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THX 1138: (Re-) Made in God's Image

Episode 3: The Third

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It is, perhaps, a little, hyperbolic to refer to George Lucas as 'the greatest artist of our time', responsible for closing 'the gap between art and technology more successfully' (Paglia, 2012) than any other; yet it is impossible to avoid the impact Lucas' films have had on both multiple generations of imaginations, and on a generation of film-makers and practitioners. However, what must also be noted is Lucas' role in the rise of the director's cut as a form of continuous textual revision. Lucas' perhaps perverse, certainly onanistic, fiddling with his texts, and the responses these alterations generate, provide innumerable examples of the fact that audiences are highly attuned to the manner with which their experiences and, specifically, their memories of their experiences, alter in line with the alterations he performs. But these alterations do more than merely make the films more of what they were always (apparently) intended to be. Instead, the alterations, additions and deletions create films that could be better considered as distinct and separate; not made anew but which are new – all over again. In this fashion, Lucas' alterations create new texts with, crucially, new narratives and new politics, all of which is troubling if these alterations render the films more in line with Lucas' original vision. To that end, an exploration of *THX 1138* (1971 / 1977 / 2004), Lucas' first commercial release, will demonstrate my concerns as a fan of the original and a disappointed consumer of the revised version.

Lucas' digital attention to the mise-en-scène of *THX 1138* in his 2004 'Director's Cut' does more than simply flesh out of the image or provide the kinds of details that render the film more contemporary, more convincing (apropos his 1977 statement that *Star Wars: A New Hope* accomplished only 25% of what wanted) (*Star Wars: The Special Edition Trilogy*, 1997, pp. 16-17). These additions, all three minutes and 18 seconds of them, along with the minor subtractions and alterations he also makes to the text, render *THX 1138* a fundamentally different film. Yet nothing occurs of the magnitude as the grandiose addition of a CGI Jabba the Hut into *A New Hope* (1977), a new character whose inclusion necessitates the addition of originally shot footage and new digital elements. The convoluted tenses involved in narrating these changes demonstrate the difficulties in considering entirely what happens when a text like this is altered with material both old (insofar as it dates from the period of the original release but was excluded from it) and new, designed in order to justify the inclusion of the previously excluded. But this is *Star Wars* and one treads here with difficulty, lest one encounter the monsters of this particular canon.

Instead, these alterations are designed to enhance and make more pointed the original narrative and Lucas' intention that the film be understood as "a metaphor for the way we were living at the time". Here Lucas' assumption is writ large: altering the mise-en-scène will not affect the narrative, will only enhance it, make it more of what it is and what it should have been all along (if only the technology that exists now had existed then, as if the technology that exists now is the only technology that will ever be needed, and so on).

In the original cinematic release, and the subsequent post-*Star Wars* VHS version (1977), which itself included footage removed from the 1971 original, the mise-en-scène provides the information we need to understand the ways in which the characters suffer through their lives. THX and LUH are roommates who share 'nothing but space'. Under constant surveillance and thoroughly

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medicated out of any affective state wherein sex and emotional connection are illegal, we experience two individuals subject to the constant controls of an Orwellian regime run amok.

The society that emerges in this version of the film is regulated, disciplined by tall, uniformed silver-faced automatons dressed, armed with shock-poles. Crucially, however, what also visible in this version of the film is the fact that this society, wherever it is located (the revelation at the close of the film is never hinted at) is ragged, collapsing in on itself. The drugged population are bred specifically for their jobs and are sedated out of their humanity; industrial accidents appear so common as to barely raise comment the economic system appears to be an enervated capitalism, but one in which objects are bought (mysterious and seemingly-functionless brightly-coloured geometric shapes) so that they can be immediately discarded. Both THX and LUH work, insofar as they engage in labour but, as above, this labour is focused in on maintaining the status quo: THX constructs more of the robot police while LUH appears to be one of a multitude of surveillance / control personnel. The jobs are repetitive, alienating and, with no scene of the larger world that constitutes the environment within which THX and LUH suffer, we must conclude that this is all that there is: soulless, often dangerous work, constant surveillance, control, discipline and an absence of any kind of meaningful connection between the workers, alienated as they are from themselves, their labour and each other.

This, surely, must be the point to the original, perhaps canonical, text: as the Lucasfilm website notes, *THX 1138's*

chilling exploration of a soulless future remains a compelling examination of the present, as it follows one man's harrowing attempt to escape a world where thoughts are controlled, freedom is forbidden and love is the ultimate crime. (Lucasfilm.com, n.d.)

The mise-en-scène of this original version restricts us to THX's experience; we identify with him as our protagonist and we empathise with his experience as LUH alters his medication, allowing him to attempt the 'ultimate crime' of love for the first and last time. As THX and LUH gain their subjectivity and individual freedom in the face of both the oppressive actions of the regime they



come to resist, and that regime's own heartlessness (LUH is, apparently, recycled; the pursuit for THX is abandoned when it runs over-budget), we experience alongside them, and as a result of them and our positioning by the miss-en-scene, we are sympathetic to their situation. We engage with them as characters and invest in their fates. The film makes possible this interpretation by limiting us directly to the action at hand (a material

consequence of the same technological limitations Lucas would seek to overcome in the later version). We have very few shots beyond the visible experiences of THX and LUH, and those that are provided never give us more than the information necessary to the plot; we see those who surveil them, and see these antagonists in a similarly restricted and limited fashion. In this way, the interpretation we are encouraged to come to is that of a system that restricts and surveils because it is failing, because it is rotting, exhausted, decaying under the weight of its own corruption. We never see beyond the demands of the immediate narrative because there is no beyond; there literally is nothing else to see.

In the wake of this conclusion, wherein the contemporary allegory would appear to be clear, Lucas' additions and directorial alterations remove this clarity and turn *THX 1138* into an entirely different film. The addition of new backgrounds, new depths of field and new mise-en-scène give us a greater sense of the world that surrounds THX and LUH. Again this is entirely as intended, except that the world Lucas pictures in these new insertions is a world that works, a system that is not decaying but flourishing (or, at the very least, functioning) and one that is also very clearly underground. In these new sequences, we see THX at work in a large, clean and very active facility; we see flying transports in the background of extensive, clearly subterranean, vistas, and large numbers of citizens moving purposefully (as opposed to the underpopulated scenes in the original pre-digital releases). With these additions, what emerges is less a picture of THX as a suffering everyman gaining a sense of self and a desire for self-articulation beyond the reach of a repressive, barely comprehensible regime. Instead, THX and LUH's search for some kind of inalienable connection seems selfish, narcissistic and pointless, the acts of two misfits in the fact of a post-apocalyptic society that appears to be working well despite them.

Cynically, then, I might conclude that Lucas is right: *THX 1138* continues to speak to the society that receives it. On behalf of the director it circulates his vision and opinion exactly as the work of

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art is designed to do. What's changed in the film must therefore still reflect the director and if the director is more himself than ever, then by making the film more itself (utilising the technologies that didn't exist at the time but were desired in their absence), the film will narrate this new message exactly as it did the old. A film about the necessity of resistance becomes a film about the impossibility of resistance. The hero's triumphant emerging into the light of new possibility becomes an act of selfish defiance that leads nowhere, resolves nothing and, importantly, affects nothing about the society he leaves because the society itself does not care for his leaving.

Lucas maintains that the digital impositions work to render the film continuously contemporary; his point is that the message remains the same, indeed, is strengthened by the addition of new material and the re-rendering of a mise-en-scène in line with the possibilities of these new technologies. Instead, what this all-too-brief exploration shows is that by consolidating and enhancing the mise-en-scène within which the characters travail, the film becomes an entirely different text, with different meanings and contrary conclusions because the character actions must be interpreted against this revised framework. *THX 1138* is made anew and, as a result, is not the thing it was. One can only wonder what Lucas' next version of the film will reveal about director and the contemporary society the text is updated to speak to.

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