



## THE FAILED PROBABILITY OF LOVE OVER LABOR IN *THX 1138* (1971)

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### Abstract

Scholarship on panopticism and film rarely considers aesthetic attributes of the medium. Thematic elements associated with panopticism are often examined instead. George Lucas' directorial debut, *THX 1138* (1971), uses aesthetic values in filmmaking to screen a narrative grounded in panopticism. By drawing on the Foucaultian principle of panopticism, this article illustrates the ideological conflation between labor and love that is central to the protagonist THX. On the surface, *THX 1138* situates the sexual ideologies of the early Seventies in a socialist contention. The sexual ideology that favors love and freedom of expression is placed in direct conflict with a socialist ideology that labor and obedience. This ideological strife erupts on screen in a dystopian future that is visualized in panoptic cinematography techniques. The result is an analysis of the nuanced visual mastery on Lucas's part that serves as an explicit commentary grounded in the political and cultural contention never quite resolved in American history.

**Keywords:** *THX 1138*, panopticism, panoptic gaze, cinematography

Originally proposed by Jeremy Bentham but popularized by Michel Foucault, panopticism is a behavior modification system that accentuates a self-serviced disciplinary standard enforced by an oppressive regime. Bentham's original panopticon was a prison structure enabling one guard to assume disciplinary control over its occupants without the tenants' knowledge of when they were being watched. Foucault advanced the practicum of panopticism into a social theory maintaining that citizens are "subjected to a field of visibility," thus assuming the "responsibility for the constraints of power" (202). In other words, the actions of the monitored populous perpetuate power dictated by fear. Agency becomes an illusion as citizens of preserve totalitarianism. Foucault goes on to argue the oppressed inherit the role of the oppressor while simultaneously erecting a "perpetual victory that avoids any physical confrontation and [that] is always decided in advance" (203). While the aggressor is invisible to the

aggressee, the aggressee also assumes the power maintained by the aggressor. The panopticon functions as a social mechanism because the fear of occupants being watched creates a state of self-surveillance fueled by paranoia. While the theory of panopticism is predicated on citizens refereeing their own boundaries, panopticism is really predicated on invisible structures. Bentham's panopticon fixates on a prison system. Foucault's analysis emphasizes the oppressive nature the panopticon serves. Foucault's panopticism can be directly applied to representations of government in dystopian narratives. Yet, scholarship on panopticism in cinema resists the aesthetic functions of the social theory in favor of thematic implications. This neglect is odd considering a camera mimics the invisible walls indicative of the panopticon.

While panopticism has been criticized for a variety of reasons, the functioning aspects of the panopticon only continue to be more pervasive in modern societies. Surveillance and monitoring systems litter street corners in all technologically advanced countries. Hospitals, airports, and military installations are locations reliant on self-surveillance driven by fear of an invisible power. Since the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and the induction of the Patriot Act, the emphasis on security is at an all-time high. Moreover, the panoptic instrument frequently takes the same form, that being the camera. Naturally, the surveillance camera, then, is linked to cinema. However, the camera is often the last mechanism considered in analyzing panopticism in cinema.

One overbearing reason Foucault's theoretical conception of panopticism avoids any aesthetic appreciation in film analysis is because Foucault insists that the social mechanism of panopticism is more powerful than any physical device. When power is self-asserted, the surveillance is no longer dictated by machinery. Surveillance technology would seem useless as Karen-Margrethe Simonsen argues: "the internal mechanism of surveillance and self-discipline is more efficient than the external surveillance apparatus" (233). According to Simonsen, the panopticon is reliant on three characteristics: absolute visibility of the occupants, invisibility of the watchmen, and "an interplay between the material, technical machinery of surveillance and internalized self-discipline" (233). Fear is a commodity purchased by the self-disciplined. Power and fear are inseparable in surveillance culture. Fear is internalized while power is a forced fantasy enabling social control. Joshua Gooch maintains that the onset of war in a postmodern capitalist culture perpetuates the "concomitant fantasies of disciplinary power" while its effectiveness is grounded in a "need for ever-more-fine-grained mechanisms of social control" (156). The physical mechanism that constitutes surveillance is ultimately inseparable from what Gooch terms the "panoptic gaze" (156). The panoptic gaze is the lens. More specifically, the panoptic gaze is the transparent apparatus that separates the authoritative regime from the occupant in the

panopticon. The panoptic gaze mediates surveillance. The interplay between surveillance technology and occupants share the same characteristics of the relationship between camera and actor in film. The actors are totally visible while the audience is invisible. The self-discipline of the actor ensures character within the panopticon. The camera functions as the technological machinery that governs surveillance. In this context, the panoptic gaze and cinematography in film go hand in hand. I argue that the panoptic gaze or lens and the actors in the frame have a working relationship to establish the self-discipline inherent of panopticism.

The rise of surveillance-themed narratives in cinema is tautological. With the advancement of surveillance technology in recent years, post-9/11 cinema has engaged with the theme of surveillance. American films like *Minority Report* (2002), *Eagle Eye* (2008), *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011), *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014), and *Furious 7* (2015) exemplify surveillance themes attributed to a “Big Brother” national monitoring system indicative of panopticism. These films, to name a few, share a similar theme and tone to a political position that favors security over freedom. The insistence on security, in turn, hinders identity. However, surveillance-themed films fail to characterize the surveillance position of the panopticon. Pre-9/11 cinema, to some degree, also repeatedly escapes the aesthetic invisible structure warranted by panopticism. Twentieth century films prophetically engage with the subject of surveillance but fail to establish a working relationship between the monitoring lens and the actors. By monitoring lens, I am referring to the panoptic lens or panoptic gaze established by the cinematography and indicated by Gooch. Many films frame the actions of surveillance but sound, or the lack thereof, is often used to establish a baseline for monitoring. For example, Stanley Kubrick’s cult classic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) briefly capitalizes on engaging its subject through the panopticon. Rather than a visual engagement, the absence of sounds signifies a shift in monitoring power. In the scene where Bowman (Keir Dullea) and Poole (Gary Lockland) debate privately on deactivating the supercomputer HAL 9000 based on a potential malfunction, the artificial intelligence oversees their conversation by engaging interrogation. HAL’s lip reading capabilities are rendered by a sequence framed in an iris shot emphasizing Bowman and Poole’s dialogue. It is the absence of sound, however, that signals to the viewer the change in perspective. The absence of sound in this sequence places the camera in a subjective stance that assumes the red oculus of HAL. In a broader context, the scene signifies the dangers of artificial intelligence. More importantly, the scene indicates how a panoptic lens can function in film to stress the attribution of power.

As a visual medium, the materiality and presentation of film offers an entry point to ascertain the relationship between a film’s subject and how the subject is being framed. Many films depict monitoring through filtered shots

often mimicking time stamped surveillance cameras. This technique is obvious to the spectator and also denotes a sense of realism. However, the criticism of this technique does little to expand the scholarship surrounding panopticism and cinema. The problem with the technique is that the actor regularly does not show a reaction to the camera. This position is problematic when examining Kubrick's *2001* because neither Bowman nor Poole take note of Hal's reconnaissance. If panopticism relies on the relationship between the monitor and the monitored, than an investigation of both cinematography and actor is needed to read panopticism's thematic implication. This article seeks to assess the relationship between cinematography and the actor as a functioning aspect of panopticism. By identifying shortcomings of the thematic interpretations surrounding panopticism and cinema to date, this article will show how the camera can be equated with the invisible structure proposed by Bentham and Foucault.

The cinematography in George Lucas's directorial debut *THX 1138* (1971) illuminates the panoptic gaze. *THX 1138* follows a protagonist of the same name (Robert Duvall) and his escape from a bleak world run by a totalitarian regime, where sex is outlawed and citizens are force-fed pharmaceutical drugs to remain compliant. Similar to the majority of dystopian films, *THX 1138* is less about the characters than it is about the world these characters are situated in. The society depicted in *THX 1138* is governed by extreme totalitarian and a fascist regime that is arguably a response to cultural anxieties left in the wake of the Sixties. While Lucas is most known for his morality epic *Star Wars* (1977), *THX 1138* is the antithesis of "the galaxy far far away," showcasing a bleak and paranoid world. Sex may be outlawed in this dystopian society but love ultimately challenges the motion picture's extremist statehood. In 1971, the sexual revolution was in its prime. Hollywood could screen more explicit content following the restructuring abolition of the Production Code and the studios did not shy away from erotic features. Even when films screened subjects that did not idealize sex, cinema had a sexual subtext. *THX* uniquely exemplifies Mask's claim since the central conflict of the film is sex, or rather the lack thereof. Sex operates as a form of agency in opposition to the socialist's ideology that favors labor dictated by the police state. This conflict of ideology between sex and labor can be interpreted as a reaction to the surveillance tactics exemplified by the panoptic positioning of the camera.

Partially financed by Warner Bros and Francis Ford Coppola's production company American Zeotrope, *THX 1138* failed to deliver any substantial revenue. The film received very mixed reviews. Roger Greenspun of the *New York Times* was the least critical in his review maintaining that *THX 1138* has "very potent material" in the depiction of "white-garbed figures against an often undifferentiated white background... resembling the kind of minimal-

information cartoon that was indicative of good taste in animation a few years back.” However, Greenspun also argued that Lucas’s depiction of the sexless society reminded him of a “slightly old fashioned anxiety dream.” On the other hand, Roger Ebert claims that *THX 1138* devalues “the whole business of Love vs. State [...] [It] is out of Orwell and countless other writers.” Yet, Ebert also argues *THX 1138* is a successful experiment while also praising the film’s sound that “add[s] to the illusion of a distant and different society.” In his review featured in *Film Quarterly*, Ernest Callenbach dismisses the sound of the film as he asserts that the dialogue is “muffled by the sound track [despite] not [being] very coherent in the first place.” Callenbach goes on to argue that *THX 1138* has “strong emotional components [...] because Lucas also takes pains to make his dreadful future-present world so self-contained.” Callenbach is referring to the last shot in which THX (Robert Duvall) climbs the pipe to escape only to find a world of emptiness and despair. In this sense, the narrative is not as empty as the critics conceive. Instead, the ending uncovers a desolate truth that echoes the stasis of a range of social circumstances that plagues American society.

While critics undervalue aspects of Lucas’s directorial debut, scholars find solace in the retelling of classical antiquity as well as the ideological constructs presented in *THX 1138*. In “The Closed Society and Its Friends,” Raymond Cormier identifies links between *THX 1138* and Plato’s *Republic*. Specifically, Cormier argues: “*THX 1138*’s concluding and dramatic escape to the sunlight above recalls the feature of The Allegory of the Cave” (194). Cormier’s notion is interesting and gives substance to the narrative that many critics quickly dismissed. At its core, *THX 1138* is a film centered on a protagonist escaping his miserable circumstances. However, THX does not know any other life besides the assembly line and consistent pill ingestion. The closing scene employs an extreme long shot of THX standing in the sun evoking a chilling sense of uncertainty. The resolution culminates into a “bitter, tense, and deep parable” that highlights human dependency on systematic government, considering THX is lost on his own (Cormier 195). Similarly, in “The Problem of the Real and *THX 1138*,” J. P. Telotte argues that the narrative of *THX 1138* opens up a dialog between utopian and dystopian films. Telotte claims *THX 1138* “penetrates beyond the social conditions and the ideology that informs and enables those conditions to remind us of the extent to which reality itself can become the focus of such fantasies” (47). Reality is a loaded term because it is a subjective term based on an individual’s construction of social circumstances rather than a universal truth. *THX 1138*, according to Telotte, resonates in a recognizable state considering “the issue of media technology, and hence of its effects on our world” (50). Telotte refers to many scenes in which THX consumes media; hence constructing a superficial reality that reinforces the totalitarian regime THX eventually challenges. In other words, *THX 1138* is

cultural commentary facilitated by media propaganda that dictates our responses to images as a social prison.

Although Cormier emphasizes the allegorical context and Telotte stresses the ideological construction of reality through media in *THX 1138*, I would argue Lucas's freshman debut is a panoptic criticism of the citizen/state relationship most associated with centralized governments. With the exception of the scene in which THX is physically disciplined by the policing androids following the consummation between THX and LUH (Maggie McOmie), disciplinary actions are largely administered by the citizens themselves. LUH is commissioned to regulate THX's drug consumption to be in compliance with the state and factory production. By the same token, many scenes depict THX as mindfully aware of his actions for his field of vision is often within proximity of the camera frame. In other words, the camera assumes the surveillance position. In this context, *THX 1138*'s narrative cannot simply be denoted as an escapist plot. Instead, agency can be considered central to *THX 1138*. Cormier would readily agree that sacrificing agency for the state is central to the formation of the republic. Telotte recognizes the Foucaultian panopticon present in *THX 1138* but views the occurrence as a "hyper-real realm" negotiated by voice overlays and surveillance iconography (52). The remainder of this article will articulate *THX 1138*'s frame composition in relation to the protagonist as a surveillance system that converts socialist ideologies to a capitalist ideologies. I argue that THX's new-found sense of agency shifts the ideological constraint in the narrative that dismisses labor for love as an existential commodity that reverberates in a sexual awakening resolved by THX and LUH's consummation.

From the initial entrance of THX, the socialist ideology emphasizing labor is visually acute. THX is captured in a close-up through a filtered shot with an eerie expression that evokes the sense of being watched closely. The scene then cuts to a subjective camera angle that is thrust between two objects out of focus giving the impression of a surveillance lens. This panoptic perspective initially conveys a tonal effect of discomfort and anxiety. The panoptic frame is confirmed by the intersection of dialogue in which THX expresses his lack of concentration. Rather than the state relieving THX of his duties, THX is prescribed more drugs to increase focus and therefore increase production. The cuts that follow are stark futuristic images of an observation room where LUH is depicted on a small television screen giving a similar impression of panopticism. Although the shots of THX and LUH differ explicitly in scope and range, the result stimulates a panoptic viewing that continues to reinforce the socialist ideology present in the narrative. The accompanying shot of THX is short and subtle but the character jerks his head giving the impression of paranoia. The portrayal of THX and LUH are not isolated incidents but rather connecting archetypes that arouse a sense of suspicion and distrust, despite the lack of a physical android or human tailing the distant couple. Between the subjective

camera angle fixated on THX and the medium long shot centered on the television screening LUH, the panoptic frames link a series of continuity shots that stress a socialist contention rooted in self-surveillance.

The socialist ideology of labor framed in the opening sequence by the panoptic shots is undermined when THX and LUH are within physical close quarters. A profile shot of LUH expresses a deep sense of fear. Before cutting away, the shot shifts in range from a medium close up to an extreme close up depicting angst and anxiety. On the surface, LUH's expression denotes immense terror evoked by an unlawful action. As Foucault argues, the panoptic system forfeits agency for a falsehood of power. LUH senses she is being watched; meanwhile a cut to an extreme close up of THX fills the frame signifying an intimate appreciation prolonged by a mandate of the state. LUH has reduced THX's medication and the anxiety depicted in her expression suggests she is conscious of her unlawful action despite being caught. In contrast, the cut to THX illustrates a character engulfed in change. The reduction of pharmaceutical consumption is not explicitly stated. Instead, the framing of THX conveys this notion. Nonetheless, Lucas's mastery of visual storytelling comes into full view as the juxtaposing shots narrate THX's drug consumption. THX is looking downward in apprehension toward the table instead of the camera in fear. The juxtaposition of shots between LUH and THX demonstrates a shift in panoptic viewing that begins to show a flourishing intimacy between the couple. This intimacy would not be possible without the fear of surveillance hanging over the protagonist. The exchange of labor for love visually defies the state and thrusts the characters into agency.

The commodity of labor is replaced by sexual desires in the shift from socialist to capitalist ideologies. As the placebos set in, THX has increased sexual desires that come into fruition. Likewise, LUH rejects the state to return THX's sexual advance. As THX and LUH embrace, there is a human connection that supersedes the needs of the state. LUH "was" afraid; THX "was" happy. However, as Telotte explains, their past conceptions of self are derivative of a false social construction mediated by media and propaganda. Once THX and LUH expunge their ties to the state by forfeiting labor for love, the panoptic angle diminishes. No longer do the protagonists scrutinize themselves because the sexual transaction divorces them from statehood. For example, while engaging in intercourse, THX and LUH are situated against the white-walled confinement with no visible boundaries. The shot then cuts to the filtered shot reminiscent of a surveillance camera directly above THX and LUH. It is in this instance the android police close in on the couple and LUH is sentenced to death, thus enabling THX's flight contingency. For the remainder of the film, THX resists the social prison by entering a post-panoptic state that is never really resolved. The end of the film screens THX escaping the city. Yet, the extreme long shot capturing THX succumbing to the desolate landscape

practically disappearing into the sun is a frightening image because our hero is alone with nowhere to go. The end result is a pessimistic cultural commentary of post-Sixties America. While the socialist ideologies rooted in labor are challenged and destroyed, the capitalist ideology of love does not seem to resolve the central conflict of the plot. Instead, humanity is disoriented and bewildered. Sex, love, and freedom prove to be a commodity that is just as socially invaluable as labor and confinement. The visual message here is frightening at best and conveys a sense of dissolution. In other words, there is no hope for the future.

Lucas would have spectators believe that panoptic isolation is preferable to the prospect of cultural destruction and freedom. In this context, *THX 1138* functions as an extreme reaction to the current political landscape. Despite the sexual revolution being in full force, sex and love in *THX 1138* can be read as a cheap product that evokes chaos rather than social solidarity. The film functions prophetically today more than ever. In a world where sex sells but the sanctity of marriage is in peril, *THX 1138* is immensely relevant. Likewise, the panoptic story telling also informs our fear of authority and especially resonates with the marginalized masses in an immutable system that privileges the white and rich. Despite being a film with little commercial success and mixed reviews from critics, *THX 1138* masterfully visualizes a dystopian future that is not too foreign from our daily lives. The illusion of a self-governing body perpetuates a desolate and bleak human existence that is somewhat lost on the average viewer even though *THX 1138*'s conflicting political ideology is embedded in our cultural experience.

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