

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18916648

# NAMELESS ENEMY, INVISIBLE GEOGRAPHY: TOP GUN: MAVERICK AND THE CINEMATIC REPRODUCTION OF THE AMERICAN WAR MACHINE

Metin Yasan<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Istanbul Nisantasi University, Turkey, <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9896-5420>

Received: 21/02/2026  
Accepted: 09/03/2026

Corresponding Author: Metin Yasan  
([metin.yasan@nisantasi.edu.tr](mailto:metin.yasan@nisantasi.edu.tr))

## ABSTRACT

*Top Gun: Maverick (2022) transcends the boundaries of a commercial blockbuster to function as a strategic instrument of Soft Power, encoding contemporary US foreign policy crises regarding nuclear proliferation and "rogue states." This study aims to explore the mechanisms by which the film's configuration of a "nameless enemy" and "invisible geography" legitimizes military intervention, framing it as a "technical necessity" and "moral duty" rather than a political violation. The research employs a discourse analysis approach to interrogate the latent meanings within the cinematic text. The theoretical framework synthesizes Eurocentric criticism, the Frontier Myth, and Dromology to elucidate the decontextualization of the non-Western world and the aestheticization of martial destructiveness. The findings indicate that the narrative reserves nuclear capacity solely for "civilization" while dehumanizing enemy geography through Orientalist codes. Equally significant, the analysis demonstrates that the film reframes 'military intervention as a "civilizing policing activity." The article concludes that this narrative exemplifies the collaborative strategy between the Pentagon and Hollywood to manufacture global consent, transforming the cinema audience into complicit subjects of the war machine.*

---

**KEYWORDS:** Soft Power, American Hegemony, Orientalism, Frontier Myth, Dromology, Geopolitics, Ideological State Apparatus, Interpellation, Top Gun: Maverick.

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a growing academic interest in the relationship between popular culture and geopolitical strategy. Within this context, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) is not merely a product of entertainment but operates as a sophisticated ideological apparatus that legitimizes the contemporary strategies of American foreign policy. Given the critical strategic role of cinema in the production of mass consent, it is necessary to analyze the film as a cultural battleground where hegemonic values are systematically reproduced.

The aim of this paper is to interrogate the latent meanings and representational regimes embedded within the cinematic message. Methodologically, the research utilizes a discourse analysis approach to deconstruct how specific "realities" are constructed and legitimized. By penetrating beneath the visible surface of the text, this study seeks to expose how hegemonic power relations are naturalized and presented to the audience as "inevitable." The film was selected through purposive sampling, as it represents a paradigmatic instance of contemporary American military hegemony.

The cinematic text operates in strict alignment with Louis Althusser's (1971) conceptualization of the "Ideological State Apparatus" (ISA). By interpellating the audience—hailing individuals as "subjects"—the narrative reframes military ideology as an imaginary relationship to real conditions of existence. Through this process, the film transforms the viewer from a passive observer into a complicit participant in a universe where military discipline is codified as an absolute virtue.

Central to this representation is the construct of the "nameless enemy." As Reineke and Borkenstein (2024) observe, this construct strategically distances the narrative from the exhausting political context of the "War on Terror," providing the film with "discursive flexibility." By withholding the name of the enemy nation, the narrative codes military intervention as a technical necessity, effectively ruling out diplomatic solutions. Deepening this ideological erasure, the depiction of the enemy aligns with Edward Said's (1978) concept of "Orientalism," constructing an "imaginary geography" that serves solely to establish Western rationality. This fiction reduces the region to a "technical obstacle" stripped of cultural characteristics, thereby legitimizing Western intervention as a regulatory authority over irrational chaos.

The aestheticization of speed, or "dromology" (Virilio, 2006), further sanctifies the "human factor" in an era of autonomous drones. As noted by Reineke

and Borkenstein (2024), the film reconstructs the "flying ace" as a symbol of chivalry against the anonymity of industrial warfare. This aligns with Arthur Asa Berger's (1995) analysis of myth, where ancient archetypes soothe social anxieties by masking the traumatic reality of war.

This study diverges from existing literature by arguing that the protagonist's roots lie not merely in chivalric tradition, but in Turner's (1920) "Frontier" thesis and Slotkin's (1992) concept of the "Hunter Hero." In this theoretical context, *Maverick* operates as a border guard protecting the line between "civilization" and "savagery." At its core, this paper argues that *Top Gun: Maverick* functions as a strategic instrument of "Soft Power" (Nye, 2004), repositioning American military hegemony as the fundamental cornerstone of global security.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to interrogate the latent meanings and representational regimes embedded within the cinematic text. As an interdisciplinary approach, this method is utilized to deconstruct how specific geopolitical "realities" are constructed, naturalized, and legitimized through visual and narrative codes.

The primary material for this investigation is the film *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, identifying the film as a paradigmatic instance of contemporary American military hegemony. This selection criterion was based on the film's global commercial success and its specific function as a "founding text" that reconstructs the legitimacy of military intervention in the post-9/11 era.

The interpretative framework integrates multiple theoretical lenses to decode the film's ideological subtext. The analysis applies Louis Althusser's (1971) concepts of the "Ideological State Apparatus" (ISA) and "Interpellation" to examine how the narrative positions the viewer as a complicit subject. Edward Said's (1978) "Orientalism" and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's (1994) critique of "Eurocentrism" are utilized to analyze the construction of the "Nameless Enemy" and "Invisible Geography." Complementing these spatial critiques, the study incorporates Paul Virilio's (2006) concept of "Dromology" (the logic of speed) to investigate the aestheticization of technology, while Joseph Nye's (2004) framework of "Soft Power" is used to evaluate the film's strategic function in manufacturing global consent. Finally, Richard Slotkin's (1992) "Frontier Myth" serves as the lens for analyzing the

protagonist's archetypal function.

Data were collected through a close textual analysis of the film. The analytical procedure involved a systematic, scene-by-scene deconstruction focusing on three primary dimensions: (1) Narrative Structure, specifically the framing of the mission as a "civilizing policing activity" rather than an act of war; (2) Visual Semiotics, including the decoding of costuming (e.g., mirrored visors), cinematography (cockpit POV), and spatial representation (the "rogue" valley); and (3) Discursive Positioning, analyzing how dialogue and plot devices operate to dehumanize the adversary while sanctifying the "human factor" of the American pilot. The resulting data were interpreted utilizing the theoretical framework to expose the mechanisms of the "Military-Entertainment Complex" (Robb, 2004).

### 3. INVISIBLE GEOGRAPHY: ORIENTALIST ERASURE AND GEOPOLITICAL AMBIGUITY

*Top Gun: Maverick* engineers a geopolitical conflict while simultaneously rendering the enemy "nameless," categorizing the adversary merely as a "rogue state." Through this narrative device, the film deliberately relegates the political content of the conflict to a zone of ambiguity. This representational choice frames military intervention not as a diplomatic crisis necessitating negotiation, but as a professional obstacle to be overcome through technical proficiency. Beyond this narrative framing, this strategy of uncertainty effectively prevents the audience from approaching the film with pre-existing political biases. By doing so, this strategic ambiguity serves as an ideological smokescreen, decisively shifting the narrative focus from the political question of "why the war is being fought" to the procedural question of "how it will be won."

As Reineke and Borkenstein (2024) observe, this strategy of anonymization functions to disconnect the narrative from the exhausting and contentious political context of the "War on Terror." According to the authors, this disconnection provides the film with a necessary "discursive flexibility." In effect, the cinematic focus shifts away from the justifications for war and centers instead on the hero's mythical performance as a "flying ace" (Reineke and Borkenstein, 2024). In doing so, the film takes meticulous care not to target a specific nation, thereby respecting the commercial sensitivities of the global market. However, simultaneously, the narrative implicitly endorses a universal "policing" authority, asserting that American military power possesses the inherent right to intervene legitimately

in any geography, at any time.

The conspicuous absence of the enemy's flag, language, or ideology reduces the act of intervention to the level of a rational "technical mission." It is within this context that Edward Said's conceptualization of the practice of "imaginary geography" becomes theoretically pertinent. Through this practice, non-Western spaces are stripped of their historical and cultural depth, transformed into a blank stage upon which the Western subject acts (Said, 1978). According to Said, this process of emptying constitutes the most fundamental epistemological step that legitimizes the West's dominance over the "Other." A geography rendered void of culture, history, or people is treated as *terra nullius*—empty land—and is thereby deemed suitable for domination. Within the film, the enemy geography is reduced to dehumanized technical indicators, referenced only as "valley," "canyon," and "uranium facility." The region is thereby stripped of its status as a living space and confined to the level of a mere "target" to be destroyed.

This visual and narrative choice renders the human cost of war—the collateral damage—effectively invisible. As such, the bombardment is presented as a sterilized, surgical operation framed within the aesthetics of a video game. This representational strategy stands as a typical manifestation of the "Eurocentric" perspective discussed by Shohat and Stam (1994). This is because the strategy positions the non-Western world as a timeless and blurred backdrop, devoid of historical continuity. This hegemonic perspective, defined by Blaut (1993) as the "colonialist model of the world," continues to exert its influence even though formal colonialism has effectively ended. This model functions as a "residual" mode of thought that internalizes and naturalizes the hierarchical power relations produced by imperialism.

Eurocentric discourse traditionally initiates world history with Ancient Greece, which it regards as "pure" and "democratic." It constructs a linear and unidirectional trajectory of progress extending from the Roman Empire, through European metropolises, and finally culminating in the United States. In the film, the character of Maverick and the American air power he represents are coded as the pinnacle and protector of this historical progress. In contrast, the unnamed enemy is positioned as an irrational deviation that threatens this trajectory. This historical construction presents the succession of empires, stretching from *Pax Romana* to *Pax Americana*, as the sole "engine" of civilization. Simultaneously, it

trivializes the West's practices of colonialism, the slave trade, and systemic violence, framing them as "temporary and exceptional accidents" rather than a historical norm. The West sanctifies and sanitizes its own history through the discourses of science and humanism. Conversely, it monitors and demonizes non-Western societies, defining them solely through their "deficiencies."

Therefore, as Talal Asad points out, this perspective is not so much a debate about intentional good and evil, but rather constitutes a power relationship. This relationship acts as a historical form that holds the power to determine the criteria for guilt and innocence (Shohat and Stam, 1994). The visual depiction of enemy pilots, obscured behind mirrored visors and displaying no human characteristics, effectively deprives the "Other" of its status as a historical subject. Compounding this visual dehumanization, by presenting the cessation of the nuclear threat as a response to a "breach of the NATO agreement," the film constructs a meta-narrative that justifies unilateral intervention on the basis of international law. This legal cover reproduces the Orientalist assumption embedded in the film's ideological subtext: that the right to possess nuclear technology is the exclusive monopoly of "civilization" (the West). According to this assumption, technology in the hands of the East can only result in a global catastrophe. As Reineke and Borkenstein (2024) emphasize, this "nameless threat" construct frames American military power as a "universal" competence applicable in any geography. By orchestrating this ideological erasure, the narrative distracts the viewer from interpreting military violence as a political choice. Instead, it directs the viewer to perceive the operation as a series of technical achievements coded as the "first miracle" and "second miracle," thereby repackaging American military hegemony as a "soft power" that maintains order on a global scale.

#### 4. THE CONSTRUCTION OF "THE OTHER" IN CINEMA AND THE EUROCENTRIC GAZE

Cinematographic regimes of representation function not merely as aesthetic preferences, but operate as an epistemological field of violence in which the West constructs its own ontological existence as the "subject" and the non-Western world as an inert "object" (Stam, 2000). This violence extends beyond physical destruction; it constitutes a symbolic form of power that deprives non-Western societies of narrative agency, condemning them to the gaze of the West. Drawing on Edward Said's

framework, the East is constructed not as a lived "reality," but as a "counter-image" or "imaginary geography" requisite for the West to define its own rationality, power, and civilization (Said, 1978). This fictional fabrication necessitates the coding of the East as "negative" – associated with emotion, chaos, and despotism – so that the West can establish its own identity through the "positive" values of reason, order, and democracy.

In this hegemonic fiction, the West is coded as the engine of history, the representative of progress and reason. Conversely, the East is imprisoned in a timeless and irrational stagnation, disconnected from historical development (Hentsch, 1992). As Thierry Hentsch emphasizes in his conceptualization of the "Imaginary East," this attribution of "timelessness" prevents the Non-West from being perceived as a legitimate political actor. By extension, it legitimizes Western intervention as a mission to bring a geography resistant to the flow of history forcibly into modernity. When this practice of othering is analyzed alongside Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's critique of "Eurocentrism," the mechanism by which cinema visualizes global hierarchies becomes evident. According to Shohat and Stam (1994), the Eurocentric narrative reads world history through a single, European-centered trajectory, positioning non-Western cultures as lagging "behind" this line, existing in incomplete and unfinished "childhood stages."

Within *Top Gun: Maverick*, the construct of the "nameless enemy" (rogue state) represents a paradigmatic manifestation of Said's "anonymous and threatening Other." The systematic erasure of the enemy's face, language, and geographical affiliation reduces the adversary to an "ahistorical" position, as criticized by Shohat and Stam (1994). This visual and narrative erasure detaches the enemy from any specific political context, transforming them into an abstraction of absolute evil. Rootless and therefore impossible to negotiate with, this enemy is depicted as capable of appearing anywhere at any time. In this light, the enemy is not framed as a nation or a culture, but merely as a "technical problem that must be eliminated."

This representational strategy sanctifies the active agency of the West – embodied by *Maverick* and his team – as the sole "subject" of history. In stark contrast, it reduces the "Other" – represented by the uranium facility and the faceless pilots – to merely a "backdrop" against which the Western subject's heroism is displayed. Through this framing, the cinematic narrative reproduces the fundamental binary of colonial discourse: on one side stands the

Western “subject” who acts, knows, and decides; on the other, the Eastern “object” who is subjected to action, known, and judged. Therefore, this representational hierarchy in cinema serves a critical ideological function, legitimizing geopolitical domination under the guise of cultural “naturalness.”

#### **4.1. Cinema As An Ideological Apparatus And Soft Power**

Cinema functions as a strategic instrument within the context of Louis Althusser's conceptualization of the “Ideological State Apparatus” (ISA). Within this theoretical framework, the cinematic medium operates to “interpellate” individuals, hailing them as “subjects” situated within the value system of the state and the ruling class (Althusser, 1971). Crucially, cinema establishes a hegemony based on consent, functioning distinctly from the repressive apparatuses of the state (police/military). Functionally, the cinema theatre operates as a site of consent production, where the viewer is isolated from the external world and rendered receptive to ideological transmission. Through the images projected on the screen, the viewer internalizes the “invisible hand” of the state. The film operates not merely as a narrative invitation; it simultaneously invites the audience to identify with militaristic values and to internalize military intervention as a “necessary and justified” action. Ideology addresses individuals as subjects, delineating their position in the world and prescribing their actions. Following this logic, the film displaces the viewer from the position of a passive observer, transforming them into a complicit participant in a world where military hierarchy and discipline are codified as absolute virtues.

This process of “interpellation” becomes particularly salient when analyzed through Joseph Nye's framework of “Soft Power.” According to Nye, soft power represents the capacity to achieve desired outcomes not through coercion or financial inducement, but through attraction, cultural values, and agenda-setting (Nye, 2004). In this geopolitical context, attraction functions more effectively than coercion in securing international and domestic cooperation. Accordingly, military operations within the film are not coded as acts of “invasion” or “aggression.” Instead, they are re-coded as aesthetic elements of attraction and as the indispensable anchor of global stability. Through this semiotic coding, the political nature of violence—and the dehumanization of the enemy analyzed in the previous section—is effectively concealed behind a

veil of cultural consent.

Within *Top Gun: Maverick*, the destructive reality of warfare (Hard Power) is transmuted into an instrument of Soft Power. This transformation is achieved through the aesthetics of speed, nostalgia, and the reconstruction of heroic myths. In this process, warplanes and munitions are dissociated from their function as instruments of death. By evolving into objects of technological fetishism and masculine aesthetics, they facilitate the consumption of violence as a form of aestheticized pleasure.

The material basis for this ideological function is grounded in the symbiotic relationship between the Pentagon and the film industry, as documented in David Robb's (2004) *Operation Hollywood*. This relationship is predicated on a specific exchange: the “censorship” and “approval” of scripts in return for access to high-value military equipment (Robb, 2004). This structural constraint mandates that the script be compatible with military doctrine from the initial writing stage. Inevitably, this obligation transforms the film's artistic narrative into a subsidiary component of the Pentagon's strategic communication goals.

This institutional arrangement compromises the autonomy of cinema as an art form. Instead, cinema becomes an apparatus that executes the ideological function of the state, as defined by Althusser. As Robb (2004) observes, military depictions in such productions effectively function as “commercials” for the armed forces. The film aestheticizes military violence and repackages American foreign policy as “global protectiveness,” thereby manufacturing the “consent” of the masses. As Althusser points out, the viewer recognizes and validates their own “place” within this ideological construct. Structurally, this act of approval constitutes a cyclical ideological victory. This victory is consummated by the viewer's recognition of American military power as the sole guarantor of their own security, leading to an unquestioning acceptance of the legitimacy of this power's boundless application.

#### **4.2. The Frontier Myth, The ‘Frontier’ In The Sky, And Heroic Archetypes**

The Frontier Myth, which played a foundational role in the construction of American national identity, transcends the boundaries of its historical thesis to be reproduced within the mythological universe of popular culture. This reproduction circumvents the problem of “closing land frontiers” identified by Frederick Jackson Turner (Turner, 1920). It arises from the necessity of inventing a spatially infinite “new frontier” for American

expansionism. In this process, the frontier ceases to be a concrete geographical line; instead, it evolves into an existential necessity. As Turner posits, although the physical frontier has vanished, the “restless energy” inherent in the American character demands a wider field for its application. As a natural extension, the exhaustion of physical frontiers precipitates an existential crisis requiring a redirection of this energy. In this theoretical context, the frontier assumes a mythological function, operating as a mechanism to break the bonds of tradition (Turner, 1920). With this functional transformation, the border acquires a mythological structure, defined by Richard Slotkin as a mask for the enigma of national character (Slotkin, 1992). Even if the border loses its physical reality, it persists as an ideological “state of mind,” conveying the worldview of the ancestors to the modern audience and providing them with historical consistency.

As Ryan and Kellner (1988) observe, when the classic Western geography was exhausted, Hollywood invented “high-tech Westerns” to perpetuate the ideology of the “enterprising individual” and conquest. *Top Gun: Maverick* inherits this tradition by transporting the classic “Wild West” narrative to a vertical plane: the sky. In this reimagining, the sky ceases to be merely a physical atmosphere; it becomes a frontier where American exceptionalism is reified, and where justice is dispensed not by law, but by the cowboy.

Within the film, the uranium facility and the snowy valley controlled by the “rogue state” function as the modern equivalents of the wild frontier at the edge of civilization. This geographical coding effectively removes the enemy as a political subject, reducing them to a natural element of danger that must be brought under rational control—analogue to the “wild nature” or “sinister natives” of classic Westerns. *Maverick*, conversely, epitomizes the archetype of the “border guard” who tames this chaotic frontier not through technological reliance, but through “cowboy” instincts. As Ryan and Kellner (1988) note, such archetypes are utilized to reestablish conservative values and individualistic heroism during periods of social trauma. According to Arthur Asa Berger (1995), these archetypes soothe the unconscious anxieties of society by resolving complex political issues through simple “good/evil” dichotomies. This mythological function frees the viewer from the burden of analyzing political cause-and-effect, preparing them to accept the conflict as a moral imperative.

The narrative of heroism in the film alleviates the social “fear of chaos” created by technological

determinism through the myth of “individual will” embodied in *Maverick*. Therefore, the “cowboyism” represented by *Maverick* constitutes an ontological stance that asserts the superiority of the American spirit against the cold calculations of drones and algorithms. Framed in this way, the military bombing is legitimized through mythical codes as a “civilizing mission” rather than an act of invasion. Within this framework, violence ceases to be an act of aggression; instead, it is transformed into a ritual of “purification through violence” (Slotkin, 1992) performed by the lone hero standing guard against irrational forces.

*Maverick*’s resistance frames a dichotomy between the courage inherent to the human experience of war and the efficiency demanded by cold technocratic reason. The “Drone Ranger” mentality, represented by Admiral Cain, reduces war to a matter of technical management. In stark contrast, *Maverick* resurrects the myth of the “outlaw hero” who violates the rules to uphold the moral order. Here, the emphasis on the inevitability of technology constructs a “mythic framework” in which technology becomes the modern monster that must be conquered.

The fundamental iconography of the Western genre—the horse and gun (Butler, 2002)—are replaced here by F-18 jets and laser-guided bombs. However, *Maverick* utilizes these tools with “cowboy-like” intuition rather than bureaucratic compliance. This usage symbolizes the purest form of the “Frontier Spirit,” specifically the supremacy of individual will over technology. The alienation created by technological warfare is ruptured by *Maverick*’s physical presence in the cockpit and the somatic endurance of G-force. Positioned as a “paradoxical protector” (Butler, 2002), *Maverick* stands on the border between the civilized and the barbaric, saving civilization by transgressing its laws. This paradox suggests that the system structurally requires a “savior” who violates the system’s own rules to ensure its continuity.

This protective mission gains political legitimacy through the assumption of a “nuclear monopoly.” The narrative presupposes that apocalyptic power is safe only in the hands of the “Rational West” (NATO/US). Conversely, in the hands of the “Irrational Other,” it represents a global catastrophe. This ontological distinction removes nuclear armament from the status of a universal threat, transforming it into an identity-based privilege. As Berger (1995) points out, popular narratives resolve complex political issues by reducing them to mythological conflicts. Operating on this principle,

this new frontier struggle in the sky blends the Western myth's "civilizing mission" with the anxieties of the nuclear age, thereby re-branding American military hegemony as the exclusive shield protecting global security.

### ***4.3. The Aesthetics of Speed And Political Blindness: A Scene of Dromology***

The manufactured mythological and ideological framework of the film is structurally grounded in Paul Virilio's concept of Dromology – the science and logic of speed. This theoretical grounding transforms the Frontier Myth and the hunter-hero narrative into a visual "regime of speed". As Virilio (2006) posits, speed is not merely a physical act of displacement; rather, it constitutes the fundamental form of power in the modern age. Within this paradigm, war is no longer defined by spatial conquest but has evolved into a war of "logistical perception" waged through the conquest of time (Virilio, 2006). The "Darkstar" sequence and the Mach 10 speed test at the narrative's outset function not merely as a display of technological achievement, but as proof of this perceptual transformation. This sequence pushes the limits of technology while simultaneously subjecting the human body and perception to the violence of the machine's velocity. Effectively, the film transforms the subject of war from the "thinking soldier" to the "accelerating machine." Crucially, the imperative command "Don't think, just do," which forms the epistemological backbone of the film, serves as the operational code of this constructed regime. As Virilio (2006) points out, speed obliterates the time required for reflection. This discursive command detaches the pilot from his status as an ethical and political subject, reducing him to a dromological automaton who reacts solely to the logic of acceleration.

As Robert Stam (2000) observes in his reading of Virilio, war operates as an engine that alters not only visual technologies but the very field of vision itself. As Virilio notes, the visual field is reduced effectively to the "line of fire" (Stam, 2000). The act of destruction becomes simultaneous with the act of seeing. Under this dictatorship of speed, the temporal space required for moral reflection—identifying a target and deciding to destroy it—is reduced to zero. In *Top Gun: Maverick*, speed conceals the political motivations for military intervention and its destructive consequences through the vertigo and kinetic pleasure it generates in the viewer. Facilitated by the intense identification provided by the cockpit point-of-view (POV) camera, the viewer absorbs the adrenaline of speed as a

narcotic. Intoxicated by this perspective, the audience ceases to question the brutality of the act, surrendering instead to the pure aesthetics of movement.

In this process, the ontological distinction between the pilot's visor and the cinema screen is dissolved. The battlefield is transformed into a simulation produced by what Virilio terms a "vision machine" (Stam, 2000). In this simulated universe, "accelerated images" supersede reality. The viewer consumes violence as a form of pornographic entertainment from the sanitized distance provided by the bomber's cockpit. The dizzying velocity of low-altitude flight compresses the geography, rendering the enemy—and their humanity—invisible. Speed removes war from the context of political crisis, imprisoning it within a reflex-based "video game aesthetic." As the velocity increases, the enemy ceases to exist as a historical entity or human subject. They are reduced to digital "pixels" to be erased, or abstract obstacles to be overcome through reflex. In this state of technological intoxication, the viewer is conditioned to ask not "why" the war is being fought, but only "how fast" it is being fought. The culmination of this conditioning establishes a totalitarian regime of perception that seeks the legitimacy of war not in political justification, but in technological superiority and the seductive allure of speed.

### ***4.4. The Last Samurai in the Age Of Drones and the Appeal of The Human Factor***

The film's insistence on sanctifying human pilots over unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) functions as a strategic exercise in "image management" rather than a reflection of technological necessity. By framing the narrative in this manner, the film operates as a humanistic defense mechanism, countering the perception of modern warfare as a "cold" and "ruthless" digital operation. As Reineke and Borkenstein (2024) observe, Maverick's mantra – "it's not the plane, it's the pilot" – constitutes a deliberate attempt to remove war from the reality of a technocratic massacre. The narrative goal is to reconstruct aerial combat as a "chivalrous" duel. Such a framework dissociates war from the reality of remote-controlled assassination and reimagines it as a "challenge" governed by ethical codes, where skill, courage, and risk are the decisive factors. For Soft Power to operate effectively, such a reconstruction is essential. As Joseph Nye (2004) posits, soft power is the capacity to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. While cold, metallic drones may instill fear (Hard Power), they are

incapable of generating admiration or consent in the eyes of the global audience. The absence of a human “face” leads to the severing of the emotional bond required to legitimize American military hegemony. Therefore, the retention of the human element is a strategic necessity. In this context, the film's emphasis on the “Human Factor” aligns with what Nye defines as “cultural appeal” (Nye, 2004). To maintain this appeal, the American military cannot be represented as a faceless, algorithmic killing machine. Instead, it must be personified through the archetype of the “hero”—embodied by Maverick—who possesses talent, courage, and, crucially, human vulnerability.

By employing such a personalization strategy, the narrative obscures the structural reality of the American military as a global instrument of domination. Instead, the military is aestheticized as a “moral community” of individuals, each possessing a unique narrative. The “moral distance” and emotional detachment inherent in drone warfare are replaced by the somatic reality of Maverick's physical exertion and sweat within the cockpit. Through this somatic shift, war is repackaged as a “human” and “moral” act. The narrative marginalizes the aseptic lethality offered by technology, highlighting instead a performance that pushes the pilot's physical limits. By privileging the somatic over the technical, the narrative elevates the act of killing from a bureaucratic “job” to the status of a “sacrifice” for which a personal price is paid. The narrative thereby creates an ideological veil, masking the impersonal brutality of modern warfare by exploiting nostalgia for the myths of the “flying ace.” Operating as a psychological buffer, this nostalgic veil distracts the viewer from the asymmetrical reality of conflict, persuading them to accept the comforting illusion that technological superiority is exercised on a “fair” playing field defined by human agency.

#### **4.5. The Pentagon-Hollywood Complex And Global Consent Production**

The production process of *Top Gun: Maverick* serves as a paradigmatic instance of the “Military-Entertainment Complex,” a concept rigorously documented by David Robb (2004). Within this industrial framework, the access to high-value military assets—such as aircraft carriers and F/A-18 jets—is structurally conditional upon the script being deemed “appropriate” by the Pentagon's public relations apparatus. Under such conditions, artistic autonomy is subordinated to the strategic imperatives of corporate propaganda. The Department of Defense's (DoD) control over the

narrative, combined with its subsidization of production costs through equipment access, transcends the film's status as a mere commercial product. Instead, it transforms the cinematic text into a global “recruitment video.” In enacting this functional shift, the film displaces the viewer from the position of a passive consumer, repositioning them as a potential “volunteer” who aspires to internalize military values and lifestyles.

Joseph Nye (2004) posits that while the military can cultivate soft power during peacetime through exchange programs, the management of fictional representations becomes vital during periods of geopolitical tension. Operating as a strict management process, the narrative filters the chaotic and bloody reality of war, presenting the public with a digestible, justified, and sanitized “narrative of victory.” According to Nye, in the information age, power depends on “whose story wins,” and American hegemony is significantly fueled by civil society-based centers of attraction such as Hollywood. Therefore, the Pentagon's influence does not merely determine the content of a single film; it curates the hegemonic narrative that shapes the global public's perception of American power.

A diachronic analysis of Tom Cruise's discourse reveals the extent of this ideological shift. In a 1990 interview with *Playboy* (cited in Novak, 2022), Cruise demonstrated an ethical distance from the military-entertainment complex, explicitly acknowledging that the original film was perceived as “right-wing propaganda” and refusing sequels on the grounds of “irresponsibility.” At that time, the actor described *Top Gun* as an “amusement park ride” disconnected from reality, an early admission of Paul Virilio's (2006) thesis regarding the “gamification” of war. However, *Top Gun: Maverick*, released three decades later, stands as proof of how this ethical rejection has been transformed into aesthetic endorsement. The technological capabilities provided by the Pentagon and its oversight of the script have erased these earlier concerns. The concern for “irresponsibility” has been replaced by a new militarist mission marketed as the “responsibility to tell the story as technology advances.” Such a shift illustrates the efficacy of the ideological apparatus in an Althusserian context: the apparatus not only interpellates the audience but also reconfigures its own star, purifying him of past dissenting discourse and reconstructing him as a “militarist subject” fully compatible with the system.

Submerged within the film's “nostalgic brand value,” the critical stance of the past is rendered ineffective. The film becomes the visual carrier of the

speed aesthetic identified by Virilio (2006) and the soft power defined by Nye (2004). The admiration generated by technological velocity amplifies the “voluntary attraction” effect. By means of this aesthetic synergy, the frightening face of hard power evolves into an object of aesthetic desire. Through the censorship/approval mechanism identified by Robb (2004), the Pentagon intervenes to sanitize elements that could compromise the institutional image, re-marketing American military hegemony as the “guarantee of global security.” In enacting this cleansing process, the Pentagon excises potential failures, civilian casualties, or moral ambiguity from the narrative, imprisoning the institution in a sterile idealism exempt from criticism. As Nye (2004) notes, soft power is maximized when policies are perceived as legitimate by others. By enchanting the viewer with the thrill of speed and heroism, the film transforms unilateral interventionism into a “legitimate” and “desirable” spectacle. Seduced by this imagery, the viewer is encouraged not to view the violation of international law as a crime, but to applaud it as an aesthetic choreography of justice. In essence, the film operates not merely as a generator of box office revenue, but as a strategic soft power operation aimed at restoring the “appeal” of the U.S. military in the global public sphere.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis demonstrates that *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) operates not merely as a nostalgic sequel, but as a strategic cultural text that functions within the logic of the “Military-Entertainment Complex.” By analyzing the film applying the perspectives of geopolitics, semiotics, and political economy, this paper argues that the narrative serves as a sophisticated “manifesto” for the rehabilitation of American military hegemony in the post-9/11 era. The film strategically obscures the traumatic legitimacy crises of recent interventions (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq) by constructing a fantasy of a “winnable,” “sanitized,” and “just” war. As Ryan and Kellner (1988) posit, such cinematic productions function as “founding texts” that re-mythologize the savior leader and the invincible army during periods of national anxiety. Fulfilling this cultural mandate, the film acts as a mechanism of “salvation,” restoring the image of omnipotence on the cinematic plane precisely when it is contested in the geopolitical arena.

## REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans.). London: New Left Books.  
 Berger, A. A. (1995). *Cultural criticism: A primer of key concepts*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

The analysis reveals that this restoration is achieved through specific mechanisms of epistemological violence. As evidenced in the discussion of “Invisible Geography” and the “Nameless Enemy,” the film adopts an Orientalist framework (Said, 1978) to reduce the adversary to an abstract “technical target” devoid of historical subjectivity. Such an erasure, aligning with Shohat and Stam’s (1994) critique of Eurocentrism, depoliticizes the act of war, transforming a violation of international sovereignty into a neutral “engineering problem” to be solved by American expertise. By stripping the enemy of a face and the geography of a name, the narrative creates an ethical void where the viewer is relieved of the burden of moral questioning.

Coupled with this moral detachment, this study demonstrates that the film’s “Aesthetics of Speed” serves a critical ideological function. Drawing on Virilio’s concept of dromology, the visual language of high-velocity warfare acts as an anesthetic. The kinetic pleasure of the cockpit POV and the emphasis on the “Human Factor” (the pilot’s intuition over the algorithm) distract the audience from the political reality of the intervention. Underpinning this aestheticization is the material collaboration between the production and the Pentagon (Robb, 2004), ensuring that the film operates as a vehicle of Soft Power (Nye, 2004). Through this symbiotic relationship, the crude reality of “hard power” (munitions and destruction) is transmuted into an object of desire and cultural attraction.

In the final analysis, *Top Gun: Maverick* exemplifies the efficiency of the Ideological State Apparatus in the digital age. It does not merely entertain; it “interpellates” the viewer (Althusser, 1971), transforming them from a passive spectator into an emotional accomplice of the war machine. The convergence of the Frontier Myth (Slotkin, 1992), which frames violence as a ritual of purification, with the technological sublime creates a hegemonic consensus. The narrative successfully reconstructs Turner’s (1920) “closed frontier” in the vertical limit of the sky, offering a simulated victory to a fractured society. Through these ideological shifts, the cinema screen is transformed into a border outpost and the viewer into a volunteer guard on duty. Far from being a mere cinematic spectacle, the film reinforces the American war machine’s dominance not only beyond physical borders but, more significantly, within the cognitive map of the global audience.

- Blaut, J. M. (1993). *The colonizer's model of the world: Geographical diffusionism and Eurocentric history*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Butler, A. M. (2002). *Film studies*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials.
- Hentsch, T. (1992). *Imagining the Middle East* (F. A. Reed, Trans.). Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Novak, M. (2022). Tom Cruise said in 1990 making a sequel to Top Gun would be 'irresponsible'. *Gizmodo / Paleofuture*. <https://gizmodo.com/tom-cruise-top-gun-sequel-irresponsible-1848868910> (Accessed: 19 February 2026).
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Reineke, A. and Borckenstein, S. (2024). The myth of the flying ace in Top Gun: Maverick. *Portal Militärgeschichte*. [https://www.portal-militaergeschichte.de/reineke\\_borckenstein\\_maverick](https://www.portal-militaergeschichte.de/reineke_borckenstein_maverick) (Accessed: 19 February 2026).
- Robb, D. L. (2004). *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon shapes and censors the movies*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Ryan, M. and Kellner, D. (1988). *Camera politica: The politics and ideology of contemporary Hollywood film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Shohat, E. and Stam, R. (1994). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*. London: Routledge.
- Slotkin, R. (1992). *Gunfighter nation: The myth of the frontier in twentieth-century America*. New York: Atheneum.
- Stam, R. (2000). *Film theory: An introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Turner, F. J. (1920). *The frontier in American history*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Virilio, P. (2006). *Speed and politics* (M. Polizzotti, Trans.). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).