

THX-1138

Directed by George Lucas
Produced by Lawrence Sturhahn
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1971

Some visions of the future are bleak; others are hopeful. But all are projections of the present. *THX-1138* is more compelling than most films of the future, but it also suffers limitations that have nothing to do with its modest budget. For starters, the film looks great. The future is spent underground. There is no sunlight, only fluorescence. There is no clutter. The people conduct their lives but leave no evidence of living. Because all people (save the bizarre-looking shell dwellers) shave their heads (or judiciously cover them with swim caps) hairstyle fashions (a particular problem with women in period movies) do not distract the viewer. The computer equipment is clunky and oversized, but it seems to mesh with the regimented, oppressive world underground. The only piece of extraordinary technology is a super-car, which looks and sounds as if it did, indeed, ride in from the future. People buy junk and immediately do justice to its name—they junk it. Religion is exposed as a man-made construct, the purpose of which is to deter anti-social behavior and promote a modicum of wellness. That, indeed, is all religion is. (True faith is given by God and centers on relationship, not ritual.)

Similarly, the penal void, all whiteness and oblivion, rings true. Also of note are holographic television, the faceless robot-cops, and the sad relegation of blacks to the role of entertainer.

All this rings true. Where the film runs astray is not in its stillness, its repetition, directionless dialogue, deficient character arcs, or glacial pace. No, the big problem is the idea that sex is ultimately what brings fulfillment in life. Once Luh and Thex are off their medications they embark on a binge of sexploration that is supposed to be compelling and fulfilling but plays as antiseptic and un- (almost anti-) erotic. We are, indeed, becoming a society that medicates away its troubles. But stifling sex is not remotely on the radar, and one wonders where writer-director George Lucas got the idea that sex was being stymied in the wake of the 1960's sexual revolution. Now we reap the benefits of societal upheaval. We are a people awash in sex, looking for satisfaction in pure and fleeting physicality. The physical dimensions of sex are hugely attractive, but the spiritual dimensions are ignored (as are the pathological and reproductive dimensions). Thex seems happy copulating with Luh, but we're not that happy for him. This film is one of the few instances where sex is rendered unappealing unintentionally.

Yet, just when it seems the film is all shadow and no substance, we are provided with two similar scenes, their narrative flow interrupted by a brief return to a chase, that come very near to tying the whole story together, and making of pure sex something amounting to love, with all the concomitant attributes of sacrifice, family, loss, wonder, fear, and regret.

As we pan across a row of jars that contain test-tube babies, the 'hologram,' SRT, ruminates: "How shall the new environment be programmed? It all happened so slowly that most men failed to realize that anything had happened at all." THX wonders about SEN's fate

and then asks SRT to explain who he is. After explaining his desire to take on a more concrete form, SRT reflects, "I always wanted to be part of the real world. So I left." We, of course, are left to wonder how real this underground world really is. We also marvel at SRT. How could a hologram take on corporeal form? If he is a hologram it makes sense that he feels no pain when his ear is tagged by the organ-harvesting crew. But why, pray tell, does he hunger for THX's excess biscuits? Then SRT breaks the vacuum seal and our heroes are back on the run.

A few minutes later in the movie they lock themselves into a control room where THX avails himself of a computer board. He wants to know the fate of his lover. With SRT's help he discovers that LUH has been consumed—killed and her organs harvested—and her name has been reassigned to a new child of the jar. THX refuses to believe it. But as the truth sinks in, SRT tries to console his new friend: "Maybe you are right. Maybe there's something wrong with the computer. I don't know, it's a strange life: cybernetics, genetics, lasers, and all those things. I guess I'll never understand any of that stuff. Guess maybe holograms are not supposed to."

What SRT doesn't understand is the human connection, the capacity to love and grieve, and cherish each other.

And as Lalo Schifrin's beautiful score plays, we get perpetually closer to that jar, though we are denied a detailed look by an inefficient monitor. This just adds to the mystery. Is it a test-tube baby? Is it THX and LUH's child, harvested and transplanted to a jar of amniotic solution? We don't know, nor does THX.

But it is this last great affront to human dignity, a wrong which surpasses all the wrongs to which THX has already been subjected, that compels the title character to make the fateful decision to leave the city and make an uncertain attempt at life on the outside. Nothing could be worse than this.

And so, as the film concludes, we can identify with our hero as a man with the same longings and needs that we all share. And we can be grateful that we need not pursue those needs and longings in an environment as inhospitable to love as confronts THX-1138.