



The Final Cut

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Rated PG-13 for mature thematic material, some violence, sexuality, and language; nevertheless, the movie has no nudity and no on-screen sexual activity.

Sci-fi drama with essentially no special effects. Suspenseful, but little action, little romance, and little humor. An okay movie for your brain, as long as you don't think too much, which — let's face it — includes most of us while watching a movie. So you may enjoy the movie if you don't think about it afterwards or read the rest of this review.

Basic story: Alan Hakman (Robin Williams), who is haunted by memories of an incident in his past, has made a career of sanitizing the memories of other people, which is possible thanks to implanted Zoë Chips. His safe, inhibited life unravels after he takes on the job of sanitizing the memories of a controversial figure. The story is engaging to an extent.

How the Movie 'Captures' You

All commercial movies try to hook you very quickly so that you will become engaged psychologically and thereby drawn into the movie's world. Some do this through cinematographic razzle-dazzle as the opening credits roll, while others may open on an interesting scene or an unusual situation involving a charismatic character. "The Final Cut" does none of the above. Instead, the movie initially throws a series of puzzle pieces at you in hope that you will become interested in puzzle solving. Then it focuses on the Zoë technology, which writer/director Omar Naim hopes you will find fascinating. This strategy is dictated, in part, by the fact that the Robin Williams character is not particularly interesting.

The movie jars you by starting with a scene showing two boys who just met discussing about whether to play marbles, even before the opening credits have rolled. The two perhaps twelve-year-olds then venture into an abandoned factory and encounter a plank across an opening in the floor. The heavy-set boy walks across the plank with ease and eggs on the other boy to follow suit. The smaller boy does so but then panics at the sight

of the multi-story drop beneath him and loses his footing halfway. He has the presence of mind to grab for the far edge of the hole, but can't hold on and falls. It seems as if the other boy could have helped pull him up as he dangled at the lip of the abyss, but he was perhaps afraid to try. The heavy-set boy then goes down to where the boy's apparently lifeless body lies and notices that the boy is lying in a spreading pool of dark, red-tinged liquid, which could be movie blood. The episode ends with the heavy-set boy in the back seat of his parents' car. Apparently he is returning home without having told anyone about the incident, leaving the other boy to almost certain death, if he hasn't died already.

The opening credits then roll and give way to another puzzle piece, the Cutter's Code — cutter? what's a cutter? This leads to a third jarring image, the birth of a baby shown apparently from the baby's viewpoint. Subsequently it becomes revealed that the birth moment was part of a movie of a sort being shown to a client by Robin Williams as Alan Hakman, who puts these presentations together. We next learn that people who do that sort of thing are called cutters and that Zoë Chips, which record people's life memories for later presentation, are implanted in people's brains before birth and are a highly controversial technology. Later on you discover that Alan was the heavy-set boy, and that throughout his life he has been haunted by the memory of the smaller boy's apparent death.

Does the Movie Make Sense Psychologically?

Alan is an intelligent but mousy and frightened man who doesn't reach out to people very much and who typically refuses to become involved when friends need help, so it is something of a mystery why several movie characters seem to like him very much. He even has a pretty girlfriend (Mira Sorvino). The only reason the movie offers is that Alan is renowned as the best cutter in the business. While this is plausible — fame has made many a disagreeable curmudgeon likeable to others — I lean toward a more cynical view. I see this as a moviemaker ploy to try to get moviegoers to like Alan more than they otherwise would, by presenting him as being a somewhat famous personality who is unreservedly liked and admired.

There are several logical problems with the Zoë Chips. The movie shows you what one of these things looks like. They are about two inches square and are evidently made of silicon and metal. Do they stick those big things into fetuses' heads? Well, no, the movie argues. The chips then are much smaller, and they "grow" in size as the child does. What do you have to feed a kid to make that happen — roofing nails and sandbox sand?

And who would want to buy one of these things, particularly since using it means subjecting a fetus, not to mention its mother, to a highly invasive operation? Who would benefit? Not the parents who would be putting up the money for the technology. Not the child, either, since under normal circumstances the memories the chips contain cannot be accessed while the person is still alive. And what is the practical benefit? Merely a short movie to be played at the person's funeral that is only marginally more detailed than could be achieved by splicing together home video footage taken throughout the person's life.

The movie tries to puff up the technology by claiming that it offers a kind of "immortality." And while it is true that the record of every life event is contained in the chip, this falls far short of providing the full record of a person's life, because the

person's private hopes and dreams do not get recorded. Then, too, to view another person's life would itself take a lifetime, and you couldn't do it by plopping a chip into a DVD player. You would need to buy a very expensive piece of equipment, which the movie calls a Guillotine. The Guillotine does have a sorting feature that would cut down on viewing time, but, still, who is going to bother using it and why?

It is essential to the plot of the movie that there be a protest movement against the use of Zoë implants. The reasons given for the protests are pretty lame, particularly since, as we have seen, this is a technology for the rich that would offer little benefit even to them. But the movie needs protests, so it cheats by visually creating the impression that everyone in the country is being pressured to buy these things. That's done by showing saturation ads for EYE TECH, the company that makes the implants, on buses and fences in bad neighborhoods — places where no company in its right mind would advertise a product for the wealthy.

The plot of the movie begins taking shape when Alan agrees to provide a “rememory” video for the wife of a rich, unscrupulous lawyer who worked for the EYE TECH company and who, Alan subsequently learns, sexually molested his young daughter. Is it credible that a person who has everything in life including a beautiful and apparently loving wife would do such a thing?

Such considerations — including his being an unscrupulous shyster — have no bearing on whether he would molest his daughter. The recent scandals in the Catholic Church should make that clear. Most often, people molest kids because they were themselves molested as children. Saying that does not provide a reason for them doing it, neither does it provide an excuse; it is merely the usual course of events under such circumstances, even though it may seem counterintuitive at first glance.

We are not told anything about the lawyer's childhood, so there are no grounds to criticize the movie on this score, except that Alan is shown coming upon the moments leading up to the apparent molestation and then deleting the entire episode without actually viewing it. That makes cinematographic sense, but it creates a logical problem. How did Alan know that the lawyer was leading his daughter into an empty room to molest her? Maybe he was merely getting her alone to let her in on a surprise he had planned for mommy.

The plot turns on Alan discovering that the memory that was haunting him is probably false. He learns this by having a friend access this and other of his Zoë memories. This objective record shows that he as a child tried to dissuade the smaller boy from crossing the board and that he actually had no time to help the boy as he clung at the edge of the abyss. It also shows that the spreading liquid was paint, rather than blood, and that the boy was breathing when Alan left. This evidence provides Alan with a new lease on life, which comes in the nick of time, because Alan's old life is crumbling, creating the prospect that if he can just put all of his present troubles behind him, he may have a rosy future.

There are a number of issues with all of this. Is it really possible for someone to remember an event in his past incorrectly? Sure. We do it all the time, but for the most part we put a positive, rather than negative, spin on the events we consciously remember. That Alan's memory erred on the side of being too damning suggests that some other

damning memory was involved and that the memory of the boy was a less damning substitute. This means that Alan would not have been freed of guilt, because the memory that was too damning to remember would have remained unresolved. So it is not at all clear that Alan had a wonderful life in the offing.

Interestingly, the movie does provide a hint about what this damning other memory might have been. Alan told the lawyer's daughter that he lost his parents when he was a little older than she. Later, one of the Zoë memories he accesses is of his parents' wake. They apparently died together, because they are laid out side by side. This would suggest that they died in an accident, perhaps a car accident, perhaps a car accident that occurred when they and Alan sped away from the visit that resulted in the small boy's fall.

Would Alan have felt guilty for having survived when his parents died even though he did nothing to cause the accident? Yes. It's called survival guilt. It's not rational, but it is how people — particularly kids — react. And because of it, Alan would have grown up feeling that he did not deserve to have much of a life. And that feeling would not be affected by the discovery that the false memory was false.

Near the end of the movie, Alan runs from the gun-toting ex-cutter who is leading the protest movement against EYE TECH, and who is chasing Alan to kill him to get the Zoë Chip inside his head. After a long chase, he calls out to Alan because he has had a change of heart, but Alan doesn't know that. Alan stops running, nevertheless. He has evidently given up. Does this make sense? After all, the movie does portray Alan as having started on the road toward recovery. He became more open with his girlfriend (with admittedly negative results), and he took the dramatic step of risking his life to learn that at least one lifelong source of guilt was unfounded. Would someone who has started climbing out of a psychological hole give up when there is a good chance that giving up may mean losing his life?

Six steps are involved in climbing out of a psychological hole caused by hurtful experiences due to bad parenting, a lack of opportunities, or some other form of misfortune:

1. A person on the bottom rung of the ladder upward is dedicated more to preserving and protecting the status quo than to attempting change. We build walls around our lives out of the experiences we let ourselves have on a daily basis. These experiences, in turn, arise from our routines, the routines that fill our every day. They are our routines at work and play and our routines of thinking, too. We all — including those on the bottom rung — unconsciously compare our lives to those of others on a constant basis. This inevitably leads to envy, but a person on the bottom rung doesn't feel envy and doesn't see himself as being envious. Such a person instead takes the attitude of criticizing those who have sparked the envy, as a way of denying that he wishes to be similar to them or have similar things.
2. A person on the second rung is somewhat less dedicated to protecting the status quo. Such a person will sometimes allow envy to be experienced as actual envy. When we allow ourselves to be openly envious, we allow ourselves to in effect openly criticize the current state of our lives. Although experiencing envy is unpleasant, it can be psychologically beneficial if it helps to prompt us to take steps toward a better life. A second-rung person will also unconsciously execute

small tests to see if a basis in experience can be established for reaching an unconscious goal. An example of such a test would be when Alan allowed his girlfriend to learn about his life as a cutter and to see what he did with the Guillotine. Previously he had shut her out of all of this, and their relationship was merely physical. By telling her more about his work, he was testing whether he could be more intimate with someone than he regularly was.

3. Successful unconscious testing brings a person to the third rung. At this stage, a person is openly critical of some aspects of his life and is unconsciously testing the boundaries that hem his life in more frequently and more vigorously. A person at this stage also generally experiences neurotic symptoms of some sort, such as panic attacks or anxieties or physical symptoms of one sort or another. A person at this stage is also likely to be interested in self-help literature.
4. Third-rung developmental initiatives are usually undertaken alone. The next step up and involves reaching out to others for help. By reaching out to others, a person demonstrates a greater commitment to change, both to himself and to the others with whom he interacts. These would include new friends or teachers or self-help gurus or therapists of one sort or another.
5. Reaching the final rung is often signaled by a period of crisis. In saying this, I'm assuming that we're talking about a person who began at the first rung and worked himself up to the final rung. Typically such a person's start in life is dictated by the values and priorities of others, usually the person's parents. There would be no need for an involved developmental process if the person's true path in life were merely an extension of the path tread by his parents. That a person has taken significant and painful steps indicates that the person's true path lies elsewhere. Typically what happens is that a person stays within his initial frame of reference for as long as possible and only departs from that path when it becomes painfully clear that he is overcommitted to what he is not. It's at this point that crisis occurs, leading a person to eventually clarify what he is true path in life is.
6. The sixth step involves getting off the ladder and moving along one's true path. Many people who make it to the fifth rung become so traumatized by their midlife crisis, as it is often called, that they retreat and attempt to become satisfied with a lesser life. It's one thing to say that I could have done that if I had tried harder. It's quite another to say that I tried my best and found that my dreams were beyond my grasp. The prospect of possibly losing one's dreams can terrify a person to such an extent that he hangs back from testing whether those dreams could actually have been realized. That existential terror also continually inhibits the person who finds the courage to continue going forward.

So where do we place Alan in this scheme of things? Just barely past rung one, I think. The movie offers no evidence that he has a clue about who he truly is. Therefore, while it is surprising that he would momentarily give up when his life is potentially on the line, it isn't outside the realm of possibility, particularly since giving up for a time is an integral component of all six steps.

So “The Final Cut” should probably get a C⁻ for making sense psychologically. On the negative side are a psychologically unrealistic story line and visual cheating. But on the positive side, there are elements to Alan’s life story that do hang together realistically.