(I’m) A Cog in the Machine

Rather than present THX 1138 as an exhilarating experience, and force the audience to engage with overly-visible concepts, the movie conveys its message in a deliberately slow and cryptic manner. This message warns us of a future in which people become mere cogs in a machine, sacrificing individuality and free will for ultimate efficiency. It is not a film that is meant to be enjoyed in a traditional sense, but requires a focused and intentional analysis to understand and appreciate. This is accomplished through haunting camera shots, unnatural sound bytes, and unforgettable scenes that creep back into the audience’s minds, allowing them to slowly develop their own conclusions about the eerie presentation of this society. The slow pacing of the plot may bore some viewers, but every second of footage conveys a particular thematic element of the piece, rewarding an attentive audience with subtle yet powerful engagement. In this way, THX 1138 questions how technology draws us away from one another, and its potential to drain us of our humanity. This contributes to a sweeping passivity - social indifference is the primary menace of THX’s society, as it enables insidious methods of control, both external and self-enforced. These mechanisms of control are empowered by both technology and indifference, birthing a vicious cycle in which society does not question its actions, but mindlessly accepts things as they are.

One of the first scenes explores how technology has come to dominate the physical and emotional aspects of sexuality, which are no longer innate components of life. THX’s sexuality has become mechanized - he has no desire to interact with his female “mate”, but instead displays a bored expression as he channel surfs: a robot jerks him off. He changes the channel. His masturbation session is immediately followed by a brutal scene, in which a cowering human is beaten by an android policeman. The android’s strikes continue with the exact same rhythm as THX’s masturbation machine, creating a bizarre and unsettling contrast that his non-reaction makes all the more unnatural. A combination of emotion-numbing drugs and his recent sexual fix makes THX totally immune to the violent scene that plays out before him - technology has replaced the need for empathy, sympathy, or urgency, and instead offers a universal rhythm that can be mindlessly followed. After THX is weaned off of these drugs, and begins to have feelings for his roommate, LUH (with whom he shares “only space”), he becomes noticeably confused and frustrated. “Our relationship is normal”, he says, and cannot fathom the connection that forms between them, as his sense of purpose is supposed to come from a dutiful service to the workforce. His society has not prepared him to handle these emotions, and as such, THX must develop and exercise his newfound agency throughout the rest of the film. This serves as a reminder that ambition towards one's work can easily starve and consume the social relationships that shape personality, and define a sense of purpose.

One of the few opportunities for solace in this society is Omm, an all-knowing figure who is, in fact, represented by a painting of Jesus Christ. Omm’s religious domain is contained in small cramped room that heavily resembles a phone booth. Though man traditionally had to enter a temple to reach out to God, this society has made the process far more efficient; the convenience of a telephone call now encompasses their portal to the divine. In buddhism the symbol “OM” refers to a universal truth or essence that encompasses and connects *all* things. Even this divine aspect is unsafe from the influence of technology; the word’s meaning is more akin to “Ohm”, referring instead to a scientific measurement of electrical resistance. And indeed, Omm measures resistance - his primary function is to pry confessionals out of troubled citizens, allowing for an effortless policing of society. The quote “Ohm is a hologram” is carved into a wall in a shot where SEN and THX argue, a direct statement that there is no true leader or "God" that is watching these people. This is the function of the panopticon; though android policemen provide a physical presence and occasional enforcement, the citizens are already conditioned to report themselves, and one another. The audience is offered an ever greater perspective than Omm, as the cinematography reveals THX's struggle to escape, and the Controllers who attempt to hunt him down with the aid of androids. These same androids have been built by the very citizens that they police, embodying the physical manifestation of the panopticon’s self-policing. The visual pacing of the film contrasts this social unawareness with painfully long camera shots - unlike those within the film, the viewer is forced to examine each scene for an extended amount of time, allowing the absurdness of each situation ample time to soak in. Rebellion or revolution is beyond the realm of possibility when free will has been subverted, and society bows silently to an unseen overseer that may or may not exist.

Though human reproduction seems *possible* in this world, as THX is referred to as a birth-born, and LUH becomes pregnant, this is not the standard method of creating human beings. In one scene the protagonist is referred to as, “Subject 1138, Prefix THX” by a Controller, who watches his desperate attempt to escape. His number is prioritized over that which most closely resembles his “human” name, revealing the non-importance of an individual’s identity, and making them seem more like replaceable parts in an over-industrialized society. These naming conventions, or lack thereof, are notably linked to the numbers that are placed on each android’s helmet. Without awareness of their social condition, free will, or desire to act, the humans have become as serialized as the robot counterparts they create. The color white is a symbolic representation of this sweeping blandness that has consumed humanity; with the exact same set of white robes (save for select few) and near-omnipresent baldness, the humans are difficult to distinguish from one another, especially when they are crowded together. Lucas employs this beautifully in the shot where SEN and THX return to the outside world following their imprisonment. The endless whiteness, emptiness, and negative space of the prison is instantaneously contrasted with a chaotic horde of humans, following a very brief transitory darkness. They are dumped back into the societal pool that swallows them in a heartbeat - the camera cuts rapidly and the main characters are often absent from these shots. The music is tense, but not much is audible over the noises of the crowd, as our characters identities are drowned visually and aurally. This is the scene that separates SEN from the others, physically and mentally. He lacks the decisiveness that SRT and THX have in common, and will not continue the quest for individuality, but instead return to the familiar ways that society has conditioned him to act in.

The needs of the individual versus the needs of society are questioned heavily, as Lucas’ film trends toward one extreme of the spectrum, in which every individual has sacrificed his or her personality, freedom, and identity to facilitate ultimate economic efficiency. The phrase “Consumption is being standardized for greater efficiency” is repeated throughout the film, in addition to the command, “Buy more, be happy”, showing that this void is meant to be filled with petty consumerism. The characters of THX 1138 express little to no individuality, but instead act in a manner that utterly conforms to the standardized behaviors that society deems acceptable. Omm says, “You were created by the people, for the people”. This eerie statement becomes hauntingly literal as the viewer is exposed to a sort of morgue scene, in which our protagonist discovers that human bodies have “had the insides scooped out”. This information, coupled with a monitor shot that analyzes THX and reads “Reusable Parts: Kidney”, suggest that people are reproduced through a horrific process of harvesting and cloning. Though his value to society still surpasses that of this single part, for the time at least, his roommate is not so lucky The tragic fate of LUH shows that her name/number has been re-assigned to an embryonic shape inside of a tube. Her value has become negligible to the point where her body parts are better used in the assembly of a new, “less-troubled” human. Though these technologies are beyond reach at present, Lucas questions whether or not the sacredness of a human life can potentially be swallowed by an industrial desire to cut costs, recycle materials, and improve overall efficiency.

The uncanny dystopia of THX is shaped by technology; no facet of the world is free from the influences of manufactured drugs, android policemen, or an omniscient camera system. Standardized components make for clockwork precision, and THX’s world has done its best to shape individuals into a more desirable mold, free of uniqueness or speciality. As a critique of hyper-industrialized society the film is supposed to be uncomfortable, and cause the audience to reflect on how these discomforting phenomenon could easily creep into our own world. George Lucas further examines these sociological situations in his most famous set of works, Star Wars, which will appear later in the 1970’s. These films critiqued social indifference, assessed deindividuation, and feared an over-importance of technology - lessons that are still incredibly pertinent in the present. While THX is able to escape the monstrous society that created him he is alone, a solitary ascendent of Lucas’ own Allegory of the Cave. While THX 1138 may not be the most attention-grabbing film of the century, it will award those who are capable of understanding its message, and embody the awareness that we, as a society, are in such desperate need of.

Works Cited

*THX 1138*. Perf. Robert Duvall, Donald Pleasence, Maggie McOmie. Warner Brother, 1971. Videocassette.