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FILM MAVERICKS: FROM HOLLYWOOD TO AFRICAN CINEMA

THE HOOPLA SURROUNDING *TOP GUN: MAVERICK* (2022) is much like the hoopla that surrounded the remake of *Ghostbusters* (2016), which was the subject of my chronicle in the summer 2016 issue. On the one hand, to summarize *The New Yorker*'s Anthony Lane, it is somewhat amazing to see so many brows furrowed and hands wrung about the legacy of a basically ridiculous 1980s entertainment. Nevertheless, I will briefly and no doubt too generally summarize the arguments about Joseph Kosinski's reinterpretation of the Kenny Loggins-infused original that anyone born before the 1980s is almost guaranteed to know well. Is this new version a harmful love song to militarized American nationalism, its testosterone and octane levels upped appropriately from the original 35-year-old version (even if the new version features a single female fighter pilot)? A-firm, as some of those Navy folks might gruffly squawk over their radios. Is it also a gorgeously photographed series of arial ballets, the likes of which only the most aesthetically indifferent scolds could fail to see as impressive? I would also answer that in the affirmative, swearing to that effect on a pile of gender theory textbooks if necessary. Both the film and the critical conversation around it have thus been "little bits of history repeating," to quote Shirley Bassey.

On the other hand, to quote the opening words of Bassey's song, there is also "something evolving." What is evolving is cinema, by which I mean cinema's *machine*. Well-informed film historians can reasonably disagree about how much has really changed between the broad representational patterns of Regan-era Hollywood film and the contemporary version of the same, but one aspect of that argument can bear no disagreement whatsoever: my use of the word "film" is, strictly speaking, inaccurate. When *Top Gun* (1986) was released, literally every commercial movie in the world was exhibited on 35mm *film*, a piece of transparent plastic that passed in front

of a light to cast a shadow on a screen in a manner whose technical details were mostly unchanged from those of fifty years earlier (and not really so different from the technology of fifty years before that, which was itself based on the same principles as the magic lantern, which dates back to the 17th century). When *Top Gun: Maverick* was released, literally no commercial movie in the world was produced on *film*. I suppose such general statements are always falsifiable through a counterexample here and there, but I would wager just about any amount that there are very few such exceptions. Over the last two decades cinema's *machine*—that is, the combination of camera, laboratory, and projector—has changed from something basically mechanical to something basically digital. That, for me, is the most interesting aspect of *Top Gun: Maverick*: the degree to which the work overall is a meditation on the *machine* of cinema itself. I can hear the moans of my readers at the latest critical excess to emerge from this chronicle, but please bear with me.

Consider, for instance, the way *Top Gun: Maverick* opens. We find our hero, Captain Pete "Maverick" Mitchell (played by Tom Cruise), now working as a test pilot for experimental aircraft. His crew is small, as it only includes his chum "Hondo" (who is basically running the show), a pair of dorky engineers, and a small handful of anonymous technicians. The technology they are working with is small-scale and thus flexible, personalized, and open to spontaneity (for better and for worse, as we will see). This isn't exactly analogous to the experimental cinema of someone like Hollis Frampton, although it is tempting to see it that way, given his famous description of film as "a machine made of images." Rather, this is something like the crew of a small independent film like, say, *Moonlight* (2016), which I discussed in my chronicle in the spring 2018 issue: radically new and different but still recognizable as a "movie" in the same way that the airplane in question is recognizable as a jet. They also both require not insignificant outlays of capital and expertise despite their experimental qualities. The first reel of *Top Gun: Maverick* (as a critic of my, *ahem*, vintage would be accustomed to saying) is thus most self-consciously about the *machine*, and you'd have to be pretty determined to ignore what is going on in the narrative to argue otherwise.

This is also true of *Top Gun: Maverick*'s last two reels, which take place on and in the range of an aircraft carrier. Here the difference between the worlds of test pilots and naval aviators is just as vast as that between the pro-

duction methods of small independent films and Hollywood blockbusters. Not only is the technology more omnipresent, powerful, and cumbersome (and the film works hard to let us know how technically demanding a feat it is to land aircraft at sea), but the number of people involved is also much larger—something that is made explicit in both the film's narrative and its closing credits, which reveal that "the making and authorized distribution of this film supported over 10,000 jobs." The U.S. Navy's website also tells us that a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier has a total crew of about 5,000 people ("Crew: Ship's Company: 3,000-3,200, air wing: 1,500, other: 500"). In terms of size and complexity, the film's most significant setting and the conditions of its production are therefore roughly analogous. Furthermore, at one point in the film Maverick and his not-quite foster son (it's complicated and not worth pausing to explain) find themselves trapped behind enemy lines, which leads to their commandeering an older model fighter plane and facing off against more modern and heavily armed opponents. This makes the status of the film as a meditation on the *machine* of cinema even more explicit, as the narrative shows that the technical gaps between the 1980s vintage jet and a contemporary jet are roughly equivalent to that between the 35mm camera with which the original *Top Gun* was made and the present-day 6K IMAX camera that captured the images of the sequel.

What we have between this opening and this oddly too-long ending is more difficult to characterize. Some of the meditation on the *machine* of cinema is clearly present. At one point, for example, Maverick's sort-of girlfriend (played by Jennifer Connelly) takes him out on her sailboat (which is comparable to a 4x5 still camera, to stick with the metaphorical framework I'm developing here) and marvels that a Navy man like him is so uncomfortable on its deck. But that's a brief sequence. Most of this heavy middle is given over to training for a seemingly impossible mission to go somewhere (mountainous, it seems) and drop a bomb on something (dangerous, it seems). It's all a little fuzzy—deliberately so, I'm sure, as the producers need to satisfy the demands of various international markets. It's also a little fuzzy for reasons that have to do with maintaining the focus on sensation over narrative, much like the original *Top Gun*. Indeed, what this middle section is really about is finding teeny tiny variations on what is a seemingly linear but actually elliptical narrative. Everyone knows they need to get from point A to point B and back again, and this middle section replays that voyage over and over, with the characters struggling to figure out which

extremely minor variation will lead to success. On the side there is a romance and some displaced father-son stuff, but all of this is so careless in its presentation that it's difficult to take it seriously. (How does Maverick know this woman exactly? Why was he able to block Goose's son from the Naval Academy but still unable to be promoted beyond the rank of captain?) Instead, what the film leaves us with is a middle that feels like a meditation on the *narrative* in a way that corresponds with the very long beginning and the too-long ending that together meditate on the *machine.*

What I'm trying to argue is that *Top Gun: Maverick* is, for lack of a better way of putting it, *weird.* Structurally speaking, it's lopsided: too heavy in the beginning and the ending (which is *a lot* heavier, in narrative terms, than the too-heavy beginning) and oddly messy and haphazard in the middle. Subject matter-wise, it is practically Althusserian in its 1970s-style engagement with what anyone who has read any film theory knows to call the "apparatus." That is somewhat different from what a died-in-the-wool experimentalist like Frampton called the "machine," lest anyone think that I've lost my head by arguing for an understanding of this latest Cruise vehicle along the lines of cinema's most rigorously deconstructive thinker and maker. No, no, nothing like that. My claims for this film are much more modest and down to earth. It's just that I think *Top Gun: Maverick* is, at the level of both subject matter and narrative structure, the most ambitious engagement with Marxist-inflected meta-cinematic thinking that the 21st century has yet produced.

Anyone who knows the history of African cinema knows that Senegal looms large. It produced two genuine giants of the form—Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Diop Mambéty—just as it produced a giant of decolonial politics and culture writ large—the "président-poète" Léopold Sédar Senghor. But seeing matters this way obscures other crucial players and places in this postcolonial landscape. Most literary people know the contours of négritude and thus also know Senghor, but major figures in African philosophy like Paulin J. Hountondji remain far more obscure (despite his status as mentor to the bone fide philosophical celebrity Kwame Anthony Appiah). Hountondji also worked for a brief period as Minister for Culture and Communications in the Government of Benin, and that is part of what makes me think of him when I try to explain the significance of Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, who was also born in Benin. Though his family left for Senegal when

he was just a schoolboy, I think the gentle béninois outsiderness that defines Hountondji's work is also visible in Vieyra's delicate, precise filmmaking. That work is visible right now on the Criterion Channel, which is streaming a seven-film retrospective of Vieyra's œuvre that covers the years 1955 to 1982 (he died in 1987). Three films are of special interest. One is *Afrique sur Seine* (Africa on the Seine, 1955), a group portrait of West Africans living in Paris that has obvious connections to the contemporary négritude movement but just as significant connections to the Nouvelle Vague movement and its still largely unacknowledged roots in documentary. (Even when one does read about that, it is generally via the work of Jean Rouch; here is a powerful rejoinder to that limited view of what was going on in the City of Lights in the 1950s.) *Behind the Scenes: The Making of* Ceddo (1981) documents the production of what I believe to be Sembène's greatest film, even if it is far less seen than *La noire de . . .* (Black Girl, 1966) or *Xala* (1975). Vieyra's work certainly gives a detailed sense of Sembène's working methods, but it's also a portrait of where African cinema had arrived after the earlier, quasi-revolutionary years. There is a workman-like quality visible here, on the part of both Sembène and Vieyra, showing the viewer how the exciting, youthful phase of African cinema was coming to a close and the serious labour involved in making art was now well and truly underway. In between these is *Une nation est née* (A Nation Is Born, 1961), an unabashedly nationalist celebration of Senegalese independence that is also sober and a bit sombre about the colonialism that it came out of and continues to struggle against. That same year the great Québécois filmmaker Claude Jutra produced a moyen-métrage called *Le Niger, jeune république* (Niger, Young Republic, 1961) as a gesture of postcolonial solidarity. That film is easily available on the National Film Board of Canada website, and I highly recommend watching it alongside Vieyra's shorter film to get a sense of the competing visions that would come to define the 1960s: youthful idealism vs. the radicalism that only experience can lead towards. The radicalism of experience is not a bad way of summarizing the content of Paulin Soumanou Vieyra's overall body of work.