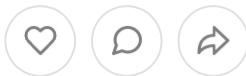**Movie Review: Top Gun Maverick**

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Movie Review: Top Gun Maverick

A comparison to the original, and on themes of AI, unmanned and manned air combat

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APR 10

CROSS-POST

In my freshman year of college (2002), I got a job at the *Daily Illini,* writing TV and film reviews. A single review (for the NBC drama *American Dreams*) was published before the entire staff was fired, for an unrelated reason. I remember picking up a copy of the campus newspaper before class and seeing my article before my Anth 143 class, Biological Anthropology, started in Lincoln Hall. I was somewhat timid in searching for a replacement

internship, as I had only resumed writing in an informal blog setting. Perhaps the sudden layoff experience led me to fear the stability of a degree in journalism, which ultimately I never declared. In a way, I wanted to be the next Roger Ebert, for a while (also a UIUC alum).

Writing film reviews can be quite enjoyable. Not many people like critics, but it's a job I am capable of doing- perhaps more so now, that I'm 21 years older and more sure of myself.

A job requirement of a film critic is that they really should watch all types of movies, and not be choosy- they may have an expertise, but there is nothing wrong with having an opinion on various genres- Roger Ebert could do it, so why not me? An important distinction should be made- a film review is not an expertise review in technical aspects- a movie might not be historically or scientifically accurate, but can have artistic qualities that make it aesthetically acclaimed. In fact, the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry has a definition for movies considered "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant." A movie like Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) were selected for LoC in 2005. Yes, it is possible to make a weird movie and be preserved by the government. In fact, you could say my goal in life is to become "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant"- although I don't believe the Library of Congress has a mummification department, yet. That was a joke! :)

Onto my 2nd movie review of this month, it should be no surprise that I can cover every genre. A cultural critic is kind of like an anthropologist- one who has a curiosity of different cultures and subcultures, but doesn't necessarily retain a super long interest in them to become a kind of expert in that culture. So in that sense, they aren't able to provide the most technically-accurate or ethnically-conscious review of a film, but can still compare it to many other movies that have attempted to aspire to the greatness of a prior trailblazer. For example, Bruce Lee films led to clones and the term "Bruceploitation," much like Shaft defined the Blaxploitation genre.

One benefit of reading a film review prior to watching or choosing what film to watch, assuming minimal or no spoilers are in the review, is that it can provide insight on whether a film is known to be a derivative, an original, or a clever (and thus possibly worthwhile) reinterpretation of an original. Many times a movie might be available that may not be the first of its kind, and to compare it to what is widely considered to be "original" (somewhat of a myth, in that great artists steal, good artists copy), might be helpful information, but still kind of useless to whether to watch the movie or not. On the one hand, a

viewer may be at a luxury to access a wider library of films, upon reading of a "superior" film (and a rating given by perhaps a minority of critics, unless widely panned). Others may not prefer to read any reviews, as it may spoil the film.

So onto *Top Gun: Maverick (2022)*

Disclaimer: I watched the original 1986 film after the sequel. First, there are some decent reviews that already touch on some of the themes that I want to cover: this one by the *NYT* gets close to covering most of it.

First- why I chose this movie. Top Gun is one of those big budget movies that are able to demonstrate some high-tech razzle dazzle, state of the art film technology (not to omit the F-18, which, while not an F-35, is still a step up from the F-14 in the original Top Gun. The *Maverick* budget was $170 million. The original was $15m. Both grossed values far exceeding those- ($1.488 billion, and $357.3 million).

So why another review, if it is already so successful? The themes are important to the debate/hype on AI, and the devaluation of human control. Regardless of the purpose of the mission. Pete Mitchell, the Maverick (Cruise), is an experienced captain in the Navy- the same character from the original. It is set exactly 35 years after the original, to reflect the actors age. His boss, Admiral Cain (Ed Harris) plans to shut down the fighter pilot program because he believes unmanned aerial drones are the future. Cruise, getting advance notice of the imminent program cancellation, also finds out from his team that is on the technical excuse that the F-18's have not been proven to reach 10G (Mach 10, ten times the speed of sound, which is approximately 7,672mph), a requirement for a certification and an upcoming mission. Mitchell, being the Maverick, decides to pilot the F-18 before the Admiral arrives to officially and personally shut down the program. The team (as well as Cain) watch Mitchell as he reaches and surpasses 10G and officially extends the life of the program, much to the disappointment of Admiral Cain. Notwithstanding bureaucracy realism (which isn't to say these limits don't/wouldn't exist in the real world), the film makes an interesting point, in that far too much bureaucracy often hampers experimental R&D, on the ostensible excuse of safety (in the first film, it was taxpayer dollars). If you've read my previous blog posts, you'll know I put the the skunk in skunkworks.

A not-so-unrelated tangent. Tangents lines meet a circle, so they are not, by definition, unrelated. The other day I went to a hardware store to copy a key. In the past, I would typically go to Walmart since the automotive section had a cheap key copy ($1.79-2.19) machine staffed by an employee. Upon arriving the other day, I approached a clerk and inquired if they had a key copier. They stated, "Nope, no longer," but gave me a list of places nearby that had them. One was Menards. In the past, I have used some copy machines at Home Depot and Menards, until their key copy machine was replaced by only a self-service 3D scanner system (which cost $10.99, by the way). When I arrived at Menards, nearby, I found out that they also did not have a manual key copying machine, so I went to check out the KeyMe machine. The key was scanned, and then the screen displayed a messages saying that my key was a "special" type of key that was not housed in the machine, and that I could as a store associate. The message also stated that I could get a key copy mailed to me in 7-14 days. I thought this was preposterous. It was a standard key. I then checked my phone for other stores nearby and found a *Blain's Farm & Fleet*. If you've ever been in a Blain's Farm and Fleet, they have things for farmers, who, you might know, still operate machines to produce food, but are resourceful humans themselves. A farm can't outsource *everything*. I was able to find a clerk near the key copy machine who, quickly offered to copy my key, and all for the low price of $2.49. I thought, why did it take me three stores, over an hour, and no high-tech technology to accomplish a very simple product? The simple answer might appear to be profitability- if the store employees spend too much time copying keys, they aren't able to ring up other products while selling a low margin product. But if I were to imagine a more complicated, and risk-averse reason, it would be the same reason that Admiral Cain supports unmanned aerial drones. Liability. The store might fear a litigious individual that may have gotten his key stolen and copied by someone who claimed to be the owner of the key, and since the store had no way/obligation of verifying the address of the individual/legal tenant/owner of the property, they might be sued for assisting in a crime, even if unknowingly. Thus, a key copying task becomes a headache for s supermarket more interested in selling higher-margin TVs and appliances. So why would a machine not carry it? Possibly for the same reason- Why does it take 7-14 days to copy a key? Perhaps the company that wants to store the data of the key might also want to do a background check, to verify the purchaser of the key, who uses their credit card, matches the address they claim to be copying it for, in the event that perhaps it could be traced back to the store, and the store now has a way to outsource that liability.

With unmanned aerial drones, a pilot doesn't have to risk their own life to partake in a mission, if they are able to remote control it. If a manned plane is shot down, the pilot *might* be able to eject early enough, provided he/she does land in a safe territory and doesn't get captured and killed. Obviously key copying and fighter planes have significantly different levels of risk. But of course, the subject of this review is the theme of human/manual operated technologies versus automated and unmanned technologies. When a product becomes defined more by bureaucracy, then it becomes much more of a political issue than one defined by its personal capabilities. There are perfectly capable employees capable of copying keys that makes the customers happy and coming back to purchase other products. On the other hand, a store like Walmart isn't going to lose many customers by getting rid of key copying, and perhaps can give some business back to other local/regional chains.

Warfighting of course, is in some ways a monopoly, and can't be compared in that sense, nor is the purpose of this review. It is merely to highlight that high-tech is not always better- smart phones are not always smarter. AI is not exactly "intelligent" and automation is not always better than manual. I will say that I do not drive stick shift, but I can see the appeal to someone who is very familiar with it and drives better with one. It is very possible that driverless cars are developed because someone thinks all driverless cars will be more intelligent than the best drivers, while forgetting to point out that even the "best" decision making can sometimes favor an unselfish decision (whether a driverless car will swerve right or left to minimize impact/injury-two very important decisions, I will add) that may not benefit the human who has autonomous decision-making- that is, one can be selfish to save one's own life, but the AI might decide (or even err completely) to avoid colliding with an an empty parked SUV to prefer colliding with a smaller, carpooled car based on the estimation of impact, when in fact colliding with a parked car that's empty might save even more life- thus this kind of real-time data isn't always available, and AI might make these kinds of <u>decisions</u> without understanding the greater context of the milieu, which is something only a sober human would understand. It is also true that good drivers will remain better drivers than most early-late AI. It is the bad driving that *could* benefit from AI, but would still make many drivers wary. Accidents that would never happen in 100 years can happen with AI, like a car engine suddenly stopping in a <u>tunnel</u>, causing a pileup, while and some accidents can be prevented, such as rear ending. But the gulf between the two could remain large enough that makes driverless cars too <u>dangerous</u> for <u>practicality</u>.

But interestingly, those who suggest there should be a pause on AI are the same continuing driverless features. Thus the interest isn't about curbing AI, but about profits-perhaps the interest in getting ahead. For example, it might sound reasonable if someone is suggesting caution in AI, if they have no vested interest in AI startups. But if someone is urging caution while engaging in the same research, it could merely mean that others want to be the first to market a new product. However, without any specific products currently being implemented on a large scale (with the exception of Chat-GPT-3/4 and Bard), it's hard to say whether a blog/article urging caution is a duplicitous attempt-what is clear is that the fear of an AI monopoly is rightfully encouraging open source alternatives, aptly titled, the LLama Effect.

While a lot of these political issues might not seem to have much to do with *Top Gun: Maverick,* the NYT review goes even further and even suggests the purpose of human actors are needed, and films themselves!

"The conversation with Cain is not so much a red herring as a meta-commentary. Pete, as I'm sure I don't have to tell you, is the avatar of Tom Cruise, and the central question posed by this movie has less to do with the necessity of combat pilots than with the relevance of movie starts. With all this new technology at hand —you can binge 37 episodes of Silicon Valley grifting without leaving your couch — do we really need guys, or movies like this?"

Wow! Even I wouldn't go so far to suggest that. I suppose if the film *were* about combat pilots- in the age of drone warfare, then the central question would be about the value of human life according to the rules of warfare. Drones may suggest an asymmetric advantage, although that too can be debated in an asymmetric context. Since the NYT suggests a wider commentary on content consumption, from the convenience of a couch, in an era were attending brick-and-mortar movie theaters is hardly worth the effort, the slippery slope goes on to suggest why not use some alternative- not unlike an AI version of a famous Pixar franchise? That is, if the real voice-actors were replaced by AI-generated sounds, and animations were all generated through AI Image-rendering software, then it is not inconceivable that more movies will be made completely without live action footage. Aware of this trend, such as Keanu Reeves (not a Top Gun actor) opted for no-post production on his performances. That is, the scene around him can be edited with special effects, but he was able to negotiate no AI and no deepfakes on

any scenes where he acted in. This is crucial, because it draws a line on the definition of film as a branch of theater, which is a human endeavor.

Film has been commercialized for over a century as an entertainment product, but most great art is usually at the behest of a human, not an exclusive machine. In that sense, seeking out film as a human endeavor is critical for understanding human issues. When entertainment formulas become the creative auteur, all traces of relevancy disappear. I recall a review of the Matrix Resurrections (2021) that suggested the film was more of a parody of itself, with self-referential jokes alluding to the former trilogy. Like *Top Gun: Maverick, a* parody of a more-or-less science fiction action film becomes a meta-conversation on the seriousness of the film's purpose: While the original movie might have had some humorous moments, it more or less had a philosophical seriousness. For the Resurrection sequel (the 4th installment) to suddenly embrace many in-jokes for viewers of the previous films (which is not uncommon in other films) suggests the franchise is successful merely for the nostalgic factor, and not on the merits of its storyline. Of course, humor could serve a very integral part to the new franchise in a not-so-whimsical manner, such as satire. But it also is hard pressed in a struggling economy that a workforce isn't exactly entertained by unoriginal remakes. That said, I haven't seen Resurrections, and I could be wrong about all that. I think as both films had similar budgets ($190 million for *Resurrections*, but with a gross of only $159 million), comparing the two can juxtapose how effective special *effects* add to a movie when the story/plot itself is convoluted or somewhat derivative. The difference in Box office returns with Top Gun: Maverick could be due to the higher popularity of a military films, April as opposed to December release date, rarity of sequels for the former (only the 2nd Top Gun, whereas Resurrections is the fourth), and real F-18s pilots being used for filming. As one reviewer writes, "*Resurrections* is a film that argues against its own existence while bringing new weight to a universe that has captivated audiences for two decades." The goal of Top Gun is also simpler- a clearer objective, even though canyon flying literally under the radar of SAMs is quite perilous- it makes for a riveting storyline.

It's clear that films have largely become entertainment cash cows, as seen by the Marvel franchises, rather than arthouse productions, and the desire to seek more human-made content won't disappear, despite the march towards more automatic special effects, machines, animations and even voice-actors.

A recent book I discovered about Ancient Greek theater is <u>Satyric Play</u>: The Evolution of Greek Comedy and Satyr Drama, by Carl Shaw, 2014. As someone who's watched many dramas and comedies, I've always been curious how comedy evolved out of the early tragedies. I've always had an interest in real theatre, partly because as movies become more fake, there is more question as to whether something is real.

Perhaps movies will attempt to market themselves as offering no AI/deepfakes/post production to limit the randomness of the form, as it could lead to films as a genre from declining-shorter TV content has for decades already become more profitable and popular, partly due to the serial and binge-capable structure of the medium. If there is any meta-conversation worth having by reviewing Top Gun: Maverick, it isn't the plot about drones, and and whether movies need real actors, but to go a step further than the NYT, it's to ask why we watch movies in the first place.

Rating: 4 of 4 stars.

⇄ CROSS-POST

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