

REAGANISM IN TONY SCOTT'S *TOP GUN*

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TECHNICAL PRESENTATION

Top Gun is an American movie released in 1986 and directed by Tony Scott. The film tells the story of Lt. Pete Mitchell, callsign "Maverick", a young and reckless US Navy fighter pilot serving onboard the *USS Enterprise* aircraft carrier and flying the F-14A Tomcat. He follows the path of his father, who was also a pilot; but Maverick ignores the details regarding his death, knowing only that he was killed in action over Vietnam. After a risky encounter with some MiG-28s¹ from an unidentified country resulting in the resignation of another pilot, Maverick and his co-pilot (and friend) Nick "Goose" Bradshaw become the carrier's best crew. As a consequence, they are sent to the Fighter Weapons School, informally called "Top Gun", whose objective is to form the Navy's elite pilots. There, the two train with instructors and with other skilled aviators to graduate, but Maverick also competes with his peers to be awarded the title of best pilot in the program. He also meets Charlotte "Charlie" Blackwood, a civilian instructor with whom he starts a romance. But his flying style, while effective, is judged too dangerous by trainers and by other pilots. One day, following a hazardous maneuver, Maverick's air-

craft goes out of control, forcing him and Goose to eject; and the latter dies in the incident. Maverick is left in shock, and attempts to recover from it by speaking with one of his instructors who used to know his father; in this way, he discovers that his parent died in a heroic way, and decides to complete his training. Still, Maverick has not fully overcome the trauma; and while he manages to graduate from the school, he fails to be named as best pilot. Then, he is sent back to the *USS Enterprise*. Once there, he is involved in a combat with a group of MiG-28s, during which he finally finds the force to recover from the loss of his friend. Having successfully accomplished the mission, Maverick decides to become himself a Top Gun instructor.

TOP GUN AND THE VALUES OF REAGANISM

The first element to consider when analyzing *Top Gun* (and to understand its success at the box office, despite receiving mixed reviews from critics) is to contextualize it in the historical period when it was shot and set².

The film appeared in 1986, in the middle of a period in American histo-

ry market by the Presidency of Ronald Reagan; to the point that his two mandates (1981-1989) have been named the "Reagan years". It was a particular moment for the country, which struggled to regain its national self-assurance after the shocks of the previous decades. The memory of the social turmoil of the late 60s was still vivid, as that of the long and traumatic military involvement in Vietnam, that ended in a failure for the US which deeply influenced its society. But these were not the only recent events that had hurt America's national confidence: the 70s were a decade characterized by multiple shocking events for the country, such as the oil crises, the Watergate scandal and the debacle in Iran; all while the other superpower – the USSR – appeared to be increasing its presence and influence around the globe.

It is therefore clear why the traditional national image of America as the perfect *City Upon a Hill*³ started to crack in the eyes of its own people, who felt disoriented and disappointed. In this context, the US needed to find a new reference point, someone capable of restoring the country's self-confidence by returning to its traditional values; upon which to start again so to overcome the recent traumas and walk ahead to a brighter

future. During the 1980 presidential campaign, the Americans identified that person with the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan. He became President in early 1981, and implemented a conservative program generally based on tax cuts, financial deregulation, a rise in military expenditures, a more assertive foreign policy, and the restoration of traditional American values⁴.

This last aspect is particularly relevant when examining the cultural impact of *Top Gun*. As a matter of fact, the Reagan years were marked by an emphasis on patriotism, on the celebration of the armed forces, on the patriarchal conception of the family, and on the depiction of America's enemies (first and foremost the Soviet Union, labelled the "evil empire") as gloomy forces threatening freedom and democracy, themselves praised as two fundamental pillars of the country's national identity. But those were also years marked by significant changes in the American media⁵; and in this context, *Top Gun* can be largely considered as the epitome of the ideals spread during the Reagan period.

The first and most obvious point in this regard is probably the exaltation of the military and its superiority over America's rivals, as well as a patriotic discourse; which can be found for example just before the final air battle, when the commander speaks to the pilots saying them "You are America's best. Make us proud."⁶ More in general, the film displays the performance of US fighter aircraft, featuring spectacular sequences of high-speed close air combat ("dogfight") supported by intense rock music tracks. Those scenes are meant to thrill the spectator by transmitting a sense of dynamism and power, by projecting him high in the sky with the fighter, and by bringing it in the heart of the action, *right into the danger zone*⁷. This "show of force" effect is also achieved through slow-motion shots focusing on the details of the aircraft, notably the afterburners: heavily present in the opening sequence of the film⁸, this type of scenes are equally conceived to transmit a sense of might and strength in a way that emphasizes the almost "corporal"

dimension of the jets, so to impress and inspire the spectator. But apart from the way the scenes are directed, the movie also shows the superiority of American fighters over Soviet ones in more narrative ways. As such, the enemy MiG-28s are portrayed as powerful aircraft as well, notably due to their high maneuverability; and the film makes them appear even better than what believed by the US intelligence, as it can be seen in the scene where Charlie affirms the aircraft is not capable of performing a "negative G pushover" and Maverick replies that it actually is, having personally witnessed a MiG-28 executing one⁹. Still, the F-14 and US pilots are depicted as superior: this is demonstrated in the final combat scene where Maverick's and Iceman's Tomcats engage in combat with six MiG-28s managing to shoot down four of them and forcing the remaining two to withdraw¹⁰. In short, the message is clear: Soviet fighters may be good, but American ones are better.

A final point that should be remarked in this regard is that (as the ending credits show¹¹) *Top Gun* was sponsored by the US Navy. Another revealing sign in this regard is the presence of recruitment posters in the movie, like one where it is perfectly possible to read "Your road to adventure starts here. Navy. It's not just a job, it's an adventure"¹². Addressing a young male public, the film can therefore be fully considered as an extended recruitment ad for the US Navy; something in line with the spirit of the Reagan years. From a cultural point of view, this celebration of the armed forces reminds the ideas of the Futurist movement in post-WWI Italy; as a matter of fact, it equally exalted military values, courage, warfare, machines (including combat vehicles), speed, power and strength¹³. In both cases, this kind of aestheticization of the military can be interpreted as a mean to justify the use of the armed force by accustoming the public to view and "touch" it through the media¹⁴.

Somehow linked with the celebration of the military, there is also a second element that appears in *Top*

Gun, namely the emphasis on manliness¹⁵. This aspect is present in several scenes in the movie; as in the one where Maverick and other pilots play beach volley¹⁶. Here, the effect is mainly achieved by showing the athletic bodies of the pilots, their strength and performance. But the film also displays this in other ways: one is the constant presence of specific "manly" clothing, notably Maverick's iconic leather jacket and sunglasses (as well as military uniforms, of course); or the fact that the protagonist often appears riding a motorbike at high speed. This last factor is important as well, since it is continuously recalled throughout the film. Apart from the aforementioned air combat sequences and the motorbike scenes, speed is repeatedly evoked in other means: the fly-bys that Maverick executes several times during the film, his famous quote ("*I feel the need... the need for speed!*"¹⁷), and most importantly the music. The soundtrack for the dogfight scenes, with its intense and fast rhythm, enhances the sense of speed, bringing the spectator on its *mighty wings across the sky*¹⁸.

Another point to consider in this regard is the preeminence of male characters in the movie. It is true that in a film about fighter pilots like *Top Gun* the space for female roles is somehow limited in comparison to other kinds of productions; still, almost all the relevant characters are males. The only significant exception is Charlie, but her role in the plot, after all, is essentially that of being Maverick's partner in the development of the love story. It is true that she supports Maverick after Goose's death, but in general she remains relatively passive, and is not much of an "acting" character who takes initiatives and has a sensible impact on the evolution of the storyline. And, while she is portrayed as a competent instructor and not simply as an attractive woman, it is difficult to deny that her look was meant to increase the appeal of the film for its target audience of young males. Other than Charlie, the only other female character of a certain relevance is Goose's wife, but her role does not go beyond that of the devoted wife

and mother. Finally, another notable absence is that of Maverick's mother: apart from a brief mention during a dialogue between him and Charlie¹⁹, she is completely absent and nothing is known of her. Much more importance is given to his father, despite his equal absence on the screen. His figure inspires the protagonist to become a fighter pilot; and discovering that he died heroically helps Maverick to find a reason to continue his career in the Navy.

This observation raises an important issue, namely the traditional American (and even conservative) values presented in *Top Gun*. As a matter of fact, the film displays several elements with such connotations. The most evident one is the celebration of the military, that has already been noted, and that naturally implies a series of underlying values such as patriotism, courage, the mission of defending America, the sense of duty and sacrifice. In regard to this last aspect, it is significant to note that both Maverick and his father have experienced a loss during their service: the latter arrives at losing his life in the skies over Vietnam, and the former assists to Goose's death (to which it may be possible to add the loss of his father, a marking event even if it occurred well before the period when the film takes place).

Always considering the figure of Maverick's father, it is possible to address the theme of family. Even if it not a central aspect in *Top Gun*, one can still make some observation on it. As it has been observed, even if he never appears openly, Maverick's father is an "indirect presence" in the film; whereas his mother is virtually absent. There is also a line of continuity between the protagonist and his father, as both are fighter pilots in the US Navy. Considering this, it can be claimed that the movie reflects a patriarchal conception of the family, one that is centered on the father. In this sense, and considering the values it displays, the film can be considered somehow conservative; something that is certainly an echo of the cultural atmosphere of the Reagan era²⁰. This is not to say that *Top*

Gun is a sexist film supporting male chauvinism: even if there are just two female characters of some relevance (Charlie and, to a far lesser extent, Goose's wife), the film does not represent women as being "inferior", nor they are oversexualized as it happens in other cases. Charlie, while certainly being portrayed as attractive, appears also as a woman with a determined temper, a successful career, and a great competence and professionalism in her work; even if her role during the story is quite passive. Taking this into consideration, it can be affirmed that while *Top Gun* emphasizes manliness, it cannot be considered as an example of machoism.

Then, there is also another typically American value that is heavily present in *Top Gun* and that plays a very important role in its plot: competition (that, again, could be associated with its focus on manly values). Basically, the whole film is the story of Maverick's quest to become the first among his peers, so to be able not only to graduate from the Fighter Weapons School, but also to be awarded the title of best pilot. The theme of competition permeates the film, and once again the soundtrack is important in this regard: as the lyrics of *Mighty Wings* affirm, *there's no points for second best*²¹. This struggle for the first place is epitomized in the rivalry between Maverick and Iceman, the protagonist's main contender, who ultimately manages to win the prize as the course's best pilot. In a film that gives such an emphasis on competitiveness, it is interesting that the protagonist does not manage to achieve his objective and obtain the first position in the ranking. But Maverick's skill as a pilot is recognized multiple times (as during his discussion with Charlie after the pursuing scene, when she says "I see some real genius in your flying, Maverick"²²), and most importantly he finds his redemption at the end of the movie, when he finally recovers from the trauma of Goose's death and gives a determinant contribution to the victory in the final air battle with the MiG-28s; after which

Iceman tells Maverick he can be his wingman at any time, and the protagonist replies that it would rather be the contrary²³. So, the film seems to implicitly suggest that, had it not been for the shock following the death of his friend Goose, Maverick would have won the award.

As such, competition is another element that is in line with the American values so embedded in the Reagan years. Apart from being a concept deeply present in various aspect of US society, and most importantly in its market-based economy; competitiveness became even more important during Reagan's presidency in the 80s. Apart from his reforms to further liberalize the economy (thus making it more competitiveness-centered), this was a period during which the United States was engaged in a close struggle for global supremacy with the Soviet Union, in a wide range of fields like geopolitical influence, military power, economic and social development, technological progress, and ideological superiority. This fight, that already existed, became even more intense during the Reagan administration, which decided to implement an assertive policy toward the USSR and to launch the US in an arms race with its rival. In this context, a film like *Top Gun* is clearly an expression of America's engagement to prevail. This is done in two ways: one is by showing patriotic, pro-military and traditional values to serve as an inspiration for the country; the other is by directly depicting the struggle between the US and the USSR in the form of the encounters between the F-14s and the MiG-28s, which naturally end with the victory of the formers.

A final point to observe is that all of the aforementioned elements that are widely presented in *Top Gun* are synthesized in Maverick's character. He is an ambitious, reckless and rebel young man; depicted in a manly manner in terms of behavior, interests and clothing (he is instinctive and does not follow the rules; he joined the military as a Navy pilot; he rides a motorbike, he wears sunglasses and a leather jacket). In

short, Maverick's figure is designed to make the target audience of the film (young men) to identify with him and, therefore, persuade them to join the military themselves. He is also extremely competitive, in his permanent effort to distinguish himself over his peers and become the best pilot. This, other than being another element of appeal for youngsters, is also a reflection of the typical American attachment to competitiveness. Finally, the importance he confers to the figure of his father and to his sacrifice is a representation of a traditional, if not conservative, conception of the family; as well as a further point of patriotic content.

Such factors are all characteristic of the cultural atmosphere of the Reagan period, and of the vision of the United States that it supported; to the point that Maverick's character could be considered as a personification of America itself. As a matter of fact, the US of the epoch were a country exiting from more than a decade of disappointments, turmoil and even shocks; as it has already been mentioned above. It was a country that found itself disoriented, with a feeling of having lost its self-confidence and its innocence (especially after the war in Vietnam), as well as its leading role in the world. In short, referring to the 80s, it is possible to affirm that "the Americans are now aware that their country is neither omniscient nor omnipotent, that it has aged and has no longer the innocence, or even the recklessness of youth"²⁴. In that context, Reagan's presidency represented a new beginning, the moment when America managed to recover from its recent traumas and to reestablish its self-assurance by returning to its original values, so to stand again as the champion of freedom against the forces of evil. It is in this sense that Maverick is the representation of America, as it is clear when observing the evolution of his character throughout the movie.

At the beginning, he is a reckless and (over)confident pilot who is determined to prevail over his peers, and he faces challenges with courage and resolve. In this initial part of the

film, the atmosphere is much more optimistic and light, with several moments of entertainment and humor. Then, Goose dies, and the protagonist enters in a deep personal crisis. He loses the confidence in himself, he appears demotivated (if not paralyzed), it seems he has lost his flying skills, and even seems he is on the point of abandoning the Navy. The movie changes tone, becoming more gloomy, melancholic, and serious. Goose's death is a shocking event for Maverick, for which he feels responsible. In this sense, it can reasonably be considered as a representation of the traumas that the US suffered in the 60s and 70s; most notably the Vietnam war, for which the American society felt somehow responsible as well. After all, it is not a case if Maverick's father died in combat over Vietnam and not in other circumstances; and the fact that the protagonist finds the will to continue the training after discovering that his father died as a hero in that conflict is not a coincidence: it represents a catharsis, a redemption, a way to overcome the tragic impact of the Vietnam war on America's collective psychology. But Maverick manages to fully overcome the shock only at the end of the movie, when in the middle of an air combat with hostile aircraft he finds once again his self-confidence and, returning the skilled pilot he was, he resolves the situation and triumphantly returns to the carrier. Then, Maverick receives the praise of his peers (notably Iceman), becomes an instructor and restores his romance with Charlie. In other words, the situation returns to the origin, something that is symbolized by the fact that he throws Goose's dog tag into the sea²⁵, as if he wanted to close with the recent traumatic past. So, at the end of the film, Maverick represents Reagan's America; which, after the difficulties of the previous decades, by returning to its traditional values and therefore to the past, manages to overcome the recent shocks, to find the force to continue facing the adversities and to fight for its beliefs against the forces that threaten them. As such, the movie returns to more optimistic scenes (without going back to the fully bright atmosphere of the initial

part); in the same way the US, without forgetting its past, restarts looking at the future with restored hope and self-assurance. As a matter of fact, the 80s are the decade during which "the Americans seem to have reestablished the confidence in their future, in their values, in their international role"²⁶. Taking all this into consideration, if one adopts Kaspi's definition of Reaganism as "an aptitude, a will to renew, a patriotic discourse, often nationalist"²⁷, then (even if the label of "nationalist" is likely excessive), it is fully legitimate to affirm that *Top Gun* is definitely an example of Reaganism.

CONCLUSION

The previous considerations make it clear that *Top Gun*, far from being a simple entertainment film, is actually an interesting cultural product to understand the reality of America during the Reagan years. Other than being a "recruitment ad" for convincing the youngsters to join the military, the movie displays several traditional values and ideals that were recovered during that period; such as patriotism and competition. Finally, Maverick's story reflects the experience of America, and the way it had to deal with a traumatic past to restore its self-confidence and find the will to face the future with renewed trust and optimism.

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ENDNOTES

1 An aircraft that did not actually exist.

2 For more details, see Kaspi 1986, chapter 17 and Johnson 1991.

3 For more details on this concept and on America's self-perception as a nation, see (among others) Snégaroff 2015. For more information on the importance of the "national images", see Holsti 1962.

4 For more details on Reagan and his term as US President, see Johnsons 1991 or Kaspi 1996.

5 See Johnson 1991, chapter 13.

6 *Top Gun*, 1986, 1:23:44.

7 *Top Gun Soundtrack, Special Expanded Edition*, 1999; *Danger Zone* (track 1).

8 *Top Gun*, 1986, 00:00 to 03:26.

9 *Top Gun*, 1986, 24:23 to 26:48.

10 *Top Gun*, 1986, 1:27:28 to 1:34:54.

11 *Top Gun*, 1986, 1:42:45 to 1:42:59

12 *Top Gun*, 1986, 57:37.

13 For more details on Italian Futurism, see Conversi 2009.

14 In this regard, see Der Darian 2009.

15 This kind of celebration of masculinity is recurrent in history, as it can be observed (among other cases) in the Nazi ideology and iconography. Pushed to the extreme, this even implied that a "true" man and warrior should avoid any contact with women (as they are considered "weak"); thus resulting in homosexuality.

16 *Top Gun*, 1986, 38:23 to 39:43.

17 *Top Gun*, 1986, 52:23.

18 *Top Gun Soundtrack, Special Expanded Edition*, 1999; *Mighty Wings* (track 2).

19 *Top Gun*, 1986, 42:46.

20 For a definition of the "Reagan era" and a detailed study of its speci-

fities, see Johnsons 1991.

21 *Top Gun Soundtrack, Special Expanded Edition*, 1999; *Mighty Wings* (track 2).

22 *Top Gun*, 1986, 50:27.

23 *Top Gun*, 1986, 1:36:31 to 1:36:48.

24 Kaspi 1986, 610-611. « les Américains sont maintenant conscients que leur pays n'est pas omniscient ni omnipotent, qu'il a vieilli et n'a plus l'innocence, voire l'inconscience de la jeunesse ». Translated by the author.

25 *Top Gun*, 1986, 1:37:14 to 1:37:38.

26 Kaspi 1986, 579.

27 Kaspi 1986, 611. He describes Reaganism as « une attitude, une volonté de renouveau, un discours patriotique, volontiers nationaliste ». Translated from French by the author.

