

Securing the Virtual Frontier for Whiteness in *Tron*

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Tron (1982), directed by Steven Lisberger, was Disney's attempt to have a *Star Wars*-style triumph, particularly needed during a downtime for the company's film fortunes. The sustained success of Disney's new live action wing, Touchstone, was a few years away and the company's animated film renaissance which, like *Tron*, would rely partially on advances in computer technology, was almost a decade away with *The Little Mermaid* (1989).¹

Like most of Hollywood at the time, Disney believed that the holy trio of innovative special effects technology, new synergy/marketing tactics and blockbuster filmmaking was the road back to relevance and profits after the economic downturn of the early 1970s. The most financially successful films of the several years prior to *Tron*'s release were fantasies that had been married to groundbreaking new developments in special effects, marketed as brands, and aimed at teenagers: not only George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) and its sequels, but *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Superman* (1978), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and others.² Disney had tried and failed to get into the blockbuster game with *The Black Hole* (1979). Not without experience making successful science fiction films—*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), *Son of Flubber* (1963)—and keen to appease its stockholders, the studio would try again with *Tron*.³

Despite the Herculean efforts that went into the pioneering production—the invention of sustained, immersive CGI; imagining and designing the virtual world—*Tron* was far from the success that the studio was hoping for, either critically/artistically or, especially, financially.⁴ Of the major science fiction movies of the summer of 1982, *E.T.* ran away with the box office and the Oscar nominations; *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* was a solid hit and a critical dar-

ling; *Blade Runner* (1982) has emerged as a cult classic and made its way into cinema's canon. *Tron* never found love with either audiences or critics, both of whom found the story uninvolved and the characters bland.⁵ Unlike *Blade Runner*, it has not had a critical or cult renaissance, though Disney is hoping that at the least the brand name conjures up enough nostalgia to spark interest in the long-incoming sequel, *Tron Legacy* (2010).

What the movie is largely remembered for is its tie-in with the popular arcade game that it spawned—which, like the movie, featured the famous "light cycle" sequence—and with the relatively brief golden age of arcade games in general.⁶ *Tron* tried to capitalize on the video game craze both at the level of merchandising/marketing (again following in the trailblazing steps of George Lucas and company) and within the narrative itself, as the movie's hero, Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges), survives and eventually triumphs within the virtual world largely because of his skills at arcade games.⁷

Not surprisingly, given Hollywood's inclination towards formula, the parallels between *Tron* and *Star Wars* go beyond the movies' innovation of special effects technology and merchandising tie-ins. Like Lucas's groundbreaker, *Tron* attempts to marry the new effects to classical sci-fi themes and narrative features, including good vs. evil; class struggle; revolt against totalitarianism; and the quest story. Like *Star Wars*—and a lot of science fiction, including Cyberpunk, one genre to which *Tron* belongs—the movie is schizophrenic in its approach to technology (particularly advanced weaponry). It fetishizes it at the same time that it spins a cautionary tale about its dehumanizing dangers; it vilifies it but asserts it as a necessary tool of the Eurocentric West to maintain liberal democracy over Totalitarianism.⁸

Though *Star Wars* takes place in a "galaxy far, far away" and *Tron* is set largely in a virtual world inside a computer, both narratives concern three scrappy heroes—two young men and a young woman—who embark on a journey to battle an evil overlord and make the galaxy/virtual world safe for regular freedom-loving folk. Though I will later show that, despite the nominal story of class conflict, *Tron*'s heroes are actually fighting to preserve advanced capitalism for whiteness, which in this essay is being used as a critical category and discussed as a cultural construct that "secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular," as Richard Dyer writes.⁹ Building on Dyer's work, George Lipsitz argues

white Americans are encouraged to invest in Whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power and opportunity. This whiteness, of course, is a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continues with all-too-real-consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige and opportunity.

In asserting how whiteness is represented in *Tron*, I argue that the movie per-

petuates Hollywood's traditional approach to representing race and gender norms in cinema. These traditional ideas feature white powerful males at the center of the narrative; characters of other races and ethnicities are marginalized, vilified, stereotyped, absent, or some combination thereof; and the pattern of representation is repeated so often throughout Hollywood history that it is made to seem "normal," thus striving to permanently equate whiteness with both superiority and "normality." The idea of "normality" also mandates that protagonists are heterosexual, non-disabled and typically middle class (or at least subscribe to middle class values).

Star Wars essentially updated *Flash Gordon* and other early science fiction serials that relocated the Western to outer space with these ideas of the "norm" intact. The space operas culled narrative and other formal features from the Western, and those features were inextricable from racist and sexist representation that was part and parcel of the genre: white settlers/colonists in conflict with racial and ethnic Others at the frontier; women supporting and being protected by men or else being punished for sexual independence.

But *Star Wars* went into production in the mid 1970s and the movie's hero, Luke Skywalker, still had a touch of the 1960s about him: he wore his hair long, espoused youthful naïveté and rebelled against his family's conservative wishes for his future: he wanted to join the revolution. *Tron*, on the other hand, went into production at a time when political and cultural conservatism had firmly reasserted influence over a mainstream America anxious and uncertain over the threat of global nuclear war (constantly imagined and narrativized by the government and the media); over the lingering anguish of Vietnam and the fear that America had been diminished both militarily and morally; and over the ever stronger push for equal rights by women, racial and ethnic minorities and gays and lesbians, which could no longer be ignored or put down. Hollywood responded to all this by churning out cinematic comfort food in the form of 1930s and '40s style genre throwbacks by Spielberg, Lucas, et al. These movies—*Raiders of the Lost Ark* is particularly representative—were being updated with period racism and sexism intact, to reassure the dominant mainstream whose superiority and centrality Hollywood had insisted upon for so long.¹⁰

Tron sits at the intersection of all these cultural and industrial elements: anxiety over technology, national identity, and perceived encroaching Otherness both from without and from within; and a film industry bent, as always, on marrying new technology to traditional conservative representation. In this way, *Tron*, like all movies, is a product of its specific historical moment. But, as noted, the movie also takes its place in a long line of like-minded Hollywood science fiction movies that perpetuate Eurocentric, patriarchal hegemony. At the level of hoary science fiction themes and race and gender representation, the movie doesn't play much differently than *Flash Gordon*. Given what many critics and moviegoers have found to be its generally uninvolved characters

and narrative, it might hardly seem worthy of study over any other middling science fiction movie of the era.

Yet *Tron* brought several historic firsts. Most significantly, it was the first feature film to substantially integrate computer-generated special effects, which of course would revolutionize the film and media industries.¹¹ It was the first film to represent virtual reality, in which humans interact inside digital worlds.¹² It was, along with *Blade Runner*, released a few weeks earlier—the first "Cyberpunk" film. Though literary science fiction had already imagined the Internet and virtual reality, neither loomed large in the popular consciousness of the time. Both were essentially new frontiers for humans in 1982, in real life and in the movies.

In terms of representation this is significant because, even despite the freshness of *Star Wars*, the Western and the space opera had exhausted stories in which white American men righteously claim traditional frontiers. These stories had long been a staple narrative for Disney as well, particularly for their live-action entertainments. Leading up to *Tron*, movies on the subject included *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), *Westward Ho* (1956), *Old Yeller* (1957), *The Light in the Forest* (1958), *Ten Who Dared* (1960), *The Adventures of Bullwhip Griffin* (1967), *The Black Hole* (1979), and many, many others. On television, Fess Parker helped Disney spin the American frontier saga over and over again by playing Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone in made-for-television movies and hundreds of hour-long episodes. Disney also ran the *Man in Space* series in the mid 1950s, chronicling the American achievements and goals at that frontier.

Finally, of course, Disneyland itself was a virtual Frontier world, featuring "Adventureland," "Frontierland" and "Tomorrowland," among others. All of these "lands" are strategically situated around "Main Street USA," suggesting that the American dominion stretched out infinitely in all directions from its cozy home base of security and Puritan values.¹³ Together, all of this popular material strongly perpetuated the myth of manifest destiny—of frontiers as the righteous domain of Anglo Americans—and was committed to essentially effacing America's bloody history of Colonialism.¹⁴

But despite the success of the post-war Disney frontier narratives, the claiming of such frontiers by white men had begun to be seen—in academic circles and to some extent in popular culture—as colonial and immoral, an attitude reflected in the revisionist cinema of the late 1960s and '70s. Films such as *Little Big Man* (1970), *Billy Jack* (1971) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), for example, were manifesting white liberal guilt about historical treatment of Native Americans, and major stars such as Marlon Brando and George C. Scott were publically supporting the issue as well.¹⁵ In the face of diminishing acceptance of traditional Eurocentric colonialism, Disney needed new—and subtler—cinematic arenas in which to reassert the superiority of the white patriarchal self and its perceived "rightful" dominion. In addition to its

other historic firsts, and despite the fact that the movie never caught on with audiences, *Tron* broke new ground in that, through the burgeoning genre of Cyberpunk, it claimed two new cinematic frontiers for Whiteness and its associated systems of colonialism and capitalism: CGI and virtual space.

Genre and Representation

Save for perhaps the first half of *Wall-E*, Disney films have not been in the business of representing dystopias. And though with its chirpy heroes and bright cinematographic pallet, *Tron* may seem to be the generic opposite of a dystopic vision such as *Blade Runner*, both films actually belong to the early 1980s sub-genre known as Cyberpunk. Though *Tron* was not deliberately evoking Cyberpunk as such—it wouldn't become known as a genre for several years after the movie's release, it is certainly among the handful of novels, stories and films from the early 1980s that would, taken together, manifest enough similarities to later help create and be grouped into that genre.¹⁶

Like *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* or *The Black Hole*, Cyberpunk stories are frontier stories, but the frontiers are not the traditional sci-fi frontiers of the ocean or beneath the earth or other worlds or universes. In Cyberpunk, the frontiers are close to home: the near rather than distant future; virtual reality; and transcendent new possibilities of Posthumanism (often referred to as transhumanism), which concerns humans interfacing with or combining with computers and other advanced technology (cybernetics), or sending their detached consciousnesses inside virtual spaces.¹⁷

The stories are set within a breakdown in the social order that results in decaying, post-industrial dystopias that offer few choices for human happiness or freedom. Cyberpunk plots often feature anti-heroes as protagonists: young rogues, criminals and hackers, who, while flawed and anti-social, are shown to heroically oppose oppressive, dehumanizing systems such as artificial intelligences, giant corporations and systems of totalitarianism (or some combination thereof). The anti-heroes traffic in technology and often innovate uses for which the technology was not intended, but which allows them to survive and sometimes prevail over the malevolent forces.¹⁸ Class conflict is also a theme, with the young anti-heroes scrambling for socioeconomic survival in the face of vastly wealthy corporations who are sucking up every resource.¹⁹ Movie examples of Cyberpunk include *Blade Runner*, *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *Strange Days* (1995), *eXistenZ* (1999) *The Matrix* (1999), and *Anime* films such as *Akira* (1988) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1996).

Tron, though not often grouped together with these films, nevertheless manifests most of their genre tropes, including the advanced science and the breakdown of the social order. Kevin Flynn, the young hacker/hero, is a brilliant computer programmer who uses advanced technology to become Clio—his avatar inside the virtual world—and battle the dehumanizing mega-

corporation/artificial intelligence that has marginalized Flynn in the "real world" by stealing his ideas for programs and forcing him out of his research position at ENCOM Corporation. He is alienated now from his former career and from his former colleagues at ENCOM, Alan (Bruce Boxleitner) and Dr. Lora Baines (Cindy Morgan), who discover him living "on the edge of society," in a small apartment above the video arcade he runs which features games he has created.²⁰

Posthumanism is of course, a major element of *Tron*'s virtual world, as Flynn, through "invasive modification of the human body," is beamed into the movie's virtual world to become a sort of organic/digital hybrid.²¹ Posthumanism is significantly a condition of the movie's "real" world as well. Dillenger (David Warner), the corporate boss of ENCOM, has become a slave to the Artificial Intelligence known as the Master Control Program (MCP), whose goal is to take over the Pentagon. Finally, the interface between the video games and the teenagers at Flynn's arcade represents contemporary posthumanism, (albeit not in a way that most people think about it).

Though *Tron* does not imagine a dystopia in conventional Cyberpunk fashion, the fact that the movie's "real" spaces are entirely contained to Flynn's arcade and the corporation—its scientific and computer labs, offices and its roof—does imply that comfortable middle-class existence has vanished. Signs of typical American life are absent in *Tron*, or at least the typical American life that was routine in Hollywood movies in 1982, ala *E.T.*, *Tootsie* or *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. There are no suburban breakfast tables, schools, malls, restaurants, police stations, courthouses or other signs of a "functioning" society, i.e., one that is perpetuating and protecting the status quo that is typically portrayed in Hollywood movies. Further, the sense of urgency displayed by Flynn, Alan and Lora in their defiance of Dillenger's corporate dictatorship; Flynn's (self) alienation; the jeopardy in which the characters feel they are in; and the fact that none of them interact in the larger society; all signal that the world is no longer safe for their kind, which the movie will make more and more clear means white, straight, young, able-bodied, non-ethnic middle class Americans.

Cyberpunk and Racial Anxiety

Tron manifests some of the racial anxiety and xenophobia that scholars have argued are typical of Cyberpunk, the narratives of which tend to reflect concerns over multiculturalism and miscegenation, or racial mixing. The anxiety of posthumanism is partly an fear of merging with the "Other" in whatever form. In the genre's dystopian future, Western powers and white heroes are often shown to be under siege, particularly by Asians, who were considered an economic threat to the United States in the early 1980s. Timothy Yu writes,

[Cyberpunk] portraits of the postmodern city expose the extent to which the imagining of postmodernism has been grounded in Orientalism and racial anxiety ... at times they also propose in response a recolonization that reasserts the hegemony of the white Western subject.²²

Stephen Hong Sohn similarly argues that Cyberpunk stories are sites for "the projection of futuristic anxieties..." and that Orientalism "troubles the possibility that the West can retain or recover a nostalgically configured purity."²³ Crucial to my argument, Chun asserts, "Faced with a 'Japanese future,' [stories of] high tech Orientalism resurrects the frontier—in a virtual form—in order to secure open space for America ... [and] offers representations of survivors, of savvy-navigators who can open closed [cyber] spaces."²⁴ This is seen in *Neuromancer* and, I argue, in *Tron*, as Flynn opens, "navigates" and finally secures the new frontier of cyberspace for his vision/version of America.²⁵

Though *Tron* does not depict a multicultural "actual" world—or indeed any non-white characters at all (save for one black extra in the opening scenes)—it is nonetheless conspicuous by its absence. As with *Blade Runner*, the skyscraping corporate roof in *Tron*, again, one of the few "real" spaces shown, signals a deliberate distance from the multicultural "dirty" reality on the ground. Whereas *Blade Runner* clearly represents this multi-ethnic threat and sends Whites into towers and "off-world" to escape it, *Tron* elides representation of the multicultural world but nevertheless implies the threat by creating urgency for "white flight" into the "open spaces" of virtual reality. As Chun writes, "[Cyberspace] narratives imagine a world dominated by 'global' difference in order to dispel the hostility and invasiveness of such a world."²⁶

The very first scene inside the virtual world of *Tron* establishes the dangers to middle class capitalist patriarchy by this "invasive global difference." A computer program co-opted/enclaved by the Master Control Program is given the virtual avatar of a middle-aged white man. "Hey look," he says, as he is being "imprisoned" by guards with black holes where there faces should be, "This is all a mistake. I'm just a compound interest program. I work at a savings and loan. I can't play these video games." The program could conceivably take any form—including that of an African American inner-city schoolteacher, a Latina social worker, a Polish-American unionized dockworker, a Cuban American house wife and mother of four, etc. But *Tron* signals its anxieties of these groups and the progressiveness and need they represent by making this avatar an extension of Wall Street and corporate capitalism, which the "black" guards threaten, and whose (upward) mobility they limit.

"It's murder out there," says another captured program/white male avatar. "You can't even travel around your own microcircuit without permission from Master Control Program." He says this not in a voice tinged with fear, though his life is presumably in danger, but rather with distaste and resentment. Later

Tron says, "My user has information that would make this place a free system again ... and no MCP looking over your shoulder!" He also says his goal is to "erase the MCP and change the system."²⁷ MCP gives the "programs" inside the virtual world the choice to renounce their white "users," and join him, or be eliminated in gladiatorial contests. Given what we have seen at this point of Cyberpunk in general and *Tron* in particular, the fear being allegorized here is the fear of forced multiculturalism, having to share the power and dwindling resources of the world with the Other, in whatever threatening form.²⁸ During an idyll in their adventures, when three young white men are alone together, they revitalize themselves by drinking from a digital stream, after which Tron says, "Boy, you forget how good the power feels, when you get to a purer source." In the context of the movie so far, "purity" takes on troubling racial and cultural associations.

Further establishing this, even ethnic working class whites will have no place in the virtual world. The first task given to Flynn by Dillinger, after he is beamed inside the virtual world and takes the form of Clu, is to defeat a program whose avatar is a "program" with a vaguely Italian, working class accent. Though Flynn refuses to kill this character as a way of setting up his virtue, the character is nonetheless purged from virtual space and the movie as soon as the point is made about Flynn's character. Hypocritically, despite sparing this character, Flynn will nevertheless go on to eradicate all Others inside the virtual world. This early scene sets up the goal of Flynn/Clu, Alan/Tron and Lora/Yori—and by extension the movie—which will be to purge and homogenize the virtual frontier, and then seal and protect its borders before the New World becomes contaminated in the way that the "old" New World has been.

With this narrative set-up, *Tron* manifests the multicultural anxiety of the neo-conservative era, when, among other indicators of the cultural and political mood, the Reagan Administration worked to roll back Affirmative Action; dry up tax dollars to the crumbling inner cities and their largely non-white populations; promote deregulation; and generally protect and expand Wall Street and corporate America, both of which were practically the exclusive domain of white men in the early 1980s.

Whiteness and Ideology

Hollywood has long equated Whiteness with heroism, virtue and morality, while non-white characters—black, red, yellow, brown—have been historically represented as falling short of, if not outright failing in contrast to, the white ideal. When Flynn refers to Alan and Lora approvingly, if somewhat mockingly, as a "clean-cut young couple," the movie is reinforcing what it considers the accepted norm for movie protagonists.²⁹

Though *Tron* does not feature any non-white characters with speaking

parts, the movie, consistent with Hollywood traditions, does use color as a way of demarcating between heroes and villains. Blue equals whiteness inside the virtual world: it is the color of the glowing virtual uniforms of Clu, Tron, Yori, Ram, the wise old Obi-Wan Kenobi-style wizard Dumont, and the aforementioned "middle class" slave programs, all played by white American actors. Conversely, red represents evil—it is the color of Sark, his minions and Master Control—and even being touched by a "red" villain is enough to render a blue character compromised, weak and impure. In one scene, Tron does not even recognize a temporarily "reddened" Flynn as a "good guy," and almost destroys him. The only way for a compromised character to reverse this stain of miscegenation is to touch a pure "blue" hero. Once reunited and melded with a pure blue hero, the "contamination" fades away and the formerly afflicted character regains strength and fortitude.

Although Dillenger/Sark is European and white, some of his qualities still signify him as "Other"—his British accent, his cowardice, his age (in Hollywood blockbusters, older people are invariably vilified or marginalized). Sark is also linked with blackness. His evil tanks are black; the "faces" of his minions are pitch black, signifying their racial Otherness. Significantly, David Warner, the actor who plays Dillenger/Sark also plays Master Control. Master Control takes the form of a giant digital face whose wide nose, wide lips and deep baritone voice are phenotypes (physical characteristics) typically associated with African Americans. Having Warner play all three characters is the movie's shorthand for correlating villainy with blackness. Further, Master Control, especially through his voice, clearly evokes Darth Vader, another black villain. Especially given *Tron's* many other parallels with *Star Wars*, the average 1982 moviegoer would almost certainly associate the redness and blueness of the movie's characters with the red and blue lightsabers used by Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). The shades in both movies match each other almost exactly and signify evil and virtue, respectively. The connection here for the viewer is clear, if only unconsciously: redness equals Darth Vader equals blackness equals villainy in Hollywood sci-fi representation.

By contrast, the movie associates Whiteness with courage, heroism and even Godliness by setting up Flynn as a white Messiah character.³⁰ The human users of *Tron* are set up as Gods/controllers to their avatars inside the virtual world. Once MCP digitizes him, Flynn becomes the only human/user inside the Virtual World, making him in a sense a deity among mortals, and as such he is capable of Godlike feats. In one scene he saves the protagonists from a fatal encounter with the villains by using his body as a conduit to shift the high-powered energy beams on which their ship is traveling. Later he resuscitates a dying Yori. Finally, in the movie's climax, he somehow leaps into MCP and uses his User powers to transform the AI's red color to blue, thus liberating the virtual world for Blueness.

The movie sets up Flynn's savior/messiah status even before he enters the virtual world. He is referred to as the "best programmer Encom ever saw"—preternaturally intelligent and gifted. Alan even likens Flynn to "Santa Claus," which doesn't quite seem to apply in the context of their conversation, except as a way of associating him with Eurocentric, capitalist, patriarchal authority.

Moreover, a character speaks of Flynn as "playing space cowboy," which here not only refers to virtual space, but also evokes associations with Westerns and Western inflected science fiction such as *Flash Gordon* and *Star Wars*. Significantly, it also evokes the idea of the "imperial imaginary," which refers to the cinematic representation of the colonizing actions of white, male Europeans and Americans. In these stories, colonizers "tame" and conquer the frontier and the savages that live beyond it, securing the space for Empire, while whooping it up like adventuring boys.³¹ By "playing space cowboy"—space refers here to virtual space, not outer space—Flynn takes his place in a long line of cinematic imperial adventurers at the Western frontier—in this case, the virtual frontier.

Technology and Representation

Perhaps the biggest indicator that the movie intends to equate virtue and strength with whiteness is that it designs the faces of the heroes inside the virtual world to look like silent movie stars. This silent movie parallel is established right away in the first scene in which *Tron's* virtual world is introduced—two white faces in close-up, which, in their formal likeness to early film characters, could easily be right out of D.W. Griffith.

I make the connection to Griffith's characters not arbitrarily, but to describe the link between form and representation in *Tron*. Scholars have argued that Griffith—and other early filmmakers—did not just innovate film technology and then, separately, employ it in the service of stories that featured white racism and white supremacy such as *The Birth of a Nation* or Griffith's Biograph shorts. Rather, form and content evolved together so that the very language of filmmaking—narrative, mise-en-scene, cinematography and editing—was inextricably bound up with the cinematic advancement of white supremacy. As early directors standardized early formal techniques, they standardized a representation of white supremacy for a century of filmmaking. Bernardi writes,

Griffith ... helped develop parallel editing and other stylistic techniques in support of storytelling, but also ... perpetuated a discourse supported by racist practices—which is to say that Griffith's articulations of style and of race are involved in the same cinematic and discursive processes; pragmatically, they co-constitute the filmmaker's narrative system.

This narrative system, argues Bernardi, articulates "an ideology of race that

positions 'whites' as normal and superior and 'non-whites' as deviant and inferior.³²

Considering this, the silent movie faces of *Tron*'s white heroes not only evoke the age when white racism was overt and ugly in American filmmaking and when—with a few exceptions, such as Griffith's own (problematic) *Broken Blossoms* (1922)—only whites could be heroes. They are also the filmmakers' winking acknowledgement that they, like the early filmmakers, are engaged in the work of innovating a new cinema of storytelling, in this case CGI, which is arguably the most important cinematic innovation since color.

Now to the point: when *Tron* uses CGI to not only advance a discourse of whiteness, but to represent white characters to appear *exactly as they did in the work of Griffith and other silent filmmakers*, an agenda emerges that is larger than just perpetuating representational norms, à la the typical Hollywood film. It is, as Bernardi argues of Griffith, to re-set ideological standards in an age of conservative racial anxiety by marrying white supremacy to brand new technology—not only to advance white supremacy through new artistic techniques, but to continue to evolve form and content simultaneously so that they would be inextricable from each other.

By linking patriarchal white supremacy with CGI (along with virtual space and Cyberpunk), *Tron* was, in essence, a new dawn for Hollywood in terms of perpetuating race and gender norms. Given how patriarchal whiteness has been positioned in Hollywood's biggest and most groundbreaking CGI films since—which have been, not coincidentally, Hollywood's biggest films: *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Lion King* (1994), *Forrest Gump* (1994), the new *Star Wars* films (1999–2005), *Spiderman* (2002), *Harry Potter* (2001–2009), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), *Avatar* (2009), all films that feature white male heroes and marginalize women and people of color—one can argue that *Tron* has been successful in setting the template. Had *Tron* instead featured African American, Native American, gay, disabled or female protagonists (among other possibilities), it is perhaps more likely (if not highly likely) that the association between CGI and representation would have evolved differently. The initial model for other filmmakers would have looked different and perhaps began to (slowly) help reverse a history of institutionalized cinematic racism.³³

Conclusion

The apotheosis of the red/blue racial coding in *Tron* is reached at the movie's climax when Clu, Tron and Yori defeat Master Control and blue beams sweep over the world, eradicating Otherness, homogenizing the virtual environment, making it safe for all of Hollywood's norms: white, middle-class, youthful, heterosexual, athletic, patriarchal. This is sealed by Tron and Yori's kiss. Hollywood's ideal union can be safely consummated now in the newly clean virtual space, which has been preserved for Eurocentric dominance on

the inside and cut off from the multicultural "pollution" on the outside. The "open spaces" imagined by Cyberpunk have indeed granted sanctuary to besieged whiteness in the late 20th century. The "video warriors," as they are called in the movie, have conquered the new frontier—the virtual frontier. "Every tower is lighting up," says Dumont in the last shot inside the virtual world, signifying that the "light" of Western civilization has replaced the former barbarism at the frontier. His power as a white patriarch has been restored now that Flynn and Tron have rescued "The fate of both the electronic world and the real world."

In homage to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the film vanquishes threats inside a fantasy world to make the "real" world safe again for the traditional nuclear family. In the final scene Flynn, newly anointed as the corporate boss, swoops down in the corporate helicopter to meet Alan and Lora on ENCOM's roof. Again, their position atop the skyscraper keeps them safe and separate from the multicultural world; they are restored on the outside to the position of the Anglo heroes in "imperial imaginary" stories, lordling it over the natives below. Taking their place in a long line of Disney heroes, they have conquered the new frontier virtual world and now control the technologically advanced portal between the worlds as well; the helicopter also signals their rule of the air far above the "real" world, as well as the technology that allows for its safe and easy navigation. As in real life, reducing multiculturalism depends on controlling both the ability to travel and the borders that allow mobility.

The final shot fades out on the "real" city, photographed to look like a grid from inside *Tron*'s virtual world: clean, fast-moving, pure and unmarred by complication, need or conflict, suggesting that, despite the multicultural threat, despite mainstream anxiety of the new technological world with its easy travel and porous borders, the Eurocentric mainstream is still dominant and in control. The ostensible class war in *Tron*—with the protagonists battling evil corporate power—turns out to be a red herring. Unlike, the narrative of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, which truly seems to want to make the working-class universe safe from aristocracy, *Tron*'s narrative merely transfers power—social, cultural, economic, technological—from the "evil" co-opters to the "rightful" holders (my quotes). As Chun writes, Cyberspace "reinvigorates capitalism" and it reinvigorates it for youth.³⁴ In *Star Wars*, the protagonists return from their triumph to be hailed as heroes by their working class brethren; at the conclusion of *Tron*, Flynn is now the corporate leader, re-affirming the race and gender hierarchies in patriarchal capitalism advocated by Reagan-era politics and policies—and by Disney movies. The only question left for them is which frontier to conquer next.³⁵

Notes

1. Douglas Gomery, "Disney's Business History," in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 78–79.

2. Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 2–22.
3. Brian Attebery, "Beyond Captain Nemo: Disney's Science Fiction," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 150–151.
4. AP Byline, "Stock Decline After Screening of *Tron* Irks Disney Studio," *The New York Times*, July 9, 1982, Business section, late edition.
5. Roger Ebert, summing up the critical consensus towards the movie, wrote, "It is not a human interest adventure in any generally accepted way... It's brilliant at what it does, and in a technical way maybe it's breaking ground for a generation of movies in which computer-generated universes will be the background for mind-generated stories about emotion-generated personalities."
6. Arcade games were at their peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s when they began to be marginalized by home console games.
7. The producers no doubt hoped that teenagers would imagine their own skills put to heroic use, indulging the fantasy that they weren't wasting an inordinate amount of their free time.
8. In this way *Tron* also has much in common with *WarGames* (1983) and other nuclear war-themed movies of the period such as *Mad Max* (1979), *Superman III* (1983), *Tastemur* (1983), *Terminator* (1984), *Real Genius* (1985), *Spies Like Us* (1985), *The Manhattan Project* (1986), and many others.
9. Richard Dyer is a pioneering whiteness scholar, whose essay "White," published in a 1988 issue of the British film journal *Screen*, and subsequent 1997 book of the same title, laid the groundwork for Whiteness as a study of fertile cultural inquiry.
10. Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of the American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 339–356.
11. Ellen Wolff, "Tron: Then and Now," *Millimeter*, July 1, 2007, 30.
12. Though CGI had been used briefly in such films as *Looker* (1981) and *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, *Tron* was the first film to use CGI extensively—the movie features 15 fully computer generated minutes—and to use it to represent a fully immersive character experience.
13. Davy Crockett movies included *Davy Crockett at the Alamo* and *Davy Crockett and the River Pirates* (both 1955). Daniel Boone ran for 159 episodes between 1964 and 1970.
14. Frontier narratives as a Disney staple have continued long after *Tron* as well. Such movies include *Pocahontas* (1995), *Tarzan* (1999), *Atlantis* (2001), *Treasure Planet* (2002), *Wall-E* (2008), *Up* (2009) and many others.
15. Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 108.
16. Bruce Bethke's 1983 short story "Cyberpunk" gave the genre its name and William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer* became its defining text.
17. Stories from the science fiction literature movement from the 1960s known as the New Wave, which featured seminal sci-fi texts from such authors as Philip K. Dick and Samuel R. Delany and often dealt with posthuman themes, preceded and greatly influenced Cyberpunk.
18. Lawrence Person, author of "Notes Towards a Postcyberpunk Manifesto," summarizes "Classic Cyberpunk characters [as] marginalized, alienated loners who lived on the edge of society in generally dystopic futures where daily life was impacted by rapid technological change, an ubiquitous daterange of computerized information, and invasive modification of the human body." <http://slashdot.org/features/99/10/08/2123255.shtml>
19. Though not as pertinent to *Tron*, the genre often strongly evokes Film Noir and hard-boiled detective fiction, particularly in its evocation of alienated heroes who, stripped of their illusions, are forced to confront the grim truth of human existence.
20. Person, Lawrence. "Notes Towards a Postcyberpunk Manifesto."
21. Person, Lawrence. "Notes Towards a Postcyberpunk Manifesto."
22. Timothy Yu, "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: *Naked Lunch*, *Blade Runner*, and *Neuromancer*," *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter 2008): 48.
23. Stephen Hong Sohn, "Introduction: Alien/Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future," *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter 2008): 7.
24. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Othering Cyberspace," *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 251.

25. Cyberpunk also represents racial anxiety beyond the "the yellow peril." Sandy Rankin argues that Walter Mosley's short story collection *Futureland* co-opts the genre tropes as a way to criticize its visions, including its racist subtexts, by creating Cyberpunk stories that are populated by black people, and that replace dystopic xenophobic visions with more utopian ones.
26. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Othering Cyberspace," *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 250.
27. Surely, it's only a coincidence that Master Control could stand for another M.C.—multiculturalism, or the big government legislation, loathed by conservatives, that has enabled it.
28. The place for women suggested by *Tron* is, if anything, even more cut and dried than the place suggested for minorities. The movie signals its ideas about gender by putting a woman in a scientific laboratory, and then giving her virtually nothing to do there other than to look utterly unconvincing in her oversized prop glasses—subtle mockery of women as scientists—and a starched and brilliant white lab coat that clearly never been exposed to the messy, hard work of real science. Her job in the movie's opening scenes is that of flirt and enabler. Later, she takes on the obligatory Hollywood female roles of victim, sex object (in her skin-tight outfit) and object for the men to fight over and be admired by.
29. *Tron*'s all-white cast is not only typical of Hollywood moviemaking in the early 1980s, but also of the live-action Disney features of the several decades preceding it: *Old Yeller*, *Herbie, The Shaggy Dog*, etc.
30. Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 33–34.
31. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "The Imperial Imaginary," *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London, Routledge, 1994), 100–136.
32. Daniel Bernardi, "The Voice of Whiteness: D.W. Griffith's Biograph Films (1908–1913)," *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of United States Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 104.
33. One could argue that 27 years later, James Cameron's *Avatar* has is the next step in this evolution of cinema that links new film technology with a discourse of whiteness.
34. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Othering Cyberspace," *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 246.
35. The winter 2010 release of *Tron Legacy*'s previews make it look as though it is in line with the familiar race and gender representation of the original. The only speaking parts in the trailer go to white men and the brief shots of women show them as highly sexualized. There are no non-white characters in the trailer. The detailed casting available on IMDb shows the same—an almost completely white cast. The one black actress, Yaya DaCosta, is billed as a "siren." It seems as though the *Tron* brand is revisiting its legacy in more ways than one.

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A Womb with a Phew!: Post-Humanist Theory and Pixar's Wall-E

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This essay seeks to understand the significance for disability studies of Disney/Pixar's *Wall-E* (2008), an animated blockbuster about a wheelchair-like robot who helps guide wheelchair-using humans back to a devastated Earth. While *Wall-E* is indeed isolated for the first twenty minutes of the film on an otherwise lifeless planet, I do not offer disability studies in the tradition of Martin F. Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation* (1994), the foundational text in studies of film and disability. Instead, I turn for methodology to a more recent reader, *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (2001), in which Thomas B. Hoeksema and Christopher R. Smit advocate for a balancing of film studies with disability studies:

While a posture of disability activism ... has helped Disability Studies gain status similar to that of Women's and African American Studies in the humanities, it has not encouraged a stylistic, analytical or structural study of these films as cinematic expressions.... Cinematic depictions of people who live with disability have been enormously diverse.... We believe that it is inaccurate and insufficient to characterize cinematic depictions of disability as primarily negative and stereotypic. We also think that taking an activist, advocacy perspective when critiquing disability cinema risks missing insights that may be obtained by reviewing films using additional tools from the field of Film Studies.¹

Such a fluid view of disability studies and its application to film is supported by Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns in the introduction to the anthology: "[D]isability itself has no easily recognizable form.... The disabled experience, defined only in relation to a perceived lack of human potential, becomes