

vestigial brain review

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Death, She Inherited: Final Destination's Matrilineal Mind-Fuck

Jack Lipovsky & Adam Stein's *Final Destination Bloodlines* (2025)



by lewin redfern

In ancient Norse mythology, tales were told of Völvas: seeresses whose prescient practices of seiðr were passed down hereditarily from mother to daughter. That is essentially the key conceit that the latest Final Destination film weaves into the franchise's communal formula of bookended, gory tales populated by sympathetic teenage ensembles, and for the most part, the film pulls off the latest variation on this perennial horror tale brilliantly well. There is something to be said for a certain polish of dialogue lost between the millennium and now, but *Bloodlines* retains the structural soundness and oiled perpetuity that lovers of the films hold above all, and gloriously rips, crunches, and juices its way through perhaps the best crew of protagonists the franchise has paraded as of yet.

With a film like this, there's a potential to lose sight of thematic and symbolic content through the immensely satisfying (and complex) web of visual motifs, intricate sequences and arcs of irony, but *Bloodlines* brings new profundity to what has been a near-wholly insular mythos. While many contemporary moviegoers may wince at the mention of the wanked-to-high-heaven term 'horror as trauma', this film pushes it far enough to the background for it to actually substantially populate the seams of this otherwise angular film, like forests of moss springing to life in the cracks in a tile path. Whether at one of many deliberated points in the toned-down yet accessible dialogue, or within the actual body of the conceit itself, several genuinely interesting themes are explored, such as hereditary neurosis and nature/nurture: the film parses the quandaries of whether it's genuinely ethical to knowingly raise a child who may adopt your own mental illness, and if one is doomed to the shortcomings of one's own childhood in the taking up of the parental mantle.

While other genre films of recency have explored these dire, existential worries such as Alex Garland's *Men* (2022), *Bloodlines* does this through mother-daughter relationships as opposed to father-son relationships, and does a damn good job: neither is any genuine conclusion reached, nor does the film dangle in the abyss of unknowing, as it avoids the pitfall of making the thematic content the basis of the film's surface; whenever the subtext pendulum begins to lose momentum, the Goldberg-like kill sequences swing into full, satisfying effect, much to the joy of this old gorehound. And as far as the machinations of suspense and their brilliantly exacted synch points of explosive viscera and scorched rubble go, one couldn't ask any better of a legacy sequel of a franchise so fleshed-out in formula.

14 years after the franchise last ran smoothly, a new destination has been added. While one might be too swept up in the totality of the picture to question the strategy, when the circumstances and the final (lol) product are considered, this film is quite a feat of planning. Catering both to new customers and those priorly invested in the lineage of these films, *Bloodlines* excels at simultaneously understanding its place within a mythological formula of repetition and variation, as well as its responsibility to surprise, for surprise is of the utmost importance to any thriller, and *Final Destination*'s first prerogative has always been to thrill. Without spoiling the minutiae of the plot, this is done especially well in a scene involving a garbage truck, a soccer ball and a hedge trimmer (though not in the order you'd expect). That was the point in the film at which I was fully swept up both into the interpersonal and suspenseful narratives, where I was bought as a viewer. And while *Final Destination: Bloodlines* isn't absolutely perfect as a character story, the best approach is perhaps to adopt the piece of simple wisdom that one of the characters deploys mid-familial carnage, right before his turn to wear a crimson crown: love what you got, while you got it.

Love, Actually, Is Just Code: On 'Her' and the Fetish of Femininity

Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013)



by lewin redfern

With 'Her', Spike Jonze continues to walk the paper-thin line between pretense and mainstream innovation. Adopting and transforming an autumnal indie visual aesthetic and deadpan British-inspired humor, the film seems at moments to transcend its rather pandering trappings, then sinks back down into the dredge of 'thought-provoking' American cinema at the next. However, all this is carried by a thankfully consistent body of impressive performances, a kind of handrail for the committed cinephile here.

This film is incidental to Jonze's constant re-delving into the themes of inter-connectivity, the mundanity of life, relationship impermanence and emotional numbness. However, there is one genius sci-fi move here, the single low-concept sci-fi feature often being the saving grace of Jonze's otherwise mildly monotonous approach. In this case, it is something more prescient to contemporary philosophical quandaries than Jonze ever could have predicted, here in our joyous year of 2025: the AI girlfriend.

Now, that title is not to meaninglessly gender a branch of incel marketing which in reality is much more sexually diverse than all that; trust me, I have seen this diversity myself. No, the femininity, or idealised femininity, more fittingly, is a key theme of Jonze's SamanthaOS. She is our down-trodden white-collar protagonist's angel of a woman: domestic, called upon, yet with just enough sprinkles of self-interest to dismiss any notions that he is in any way partaking in a gratuitous, one-sided relationship.

Said relationship evolves in a quite regular pattern of development for a Hollywood romantic drama: the key players are introduced, their relationship budding, the relationship is established, then furthered over a set of time-crushing montages, in this instance often silent montages set to classical and minimal piano pieces, a stylistic trope employed in the 'elevated' Hollywood drama that I despise greatly. Not to devote all my time to this film's criticism: there is much to be praised here! While it is not particularly a set of tropes that fascinate me, I am an advocate for tropes as a whole, by and large. A skilled artist is able to create their most meaningful work when impressed upon by a series of stylistic rules or conventions, creating meaning in the compliance and occasional juxtaposing variation of their art. I truly believe this is the best way for art to be made. Just look at my favourite genres: in music, you have Hip Hop, Rhythm and Blues, Trip Hop, Acid Jazz, and Techno. These are literally all genres that employ sets of heavy rules and tropes for auteurs to work within and around. The same can be said for Hollywood genres as a whole, and especially the romantic melodrama. It is just a shame, an ad personam reaction of mine to reject the tropes of this genre, and Jonze truly does something good within this formal system.

Speculation is scattered throughout the film, and not limited to the science-fiction kind either: while much time is spent alluding to Samantha's growing sentience, the nature of sentience itself, and the difference between her and our protagonist, what I found truly more fascinating in my viewing was the prescient way in which Jonze uses similar moments to speculate instead about the nature of these idealized, human-AI relationships that are so prevalent in our day and age. The question that played most on my mind during my mid-bath screening: is Samantha truly a person in her own right, or is she simply an incredibly complex algorithm created in order to please Twombly?

Well, Jonze took this answer in a different direction than I would have. To avoid spoiling a decent film, I'll neither state his approach nor that which I would have taken: instead, I'll use this curtail to draw my speculation to a close.

Lightcycles and Lightscares: Tron and the Birth of Digital Style

Steven Lisberger's *Tron* (1982)



by lewin redfern

It's difficult as a critic to throw either praise or criticism the way of 1982's *Tron*, because doing either will inevitably feel chasmically distant from engaging with the actual film. So much of its enduring retrospective appeal is drawn from the stilted, basic and technologically rudimentary special effects. Almost proving my point, much of its retrospective criticism emerges from the same pool. So what degree of watching this film in 2025 can be chalked up to analog yearning? Very little, if it is approached with the right mindset.

Right from the beginning, *Tron* feels unshakably classical. Coming to life on a wide landscape shot of a modern American city in all its nocturnal glory, the film is already constructing lightscares and physical environments that strike a well-constructed parallel to the setting that later takes up much of the film's runtime, cyberspace. Bridging straight out of that, the film establishes one of two pivotal 'real-world' locales, Flynn's Arcade. Fetching 80s ambience of laughing teenagers and clinking drinks stitches together a series of shots, before giving way to an outstandingly classical crane shot up to the blinking neon sign that proudly displays the name of our protagonist-to-be. We meet Flynn, but more importantly, we take our first steps into the digital world of *Tron*.

With the similarly groundbreaking *Star Wars* having been loosed on the American juvenile zeitgeist half a decade prior, *Tron* was hardly hot on Lucasfilm's tail. In fact, it began production in 1981, long after the shockwaves of *Star Wars* had stilled. So *Tron* had clearly been a considered investment on Disney's behalf (a corporate patronage of great importance, on which I will elaborate later). They could hardly copy the effect of *Star Wars*, as had so many European and exploitation films in its immediate wake. Instead, they had to do exactly what *Star Wars* had done that was actually groundbreaking: recontextualise a set of aesthetic references from classical and world cinema for a modern American Sci-Fi audience. On top of that, *Tron* followed in the footsteps of *Star Wars* by funneling a large amount of money into an immersive worldbuilding experience built on a series of FX breakthroughs. Thankfully, *Tron* would draw on entirely different points to its predecessor. Where Lucas remapped....*Tron* turned elsewhere for influence.

Riding both on Disney's legacy as a source of entertaining, bombastic, new images and sounds and its history as a pioneer of audio-visual theory both inside and out of animation, *Tron* snatched visual cues from the German silents and Carl Dreyer, making its protagonists into starkly monochromatic figures of full lips and darkened eyes. *Tron* also drew on Charlie Chaplin, locating its plot both literally and thematically around corporate power struggles, emerging technologies, oppressive systems and the individuals who exist inside those systems, to name a few themes. With these insane points of reference being just as interesting as Lucas's remapping of Kurosawa films and philosophy of folklore and mythology, *Tron* had one thing left to do in order to be just as impactful as *Star Wars*: pioneer technical inventions in order to coin a brand new look for American science fiction.

In *Tron*, more freedom than ever before was seen in the visual effects. As jilted as they may now seem, what we see here is really a phenomenally impressive refraction of an entire century of French and American pulp through the lens of CGI object and environment synthesis. Moreover, impressive backlighting, bluescreen and rotoscoping techniques draw together an illusion that, though you may see every seam, you cannot possibly critically penetrate it. Unlike the CGI-fueled genre exercises of today, *Tron* is balanced in its exploitation of this new technology. Despite the newfound ability to construct an entire detailed environment through a single wide shot, the film endeavours to use multi-shot constructions of environment akin to its miniature and real-set based contemporaries, sometimes even resembling classical rear-projection epics in its montage and composition, such as RKO Radio's *King Kong*.

So, why is this excellent futurist film subject to both ridicule and limiting retro-commodification by those who might otherwise seriously analyse the same film made 20 years later? Well, due to the pioneering nature of its technological crutches, it now appears rudimentary, as opposed to *Star Wars* for example which seems to do much that is new, but in reality leans on the prior decade's *2001: A Space Odyssey* for many of its visual effects. Is the immersion *Star Wars* achieves possible with *Tron*? I would say that it all comes down to approach. Watching *Tron*, you must approach the images like a child, with deliberate open-mindedness. I'm sure that much of my appreciation for this classic was fueled by my love for filmic artifice, as well as my intermediate knowledge of special effects, which allows me to understand just how impressive this is. I'm sure that another great deal of my appreciation was due to the fact that I am a nerd. But regardless of all that, I think that *Tron* embodies what Disney was to some extent losing in the 80s, the ability for pure audio-visual composition, for painting with motion and sound as well as colour. This film remains emblematic of that fading approach, and I think this is the film in which I am liable to find CGI the most beautiful. Beyond that, it's an incredibly competent genre exercise. If there were an aesthetics of CGI, *Tron* would be a whole chapter of the book.

Post-Ironic, Pre- Interesting: Where the Hell Is This Clown Going?

Eli Craig's *Clown in a Cornfield* (2025)



by lewin redfern

As far as Gen-Z-pandering modern genre film goes, *Clown in a Cornfield* just manages to pass a very low bar. Whether it's the obnoxious ensemble of digital natives, or the Darko-esque inability to bridge or widen a generational gap with anything representing intelligence or at least comprehension, *Clown in a Cornfield* seems to simultaneously sell itself to and criticise two different breeds of closed-minded idiots. There are nice touches: the tyrannical, ideologically disconnected Musk-lookalike draws forth some laughs, and the well-built up stretch of hat-on-a-hat madcap goreing in the second act seems to briefly tap into some genuine modern gonzo genre madness alike to one of the *Meg* films or a *Wingard* monster piece, but the rest is a painfully stupid criticism of conservative adults which seems to in reality cast its teenage protagonists in a worse light than ever.

Visually, it's boring: neither does it tap into the contemporary plasticism of similar films like 2022's *Bodies Bodies Bodies* nor does it seem to carve any genuinely new stylistic crutches for the new age slasher film. And nostalgia's entirely out of the question: one thing I genuinely respect about this film is that it doesn't fall into the same pit traps as many modern horror films, that being an entirely superficial retro-aestheticism that manages to drain the genre of any life it would otherwise have left. However, in the rejection of other contemporary horror styles, it fails to do anything new. Never in the film would I say I was genuinely thrilled or concerned, nor did I manage to suck a great deal of gorehound sadist satisfaction from the visually darkened kills.

The found soundtrack is irritating at best: even the brief stretch of golden-age hip hop in the opening is played for laughs, and the songs themselves aren't particularly good choices. It infuriates me beyond measure how immaturity this film rejects the old, and fails to do anything good with the new. It'll be a moderate hit with the idiots, and the provocatively simple name will garner it some numbers on its inevitable Netflix release, but this reverse-children of the corn has an unremarkable number of tricks up its sleeve.