

ely
film
society

nov
2015

at the
notes

Free mulled wine and mince pies!
Nothing better to keep out the chill
of winter and the challenge of a
Korean war film at next month's
showing. See, we look after you
really, body and soul.

A sad farewell to another
progressive local initiative: next
month's **Creative Ely** meeting will
be its last, at the Cutter on December
1st. A reminder that local groups
thrive on local support and local
organisers. **EFS will keep going -
as long as you keep coming!**

[http://www.meetup.com/
Creative-Ely/events/221436364](http://www.meetup.com/Creative-Ely/events/221436364)

THX1138 *The Director's Cut*

George Lucas, US 1971/2008



Script by George Lucas and
Walter Murch

Music by Lalo Schifrin

Cinematography by

Albert Kihn and David Myers

Robert Duvall THX
Donald Pleasence SEN
Don Pedro Colley SRT
Maggie McOmie LUH
Ian Wolfe PTO
Marshall Efron TWA
Sid Haig NCH
John Pearce DWY

Science fiction film is a perpetual
hostage to fortune. For something that
claims to envisage the future, it can
date in alarming and unpredictable
ways: to walk away from the familiar
it has to be able to create a believable
reality in its place, and make it stick
in the mind with more than gadgets
and mannerisms. It also has to deal
with established rules of narrative
and character, while suggesting that
an unknown future generation may

no longer live by those rules if they
become unrecognisable. No wonder
that many sci-fi films fail, but it is
always worth noting the brave and
interesting ways in which they fail, and
the example they often set to those
films that come after.

We now know too much about
George Lucas. In 1971 we didn't. In his
mid-twenties, as a graduate of the film
school at University of California San
Diego, he revisited - a Lucas trope,

it will be seen - a student short film project called *Electronic Labyrinth: THX 1138 4EB*, raising finance with the then scarcely-better-known Francis Ford Coppola. Shot in improvised interior locations on a modest budget, it aimed to create a portrait of a bleak dystopia, a human ant colony dedicated to a faceless hi-tech future and ruled by a total surveillance state apparently beyond individual or collective rebellion.

Lucas's world in *THX1138* is intensely political in ways that reflect his times and generation. Born in 1944, the gilded post-WW2 generation raised in unparalleled prosperity, he was nevertheless of the era of protest and challenge. An early short from his UCSD days consists solely of a long continuous shot of a bath filling with blood, a commentary on the US military involvement in Vietnam. Much of the interior décor of THX recalls the control rooms of the Apollo moon missions, the aspirational new workplace - what kid *didn't* want to work at Houston or Cape Canaveral in the late 60s? - of video screens, coded commands and remote operation that represented an unprecedented urge to scale projects and ambitions beyond the narrowly human. In which the white-clad bodies of astronauts were merely convenient performing mechanisms at the centre of a highly regulated machine. They were there but it was not for their benefit, no more than the soldiers in the parallel war in Asia whose operation was not considered the concern of democracy back home.

Lucas's generation also grew up in the era of drugs, recreational and otherwise, and a guiding influence in *THX1138* is Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* [1932]. Education and motivation are administered by chemicals with a crime of "criminal drug evasion", and sex is a laboratory activity. Not far behind that is Orwell's *1984*: not only a total surveillance society but a rogue free-thinker who may be an *agent provocateur*, SEN (Donald Pleasence, doing that charismatic villain thing that seemingly only Brit actors can provide in Hollywood, and apparently using



speeches from that great Californian, Richard Nixon - go figure), intimacy as a betrayal, and a cult of confession to a deity OMM who turns out to be a poster in a television studio - a reveal that may remind us of the high point of *The Wizard Of Oz*? But nobody shouts. The future is a murmuring shopping mall: the deity's blessing is: *Buy more. Buy more now. Be happy.* Where the controllers repeatedly ask: *Are you now or have you ever been?* in a creepy echo of the McCarthy inquisitions. The faceless police robots intone *I am here to protect you. You have nowhere to go.* Prison is a white mist.

A screen-sedated virtual society in sedentary jobs and minimalist accommodation is more recognisable to us than it was to Lucas's hippie generation. The widescreen slot format of the frame (Cinemascope) is full of great expanses of white and cool pastels, the lighting is flat and cold, and Lalo Schiffrin's eerie soundtrack has not dated over the years. The minimalist set is a virtue of the modest budget (shot in car parks and empty offices, with the final escape using an underpass from the San Francisco BART subway system which was then under construction).

THX himself is an icon of the times: the solitary man who flees to the unknown because he cannot bear what he has always known. And yet - what? The end of the film is one great overwhelming sunset. Does THX survive? The colony has given up on him, since the cost of his control has gone over budget

and the police are turned back. He is no Spartacus: nobody follows his example or even sees it. Is the bleak impotence the point, the choice being worse than the conformity, as many an escaped dissident finds once over the border? (Outside the colony live "shell dwellers", stunted humanoids that suggests human evolution has long gone in divergent directions: add *Freaks* to that list of influences)

Lucas considers *THX1138* "one of the greatest achievements of his career". And yet this is the Director's Cut: the maker of *Star Wars* (also "recontextualised") could not resist editing his past to burnish his present, like some minister of truth. CGI backgrounds of hovercars and whooshing traffic have been inserted into what were white walls, creating fervid activity out of grim stasis. At least only two minutes was added to the running time, unlike many recuts that add in great chunks of lost favourite shots (though Lucas's great ally Coppola greatly improved an already stunning film with his ground-up re-edit *Apocalypse Now Redux* with nearly an hour of additions). In the internet era we can constantly change history. Nobody is supposed to notice. *For greater efficiency, consumption is being standardised.* Say it often enough...

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
THE DMZ (Park Sang-ho,
Korea 1965)
Monday 21 December

www.elyfilmsociety.com

[www.meetup.com/
ely-film/](http://www.meetup.com/ely-film/)

