Deviant Imitation (A Sci-fi Film Essay on Automata)

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"We are fashioned creatures, but half made up."

~Mary Shelley, "Frankenstein"

In the study of three American science fiction films from previous eras, we will discuss some of the initial fears and concerns over the rampant evolution of artificial intelligence, robotics and automatons. While advances in such technologies ideally would benefit human society through rapid information and data management along with different forms of mechanical servanthood, the three films under study paint a bleak picture of a world where such advanced machines could pose a direct threat to their human masters when harnessing their powers to seek independence, self-sufficiency and even supremacy.

In Steven Spielberg's turn of the millennium classic A.I. Artificial Intelligence (1), we are transported to a futuristic time when "Mecha" live among humans (or "Orga") as lifelike companions and servants. After robot-child David is brought into a household to help comfort a grieving mother whose real son is in a deep coma, advances in cryogenics help revive the child and the parents soon decide to abandon David despite his deep attachment to Monica the mother. David soon discovers that the world between "Mecha" and "Orga" is deeply divided, with many humans often bent on casting away or eliminating their mechanical creations when they fall out of favour as slaves or become obsolete.

In the ground-breaking Disney sci-fi film Tron (2)—which pioneered the use of CGI (computer-generated imagery) and spurred a series of technologically advanced films including the upcoming "Tron: Ares"—we meet Kevin Flynn, a former programmer at a computer technology corporation called ENCOM who lost his position at the company and had his work plagiarized upon termination. Using their superior computer skills, Flynn and his two friends Alan and Lora, who still both hold research positions at ENCOM, enter the mainframe as CLU, Tron and Yori to try and vanquish the powerful "Master Control Program", a hell-bent and tyrannical artificial intelligence system created by incumbent ENCOM boss Ed Dillinger who initially stole Flynn's programming work at the company to be promoted as its new CEO.

In dystopian sci-fi western film Westworld (3), we encounter Peter and John, two men embarking on an expensive and futuristic getaway at a Delos Vacations resort. Choosing the realm of "Westworld" for their vacation, the two are outfitted to be cowboys and quickly are immersed in a world with life-like robots who can play characters like gunslingers, cowboys in bar fights and even harlot companions. While the realistic robots are designed to have 'safe' and 'true-to-life' interactions with resort-goers while under the constant control and maintenance of a large behind-the-scene team of technicians and scientists, concerns over 'breakdowns' and malfunctioning in the automatons soon snowball in each of the three resort realms with many of the

machines acting out violently and without inhibition toward the human vacationers. Soon, Peter is forced to flee Westworld when an advanced '406' robot ignores its original programming and uses its sophisticated heat sensors to track the escapee and terminate him.

While the three films under study expose problems in the advancement of computer and A.I. technologies that can mimic and even exceed human performance, human frailty and weaknesses are tied into problems in automaton programming and abuse of power. In the end, ethics play a large role as a safeguard in a world where machine antagonists could potentially be used to exert power and to suppress opposition through the use of harmful actions and commands, originating from initially flawed human orders and deviant imitation.

Sources:

1. A.I. Artificial Intelligence (2001). Dir. Steven Spielberg. Warner Bros. Pictures. USA. 146 min.

2. Tron (1982). Dir. Steven Lisberger. Walt Disney Productions. USA. 96 min.

3. Westworld (1973). Dir. Michael Crichton. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. USA. 88 min.