# Men to Man: a Duologue

Diner: Written and directed by Barry Levinson; MGM.

by Eric Shapearo

One big cheer for a movie in which humanness—with all its weaknesses, foibles and modest strengths—does not run against humans (as is *de rigeur* in modish literature and its byproduct, popular moviemaking). It's a refreshing change to see a movie in which decency, loyalty, friendship do not ruin existences and drag stuporous wrecks of humanity to their prescribed habitats—the jungle of psychoanalytical couches, the swamps of abominable marriages, the purgatories of self-realization, the Bosch-like limbo of human-potential centers and psychiatric clinics, and finally to the most unsavory treat of Hollywood's beloved symbolization—a depraved penitentiary. In *Diner,* there is no gourmet destruction of the individual or society but, on the contrary, a humble enrichment of man through other men, of a cluster of people through the very rudiments of unpretentious realism. The rulers of today's Hollywood seem unable to understand one simple truth: that excessive pessimism turns as quickly into caricature, meaninglessness and boredom as mindless optimism does.

Diner is an unassuming antidote: it finds its way between the vagaries of sadness and premonition and hope and warmth, among the natural complexities of basic relationships and uninspiring everydayness. What results is a miniphilosophy of friendly, post-Darwinian naturalism in which man does not eat man, but enjoys his being next to himself and tries to communicate his feelings of acceptance or disappointment with the meager means which are offered to him by his not-too-original personality and not-too-elevated grasp of what life is all about. This is not particularly enlightening, in comparison to what the 20th-century creative culture has tried to convey to
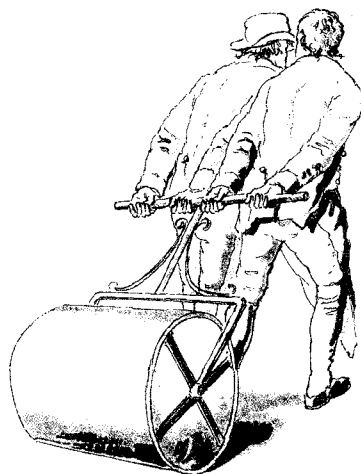
us, but it is a welcome reprieve from the fashionable highbrow and middlebrow cultural fare that sees artistic virtue and cognition in freakish obfuscation and outright lies about us. The tale of five men who wrestle with the minor traps of living their youth, and whose defense against existential defeat is endless talking, has a curious healing potential. The moviegoer quickly understands *Diner's* difference from the routine cinematic fix—it is the same as the difference between health food and a nourishing, tasty, honest-to-goodness American hamburger.

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by Stephen Macaulay

"Who's the best singer—Frank Sinatra or Johnny Mathis?" he demands, explaining that the answer is "important" to him. White shirt, tie, sports coat.

"Elvis Presley," replies the young man with hair slicked by pomade, an iridescent suit, gold jewelry including a class ring on a chain around his neck, and presumably thick-and-thin stockings covered by shiny black shoes known as points.

The answer is right for the speaker, wrong for the auditor. It doesn't mean

anything; it really doesn't matter. It's just idle chatter in a diner at 3 a.m., not the Fitzgeraldian 3 a.m., when grand struggles commence among mind, body, and soul, but the 3 a.m. when men—boys, actually—in their early twenties meet to idle away time because the dance is over and the bars are closed. A diner in Baltimore in 1959. Five young men: a greaser, a Wasp, a married man, a rebel, a fan. They really don't mean anything in the grand scheme of life: except for the fact that Fitzgeralds are rare and that they are typical of the people one passes on the streets every day in any city, types who don't wonder if they're leading lives of quiet desperation, but rather remember the times when they had good times, who think that they "have a history," as one character in *Diner* puts it, without realizing that each day adds another line or paragraph to their chronicle. The brief interrogation is indicative of this attitude or approach to life. It points up to the fact that communication between individuals is an extraordinarily difficult thing to effect, not because of the background noise or interference that people like Norbert Wiener and Michel Serres describe, but simply because there is little to *say.* However, friendship and love are not based on verbal communication. Actual statements between lovers and/or friends are more often than not trivial ("Ask me what's on the flip side of any 45," "Who was the leading wide receiver for the Colts in 19--"). They communicate through proximity, through closeness. When this isn't achieved and maintained there is a falling apart and the answer to a question about the leading pop singer becomes a frame for a bitter exchange.

Diner is a slight movie—spare, not anemic. A diner in Baltimore in 1959. Five young men: $2000 lost in a bet on a basketball game and no money to pay it; a pregnant friend who begins to take on the image of a wife; a marriage in which

the spouses begin to lose touch; a family lost because of differing values; an impending marriage in a life whose dominant concern was once which team would win the football championship. The beat of these lives is kept by rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll—James Brown, Jerry Lee Lewis. It's not important music with important lyrics ("Everyone SHOUT!—a little bit louder now. . . ."), but that which these five share as a touchstone. It's a driving sound whose repetitious cries of exuberance sometimes become annoying: when the bet is lost, the car radio is punched repeatedly. It is the right music at the wrong time. But tomorrow night is a different story, but the same story. They'll meet, chew french fries and gravy, and swap stories—talk about their "history." They won't discuss their dreams as philosophers would; they'll speak of their fears and desires as men of action do. In Baltimore in 1959—or Houston, Detroit, Boston, Los Angeles in 1982—action doesn't amount to much in a romantic sense of gesture. But that doesn't make it any less important. ☐

Binary Codes & the Miracle of Man

Tron; Screenplay by Steven Lisberger; Directed by Steven Lisberger; Walt Disney Productions.

Forget *Tron* as a movie. It is nothing of the sort. Certainly there is plenty of action and a plot line, which separate it from what are known as *films,* those creations of European directors and their domestic devotees. *Tron* is akin to Abel Gance's *Napoleon,* not the version that Francis Ford Coppola brought back from the archives, but the one that Gance partially destroyed in response to the fact that his panoramic, three-screen approach was aborted by the advent of "talking pictures." Gance struggled to push the limits of film, to stretch the frame. How well he succeeded is now known only by a few, those who retain the images in now-fading memories. The rest of us can only extrapolate. We can see something of the same efforts being made in *Tron,* heir to Disney's *Fantasia,* the 1940 creation that yokes Bach, Stravinsky, and Mussorgsky with cartoons, the motion picture that has influenced many film-makers of today, particularly Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, two directors who are obviously influential on the work of Steven Lisberger. Thus it goes full circle.

Computer graphics are the basis of *Tron.* It is a process in which images are electronically created from binary codes. *Tron* isn't the first motion picture to make use of the computer, but it uses it to a greater extent than any previous popular creation. Silicon chips, the essence of computers, are not a subject upon which many are inclined to dwell, with the exception, of course, of those who are entirely captivated by thinking and doing machines—those blear-eyed fanatics who spend nights in temperature-and-humidity-controlled rooms, loading a cryptic language via a keyboard, staring at a cathode-ray tube

screen. With the geometric increase in the number of chips that influence our lives—digital watches, word processors, home video games—the computer, in one Protean guise or another, is coming to have an influence on the rest of us as profound and pervasive as the steam engine.

There is something unsettling about the idea—and the fact, like *Tron*—that the computer has capabilities far beyond those of man. Animators, the types who worked on preintegrated-circuit movies like *Fantasia,* cannot create a *Tron;* those binary believers for whom Boolean algebra and VLSI's are fundamentals of existence, could, given a hand by products from Digital Equipment Corporation and others. Man is limited. Certainly that's not a fresh statement, but it's one that computers are forcing us to face again. Of course, no computer can work without having at some point relied on man, and artifical intelligence, which is being diligently developed at labs from Cambridge in the East to Cupertino in the West, is still far from realization. These are soothing thoughts, but only temporary anodynes. There will be more *Trons.* Eventually, only 20th-century Luddites will be without personal micro or minicomputers. This is not a recommendation, merely an observation.

A recurrent theme in fiction—in literature both high and low—is that the plucky spirit of man will overcome all challenges: natural, alien, artificial. There is something to that; man has survived against odds that make Darwin's theory of selection a moot point. In one sense, the computer is another, more subtle challenge, a challenge to man's creative powers, those powers which help define *Homo sapiens.* Traditional animators can't be happy with *Tron* any more than livery operators were pleased with Henry Ford, or Abel Gance with the sound track. Technology seems to have an inexorable power. Still, there is one thing to consider. Although Xerox probably has a machine that can create manuscripts that are truly remarkable, it will never construct one that will surpass the beauty of *The Book of Kells.* Secular triumphs are one thing; the inexplicable miracle of man is quite another. (SM) ☐