Electronic Labyrinth: THX 1138 4EB

By Matthew Holtmeier

Dan Natchsheim as a character known simply as 1138 attempts to escape a dystopian future society. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Considering at least one "Star Wars" film has been released every decade since the 1970's, this epic science fiction franchise likely jumps to mind upon hearing the name George Lucas. Avid filmgoers might think, instead, 'Industrial Light and Magic,' which has contributed to the special effects of over 275 feature films since it was founded by Lucas in 1975. Either way, Lucas's penchant for the creation of fantastic worlds has radically shaped the cinematic landscape of the past 40 years, particularly where big budget films are concerned. Like many filmmakers since the growth of film schools in the 60's, he started with a student film, however: "Electronic Labyrinth: THX1138 4EB" (1967). "Electronic Labyrinth" provides a strikingly different vision of what the cinematic medium is capable of, particularly when compared to the modern fairytales of the "Star Wars" films. It too has a science fictional setting, but one without heroes or princesses, and instead delves into the dystopian potential of technology itself. Giving vision to a world akin to George Orwell's "1984," "Electronic Labyrinth" reveals Lucas's nascent penchant for creating cinematic futurescapes, and sets the stage for the development of Industrial Light and Magic, soon to be his empire of other worlds.

A blue-tinted close-up of an eye introduces the viewer to Lucas's prototypical vision via a flickering screen, while text relays the temporal setting, the year 2187. The image wavers, and cuts further back to reveal the face of YYO 7117, while subsequent text relates: subjecte THX 1138 type ErosBod class 4 genesis sexacte. The cut reveals that the subject on screen is not THX 1138, but his 'mate' 7117 being interviewed regarding 1138's supposed inconsistencies with the authoritarian system of year 2187. She speaks indignantly into the camera, "Of course we're not in love with them. Of course I don't love him. We were… never in love with them. We've been the ideal mates. You know that. You *know* that." A deep, almost mechanical voice responds, "I know. I know." She continues, "You know they're different. ErosBods are just not as good. You know that." And again, cueing the opening chords of 'Still I'm Sad' by

The Yardbirds, "I know. I know." As the Gregorian chant of The Yardbirds track begins, the camera tracks across an extreme close up of electronics equipment, revealing the technocracy of the future. The rest of the film will oscillate between the 'operators' of this technocracy, and THX 1138's attempted escape from the smooth, featureless white walls of a compound, presumably a world without desire.

Lucas builds his fantastic vision in "Electronic Labyrinth" through avant-garde editing, special effects, and carefully designed mise-en-scène, while the constant thrum of radio chatter suggests the power of the technocracy that hunts 1138. Despite the use of the pop song early on in the film, little else follows Hollywood or commercial film style, which focuses on the coherency of spatio-temporal relations and narrative efficiency. Instead, the mise-en-scène constructs a world through its consistency of architectural and costume design, as well as its technological imagery. Clinically white 'scrubs' adorn the operators that track 1138's movement, making them out to be orderlies keeping the machine functioning, with the notable addition of oversized headphones that allow them to plug in to its vast network. These elements are brought together through Einsteinian montage, cutting from one image to the next, not to locate 1138 as much as to suggest the futility of his flight. As 1138 continually eludes their grasp, the operators reveal themselves to be more than human in their pact with the machine, and we later see through the infrared vision of PERFECTBOD2180's I-R viewer.

The screens from the beginning of the film may have been relatively familiar to audiences of 1967, but when the image drops into its red inversion of heat and light, we see the genesis of Industrial Light and Magic and Lucas's desire to create a world wholly unlike our own, even if based in real stories, desires, and fears.

This experimental student film led Lucas to the feature "THX 1138" in 1971, and despite his rekindled success with the "Star Wars" space operas, it was an inauspicious start for this filmmaker. "THX 1138" builds upon many of the images from "Electronic Labyrinth," transporting them into a narrative, feature-length film. "THX 1138"'s" visual consistency with the earlier film challenged its commercial appeal, however, and marked Lucas out to be a cold science fiction filmmaker, if learned in his craft.[1] Lucas's own reflections on the film suggest as much: "Modern society is a rotten place thing, and by God, if you're smart, you'll get out and try to escape. Start an alternative civilization above ground, out of the sewer you find yourself in."[2] And while the film would eventually become a cult success, making its money on rentals, it was a commercial failure for Warner Brothers. These failures led to a reconfiguration of the filmmaker's trajectory, turning first to "American Graffiti" (1973) and then "Star Wars" (1977). And even if "Star Wars" marks a return to science fiction for this filmmaker, the Joseph Campbell influenced space opera is nothing like the dystopian political critiques of "Electronic Labyrinth" or "THX 1138."[3]

Despite the drastic transformation of Lucas's career early on, premises developed in "Electronic Labyrinth" shaped Lucas's films to come and the future of the Hollywood industry. As Mark Decker argues, the dystopian critique of technology and industrial society did not end with "Electronic Labyrinth"/"THX 1138": "after using "THX" to attack industrial society in ways that strongly resemble the argument Herbert Marcuse makes… Lucas created rhetorically deft critiques of industrial society in "American Graffiti" and the "Star Wars" films that cleverly continued the Marcusian critique found in "THX" by means of much more commercially viable films."[4] And while Lucas's subsequent films may be less difficult conceptually, they illustrate the same close attention to the design of an(other) world that Lucas develops in "Electronic Labyrinth," leading him to create Industrial Light and Magic for "Star Wars." As John Dykstra, one of the original founders of Industrial Light and Magic, recounts regarding breaking new Special Effects ground with "Star Wars," "It was an impossible number of shots for an era in which none of the equipment or processes that were used to produce ["Star Wars"] existed. It was overwhelming."[5] "Electronic Labyrinth" reveals Lucas's brilliance for world-building, and since neither company nor technology existed to help him fulfill his vision, he created it. Understanding this genealogy from "Electronic Labyrinth" to Industrial Light and Magic illustrates the way Lucas's student film paved a path for a radical new vision of the cinematic medium for decades to come.

[1] Roger Greenspun, "Lucas's 'THX1138': Love Is a Punishable Crime in Future," *New York Times*, March 12, 1971.

[2] Dale Pollock, *Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas* (Da Capo Press, 1999): 94.

[3] In an interview with Bill Moyer (see *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* from 2001), Lucas names mythologist Joseph Campbell as his mentor, second only to Francis Ford Coppola, and this connection is significant to Lucas's transformation from the 'cold Sci-Fi' filmmaker of *Electronic Labyrinth* to the filmmaker associated with the fairytales of the *Star Wars* franchise, complete with heroes and princesses.

[4] Mark Decker, "They Want Unfreedom and One-Dimensional Thought? I'll give Them Unfreedom and One-Dimensional Thought: George Lucas, *THX-1138,* and the Persistence of Marcusian Social Critique in *American Graffiti* and the *Star Wars* Films," *Extrapolation*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2009): 419-420.

[5] Alex French and Howie Kahn, "The Untold Story of ILM, a Titan That Forever Changed Film," *Wired* (June 2015).

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