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Tron: Legacy

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Abstract

This is a review of *Tron: Legacy* (2010).

Tron: Legacy is a sequel to the Disney cult science-fiction film *Tron* (1982). In *Tron*, computer hacker Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) is transported into a virtual world known as “The Grid.” Here, Kevin is able to interact with digital programs on a physical level. He is forced to play deadly arcade games as a kind of gladiator. He also encounters digital programs such as the benevolent Tron who refer to Kevin as “a User.” The programs of The Grid understand that they were created in the image of their Users. However, the Master Control Program (MCP), an artificial intelligence, has declared that Users do not really exist and persecutes those who will not renounce their belief. This makes for Christian allegory as Kevin is a sort of persecuted demi-god. Ultimately, Kevin and Tron defeat the MCP. Kevin escapes The Grid and becomes the CEO of ENCOM, the corporation that created the MCP.

In the sequel, Kevin has been missing for twenty years. His son, Sam Flynn (Garrett Hedlund), controls the majority share of ENCOM but, believing his father abandoned him, has become an angry and reckless young man. When Sam is informed of a page apparently sent by his father, he discovers his laboratory and becomes trapped within The Grid. Here, he meets his father who has also become a digital prisoner. It is revealed that after defeating the MCP, Kevin returned to study the potential of the digital environment. He discovered that The Grid had become home to “isomorphic algorithms” (ISOs). The ISOs are sentient programs

that appear to have arisen spontaneously with no human or computer creator. Kevin calls the ISOs “a miracle” and states that they will change everything we know about science and religion. To continue his work in The Grid, Kevin creates a digital clone of himself named Clu and charges it with “creating a perfect world.” Unfortunately, Clu equates perfection with fascism. He takes over The Grid in a coup, preventing Kevin from returning to the physical world, and commits genocide against the ISOs. Kevin and his evil clone fight a stalemate until the arrival of Sam. Father and son, along with Quorra (Olivia Wilde) the last ISO, defeat Clu. Sam and Quorra return to the physical world. As a program with no creator, Quorra’s existence in the physical world raises serious questions about what constitutes real worlds and real people.

The most pleasant surprise in *Tron: Legacy* is its proficient use of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. Since *The Matrix* (1999) – with which this film will inevitably be compared – science-fiction films about virtual reality are often expected to incorporate snippets of Buddhism. Indeed, the phrase “cyber-zen” has been coined to describe the genre. However, Buddhist elements in *The Matrix* are fairly superficial. The film’s preoccupation with piercing illusion and discovering the “real” world is more indebted to Plato than Buddhist philosophy. By contrast, *Tron: Legacy* explores legitimately Buddhist themes of struggle with the ego and non-duality. This is not surprising considering that Jeff Bridges, who stars in both

Tron films, is a practicing Buddhist. Bridges invited Zen master Bernie Glassman to come onto the set as an informal consultant.

When Sam finds Kevin, he is engaged in Zen meditation, seated upon traditional zafu and zabuton cushions. In his battle with Clu, Kevin has resorted to egoless non-action, a strategy he describes as “his Zen thing.” Quorra, his apprentice, explains that Kevin has been teaching her how to “remove the self from the equation.” Conversely, Clu, as the personification of Kevin’s pride and ambition, is a decidedly Buddhist antagonist. Kevin declares of Clu, “He is me!” At the end of the film, he appears to miraculously absorb Clu into himself.

Whereas *The Matrix* is preoccupied with “waking up” and distinguishing between false and transcendent realities, in *Tron: Legacy* it is not clear which world is real and which is false. Users are bodily transported into The Grid and Quorra is transported out. It is taken for granted that Quorra the ISO is no less real than Kevin or Sam. Tellingly, Kevin states that the ISOs arose spontaneously, “like a flame.” Flame is frequently used in Buddhism as an allegory for the ephemeral nature of reality. This pragmatic view of reality is consistent with the Mahayana Buddhist notion of “non-duality” in which reality is ultimately subjective. This point is hammered home at the end of the film when Kevin explains that Clu’s evil is rooted in his own misguided view of the world. He explains that a perfect world cannot be imagined and implemented. Instead, perfection is in front of us and we must learn

to see it. This is a concise explanation of the Mahayana view that ordinary reality (samsara) is no different from nirvana and that suffering arises from our own ignorance and striving.