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Tron

Considered one of the precursors of film's digital era, **Tron** (1982) stands today as an impressive achievement, and a sweet reminder of the optimism held at the brink of the computer age. Starring Jeff Bridges, Bruce Boxleitner and David Warner, **Tron** is like a modern *Metropolis* (1927), pushing to new technical frontiers, telling the story of tyranny in a strange yet familiar world, and creating unforgettably beautiful moments of neon-glow filmmaking. Bridges plays Flynn, a whiz-kid programmer who has had all of his game ideas stolen by Dillinger (played to perfection by David Warner), head of ENCOM. Meanwhile, Master Control Program (MCP), installed by Dillinger, is gaining power in the ENCOM system and running amuck, failing to fear even its maker. Flynn tries repeatedly to hack into the ENCOM computers to retrieve the evidence that will prove the games are his, while his friend and ex-coworker Alan (Boxleitner), tries in vain to implement a guardian program, Tron (also played by Boxleitner), which would monitor Master Control. Needless to say, MCP is not interested in having its activities overseen or its system hacked. Through a clever sequence of events, Flynn is digitized and brought inside the domain of MCP, who now hopes to have him destroyed in its gladiator-type games, like so many other programs MCP has kidnapped for destructive entertainment (the characters even wear togas over their circuitry). MCP would also like to put an end to the meddling Tron, who is far too good at the games and difficult to control.

It took 36 outlines and 18 rewrites of the script before director/writer Steven Lisberger and producer Donald Kushner felt they'd gotten the story right. In a 1998 interview with Realhollywood.com, Lisberger, who came to film via animation, explains the genesis of **Tron**: "The idea was to come up with a character made out of light and one of our designer/animators, John Norton, designed this warrior who was made up of neon -- looked like neon. . . . And, he looked electronic and from that came Tron. . . . once that footage existed it was alive and couldn't be stopped. Here's this interesting character -- where do we put him? And, it made sense to put him

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A veteran stage, film and TV actor for more than thirty years, Brian Dennehy gets to play favorites for a change in a 4-film lineup that includes James Mason in **Odd Man Out** (1947) and Albert Finney in **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning** (1961).
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in an electronic dimension. One thing lead to another."

Unable to secure initial financing, Lisberger and Kushner put up $300,000 out of their own pockets to create a development package to present to major studios. It included a script, the entire film in storyboards, designs and a sample reel of proposed effects. Disney bought it, securing the deal several months before the computerized video game craze took off. Though **Tron** didn't provide the jump-start to Disney's slumping family film market that studio executives had hoped for, it did exemplify the risk-taking sensibilities that had been a hallmark of the studio's earlier days with its production of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), for example. Unfortunately, filmgoers in the early '80s didn't know quite what to make of **Tron**, though a successful **Tron** video game, released later in 1982, out-grossed the film's box-office take. Over time, the movie and the game have built a cult following and there are rumors that a film sequel may be in the works.

Tron represents the first use of computer-generated, 3-D imagery to produce effects that had previously been done with miniatures, model sets and matte paintings. The film contains 40 minutes of computer animation, much of it combined with live action elements shot against a black screen. The live action that occurs inside the computer was filmed in black and white and later colorized with photographic and rotoscopic techniques -- giving the film that magical silent-era look. These new techniques posed a challenge for the actors. Reportedly, Peter O'Toole was offered the role of Dillinger/Sark but balked at the black-screen notion and passed. "A lot of the time we had no idea what kind of world we would be in," says Jeff Bridges. "But Steven kept video games right on the set. If you were on a streak, people would gather around and he would postpone shooting. Then you'd pop right into the scene with this adrenaline buzz."

The demand of the work was extreme. In some of the film's more complex sequences, like the Solar Sailer moving through metal canyons, it took up to six hours to generate individual frames. "The medium *is* the message of this film," Lisberger told *Rolling Stone* in 1982. "The main character is sent into an electronic world that he's helped create, and has to deal with it. The filmmakers were put in a very similar situation."

Producer: Donald Kushner
Director: Steven M. Lisberger
Screenplay: Steven M. Lisberger, Charles Haas
Art Direction: Al Y. Roelofs, John Mansbridge
Cinematography: Bruce Logan
Editing: Jeff Gourson
Music: Wendy Carlos
Principal Cast: Jeff Bridges (Kevin Flynn/Clu), Bruce Boxleitner (Alan Bradley/Tron), David Warner (Ed Dillinger/Sark), Cindy Morgan (Lora/Yori), Barnard Hughes (Dr. Walter Gibbs/Dumont).
C-96m. Letterboxed. Closed captioning.

by Emily Soares

TCM THIS MONTH

SPOTLIGHT

After the Thin Man

Though it was only their second Nick and Nora Charles picture, **After the Thin Man** (1936) was actually the fourth pairing for Myrna Loy and William Powell, a combination that goes unrivaled in Hollywood for its great chemistry and humor. The two made 14 pictures together, six of them in the *Thin Man* series.

As the sequel to the *The Thin Man* (1934), **After the Thin Man** had a much bigger budget than its predecessor. MGM realized what a winning combination it had with Powell and Loy and planned to make the most of it. Once again, Nick and Nora fall into a case, though Nora swears upon their return to San Francisco that Nick is done with all that. Her cousin Selma, played by Elissa Landi (*The Sign of the Cross*, 1932), hires Nick to find her carousing husband, who has been having an affair with a nightclub singer. But the husband's murdered and Selma becomes a suspect. [SPOILER ALERT] It turns out that nice guy Jimmy Stewart, cast as Selma's ex-boyfriend David, is actually the killer, and it's fun to see him play the gleeful psychopath with the conviction he brings to all his roles: "I did it, do you hear, and I'm glad, glad, GLAD!"

The *Thin Man* production team returned in force for this sequel, including director W.S. Van Dyke; screenwriters Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, who won an Oscar nomination for the film; and Dashiell Hammett, who wrote an original story for it. In her book *Being and Becoming*, co-written with James Kotsilibas-Davis, Loy recalls a memorable evening with the famous detective writer: "Hammett was an attractive kind of angular man, compelling and rather like the operatives of his stories. He told me that he'd fashioned Nora after his friend Lillian Hellman, which I found interesting....As we talked that evening, Dash drank heavily and began turning a little green. He went on and on about Lillian, while aiming overt passes at me, lunging and pawing, with my lover beside us....Dash could be intransigent, but, by God, they got him downstairs and sent him home in a studio car. That was a great disappointment to me, because I really wanted to talk to the man. I never got the chance again -- Metro let him go soon after that. Apparently he couldn't handle the job."

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The *Thin Man* series was the best thing that ever happened to its leading actors. Playing vamps and assorted exotica for 80 roles, Loy finally got the type of part she knew she was made for when offered the role of Nora Charles for the first *Thin Man* picture.

After a run on the stage, Powell began his film career, like Loy, playing various unsavory characters. At the end of a successful run at Warner Bros., including a series of films as another detective -- Philo Vance -- Powell's career began to wane. He made the move to MGM in 1934 and did *Manhattan Melodrama*, which also featured Loy. Director Woody Van Dyke immediately picked up on the chemistry between the two and the duo were next cast in the roles that would make them superstars.

By 1936 Loy had been voted "Queen of the Movies" by box-office exhibitors, but following the first *Thin Man* she had to play hardball with MGM to meet her contract requirements. Her *Thin Man* salary was reportedly half of the $3,000 a week earned by Powell and she felt that if the studio publicized the two as a team, they should pay them accordingly. Loy held out and L.B. Mayer finally relented -- a record event in the history of a man well known for his threats and tricks to get his own way.

After much internal debate, it was decided to call the sequel **After the Thin Man**, which didn't make much sense because the "thin man" in Dashiell Hammett's original story is the murder victim. But after Powell's brilliant performance in the first film, audiences couldn't separate him from the film's namesake character. Likewise, audiences had trouble separating fact from fiction when it came to Powell and Loy's relationship. Though the two were very close friends offscreen, their only romantic moments together occurred on-screen. The public, however, was determined to have them married in private life as well. When the two stars showed up in San Francisco (where most of **After the Thin Man** was shot) at the St. Francis, the hotel management proudly showed "Mr. and Mrs. Powell" to their deluxe suite. This was an especially uncomfortable moment as Jean Harlow, who was engaged to Powell, was with them, and the couple had not made a public statement about their relationship. Harlow saved the day by insisting on sharing the suite with Loy: "That mix-up brought me one of my most cherished friendships," Loy said in *Being and Becoming*. "You would have thought Jean and I were in boarding school we had so much fun. We'd stay up half the night talking and sipping gin, sometimes laughing, sometimes discussing more serious things." Meanwhile, Powell got the hotel's one remaining room -- a far humbler accommodation downstairs.

The film's bigger budget also meant a more reasonable shooting schedule, considering that the first *Thin Man* was shot in 16 days! Overall, shooting in San Francisco was rigorous but celebratory, according to Loy: "We worked terribly hard on that San Francisco location. We shot all over town, with about sixty principals and crew and hundreds of local extras; but Woody Van Dyke always liked a festive company, so there were lots of parties." Loy also recalled that Jimmy Stewart "was very excited and enthusiastic about it all, rushing around with his camera taking pictures of everybody on the set, declaring, 'I'm going to marry Myrna Loy!'"

A stellar supporting cast was pulled in for the sequel as well. In addition to Landi and Stewart, Dorothy McNulty (who later went by the name Penny Singleton) is featured as the film's vamp. In the years following **After the Thin Man**, she went on to greater success as Blondie in the Dagwood and Blondie films and as the voice of Jane Jetson in the animated series.

Producer: Hunt Stromberg
Director: W. S. Van Dyke II
Screenplay: Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, Dashiell Hammett (story)
Cinematography: Oliver T. Marsh
Film Editing: Robert Kern
Art Direction: Cedric Gibbons
Music: Nacio Herb Brown, Walter Donaldson, Herbert Stothart, Edward Ward
Principal Cast: William Powell (Nick Charles), Myrna Loy (Nora Charles), James Stewart (David Graham), Elissa Landi (Selma Landis), Joseph Calleia (Dancer), Jessie Ralph (Aunt Katherine Forrest).
BW-113m. Closed captioning.

by Emily Soares