

The Empire Cannot Die: Propaganda and Immortality in *Top Gun: Maverick*

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Top Gun: Maverick is a film about the American Empire: its ethos and hopes, its illusions and contradictions. This essay considers the propaganda content of the movie, and reflects on what it reveals and conceals about the wider political and social context of America's imperial project. The film provides insights on the shifting expectations, and troubles facing the American Empire in 2022. In reflecting upon the sequel and comparing it with the original, it is possible to notice changes and new prerogatives in the self-perception of the United States, as well as an overall imperial fatigue and tension. In particular, this essay evaluates the use of missionary language and metaphors in the film, and considers that empires have a chronic incapacity, or maybe impossibility, in abdicating their power. *Top Gun: Maverick* shows that an empire, any empire, would simply cease to be such if it would not believe in its own myth of perennial youth. Ultimately, this essay considers the burden of the American Empire: its damnation is its immortality, its illusion of eternity.

Film is like a battleground
Samuel Fuller

Propaganda

Top Gun: Maverick is a movie about the American Empire; about its ethos and hopes, its illusions and contradictions.

The United States does not like to present itself as an Empire. The phrase itself, 'American Empire', is a contested one. To many Americans it is inconceivable that their country, born from an anti-imperial struggle, could ever be an empire. However, the United States is much more than a single, sovereign nation, as evidenced by the sheer number of U.S. soldiers and military bases stationed around the world, its fourteen unincorporated territories in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean, and the scope of influence that the nation has on matters of international politics, economics and culture. That said, there is a remarkable amount of academic writing that denies the existence of an

‘American Empire’ whilst, simultaneously, confirming that the United States is an ‘imperial’ or ‘imperialist’ nation.¹ The imperialism of the United States is less difficult, or perhaps even impossible, to deny. What it seeks to spread through its power, what it claims to spread, and the ultimate benefits of this reach, are rich topics of debate, ones that I will only glance upon in what follows. What I argue here is that, whether or not intellectuals find this notion of ‘American Empire’ satisfactory, the cultural products of the United States betray and bolster a social imaginary of an imperial power devoted to the pursuit of a universally beneficial mission.² *Top Gun: Maverick* is a perfect example of one such cultural product that promotes the myth of the ‘American Empire’ and speaks to its undying appeal.

This sequel to the original *Top Gun* (1986) might be seen as an advertisement for the military, and to a certain extent it is. The film is part of a long history of collaboration between the Department of Defense Entertainment Media Office and Hollywood.³ But *Top Gun: Maverick* is more than this. The film provides insights on the shifting expectations, and troubles facing the American Empire’s project. In reflecting upon the sequel and comparing it with the original, it is possible to notice changes and new prerogatives in the self-perception of the imperial project of the United States, as well as an overall imperial fatigue and tension.

Many have marveled at Tom Cruise’s performance, and at the feeling of authenticity of the film. In the pre-recorded speech that welcomes audiences to the theater, Cruise himself says that the entire team’s effort was to produce something ‘authentic’. Forces of gravity truly smooch Maverick’s (Tom Cruise) face during the action scenes, and we are looking at ‘real F-18s’. But what is even more significant is

¹ See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. ‘The American Empire? Not so Fast’, in *World Policy Journal* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring, 2005): pp. 43-46. See also David A. Lake, ‘The New American Empire?’ in *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (August 2008): pp. 281-289. See also Richard Saull, ‘Empire, Imperialism, and Contemporary American Global Power’, in *International Studies Perspectives* Vol. 9, No. 3 (August 2008): pp. 309-318.

² Many factors contribute to a social imaginary and are the result of theories, ideas, practices, and cultural products. For instance, what starts off as a theory, or ideology, held by a few people, perhaps a circle of intellectual elites, infiltrates the social imaginary and then the whole society. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 171–6.

³ The movie received support from the Department of Defense (DOD) Entertainment Media Office in the form of equipment, personnel, and technical expertise. The DOD already collaborated on the making of the first *Top Gun*. See Theo Zenou, ‘Top Gun brought to you by the American military’, in *The Washington Post*. May 27, 2022. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/05/27/top-gun-maverick-us-military/> Accessed June 30, 2022. See also Pearse Redmond, ‘The Historical Roots of CIA-Hollywood Propaganda’, in *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (March, 2017): pp. 281-310. See also Tim Lenoir and Luke Caldwell, *The Military-Entertainment Complex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

the combination of fiction and nonfiction at play. After all, the story remains fictional and *Top Gun: Maverick* is ‘only’ a film. Yet this combination of fictional narrative and authenticity of *how* the story has been filmed is essential for any propaganda and, in general, for any ideology.⁴ For no propaganda, or ideology would ever have any chance to succeed without being *perceived* as ‘real’, as ‘authentic’. In the following pages, I want to stare through this *feeling* of authenticity and past the film’s grand visual spectacle in order to better understand the movie’s propagandistic content: something that makes this movie more than just a movie. For *Top Gun: Maverick* tries to re-cement the myth of a country—the United States—with a universal mission.

Especially in the English-speaking world, there is a tendency to negatively value the concept of propaganda as dissemination of dangerous, often dishonest, ideas and information. Jürgen Wilke notices that the term propaganda arouses highly negative associations in Western democracies since they present themselves as defenders of the ideals of freedom of opinion and freedom of the press. In the context of Western democracies, propaganda appears as information and education’s Other.⁵ Propaganda is taken as a synonym of manipulation. Of course, this is often the case. And yet the reality is more complex. Western democracies are no exception to the variety of propaganda that weaves together information and ideology, education, and entertainment. That said, in this essay I prefer to employ the term ‘propaganda’ according to its Catholic usage as ‘propagation’ and active promotion of a worldview.⁶ A more ‘neutral’ understanding of the concept of propaganda has been described by film historian Richard Taylor, according to whom ‘propaganda is concerned with the transmission of ideas and/or

⁴ With regards to the use of cinema as an ideological vehicle and to the co-existence of fiction and non-fiction, T.F. Lindsay, in a 1945 article, notices: ‘By judicious omissions and emphasis, and by a carefully phrased commentary, a series of shots from the battle-fronts (*each true in itself*) may easily give the impression, to a national audience, that a country is winning the war, when it is in fact losing it.’ T. F. Lindsay, ‘The Film as Propaganda’, in *Blackfriars*, Vol. 26, No. 308 (November 1945): p. 411, emphasis added. See also Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*, revised edition (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

⁵ See Jürgen Wilke, ‘Propaganda’, in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, First Edition, edited by Wolfgang Donsbach (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), pp. 1-5. See also James Chapman, ‘The Power of Propaganda’, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Oct., 2000): pp. 679-688.

⁶ As known, the concept of propaganda has a distinctive religious history as demonstrated by Pope Gregory XV’s foundation of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) in 1622. See Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (London: Sage, 2010), p. 2. See also Alan Sennet, ‘Film Propaganda: Triumph of the Will as a Case Study’, in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring 2014): p. 46. See also Marshall Soules, *Media, Persuasion and Propaganda* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 4-5.

values from one person, or group of persons, to another'.⁷ It is also worth recalling that propaganda is not always or exclusively a method to create *ex nihilo* a social imaginary, but also and more often a way of solidifying and reshaping an already existing set of ideas. As Aldous Huxley, insightfully reminds us: 'Propaganda gives force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire; but it does not do much to create these movements. The propagandist is a man who canalizes an already existing stream. In a land where there is no water, he digs in vain.'⁸

Mission

Maverick is a US Navy test pilot who is sent to train an elite group of aviators for a secret mission. In his career, Maverick has been recognized as a top pilot, but he is also incapable of submitting entirely to authorities. Despite his achievements, he has remained a captain, rather than advancing to higher ranks. He is chased by the memories of Goose (Anthony Edwards), his wingman whose death in a flight accident is a central plot point of the first *Top Gun*. Always looking for adrenaline and impossible challenges, Maverick's entire *raison d'être* seems to be to fly and push the boundaries of what can be achieved, which has earned him a checkered reputation with the Navy's top brass.

The mission at the center of *Top Gun: Maverick* is the first element of divergence from the 1986 original. Where *Top Gun* focused primarily on the camaraderie and competition between elite, young aviators in training, the sequel presents the viewer an actual threat and job that must be done. Before giving more insights into the specifics of the mission, I want to consider the metaphorical implications of centering the film around a mission to begin with. *Top Gun* came out in May 1986, during Ronald Reagan's second presidential term at a time when America was more certain of its world superiority. The confrontation with an enemy, in the first *Top Gun*, was detached from any mission. There, the enemy appeared as a necessary accessory. The symbolism of the emphasis on the mission could hardly be more explicit in the sequel. At least half of the 2022 movie is dedicated to the training for and then accomplishment of this mission. Its centrality cannot be overstated. This change—from the training and possibility of an enemy in the former movie to an actual mission in the sequel—indicates an American Empire that feels less secure in the world. In this moment

⁷ Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda. Soviet Russian and Nazi Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 19. Quoted in Sennet, 'Film Propaganda: Triumph of the Will as a Case Study', p. 47.

⁸ Aldous Huxley, 'Notes on Propaganda', in *Harpers' Magazine* 174 (December 1936): p. 39. Quoted in Sennet, 'Film Propaganda: Triumph of the Will as a Case Study', p. 47.

of insecurity, *Top Gun: Maverick*, tries to penetrate within America's and the world's imaginaries with the following statement: the American Civilization must regain an awareness of its historic and universal mission.

For further context of the geopolitical contrasts separating 1986 and 2022 that speak to the divergences in the films, one can recall that in 1989, only three years after *Top Gun* was released, political scientist Francis Fukuyama popularized the famous expression 'the end of history', by which he indicated an end of historical struggle now that, at the end of the Cold War, liberal democracies like the American one, could spread throughout the rest of the world. Today, everyone knows that history did not end, and rather than a unipolar world imagined by Fukuyama we have entered a multipolar world in which the US has faced, and it is still facing the rise of new, and aspiring empires. The war that the US is currently fighting, indirectly, with Russia on Ukrainian soil, captures this current imperial battle and gives insight into the rise of a multipolar world. This change of affairs—from one in which the American Empire could simply train itself to one in which it must regain a sense of its own mission—is essential to *Top Gun: Maverick*'s propaganda content. The mission is far from being a mere backdrop to the human story of Maverick, or an excuse to increase the action sequences. Instead, it is the detail that reveals the ideological underpinning and purpose of the film.

Furthermore, it is impossible to not notice a certain religious afflatus in the reference to a *mission*. The mission must pass through 'two miracles', as Maverick likes to say and the admirals like to repeat, referring to the two bombs that need to hit the nuclear site that the navy pilots must destroy as part of their mission. Of course, these are miracles not based upon faith, but upon engineering, technique, innovation, human accuracy. The use of missionary language in American politics has a long history that still reverberates within *Top Gun: Maverick*.⁹

So, what is the mission? As explained to Maverick by Admiral Beau 'Cyclone' Simpson (Jon Hamm) and Rear Admiral Solomon 'Warlock' Bates (Charles Parnell), an unspecified foreign country is not respecting international regulations on nuclear weapons and the US army has the responsibility to destroy this arsenal. This is just the story, but beyond this apparently generic plot there is something more: the American Empire still wants to present itself as the watchdog of the world order. The movie does not give many details on the actual threat

⁹ The 'idea of the American mission' is a pillar of American exceptionalism. As pointed out by Paul T. McCartney, already during the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States conceived international relations in a missionary fashion, and a certain missionary rhetoric predated pre-war debate. See Paul T. McCartney, 'Religion, the Spanish-American War, and the Idea of American Mission', in *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 2012): pp. 257-278.

represented by these nuclear weapons. What counts most in the logic of the film is that the United States preserves the status quo, and thus its position at the top of the world.

The defenders of this order take a more plastic formulation with the flags on the back of the famous bomber jacket that Maverick wears at the beginning of the movie: those of the United States, the United Nations, Japan and Taiwan. These flags function as a statement on the concept of empire as a trans-national political alliance formed by ‘united’ nations.¹⁰ In the mythology of the *Top Gun* saga, the flags indicate a world order in which the United States has the leading role among the United Nations, while being supported by its allies. Japan and Taiwan, metaphorically, signify allies par excellence, the most loyal supporters of the Empire that can and should trust in the Empire’s support.¹¹ The movie promotes imperial unity and indicates the direction of possible conflicts.

Of course, one must notice that the mission is not presented as an aggressive measure. Rather it represents the consolidation of the *Pax Americana*. The United States wants to perceive itself as defender of peace and enforcer of rules, not as an imperial aggressive power. America might know that it is an empire, but it does not want to be perceived as such—especially not as an aggressive one. Again, it would lead us too far to consider the paradox of an empire, the United States, that was born out from a rebellion against another empire, the British one. It is probably true that these historical roots of the American Empire determine a strange kind of schizophrenia in its self-perception.¹² What one could infer from *Top Gun: Maverick* is that the United States does not want to project an image of a country that must necessarily *change* the world, as much as it has a duty of keeping the world as it is. Of course, this could be interpreted as a sign of imperial fatigue since the American Empire seems to state that it has no more the capacity or energies to *change* the world; a narrative and desire that was still in place at the

¹⁰ A similar definition of Empire has been provided by French philosopher Alexandre Kojève who writes: ‘This is the epoch of Empires, which is to say of transnational political unities, but formed by affiliated nations.’ Quoted in Robert Howse, ‘Kojève’s Latin Empire: From the “End of History” to the “epoch of Empires”’, in *Hoover Institution*, August 1, 2004. URL: <https://www.hoover.org/research/kojeves-latin-empire>. Accessed August 16, 2022.

¹¹ The production and release of *Top Gun: Maverick* also provides one of the best overviews on the current drift between Hollywood and China. See Eric Schwartzel, ‘“Top Gun: Maverick” loses Chinese Investor Due to Pro-U.S. Messaging’, in *The Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/top-gun-maverick-loses-chinese-investor-due-to-pro-u-s-messaging-11653643803> Accessed July 1, 2022. See also Kyle Smith, ‘Hollywood’s China break up is long overdue’, in *National Review*, June 7, 2022. URL: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2022/06/hollywoods-china-breakup-is-long-overdue/> Accessed July 1, 2022.

¹² See Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (London: Macmillan Publisher 2019).

start of the Iraq War, not to mention all the active regime change efforts in Latin America in the twentieth century. Yet what counts most to consider here is that *Top Gun: Maverick* is not a movie that cements ‘jingoistic’ narrative. The movie does its best to portray the American Civilization as defender of a world order, not as an aggressive imperial power. The mission to destroy a nuclear arsenal must be read as the destruction of a threat.

Furthermore, in the context of *Top Gun: Maverick*, the mission is not presented as part of a general conflict between good *versus* bad, the good empire *versus* the empire of evil. This is an interesting shift in political message and articulation of political ideology if one recalls that only a few decades ago George W. Bush framed Global War on Terror precisely as a fight against ‘the Axis of Evil’, referring to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Bush’s rhetoric resurrected the Cold War and Reagan’s reference to the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire. Within the logic of *Top Gun: Maverick*, the American Empire wants to show the increased awareness that the dichotomy good versus bad is a simplification that does not convince the international public opinion anymore. Probably the utter failure and unpopularity of the War on Terror justifies this shift. To maintain an order, encapsulated in the destruction of the nuclear arsenal, does not require anymore the attempt to explain who is good and who is bad. What counts more, again in the logic of the film, is the preservation of a status quo. In such a sense, the mission is not about aggressiveness. Rather it is meant to guarantee the *Pax Americana*. This is the way the American Empire wants to perceive itself, and wants to be perceived, internationally.

If preservation of the status quo is the goal, then any entity seeking to disrupt things as usual is the ‘enemy’. What form does this ‘antagonist’ take in *Top Gun: Maverick*? One notices here an element of continuity between the sequel and the original movie since in both movies the enemy’s identity is unspecified. Of course, one might easily recognize in the fictitious symbols on the enemy’s planes a certain association with the Soviet Union in the original *Top Gun*, and with China in *Maverick*. At the same time, the nuclear threat might call to mind Russia, Iran, or North Korea. The landscape surrounding the nuclear site that the jet fighters need to bomb recalls the remote parts of Russia or China. Yet it is a futile exercise to try to identify *who* the enemy is since, in the logic of the American Empire, that is, of an Empire that still wants to present itself at the top of a world order, the enemy is always the enemy to come. A future enemy, and not *only* China or Russia. It is indicative that the enemy is unknown since its undeclared identity projects the enemy towards a future plane. At the same time, it unwittingly testifies that the Empire, any empire, never feels entirely safe. A possible enemy—an unknown enemy—might always come into existence.

The geopolitical bent of *Top Gun: Maverick* could not be more straightforward, yet its mission is not motivated by a clear

ideological aim.¹³ It is not enough to say that American Civilization must engage in a mission to preserve a world order. This is utterly generic. One would like to know *why* this mission should be fought. What remains largely unclarified in the movie is the moral content of this mission. The movie states that the American Empire is on the right side of history. But it does almost nothing to state explicitly *why*, as if the rightness of a world order could appear as self-evident. Perhaps, the movie proves a more generalizable rule since any empire, at some point of its life cycle, exists but unaware of what moves them towards their own mission. Ultimately, it is a strange kind of mission, apparently justified by a rather generic reference to the violation of ‘international treaty’. Yet the implications of the mission remain unknown. Based on this film, it seems that American exceptionalism has ceased to rest on any certain belief.

Perhaps, only if we reflect more upon *how* the mission can be won, one could detect some hints of how *Top Gun: Maverick* intends to portray the ethos of American Civilization, that is, the ideological reasons to fight this mission.

E Pluribus Unum

The individualism and the competition among pilots—in the first *Top Gun*, between Maverick and Ice (Val Kilmer), in the sequel, between Hangman (Glen Powell) and Rooster (Miles Teller)—is a persistent feature within both movies. Who is going to be recognized as ‘the best of the best’ is a leading thread in the *Top Gun* saga. Actual pilots and Navy officials might consider that this is a fictionalized aspect, and that teamwork is much more important than personal competition in the navy. Even if this criticism would be justified, it would miss the general import of both movies since the idea of individual excellence is grounded in a certain ethos of American Civilization.¹⁴ Yet one should also notice that both movies do not limit themselves to the celebration of strictly individual talent and individual achievement. Both movies—already the first *Top Gun*, and even more the sequel—provide a more sophisticated account. By the end of both movies, the pilots who were in competition end up forming an alliance, or

¹³ For an opposite view that stresses, instead, the geopolitical vagueness of the movie see Erin Harrington, ‘Top Gun: Maverick is a Film Obsessed with Its Former Self’, in *The Conversation*. June 1, 2022. URL: <https://theconversation.com/top-gun-maverick-is-a-film-obsessed-with-its-former-self-179461> Accessed: June 29, 2022.

¹⁴ One should notice here a problem within this emphasis on excellence. Films like *Top Gun* try to convince the general audience that the top 1% is not an elite of privileged, but an elite of talented. The *Top Gun* saga tries to reshape the American perception of the idea of the 1%, an idea that today recalls economic privileges, and that in the movie, instead, is presented as a form of privilege grounded in talent.

practically speaking watch each other's backs, as Hangman does in one of the final scenes in which he takes down an enemy who is in the act of hitting Maverick and Rooster. Maverick's unorthodox methods, individualism, rebelliousness, and disrespect for authorities do not exclude social discipline, too. By watching the movie, one has the impression that the negotiation and reconciliation of the individual with the collective is truly at the core of the American Civilization project; it is the way American Civilization would like to be perceived and what it evangelizes.

In this movie, as in any movie of American propaganda, social discipline is persistently valorized; in particular, the importance for individuals to work as a collective, as a 'team'. Even the individual hero, Maverick himself, would be unable to accomplish any mission without relying on the team of young navy pilots and the various forms of technical assistance provided by naval officers. Central to the ideological message of the film is the scene of the football match played on the beach, which stresses precisely this need of succeeding as a team. The Admiral 'Cyclone's' disapproval towards Maverick's waste of time during the aviators' training is met with Maverick's words on the need of creating a team first, as if a collective spirit would be essential and preliminary to any technical proficiency. This is also something that marks a distance between *Top Gun: Maverick* and the original movie since in the former the famous volleyball scene was a spontaneous and pointless interlude of masculine posturing, where in the sequel the football sequence becomes part of an exercise of team-building.¹⁵ Again, this is telling of a change of ethos, and how the American Empire, today, wants to communicate that the time for narcissistic indulgences might have come to an end.

This idea of the synergy between the individual and the collective is reflected by the inter-racial and inter-gender dimension of the team, too. The ethnic, racial, and gender diversity is transcended in the unity of the Navy and the collective purpose of the mission. The differences are set apart since what counts most is an overall sense of unity. Phoenix (Monica Barbaro), Bob (Lewis Pullman), Payback (Jay Ellis), Fanboy (Danny Ramirez), or Fritz (Manny Jacinto) might be born in the United States, but they are all distinctively coming from diverse ethnic and racial groups. Regardless of differences, the message is that when you become 'American' you automatically become part of the same civilizational process. Of course, most of the primary characters and people in power are still White Americans. Yet the most important aspect is that the movie, quite explicitly, tries to address any

¹⁵ This is also pointed out by Jack Butler in his review 'Two Reasons to Love Top Gun: Maverick', in *The National Review*, June 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/two-reasons-to-love-top-gun-maverick/> Accessed June 30, 2022.

‘American’—coming from any racial and class background—as active in the physical maintenance of the American imperial project.

The movie is thoughtful enough to not completely mask social tensions behind this ideological depiction. Today, the United States is a vastly divided country. The sequel presents a lack of unity at the level of government which captures not only the perception of the general population, but also the reality of contemporary American politics. The contrast between admirals and captains, and among admirals themselves is part of this general need of the movie to be perceived as authentic. Of course, even in this case there is a propagandistic message: the possible reconciliation between individuals thanks to the accomplishment of the mission.

That a collective of individuals might form a unity beyond their individual particularities is the moral content of this mission. *E pluribus unum*. This moral content is the idealistic version of democratic powers since this is a political organization grounded in the faith of resultant forces—even ones distinctively opposed to one another—and not upon a single clearly-planned set of ideas.

The ethos of American Civilization that *Top Gun: Maverick* wants to portray is constantly grounded in this idea of reconciliation of individual and collective. However, this reconciliation should not be seen only among a community of individuals living in the present, but also extending towards the past and projecting itself towards the future. The intergenerational dynamics of this movie are fundamental to the political and military message of the film itself. The human story—more precisely, the relationship between Maverick and Rooster—connects intimately with the political story on the preservation of an American world order. To the question, ‘How can this mission be won?’, one should reply here by replying, ‘If the past and present form an alliance and the traumas of the past are redeemed in the present.’¹⁶

In the first *Top Gun*, Maverick was a much skilled pilot chasing the ghost of his much-admired dad, a deceased Navy legend. In the sequel, the ghost hunting Maverick is Goose, his wingman deceased in the previous movie. As much as Maverick has been judged not responsible for Goose’s death, he still holds onto the guilt of not having been able to save him, a guilt that is exacerbated by the fact that Rooster, Goose’s son, is one of the pilots hoping to fly the mission. Rooster, too,

¹⁶ Of course, this continuity of past and present can be connected to the theme of nostalgia. The first scene of the movie, and the opening credit are almost identical to the original *Top Gun* creating an ideal continuity between the original version and this one, from the iconic main theme to the title card outlining the real-life Top Gun program to shots of planes flying off the runway. But *Top Gun: Maverick* is not a movie obsessed with the past, as much as it tries to reflect on the possible continuity between past and present. Historical roots are always necessary to feed imperial myths in the present. See Danilo Caracciolo, ‘Il Potere del Mito’, in *Limes. Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica* 2/20 (2020): p. 4.

is hunted by the ghost of his father, Goose. The persistence of Goose's memories in Maverick and Rooster is recalled throughout the movie a few times. We also learn that Maverick had set back Rooster's career to save him from the same destiny of his father. The film follows the contrast and final reconciliation between Maverick and Rooster.

The characters belong to two different generations but are both connected by this intergenerational loss. Both pilots have lost their parents. The shared experience of a parental sacrifice to the interests of the nation brings Maverick and Rooster together. There is a common story, here, that consolidates the sense of belonging to a nation, to an historical community grounded in the continuity among several generations. Yet there are several problems with this intergenerational dynamic as well. The ideology of *Top Gun: Maverick*—built around this intergenerational continuity—is not believable since the only character with some depth is Maverick whilst the young pilots, Rooster included, are only masks. Bob is 'the nerd,' Phoenix is 'the strong woman', Rooster is 'the traumatized', Hangman is 'the individualist', and so on. This younger generation of fighters are typologies of individuals. Maverick is the only character with a psychological depth (remorse, guilt, needs for reconciliation, and so on), which isolates him from his peers.

Even more crucially, the continuity between past and present appears purely ideological since one leading feature that could create a greater bond is entirely missing: sacrifice itself.¹⁷ The American Empire, today, cannot tolerate more losses. One could compare this movie with the first *Top Gun* in which Goose dies, and acts as a sacrificial lamb with no psychological nor existential weight in the movie. Goose exists only so that he could die. Any empire needs a certain amount of blood. Goose is the metaphorical 'bird' sacrificed to the life of the Empire. This relationship between violence, death, and sacredness is quintessential to the sacralization of politics. The image of a 'new man' for the nation can only be born out of struggle and sacrifice.¹⁸ Lastly, one could recall that, in a classic study by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, the sacrificial system should be understood as providing 'a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim'.¹⁹ Now, it is telling that, apart from Iceman, who is old and sick, in *Top Gun: Maverick* no one dies. In the first *Top Gun* someone dies among the pilots, but in *Maverick* it is no one. The Empire has been traumatized enough, especially after 9/11 and the disaster of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it cannot

¹⁷ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (London: Athlone Press, 1995).

¹⁸ See Emilio Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1993).

¹⁹ Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, 'Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function', in *L'Année Sociologique* (1898). Quoted in Peter Phillips, 'The Cross of Christ, Sacrifice and Sacred Violence', in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 81, No. 952 (June 2000): p. 259.

tolerate any more trauma. Yet it is hard to justify a true generational bond without this disposition to loss and sacrifice.

It is true that the navy pilots in *Top Gun: Maverick* are still willing to risk their lives, but what is fascinating here is that the feeling of the Empire—its self-perception—has changed: no one must die. It is impossible to not notice here a contradiction and another symptom of imperial fatigue. The American Empire is incapable of tolerating any more losses. Aside from the personal dynamics, what is most fascinating is the sense of guilt of the Empire towards its past: the guilt towards sacrificed people, and the desire to not see anyone else sacrificed again. As much as Maverick and Rooster form an intergenerational chain, a gap has been created between the past and the present. In the present, the American Empire is not willing anymore to tolerate more losses—at least, not the losses of American citizens. This tells us that it is impossible to actualize, entirely, a sense of continuity with the past since the past, with its willingness to sacrifice itself, has slipped away. Of course, nothing precludes that in the future this situation might be overcome, but what is worth considering here is the unconscious disposition of this movie. As if the American Empire is trying to convince its citizens that they can remain at the top of the world without any sacrifice anymore.

Immortality

If we now return to the leading question, ‘How can the mission be won?’, we should conclude the analyses of the propagandistic messages of this movie by looking at another possible response: by going beyond the book. There is a quite terrific scene in which Maverick meets his students for the first time. He points to the rulebook of the jet that they will have to fly, and immediately subverts the students’ expectations by throwing it literally into a garbage bin, saying that that same book was already known to the enemies as well. This apparently insignificant scene is quite telling.²⁰

Of course, Maverick’s gesture is meant to emphasize human courage, creativity, and teamwork. The capacity of going ‘beyond the book’ mirrors the capacity of being inventive, courageous, capable of working with other people. But the symbolic gesture of throwing away the rulebook has a larger ideological implication: it refers to a capacity of acquiring knowledge about something that has *not* been written yet. Maverick’s gesture emphasizes a perennial push towards innovation,

²⁰ To a certain extent the gesture might be read as anti-intellectual, and it emphasizes pragmatism and hands-on knowledge in opposition to everything that feels overtly bookish. Yet this would be only one possible interpretation, and I guess not the most exhaustive since the lieutenants have all already studied the rulebook.

and an infinite progress that has no arrival point. Going ‘beyond the book’ emphasizes the need to rewrite, perennially, the book itself. And yet, the emphasis on innovation is not deprived of an anxious side.

One of the very first scenes, which appears to a certain extent as a sort of prologue to the actual movie, shows Maverick being a test pilot working on a hypersonic Darkstar. The scene presents the first and most obvious propaganda message: the American civilization’s projection towards a universe that is beyond the earth, its capacity of transcending the earth.²¹ Yet one must notice a certain amount of anxiety based on the tension between human inventiveness and the shadow of machines. In the movie, the possible antagonism between man and machine is resolved in favor of humans, especially thanks to a celebration of group values and team efforts.²² But the shadow of machines looms over Maverick and the younger generation of pilots. In the initial scene which I briefly recalled, the Rear Admiral says to Maverick that he belongs to the past and in the future human pilots would not serve anymore, replaced by self-guided planes. Aside from this facile concession to a rather stereotypical idea in action movies—the machine taking over human beings—there is something else to consider.

The movie deals with a certain amount of historical anxiety about this perennial research of innovation. Considering Maverick’s obsession with his own work, it seems that a greater problem for Maverick would not be death itself, as much as not working. The veneration towards one’s profession is a distinctive feature of American society. In the United States, it is one’s profession that defines one’s identity. Yet, how can this veneration towards work be sustained and justified within a field—technological innovation—that might not be capable of creating new jobs as much as reducing them? Again, one notices here another tension and contradictory aspect within the project of American Civilization. Innovation is valued and celebrated throughout the entire movie, yet under the signs of a general anxiety that innovation might bright people out of work. The American Civilization faces

²¹ This scene has multiple metaphorical implications. First, it testifies that human beings, when they escape from a stronger connection with a team of other humans, end up entering a state of self-destructive competition with machines. Furthermore, this scene also reminds that a central ethos of the American Empire perennially states two opposite statements: on the one hand, this world has been made for us, as the pilots happily playing football on the beach seem to prove with their excited behaviors, and comfortable postures; on the other hand, this world is *not* our home. The American Empire, as any empire, does not know boundaries. Lastly, that sequence also states that future geopolitical competitions will be fought in the sky, and functions as a message to the contenders of geopolitical dominance.

²² For an insightful analysis of the contrast between ‘man’ and ‘machine’ in *Top Gun: Maverick* see Lauren Spohn, ‘Top Gun, James Bond, and the Myth of Obsolete Heroes’, in *Genealogies of Modernity*, August 9, 2022. URL: <https://genealogiesofmodernity.org/journal/2022/8/8/top-gun-james-bond-and-the-myth-of-obsolete-heroes>. Accessed August 16, 2022.

another form of anxiety: professional marginalization and, in so doing, a loss of any true meaning of one's own existence since, in the American Civilization project, it is *only* your work that truly defines you.²³

The transfiguration of the individual in the collective, and the collective in the individual; the cult of work; the adoration for innovation and infinite progress; the perennial need to find newer paths in one's life; and the United States as preserver of world order are some of the leading features of *Top Gun: Maverick*.²⁴ Of course, how effective this propaganda-movie is remains hard to establish.²⁵ What matters more to consider here is that these ideals coalesce around a crucial message: the empire cannot die. Tacitly, subtly, the movie claims a desire for immortality.

Top Gun: Maverick is the dream of immortality that persists within the American imaginary. *Maverick*, more than anyone else, is the image of the desire of transcending time and death. It is through him and thanks to him that the movie can also say that the empire cannot die.²⁶

²³ The best words on this issue remain those professed by Hannah Arendt: 'The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society.' With the advent of automation we would find ourselves within a 'society of laborers which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor [...]. What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.' Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition, Second Edition*, with an introduction by Margaret Canovan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 4-5.

²⁴ These features are key aspects of the American ideology which is an imperial ideology. In our attempt to remind further what is the nature of empires, it is worth recalling that any empire must rely on universalist scopes and causes. I agree with Krishan Kumar when he observes that: 'Imperialist ideologies are universalistic, not particularistic. [...] Imperial peoples do not, unlike nationalists, celebrate themselves; they celebrate the causes of which they are the agents or carriers. It is from this that they derive their sense of themselves and their place in the world.' The cult of work, the adoration for innovation, the transfiguration of the individual in the collective, these are all universalistic and not strictly particularistic causes. Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 30.

²⁵ Commenting upon the effectiveness of Lori Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* in supporting the Nazi regime, Sennet recalls that 'Foreign policy and economic successes of the regime would win it far greater popularity', than the movie itself. Perhaps the same could be stated about *Top Gun: Maverick*, too, yet one could hardly underestimate the importance that cinema can play in the formation of the national self-perception and the role played by cinema to foster American soft power. That said, how to gauge the effectiveness of propaganda is a problem that has chased professional scholarship at any time. Chapman rightly notices that 'It is difficult enough to assess accurately the precise nature of public opinion; it is even more difficult to gauge the extent to which public opinion may have been influenced by specific instances of propaganda. The effectiveness of propaganda can be determined only by its results, but there are no reliable quantitative mechanisms for evaluating those results. The verdicts of historians, therefore, are inevitably rather speculative'. See Sennet, 'Film Propaganda: Triumph of the Will as a Case Study', p. 56. See also Chapman, 'The Power of Propaganda', pp. 688.

²⁶ One example among innumerable others is provided by the initial scene in which *Maverick* tests the Darkstar. *Maverick* overcomes the speed limit of the hypersonic jet and ends

Maverick/Cruise's quasi-miraculous incapacity to age is a grand advertisement to this myth of perennial youth of American Civilization. It is distinctively American, a never-ending desire for more. More life. More youth. More time. Even Iceman appears, in the photograph that camps over his coffin, incredibly alive. There is an endemic Christianity in the United States which lies in the conviction that some part of one's being—what Christians call the soul—continues to live even after death. Yet the immortality at the forefront of American spirituality is not the one of the soul as much as the immortality of one's image and one's body. Immortality in this theo-materialistic sense means more of what you already got. Of course, this is ideology since, to my knowledge, history has no trace of immortal empires nor immortal human beings.

In the movie, the dream of immortality is sustained by and presented through two more opposing forces: technology as something that is perennially perfectible and potentially at the service of human beings in order to overcome their limits, on the one hand, and the lack of interest in fashion, on the other hand.

The first aspect is simple to explain, and it is captured, for instance, by the scene in which Maverick is running assisted by technological equipment, or by the voice of Iceman which has been recreated thanks to a software.²⁷ This desire for a technological-assisted immortality sheds light on this human desire to become like God. The fundamental project of American Civilization goes beyond politics, and it presents itself as a theo-political project in which the human being could assimilate itself with divinity.

With regards to fashion, nothing is more mortal and vanishing than fashion itself. It is not surprising that this movie, with its strong impulse towards immortality, has almost no interest nor capacity in influencing fashion in any way. The first *Top Gun* created a number of fashion 'looks', the bomber jacket being the most distinctive. In *Top Gun: Maverick* fashion is truly vague and generic. This makes sense since the movie wants to be perceived as timeless, and not on the side of what is constantly changing like fashion. With regards to the clothing styles of the lieutenants and Maverick himself everything is a bit generic. Maverick's white shirt and the blue jeans is a reference to the past, to an incapacity of influencing fashions in new ways. Rooster's

up destroying it. Everyone thinks that he is dead, but, of course, somehow, he manages to survive. This incapacity to die is a distinctive feature of action movie heroes, but it metaphorically points towards this image of the United States as the empire that cannot die. See also Lauren Spohn, 'Top Gun, James Bond, and the Myth of Obsolete Heroes', in *Genealogies of Modernity*, August 9, 2022. URL: <https://genealogiesofmodernity.org/journal/2022/8/8/top-gun-james-bond-and-the-myth-of-obsolete-heroes>. Accessed August 16, 2022.

²⁷ See Cody Mello-Klein, 'How A.I. Helped Val Kilmer Get His Voice Back for Top Gun: Maverick', in *News@Northwestern*, June 7, 2022. URL: <https://news.northeastern.edu/2022/06/07/a-i-clones-val-kilmers-voice-in-top-gun/> Accessed July 1, 2022.

Hawaiian shirt recalls generic chain clothes. Nothing in the fashion style of *Top Gun: Maverick* really stands up. The vagueness of fashion is a trace of the desire of transcending time.

It is part of the history of empires a chronic incapacity, or maybe impossibility, to abdicate their power.²⁸ The Empire is only capable of one message of perennial rejuvenation. *Top Gun: Maverick* states that an empire, any empire, would simply cease to be such if it would not believe in its own myth of perennial youth. An empire cannot give away power, and cannot stop being a great political, military, and technological power. In such a sense, this is also a movie about the burden of being an empire. Its damnation is its immortality, its illusion of eternity. Any empire is forced not to die.²⁹

Despite several internal contradictions—or maybe even thanks to them—the propaganda of *Top Gun: Maverick* is extremely sophisticated. One marvels not only at the authenticity of the movie, but how persuasive the propaganda is. This movie is not absent-minded patriotism. At least, not only. Its multiple nuances and complexities make it an incredibly more convincing movie than the original one. *Top Gun: Maverick* is, yes, a sequel, but also an entirely new movie that shows a different state and stage of the history of the American Empire. The 1986's movie arrived at the end of the American century—the twentieth. *Top Gun: Maverick* is projected towards the future and tries to indicate plans to make the twenty-first century, also, an American century. Indeed, the central message of the film is that the century in which

²⁸ One could notice here how Barack Obama himself, who seemed to desire to detach himself from the rhetoric of ‘American exceptionalism’, ultimately revised his position throughout his tenure as President of the United States and, condemning Russian’s invasion of Crimea, would state: ‘We must meet the challenge to our ideals and our international order with strength and conviction’. [There could be] ‘no going back’. Quoted in Simon Tisdall, ‘Barack Obama delivers withering civics lesson to Putin over Crimea’, in *The Guardian*, March 26 2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/26/barack-obama-putin-withering-civics-lesson-crimea>. Accessed August 16, 2022. See also Dario Fabbri, ‘La Città Sulla Collina, Mito Imperituro d’America’, in *Limes. Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica* 2/20 (2020): p. 69.

²⁹ There is a crucial sentence in the movie which I believe captures the drama of the American Civilization, and to a certain extent any civilization project with an imperialistic dimension. At some point in the movie, Maverick is upset since Rooster is risking his life to save him, after that Maverick has been forced to eject himself from his flight and land in the enemy’s territory. What were you thinking, screams Maverick, and Rooster replies: ‘You told me to not think’, a sentence that Maverick has repeated to Rooster before during the training stage. There is all the drama of any empire in this sentence. Any empire must learn *how to not think*. First and foremost, it must learn how to not think about its ineluctable finitude. Yet, this creates troubles, as Maverick demonstrates with his reaction that proves that any empire should also learn, at some point of its historical and existential trajectory, to think better. Yet by the time it might arrive at this realization, it might have learnt how to not think. And it might be too late.

we have recently entered will represent a *continuation* of the previous one. If this message is true, only time will tell.³⁰

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