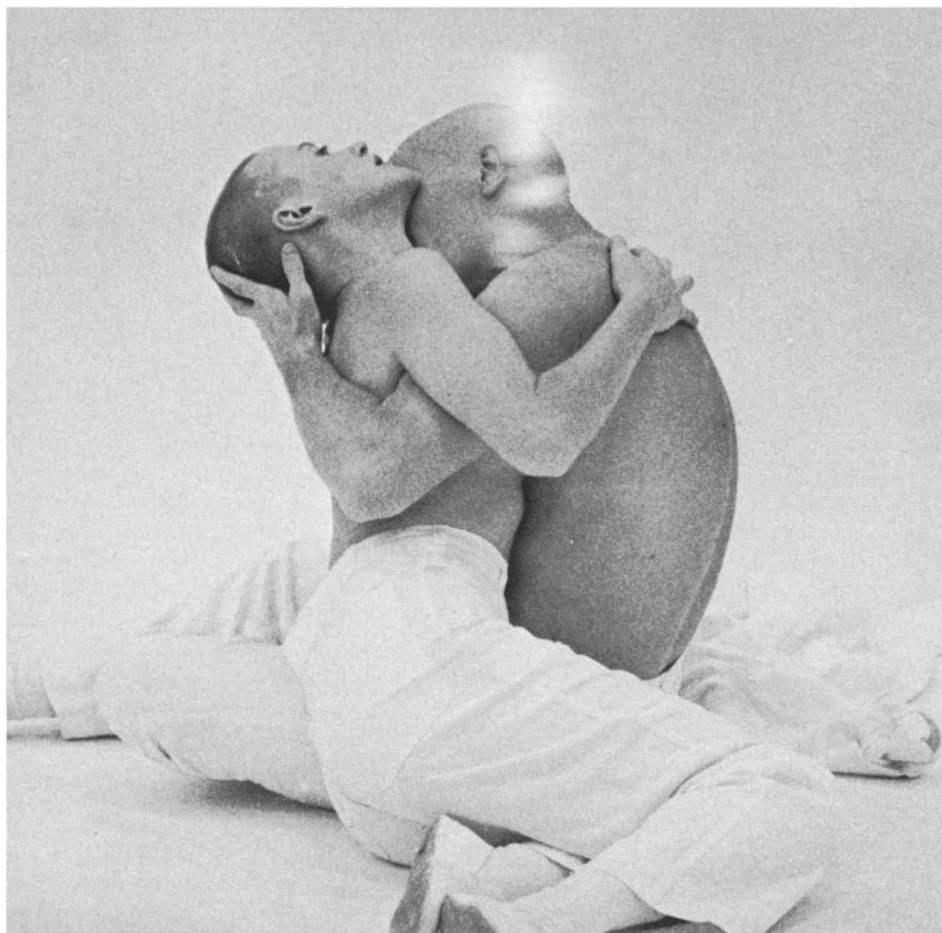
THX 1138 is very satisfying as science fiction and as a film, without being particularly innovative as either. Its literary character is more problematic, though still quite good enough for a movie; it is also highly derivative. So without being real news, the movie is a happy synthesis of high quality elements. For many people in the audience it will provide both a moving and original experience. The movie may show that the science fiction film has come of age, like the western. It has developed from juvenile space opera and pretentious allegory into a form whose basic conventions are understood by a sizable audience. So, like the western, we expect it not to be new but the same familiar thing well done. *THX 1138* is very well done.

It is set in a future (not very distant, it warns us) when technology allows a society of highly organized technical workers controlled by electronics and sedatives. This is one of

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the basic science fiction premises as well as being a commonplace of mass society theorists. Sophisticated technology produces totalitarian control, while the complexity and top-heaviness of the mass system requires high output from people in high-level alienated labor. Life is barren and cheerless in a synthetic environment, and personal space is virtually nonexistent. *THX 1138*, the title character, is a machine doctor, working with high energy to repair robots. He is troubled because his computer-selected roommate, a woman, is substituting dummy capsules for his libido-suppressing sedative. She wants him, and he responds. Their love-making is a criminal antisocial act. The intrusion of a high-ranking fellow worker, a man, who wants *THX* for his own roommate, and *THX*'s non-sedated shakiness at work get all three busted. He is "reconditioned" and held in detention, where he makes his escape with the other man. They join up with a black runaway (blacks are all used as performers on the hologram, 3-D television) and start running. From here on, the movie is a *Great Escape*. *THX* first looks for *LUH*, his lost love, but finds she has been "consumed." All the escapees fail, except *THX*, who finally climbs to the "superstructure" (surface of the Earth) because the organized pursuit has exceeded its budget and is called off as robot cops are closing in on him. In the closing shot, *THX* stands erect, silhouetted against a huge orange sun ball as a wild goose flies over.

The movie takes an approach to the visual production problem of science fiction which has been used to good effect in recent adult films in the genre. It is the exact opposite of the costly special effects and animation approach of *Destination Moon* and *2001*. It consists of constructing a future world completely out of contemporary elements in our world. The total absence of artifacts and images that are not contemporaneous produces a convincing futurism. We have seen this approach used in Godard's *Alphaville*, Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Tenth Victim*. The original discovery probably comes from Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, which was not



about the future at all.

But is *THX 1138* about the future? A doctored trailer for an old Buck Rogers serial serves as preamble to the movie. The voice-over has Buck in the twentieth century, rather than the twenty-fifth. And we are informed that the important thing about Buck is that he is just an ordinary fellow like you and me, even though he lives in the marvelous "future." THX's world is extrapolated from current social trends and available technical possibilities. The movie is successful in creating a visual technological reality, but its point is political and cultural.

A special circumstance throws the sociological element into great prominence. This film is directly based on a celebrated student film done several years ago by its makers. That film presented only the escape and the chase, without any development of characters or plot. The action was seen through the eyes of the TV monitoring devices used to control the system. The film was more abstract, more intense and in many ways more effective. The device of showing a man's successful run for freedom through the perspective of his jailers produced a powerful thematic statement in cinematic terms so apt as to become a pun on the medium. It was a distillation of the basic form of the escape movie.

Escape movies are all alike, and we never tire of the similarity. They may vary a bit in establishing the nature of the confinement (prisons, POW camps, kidnappers, the Iron Curtain), the escapers and their motivations (love, sport, sublime love of freedom, fear of death), but we are in the theater to see Dick run. We may all be suckers to a nostalgic yearning to be free of our routine social bonds. Whatever our inner vulnerabilities are, our delight in seeing a man cheat the organized system of the compliance it has so carefully engineered is a fundamental form of political radicalism. By comparison with this political stance of escape movies in general, the specific political inventions of *THX 1138* are mere window dressing.

By a basic convention of science fiction, future technology produces totalitarianism by creating irresistible social control. A corollary shows that

the outcome is the same for all forms of social organization, in particular for both capitalism and socialism. It is a kind of extrapolation from the conventional wisdom of sociology about the structural uniformities of all industrial societies. *THX 1138* shows a world where organizational scale and the drive for material productivity have achieved the consequences predicted by Paul Goodman and Herbert Marcuse for capitalist society. Yet, the film-makers give symbolic indications that it is born of left-wing collectivism (a pseudoreligious, Cuban-bearded icon called Om; loudspeaker exhortations to serve the masses). A minor irony in the movie is the realization in its future world of many current movement goals, displayed in demonic form: the replacement of the nuclear family by the larger community as the effective unit of socialization, the open classroom, the material and symbolic equality of the sexes, planned fertility, the elimination of the private automobile, the institutionalization of altruism and equal opportunity. But because human scale has been exceeded, these victories become further forms of oppression.

The movie presents all the common forms of social control: the rationalization of physical space (in the superstate of the future, it has been agreed, we will live completely indoors), programmed learning of common ideologies (school subjects will be absorbed intravenously), monitoring of all human activity (TV, data banks, surveillance of brain functions), manipulation of human biochemistry (drug abuse means not taking your assigned doses), suppression of libido, ventilation of frustrations in the confessional, mass media propaganda and repressive desublimation, centralized control of the distribution of the means of survival and, for comic relief, robot cops in crash helmets and motorcycle jackets. There is some ingenuity in the social-science-fiction devices; the solutions are cute, like the role of black people or how a prison is run.

There is one major feature which is arbitrarily chosen, the management of sexuality. Creators of totalitarian futures in science fiction have been of two minds about the connection of

sexuality to social control. One school, represented by *1984*, holds that sexuality will be suppressed as a threat to good order. The other, as in *Brave New World*, sees sexuality as the new opium of the people, diverting their attention from thoughts of liberation. *THX 1138* opts for the first hypothesis and, in keeping with that choice, gives the outbreak of sexual love as the seed of rebellion and finally escape. It may occur to other viewers that by using sexuality, rather than suppressing it, the engineers of this future world could have saved themselves some trouble. There would remain the problem of the productivity of labor, but in science fiction a little chemistry may properly be invoked to handle such difficulties.

THX 1138 has been less than imaginative in devising ways for this new society to seduce its members with mass-produced diversions. They are especially remiss because our contemporary society has already shown great ingenuity in that area. These future engineers seem to know less about gulling the masses than Madison Avenue does in the present. In particular, that strikingly collective society seems very short on collective institutions. There are no mass meetings, no rituals, no rallies. Perhaps American movie-makers, like other Americans, are still operating with an individualistic world view. Even in this beehive, they don't produce much that is convincingly social.

This point leads us to the real problem with the escape. Although we are ready to accept escape as its own good reason, escape movies seem always to construct a rationale for us. In this asocial movie, as in those social theories which overemphasize the state and thus neglect society, the only source of change is the mysterious hunger of the inaccessible body. In particular, the voracious womb of the natural female, as in mythology, subverts the social order. The girls have done it again! But this crude plot device is needed only when there is no recognition of a social dialectic.

Although four people are involved in the escape, THX, his girl friend LUH, his would-be roommate and the

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