Tron Legacy: A 21st Century Frankenstein

[Editor's Note: Movie spoilers ahead!]

A culture, like the human body, gives warning signs when it feels sick. If an infection enters the body, fever breaks out. This serves as a demand for treatment. Science fiction has served this purpose in modern culture since the first sci-fi novel, *Frankenstein*, appeared in 1818. A well–intended scientist creates new life that could impart immortality to all, only to immediately cast it aside. However, being an emotional creature, Frankenstein's creation will not be dismissed so easily and demands that his maker take responsibility and introduce him to the human community. Put very simply, all Frankenstein's Monster asked of his creator was to be loved! In the absence of love and acceptance the creature wreaks a terrible revenge and destroys his creator.

The story is so well-tread in popular culture that it provides a guiding motif for most sci–fi stories; thus it serves as a prophetic warning to all technological innovation. In literature, folklore and the movies, a monster means WARNING! "Victor's monster, then, which brings about his death, is a warning to us all. Monster derives from the Latin *monere*, to warn."{1} Science fiction acts as the Socratic gadfly of scientific advance. "From its very birth . . . modern science fiction has functioned as a critic of the scientific enterprise . . . . [It] both educates the general public in science and advises the scientists as to the appropriate projected goals of science . . . . [In] the context of explosive technological advance and 'future shock,' science fiction is the only literature that seriously attempts to explore the social consequences of scientific innovation."{2} Theologian Elaine Graham notes that the Greek word for monster is *teras*, which means something both abhorrent and attractive.

The monster is pure paradox and incarnates a contradictory state of existence. “It is both a sight of wonder—as divine portent—and loathing, as evidence of heinous sin.”{3} Awful and “aweful,” the monster embodies a liminal{4} being caught between two worlds. It represents the ambivalence of our creations. “Monsters embody fearful warnings of moral transgression . . . [they] herald new possibilities . . . the otherness of possible worlds, or possible versions of ourselves, not yet realized.”{5} This is not unlike ancient maps that demarcate unexplored territory with the warning: “HERE BE MONSTERS!” So our popular fictional monsters beckon us to heed their cries to take care for what we create.

The film *Tron Legacy* (2010, directed by Joseph Kosinki) continues this theme for the next generation. The movie is so visually spectacular in 3–D that the audience may easily forget its prophetic warning in a clear case where the medium threatens to overpower the message. As a visual spectacle *Tron Legacy* transforms the original *Tron* (1982, Steven Lisberger) from a cult movie following filmed in animation and live–action into a magnificent film that is also an amusement park ride.

The story follows Sam Flynn (Garret Hedlund) a disinterested majority share holder in Encom, a giant computer software company, as he pulls pranks on the board. Sam responds to a mysterious page sent from his father’s old arcade haunt and stumbles upon a teleport machine and is transported into *The Grid*.

Sam’s father, Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges), was a radical who believed quantum teleportation represents the “digital frontier.” Inside the computer, humanity can alter itself to create the perfect world. “In there is a new world! In there is our future! In there is our destiny!” Flynn emphatically states in a public address. He wants to reshape the human condition through digital manipulation. Flynn, Sr. discovers a serendipitous miracle in the process of creating utopia: a new

life form bursts into existence through spontaneous generation; he calls them “isomorphic algorithms” (ISO’s). These self–forming programs hold the potential for solving all the mysteries of science, religion and medicine. They could end all disease and would be Flynn’s gift to the world! However, Flynn’s own created program CLU (Codified Likeness Utility)–designed to create perfection in The Grid–destroys the ISO’s in a coup because they threaten their shared vision for creating perfection within The Grid. This traps Flynn in the digital world with the last surviving ISO, Quorra (Olivia Wilde), forcing them into hiding.

CLU (pronounced “clue”; Jeff Bridges playing his own clone) traps Sam in a vicious gladiatorial game–that he has stacked to be impossibly difficult, despite Sam’s skill and determination–in an effort to lure Flynn Sr. from hiding. Quorra rescues Sam and brings him to his father. Flynn Sr. has been languishing all these years because he believes that his only viable option is to remain in his Zen Buddhist retreat. When Sam asks his father to fight CLU in order to escape with him back to the real world, his response is “We do nothing.” The elder Flynn hopes against hope for the help of Tron, a warrior program designed to resist assimilation; but we discover that even Tron has been co–opted by CLU. The “Son of Flynn,” as programs call Sam, botches an escape attempt, triggering a surprise rescue by Flynn Sr. and Quorra, who then seize the opportunity to exit through the rapidly closing window on the portal back to the actual world. Unfortunately, a Program steals Flynn Sr.’s memory disc in the process, giving CLU complete control over the entire Grid. Using his newfound power, CLU raises an army ready to escape the digital world and enter the real one. “Out there is a new world! Out there is our victory! Out there is our destiny!” CLU proclaims to his troops in Hitlerian Nuremburg Rally style.

Sam and Quorra escape dramatically through the open portal with the help of Tron, who has finally decided that he fights

for the Users (the people who write the Programs). In a dramatic climax, Flynn reintegrates with CLU, destroying both of them.

The movie recapitulates the Frankensteinesque fear of technology turning on its creator. CLU represents the dark *doppelganger*{6}*,* or alter ego, of Kevin Flynn in his youthful days when he believed perfection was an attainable goal.

Biblical allusions emerge, as well. CLU demonstrates a Luciferian jealousy when Flynn discovers the ISO's and seeks their destruction to spite his creator's love for them. Trinitarian imagery abounds throughout the movie, especially in the continual triangular juxtaposition of Flynn the Creator, Son of Flynn and Quorra who represents new life and remains the heart and soul of the movie through her innocence. In one scene, Flynn resides in the background with a glowing halo over his head as Sam and Quorra sit adjacent to each other discussing the beauty of a sunrise, forming a perfect triangle in the center of the screen. This symbolism reminds us that humanity creates the digital world, much the same as the Creator did the real one, and this co–creation can just as easily turn on us. The human condition is one of rebellion against creation. CLU's programmed perfectionism seeks eradication of all that is other than itself including the reclusive creator Flynn and plans to extend that stultifying perfection to the non–digital world.

Flynn's problem, like that of Victor Frankenstein, is that he no longer cares for CLU, but runs away and hides from his darker self. He rejects his creation and does not seek to reintegrate him into the society into which he has been "born," just as Victor Frankenstein disavows his creation. Technology critic Langdon Winner gives us an excellent explanation of the *Frankenstein / Tron* analogy, relating it to our spiritual reality. Winner argues that we fail to take sufficient care as to the consequences of our creations or how these innovations may change our lives negatively, and then we

act shocked when they return to us as demonic powers instead of blessings. “Victor Frankenstein [Kevin Flynn] is a person who discovers, but refuses to ponder, the implications of his discovery. He is a man who creates something new in the world and then pours all his energy into an effort to forget. His invention is incredibly powerful and represents a quantum jump in the performance capability of a certain kind of technology. Yet he sends it out into the world with no real concern for how best to include it in the human community. . . . He then looks on in surprise as it returns to him as an autonomous force, with a structure of its own, with demands upon which it insists absolutely. Provided with no plan for its existence, the technological creation enforces a plan upon its creator.”{7}

Sam emerges back into the real world with Quorra a changed man, refusing his father’s Zen retreat and ready to assert responsibility for his company by taking it back from greedy executives. *Tron Legacy* warns of the dangers of the digital frontier including cells phones, online dating and WiFi. Only through our care to assert responsibility for our technology through ethical control will it bring positive change to the human condition. But the movie also offers hope in the astounding potential digital technology offers through Sam’s transformation coupled with Quorra’s ability. The movie is a welcome tonic to a perfectionist and paranoid age obsessed with an elusive ideal of perfection. Flynn Sr. states, “Perfection is not knowable, but right in front of us all the time.” The movie proclaims that utopia, or human happiness, is not an ideal such as a computer program, but is found in our loved ones who are right in front of us.

Notes

1. Eric S. Rabkin, “Imagination and Survival: The Case of Fantastic Literature” in Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner, eds. *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts* (Lexington, KY: ICUS, 1999), 304.

2. Joseph D. Miller, “The ‘Novel’ Novel: A Sociobiological Analysis of the Novelty Drive As Expressed in Science Fiction”in Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner, eds. *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts* (Lexington, KY: ICUS, 1999), 326.

3. Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 53.

4. According to Encarta Dictionary: English (North America) accessed via Microsoft Word, “liminal” [liminl] means: “belonging to the point of conscious awareness below which something cannot be experienced or felt.”

5. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* 53, 54.

6. Encarta Dictionary: “dop·pel·gang·er [dɑp(ə)lgæŋər]: 1. someone who looks like someone else; 2. spirit that looks like someone alive; 3. a spirit that some people believe looks like someone who is alive.

7. Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 313.

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