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Final Essay
3. <i>“Basically, theorizing ought to equip us with tools for thinking about, understanding and explaining the objects with which a body of knowledge concerns itself” (Annette Kuhn). Provide a methodologically self-aware close textual analysis of a film. Ensure to apply appropriate methodology and cite scholars where relevant.</i>

### Those Top Flying Combat Heroes

In Comolli's words, "the majority of films in all categories are the unconscious instruments of the ideology which produces them." (31) Cinema can act "as support and instrument of ideology [..., as] an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a fantasmaticization (sic) of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism." (Baudry ;46)

This thinking is extrapolated from the Frankfurt critical paradigm of the 20th century, built on two basic pillars: "in one hand, the critical theory is set as an analytical construction of the phenomenons that it researches and, in the other hand, simultaneously, as a skill for referring those phenomenons to the social forces that cause them."<sup>1</sup> (Wolf; 91) Information that could be considered just as regular data by other points of view is, for the critical theory, "a product of an specific historical and social situation."<sup>2</sup> (idem; 91-92)

In addition, we can conclude as Comolli that a film is "a particular product, manufactured [..., that] is governed by the laws of the market [... and], as a result of being a material product of the system, it is also an ideological product of the system" (29).

So far, it is not hard to infer that, if every piece is a manifestation of its own *zeitgeist*, there should be a sort of clues in every work that could refer to its own context, attending to the art as an anthropological expression and not only as a simple, undetermined product replication process. As Althusser suggests, these clues might remain in "the 'simplest' acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading..." (Polan, q.)

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<sup>1</sup> Free spanish-english translation from the original source, that says "se configura, por un lado, como una construcción analítica de los fenómenos que investiga [y], por otro lado, simultáneamente, como capacidad de referir dichos fenómenos a las fuerzas sociales que los determinan."

<sup>2</sup> Free spanish-english translation from the original source: "productos de una específica situación histórico-social".

Under this optic, *Top Gun*, a north-American movie released in 1986 starring Tom Cruise as a prominent army pilot, does not seem to be just an art exercise but also a sort of propaganda film in the benefit of the United States of America in the late development of the Cold War.

We should attend first to the represented main character, which is expected to be identified with a middle-class, north-American, young, male audience. His nickname, 'Maverick', highlights us his attitude: haughty, disobedient and adventuresome. He is also attractive and healthy, a sexual referent in his context<sup>3</sup>. And, against all preset odds, it seems that this reckless behaviour, based in ambition and appearance, provides him a success regarding his social, working and personal life.

If we relate Maverick's behaviour with the success he achieves, a harmless identification could become a determined aspiration. But if the spectator wants to achieve all this success then he<sup>4</sup> needs the means; he needs a way for achieving it. Ideology "has all the answers ready before it asks the questions" (Comolli; 31), and this is not an exception. The Army is presented as the highway catapulting Maverick to the peak; and not just a simple troop but an elite group called Top Gun.

This configures a sinister reasoning by which, in order to deserve the success in all areas of life, individual must apply to the army. On the contrary: Army becomes a solution for filling all the empty spaces in a twenty year old boy. The fact that this solution-for-everything matches with the North American need of a powerful army in a determined moment of the History does not seem to be by chance. A symbioses between political needs and media functions appears.

Also, the submerged ideology sketches some presupposed truths without bringing into question its background nor morality. All these considerations are taken for granted, which implies a tacit acceptance of them.

It is the case of the woman in the film. Charlie (Kelly McGuillis), is a reputed physicist who teaches in the most important flying academy of the USA Army; she is also attractive, and single at the age of 30s, which sketches the model of the independent woman in this time. But, however her powerful role, she will be in love with a rude boy who dares to interrupt her in class

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<sup>3</sup> He seems to coincide with the "good-looking-for-teenagers" boy, a role that other actors such as Leonardo DiCaprio or Robert Pattinson performed, too.

<sup>4</sup> "He" because the movie is obviously directed to a young men public who is looking for all that Tom Cruise achieves in the fiction.

-like a teenager?-, without the need for Maverick to demonstrate her a modicum of intelligence.

In the end, this transpires that women should be seduced for how predisposed a man is to show his *cliché* attributes: strength, “herd” control, facial features and chances to assert himself as the dominant male, instead his skill for preventing the long-term consequences (related with the paternity and the starting of a family, for example).

We should also consider that the background threat, represented by the soviet MIG fighter, seems to be a pretext for justifying the rest of the film but not a real enemy present during the whole film. By appearing in the beginning and in the very end of the film, the film tries to make us conscious of a riskiness that justifies the existence of the army and also of an elite flight squad designated to prevent it. If someone asks about why money is wasted in military programmes<sup>5</sup>, it would be easy to re-ask: “Otherwise, how could we be saved from that barely invisible predator that fills the airspace?”

This treatment feeds the (unproven) belief that an enemy as the Soviet Union was (a *MacGuffin* for the advance of the story -and also History itself in our real politics-). As the Big Brother in *1984* or the “outer world” in *The Truman Show*, the north-American film industry seems to breed a malicious ghost inside people’s imagination.

And, in the absence of a real enemy, the audience asks for some kind of rivalry. So Maverick finds his opposite in a taller, blonde pilot nicknamed ‘Iceman’ (Val Kilmer), a cold unbreakable person who is transformed, in the end, by the nice hero of Tom Cruise in order to combat a greater evil. If we compare the identifier with the identified, this manifestly subordinates the spectator’s preferences to the national interests.

In order to achieve success, Maverick challenges authority. He is supposed to be a subordinated, trained for obeying without asking but, in spite of that, he beaks the rules during the whole film. In a real situation, we would expect some kind of punishment but, instead, they reward him. The most remarkable example comes when, in the beginning of the film, his superior is annoyed because his reckless behaviour during the maneuver against the soviet MIGs; instead taking precautionary measures because one of his pilots compromised the weak relations between Occident and the red block, he decides to send him and his wing man to Top Gun, the highest combat pilot unit in the whole Army.

Should we understand by this that challenging behaviour will help us, no matter if some superior figures seem opposite to our choices because the only option is to reward us? And therefore, should the north-American young face their parents if they are against their choices? (Remember that the only choice presented in the film is the Army.)

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<sup>5</sup> As the hippie movement did.

This kind of character presentation seems to coincide with the postmodernist paradigm of life. It consists in a look for the instant pleasure and the skill to understand the world as a relative whole in which the objective considerations are not the common ones.

There is a remarkable quote in this work: "Son, your ego is writing checks your body can't cash." First, because Maverick's superiority is identified with the father figure by calling him son and, second, because the sentence distills the spirit of acting something without thinking in the consequences; it will be rewarded anyway.

When Maverick's friend dies, the pilot has a choice either to go ahead or to keep flying. Everybody appreciates how dangerous it is to fly as a combat pilot, also Goose's family, but nobody seems to worry whether Maverick is still flying or not. With his feelings and the situation against him, the trauma remains a delusion and everything goes on. The danger does not act as a barrier but as a motivation. A brave heart seems to deserve such a stressing situation and responsible choices are beneath emotional decisions.

However, at no time the legitimacy of the war is analyzed and only the benefits are presented. We should then consider that

"as a consequence of the journal's, television and the rest of the communication media action, the public is conscious or ignores, pays attentions or does not care, emphasizes or skips, specific elements of the public scenario. People tend to include or exclude in their own knowledge what media include or exclude from their own content. Also, the public assigns relevancy to the contents they include in order of how much relevant those events, problems, people were in the mass media." (Wolf; 163)<sup>6</sup>

According to that, it is expected by the audience to include the benefits of the army but not the reality of the conflict, which would cause many enthusiastic people to join the army, who never thought about the consequences of taking part in a real, raw, bloody military action.

In the end of the film, the enemy is still virtual (the shadow of the communist), and we

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<sup>6</sup> Original Spanish quotation: "como consecuencia de la acción de los periódicos, de la televisión y de los demás medios de información, el público es consciente o ignora, presta atención o descuida, enfatiza o pasa por alto, elementos específicos de los escenarios públicos. La gente tiende a incluir o excluir de sus propios conocimientos lo que los media incluyen o excluyen de su propio contenido. El público además tiende a asignar a lo que incluye una importancia que refleja el énfasis, atribuido por los mass media a los acontecimientos, a los problemas, a las personas."

have just attended a propaganda film “inviting” us to join the army in order to have success in all in all aspects of life, in an uncritical scenario that shows us reckless behaviour in the expected North-American way.

## Sources

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