

A Night at the Movies

In September 2013, there was a half-time show which took place at West Point during a football game between Army and Stanford. Its sponsors showed a video of military hardware flattening every obstacle, and by suggestion, every enemy in sight, after which they announced that if the Cadets played their cards right, they could hire out to weapons manufacturers at the end of their military careers and grow rich. And so the Cadets' service to their country and idealism were reduced to a business proposition. The crowd in the stands loved it.

It looks like something similar is happening this summer at the movies, reinforced by commentary in *The New York Times*, not to mention hourly reports on the war in Ukraine.

On Father's Day this year, Ross Douthat's column in the *Sunday Times* bemoaned the decline of the movies as an essential American art form. Then, in a neat pirouette, Douthat announced that two films, *Northman* and *Top Gun Maverick*, may reverse that decline. Both films opened in theaters this June, with *Top Gun Maverick* being the bigger box office hit. For Douthat, even though both films are spectacular and violent, the differences between them are what stand out.

Admittedly there are some differences. In *Northman*, all the fighting takes place on the ground. Everything revolves around personal injury, enmity, spite, and vengeance. Each side knows exactly who the enemy is, with both equally given to raiding and plunder. People kill each other and enslave their surviving victims face to face. Both hero and villain die, with the only redemption being the survival of the hero's children. In *Top Gun Maverick*, no one sees the faces of the enemy, who is never clearly identified, and its heroes kill their foes from a distance in the air. The fighting and killing are tense and dangerous, but quite clinical. In *Northman*, one sees blood, iron, and filth all around, but aside from the explosions, everything in *Top Gun Maverick* is nice and clean.

For Douthat, *Top Gun Maverick* is the morally and artistically superior film since there's one sequence where the fighter pilots involved go out of their way to save each other's lives and everyone at home is kept safe. After all, they're Americans, not Viking barbarians.

Assuming these films actually function as a form of artistic rescue, what do they reveal about the current state of American culture? For this writer, their similarities are far more important than their differences. Both build on the proposition that the world is full of threats to be met by killing. Those who fight have to prove themselves against constant, clear, and present danger. For both, conflict is inherently deadly, and differences are best resolved in combat to the finish. Whether it be among Viking warriors or US Navy fighter pilots, skill at arms, physical perfection, and arrogance abound, and because of the courage they require, the fighting and the killing are glorious. In both films, people had better stay well armed, since there's no knowing where or when the next enemy will show or the next blow land.

One important difference remains. *Northman* is at least honest, offering no apologies for its gore and requiring its audience to deal with it. Since its Vikings bathe and glory in war, maybe it

provides us a warning of where war can lead. Along those admittedly minimal lines, and in spite of its direct and unrepentant brutality, it may be the morally and artistically superior film.

By comparison, *Top Gun Maverick* is insidious, since the killing is clean, the folks at home stay safe, and its pilots' self-sacrifice tells us that compassion comes at the tip of an air-launched missile. No matter: at the end of the film, the audience in the seats clapped and cheered.