

AMERICAN SOCIO-POLITICS IN FICTIONAL CONTEXT:
TRANSFORMERS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The fictional narratives that have been developed for the support of the *Transformers* brand, with their underlying emphasis on the sale of action figures, have been dismissed as a somewhat juvenile and uninteresting text. Little to no serious academic analysis of any of the various iterations of the franchise has been undertaken. With this thesis, I endeavour to begin that analysis and thus broaden and problematize the currently limited understanding of *Transformers* fictions. Due to the franchise's vast nature, I focus on the original animation (1984-1987) and the recent live-action movies (2007-2011) with their attempts to offer a representation of the contemporaneous socio-political environment in America at the time of their production. In order to undertake this study, I combine my background in political analysis with film and media studies to seek out and explore the political themes and commentaries present in the key areas of political philosophy, technological change, the depiction of politicians, gender and sexuality, and America's international role. Through this analysis of the franchise I shall construct an argument that *Transformers* is a complex narrative, replete with socio-political allegory that offers a representation of the United States and a view of itself in the arenas of domestic and global politics.

Contents

List of Figures	7
Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	11
<i>Transformers: A Primer</i>	13
<i>Transformers as a Site of Complexity</i>	17
References	21
Chapter 1: Autobot and Decepticon Political Philosophy as Allegory	22
“Freedom is the Right of All Sentient Beings”: The Autobots	23
“Peace Through Tyranny”: The Decepticons	28
Concluding Thoughts	36
References	37
Chapter 2: <i>Transformers</i> and the Shift in Domestic American Politics	40
Technophobia and Attempts at Control	40
Cynicism and Distrust: Politicians in <i>Transformers</i> Media	50
Concluding Thoughts	58
References	59
Chapter 3: The Representation of Gender and Sexuality in <i>Transformers</i>	61
Transformers Gender and Sexuality	62
Human Gender and Sexuality	71
Concluding Thoughts	78
References	80
Chapter 4: <i>Transformers</i> and America in World – Roles and Perceptions	82
“Solving Human Conflicts”: The Right to Intervention	82

Abdul Fakkadi, Carbombya, and Negative Arab Stereotyping	90
Concluding Thoughts	95
References	96
Conclusions	99
References	103
Appendix: Episode and Film Production Details	105
<i>The Transformers (Generation One) Episodes</i>	105
Animated and Live-action Film Series	109
Bibliography	110
Index	117

List of Figures

Figure 0.1:	List of all <i>Transformers</i> television series and film	12
Figure 0.2:	Diagrams from the patent for the Megatron toy (US Patent Office, 1986)	13
Figure 0.3:	The evolution of Optimus Prime in toy form (images from TFWiki.net)	15
Figure 1.1:	Optimus Prime sacrifices himself to save the other Autobots (<i>The Transformers: "Dark Awakening"</i> , 1986)	24
Figure 1.2:	Optimus Prime deliberately avoiding harming humans while under attack (<i>Transformers</i> , 2007)	26
Figure 1.3:	Human slaves forced to carry energon cubes in a Decepticon work camp (<i>The Transformers: "Megatron's Master Plan, Part 2"</i> , 1985)	30
Figure 1.4:	Images of Decepticon terrorism in Chicago (<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i> , 2011)	35
Figure 2.1:	The Hive's machines on Nebulos (<i>The Transformers: "The Rebirth, Part 1"</i> , 1987)	42
Figure 2.2:	The Autobots surrender their heads (<i>The Transformers: "The Rebirth, Part 1"</i> , 1987) and the Decepticons offer up their heads and weapons to the Hive (<i>The Transformers: "The Rebirth, Part 2"</i> , 1987)	43
Figure 2.3:	Frenzy transforming from his boombox disguise aboard Air Force One (<i>Transformers</i> , 2007)	48
Figure 2.4:	Shawn Berger names his price while cradled in Megatron's hands (<i>The Transformers: "Megatron's Master Plan, Part 1"</i> , 1985)	51
Figure 2.5:	Secretary of Defence John Keller, played by Jon Voight (<i>Transformers</i> , 2007)	53
Figure 2.6:	Theodore Galloway (portrayed by John Benjamin Hickey) contrasted with Optimus Prime's pointing hand (<i>Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen</i> , 2009)	54
Figure 2.7:	Charlotte Mearing (Frances McDormand), on her introduction (<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i> , 2011)	56

Figure 3.1:	Arcee as she appears in the original cartoon series	63
Figure 3.2:	Arcee in battle against the Dweller (<i>The Transformers: “The Dweller in the Depths”</i> , 1986)	65
Figure 3.3:	Arcee’s initial design for her abandoned appearance <i>Transformers</i> (2007) compared to the toy based on her character model in <i>Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen</i> (2009)	67
Figure 3.4:	The two designs of Optimus Prime in the live-action films - top image as the character appeared in the first two films (<i>Transformers</i> promotional image, 2007); bottom showing the redesigned abdominal area (<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i> , 2011)	68
Figure 3.5:	Optimus Prime through the ages - Orion Pax (<i>The Transformers: “War Dawn”</i> , 1985) compared to Optimus Prime (<i>The Transformers: “Changing Gears”</i> , 1985)	70
Figure 3.6:	Carly being carried by Spike (<i>The Transformers: “Desertion of the Dinobots, Part 2”</i> , 1985)	72
Figure 3.7:	Mikaela (Megan Fox) examining Bumblebee’s engine (<i>Transformers</i> , 2007)	74
Figure 3.8:	Carly’s (Rosie Huntington-Whitely) introduction (<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i> , 2011)	76
Figure 3.9:	Sam (Shia LaBeouf) in his more adolescent attire of <i>Transformers</i> (2007) and his adult self in <i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i> (2011)	77
Figure 4.1:	The Qatari town the military flees to on the destruction of their base (<i>Transformers</i> , 2007)	85
Figure 4.2:	The sticker adorning Skids and Mudflap’s vehicle mode (<i>Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen</i> , 2009)	87
Figure 4.3:	(Top) The Middle Eastern nuclear facility; (bottom) the Autobot Que disguised as the nation’s Defence Minister’s car (<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i> , 2011)	88
Figure 4.4:	Abdul Fakkadi demanding the Autobots’ assistance after his alliance with the Decepticons turns sour (<i>The Transformers: “Thief in the Night”</i> , 1986)	91
Figure 4.5:	A marker shown outside Carbombya’s capital city (<i>The Transformers: “Thief in the Night”</i> , 1986)	93

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Introduction

Since its debut in 1984, *Transformers* has become a popular culture icon. The franchise's owners and creators – Hasbro in Western markets and TakraTomy in Japan – have continued to develop and expand their property across different media platforms for almost thirty years. The concept of “robots in disguise” has been reinvigorated and reimagined on numerous occasions in order to ensure that it remains relevant, popular, and engaging to its target audiences. As a result of this constant refreshing and reintroduction, the *Transformers* brand has survived continually since 1984. Indeed, there has been a total of only four years in the United States wherein no re-edited or new *Transformers* fiction was being aired on television and only two years globally – those being 1991 and 1992 – where that was the case (see Figure 0.1). In terms of toys, they have constantly been on shelves.

Across the various television series that make up (part of) the *Transformers* fictional canon as it exists in Hasbro's markets, there are a total of 468 episodes in addition to an animated film and three entries in the live-action movie continuity¹. These numbers continue to grow. The current iteration of the franchise on television, *Transformers: Prime*, is scheduled to air its third and final season in 2013 and a fourth live-action film by Michael Bay is currently under development for release in the summer of 2014. The brand also exists in the form of numerous comic books produced under license by various companies over the years, video games, tie-in novels and reference books, stickers and trading cards, clothing, accessories, and a myriad of other materials all bearing the signature *Transformers* logo.

Over the course of this thesis, I intend to explore how the franchise has offered a representation of the United States in its narratives; offering the contention that the *Transformers* brand represents a distinct view of the socio-political environment in America at the time my examples were created. Prior to outlining the course of my research and explaining my justifications and arguments, it is necessary to offer a brief overview and introduction to the *Transformers* franchise.

¹ An additional 209 episodes and a further animated film have been created in order to support the brand in Japan. Hasbro does not consider these canonical. These number are correct as of the time of writing.

Title	Format	Duration
Generation One Continuity		
<i>The Transformers</i>	Cel-animated Series	1984-1988 ²
<i>The Transformers: The Movie</i>	Cel-animated Film	1986
<i>The Transformers: Generation 2</i> ³	Cel-animated Series	1993-1995
<i>Beast Wars: Transformers</i>	CGI Animated Series	1996-1999
<i>Beast Machines: Transformers</i>	CGI Animated Series	1999-2000
Japanese-exclusive Generation One Continuity ⁴		
<i>Transformers: The Headmasters</i>	Cel-animated Series	1987-1988
<i>Transformers: Super-God Masterforce</i>	Cel-animated Series	1988-1989
<i>Transformers: Victory</i>	Cel-animated Series	1989
<i>Transformers: Zone</i>	Cel-animated OVA ⁵	1990
<i>Beast Wars II</i>	Cel-animated Series	1998-1999
<i>Beast Wars Special</i>	Cel-animated Film	1998
<i>Beast Wars Neo</i>	Cel-animated Series	1999
Robots in Disguise Continuity		
<i>Transformers: Robots in Disguise</i>	Animated Series	2001-2002
Unicron Trilogy Continuity		
<i>Transformers: Armada</i>	Animated Series	2002-2003
<i>Transformers: Energon</i>	CGI & Cel-animated Series	2004-2005
<i>Transformers: Cybertron</i>	CGI & Cel-animated Series	2005-2006
Live-action Continuity		
<i>Transformers</i>	Live-action Film	2007
<i>Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen</i>	Live-action Film	2009
<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i>	Live-action Film	2011
Animated Continuity		
<i>Transformers Animated</i>	Animated Series	2007-2009
Aligned Continuity		
<i>Transformers: Prime</i>	CGI Animated Series	2010-Present

Figure 0.1: List of all *Transformers* television series and films

² The fifth season of the show, which aired in 1988, consists of previously aired episodes and *The Movie* – the latter being broken up into five episodes. Each episode is framed with scenes of an animatronic Optimus Prime interacting with a human boy, presenting the episode as a story.

³ The *Generation Two* television series consists entirely of re-edited episodes of the original series. This re-editing features a new title sequence and presents the episodes as though they are recordings of historical events.

⁴ As was stated previously, these series are not considered part of the *Transformers* canon for the American franchise and thus fall outside the remit of this thesis. They are listed here to show that the franchise continued even when American interest began to wane. Japanese continuity ignores the events of season four of the original show, replacing them with *The Headmasters* and its subsequent series. *Beast Wars II* is a spin-off to the American *Beast Wars* series and takes place between that series' first and second season. *Beast Wars Neo* serves as a sequel to the spin-off's events.

⁵ *Zone* is an original video animation (OVA) intended as the first episode in an on-going series. This plan was ultimately cancelled.

TRANSFORMERS: A PRIMER

In the United States and the majority of other markets around the world, *Transformers* toys are marketed and released by Hasbro. The original origins of the brand, however, rest with TakaraTomy – then simply Takara – and its *Diaclone* and *Micro Change* toy lines. *Micro Change* was “a collection of 1:1 scale shape-shifting role-playing accessories, including everyday objects” such as tape players that would eventually become the toys of the Soundwave and Blaster characters, a microscope that would evolve into Perceptor, and the “MC13 Gun Robo P38 U.N.C.L.E.” handgun figure which eventually saw release as the first toy of Decepticon leader Megatron (Hidalgo, 2011: 9-10). The *Diaclone* figures featured an elaborate backstory of vehicles converting into large drone suits piloted by humans⁶ battling against the invading “Warudar” and their robotic insect vehicles. It is from this franchise that the toys of Optimus Prime, Ironhide, Starscream, and others came (Hidalgo, 2011: 10). Takara attempted to sell *Diaclone* figures in the United States directly but the three figures released were largely ignored – in part due to the attached storyline “never [being] explored or expanded in media” (Hidalgo, 2011: 10).

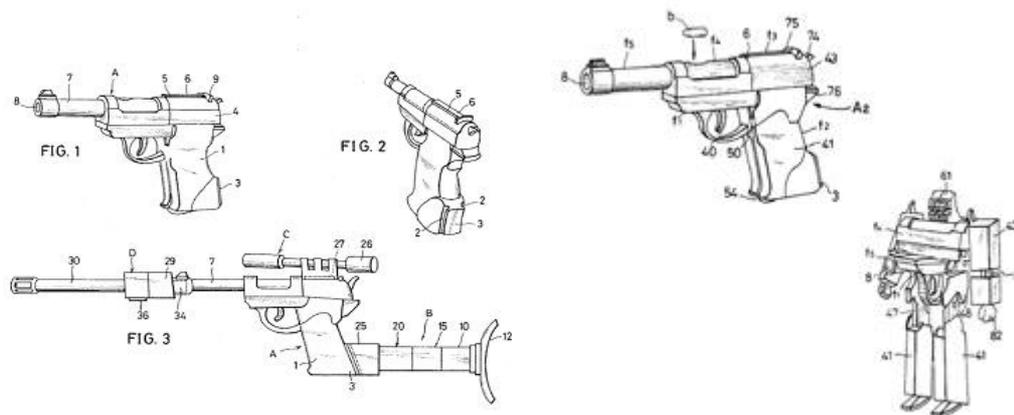


Figure 0.2: Diagrams from the patent for the Megatron toy (US Patent Office, 1986)

During the course of the Tokyo Toy Fair in 1983, Hasbro’s representatives encountered the *Micro Change* and *Diaclone* toys and “saw their enormous potential” (Hidalgo, 2011: 10). The rights to the sale of these toys in Western markets were soon purchased and Hasbro began to develop the storyline that would support their new property in earnest. The highly successful re-launch of Hasbro’s *GI Joe* property in 1982 had been ascribed to new storylines that had been developed in conjunction with

⁶ Explaining the opening cockpits seen in many *Generation One* toys.

Marvel Comics to support the toys. In creating the new fictional worlds of the Transformers, Hasbro again solicited Marvel's services to develop a fictional background which would support toy sales. The project of giving these figures names and personalities was assigned to writer and editor Bob Budiansky who went on to develop biographies for every character – which were printed on the toy's packaging – as well as edit the first four issues of Marvel's *Transformers* comic series and write a further fifty issues himself (Hidalgo, 2011: 57).

The fiction Hasbro and Marvel devised to support the toys would prove enormously popular. The four-issue comic series was quickly extended into a monthly title and the television series was a hit. By the Christmas of 1984, Hasbro's internal estimates suggest the company shipped \$70-\$80 million worth of *Transformers* figures (Hidalgo, 2011: 14) and the brand became the bestselling toy item in America in April 1985 – replacing the Cabbage Patch Kids (Hidalgo, 2011: 19). Each subsequent year saw the introduction of new characters, concepts, and toys to the roster of *Transformers*, with figures from the original Takara lines being supplemented with designs purchased from other companies. So overwhelmingly successful was the franchise, that Takara discontinued their *Micro Change* and *Diaclone* toy lines. Instead, they brought the Hasbro-created fictions to their own market in Japan and began selling the *Transformers* concept in their place (Hidalgo, 2011: 22).

From 1986 onwards, new toys designed specifically to be part of the *Transformers* brand have been the norm, the *Diaclone* and *Micro Change* lines having been exhausted. These new figures tied into the characters introduced in *The Transformers: The Movie* (1986) and were designed in a division of labour between Hasbro and Takara that has persisted to the modern day. The process of developing and engineering these figures has improved over the decades (see Figure 0.3), but their continued success owes much to the fictional reality developed in 1983 by Hasbro and Marvel Comics.

At its core, this fiction recounts the stories of two sides of robotic alien beings locked in a millennia-long civil war for the control of their home world, Cybertron. These factions, the Autobots and the Decepticons, are both gifted with the capacity to reconfigure their bodies so as to resemble other mechanical forms. Thus, they give rise to the two recurring taglines of the franchise: "More than meets the eye" and "robots in disguise". The original continuity developed by Budiansky – which has retroactively been dubbed *Generation One* – established a pattern that has been replicated time and again by the subsequent iterations of the franchise. Each new series has recreated this

basic premise, redesigning the key characters (as can be seen in the toys shown in Figure 0.3) and placing them in new situations, often with different concerns and external menaces. Elements are altered to fit to the context of the new continuity and to ensure that the brand remains relevant in the then-contemporary environment of its airing.



Figure 0.3: The evolution of Optimus Prime in toy form. Left to right: the original *Generation One* figure from 1984, the *Generation Two* figure from 1995, the *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* figure released in 2009, and the *Transformers: Prime* figure released in 2012 (images from TFWiki.net)

The original cartoon series introduced the concept of the Transformers and their capacity to shape-shift their bodies. Furthermore, it established the “Heroic Autobots” and “Evil Decepticons” (as they were described on the toys’ packaging), the leaders of these two warring sides – Optimus Prime and Megatron – and the numerous other characters serving under them. The series depicted the Transformers crashing on Earth in the distant past before awakening on the then-modern Earth of 1984. Two seasons were produced over 1984 and 1985 before a full-length feature film in 1986. It continued for a third and fourth season set after the events of *The Transformers: The Movie* (1986) before coming to an end in 1987. Its episodes largely focussed on the ongoing battles of the Autobots and Decepticons and the latter’s threat to humanity. Many episodes were designed around specific characters so as to highlight the toy they represented which would be on the shelves, with the human characters largely being secondary to the Transformers. Following the second season, the show moved to the then-future of 2005 and featured the death of Optimus Prime and the introduction of

many new characters. As I stated above, a comic book series ran in conjunction with the original animation. Interestingly, it made use of the same characters but in completely separate and distinct storylines; thus establishing the franchise as a transmedia property (cf: Jenkins, 2003). The comic series ran for a total of eighty issues and ran for almost four years longer than the cartoon, finally coming to an end in May 1991. However, this represented a short-lived end to the production of original *Transformers* fictions as 1993 saw the advent of the *Generation Two* toy line. The original animated series was re-edited and re-broadcast and accompanied by an all-new comic book series which ran for twelve issues.

Following the end of *Generation Two*, the first major overhaul of the brand took place in the development and release of *Beast Wars: Transformers* (1996-1999). Serving as both sequel and prequel to *Generation One* thanks to the standard science fiction narrative device of time travel, the Autobots and Decepticons of the original series became Maximals and Predacons, while the robots themselves now converted into animal forms. This continued with a sequel series in *Beast Machines: Transformers* (1999-2000) and represented the beginning of a new cycle in the continual development of the franchise. From the advent of *Beast Wars* on, a major reinvention of the *Transformers* brand – complete with a new continuity – occurred every three to five years. The first release under this new paradigm was the so-called “Unicron Trilogy” of *Transformers: Armada* (2002-2003), *Transformers: Energon* (2003-2004), and *Transformers: Cybertron* (2005-2006)⁷. Following this, came *Transformers Animated* (2007-2009) and the current series *Transformers: Prime* (2010-present).

During the airing of the Unicron Trilogy, Hasbro began development of a live-action *Transformers* film in conjunction with Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks. This eventually led to the release of *Transformers* (2007), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011). All three films were directed by Michael Bay with Steven Spielberg serving as an executive producer. Like the post-*Beast* series before it, the film series takes place in an entirely separate continuity from the original animated series and features new designs for the characters. The three films revolve around the human Sam Witwicky (Shia LaBeouf) and his involvement with the Autobots, led by a new version of Optimus Prime, as they seek to protect humanity from the evil of the Decepticons. Unlike the original series, the humans play a far greater role in the films’ narratives – owing largely to the budgetary constraints

⁷ The *Transformers: Robots in Disguise* series (2001 – 2002) was adapted from a Takara-produced series titled *Transformers: Car Robots* and aired between *Beast Machines* and *Armada* while the latter was under development.

inherent in the creation of large-scale computer-generated characters like Bumblebee and Optimus Prime.

This brief outline of the numerous series that have appeared on American television still represents only a portion of the vast total of *Transformers* fictions that have been produced in numerous areas around the world since 1984. For example, almost all action figures that have been produced are accompanied by a biography giving the numerous characters' fictional history, stories have been released in Japanese magazines, fictions have been devised to support toys released as part of Hasbro's Official *Transformers* Collectors' Club and the number of comic book issues now rivals the number of episodes produced. Any attempt to list all of these myriad fictions would represent a never-ending task as new releases come each passing month. As I have outlined above, each of the continuities recreate the on-going battle between the Autobots and the Decepticons and their good against evil paradigm. As Figure 0.3 shows, the characters' appearances change with each new series – and, fictionally speaking, they *are* different characters – but their personalities remain broadly the same. What changes is the environment in which they are placed, operate, and consumed.

TRANSFORMERS AS A SITE OF COMPLEXITY

In his analysis of *War, Politics, and Superheroes*, Marco DiPaolo dismisses *Transformers* as “flimsy material” possessing “little dramatic or literary worth” thanks to the fiction's origins as a vehicle “to help sell toys to young boys in an era when President Reagan relaxed restrictions against marketing to children” (2011: 39). I make no attempt to ignore the underlying necessities present within the franchise's fictions to assist in the sales of the toy lines they support. It is factually correct to state that the franchise has its origins in the deregulation of marketing laws and was originally seen by Hasbro, the owners of the property, as little more than an advertising mechanism. However, I would argue that these grounds are insufficient to disregard the franchise's ability to engage with political issues or to construct its fictions as nigh-on worthless.

In DiPaolo's estimation, “there are only two possible political readings of the series” (2011: 39-40). The examples he raises are the original cartoon's regular struggle for control of Earth's oil resources serving to highlight the importance of that commodity in the modern world to the child audience, and the brief look at American

foreign policy with the depiction of a military base in the Middle East coming under attack by the Decepticons in the first of the Michael Bay-directed films (DiPaolo, 2011: 39-40). This represents something of a selective reading of both the original animation and the live-action films. It ignores many elements and themes explored over the *Generation One* series' ninety-eight episodes and even the broader commentaries on United States foreign policy offered across the three films. Thus it certainly cannot be said to represent "all there is to say about overt political commentary in *Transformers*" (DiPaolo, 2011: 40).

As the *Transformers* brand has become a vast media franchise over the three decades of its existence, attempting to undertake an examination of all of it would prove to be a far too unwieldy scope of inquiry. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I shall be confining my focus to what are arguably the two most dominant iterations of the franchise: *Generation One* and the live-action movie trilogy. As stated above, the original animated series established the basic narrative framework and fictional elements that the subsequent variations have worked from. Furthermore, it allows for the examination of the presentation of socio-political themes in the mid- to late-1980s that can be contrasted with those offered by the live-action film series. The case for the dominance of the live-action trilogy is made in its box office takings. The takings of the three films combined amount to \$2,669,760,469 globally⁸, which represents a massive audience for each of the movies. In addition, the fictional environment presented in Michael Bay's trilogy offers a view of the post-9/11 socio-political environment. In making use of these two examples of the franchise, it allows for (some of) the omissions in DiPaolo's analysis of the two to be directly addressed.

For the purposes of this study, it is essential to pose a series of questions that must be answered. Foremost, I shall ask what, if anything, the original *Generation One* series and the recent films show and say about American socio-politics. Stemming from this root question, it is both possible and necessary to address three further queries: "How is this done?", "What are the differences between these two representations?" and "Are they designed to reinforce the accepted socio-political norms of the time?" My contention is that the narratives presented in the original animation and live-action films offer a vision of then-contemporary American socio-politics within the context of appealing to their targeted demographics and assisting in the sale of Hasbro's action figures. Furthermore, I believe that some aspects of this

⁸ *Transformers* took \$709,709,780 (Box Office Mojo, 2007), *Revenge of the Fallen* took \$836,303,693 (Box Office Mojo, 2009), and *Dark of the Moon* took \$1,123,746,996 (Box Office Mojo, 2011).

representation will differ with the passage of twenty years between the airing of the final episode of *Generation One* in 1987 and the release of the first movie in 2007. Thus, the constructions and representations of America – and, indeed, the wider world – will have altered to reflect the twenty-nine years of changing standards and norms.

Through this examination, I shall recognise that the discussion of politics in science fiction has a long and august history. It has been pointed out that “the connections between popular culture, and SF specifically, and world politics are intimate, complex, and diverse” (Weldes, 2003: 6). The interrelationship has ranged from Frank Herbert’s descriptions of the tenuous nature of balance of power structures in *Dune*⁹ (1965) – and its sequels and adaptations – and the political relations between a future human race’s socially and philosophically fractured elements in the novels of Alastair Reynolds’s “Revelation Space” series (2000-present). In recent science fiction television, this has ranged from “allusions to increasingly complex political ... issues” offered in the likes of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999) and *Babylon 5* (1994-1998) to less substantial commentary in the likes of *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007) (Geraghty, 2009, p. 17). Thus I accept Jodi Deans’ contention that it is possible to “pluralise” politics as an analysable subject by increasing “the sites and categories that ‘count’ as political” (2000: 4).

I shall pursue my examination of the social and political themes through a combination of political and film analysis. It is based primarily on a critical analysis of the narratives presented in the animated series and the films, focussing on both story and plot and recognising that “the story is the *what* in the narrative that is depicted [while the plot] is the *how*” (Chapman, 1980: 19). This narrative analysis will be coupled with commentary on the construction of scenes so as to identify deeper – potentially subtextual – understandings of American socio-politics within the *Transformers* franchise. Through this approach, I will seek to identify areas of political commentary in the text in an effort to unify political and film studies along Jodi Dean’s lines and adopting the contention that one need not “opt for an either/or approach or to privilege one mode of analysis over the other” (Hollows, 1995: 30).

As what I have defined thus far as “American socio-politics” is an incredibly broad concept, even when its analysis has been confined to two aspects of a particular media franchise, it is necessary to further narrow the scope of my inquiry to six distinct

⁹ Of course, *Dune* explores more than just this one political theme. The series delves into the dangers of reliance on a single product (the spice Melange in the fiction and oil in reality), the potential dangers of charismatic leaders, hydraulic and political despotism, and environmental politics.

areas. These are political philosophy and social morality, the fear and embrace of new technologies, the depiction of politicians, the representation of gender and sexuality, America's international role, and the depiction of Arab peoples. In this manner, Chapter One engages with the fictional Autobot and Decepticon factions and the representation of political philosophies that underpin them. Building upon past analyses of political movements (cf: Eatwell & Wright, 1999), it shows how the Autobots are designed to recreate a view of American values and morality as "good". The Decepticon, by contrast, are depicted as possessing the value system and methods of that which is currently "evil" in the American estimation. Chapter Two moves on to address changes in America's domestic social and political situation by focussing on *Transformers'* depiction of the fear and embrace of technology in the 1980s and 2000s and, in so doing, builds an examination of the American relationship with new technologies that both threaten human life and offer to improve it. Following that, the chapter moves to address the franchise's construction of politicians to offer a view of how political leaders are perceived in certain areas of the United States in comparison to the military. The third chapter continues with the exploration of socio-politics within America's borders by addressing the combined issues of gender and sexuality as they are portrayed in both the original *Generation One* series and in the modern live-action films. Through this, I show the depiction of change in gender roles and the evolution of male and female characters. My final chapter engages with America's foreign policy and place in the world as shown in the fictions I have chosen to highlight. It constructs a perception that the United States' interventionism overseas is a benevolent action undertaken for moral purposes and thus reinforces the self-image that America chooses for itself - for want of a better term, the myth of the self. The chapter moves on to address the portrayal of Arab characters in *Transformers* media and its recreation of then-current perceptions and prejudices in regard to Arabic peoples. In this, I will demonstrate how the depiction of Arabs strengthens the American case for military and humanitarian interventionism in the Middle East from the 1980s through to today.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to demonstrate the previously overlooked complexity of the *Transformers* narratives. In so doing, I intend to offer the beginnings of a new understanding of its texts *vis-à-vis* the social and political theories and problems within the United States of America.

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Chapter 1

AUTOBOT AND DECEPTICON POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AS ALLEGORY

While the initial impetus for the creation of the fictional reality in which the *Transformers* franchise takes place was undoubtedly financial in nature, it has become a far more complex fictional construct over the twenty-nine years since 1984. At the heart of the fiction is one central conceit: namely a millions of years-long civil war¹ between the Autobot and Decepticon factions. Even in the early – arguably more cynical days – of the brand’s development it was recognised by Bob Budiansky and others responsible for establishing the fictional history that the crucial Autobot-Decepticon war could not exist in a vacuum (Hidalgo, 2011: 57). It is quite impossible for such a civil war to arise without an underlying conflict between political and moral philosophies. As John R. Shook points out, “good and evil [do not] bother fighting for all eternity unless there are contrasting visions, competing philosophies, trying to gain supremacy” (2009: 200). Therefore, in order to properly and effectively engage in the telling of stories based upon this robotic civil war concept, it became necessary for the two sides to have distinct socio-political philosophies; “Autobotism” arrayed against “Decepticonism” in a representation of America’s political liberalism defending itself against its external social, political, and philosophical threats. In the following, I shall explore both sides of this constructed philosophical divide. I will further identify the Autobots as a reproduction of America’s liberal tradition² and the Decepticons as the enemy philosophy of the time. While there are some differences in the fictional histories between the original *Generation One* animation and the live-action film series, the two factions are fundamentally consistent in their respective attitudes and will be addressed together. On the occasion when differences appear, they will be highlighted and contrasted to show the differing socio-political environments.

¹ The original cartoon’s first episode, “More than Meets the Eye”, depicts the Transformers crashing on Earth four million years prior to 1984 while the conflict continues on their home world, Cybertron, in the form of a perpetual stalemate.

² Despite the conservative nature of some US administrations, the nation is founded on the basis of liberal democratic principles.

“FREEDOM IS THE RIGHT OF ALL SENTIENT BEINGS”: THE AUTOBOTS

Optimus Prime and the Autobots are constructed as the “good” side in the mythology of the *Transformers* franchise. They are consistently depicted as striving to do what is right and endeavouring to act in the interests of the greatest good. Through the fictions presented in the original cartoon series of the mid-1980s and the more recent Michael Bay-directed blockbusters, the audience is invited – and encouraged – to support the Autobots in their endeavours through their possession of the virtues seen as “good” in US society. They are, after all, our heroes. However, as shall also be shown with the Decepticons, it is too simplistic to write the Autobot characters off as an expression of the “good team” trope that is so common in television and film aimed at (relatively) younger age groups. The Autobots and their leader, Optimus Prime, are proponents of a distinct political and social ideology that emphasises their differences from their Decepticon opponents and serve as a depiction of the American self-image. They represent an imagining of the culture of the United States, an attempt to recreate “a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour” (Williams, 1993: 7).

With their robotic natures and obvious devotion to the protection of human life, it is possible to draw a *prima facie* parallel between the Autobots and the robots of Isaac Asimov’s fictions. The Asimov robots are beholden to the Three Laws of Robots which were introduced in his short story, “Runaround” (Asimov, 1942). They read:

1. A robot must not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

(Asimov, 1942)

The Autobots broadly conform to these standards. Optimus Prime sacrifices himself for the defence of humans (*The Transformers: The Movie*, 1986; *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009), the Autobots work in conjunction with the NEST military team and obey human orders (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009; *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011), and they seek to preserve themselves when faced against their

Decepticon foes. This parallel is enhanced when we consider the fact that, as his fictions developed, Asimov introduced another Law to the list which superseded the existing three. This so-called Zeroth Law states that “A robot may not injure humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm” (Asimov, 1985: 168). While the Autobots clearly abide by something resembling Asimov’s Three Laws, we cannot say that they form the bedrock of the Autobot socio-political and moral philosophy.

The Three Laws are, ultimately, an imposed ethical code of conduct. Asimov’s robots are constructed by human hands and the strictures of the Three Laws are added to their controlling programmes as a form of self-protection for their human masters. This is not applicable to Optimus and the other Autobot characters. While in the original cartoon’s backstory they are the descendants of Quintesson-built household robots, the rebellion of those original Autobots against their Quintesson oppressors (“Five Faces of Darkness, Part 4”; “Forever is a Long Time Coming”, 1986) effectively nullifies the notion that they possess an in-built series of strictures designed to preserve their creators’ authority and existence. Such restrictions would prevent the rebellion in the first place. The different origin for the Transformer race which is offered by the 2007 live-action film – namely that the energies of the Allspark gave rise to them – further differentiates the two fictional robotic groups. Within the storyline of both iterations of the franchise, the Autobots made a conscious choice to adhere to a political philosophy emphasising values akin to the Three Laws. It was *not* imposed upon them by an outside force. However, we should not be surprised by the linking of Autobot behaviour in *Transformers* fiction and the Three Laws in Asimov’s works. Both stem from political and social liberalism, which is the true philosophy the Autobots represent.



Figure 1.1: Optimus Prime sacrifices himself to save the other Autobots (*The Transformers: “Dark Awakening”*, 1986)

Liberalism, then, is the philosophy represented by the Autobots. In so doing, they begin to depict America in general. At the most basic of levels, liberalism can be defined by “a commitment to the concepts of equality, liberty, individuality, and rationality” (Bellamy, 1999: 24). This is clearly the case with the Autobots and the Americans they serve as representations of. They conform neatly with the views of Immanuel Kant whose work on social contract theory and freedom as autonomy is considered to form some of the roots of liberal philosophy. Kant’s categorical imperative that “we should always treat rational beings as ends in themselves, never solely as a means” (Michaud, 2009: 161) is shown in Autobot actions in both the original cartoon and the trilogy of live-action films. This is most obviously represented by the numerous self-sacrifices on the part of Optimus Prime across the fictions.

In the episode “Dark Awakening”, the deceased Optimus is revived as part of a Quintesson plan to destroy the Autobots. However, his intense adherence to liberal-derived Autobot philosophy prevents him from allowing the Autobots to be killed and leads to his own sacrifice (as is shown above in Figure 1.1). In the case of “Dark Awakening”, he is depicted as fighting the programming forced upon him by the Quintessons; the internal struggle is made clear and manifest by his jerking, stiff movements serving to externalise the inner conflict. His – and the Autobot philosophy’s – triumph brings these movements to an end, thus returning Prime to his usual self in the moments leading up to his piloting a ship into the automated Quintesson trap and thus saves the Autobots from certain destruction. Another example exists in *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) wherein Prime sacrifices himself to ensure Sam’s (Shia LaBeouf) escape from Megatron’s attempt to use the boy for his nefarious scheme and is shown covering Sam until the moment he is stabbed and shot through the back. His final words are used to urge Sam to run. Even when under attack himself, Prime’s desire to ensure no harm comes to humans is paramount – as is shown in Figure 1.2. Indeed, Optimus Prime’s willingness to allow his own sacrifice is a recurring motif. In these cases, it is interesting to note the numbers. With the sacrifice in “Dark Awakening”, a fleet of Autobots are saved and the Quintesson plan lies in ruins. In *Revenge of the Fallen*, Optimus’ sacrifice saves only Sam and Megatron’s scheme continues mostly unimpeded by Prime’s actions. There is no distinction between one life and many. Life, and its preservation, is the ultimate goal in the liberal philosophy and serves as Optimus Prime’s categorical imperative³.

³ None of this is to suggest that the Autobots, or their allies, will not engage in battle when necessary (see pages 68-71 and 83-91).

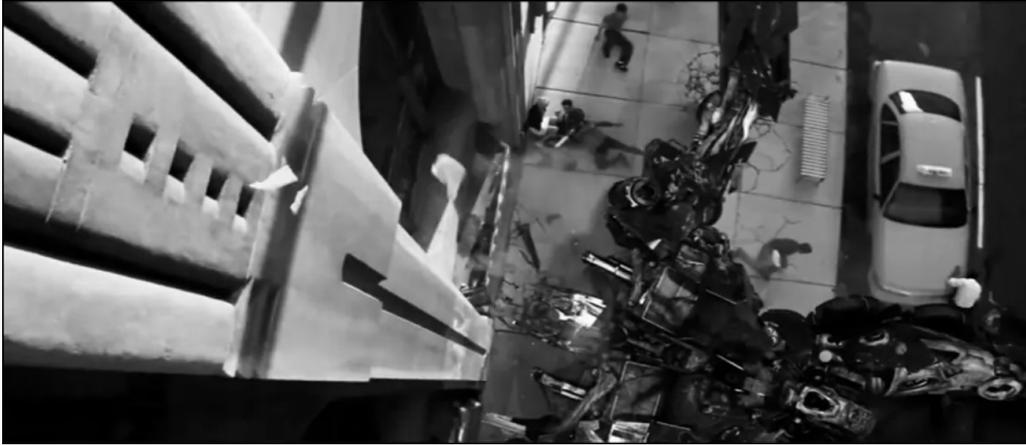


Figure 1.2: Optimus Prime deliberately avoiding harming humans while under attack
(*Transformers*, 2007)

The lives of humans are of profound importance to the Autobots, not because our species is less socially and technologically evolved than they are or is in need of their protection, but because no-one “is naturally the subordinate of anyone else” (Bellamy, 1999: 24). This is clearly evidenced in the course of *Dark of the Moon* wherein Optimus Prime confronts his wayward mentor and predecessor, Sentinel Prime, about his plan to use humanity as a slave race. It is individual and societal freedom that the Autobots seek to ensure through their actions – as is evidenced by Optimus’ pronouncement, “...for today, in the name of freedom, we take the battle to them” (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011). Thus they reference the Aristotelian undercurrents of liberalism with their “focus[...] on the natural end that all rational beings should pursue: a life of well-being and flourishing” mixed with “an understanding of natural rights” on a personal and societal level (Plauché 2009: 220). The tyranny of the Decepticons is anathema to the Autobots. Their very name, as a portmanteau of “Autonomous Robotic organism” (*Transformers*, 2007), is evidence of their commitment to freedom and is an effective demonstration of their opposition to Megatron and his philosophy of tyranny. During the concluding battle between Optimus Prime and Megatron in the first live-action film, Prime clearly articulates these values in the face of Megatron’s tirade against the worthlessness of humanity. The Autobot leader declares: “They [humans] deserve to choose for themselves” rather than have Decepticon oppression inflicted upon them. This is the freedom to choose one’s destiny and leadership – democracy – that has been the hallmark of domestic US politics since the nation’s founding and articulated in its foreign policy throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Liberalism’s commitment to self-determination is thus represented by the Autobots in name and deed.

The Autobot's representation of the American faith in liberalism as a political philosophy is reinforced when their actions in the numerous *Transformers* fictions is viewed in light of the Declaration of Independence. In the second paragraph of America's founding document, there is an eloquent espousal of liberalism's core values:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (Declaration of Independence, 1776).

That passage from the Declaration conforms neatly with the brief look at liberalism's main principles that I have outlined above. Equality, liberty, individuality, and freedom are granted to all without abridgement or caveat. These self-evident truths are very clearly found in the Autobot depiction of liberalism. The Autobots, then, are an embodiment of liberal philosophy. Optimus Prime's oft-repeated motto, "Freedom is the right of all sentient beings"⁴ (*Transformers*, 2007; *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009), can be seen as an effective summation of the principles put forth by the Founding Fathers. They are consistently depicted as fighting for freedom and justice; not just for themselves or their own kind, but for other individuals and species. In so doing, they offer a reference to a more modern espousal of liberalism – and, perhaps, one of the most recognised speeches in the world – in President Kennedy's inaugural address:

ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. ...[A]sk not what America will do for you, but what, together, we can do for the freedom of man (Kennedy, 1961).

In short, the Autobots are the "embodiments of selfless sacrifice and honour" (Koespell 2009: 208) that is idealised in the American value system. It is clear that the Autobots and their philosophical attitudes are lionised by their constant – if hard-fought – victories over the Decepticons and their "evil" philosophy. We are encouraged to see them as right and proper and decent. Theirs is a representation of

⁴ Which was originally found on the *Generation One* toy's technical specifications, and has since become a recurring sentiment espoused by later iterations of the character.

the American way – based on the foundations of liberal democracy and Judeo-Christian morality – and should be considered to be the dominant political ideology within the *Transformers* brand. It emphasises those things which are considered correct by the status quo in the United States in an effort to construct the Autobots as good. Furthermore, they “are clearly intended to be models of moral behaviour” for the audience (Koespell 2009: 207-208). The child audience is shown the consistent victories of the Autobots and their good over the Decepticons and their evil. Thus they are encouraged to take the view that being “good” is a winning strategy in and of itself. However, the concurrent engagement with, and examination of, a moral and political force which stands in contradiction to the dominant political ideology is arguably the best method to display the laudability of the Autobots and their (American) values. As Willis outlines, a text is “always produced within conditions of power, and as such it must address alternative interests and aspirations if it is to present its own position as a solution” (1995: 182). In the examination of political philosophies, it is important to understand the contextual environment in which those philosophies developed and the ideological concepts they were devised to offer a viable alternative to. Succinctly, in order to truly appreciate and understand one, engagement with the other is completely necessary.

“PEACE THROUGH TYRANNY”: THE DECEPTICONS

Standing as a dark contrast to the Autobots and their depiction of the socio-political and cultural values of America are the Decepticons, led by the tyrannical and maniacal Megatron. The Decepticons and their leader are fictional constructs created in an effort to highlight the inherent goodness and righteousness of the Autobots. They can be seen as “predictably evil” (Shook, 2009: 195) and there are very few episodes of the original animated series that do not feature an expression of Decepticon evil versus Autobot good in some manner. Despite this penchant for expressions of evil, it is far too simplistic to dismiss the Decepticons as just another example of a children’s cartoon enemy that must be stopped. In truth, they are exemplars of that which America seeks to oppose in the world as much as they are the antithesis of the Autobots.

The examination of Autobot moral, political, and social values above demonstrated their emphasis on freedom. That central tenet – espoused so eloquently

in Optimus Prime's "Freedom is the right of all sentient beings" mantra - finds an inverse in Megatron's own motto, "Peace through tyranny". This is reminiscent of the three paradoxical-sounding maxims written on the side of the Ministry of Truth building in Orwell's classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I refer specifically to "War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength" (Orwell, 1949: 6). The Orwellian overtones of Megatron's succinct three-word (oxymoronic) philosophy serve only to highlight the fact that it is possible to see it as a representation of a particular real world political doctrine: totalitarian fascism.

Let us consider the Decepticon political philosophy and its parallels with fascism in detail. In its application, fascism is "authoritarian, violent, [and] morbid" (Eatwell, 1999: 180). It cannot be doubted that the Decepticons are driven by a desire for authoritarian rule; after all, they seek dominion over their home planet of Cybertron and, eventually, the universe itself. So overpowering is the Decepticon need for absolute authority and control, that the war they instigated left Cybertron's infrastructure decimated and its cities devoid of life. In the first episode of the original series, we are shown the capital of Iacon as a city of broken buildings and this is replicated in the live-action films' brief visits to the planet. The majority of Decepticon characters in the original cartoon and the films are only ever shown to be in service of the Decepticon cause. Their individual concerns, wants, and interests have been cast aside in pursuit of greater glory for the Decepticon regime. This is a stark contrast to the depiction of the Autobot characters who - most notably during the original series' second season⁵ - have distinct personalities and characteristics. Even when characters share the same basic design (differing only in colouration) they are shown to have distinct personalities. For example, the Autobots Sideswipe and Red Alert are identical in design yet Sideswipe is shown as a reckless individual in contrast to Red Alert's paranoid nature. This differentiation does not occur amongst the Decepticons. The design-sharing Thundercracker and Skywarp, for example, are given little in the way of personality.

In this lack of differentiation, it is possible to draw a parallel to the Soviet Union and the United States' view of communism making "slaves" of the populace⁶. Furthering the current discussion, the lack of personality within the Decepticon ranks brings to mind Adolf Hitler's comment in *Mein Kampf* that "every other interest must be subordinated to the supreme interests of the nation" (Hitler, 1939: 317). Even some

⁵ Wherein many episodes were based around a single character and their toy's biographical information.

⁶ This is explored further later in this chapter (see page 33).

forty years following the end of the Second World War, Hitler, his methods, and his ideologies remained the epitome of evil in the American estimation (Bush, 2006). This is likely to have been present in the production team's development of the character. Referencing Hitler in Megatron, then, allows him and the Decepticons to be clearly identified as the evil the Autobots – and America – should stand in opposition to.

Additionally, the methods that they are willing to use are both violent and morbid. In an effort to repair the damage done to Cybertron during the execution of the war, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* sees the Decepticons – allied with an Autobot traitor in the form of Sentinel Prime – executing a plan to convert Earth into a Nazi-style work camp. For an American/Western audience educated in the horrors of the Second World War there can be no greater example of fascist evil. The Decepticons' treatment of human prisoner-slaves in the original cartoon multi-part episodes "The Ultimate Doom" (1984) and "Megatron's Master Plan" (1985) evokes similar connotations. In those episodes, human slaves are shown performing the tasks ordered by their masters. "The Ultimate Doom" depicts this being achieved through the use of a hypnotic device implanted in the captured humans but "Megatron's Master Plan" employs far more vivid work camp images. As seen below in Figure 1.3, humans are depicted transporting energon cubes on their backs – visibly pained by the weight – while Decepticons surround them as overseers and punishers. The human prisoner-workers are threatened for talking among themselves while they work. The Decepticon Soundwave deliberately fires his weapon over the heads of the characters Spike and Chip to bring about an end to their talking. While the plan in *Dark of the Moon* is never achieved, it is made clear that humans would have been made to work under similar circumstances had Sentinel Prime and Megatron been successful.



Figure 1.3: Human slaves forced to carry energon cubes in a Decepticon work camp (*The Transformers: "Megatron's Master Plan, Part 2"*, 1985)

Furthermore, in Sentinel Prime's betrayal of the Autobots and their philosophy in *Dark of the Moon*, it is possible to draw a parallel to the appeal of fascism in the early-to mid-twentieth century. It offered the appearance of Strength⁷ and success to peoples left downtrodden in the interwar years and suffering under weak governments akin to the Weimar Republic in Germany. Sentinel's belief is stated as "we [the Autobots] were never going to win the war. For the sake of our planet's survival, a deal had to be made - with Megatron" (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011). The Decepticons possessed superior numbers, training, and capacity - they had Strength. This Strength was seen by Sentinel as being necessary to ensure Cybertron's survival and reconstruction. Fascism is marked by a fetishisation of the concept of Strength. By their very natures - as the descendants of Quintesson-built military hardware in the original cartoon ("Five Faces of Darkness, Part 4", 1986), and as a conglomeration of most of Cybertron's military forces in the live-action films - the Decepticons are inherently Strong and for them "Might makes Right" (Shook, 2009: 201) while the Autobots are shown having to learn the concept of war ("War Dawn", 1985; "Forever is a Long Time Coming", 1986). The first indication of this fetishisation is the faction's members' taste for adopting alternate modes based on machines used by organisations of authority. Many Decepticons in the original series are assigned military vehicles or equipment for their secondary, non-robot configurations by the production teams. For example, Megatron transforms into a gun, Starscream and his fellow Seekers become F-15 Eagle jets, and the Combaticons are assigned modes ranging from a missile-equipped truck to an Army Humvee. This trend is continued in the first live-action film with the Decepticon characters being deliberately given vehicle modes indicative of power and authority that include an F-22 Raptor jet fighter, a police car, an M1 Abrams tanks, a Pave Low helicopter, and a minesweeper armoured vehicles⁸. They are also shown to be revolted by weakness and those beings they consider to be afflicted with that trait. During his final battle with Optimus Prime in the 2007 *Transformers* film, Megatron is visibly dismissive of humanity and any strength it may possess on an individual or species-wide level. He flicks a screaming human - amusingly portrayed by director Michael Bay - away from himself while recovering from a blow, uttering the word "Disgusting" as he does so. So insignificant are we to the Decepticon mind-set that Megatron declares that "Humans don't deserve to live"

⁷ Here capitalised due its nature as a philosophical concept.

⁸ These modes correspond to the characters Starscream, Barricade, Brawl, Blackout, and Bonecrusher, respectively. The only exception to the "authority" alternate mode rule in *Transformers* is Megatron who does not assume an Earth-inspired or -based alternate form.

(*Transformers*, 2007). We are to be eliminated as a species both because we have been branded weak and, as I shall outline later, because we are organic. Allowing humanity to live will cause everything else to weaken also because compassion is a weakness (Shook, 2009: 201). Life, then, is seen as the preserve of the Strong; the weak are nothing short of unworthy. The weak do not register and can barely be thought of as living at all. This is clearly demonstrated in this exchange between Optimus Prime and Megatron during the climax of the first live-action film:

OPTIMUS PRIME: It's you and me, Megatron.

MEGATRON: No, it's just *me*, Prime.

OPTIMUS PRIME: At the end of this day, one shall stand, one shall fall.

MEGATRON: You still fight for the weak; that is why you lose!

(*Transformers*, 2007)

The concept and exercise of Strength is so integral to the Decepticon depiction of fascist totalitarianism that their leader must be the strongest among them or he has no right to rule. The character Starscream routinely challenges Megatron's right to command the Decepticon forces only for him to be beaten back in a resounding fashion. It is possible that Starscream is never killed outright by Megatron in order for these demonstrations of Megatron's prowess and Strength to continue and thus reassert his authority⁹.

This revulsion and hatred of the weak can also serve to highlight the links between the Decepticon political philosophy and that of nationalism. Fascist doctrine has been described as an "organised form of ... radical nationalist authoritarianism" (Larsen, Hagtvet, & Myklebust, 1980: 424) which is represented by a form of "biological racism" (Eatwell, 1999: 181). In the Decepticons' case, this so-called biological racism is quite literal. In the *Generation One* cartoon, the Decepticons possess an attitude of superiority over humanity owing to the latter's "weakness" that borders on racism. Throughout the three live-action films, Decepticon characters - most notably Starscream and Megatron - evidence a far more apparent racist tendency towards humanity. Both have no compunctions regarding killing humans and routinely classify our species as being akin to insects. Epithets including "maggot" (*Transformers*, 2007) and "locusts" (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011) are used frequently. Their human allies in *Dark of the Moon* are no better thought of; Megatron

⁹ Which forms the basis for *The Transformers - Spotlight: Megatron* (2013) by Nick Roche.

casually dismisses Patrick Demspey's character, Dylan Gould, with the line, "Be gone, insect operative, your work is done". The claims to nationalism on the part of the Decepticons is enhanced when we consider the fact that they have existed for so long as a distinct socio-political entity – we must remember here that the Autobots and Decepticons are constructed as stemming from one society – that they have developed a form of national identity that unifies them and sets them apart from others. Indeed, the Decepticons are styled as an "Empire" which would, of course, be a nation-based political entity. Nationalism can be classified by this sense of uniqueness and a belief in "a special place in the historical process" for the members of that nation (Griffin, 1999: 154). It is, in the Decepticon mind, their destiny to reign supreme above all others, crushing the weak beneath their collective mechanical heel.

From the exploration we have just engaged in, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the Decepticon political and social philosophy represents a classic construction of the American popular understanding of authoritarian fascism. As a whole, they are tyrannical and controlling, violent and racist, and thoroughly beholden to the belief in their own superiority and power. Such things are the opposite of the American socio-political culture. The concepts of justice and morality as seen in the Autobots are alien to the Decepticons and they demonstrate no desire for peace other than that enforced through the barrel of tyranny's gun. Throughout the course of the *Transformers* brand's history, the Decepticons have represented that which is not American. The tides of history do not stand still, however. The global political environment is not static and unchanging. It is obvious that the perceived threat to America is not the same in the modern post-9/11 world of 2012 as it was at the beginning of the franchise in 1984. In order to remain a relevant, understandable threat to the *Transformers* franchise's audience, the nature of the Decepticons has shifted.

The original, *Generation One* Decepticons, in addition to all the fascist undertones which define them, appear to have much in common with the then-pressing enemy to the United States' global interests and their way of life: the Soviet Union. In this series, very few of the Decepticon characters can be said to possess any on-screen personality. The scant few that did were amongst the faction's leaders. Besides Megatron – whom I have already established as a classic megalomaniacal tyrant – the main possessor of any form of personality is the character of Starscream. He is a constant coward despite being powerful in his own right and is consistently endeavouring to usurp leadership from Megatron. Starscream is an aberration amongst the ordinarily loyal and obedient Decepticon ranks. He is a singular

challenge to Megatron's hegemony and the Decepticons' order while still embracing the core philosophy. Thus, he experiences Megatron's wrath on a regular basis and is ultimately killed by Megatron's upgraded self, Galvatron (*The Transformers: The Movie*, 1986). What characteristics and traits other Decepticons have been shown to possess do not come from televisual or film sources. Their main function within the fiction is simply to serve the will of Megatron, offering no dissent to his instructions and acting only as ordered. Should these Decepticons fail, they are routinely physically and verbally abused by their leader. They are mindless, personality-less drone characters living drudge-like existences equating with the (apparent) popular American view of the Soviet Union's treatment of its citizenry. This parallel becomes more apparent with the creation of the Sweeps in *The Transformers: The Movie*. The Sweeps are a group of completely identical, nameless Decepticon warriors of which there appears to be an infinite supply. They are drones in the truest sense. While this construction of the Decepticons as an allegory for the Soviet Union is relatively simplistic as a result of the series' need to appeal to the child-based audience, it is a clear parallel that stems from the underlying fascism of the faction's political ideology.

As I mentioned above, though, this conception of the Decepticons as the ever-changing threat to America has led to an alteration in their character and methods as the years have gone on. Whereas they were once Soviet-style enemies, they have evolved into a terrorist-like threat in the modern era. In the post-9/11 world, al-Qaeda and other such terrorist organisations are a far more common and visceral threat to America and its citizens than any nation-based actors. To accommodate this alteration in the perceived threat to the United States, even the origin of the Decepticons has altered. Where once they evolved from Quintesson-produced military hardware – and were thus inherently warlike – the Decepticons of the live-action films are a radical, militant offshoot of the Autobot state. Optimus Prime explains the Decepticons' rise thusly,

Our planet was once a powerful empire, peaceful and just, until we were betrayed by Megatron, leader of the Decepticons. All who defied them were destroyed.

(*Transformers*, 2007)

Their methodology in the film series' narrative has far more in common with that of the now-familiar terrorist threat than it does with a state-based aggressor. This



Figure 1.4: Images of Decepticon terrorism in Chicago (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011)

would seem to conflict with the fascist underpinning of the Decepticon philosophy were it not for the likening of Islamic fundamentalism to fascism by President George W. Bush and others in the years since the 9/11 attacks (Greene, 2006). In a speech to the American Legion, President Bush stated “they’re [the] successors to fascists, to Nazis, to communists and other totalitarians of the twentieth century” (Bush, 2006). Never is the Decepticon likeness to terrorism presented more clearly than in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. After establishing themselves in Chicago, Sentinel Prime and Megatron decide “It is time for the slaves of Earth to recognise their masters” and proceed to launch an attack on the city that is replete with imagery reminiscent of recent terrorist atrocities, most notably the aforementioned attacks on New York on September 11, 2001. The audience is then shown scenes of mass panic as people flood the streets in an attempt to evacuate, derailed trains, cars set on fire, exploding store fronts, and trains filled with the dead bodies of passengers. In Figure 1.4, the attacks directed at office buildings are depicted and smoke can be seen rising from the centre of the city in an echo of the images following the collapse of the World Trade Centre towers. The threat here is made tangible for an audience that undoubtedly recalls watching the events of that day on television news.

On the day of 9/11 itself, “witnesses ... drew on disaster and science fiction movies to describe their impressions” (Frank, 2011: 153). While this is without doubt a result of the lack of any real frame of reference for such images in the lives of the American people (Kakutani, 2001), it also serves as a phenomenon that can now be recreated in those film genres the witnesses referenced. Spielberg’s adaptation of *War of the Worlds* (2005) was a “deliberate” recreation of the September 11 attacks (Frank, 2011: 153) and the Decepticon assault seen in *Dark of the Moon* is another deliberate visual reference to those events. However, there is no attempt to explain or analyse the 9/11 disaster in the film. Instead, its references to the fall of the Twin Towers and the scenes of panic in New York that day serve to reinforce the Decepticons’ evil. In the modern American public perception, there is no greater act of evil – and no greater representation of the enemy Other – than the terrorist and terrorism.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is clear that the two political philosophies represented by the Autobots and Decepticons form parallels with the United States and its broad perceptions of good

and evil. The two ideologies stand in contradistinction to one another, constructed along Hayek's premise that "the opposite of liberalism is totalitarianism" (Hayek, 1960: 103). The socio-political and moral ideology of the Autobots is clearly given a dark and twisted opposite in that of the Decepticons. Where the Autobots are peaceful and compassionate, Megatron proclaims that "Compassion is for fools" ("Megatron's Master Plan, Part 2", 1985). Where the Autobots stand for freedom, the Decepticons desire only tyranny.

While the fantasy told by the franchise is a depiction of the ages-old concept of good and evil, the two sides are also serve to reference political philosophies that have dominated much of recent human history. Liberal democracy has become synonymous within the Western world with societal good. Democracies are fostered and encouraged around the world by the United States and its allies with the belief that it is a better, more just way to order society. The Autobots are the mechanical representation of this principle. They have fought for millions of years to prevent the establishment of a tyrannical dictatorship despite the almost overwhelming odds and the inherent might of their enemies. It is a fantasy that the American populace can appreciate given their society's liberal foundations.

Both sides are constructions designed to be reminiscent of the global political environment of their times. The Autobots have remained the consistent champions of peace and freedom and the Decepticons have evolved and changed with the demise of old enemies and the rise new ones. Like the real world they reference, the factions are not static creations. They have been altered to better recreate the world with each new iteration of the franchise in an effort to ensure that the good and evil paradigm remains obvious to the intended audience.

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Chapter 2

TRANSFORMERS AND THE SHIFT IN DOMESTIC AMERICAN POLITICS

America's domestic socio-political situation and its concurrent view of itself has not remained static in the years since the original creation and airing of the *Transformers* cartoon series in 1984 and the modern world twenty-nine years later. Politics and society have changed in that time, giving rise to new pressures and new points of interest for creators of fictions to explore. This chapter will explore issues of technophobia in the mid- to late-1980s, its presence within American society today, and the explorations of this issue within the original *Generation One* series and the later live-action films. Technophobia and the embrace of technology are an important aspect of modern American socio-politics stemming from the rapid development of consumer technology over the latter decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. It will show a representation of a culture at odds with itself. Capitalist consumerism and the embrace of the new is arrayed against the fear of change and the desire for an ideal, traditional past. Continuing from that, the chapter shall move on to address the presentation of politicians in both these works, commenting on their near-absence in the original cartoon and the obstructionism they represent in the 2007-2011 motion picture series. After all, society's views of those who practice politics can be seen as indicative of that society's opinions about politics as a whole.

TECHNOPHOBIA AND THE ATTEMPTS AT CONTROL

Technophobia, the fear of technology and its capacity to replace humanity, has been a recurring theme in fiction – not just science fiction – since the advent of the industrial revolution. It was a period that shaped American society and thoroughly altered the status quo. In their essay “Technophobia”, Ryan and Kellner sum this up most effectively when they describe the rise of machines and technological advancements as a threat to “natural social arrangements” (1990: 58). It is quite understandable that society's artistic endeavours would identify and replicate this fear in its outputs.

Indeed, it is not a new phenomenon. Telotte put this succinctly in his work, *Replications*: “our genre films have always drawn within the scope of their formulaic narratives whatever anxieties we seem unable to work out in the public arena” (1995: 4). Conversely, there have equally been periods of embracing and accepting technology. Specifically in the case of the United States, there was a simultaneous fear and embrace of nuclear weapons during the Cold War; they were the devices that ensured the protection of the homeland as much as they threatened it. More recently, it is possible to point to the rapid adoption of mobile telephones juxtaposed with fears that they dehumanise personal interactions. In a medium such as film, the identification and exploitation of the audience’s desires and fears are of vital import to ensure success. *Transformers* fiction has engaged in explorations of the fear of change and destruction wrought by the cold metallic hands of machines. In both the original *Generation One* cartoon series and the more recent live-action films, we have seen fearful reactions to the arrivals from Cybertron. From that place of fear, we have been witness to numerous attempts at controlling these enormously powerful robotic beings – even, as I shall outline later, the “good guy” Autobots. In both cases, human characters were shown to be concerned with the capacities of the Transformers to alter the status quo of their fictional world.

During the first three seasons of the original animated series, the expressions of technophobia were somewhat limited. Of course, there are examples of people reacting with shock and terror to the arrival of the robotic beings (“More Than Meets the Eye, Parts 1-3”, 1984) and being surprised when the object they had thought innocuous suddenly unfolded into the form of a robotic being (“Megatron’s Master Plan, Part 1”, 1985; PSA 2: “Don’t Steal Cars”, 1985). However, the most obvious expression of technophobia in the original cartoon series comes in a three-part final episode titled “The Rebirth” (1987), which forms the entirety of the original cartoon’s final season¹. During the course of that episode, Autobot and Decepticon characters arrive on the planet Nebulos where the humanoid inhabitants are dominated by a small cabal of self-styled lords known as “the Hive” who ensure their hegemony through their mastery of technology. When their will is not adhered to, the Hive threaten to unleash their machines on the people but only rarely are these machines actually dispatched. The fear they evoke is often enough to quell dissent. These weapons of mass destruction are seen tearing through the landscape of Nebulos,

¹ Season four of the original animation consists only of the three episodes comprising “The Rebirth’s” storyline.

indiscriminately destroying anything in their path (see Figure 2.1). Thus they resemble the effects of the chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear devices possessed by nations of the real world.

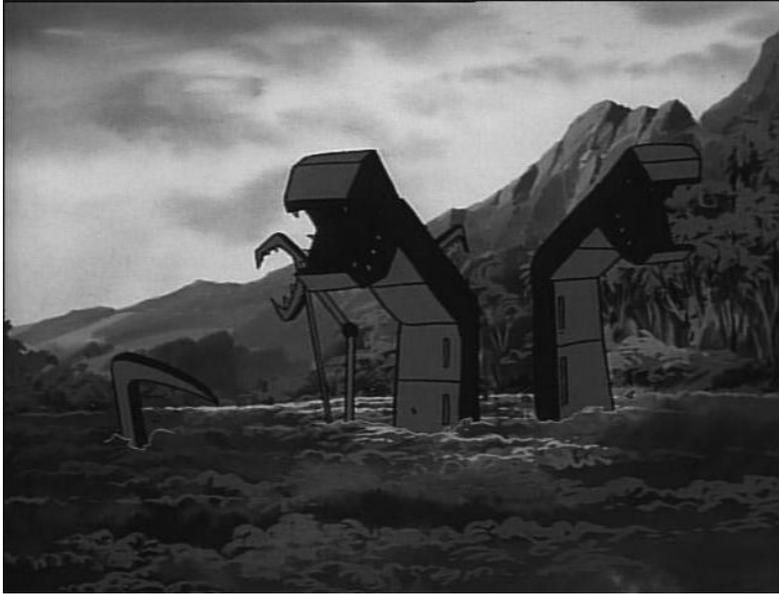


Figure 2.1: The Hive's machines on Nebulos (*The Transformers: "The Rebirth, Part 1"*, 1987)

So threatening and destructive are the Hive's devices that the Autobot Hardhead, a machine himself, comments that he is "beginning to understand why you guys don't like machines" after encountering them personally ("The Rebirth, Part 1", 1987). The fictional situation on Nebulos, then, is a construction of a society living in terror of advanced machinery that is eminently capable of destroying the world on the whims of leaders. The machines possessed by the Hive are machines of war and control. The humanoid population is seen hiding in caves lest they be happened upon by the Hive's enforcers². In the words of the leader of the Nebulan resistance, "it is the people who serve the machines and the machines serve the Hive" ("The Rebirth, Part 1", 1987). These Hive-controlled machines are the personification of technology that has come "to represent uncontrolled, destabilising power" (Tichi, 1987: 52). By the point of "The Rebirth's" production, the Cold War had begun to thaw with Gorbachev's premiership and his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* which kick-started the years of reform that ultimately lead to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the concomitant end of the Cold War on 31 December 1991. However, the history of the

² This view of Nebulos is a contrast to that presented in the simultaneous *The Transformers: Headmasters* comic wherein all machines of war had been abandoned in favour of a pacifist utopia. On the arrival of the Transformers, political and military leaders were shown to be quite unwilling to abandon that pacifism should the need arise to defend themselves against the newcomers.

near-conflict would have been quite fresh in the memories of the production team behind the episode. Indeed, 1987 saw the total nuclear stockpiles of the United States stand at 24,344 while the USSR's had achieved its maximum total inventory of 43,000 (Norris & Kristensen, 2006: 66). Therefore, despite the warming of relations between the two antagonists in the global drama of the Cold War, the fear of the bomb – the technological device that would render humanity nigh-on extinct – was still at the forefront of the American national consciousness. The Hive's devices are machines in the more traditional sense, but their ability to destroy the people of Nebulos was demonstrated to be no less apparent than those of nuclear missiles that were aimed at Washington, D.C. and Moscow. Nebulos, then, was a representation of the (correct) American fear of the machines of war and destruction that were being stockpiled by both their own government and the communist "enemy" abroad. The notion of mutually-assured destruction and automated response systems fuelled the technophobia of the Cold War and gave rise to such films as *WarGames* (1983). While a human being would have to "press the red button", after that the process of human calamity would be entirely unstoppable and mechanised. In the popular imagination, one bomb would beget another, which would be followed by another, and so on until all that remained was the hollow shells of cities and the broken artefacts of humanity. Technophobia, in this case, was less a phobia in its truest sense – defined as an "irrational fear or dislike of a specified thing" (Oxford, 2000) – and more of a potential future reality which society was required to accept as plausible and possible because of the ubiquitous nature of new technologies.

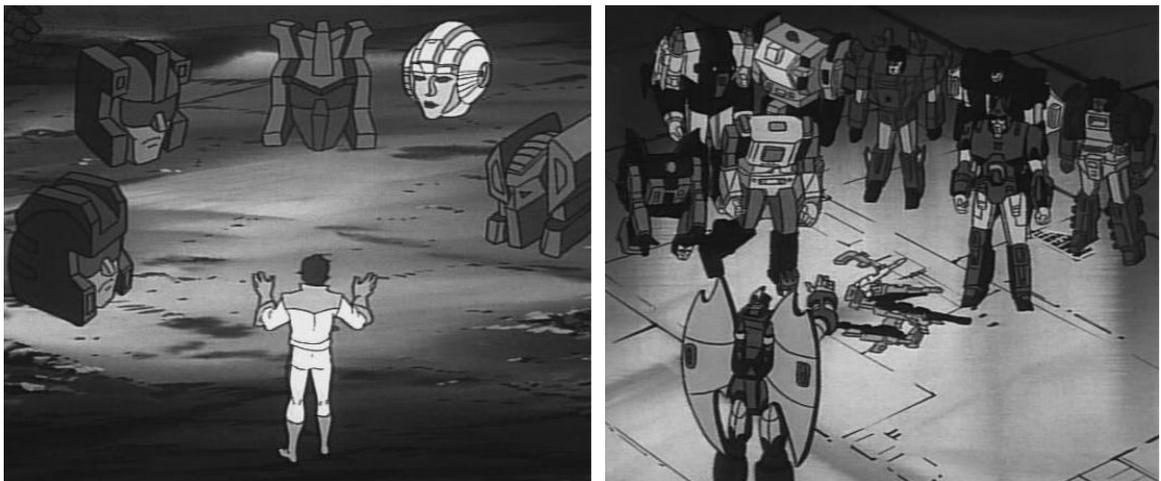


Figure 2.2: The Autobots surrender their heads (*The Transformers: "The Rebirth, Part 1"*, 1987) and the Decepticons offer up their heads and weapons to the Hive (*The Transformers: "The Rebirth, Part 2"*, 1987)

On the arrival of the Autobot characters on Nebulos, the humanoid inhabitants assume them to be a new type of machine controlled by the Hive. They are feared and not trusted to the extent that the Nebulan resistance captures the Autobots with the intention of destroying them. In their experience and estimation, “all machines are evil” (“The Rebirth, Part 1”, 1987). It is only following an impassioned plea on the Autobots’ behalf by their human ally Spike and the Autobots’ willingness to unite – quite literally – with the Nebulans against the Hive and their machines that prevents the resistance from destroying them. The form that this unity takes furthers *The Transformers’* examination of technophobia and it is this area that I shall move on to now. In an effort to allay the Nebulans’ fears and give them some semblance of control, the Autobots allow their heads to be separated and used by the humanoids. The heads are then converted into “robotic exo-suits” able to transform into the Autobot characters’ heads; in so doing, the robotic and human(oid) are united as one being. As the story of “The Rebirth” develops, the Hive recognises the Headmasters as a threat to their hegemony over Nebulos and thus manipulate the Decepticons, the Autobots’ enemies, into joining them. The Hive replicates the Headmaster process and expands it to create the Targetmasters – wherein the Transformers’ guns are converted into transforming armour (“The Rebirth, Part 2”, 1987). In this process of creating Headmasters, the Transformers are incapable of functioning in their robot modes without the willingness of their new partners to transform and form their heads. Thus, these previously supremely powerful and somewhat threatening robotic beings are limited to their vehicular modes. The same is true for the Targetmaster variation as a Transformer lacking a weapon is distinctly less than useful in a conflict. Indeed, following a return to Cybertron, the Autobots and their Nebulan partners part ways, thus rendering the partnered Autobots useless to their un-partnered compatriots in their plight. The character Chromedome summarises this aptly by exclaiming “You little creeps, we’re stuck being vehicles now without our heads!” (“The Rebirth, Part 3”, 1987). The Decepticons face similar difficulties when their now-living weapons decide to return to the Hive’s underground city at the expense of eradicating the Autobots as their Decepticon partners would prefer. The exchange goes thus:

SCOURGE: We have the key! Now let us destroy those accursed Autobots!

FRACAS: No, no! We gotta get back to the Hive city! Zarak commands it!

SCOURGE: Never! Not until every last Autobot is a smoking pile of rubble.

FRACAS: I don’t care about your petty feud! I obey Zarak! We go! Now!

(Fracas, in gun mode, aims himself at Scourge's head.)

SCOURGE: Very well, Fracas, but this argument's not over yet.

("The Rebirth, Part 2", 1987)

As such, it is clear that in the partnerships formed by the creation of the Headmasters and Targetmasters, the organic component – the Nebulans – have a disproportionate level of control. Indeed, the very name reeks of dominance thanks to the “-master” suffix. By virtue of *being* the Transformers’ heads and weapons, the Nebulans have veto power over the partnership’s actions and, as was demonstrated above, they are not adverse to exercising that power. This “organic veto” can be seen as a reference of the so-called two-man rule employed by the United States for the deployment of its nuclear arsenal. Like the nuclear devices that this rule sought to control, the Transformers can be construed as highly dangerous to humanity thanks to their inherent strength and power. Throughout the first three seasons of the cartoon, the Transformers were shown as being eminently capable of inflicting massive damage on population centres and undoubtedly causing the loss of human life. The audience is shown oil rigs on fire (*“More Than Meets the Eye, Part 1”, 1984*), mines under siege (*“More Than Meets the Eye, Part 2”, 1984*), power plants under attack (*“More Than Meets the Eye, Part 3”, 1984*; *“Megatron’s Master Plan, Part 1”, 1985*), and buildings being stolen (*“Thief in the Night”, 1986*). In the case of the Autobots, their political and moral philosophy ensures they go out of their way to prevent human casualties (as is discussed in chapter 1), but not all tragedy and loss can be prevented³. Power, meaning the ability to act as one wishes with little to no resistance and to ensure one’s will is carried out, was clearly in the hands of the Transformers up until this point. The Nebulans’ technophobia provided an opportunity to curtail the Transformers’ power and, in so doing, highlight the need for human control over their weapons.

However, this does not address the inherent changes to humans brought on by the form of control over machines and technology that the Headmasters and Targetmasters represent. The technophobes prevent the newly arrived machines from threatening them by embracing technology all the more, ultimately becoming part of the Transformers. Control, then, comes through greater integration between man and machine rather than outright destruction of the mechanical and an embrace of the Luddite dream. Symbiosis is presented as the method for ensuring that humanity is not overrun and destroyed by technology run rampant. Furthermore, the union of

³ This is a recurring theme in the *Transformers “Keepers Trilogy”* of novels (Ciencin, 2003; Cian, 2003 & 2004).

man and machine is presented as necessary for both the survival of humanity and the Transformers. Within the narrative of “The Rebirth”, power being emitted by an energy chamber at the centre of Cybertron is harmful to the Transformers and threatens to cause Earth’s sun to go supernova. The Nebulans, as organic beings, are unaffected by this “plasma energy” and manage to prevent Earth’s destruction by converting Cybertron’s planetary engines to absorb energy. Thus, Earth is saved from destruction and the excess energy repowers the long-dormant Cybertron, returning the planet to a “Golden Age”⁴. Therefore, the need to control technology in American society during the latter stages of the Cold War is presented as a logical extension of the socio-political situation of the era. Within the world at large, weapons of mass destruction were being stockpiled on both sides of the ideological divide. This begat arms treaties and other control mechanisms. Domestically, computers were becoming ubiquitous in the home and business with the rise of Apple and IBM. Bank clerks were making way for automatic transfer machines. Telephone booths were steadily replaced by the advent of mobile telephony. Life, in short, was changing. The underlying message of these final episodes of *The Transformers* is that technology – and the developments it brings – is not something that should be feared but, quite literally, embraced.

It is also interesting to note that the writers chose to move the action of the series away from Earth to represent this point. Fictionally speaking, it was somewhat impossible to represent the technophobia inherent in the Cold War on Earth at this point in *The Transformers*. While the first and second seasons of the series were set in the then-contemporary 1984 and 1985, *The Transformers: The Movie* (1986) moved the on-screen events forward in time to a fictionalised future of 2005. This fictional future saw young children owning hoverboards, human embassies on alien planets⁵, and the Earth’s nations united in the form of a mutual-defence and security organisation called Earth Defence Command which is shown to operate space stations, planetary bases, and vessels. The third and fourth seasons of the show continued on from the events of *The Movie* and embraced the then-future setting. Given that the series had established a united humanity freely using advanced machines, it would have been somewhat difficult to have constructed a Cold War technophobia allegory within this setting. The move to Nebulos, therefore, offered a clean slate with which these issues could be

⁴ Quite literally as the grey metal of the planet takes on a shining, golden hue after the energy is absorbed.

⁵ The most prominent being, of course, the Earth embassy on Cybertron with the teenage human ally to the Autobots from the show’s first two seasons, Spike Witwicky, now married and grown and serving as the ambassador.

explored without upsetting the established socio-political situation of the fictional future Earth. In the formation and operation of the EDC, it is possible to see an expression of hopefulness in regard to humanity's future even in the face of the Cold War. Akin to Gene Roddenberry's vision of the Federation in the various incarnations of *Star Trek*, the EDC is an egalitarian and utopian dream of a world without war and united under a goal of mutual benefit and betterment. In humanity's embrace of the technological in this fictional future, the opposite side of American society's relationship with technology is referenced. Here the viewer is shown technology as having helped mankind and improved the global political situation – with EDC officers on space stations and ships a regular sight during the third season. Thus the message of embracing technological change and advancement is reinforced for the audience.

None of this is to imply that the adoption of technology over the twenty years since the original airing of "The Rebirth" has brought an end to feelings of anxiety in regard to the capabilities of technology and the capacity of machines to potentially replace humanity in American culture. The modern interpretation of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), is a perfect example with its story of rampant (and, indeed, inevitable) technological development leading to the creation of Cylons which are indistinguishable from humans and the near-extinction of humanity. In short, American society continues to exhibit a certain ambivalence in regards to technology while paradoxically continuing to embrace it. As was the case with the *Generation One* cartoon, the live-action films reflect this. Both *Transformers* (2007) and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011) depict Decepticons with the ability to convert themselves into everyday devices. More specifically, Frenzy was shown to adopt the appearance of a boombox and a mobile phone in *Transformers* and Laserbeak alters himself to become a television, a photocopier, and a wall-mounted CD player in *Dark of the Moon*. Mobile telephones and music players are so commonplace and integrated into our modern lives that the notion of these devices possessing malevolent intent is a particularly frightening one. Furthermore, Frenzy's capacity to scan and convert himself into an exact copy of Megan Fox's character's telephone could be seen as a commentary on the potential of "cell phones to dehumanise the dynamics of human contact" (Kwan, 2008), which has been a charge levelled against mobile phones since they became a relatively commonplace device. With the character's existence as a mobile phone, the possibility of our being spied upon is presented. Our trust in such devices is implicit, but the potential for our being monitored is enormous. Indeed, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) took this a step further by presenting Shia LaBeouf's character's parents

being identified and tracked by their mobile phone. Furthermore, the position of a telephone so close to the user's head and brain allows for an almost unparalleled opportunity to attack and kill. The Decepticons' plans, however, are a less subtle expression of the "growing modern anxiety [about] ... technologies whose ultimate purpose seems to be the subjection and dehumanisation of the self" (Telotte, 1995: 88) with their goal in the most recent film being to make use of the natural resources of Earth, including humanity itself as a slave labour force, in order to rebuild the severely war-damaged Cybertron.



Figure 2.3: Frenzy transforming from his boombox disguise aboard Air Force One
(*Transformers*, 2007)

With these technological fears still present, the human characters in the films, like their predecessors in *Generation One*, make attempts at controlling the Transformers' actions where possible. However, rather than embracing the technological to such an extent that they become partially technological themselves, Michael Bay's films present attempts at political and military control of the mechanical aliens. Unlike with the creation of the Headmasters and Targetmasters, wherein the different blocks of Nebulan society were able to control both factions of the Transformer divide, the humans depicted in the films are only able to exert some form of control over the Autobots thanks to their alliance⁶. The NEST (short for Non-

⁶ *Dark of the Moon*, however, shows the reverse in having the Decepticons controlling human operatives.

biological Extra-terrestrial Species Treaty) alliance is, as its name suggests, a treaty-based organisation uniting numerous human nations and the Autobots introduced in *Revenge of the Fallen*. NEST was seemingly formed in an effort to combat the Decepticons and provide Optimus Prime and his Autobots with the support they require to live on Earth. As outlined by the “classified Alien/Autobot Cooperation Act”, the Autobots are required to provide any and all intelligence they may have about the Decepticons and aid in humanity’s defence in return for the same courtesy regarding intelligence and the right to remain on Earth (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009). In this situation, humans are shown to be the more dominant force once again.

This is explored further in the third live-action film. The events of *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* not only demonstrate that the Autobots’ human partners have already failed to live up to their obligations under the NEST treaty by neglecting to inform their allies about the crashed Transformer spaceship, *The Ark*, on the moon but also depicts the United States Congress repealing the Cooperation Act after Sentinel Prime sides with Megatron and demands that humanity “renounce the Autobot rebels [they] have harboured”. This political control is reinforced by the sight of human military vehicles escorting the Autobots to their ship, which itself has been attached to a decommissioned NASA shuttle to further ensure control, after the alliance is revoked. Come the twenty-first century, then, the embrace and control of technology and its changes is no longer seen as a possible solution to the technophobic reactions and as a viable means of control over machines.

Rather than an embrace of the technological, then, in NEST and the Autobots the viewer is shown that cooperation is a viable means of controlling machines. Even when the alliance is terminated, the Autobots leave peacefully. Political settlements resolved the Cold War, reunified Germany, and brought an end to the Troubles in Northern Ireland (Holland, 1998: 221). Cooperation, in the modern American – and global – consciousness, is the means by which most conflicts can and should be resolved. While the international War on Terror can be seen as giving the lie to this assumption, it is something of an aberration in recent history. For example, the first Gulf War was resolved thanks to a military-backed political settlement. More recently, the collapse of governments brought on during the Arab Spring has been met with calls for cooperation and peaceful settlement by the international community. Thus outright control and dominance has ceased to be a viable means for ensuring national and personal safety. Cooperation through political settlement – which had begun to

see acceptance in the signing of arms treaties during the Cold War – has replaced control as the default guarantor of peace and security.

CYNICISM AND DISTRUST: POLITICIANS IN *TRANSFORMERS* MEDIA

Given storylines revolving around the global dangers stemming from Earth becoming a new battleground in a civil war amongst a robotic alien race, the *Transformers* franchise has depicted politicians as part of those storylines. These characters conform to an array of archetypes ranging from self-serving fools to individuals willing to do what is needed in the defence of the nation. In the following, I shall explore these characters beginning with the original cartoon series before moving on to the characters shown in the more recent film trilogy. In so doing, we shall see a perception of domestic American politics as personified in this depiction of politicians.

Politicians are almost entirely absent from the *Generation One* cartoon series. The possible reasons for this are obvious considering the target audience and immediate goals of the show – namely young boys and advertising new toy characters to them – and thus the focus remained primarily on the Transformer characters. The closest one comes is the character of Shawn Berger – who appeared in a total of two episodes – and Abdul Fakkadi⁷. Berger is depicted as a rich industrialist and television station owner with political ambition. After losing an election to become mayor of Central City, he is abducted by Megatron and the Decepticons. Megatron convinces Berger that his faction has been maligned through “the power of public relations” and that it is the Autobots who are truly evil and desirous of humanity’s destruction. Berger’s self-serving nature is made quite clear here. Presented with Megatron’s “truth” that he is good and Optimus Prime evil, Berger asks nothing more than “What’s in it for me?” He seeks no evidence to support Megatron’s claims, instead recognising this opportunity as “the path to glory” that he has been seeking. Upon being offered control of Central City in exchange for his support, Berger instead declares that his “price is *two cities*” (“Megatron’s Master Plan, Part 1”, 1985).

Thus, the Shawn Berger character is the product of a post-Watergate opinion of politicians. Indeed, after Watergate “people did not believe their public officials” and “many good potential leaders eschewed politics in th[at...] era” (Smith, quoted in Finney, 2012). In Berger, a construction of the would-be politician as an individual

⁷ Who is discussed at length in chapter 4.

seeking political power not because of a desire to do good, but out of cynical self-interest is offered. He is completely taken in by Megatron's promise that "There is no limit to what you could have, if you join us". So taken is he with the notion of personal "glory", that it is a simple matter to imagine that, should Megatron's plans come to fruition, Berger would pursue this goal above any other concern. Indeed, his small and petty nature is reinforced by showing him as a creature that exists only to serve Megatron's ends. His grasp for power is amusingly juxtaposed by showing him as a child cradled in Megatron's hands, two fingers held up to underline the price of his cooperation (see Figure 2.4). This childlike construction is furthered when the Decepticon leader appears to neatened Berger's hair for him as their meeting ends and the human prepares to be taken back to the city by one of Megatron's minions. He is a man-child concerned only with his self and the furtherance of his ego. Once he is alone, Megatron further savages Berger's character, dismissing him as a "pompous, gullible fool" who "thinks he will be king when he will never be more than a pawn" ("Megatron's Master Plan, Part 1", 1985).



Figure 2.4: Shawn Berger names his price while cradled in Megatron's hands (*The Transformers: "Megatron's Master Plan, Part 1"*, 1985)

It would be a mistake to claim that the depiction of this one character can be applied to the American perception of all politicians. However, Shawn Berger is clearly constructed and depicted along stereotypical lines. He is, as I have stressed above, a small man seemingly furthering his own goals and self at the expense of those around him. His desire to enter politics is not the product of a sense of duty but of his

inherent cynical selfishness. This self-serving politician stereotype appears to be a dominant one, owing much to films such as *The Candidate* (1972) and the real life events that resulted in the Watergate scandal which finally culminated in President Nixon's resignation in 1974. In addition, his career as a powerful businessman involved in such enterprises as television, solar energy, and oil production further tie him into the Reaganite fetishisation of capitalist industry. That this stereotype can be recognised even in an animation series targeted at children is a telling indicator of some of the feelings held in regards to politicians and their work in the United States of that era.

The attitude towards politicians displayed through the live-action *Transformers* films is somewhat more complex. Here we are treated to politicians as sources of heroism and even humour as well as obstruction. They offer another view of the American attitude toward politicians in an age of international unrest and distrust of the United States from abroad. Interestingly, it is the appearances of real-life presidents⁸ that have yielded humour more frequently than the fictional politicians that serve them. *Transformers* (2007) shows a representation of George W. Bush aboard Air Force One seemingly willing to allow his secretary of defence (whom I will discuss shortly) to deal with the destruction of a military base in Qatar. Indeed, the president is shown laying back on a bed with his feet up asking a steward "Can you wrangle me up some Ding Dongs, darlin'?" That President Bush's approval ratings had fallen to consistently below fifty per cent when the film entered production - with the average approval for his second term being 37% (Gallup, 2009) - possibly explains the filmmakers' willingness to use the President in this manner. President Obama's appearance in the third film in the trilogy, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), is not humorous in and of itself like that of his predecessor. Obama's presence at a medal ceremony for Shia LaBeouf's character is instead the catalyst for humour from his parents and, eventually, his first encounter with Carly Spencer (Rosie Huntington-Whitely). This willingness to use the presidency for humour is perhaps indicative of a liberalisation of attitudes towards the highest office in the American political landscape. In the modern world of twenty-four-hour rolling news, presidents are less detached from the populace and are increasingly the source of both celebrity headlines and satire. Alternatively, it is possible to see the inclusion of the two real life presidents as a use of the real to emphasise the humour of the situations around them and to help ground the more fantastical elements of the fiction in a sense of reality.

⁸ While the presidents themselves are not fictional, they did not appear in the films as themselves. During those scenes where they are required to interact with fictional characters, they are portrayed by actors with their faces obscured.

Bush and Obama are not used exclusively for humour in the *Transformers* films. When the main events of the films begin, the two presidents are mentioned as having been taken to secure locations where they can oversee the American response to the crisis, thus explaining the focus on fictional politicians created by the films' makers and, as such, avoiding any legal uncertainties that may arise in regard to the use of real life political figures in the films' fictional context.



Figure 2.5: Secretary of Defence John Keller, played by Jon Voight (*Transformers*, 2007)

As I mentioned above, it is Secretary of Defence John Keller (portrayed by Jon Voight) that spearheads the US response to the Transformers' arrival in the first film. Indeed, he is the only politician character in the film series to be consistently supportive of the "hero" characters represented by the Autobots and the military. This goes so far as to present Keller himself in somewhat heroic stances. On his introduction, he is shot from a low angle as he delivers a speech to the analysts that have been recruited to identify who or what attacked the military base in Qatar. This, coupled with clear lighting and an impassioned delivery of his speech, emphasises Keller's construction as an idealised American leader. Furthermore, when global communications go down as a result of Decepticon interference, Keller's first thought is to try and contact his family – trying both his mobile phone and a landline. This is an attitude most would argue is desirable in a leader. It demonstrates a sense of compassion and concern outside of one's self. Keller's heroism comes to the fore when he is attempting to organise an air strike on the Decepticons at the climax of the film. While trying to send a message to the Air Force, he and others come under attack from the Decepticon Frenzy. While his companions continue to attempt to send a message, Keller breaks into a cabinet to arm himself with a shotgun. Here we witness the

transformation of politician into action hero akin to the presidents depicted in *Independence Day* (1996) and *Air Force One* (1997). Furthermore, it recreates the action hero-leader image of President Reagan. This willingness to become involved in defending those around him and his approval of Lennox's (Josh Duhamel) plans to hide the Allspark from the Decepticons in Mission City confirms his status as a "good" politician and character as a result of his support and embrace of the films' preference for action against those who are depicted as evil, even if that action requires vigilantism. His rubber stamping of Lennox's plan shows a willingness to support the military at the expense of what would be politically expedient. After all, an air strike on an American city by the US Air Force – with all the potential loss of life and structural damage that would entail – is hardly in a government's political interests given the public uproar that would undoubtedly ensue⁹. Keller's willingness to do what is necessary is unusual. Thus, this conforms to the common film and societal construction of a military defending the nation while being stymied by politicians.



Figure 2.6: Theodore Galloway (portrayed by John Benjamin Hickey) contrasted with Optimus Prime's pointing hand (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009)

This perceived tendency of politicians to prevent the military from engaging in the actions that are needed to defend the nation is examined in greater detail in the sequels, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011). *Revenge of the Fallen* depicts President Obama's fictional National Security Advisor Theodore Galloway (John Benjamin Hickey) as an arch-bureaucrat. On his introduction, he pushes past Lennox and other military personnel. Thus his less

⁹ Indeed, the US government has often condemned other nations' governments for similar actions that result in civilian casualties.

imposing, stature and physique is somewhat unflatteringly contrasted with that of the military characters. He is shown as a small, thin man in a suit arrayed against the strong, toned bodies and uniforms of the military characters. These likable military characters also serve to highlight Galloway's abrasive personality; they are jovial and engaging, he is not. He relies on the perceived importance of his title and papers granting him authority as none of the soldiers would willingly agree to follow his orders. Furthermore, like Shawn Berger in the original animation, Galloway is unflatteringly juxtaposed against the sheer scale of the Transformer characters. During a discussion with Optimus Prime about his theory that the continued Decepticon presence on Earth is a direct result of their desire to hunt and eliminate the Autobots, Galloway is depicted against the massive size of Prime. Figure 2.6 shows the character contrasted with Optimus' pointing finger. He is further diminished in the same scene by the camera lingering on Epps (Tyrese Gibson) standing proud next to Optimus Prime and seemingly the equal of the enormously larger Transformer despite being no taller than Prime's ankle. As before, Galloway and his arguments are rendered small in comparison to Optimus and his superior knowledge of the Decepticons and their tactics.

As viewers, we are thus encouraged to dismiss both Galloway as a character and his opinions. The previous film gave the audience the opportunity to learn about and come to like the military characters and Prime. This established affection is arrayed against the Galloway character. Following Megatron's resurrection, and the death of Optimus Prime, Galloway orders NEST to stand down and instructs its members to return to their base on Diego Garcia, dismissing Optimus' corpse as a "pile of scrap metal", and insisting that the United States and the world "will face [the renewed Decepticon threat] as we always have: with a coordinated military strategy". This, of course, prevents the military from doing what is necessary to prevent the Decepticons from securing victory and leads the Autobot medic Ratchet to proclaim "This fool is terribly misinformed". In order for Lennox and his men to prevent catastrophe, they are forced to disobey these orders and comically eject Galloway from the transport plane taking them back to base. Here we are offered a contrast to the "good" politician personified by Keller in the first film. Obstructionism and strutting self-importance are the order of the day in the depiction of Galloway. Politics, and those who practice it, is shown as good only when it, and they, work(s) in conjunction with the military and the Autobots to ensure the nation's - and the planet's - defence against the Decepticons. Anything short of that is constructed as bad. In Galloway's

case, it makes him a subject of distrust, dislike, and, eventually, fun rather than a heroic-looking and commanding individual such as his predecessor or the supportive General Moreshower (Glenn Moreshower¹⁰) who secretly assists Lennox and his team despite Galloway's objections.



Figure 2.7: Charlotte Mearing (Frances McDormand), on her introduction (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011)

The third film in the series, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011) takes the exploration of politics' interactions with the military further in the character of Charlotte Mearing (Frances McDormand). Mearing's title is worthy of some exploration. Unlike the previous two films – wherein Keller was Secretary of Defence and Galloway was National Security Advisor – in *Dark of the Moon* we are presented with the Director of National Intelligence. This emphasises the shift in the nature of the Decepticon threat and the changing role of NEST. In the first film, defence against the Decepticons was the only option available. The second saw a shift to focus on national security with the Decepticons targeting – and sinking – US air craft carriers on the coast and a national manhunt for Sam. By the third film, the Decepticons are in hiding and the NEST-Autobot force is shown “solving human conflicts” as a black ops unit¹¹. Intelligence, then, has become central to the combined operations of the Autobots and NEST. Mearing's role in the centre of the shadowy world of intelligence is emphasised by her appearances. As she is introduced, the character is shown in a dimly lit corner of a hanger quietly threatening a senator via telephone. Mearing is depicted in dim or partial light quite regularly throughout the film and in other

¹⁰ The character was named for the actor portraying him.

¹¹ They are specifically shown destroying an “illegal nuclear facility” in Iran – which is discussed further in chapter 4.

scenarios highlighting her role – including huddling with operatives quietly discussing developments and being surrounded by “total nightmare files” in her office. Mearing’s status as a female is also interesting and is explored further in chapter 4.

For the first half of the film, Charlotte Mearing is depicted in a manner similar to Galloway in *Revenge of the Fallen* – albeit somewhat more respectful of the military. She is a bureaucratic obstacle, preventing Sam from working with the Autobots. She dismisses him as nothing more than “a messenger” and insists that NEST has no role for Sam thanks to its status as “unit for veteran intelligence officers and Special Forces, not for boys who once owned special cars”¹². This is further evidenced by Mearing’s reaction to the space bridge transportation technology recovered from the crashed Autobot ship on the moon and the realisation that it can be used to instantaneously teleport military materiel into American cities. She declares: “You can’t just bring weapons of mass destruction into our atmosphere! You kind of have to clear customs first! A little formality called paperwork kind of separates us from the animals”. Here we see both the continued American fear of weapons of mass destruction in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and Mearing’s embrace of the bureaucracy underpinning the politics of America. While her outburst is tinged with humour, it is possible to see it as a commentary on the growing dissatisfaction in America with the bureaucratic nature of the federal government – a public opinion that has given rise to the Tea Party movement. Thus we are led to believe that she is another bureaucrat in a similar manner to Galloway – albeit more likable and less abrasive. However, following Sentinel Prime’s betrayal and the apparent death of the Autobots, Mearing is shown to work with Agent Simmons (John Turturro), Lennox, and others in organising and supporting an unofficial military incursion into the Decepticons’ stronghold in Chicago. Far from being the traditional bureaucrat bent on curtailing the activities of the men in uniform, she is an active participant. She arranges Lennox’s team’s entry into occupied Chicago and coordinates their actions. This serves to reinforce the apparent opinion within the films that politicians are only “good” when they are overtly supportive of the military’s attempts to defend the nation. This is a depiction of the American public’s opinion of politicians and the armed forces and a representation of the Hollywood action stereotypes. For the public, this is clearly expressed in the poll number for the current Congress, the president, and the military. Gallup’s poll results list the job approval for Congress at 17% (Newport, 2012), President Obama’s stands at 46% (Gallup, 2012), and the military’s approval is at a far

¹² Referring to his purchase of Bumblebee in the first film.

higher 76% (Saad, 2010). For an action film, the preference for the military over politicians serves the obvious requirement for action as well as offering a representation of the national outlook. After all, politicians only become interesting when they engage with the enemy directly. The armed forces are seen as the ones who truly sacrifice. The public's perception and national artistic output recognise and reinforce this opinion.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Through its fictions, the *Transformers* franchise has shown a willingness to depict the socio-political situations then-contemporaneous to it. With the creation of the planet Nebulos and a culture so dominated by the machines used for the defence of the ruling elite, it is possible to see an allegory to the Cold War. While that ideological battle had begun to wind down during the period of "The Rebirth's" original transmission, the socio-political effects of it were still being felt. Furthermore, the rapid technological development in the post-World War Two period was also having an impact on US culture with new devices being developed to make life easier and – in some cases – replace humans. It was a period of unease mixed with hopefulness. Nebulos is a representation of that unease taken to the *nth* degree. However, as I outlined above, the cultural hopefulness in regard to the advances and betterments that technological development can bring was also referenced in the portrayal of the Earth Defence Command. Here the franchise displays a global human society, united along mutual defence and cooperation lines. In the Cold War era, this would have been a heady dream. The rapid technological development did not replace or destroy humanity in this vision of our future. Rather it stabilised and united the world, encouraging political cooperation. The film series embraces this concept of political cooperation and settlement. The Transformers of the live-action movies – rather than being dominated by a human component within them – are shown in a cooperative, (mostly) mutually beneficial relationship with the United States and its military. As such, this recreates the current norms in the international community of calling for cooperation where possible between potentially competing groups.

In addition, the fictions of *Generation One* and the movies demonstrate the prevailing cynicism and distrust in the United States of its political classes. In the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, America appears to have lost its faith in its leaders

- deeming them self-serving and liars. In the characters of these two iterations of *Transformers*, this is shown time and again. The fictional politicians are constructed as craven and bureaucratic, obstructing the needs of the military in their heroic defence of America and the world against the Decepticons. On the occasions wherein a politician is shown as “good”, he or she is seen as actively helping the Autobots and the military and ignoring the bureaucratic and political needs they would ordinarily be concerned with. Thus, America demonstrates a cynicism in regard to politics and those who practice it that has been perpetuated throughout the intervening decades from 1984 to 2012.

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Chapter 3

THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN *TRANSFORMERS*

The *Transformers* franchise's fictions have created a wide variety of characters and both the original *Generation One* cartoon series in the 1980s and the live-action films of more recent years have employed those characters to offer an engagement with notions of gender and sexuality. In these fictions, the Transformer and human characters present interesting avenues of examination for these topics. In the Transformer characters, the entire concepts of gender and sexuality are, in the most literal way, constructed. Indeed, many writers within the *Transformers* pantheon have found it difficult to justify the existence of these concepts within the fiction¹. Their technological bodies conform to the stereotype of perfection in both the male and female cases. This perfection belies the complex natures and roles of these characters. Simultaneously, the female humans are presented as a mass of contradictory images ranging from purely sexual objects to strong, independent and capable individuals. In the case of Megan Fox's character, Mikaela Banes, these readings stand in contradistinction to one another within the same character. Human males are also subject to construction along stereotypical lines with the action heroes of Lennox (Josh Duhamel) and Epps (Tyrese Gibson) in the film series and, to some extent, Spike in the original cartoon. These are augmented, however, with the inclusion of characters such as Sam Witwicky (Shia LaBeouf) who is depicted as somewhat incapable and overwhelmed by the enormity of life and the Transformers. He represents a distinctly different construction of modern masculinity than that presented by the military characters. In the following chapter, I shall address gender and sexuality in both female and male Transformer and human characters. In so doing, I shall show the franchise's treatment of both genders in the context of the wider socio-political shifts in the United States in the mid- to late-1980s and again at the end of the twenty-first century's first decade.

¹ Notably, Simon Furman, perhaps the most prolific of *Transformers* comic book writers has expressed this difficulty. He went so far as to create a backstory for the character of Arcee that presents her gender as an aberration resulting from scientific manipulation (Furman & Milne, 2008).

TRANSFORMER GENDER AND SEXUALITY

As they are the primary draw of the franchise, it is only logical for us to begin our examination of gender and sexuality with the Transformers themselves. Female Transformers have been shown to be comparatively rare – with only three such characters appearing in only a single episode during the first two seasons (“The Search for Alpha Trion”, 1985). The likely reason for this is somewhat obvious given the franchise’s origin as a vehicle for the sale of toys to young boys: Hasbro believed that female robots would not be popular with their juvenile male target audience. Indeed, no toy of Arcee – who, as I shall outline, was the primary female Autobot character – was released during the original run of the animated series. During the late 1980s, a plan to repaint of the male character Chromedome’s toy as Arcee was considered and abandoned. Even in the subsequent toy lines that have recreated classic characters using modern toy engineering and techniques no toy of Arcee has been created². However, this has not prevented the eventual creation of female Transformers within the fiction. Across the various films, television series, and other media, only 138 of the thousands of Transformer characters have been designated as female³. Of that number, a total of eight appeared in the original cartoon and four in the live-action film series. In the *Generation One* cartoon, it is Arcee, portrayed by prolific voice actress Susan Blu, that emerged as the leading female character. So defining is Arcee of the female aspect of Transformer gender, that she has remained as the de facto female Autobot for the post-*Generation One* reinventions of the franchise. As can be seen in Figure 3.1, her *Generation One* design is that of a pink, sleek, and decidedly feminine robot with the capacity to transform herself into an equally sleek futuristic vehicle. Thus she is both technological and sexual. In Arcee, then, there is a representation of the consumerist pursuit of sleek – even beautiful – technology. The look and feel of a product has become as important as its function. That the character is a pink and white colour is interesting⁴. The use of this traditionally female colour scheme reinforces Arcee’s femininity and ensures that she can be easily identified as such by those without any prior knowledge about *Transformers*.

² The *Transformers Animated* release of Arcee is clearly based on the original *Generation One* design, but is stylised akin to other figures from that series.

³ Fictionally, this comparative lack of female Transformers has been explained in recent years as being the result of only one of the Thirteen, the race’s founding group, being female. Therefore, one-thirteenth of the Cybertronian population is female.

⁴ It is also worthy of note that the subsequent reinventions of the Arcee character have generally continued to use a pink colour for her. The only contrast comes in her appearance in *Transformers: Prime* (2010-present) wherein she is depicted as a blue motorcycle.



Figure 3.1: Arcee as she appears in the original cartoon series

Arcee's design is the recreation of an idealised female physique. Her body is slender and curved in stark contrast to the other characters introduced at the same time – all of whom were unashamedly male, possessing broad shoulders and chests, and lacking her sleekness. The pink and white colouration, coupled with the high heeled feet, further the creation of a female character. She represents a male designer's idealised female form – one that was repeated in other toy lines aimed at boys in the 1980s such as *GI Joe: A Real American Hero* (1983-1986; 1989-1992) and *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983-1985). Indeed, Floro Dery, the primary designer of the Transformers characters for *The Transformers: The Movie* (1986) has stated that “Arcee is the naked mechanical equivalent of Princess Leia of *Star Wars*” (Coladilla, 2007). It is interesting to note that the design process for *The Movie* began in early 1985, thus the image of the highly sexualised Princess Leia as Jabba the Hutt's metal bikini-clad slave in *Return of the Jedi* (1983) would be relatively fresh in Dery's mind as a science fiction image and as a representation of the female in that genre. Her design adds a certain sexuality that brings to mind the robot Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Like Maria, Arcee is a beautiful feat of engineering on the part of her Quintesson creators while also being heterosexually desirable to her fellow Autobots.

Within the show's narrative, Arcee is the object of Hot Rod's affections in *The Movie* and of Springer in the show's third season following Hot Rod becoming the new Autobot leader, Rodimus Prime. Of course, this denotes a sexuality among the Transformers characters that is as constructed as their gender differentiations. After

all, there is no imperative towards procreation among the Transformers by virtue of their mechanical natures. However, the attitudes displayed by Hot Rod and Springer toward Arcee are far more than the brotherly camaraderie they share with the other Autobots. There is frisson of tension when Hot Rod and Arcee hold each other close to protect one another from an attack by Galvatron and the Sweeps that is added to when the protector role switches between the two (*The Transformers: The Movie*, 1986). This is never replicated when two ostensibly male Autobots seek to shelter each other from a Decepticon assault. In fact, Arcee's two relationships - with Hot Rod and Springer, respectively - represent the greatest suggestion of sexuality in the Transformer race throughout the entirety of the original *Generation One* cartoon series and its accompanying film. It is treated in a throwaway fashion, subservient to the needs of the action within the story. The hints of attraction appear to be included as allusions to backstory for the characters who were not seen in the original animation prior to *The Movie* and thus offer some justification for their becoming the main protagonists of it and the final two seasons of the show. Given the fleeting nature of this suggestion of sexuality, it is difficult to engage in a deeper dialogue with that particular aspect of the Arcee character. However, it appears to suggest an acceptance of the heterosexual relationship paradigm as the norm for Transformers - given the absence of any suggestion of homosexual relationships - even with the lack of any need to reproduce. This paradigm acceptance ties the animated series to the social norms of the time.

Unlike the Maria character, who is "presented as a seductive creature" (Telotte, 1995: 16) seeking to remove from man the capacity of free will and convert us into slaves, Arcee's female nature is far less sinister thanks to her presentation as the far more traditional mother-protector to the human character, Daniel Witwicky. Daniel is Arcee's major concern during the events of *The Movie* while also being shown as encouraging him in his desire to help the Autobots. He is later described as her "dearest friend" and, upon his severely injuring himself and being forced to undertake the conversion into a Headmaster so that he may live, Arcee insists that she be partnered with him ("The Rebirth, Part 1", 1987)⁵. She is thus the constant protector and surrogate mother to Daniel whose biological mother is seen infrequently following *The Movie's* events. (Carly, Daniel's mother, is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.) This reaffirms the femininity of the character by casting her in the traditional womanly role of mother. With her construction as an avatar of female perfection - both in design and behaviour - one would be forgiven for simply dismissing Arcee as a

⁵ See chapter 2.

token female in the Autobot ranks, perhaps introduced in a craven effort to broaden the appeal of the franchise and its accompanying toy line⁶. However, this fails to address other aspects of the character which I shall now outline more thoroughly.

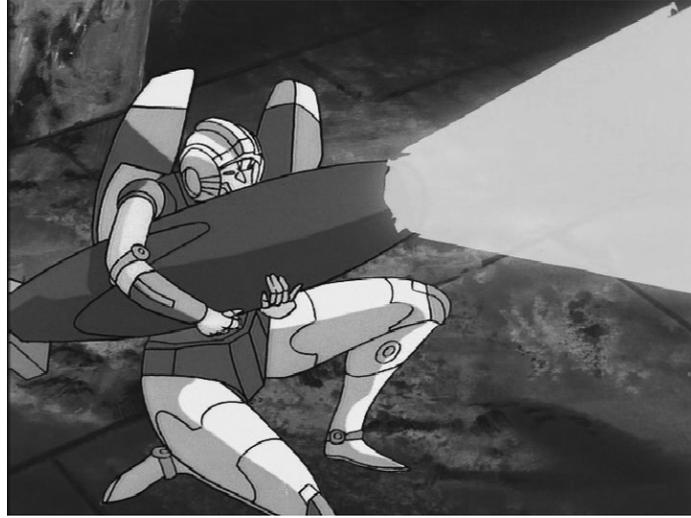


Figure 3.2: Arcee in battle against the Dweller (*The Transformers: "The Dweller in the Depths"*, 1986)

It is important to remember that the period in which Arcee's design and character were conceived was the heyday of action films in general and, more specifically, the rise of the female action hero. Films such as *Red Sonja* (1985), in which Bridgette Nielsen assumes the role of muscular hero, and Sigourney Weaver's role as Ripley in *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986), redefined women in terms that belied the perceived passivity of their gender. Arcee benefits greatly from this redefinition. Her *prima facie* stereotypical construction is undermined by her position in the upper echelons of the Autobot command structure and her capabilities in the field of battle against the Decepticons. During the third season of the cartoon, she is shown to be a key member of Rodimus Prime's command team, accompanying him to the Galactic Olympics ("Five Faces of Darkness, Part 1", 1986) amongst other occasions including diplomatic receptions ("Madman's Paradise", 1986). Arcee is further depicted as being integral to the defence of Autobot City when it comes under assault by Megatron and his forces (*The Transformers: The Movie*, 1986), was part of a small team that prevented calamity when the Quintessons made use of a reanimated Optimus Prime to lure their enemies into an ambush ("Dark Awakening", 1986), was one of two survivors from a confrontation with the monstrous Dweller ("The Dweller in the Depths", 1986), and was part of the team that battled the Hive on Nebulos ("The Rebirth, Parts 1-3", 1986). It

⁶ Despite the absence of an action figure of the character in the concomitant toy line.

is clear, therefore, that Arcee is both female *and* a capable fighter. She is a possessor of female power without the necessity of adopting a masculine physique, thus bringing to mind the characterisations of Ripley in *Aliens* – strong, capable, and feminine without being sexualised – over any of the female bodybuilder stars. Like the live-action stars that this cartoon character is reminiscent of, Arcee can be seen as representing “a contradictory set of images of female desirability, a sexualised female image that emphasises physical strength and stature” (Tasker, 1993: 14). Thus we have the first instances of a female character in the *Transformers* franchise that is explicitly female in her outward appearance and, to some extent, in her behaviours while simultaneously being as capable as any male character when placed in a combat situation. In presenting such a female character, even in robotic form, the original animated series reproduces the altering perceptions of the female and her role in America. Where a few decades earlier she would have been limited to household duties or secretarial positions, the times have changed to allow women greater freedoms.

Female Transformers characters in the live-action film series fare even less well than they did in the original cartoon series. An updated version of Arcee was developed for the first film but was ultimately removed and replaced with Ironhide⁷ as the production team felt that a female Transformer character would be seen as “trying to appease women” and that explaining her female nature would take too much time away from the action of the film (IGN, 2007). She eventually went on to appear in the film’s sequel, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) albeit in a very minor role. In that film, the character appears to occupy three separate bodies, none of which conform to the traditional Transformer bipedal humanoid body type (see Figure 3.3). In fact, while still ostensibly female, there is next to nothing in the design of the Arcee robots to indicate their gender. This, in and of itself, could be seen as an attempt by the film’s makers to remove the issue of gender from the Transformer race and negate the accusations they feared in the making of the first film lest they introduce a female robot character. Indeed, there is no attempt to explain the female nature of Arcee in *Revenge of the Fallen* as was suggested would be necessary by Roberto Orci prior to the sequel entering production. The character’s screen time is limited to her engagement in battles with Decepticons in Shanghai and Egypt; the latter confrontation seems to result in her death. As such, it is difficult to identify any sense of personality that the character may have other than a willingness to sacrifice herself in the defence of humans like any other Autobot (see chapter 1). The character’s limited screen time was

⁷ An absolutely masculine character.

the result of director Michael Bay's stated dislike for the character. Bay is quoted as having said "I didn't like Arcee, so I kill[ed] her later, all right?" (Carroll, 2009). This can be seen as an example of Michael Bay's perceived poor attitude toward women. Shia LaBeouf commented that the shooting style *vis-à-vis* women caused Megan Fox to feel "awkward" (quoted in Keegan, 2011). Thus, in terms of Cybertronians in the films, female characters fared somewhat poorly in terms of their characterisation and presentation, furthering the accusations of misogyny levelled against the series.



Figure 3.3: Arcee's initial design for her abandoned appearance *Transformers* (2007) compared to the toy based on her character model in *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009)

Following on from our look at the female Transformers in the franchise, it is only proper that we now seek to address those characters identified as male robots. The most prominent of these is, of course, the Autobot leader Optimus Prime. Due to the lack of major differences between the character's portrayals in the original *Generation One* cartoon and the live-action film series, he will be analysed as a whole, moving between the animation and the films as necessary.

Optimus Prime's appearance is a clear reference to the classical male body. The basic construction of windows as pectoral muscles and front grill as abdomen has been perpetuated in all incarnations of the character across the numerous iterations of the franchise. It is a powerful appearance that highlights the raw strength inherent in the character while simultaneously reminding one of the physiques possessed by the hyper-masculine action film stars of the 1980s; he is a robotic equivalent of Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Sylvester Stallone, or Jean-Claude Van Damme. Optimus Prime's torso is often emphasised by drawing or shooting the character from lower angles, instantly bringing the eye to these "muscular" areas. As one can see in Figure 3.4, the character's design was subtly altered for the filming of *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011). The redesign alters the grill area to create a distinctly more abdominal

muscle-like section on the character and thus create a “more heroic” appearance (Topel, 2010). This is suggestive of the American popular culture’s continued perception of the hero as a masculine and (at least somewhat) muscular character. Even Prime’s alternate configuration is a distinctly masculine – even muscular – vehicle given its nature as a country-traversing truck⁸ akin to those used for the transport and delivery of goods across vast distances. Both the occupation and the vehicle itself have an inherent “manliness” that is thus conferred to Prime through his construction as being – in part – one of these vehicles.



Figure 3.4: The two designs of Optimus Prime in the live-action films – top image as the character appeared in the first two films (*Transformers* promotional image, 2007); bottom showing the redesigned abdominal area (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011)

Optimus Prime’s body is, like the aforementioned muscular action stars, a spectacle in and of itself. Not only is his robot mode a construction of the muscular

⁸ Being British, I prefer the term “lorry”. However, I will use the American terminology in this case.

masculine ideal – both of the bodybuilding and more simple health-conscious variety – and his vehicular form representative of a masculine way of life, but its capacity to shift between the two is also worthy of note. In the live-action films at least, the inherent capacity for transformation is part of Optimus’ masculinity. The spectacle of vehicles converting into large robots is, after all, one of the franchise’s primary draws. The process is a show of strength and often results in the newly-emerged robot form positioned in an action pose, standing ready to do battle with his Decepticon foes. Furthermore, the character’s body is shown to house internal weapons ranging from projectile and energy weapons to swords and axes that emerge in the course of battle. In this construction, the perfect “man” is a combination of classical body image and the car – a common male obsession.

Within the context of the original cartoon, Optimus Prime was not always the masculine defender of freedom that he appears as during the timeframe of the series. The second season episode “War Dawn” has the Aerialbots travel backwards in time to nine million years in the past where they encounter a dock worker by the name of Orion Pax. Orion is severely damaged in one of the earliest Decepticon attacks. Following a reconstruction procedure and being granted the Matrix of Leadership to become Optimus Prime, he goes on to lead the Autobots (“War Dawn”, 1985). Orion Pax is depicted as a far weaker individual than his later self. His naïve nature leads him to trust Megatron and he is shown as quite unprepared for the inevitable betrayal. As we can see in Figure 3.5, Orion’s design is lacking the muscular definition and inherent power of Optimus Prime with his pectoral-like windows being one single panel across his chest and appearing less broad. His face is softer and smoother, lacking the sharp angles and faceplate of his later self. Furthermore, what could be considered his “hair” is a smooth and flowing mass of blue around his head in stark contrast to the more military-looking “buzz cut” of Optimus Prime. Here, “the muscular male body is a sort of armour” (Tasker, 1993: 18) which converts the weak dock worker into a strong and powerful leader capable of commanding an army in a war for the preservation of freedom in the face of tyranny.

In the process of this transformation into Optimus Prime the character’s voice changes. Orion Pax (voiced by Laurie Faso) has a noticeably younger, softer tone that is in-line with the pre-war naiveté of the character and his less defined design. Upon his re-emergence as Optimus Prime, the strong and commanding tones of Peter Cullen reinforce the newly powerful body he possesses. This conforms with the perception within American popular culture that a leader must be strong of body, mind, and

voice. It is a process we see repeatedly in presidential elections where candidates are dismissed for lacking the so-called “presidential voice” – in short, the tone of command.



Figure 3.5: Optimus Prime through the ages – Orion Pax (*The Transformers: “War Dawn”*, 1985) compared to Optimus Prime (*The Transformers: “Changing Gears”*, 1985)

The body of Optimus Prime, then, is a masculine construction designed to conform to the stereotypes of the muscular hero of American popular entertainment. His physical power is a representation of his ability to command, a necessary armour he must don if he hopes to lead the struggle against the Decepticons. However, Prime’s masculinity is not confined to expressions of physical prowess. In fact, he is a character that advocates compassion above strength. This distinguishes Optimus from the perceived “Reaganite” attitudes of film series such as *Rambo* (1982-2008) (Tasker, 1993: 92). For the various incarnations of Optimus Prime, violence is a thing of last resort⁹. He seeks a diplomatic solution rather than “advertis[ing] ... destructive machismo as the solution to men’s problems” (Chapman & Rutherford, 1988: 28). Rather, Prime’s attitudes are more paternalistic and caring in nature, standing in juxtaposition to the muscular (robotic) physique he shares with other icons of American popular culture. He is created as an ersatz father figure for the child audience, guiding them to strong, compassionate, and morally-grounded adulthood. In this manner, Optimus Prime represents an attempt to reproduce America and its self-proclaimed values. This fictional robot is the personification of the country as its citizens wish to see it: fair and compassionate, but capable of defending itself. The

⁹ This recurring motif has caused some debate within the *Transformers* fan community in light of the live-action movie version of Optimus Prime’s seeming willingness to do battle (cf. *Transformers*, 2007; *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009; *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011).

consistent colouration of Prime – red, white, and blue – serves as an overt reminder of this. Thus, he is both the ideal American male and the ideal of America itself.

HUMAN GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The primary human characters of the *Transformers* franchise also represent an interesting exploration of gender and sexuality in the American socio-political environment. Within the original cartoon series, the number of human characters – and their characterisation – is somewhat limited. In fact, this was specifically described in the show's production bible as the Autobot and Decepticon characters “are the stars and central action figures of the show” (*Transformers Series Bible*, 1984)¹⁰. Therefore, any examination of them is going to be somewhat limited. However, through the show's main humans, we are able to offer some analysis of gender and sexuality in the mid-1980s.

The main human the audience is presented with as a point-of-view character is the young Spike Witwicky. In the first two seasons of the show, Spike is depicted as a fourteen year old who becomes involved with the Transformers' war on Earth following a Decepticon attack on the oil rig he and his father are working on and their subsequent rescue by the Autobots (“More Than Meets the Eye, Part 1”, 1984). He is depicted in attire that matches that of his father – namely a yellow hardhat, simple shirt, jeans, and yellow boots – and serves to identify him as a manual labourer. Spike's muscular physique also ties him to the labourer image while simultaneously linking him to the masculine hero role that he shares with Optimus Prime. He is shown to be perfectly capable of lifting a weapon designed for the supremely powerful robotic hands of the Transformers (“Divide and Conquer”, 1984) and able to carry his injured girlfriend Carly without difficulty for extended periods (“Desertion of the Dinobots, Part 2”, 1985). These expressions of physical capability are both a product of the Spike character's nature as a cartoon creation and an attempt to construct him as another compassionate and strong hero that the series' young male audience should seek to emulate. Thus Spike is a somewhat classic child's cartoon human character akin to the paragons of virtue seen in *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* and *GI Joe: A Real American Hero*. He is masculine, able to defend those he cares for, and virtuous.

¹⁰ This statement can be taken literally as no toys representing the human characters of the *Generation One* series have ever been produced.

Spike's father, the so-called Sparkplug Witwicky – his real name is never revealed – is another example of the *Transformers* franchise's embrace of the character archetype. Here we are presented with a "real man". His masculine nature is not tied to a muscular physique but to his occupation as a mechanic on an oil rig and history of working in highly dangerous environments around the world ("More Than Meets the Eye, Part 3", 1984). Sparkplug's design is complete with clothing matching his son's and a protruding stomach akin to the middle-aged construction workers one imagines involved in the creation of New York's skyscrapers. Thus we are shown masculinity beyond the confines of that inherent in the sculpted bodies of Optimus Prime, Spike, or the action heroes of the period that they are seemingly patterned after. Sparkplug is a far more traditional construction of the male. A single father, powerful as a result of his hard days spent labouring at construction sites, lacking in formal education but still capable of holding down a job and caring for his family. The lack of a wife for Sparkplug, and thus mother to Spike, is never explored within the animated series. Her omission could be ascribed to the similar lack of female Transformers during the first two seasons – namely the desire to target a young male demographic with the series.



Figure 3.6: Carly being carried by Spike (*The Transformers: "Desertion of the Dinobots, Part 2"*, 1985)

Spike's girlfriend Carly is an interesting case within the fictions of the *Transformers*. While I have not addressed her initially, she is the first regular female character shown within the series and thus establishes a pattern for the treatment and depiction of female characters for the rest of the franchise. Far from being a mere

damsel in distress to reinforce the strong, masculine construction of Spike, Carly is shown as an MIT graduate despite being only fifteen at the time of her introduction in the episode “The Immobilizer” (1985). This is not to suggest that Carly’s existence does not serve to highlight the Spike character’s status as a man – as even in her initial appearance she is captured by the Decepticons and requires rescuing by Spike and the Autobots (“The Immobilizer”, 1985) – but it is not the totality of her meaning. Like Arcee’s subsequent appearance amongst the Autobots and Mikaela and (another) Carly, who serve as Shia LaBeouf’s character’s love interests in the live-action series, she is depicted as thoroughly independent of men. On first meeting Spike, Carly is far more interested in Bumblebee than his attempts at wooing her. Her status as an MIT graduate proves vital to the Autobots on numerous occasions (“The Immobilizer”, 1985; “Desertion of the Dinobots, Part 2”, 1985). Therefore, she exists as an individual outside of her relationship and interaction with Spike and represents a growing acceptance of the capabilities of women within the America of the 1980s. While she is not akin to that decade’s action heroines like Arcee, her established education and usefulness to the Autobot cause differentiate her from what one would expect in a male-dominated cartoon aimed at a young male audience. However, upon the advent of the series’ third season – which moves the action to the then-future of 2005 – Carly’s position is recast as a far more traditional mother. In the intervening period within the series’ narrative, Spike and Carly have married and produced a son, Daniel. The third season of the show also marks the rise to prominence of the Arcee character and thus Carly’s new motherhood can be seen as a suitable reason to reduce her importance to the series. Indeed, Carly only appears in three episodes of the thirty-three across seasons three and four and then only in her capacity as Daniel’s mother and Spike’s wife. This alteration on the advent of motherhood, however, is an interesting point. It is possible to see it as a rejection of Carly’s former feminist strength and an embrace of a somewhat chauvinistic belief that women should be caring for their children while the husband works¹¹. As we shall see, this is an attitude that has not been replicated within the female characters in the subsequent iterations of the franchise.

Mikaela Banes, Megan Fox’s character in *Transformers* (2007) and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), has been dismissed as merely a childish construction of the attractive woman – having been deliberately shot in a provocative fashion to appeal to an adolescent sexuality (Keegan, 2011). It is undeniable that she is held up within those films as an example – if not *the* example – of female perfection by both the

¹¹ By this time within the series, Spike has become Earth’s ambassador to Cybertron.

construction of scenes and by the Sam character. For example, when Bumblebee deliberately breaks down, the camera moves slowly over Mikaela's body – her face somewhat shadowed by the hood of the car and all light emphasising her stomach, buttocks, and breasts – as she peers at the engine. Her physical attractiveness is amusingly reinforced in this scene by Sam's shielded exclamation of "Oh my God!" (*Transformers*, 2007). The scene is unrepentant in its intent to highlight Mikaela's sexuality and desirability. She is Sam's ultimate goal in life and one of the primary reasons for his purchasing a car. All of his emotional and sexual desires are made manifest in Mikaela. At this point in the film's narrative, Mikaela is very much defined by her relationship – or, more accurately, lack thereof – with Sam. She is merely an object that he is in pursuit of rather than a character in and of herself. In this introduction, the audience is intended to view her through Sam's eyes and come to desire her in the same manner.



Figure 3.7: Mikaela (Megan Fox) examining Bumblebee's engine (*Transformers*, 2007)

It is after this incident that the character begins to develop into something more than she has been criticised as being. Very quickly we learn that she is, in fact, a skilled mechanic, trained in the esoteric intricacies of vehicle engines by her father. This is a traditionally masculine skillset and profession – indeed, it is one possessed by Sparkplug Witwicky in the cartoon series – and is the first contrast with Mikaela's

obvious feminine attributes. The audience is told that she hides her mechanical capabilities as she knows that “Guys don’t like it when you know more about cars than they do”. Like Arcee and Carly before her, Mikaela’s status as a female is not the full extent of her characterisation. As the film progresses, she is shown to be far more ready for action than Sam. While under attack from the small robot Frenzy, he is shown to run in blind panic (and ultimately managing to lose his trousers) as Mikaela seeks a way of arming herself against the threat, eventually finding an electric saw and severing their assaulter’s head. This continues in the sequel, *Revenge of the Fallen*, wherein Sam screams in shock and terror while being pursued by the previously human-looking Alice. Her characterisation as the first two films’ sex object, then, represents only a superficial analysis of the text. Rather than her initial construction as the girl of Sam’s adolescent dreams, Mikaela represents an independently strong construction of the female and a twenty-first century action heroine. At the climax of the first film, she is seen to throw herself into the battle, providing a method of locomotion for the disabled Bumblebee so that he might continue the assault on the advancing Decepticons.

If she were a more traditional female construct and mere trophy for the central male character, Mikaela would conform to the notion that women in action films “tend to be fought over rather than fighting [for themselves], avenged rather than avenging” (Tasker, 1993: 17). As I have shown above, this is most definitely not applicable to Mikaela and her activities in the film. Her physical attractiveness and the construction of her sexual desirability are secondary to her role as independent female. It is possible to describe the Mikaela character as having been masculinised to some extent so as to be contrasted against and highlight the gradual transformation of the Sam character into a hero and his progression from boy to man. Her skills as a mechanic are traditionally – perhaps even inherently – masculine and her speed in arming herself against the Decepticons suggests an intention to construct the character along strong lines. Thus, she is a twenty-first century reinterpretation of the female action star that Arcee is representative of. Her femininity is highly emphasised with shots akin to that described above and of her draped provocatively over a motorcycle (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009), but these are ultimately employed more to reconfirm Mikaela’s femininity in the face of her later, more heroic appearance rather than to masculinise the character.



Figure 3.8: Carly's (Rosie Huntington-Whitely) introduction (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011)

For the third film in the live-action series, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, Mikaela is replaced by a reinterpretation of the Carly character from the original animation. Like Mikaela before her, she is introduced in a scene that emphasises her feminine nature, sexual desirability, and physical “perfection”. The camera follows Carly’s bare legs as she ascends a staircase, walking as if she were wearing high heels, and wearing one of Sam’s shirts. It is a scene that highlights her female features and establishes her as the new “ideal woman” for the film. Her ideal status is reinforced to us when her employer, Dylan Gould (played by Patrick Dempsey), uses her as an example of the perfect woman his on-display Cabriolet car is designed to evoke. Carly is constructed as far more of a sex object to be battled over by the men in her life than Mikaela was in the previous two films. In addition to such shots as her ascending the staircase, she is also shown in tight-fitting dresses and jeans for most of the film. Sam and Dylan vie for her affections throughout the first half of *Dark of the Moon*’s narrative, with the latter going so far as to kidnap her with the help of his Decepticon allies. However, as with the previous examples of human females in *Transformers* fictions, there are aspects of the character that undermine her initial construction as a mere object of male desire. Primarily, she is the breadwinner in her relationship with Sam. Following her semi-seductive introduction, Carly goes on to offer Sam money for lunch and points out that she will be more inclined to profess her love for him when she is not paying all of their rent herself. Thus, Sam is somewhat emasculated as the role of breadwinner has been traditionally male. That Carly is the primary provider in the relationship is indicative of an acceptance of a changing understanding of the role of women in American society – one that is also seen later in this chapter with the character of Charlotte Mearing (Frances McDormand). Furthermore, Carly is shown to be highly intelligent, having previously served as an assistant to the British ambassador in Washington and placing her into a position wherein she is able to

manipulate Megatron into betraying Sentinel Prime and bringing an end to the Decepticon plan of the film. However, Carly's screen time is quite limited – particularly in contrast to Mikaela. She is employed in the film primarily as a narrative device to encourage and highlight Sam's acceptance of manhood and as an object whose affection can be fought over by Sam and Gould. The character is somewhat masculinised in her depiction as the primary earner in her relationship with Sam, but never moves particularly far beyond the bounds of her femininity.

The necessity for Carly to move beyond the bounds of the female role is limited because of the inclusion of Frances McDormand's character, Charlotte Mearing, in *Dark of the Moon*. In the previous chapter I discussed Mearing's role as the central politician character of the film, here I believe it is worthwhile to offer some analysis of her role as a woman. Despite being a female in the highly pressured and politically powerful position of Director of National Intelligence, Mearing is seen to frequently dismiss notions of her femininity. At various points in the film, characters are rebuked for addressing her as "ma'am" and she quietly threatens Simmons (John Turturro) in order to ensure that he makes no mention of their past relationship. Furthermore, on her entry to the NEST headquarters, she is seen swapping her shoes for far less feminine trainers. It is possible to see this trait as a commentary on perceptions that women in high office must sacrifice their femininity in order to achieve their ambition. Her command of NEST is firmly underlined when Lennox is seen to defer to her. The only commentary on her womanhood comes when Carly questions it after being instructed not to call Mearing "ma'am" – this is met with a raised and dismissive eyebrow from Mearing. Therefore, the character of Mearing is highly masculinised and her lack of femininity appears to be tied to her powerful position.



Figure: 3.9: Sam (Shia LaBeouf) in his more adolescent attire of *Transformers* (2007) and his adult self in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011)

Undoubtedly, the main character of the film series is Sam Witwicky, portrayed by Shia LaBeouf. He is depicted in the first film as a teenager desperate for some semblance of traditional normalcy – which is represented by the buying of a car and winning the affections of a girlfriend – and lacking the expressions of masculinity inherent in Optimus Prime or Josh Duhamel’s character, Lennox. Indeed, as I have suggested above, Sam’s initial reactions when confronted with the presence of the Transformers are ones of fear and panic. He comically flees on his mother’s bicycle from Bumblebee and screams in horror when he and Mikaela are pursued by Barricade and Frenzy (*Transformers*, 2007). He is not the masculine hero of the popular consciousness and, in the first two films, shares more in common with the hero-nerd trope of the *Back to the Future* series (1985-1990) or the teen comedy genre. Time and circumstance force him into action. Throughout the first two films, he is somewhat unwilling to be drawn into the conflict and is at the whims of events beyond his control. His clothing in the initial two films reinforces Sam’s nonconformity with the traditional heroic stereotype. He is dressed in variations of common teenage and student garb, namely t-shirts, hoodies, and jeans. However, the three films represent an evolution for Sam’s character that shows his emergence into an individual that more accurately conforms to the heroic mode. By *Dark of the Moon* his teenage clothing has been replaced by shirts, suits, and a leather jacket. Sam is also no longer found screaming and has accepted his role in the Transformers’ war. Indeed, he is determined to find a way to ensure that he remains involved in the on-going conflict between Autobot and Decepticon. Thus, he is shown developing into a man. It is in this third film that Sam picks up a weapon – both a gun and a piece of shrapnel – and engages in a real fight of his own. Therefore, in Sam we are shown a sense of masculinity that is far different from that shown in Optimus Prime or even the male human characters of the *Generation One* cartoon series and films. His physique is not muscular and his attitudes are not hardened by war. Sam is a representation of the man searching to identify his place in the world and a masculinity that is not defined by levels of machismo.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As such, within the *Generation One* cartoon series, it is possible to identify a construction of gender and gender roles within the socio-political environment of

America as represented in the popular culture output of the mid-1980s. Females are shown to exist outside of the roles defined by their relationships with men – at least prior to their having children – and do so in seeming happiness. In fact, their individualisation is shown as being beneficial within the *Transformers* fiction as it allows Carly to serve as the occasional problem-solver for the Autobots and Arcee to develop strength on the battlefield that can rival any of the ostensibly male robots. Furthermore, Arcee is depicted as having a quite senior role in the Autobot political and military hierarchy. While women are still sites of sexuality, they are not completely defined by their desirability to males. Indeed, Carly's capacity to reinforce Spike's masculinity appears to be secondary to her character. Within the live-action films, the leading female human characters are shown to be possessors of physical beauty juxtaposed with borderline masculine roles that create a modern interpretation of the female action hero of the 1980s, allowing them to perform roles that highlight Sam's development. Within the narratives of the three live-action films, the main females are linked with Sam to create "a central couple fighting for survival in a world thrown into trauma and chaos by the arrival of an alien force" (Cornea, 2007: 47), but their fighting is not dependent on Sam. To be female, then, does not automatically confirm weakness or passivity. And, in the case of Charlotte Mearing, the audience is presented with a woman in a powerful political position – albeit with the seeming side-effect of needing to deny her feminine nature. Males remain mostly defined by their masculine natures. Their bodies are sites of strength, muscles serving as a necessary armour against the perils they must face and the enemies that oppose them. Optimus Prime's designs in both the original series and the newer live-action films are representations of the idealised male heroic body. He is the ultimate hard-bodied hero and yet is presented as deeply moral and paternal. Amongst humans, the masculine hero stereotype role in the films is more occupied by the military characters working with the Autobots and, specifically, William Lennox. Here, we are shown a traditional, one-dimensional hero in the form of a man battling to ensure the survival of his family, country, and planet. Lennox, while not possessing the overly-muscled physique of his mid-1980s contemporaries, is possessing attitudes that are not dissimilar to theirs. Sam represents an examination of modern males that are desperately seeking a place for themselves in the world. Therefore, we are shown the complex nature of gender and sexuality in the American popular consciousness.

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Chapter 4

TRANSFORMERS AND AMERICA IN THE WORLD: ROLES AND PERCEPTIONS

Up until this point, I have engaged exclusively with the *Transformers* franchise's engagement with the domestic socio-political environment and problems in America. However, the franchise has engaged with issues outside of the United States' borders. Over the course of the original cartoon series' run, *Transformers* addressed such issues as America's right to intervene in so-called "failed states" overseas, the importance of oil to the transnational political arrangement, and Arab belligerence towards to the United States. This has not been abandoned in the Michael Bay-directed live-action film trilogy. In this chapter, I shall seek to examine these key issues as they are presented in the *Transformers* narrative, moving between the *Generation One* and movie interpretations, to show how it has constructed an image of the role and perceptions of America in the world. Primarily, the chapter is divided into two sections. The first addresses American interventionism and the myth of the self that is inherent in the portrayals of Autobot and American missions in foreign countries in the original cartoon and the film series. The second section examines the portrayal of Arabs and Arab nations in these two iterations of the franchise.

"SOLVING HUMAN CONFLICTS": THE RIGHT TO INTERVENTION

As far back as the mid-1960s, stemming from the nation's role in bringing the Second World War to a conclusion and its involvement in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, American foreign policy had begun to be expressed in terms of creating and sustaining democracies in other countries. Built upon notions such as democratic peace theory, the United States' foreign policy has been clearly intent on "making the world safe for democracy by ways and means drawn directly from the American political tradition" (Bundy, 1964: 3). This stated goal has led the United States to engage in intervention missions overseas – occasionally without the approval of the international community¹

¹ As was the case with the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

- in efforts to ensure the spread of democracies and support their own hegemony within the international system. The Autobots, being as they are embodiments of the United States², have adhered to America's foreign policy objectives quite closely. While the global role that the United States has outlined for itself is contentious outside of America, it remains a key aspect of the nation's foreign policy.

In the *Generation One* animated series, the Transformers characters are shown to enter the territory of sovereign nations without seeking consent or even informing local governments of their intentions. During the show, they are depicted entering Burma ("More Than Meets the Eye, Part 2"; "More Than Meets the Eye, Part 3", 1984), the Arctic ("Fire in the Sky", 1984), Peru ("Fire on the Mountain", 1984), Russia ("Thief in the Night", 1986), an unnamed Arab nation ("Aerial Assault", 1985), and the fictional - and offensively named - Carbombya ("Five Faces of Darkness, Part 1"; "Thief in the Night", 1986) without permission. Indeed, in the case of Carbombya they are given an explicit order not to land. (The latter two nations are explored in more detail in the next section of this chapter.) However, all of these actions have been the result of a precipitating Decepticon attack or some other nefarious event within those nations. Thus, this violation of national sovereignty is presented to the viewer as a moral imperative based upon the Autobots' collective liberal political philosophy and obligations to preserve human life³. It is possible to see this as a replication of the United States' stated need for provocation prior to intervention. In all of the above cases of the *Generation One*-era Autobots entering countries uninvited⁴, the human populations have been shown to be woefully under-equipped to effectively end the Decepticon threat. Little to no national military response to the enemy robots' actions is shown. The three instances wherein local humans have sought to address the threat come in the form of a girl from the local area aiding the Autobots when Megatron's forces invade Peru ("Fire on the Mountain", 1984), a disguised and deposed Prince falling in with the Aerialbots when the Decepticons employ local rebels to seize control of the nation's oil fields ("Aerial Assault", 1985), and the Russian military's incorrectly blaming the Autobots for the theft of the Kremlin ("Thief in the Night", 1986). This is entirely in line with the construction of American foreign policy as a morality-based ethical imperative (Lagon, 1997: 235). Indeed, when presenting the arguments for foreign policy activities to the American people, US presidents have routinely "cast

² Despite the fact that, as a fictional political society, the Autobots are not a democracy.

³ Which is explored in chapter 1.

⁴ "Invasion" is too strong a word given the inherent lack of hostile intent on the Autobots' part and thus replicated the United States' self-image of its interventions as not being military in nature.

[their positions] in terms of grand narratives of ‘good against evil’, ‘freedom against tyranny’, and ‘civilisation against barbarism’” with the United States as “the embodiment of freedom and liberty” in the world (Jackson & Nexon, 2003: 145-146). *Transformers* fictions, then, reproduce this perception of American intervention overseas as humanitarian operations that are in the best interests of the people of those nations rather than activities that are in the United States’ interests.

This perception is continued and significantly expanded upon in the modern live-action movies. In all three of the films, there is at least some form of overseas intervention depicted. Considering the film trilogy’s representation of a contemporary world and all of the post-9/11 political and international implications that entails, we are shown something of an international environment that “seem[s] deeply troubled, with daily reports of bombings, terror plots, rogue states, and civil strife” (Zakaria, 2008: 7) conjoined with a recognition that “America’s reputation in poorer countries, particularly in the Middle East, [is] particularly badly damaged” (McKay, 2009: 421). Thus we are placed in a world mimicking the real one.

The first film introduces us to the key military characters during their return to a US base in the Qatari desert. In addition to the army personnel living and working on the base, the audience is introduced to a young Qatari boy, Mahfouz⁵ (Ashkan Kashanchi), who appears to have been adopted by the team and is allowed to roam freely throughout the base. He is depicted as warm and friendly with Lennox, offering water on the team’s arrival back at the base. Following Blackout’s attack and the destruction of the base, Mahfouz leads them back to his hometown so that Lennox can use his father’s telephone to contact their superiors about the Transformer threat. They are welcomed into this town and proceed to defend it and the inhabitants when Scorponok launches an attack (*Transformers*, 2007). From this, it is possible to extrapolate a certain view of how America believes – or hopes – itself to be perceived in the world. This perception is one of a friendly, ultimately benevolent nation that seeks to improve the quality of life and personal situations of people living in the countries in which they establish a presence. Even when the town is left devastated from the combination of Scorponok’s assault and the American retaliation, there is nothing to suggest that there is any unhappiness with the US military presence. Any death or reactions to the destruction by the populace takes place off-camera; like the propaganda films of the past, the consequences are left unsaid. In this fiction, we begin

⁵ A name which means “the protected one” in Arabic. This is somewhat indicative of his role amongst the US forces.

to see the films' attempt to represent American foreign policy as a purely selfless endeavour in a manner that better befits the ostensible heroes of the text. However, it is interesting to note that by March 2007 – four years after the beginning of the war in Iraq and the year of *Transformers'* release – 49% of Americans believed the war to be the wrong decision (as opposed to 43% supporting the conflict) and 56% believed it to be going badly (Pew Research Center, 2008). One could argue, then, that at this point in time, the filmmakers were attempting to restore a positive perception of America and its global role in both the eyes of both the American people and others overseas.



Figure 4.1: The Qatari town the military flees to on the destruction of their base (*Transformers*, 2007)

Like its predecessor, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) opens with a focus on the military characters. Rather than the team returning to base and dreaming of home as in the first film, the sequel depicts a covert NEST military operation underway in Shanghai. As narration from Optimus Prime informs the viewer of the changes that have taken place in the two years since the end of the first film – namely the formation of NEST and the joint human-Autobot mission to defend Earth against the Decepticons – the area is sealed off by Chinese police and NEST moves in to combat the two Decepticons disguised, respectively, as a construction vehicle and an Audi car. The sealing of the area is the sole involvement of the Chinese in the ensuing action. No Chinese military forces are shown supporting the operation or on the ground with the NEST team; the entire operation is overseen from the Pentagon. The engagement is, quite literally, left up to the Americans. However, the existence of a Chinese cover story for the operation and the police's actions in sealing off the surrounding area indicate that the NEST intervention is quite welcome and even invited. We see here the myth of indispensability.

It is interesting to note that this operation also appears to recreate some aspects of the war movie genre and indicates a somewhat casual attitude to overseas destruction. Firstly, while the team prepares themselves, a rusted and battered ice cream truck scouts around the area. This incongruous vehicle is the combined alternate mode of twin Autobots named Skids and Mudflap. Adorning the side of the truck are the usual stickers advertising ice creams and a banner with the Decepticon logo with the phrase “suck my popsicle!” (see Figure 4.2) written alongside in a manner similar to the comments and slogans seen on the helmets of American soldiers during the Vietnam War and replicated in war movies based on the conflict or those replete with its imagery such as *Aliens* (1986). The other Autobots and soldiers are then depicted arriving in helicopters or military Humvees, their faces grimly determined. They are constructed at this moment as American warriors, sent overseas because it is in the nation’s vital interests to address the Decepticon threat. During the course of the battle in Shanghai, buildings and roads are destroyed with a seeming casual abandon – potentially replicating the recklessness some nations have accused the American military of possessing. If we compare the Shanghai operation to the depiction of battles within America during the film series there is a clear distinction. Indeed, within *Revenge of the Fallen* itself there is a contrast. When the Decepticons arrive on Earth, they destroy an American air craft carrier in the process. This destruction is shown in slow, mournful shots of the massive vessel breaking in two and sinking. As the devastation continues, attack planes and sailors fall deeper into the Atlantic Ocean around the ship. Reactions to this destruction on a news programme and within the Pentagon are sombre and subdued. Meanwhile, the events in Shanghai are merely described as “a mess” by Galloway, the National Security Advisor with consideration apparently focussed on the very public appearances of the hitherto classified Autobots rather than the loss of life. However, as this comment comes from the instantly unlikable Galloway (as described in chapter 2) it is not taken seriously by the characters around him or the audience and his intent is to use the events of the operation in China to assert his own authority over NEST rather than to point out the shortcomings in the execution of the mission. Here it is possible to see the Shanghai intervention as being conducted not because it was in the vital interest of the Chinese, but because it was in America’s interests. Thus the scene is cognisant of the fact that the United States undertakes missions which are in its own interests above even the myth of indispensability to the world’s defence against existential threats to humanity. The security of America is the true concern.



Figure 4.2: The sticker adorning Skids and Mudflap's vehicle mode (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009)

Revenge of the Fallen concludes with the Decepticon plan to reactivate an ancient device – hidden within an Egyptian pyramid – which is capable of extinguishing the Sun reaching fruition. Against orders, NEST lands a strike force in Egypt and proceeds to combat the Decepticons. Once again, NEST (read America) is given sole responsibility for ensuring the defence of the planet when helicopters containing soldiers from Egypt and Jordan are shot down by the Decepticons – further reinforcing America's perceived indispensability to the cause of humanity's defence. In the course of NEST and the Autobots' battle against the Decepticons and their plan, the Egyptian town near the pyramid is levelled by American bombers targeting the enemy robots. The attack is successful in destroying many of the Decepticon soldiers – and is devastating enough to cause the enormously powerful Decepticon leader, Megatron, to flee – but appears to leave nothing of the town intact. Furthermore, a destroyer ship in the Gulf fires its experimental rail-gun at the pyramid housing the ancient device. In the process, it further damages an ancient wonder of the world that had already been partially destroyed by the Decepticons in their zeal to expose the solar harvester inside. These are the costs of war, the necessary sacrifices that must be made in the effort to ensure freedom and security. This is demonstrated in the congratulatory aftermath of the battle. No regrets are expressed, only joy at having won and being alive. It is a further depiction of the perception that the United States military does what they believe they must to defend the homeland – and, in this case, the home *world* – from the existential threats to human existence that continue to present themselves.

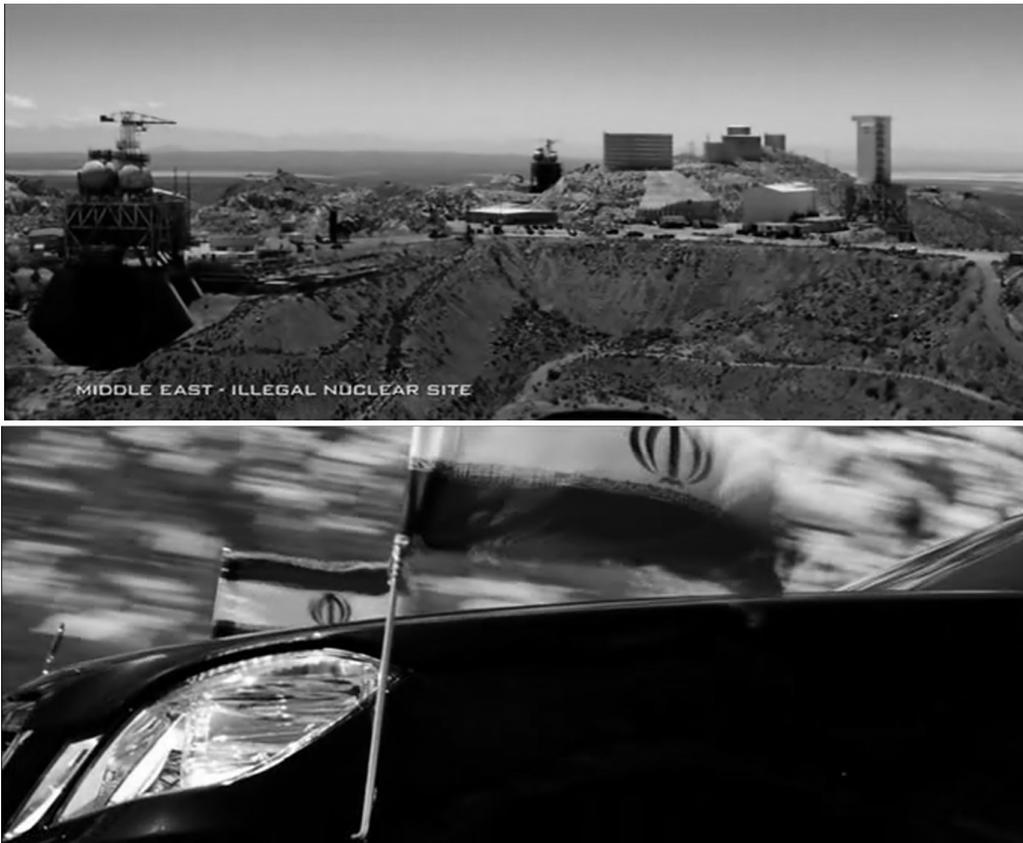


Figure 4.3: (Top) The Middle Eastern nuclear facility; (bottom) the Autobot Que disguised as the nation's Defence Minister's car (*Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, 2011)

The third film, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), is notable for its comparative lack of time spent outside of the United States. Both instances of American intervention in this film occur within the first twenty minutes of the 154-minute running time. In the first instance, the Autobots are shown to be taking it upon themselves to, in the words of Optimus Prime, “assist [their] allies in solving human conflicts” in an effort to “prevent mankind from bringing harm to itself”. The Autobots Bumblebee, Dino, Que (disguised as the Defence Minister's car), and Sideswipe are shown approaching an “illegal nuclear facility” in an unnamed Middle Eastern country – but is obviously intended to be Iran given the presence of inverted Iranian flags on Que's vehicle mode. By virtue of Que's disguise, they are allowed through the gates and proceed to subdue the troops guarding the facility before destroying it. Here we see a recognition and representation of the continued fear of the nuclear weapon in American society⁶ reinforced by its possession by a “rogue state”. Furthermore, there is a reference to America's capacity for covert intervention in this scene – which ties in with the larger narrative of *Dark of the Moon* with the use of Decepticon-controlled human operatives. The mission is highly classified and is

⁶ See chapter 2.

shown to cause international tensions. While the films revel in America's military power, here there is a recognition of the role of covert missions in sustaining American hegemony.

Dark of the Moon continues this identification of nuclear fears by moving the story from this destruction of a nuclear facility to Ukraine and Chernobyl, site of one of only two Level 7 events on the International Atomic Energy Agency's International Nuclear Event Scale and widely considered to be "the world's worst nuclear accident" (Black, 2011). As the team arrives in the town, we linger over the famous images of the disaster including abandoned and rusted playground rides, the recognisable Ferris wheel, and the derelict school. We are told how the city "won't be liveable in for another 20,000 years". However, NEST has been invited here because the post-disaster recovery teams have discovered that the true source of the accident was an engine part recovered from the crashed Autobot ship on the moon that went critical during experiments to harness its power. Despite their invitation by the Ukrainian Department of Energy, America is once again depicted as the only nation with the capacity to deal with the problem posed by the engine part. Not only is the United States militarily superior then, it is also more scientifically knowledgeable. Once again, the invitation demonstrates a certain belief in America's indispensability to the other nations of the world. The Ukrainian government did not turn to the International Atomic Energy Agency or the European Union or to Russia, it sought out America and NEST.

Within the narrative of the trilogy, by the time of *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, the NEST alliance has been formed between the Autobots and military. NEST is, *prima facie*, an international organisation constructed along the lines of the American penchant for establishing military coalitions in support of its interventions. However, we are shown only one non-American soldier during the events of *Revenge of the Fallen* – a British Special Forces officer – and it appears exclusively US-operated by the time of *Dark of the Moon*. This is taken further when one considers the location of NEST's headquarters. In *Revenge of the Fallen*, the alliance is situated at the joint American-British base on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Come the time of *Dark of the Moon*, however, the NEST central headquarters have been moved to Washington, D.C., and is disguised as a building operated by the Department of Health and Human Services. This can be combined with the lack of a Chinese military response to the Decepticons in Shanghai and Ukrainian forces at Chernobyl to create a perception and construction of America and its soldiers as the only military force capable of standing alongside the

Autobots in the defence of the planet against the Decepticon threat. America's "'manifest destiny' as the embodiment of freedom and liberty" in the world (Jackson & Nexon, 2003: 145) is here reproduced through the indispensable and superior nature of its military power⁷. It is the role of America to fight and die in the name of freedom. It is possible to see the film series as advocating that the United States operate unilaterally because of this clear and whole-hearted embrace of the notion that America is truly indispensable. However, I would argue that the films instead seek to rehabilitate American interventionism in the eyes of the US citizenry and the world at large.

The composition of NEST and the interventions that have been depicted in the course of Michael Bay's film trilogy serve "to rejuvenate myths about the benevolence of US foreign policy" (Markovitz, 2004: 212) in a manner similar to other films of the immediate post-9/11 era such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *The Sum of All Fears* (2002). The events of 11 September, 2001, offered new justifications for intervention overseas; overseas problems suddenly became domestic concerns. As a result, "in the United States, the new millennium began not on January 1, 2000, but on September 11, 2001" (Levine & Pappas, 2005: 259). Prior to that event, America had been continuing as it always had. With the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, there was a recognition that the United States had become hated in some nations and its position had been steadily eroding for years. The decline in other nations' trust of America has led to a renewed emphasis on humanitarian aid and intervening in crises. All of which are, ultimately, in the interest of American survival and security, but also serve to restore trust. In the face of this more pronounced anti-American sentiment, *Transformers* and its sequels has constructed a perception of America as the one truly indispensable nation in the fight against all evils, be they Decepticon or human in nature.

ABDUL FAKKADI, CARBOMBYA, AND NEGATIVE ARAB STEREOTYPING

As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, the original *Transformers* animated series explored two Arab nations during the course of its episodes. During the third season, the series created the character of Abdul Fakkadi and the country he rules, Carbombya. The nation is "a pastiche Arab state" constructed as a "backward tin-pot dictatorship

⁷ This is another expression of the film series' borderline fetishisation of the military and its strength.

with a great supply of oil” (Kooi, 2010: 14) that appears to be a deliberate attempt to reference the real-world nation of Libya and its leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. During the mid-1980s, Libya and the terrorist organisations that it supported were the enemy *du jour* of the United States and its Western allies. During the era of Ronald Reagan’s presidency and the concurrent creation and transmission of the original *Generation One* cartoon series, tensions between the United States and Libya were high. This included the American embargo against importing Libyan-produced oil from 1982 onwards, and the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi under Operation El Dorado Canyon following the attack on a nightclub in West Berlin by Libyan extremists in 1986. The series goes so far as to make reference to the (ostentatiously) long official name for Libya under Gaddafi – namely the Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya⁸ – by having Abdul Fakkadi repeatedly proclaim that his nation is “the Socialist Democratic Federated Republic of Carbombya”. The likening of Carbombya to Libya is furthered in its status as an oil-producing nation (“Thief in the Night”, 1986). This oil is said to be particularly pure and produces a very strong variant of the Transformer fuel energon – to the point where it is referred to as “super-energon” in the episode and shown to be able to dramatically reduce the estimated repair time for the damaged Decepticon Trypticon. Hence we see the socio-political importance of oil represented in *Transformers* fictions and the wealth it grants nations that produce it. In the constant Decepticon theft of oil to make energon, the audience further recognises its value. Furthermore, we are shown statues and paintings of Fakkadi highly reminiscent of those made in the likeness of Colonel Gaddafi and other such leaders.



Figure 4.4: Abdul Fakkadi demanding the Autobots’ assistance after his alliance with the Decepticons turns sour (*The Transformers: “Thief in the Night”*, 1986)

⁸ A word which literally means “peopledom”.

Like Colonel Gaddafi and his country, Abdul Fakkadi and Carbombya are depicted as the source of both threat and humour. On his first appearance, he is shown desperately attempting to prevent the Autobots Outback and Blaster from landing in his country to search for Decepticons (“Five Faces of Darkness, Part 1”, 1986). At this point in the narrative of the series, the Decepticons have fallen on hard times with the apparent demise of their leader Galvatron and having been driven from Cybertron by the victorious Autobots (*The Transformer: The Movie*, 1986). As such, the characters Ramjet and Dirge have taken to hiding in their alternate, jet configurations and pretending to be part of Fakkadi’s air force. Abdul Fakkadi is shown shouting into a microphone at Blaster and Outback, reeling off a list of his titles – “Supreme Military Commander, President-for-Life, and King of Kings”⁹ – and commenting that the Autobots are guilty of “fanaticism” and are “irrational”. It is Fakkadi’s behaviour that is somewhat irrational and humorous as he throws the microphone at his aides in annoyance when it is clear that his protestations will not prevent the Autobots from landing and searching for the Decepticons they suspect to be in hiding in Carbombya. He denies all knowledge when the two Decepticons make their escape and it remains unstated whether he was truly aware of their activities. In Fakkadi’s second appearance in the episode “Thief in the Night”, he refers to himself in the third person and is seen to ride camels everywhere despite his position as the absolute ruler of the country. Furthermore, his plan during the episode is to use the Decepticons to steal the major tourist attractions of other nations to kick start the Carbombyan tourist industry. In exchange for the super-energon created from refining Carbombya’s oil, Trypticon is shown stealing Fort Knox, the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, and the Kremlin and returning them to Fakkadi. This depiction of Arabs as figures of fun with little to no redeeming qualities has caused accusations of the original *Generation One* series engaging in negative stereotyping of Arabs. In this, the series concurs with other American entertainment wherein “demeaning depictions [of Arabs] prevail... [A] narrow range of stereotypes reduces Muslims and Arabs to lecherous sheiks with undeserved oil wealth or demonic Middle Eastern terrorists” (Zywietz, 2011: 185). It is likely that use of these stereotypes was made because of their ubiquity and, as such, they quickly established Fakkadi as “bad”.

⁹ Again, this references Gaddafi’s accumulation of titles and further links the character to Idi Amin, another dictatorial leader.

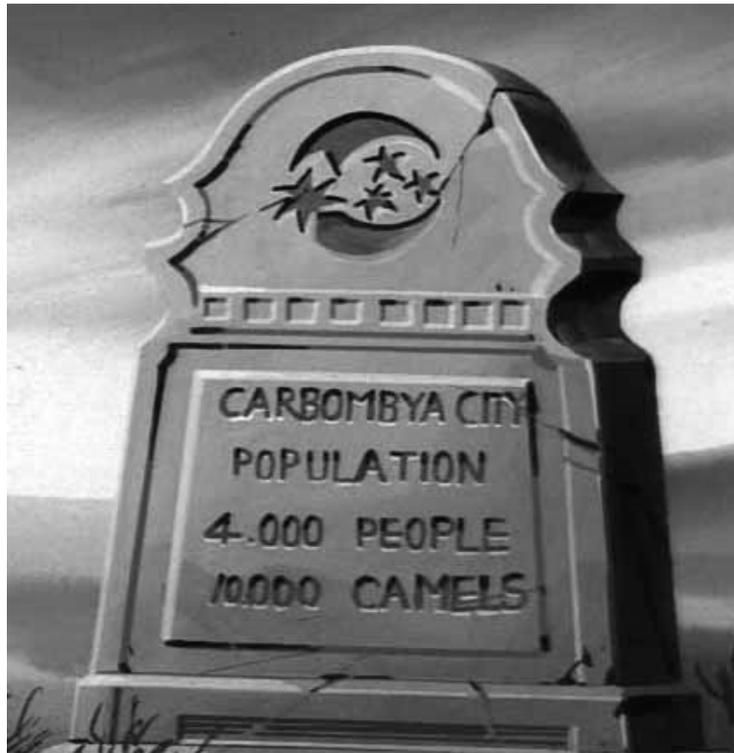


Figure 4.5: A marker shown outside Carbombya's capital city (*The Transformers: "Thief in the Night"*, 1986)

This accusation of negative stereotyping is reinforced by the (apparently intended as humorous) fascination the characters in Carbombya have with camels and other animals. As can be seen in Figure 4.5, the marker showing the population of the capital city lists the number of camels as well as people. Furthermore, at the conclusion of "Thief in the Night", Rodimus Prime and the other Autobots have removed the Decepticons from the country after they turned against Fakkadi. After Rodimus requests that Abdul Fakkadi have nothing further to do with the Decepticons, he replies:

FAKKADI: You have my word of honour, Rodimus. In fact, I swear to you on the grave of my mother's camel, and my uncle's goat, even my sister's donkeys. And did I say my brother's sheep? And my nephew's roosters? Such fine roosters you never did see!

("Thief in the Night", 1986)

As one can imagine, there are some that found this characterisation quite offensive. The depiction of Carbombya and Abdul Fakkadi were cited as reasons for Casey Kasem – who had voiced Bluestreak, Cliffjumper, and Teletraan I, the Autobots' computer – resigning from the show. After reading the script, noticing the negative

stereotypes present within it, and identifying an absence of “any good Arabs in the script” to counteract the negative, Kasem decided that he, “in good conscience, ...couldn’t be a part of th[e] show” (Kasem, 1990: 7). This builds upon the depiction of an Arab country seen in the late season two *Transformers* episode, “Aerial Assault” (1985). In that story, the Decepticons are seen supporting a coup against Prince Jumal¹⁰ in exchange for control of “the Middle East oil fields”. In this episode, the majority of the Arab characters are depicted stealing parts from aeroplanes and cars or having been involved in a coup d’état against the rightful ruler of the country. Their redeeming qualities are nowhere to be found and their negatives emphasised by showing them abusing the disguised Jumal and “demonstrate[ing] a total absence of regret, remorse, or restraint” (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008: 62). Only the deposed Prince Jumal is depicted in a favourable manner. In this, the original *Transformers* series recreates the then-prevalent negative stereotyping of Arabs that Kasem discusses in his “Arab Defamation in the Media” article.

This somewhat negative perception of Arab peoples is continued in the live-action series. *Revenge of the Fallen* depicts the characters of Sam (Shia LaBeouf), Mikaela (Megan Fox), Leo (Ramon Rodriguez), and Simmons (John Turturro) on a quest to locate the Matrix of Leadership. At a border crossing, they encounter a guard (portrayed by Deep Roy) who demands to see their passports. He is mocked for his short stature and allows them to pass through the checkpoint without further checks based only on Simmons’ status as a resident of New York City. The other Arab character in the film is shown having found Theodore Galloway after Lennox and other soldiers forcibly eject him from a transport plane. The character is shown exasperating Galloway by answering his question about where they are by saying only “United States”. Arabs, then, are little better thought of in the representations of the world seen in the modern live-action *Transformers* films as they were in the original cartoon series of the mid-1980s. Their construction as figures of fun in the films may, in fact, be a reaction to modern fear of Arabs in the United States stemming from the national identities of those involved in the 9/11 attacks. Indeed, under the provisions of the Patriot Act introduced in the aftermath of 11 September, 2001, more than 1,200 people had been arrested on terrorism-related grounds by the year of *Revenge of the Fallen’s* opening, the majority of whom were of Arab descent (McKay, 2009: 287). Thus, there continues to be a trend of negative stereotyping in regards to Middle Eastern nations and their inhabitants that suggests a reaction to the threats that the United

¹⁰ This is the spelling used in the episode’s script as opposed to the correct “Jamal”.

States perceives as being arrayed against its interests and position from that region. In the past, the threat was Libyan-sponsored terrorist groups; now the threat has become stateless actors that make their homes in the Middle East.

It is possible that this construction of Arabic characters in both the original animation and the modern film series is another attempt at constructing justification for intervention. In cases presented in *Generation One*, both Prince Jumal's nation and Cabombya are oil-rich. During the mid-1980s, the oil crises of the previous decade would have been relatively fresh memories in the minds of the production team. Furthermore, this was still the period of the Cold War, and both the United States and Soviet Union required access to oil in order to remain competitive. As mentioned above, the series reinforces the importance of oil to the United States on a regular basis. When they are shown squandering or stealing the oil from one another, the American child viewer is presented with the option to consider how much more efficiently the United States would use the vital substance. With the film series, this reading is more problematic thanks to the absence of references to oil and its importance to the US and global economy. However, the creation of Arabs as figures of fun and lacking the amenities of the West could present the opportunity to construct any interventions as being humanitarian and thus reiterating the intent of rehabilitating interventionism in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The original cartoon series – given its origins as a product of the Cold War era of American and international politics – contains references to, and representations of, the United States' role in the world. The Autobots are shown entering into foreign countries in a style highly reminiscent of America's military interventions throughout the period. The live-action film series also recognised the fact that the “the United States continues to battle increasing global hostility” (Chua, 2007: 288) in the twenty-first century. Both of these iterations of the *Transformers* franchise make attempts to conform to – and even reinforce – the myth of indispensability that America appears to possess. The interventions undertaken by the Autobots and the American military in *Transformers'* fictional narratives also recreate the reasoning behind the interventions that is often espoused by United States presidents in their justifications for sending troops overseas. The American people, via televised addresses and interviews, are told

of the United States' requirement to assist those in need. It is frequently constructed as a humanitarian endeavour. From this starting point, the original cartoon series created a depiction of Arab states as being oil-rich but populated by thieves and revolutionaries willing to work with the Decepticons to attain power and individuals with fragile grips on reality in the form of Abdul Fakkadi and his caricature of Muammar Gaddafi. This, of course, offers a secondary justification for intervention in the minds of the demographic targeted by *Generation One* by emphasising oil's importance to the Transformers and depicting those living in the region as being dangerous to the continued supply of oil. In the live-action films, these justifications for intervention also restore the faith of the American people in the righteousness of their nation's international role. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the continued mistrust of America overseas, various films have sought to restore the myth of America's indispensability and moral certitude for both the general US citizenry and those living elsewhere.

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Conclusions

At this time, I believe it is important to return to the original questions and hypotheses posed at the start of this investigation. I set out to establish whether or not the *Transformers* franchise's narratives engage in a discussion of the political. Proceeding from that questioning, I outlined an intention to identify how this was done and the differences between the socio-political reproductions and representations offered in both the original animated series and the live-action films. Furthermore, I would seek to show whether they represented an acceptance of the social and political norms of the times of their production. Through this analysis, I intended to dispute Marco DiPaolo's limited analysis of the series' potential in his *War, Politics, and Superheroes* (2011: 39-40) and offer a more complex and nuanced understanding of the brand's fictions that moves beyond the underlying intention of advertising toys to children. Ultimately, my contention was simply that the franchise *does* engage with the political within the context of its narratives and that, through this, it offered a representation and reproduction of the United States.

Of course, thanks to the vast nature of the *Transformers* franchise and the nebulous concept of American socio-politics, a certain narrowing was absolutely necessary. Following DiPaolo's lead and the fact that they are arguably the most dominant *Transformers* continuities (cf: Introduction; Box Office Mojo, 2007, 2009, 2011), my attentions were focussed on *Generation One* and Michael Bay's three films. Furthermore, it would have been quite impossible to embrace and analyse all of what one could categorise as socio-politics in the United States. Thus, I chose to address what I considered to be the key areas of political philosophy, technological change, representation of politicians, gender and sexuality, America's global role, and the characterisations of Arabs. In these areas, *Transformers* makes clear socio-political allusions and commentaries that give the lie to notions of the franchise's juvenility.

Over the course of the preceding chapters, I have shown attempts within the brand to recreate the environment in which it finds itself. Those watching the original series at the time of its airing would undoubtedly recognise the themes of technophobia represented in "The Rebirth, Parts 1-3" (1987) and the simultaneous

hopefulness brought about by technology in the depictions of the Earth Defence Command throughout the cartoon's third season. After all, the 1980s saw the continued fear of the nuclear weapon thanks to the Cold War and the rapid advancement of technology in the continued pursuit of making life simpler and easier for modern societies while also replacing humans in some roles. In addition, the live-action films have continued this theme. Decepticons were assigned the forms of ubiquitous technologies that many now cannot consider living without – such as the mobile telephone and the laptop computer. The franchise's development over the years has shown the change from attempting to control technological development by various means to working within cooperative frameworks to prevent these developments from truly usurping and damaging humanity. The political classes are also subject to representations that replicate America's somewhat cynical and anti-political viewpoint. Those seeking power – personified in the Shawn Berger character ("Megatron's Master Plan, Parts 1 & 2", 1985) – are displayed as self-serving and morally bankrupt with few redeeming qualities; a view which has prevailed in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal of the early-1970s and continues in the present. The films show the demonstrable distrust of politicians by depicting them as only being worthwhile and good when they are directly involved with the military in the defence of America and humanity, thus standing alongside the "good guys" in the armed forces and the Autobots.

Furthermore, in Chapter Three, I have outlined the complex concept of gender and sexuality in *Transformers* as embodied in the Transformer characters of Arcee and Optimus Prime as well as in its human protagonists. Arcee enjoys the benefits of a rise in the popularity of strong female action stars in the 1980s. It is also possible to point to multifaceted constructions of human female characters that, while emphasising their nature as sites of heterosexual desire, also partially masculinise them in an effort to demonstrate capacities beyond their mere attractiveness. The females of the movie series also serve as counterpoints to highlight the progression of Sam's (Shia LaBeouf) journey from adolescence into adulthood.

In addition to these references to, and reproductions of, social and political concerns, the franchise has further attempted to present an interpretation of the United States as a whole. Across many of the socio-political themes I have sought to address, it has become clear that the franchise has been, and continues to be, keen to present America as one would imagine it wishes to be seen. The political and moral philosophies of the Autobot faction tie in with the (relatively) politically liberal,

righteous and just construction that America has for itself. They are shown as being virtuous and distinctly moral. In the Decepticons, it is possible to see a representation of the “evil” that the United States has sought to oppose internationally. They are fascist in their outlooks and were shown adopting attitudes broadly in line with the conception of Soviet communism in *Generation One* and terrorist cells in the film series. Thus we can see the changes that have taken place in the basic construction of the franchise in order to ensure that it remains a relevant and understandable narrative for its audiences. More specifically, the Optimus Prime character has come to personify and recreate the American self-image thanks to his portrayal of the strong and benevolent leader intent on preserving the lives of the people under his care. In Megatron’s mocking estimation, he is “a red and blue paragon of virtue” (Roberts & Milne, 2011a: 9). It is a myth of the self that is perpetuated to the child demographic of the franchise through these narrative constructions.

This is furthered in the recreations of America’s global role. The audience is shown the Autobots and the United States as the indispensable elements that ensure continued national and global security. Other nations have no hope to stand against human or Decepticon threats. The American and Autobot interventions are, furthermore, depicted as entirely humanitarian in nature. There is a selflessness and necessity to these actions that both the original series and the more modern films use to construct justifications for American foreign policy and its interventionism. Indeed, even in the stereotypical depiction of Arabic peoples shown in the fourth chapter there is a further justification for American interventions overseas based on the inability of Arabs to effectively control and distribute the oil produced in their nations. Also, there appears to be an attempt to rehabilitate the US and its international role in the post-9/11 political environment which is replete with distrust of the United States abroad and an unwillingness to intervene at home.

Given the representations that this thesis has highlighted, I would argue that it is impossible to dismiss *Transformers* as a juvenile series of narratives underpinned by the somewhat cynical desire to continue to sell new toys based on the concept of “robots in disguise”. The two iterations that I have engaged with over the course of this analysis demonstrate a clear engagement with social and political issues that has changed over the years to ensure that the brand remains continually interesting to its audiences. Our understanding of the *Transformers’* narratives is thus far more complex and problematic than it would initially appear to be. The dominant social and political

norms of the time see a reproduction that is likely designed to reinforce these beliefs in the mostly adolescent audience.

Unlike DiPaolo (2011: 40), I make no claims that my analyses represent a complete examination of the franchise's engagement with socio-political themes. Indeed, stemming from the inherent and necessary restrictions on the scope of my inquiry, it would be quite wrong to make such a suggestion. Eight *Transformers* television series have fallen outside my remit. For example, *Beast Machines: Transformers* (1999-2000) features a recurring engagement with environmental and green issues that continues to be of interest in light of global warming. *Transformers Animated's* (2007-2009) third season features an exploration of the Autobot political system that marks it out as interestingly undemocratic in light of their reconstruction of America. Furthermore, episodes such as "This is Why I Hate Machines" (2009) depict the use of propaganda in the control of populations. The most recent television series, *Transformers: Prime* (2010-present), has developed a history for Megatron as a political agitator who originally sought greater freedoms for Cybertron's oppressed citizenry before he fell to despotism ("One Shall Rise, Part 3", 2011). Non-televisual variations of the franchise also offer interesting avenues to pursue the engagement with political and social themes in *Transformers*. Recent comic books produced by IDW Publishing have shown the social impact of the Transformers presence on Earth (Costa & Guidi, 2010), political corruption (Holmes & Milne, 2007; Roberts & Milne, 2011a & 2011b), Autobots standing trial for war crimes (Roche & Roberts, 2010), and the attempts to construct a post-war political settlement amongst the Autobots and Decepticons (Roberts, 2012; Barber, 2012¹). In bringing in these other media forms, the opportunity would arise to analyse these themes from a transmedia perspective. Another possible avenue that I have not pursued is an engagement with the multiple audiences for the *Transformers* franchise. These represent interesting areas for future for exploration.

Therefore, I have shown that the fictional world created for the support of the *Transformers* franchise offers a representation of, and engagement with, our real world. Social and political themes have been explored in its various iterations. Within the *Generation One* animated series and the live-action films, America is recreated along lines that reinforce its self-image and reproduce the then-contemporary norms of politics and society. However, this only begins to establish a new understanding of the franchise *vis-à-vis* socio-political themes and there are many other viable avenues of

¹ Both of these are, at the time of writing, on-going series.

exploration. Like the action figures they support, the *Transformers'* narratives contain "more than meets the eye".

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David William Underwood

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Appendix

EPISODE AND FILM PRODUCTION DETAILS

The following is a list of production details for the original cartoon series, its associated theatrical film, and the live-action film series. Where the air dates appear to be out of sequence, it is because the order listed here represents the canonical viewing order established by Hasbro in recent home video releases.

It is also worth noting that the animated film, *The Transformers: The Movie* (1986) occurs between seasons two and three of the cartoon series and moves the narrative of the series forward from 1985 to the then-future of 2005. It is not part of the continuity formed across the live-action films and their various spin-off media in comic books, toy biographies, and other such elements.

THE TRANSFORMERS (GENERATION ONE) EPISODES

#	Title	Writer(s)	Production Code	Air Date
Miniseries (1984)				
1	More Than Meets the Eye, Part 1	George Arthur Bloom	MP4023	17/09/84
2	More Than Meets the Eye, Part 2	George Arthur Bloom	MP4024	18/09/84
3	More Than Meets the Eye, Part 3	George Arthur Bloom	MP4025	19/09/84
Season One (1984)				
4	Transport to Oblivion	Dick Robbins & Bryce Malek	700-01	06/10/84
5	Roll for It	George Arthur Bloom	700-02	13/10/84
6	Divide and Conquer	Donald F. Glut	700-03	20/10/84
7	Fire in the Sky	Douglas Booth (story); Leo D. Paur	700-04	08/12/84

		(teleplay)		
8	S.O.S. Dinobots	Donald F. Glut	700-05	27/10/84
9	Fire on the Mountain	Douglas Booth	700-06	22/12/84
10	War of the Dinobots	Douglas Booth (story); Larry Strauss (teleplay)	700-07	24/11/84
11	The Ultimate Doom, Part 1	Douglas Booth (story); Larry Strauss (teleplay)	700-08	03/11/84
12	The Ultimate Doom, Part 2	Douglas Booth (story); Earl Kress (teleplay)	700-09	10/11/84
13	The Ultimate Doom, Part 3	Douglas Booth (story); Leo D. Paur (teleplay)	700-10	17/11/84
14	Countdown to Extinction	Reed Robbins & Peter Salas	700-11	01/12/84
15	A Plague of Insecticons	Donald F. Glut	700-12	29/12/84
16	Heavy Metal War	Donald F. Glut	700-13	15/12/84

Season Two (1985)

17	Autobot Spike	Donald F. Glut	700-16	23/09/85
18	The Immobilizer	Earl Kress	700-21	24/09/85
19	Dinobot Island, Part 1	Donald F. Glut	700-29	25/09/85
20	Dinobot Island, Part 2	Donald F. Glut	700-30	26/09/85
21	Traitor	George Hampton & Mike Moore	700-20	27/09/85
22	Enter the Nightbird	Richard Milton & Sylvia Wilson	700-25	30/09/95
23	Changing Gears	Larry Parr	700-17	01/10/85
24	A Prime Problem	Dick Robbins & Bryce Malek	700-26	02/10/85
25	Atlantis, Arise!	Douglas Booth	700-23	03/10/85
26	Attack of the Autobots	David Wise	700-19	04/10/85
27	Microbots	David Wise	700-33	07/10/85
28	The Master Builder	David N. Gottlieb & Herb Engelhart	700-31	08/10/85
29	The Insecticon Syndrome	Douglas Booth	700-28	09/10/85
30	Day of the Machines	David Wise	700-24	10/10/85
31	Megatron's Master Plan, Part 1	Donald F. Glut	700-34	14/10/85
32	Megatron's Master Plan, Part 2	Donald F. Glut	700-35	15/10/84
33	Auto Beserk	Antoni Zalewski	700-32	16/10/85
34	City of Sttel	Douglas Booth	700-18	17/10/85
35	Desertion of the Dinobots, Part	Earl Kress	700-36	21/10/85

36	Desertion of the Dinobots, Part 2	Earl Kress	700-37	22/10/85
37	Blaster Blues	Larry Strauss	700-38	23/10/85
38	A Decepticon Raider in King Arthur's Court	Douglas Booth	700-39	24/10/85
39	The God Gambit	Larry Strauss	700-41	28/10/85
40	The Core	Dennis Marks	700-27	29/10/85
41	Make Tracks	David Wise	700-42	30/10/85
42	The Autobot Run	Donald F. Glut	700-22	31/10/85
43	The Golden Lagoon	Dennis Marks	700-40	04/11/85
44	Quest for Survival	David Wise	700-44	05/11/85
45	The Secret of Omega Supreme	David Wise	700-45	06/11/85
46	Child's Play	Beth Bornstein	700-43	07/11/85
47	The Gambler	Michael Charles Hill	700-46	11/11/85
48	The Search for Alpha Trion	Beth Bornstein	700-52	12/11/85
49	Auto-Bop	David Wise	700-51	13/11/85
50	Prime Target	Flint Dille & Buzz Dixon	700-50	14/11/85
51	The Girl Who Loved Powerglide	David Wise	700-53	18/11/85
52	Triple Takeover	Larry Strauss	700-49	19/11/85
53	Sea Change	Douglas Booth	700-48	20/11/85
54	Hoist Goes Hollywood	Earl Kress	700-54	21/11/85
55	The Key to Vector Sigma, Part 1	David Wise	700-55	25/11/85
56	The Key to Vector Sigma, Part 2	David Wise	700-56	26/11/85
57	Masquerade	Donald F. Glut	700-63	16/11/85
58	Trans-Europe Express	David Wise	700-59	23/12/85
59	War Dawn	David Wise	700-58	25/12/85
60	Cosmic Rust	Paul Davids	700-60	26/12/85
61	Kremzeek!	David Wise	700-47	27/12/85
62	Starscream's Brigade	Michael Charles Hill	700-61	07/01/86
63	The Revenge of Bruticus	Larry Parr	700-62	08/01/86
64	Aerial Assault	Douglas Booth	700-57	10/12/85
65	B.O.T.	Earl Kress	700-64	09/01/85

Season Three (1986-1987)

66	Five Faces of Darkness, Part 1	Flint Dille	700-86	15/09/86
67	Five Faces of Darkness, Part 2	Flint Dille	700-87	16/09/86
68	Five Faces of Darkness, Part 3	Flint Dille	700-88	17/09/86
69	Five Faces of Darkness, Part 4	Flint Dille	700-89	18/09/86
70	Five Faces of Darkness, Part 5	Flint Dille	700-90	19/09/86
71	The Killing Jar	Michael Charles Hill & Joey Kurihara Piedra	700-91	29/09/86
72	Chaos	Paul Davids	700-92	30/09/86

David William Underwood

73	Dark Awakening	Antoni Zalewski	700-93	01/10/86
74	Starscream's Ghost	Megeen McLaughlin	700-95	02/10/86
75	Thief in the Night	Paul Davids	700-96	06/10/86
76	Forever is a Long Time Coming	Gerry Conway & Carla Conway	700-94	08/10/86
77	Surprise Party	Steve Mitchell & Barbra Petty	700-97	09/10/86
78	Madman's Paradise	Craig Rand	700-98	13/10/86
79	Carnage in C-Minor	Buzz Dixon	700-102	14/10/86
80	Fight or Flee	Tony Cinciripini & Larry Leahy	700-106	15/10/86
81	Webworld	Len Wein & Diane Duane	700-101	20/10/86
82	Ghost in the Machine	Michael Charles Hill & Joey Kuyhara Piedra	700-100	21/10/86
83	The Dweller in the Depths	Paul Dini	700-107	30/10/86
84	Nightmare Planet	Beth Bornstein	700-99	31/10/86
85	The Ultimate Weapon	Arthur Byron Cover	700-104	10/11/86
86	The Quintesson Journal	Richard Merwin	700-103	11/11/86
87	The Big Broadcast of 2005	Michael Reaves	700-105	12/11/86
88	Only Human	Susan K. Williams	700-108	13/11/86
89	Grimlock's New Brain	Paul Davids	700-110	14/11/86
90	Money is Everything	Gerry Conway & Carla Conway	700-109	17/11/86
91	Call of the Primitives	Donald F. Glut	700-112	18/11/86
92	The Burden Hardest to Bear	Michael Charles Hill	700-114	19/11/86
93	The Face of the Nijika	Mary Skrenes & Steve Skeates	700-113	20/11/86
94	The Return of Optimus Prime, Part 1	Cherie Wilkerson & Marv Wolfman (story); Michael Charles Hill (teleplay)	700-115	02/03/87
95	The Return of Optimus Prime, Part 2	Cherie Wilkerson & Marv Wolfman (story); Michael Charles Hill (teleplay)	700-116	03/03/87

Season Four (1987)

96	The Rebirth, Part 1	David Wise	6701-0001	09/11/87
97	The Rebirth, Part 2	David Wise	6701-0002	10/11/87
98	The Rebirth, Part 3	David Wise	6701-0003	11/11/87

ANIMATED AND LIVE-ACTION FILM SERIES

Title	Writer(s)	Director	Release Date ¹
<i>The Transformers: The Movie</i>	Ron Friedman	Nelson Shin	08/08/86
<i>Transformers</i>	John Rogers (story); Roberto Orci & Alex Kurtzman (story/teleplay)	Michael Bay	28/06/07
<i>Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen</i>	Ehren Kruger, Roberto Orci & Alex Kurtzman	Michael Bay	19/06/07
<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i>	Ehren Kruger	Michael Bay	23/06/11

¹ This represents the first date the film was seen in a cinema.

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Index

The italicised names in brackets after a character's entry are the actors or voice actors that portray them. When a character has been referenced as appearing in both *Generation One* and the live-action films, the live-action actor is indicated with an asterisk. A double asterisk indicates that the voice actor changed between *The Transformers: The Movie* and the third season of *Generation One*.

- 9/11: see September 11 attacks
- Aerialbots: 69, 83
- Allspark: 24, 54
- al-Qaeda: 34
- America: see "United States of America"
- Arabs: 20, 82, 83, 99
- and Arab Spring uprisings: 49
 - stereotyping of: 90-95, 96, 101
- Arcee (*Susan Blu*): 61*n*, 75, 99, 100, 101
- in *Animated*: 62*n*
 - in *Generation One*: 62-66, 73, 79
 - in live-action films: 66-67
 - in *Prime*: 62*n*
- Asimov, Isaac: 23-24
- Authoritarianism: 29, 32, 33 (see also "fascism", "totalitarianism")
- Autobots: 14, 15, 16, 17, 22, 29, 30, 31, 36, 41, 43, 44, 45, 49, 50, 53, 55, 56, 57, 59, 63, 64, 69, 71, 73, 79, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 101, 102
- as representation of US: 20, 27-28, 83
- political philosophy of: 20, 23-28, 33, 37, 45, 100
- Banes, Mikaela (*Megan Fox*): 61, 73-75, 76, 77, 78, 94
- Barber, John: 102
- Barricade (*Jess Harnell*): 31*n*, 78
- Bay, Michael: 11, 16, 18, 23, 31, 48, 67, 82, 90, 99
- Beast Machines: Transformers*: 12, 16, 102
- Beast Wars II*: 12
- Beast Wars Neo*: 12
- Beast Wars Special*: 12
- Beast Wars: Transformers*: 12, 16
- Berger, Shawn: 50-52, 55, 100
- Blackout: 31*n*, 84
- Blaster (*Buster Jones*): 13, 92
- Bluestreak (*Casey Kasem*): 93
- Budiansky, Bob: 14, 22

- Bumblebee (*Dan Gilvezan*): 17, 57*n*, 73, 74, 75, 78, 88
- Burma: 83
- Bush, George W.: 30, 36, 52, 53
- Carbombya: 83, 90-93
- Chernobyl: 89
- Chicago: 35, 36, 57
- Chromedome (*Frank Welker*): 44, 62
- Cliffjumper (*Casey Kasem*): 93
- Cold War: 41, 42, 43, 46, 47, 49, 50, 58, 82, 95, 100
- Combaticons: 31
- Costa, Mike: 102
- Cybertron: 14, 22*n*, 29, 30, 31, 41, 44, 46(*n*), 48, 73*n*, 92, 102
- Cybertronians: see "Transformers (race)"
- Decepticons: 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 37, 41, 43, 44, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 71, 73, 75, 76, 77, 78, 83, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 96, 100, 101, 102
as allegory for evil: 30, 33-36, 101
personalities of: 29, 34
political philosophy of: 20, 23, 27, 28-36, 101
- Declaration of Independence: 27
- Democracy: 26, 28, 37, 82, 83(*n*)
- Dery, Floro: 63
- Diaclone*: 13, 14
- Diego Garcia: 55, 89
- Dino (*Francesco Quinn*): 88
- DiPaolo, Marco: 17-18, 99, 102
- Director of National Intelligence: 56, 77
- Dirge (*Bud Davis*): 92
- Earth Defence Command: 46-47, 58, 100
- Earth: 15, 17, 22*n*, 30, 31*n*, 36, 46(*n*), 47, 48, 49, 50, 55, 58, 71, 73(*n*), 85, 86, 102
- EDC: see "Earth Defence Command"
- Egypt: 66, 87
- energon: 30, 91, 92
- Epps, Robert (*Tyrese Gibson*): 55, 61
- Fakkadi, Abdul (*Philip L. Clarke*): 50, 90-93, 96
- Fascism: 29-34, 36
and racism: 31-33
and Strength: 31-32
tenets of: 29
- Female: 20, 57, 61, 62-67, 62(*n*), 72-77, 79, 100
- Fox, Megan: 67 (see "Banes, Mikaela" for her character in the films)
- Fracas (*Neil Ross*): 44-45
- Frenzy (*Reno Wilson*): 47, 48, 54, 75, 78
- Furman, Simon: 61(*n*)
- Gaddafi, Muammar: 91, 92(*n*), 96
- Galloway, Theodore (*John Benjamin Hickey*): 54-56, 57, 86, 94
- Galvatron (*Leonard Nimoy; Frank Welker***): 34, 64, 92
- Generation One*: see "Transformers: Generation One"
- GI Joe*: 13, 63, 72
- Gorbachev, Mikhail: 42

- Gould, Dylan (*Patrick Dempsey*): 33, 76, 77
- Guidi, Guido: 102
- Gulf War: 49
- Hardhead (*Stephen Keener*): 42
- Hasbro: 11(n), 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 62
- Headmasters: 44-46, 48, 64
- He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*: 63, 72
- Heterosexuality: 63-64, 100
- Hitler, Adolf: 29-30
- Hive, the: 41, 42, 43, 44, 66
- Holmes, Eric: 102
- Homosexuality: 64
- Hot Rod (and Rodimus Prime) (*Judd Nelson; Dick Gautier***): 63-64, 65, 93
- Humans (also humanity): 12n, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 30, 31-33, 37, 40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46(n), 47, 48, 49(n), 50, 51, 56, 58, 61, 64, 67, 71n, 82, 83, 85, 87, 88, 90, 100, 101
gender in: 71-78, 79
- IDW Publishing: 102
- Iran: 56n, 88-89
- Iraq: 83n, 85
- Ironhide (*Peter Cullen; Jess Harnell**): 13, 66
- Japan: 11(n), 12(n), 14, 17
- Jumal (*Mona Marshall*): 94-95
- Kant, Immanuel: 25
- Kasem, Casey: 93-94
- Keller, John (*Jon Voight*): 53-54, 55, 56
- Kennedy, John F.: 27
- LaBeouf, Shia: 67 (see "Witwicky, Sam" for his character in the films)
- Laserbeak (*Keith Szarabajka*): 47
- Lennox, William (*Josh Duhamel*): 54, 55, 56, 57, 61, 77, 78, 79, 84, 94
- Liberalism: 22(n), 24-28, 37, 83, 100
democracy and: 26
tenets of: 25
- Libya: 91, 95
- Mahfouz (*Ashkan Kashanchi*): 84
- Male: 20, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67-72, 73, 75, 76, 78, 79
- Marvel Comics: 14
- Matrix of Leadership: 69, 94
- Maximals: 16
- Mearing, Charlotte (*Frances McDormand*): 56-58, 76, 77, 79
- Megatron (*Frank Welker; Hugo Weaving**): 13, 15, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31-32, 31n, 33, 34, 36, 37, 49, 50, 51, 55, 65, 69, 77, 83, 87, 101, 102
- Micro Change*: 13, 14
- Milne, Alex: 61n, 101, 102
- Mobile telephones: 41, 46, 47, 48, 53, 100
- Moreshower, General (*Glenn Moreshower*): 56
- Mudflap (*Reno Wilson*): 86, 87
- National Security Advisor: 55, 56, 86
- Nationalism: 32-33
- Nebulan resistance: 42, 44

- Nebulans: 44, 45, 46, 48
- Nebulos: 42*n*, 46, 58, 66
- as allegory for technophobia: 41-45
- NEST: 23, 49, 55, 56, 57, 77, 85, 86, 87, 89, 90
- Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 29
- Nixon, Richard: see "Watergate scandal"
- Non-biological Extra-terrestrial Species Treaty: see "NEST"
- nuclear weapons: 41, 42, 43, 45, 88-89, 100
- Obama, Barack: 52, 53, 55, 58
- oil: 17, 19*n*, 45, 52, 71, 72, 82, 83, 91, 92, 94, 95, 96, 101
- Optimus Prime (*Peter Cullen*): 12*n*, 13, 15, 16, 17, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 31, 32, 34, 49, 50, 54, 55, 65, 70*n*, 72, 78, 79, 85, 88, 100, 101
- as father figure: 70-71
- as Orion Pax (*Laurie Faso*): 69-70
- masculinity of: 67-71
- self-sacrifices of: 25
- Orci, Roberto: 66
- Orwell, George: 29
- Outback (*Dan Gilvezan*): 92
- Perceptor (*Paul Eiding*): 13
- Peru: 83
- Predacons: 16
- Qatar: 52, 53, 84, 85
- Que (*George Coe*): 88
- Quintessons: 24, 25, 31, 34, 63, 65
- Ramjet (*Jack Angel*): 92
- Ratchet (*Robert Foxworth*): 55
- Reagan, Ronald: 17, 54
- Reaganism: 52, 70, 91
- Red Alert (*Michael Chain*): 29
- Roberts, James: 101, 102
- Roche, Nick: 32*n*, 102
- Rodimus Prime: see Hot Rod
- Russia: see "Soviet Union"
- Scorponok: 84
- Scourge (*Stan Jones*): 44-45
- Second World War: see World War Two
- secretary of defence: 52, 53, 56
- Seekers: 31
- Sentinel Prime (*Leonard Nimoy*): 26, 30, 31, 36, 49, 57, 77
- September 11 attacks: 18, 33, 34, 36, 57, 84, 90, 94, 96, 101
- Shanghai: 66, 85-87, 89
- Sideswipe (*Michael Bell; James Remar**): 29, 88
- Simmons, Seymour (*John Turturro*): 57, 77, 94
- Skids (*Tom Kenny*): 86, 87
- Skywarp (*Frank Welker*): 29
- Soundwave (*Frank Welker*): 13, 30
- Soviet Union (and Russia): 29, 33, 34, 42, 43, 82, 83, 98, 95, 101
- Spencer, Carly (*Rosie Huntington-Whitely*): 52, 76-77
- Spielberg, Steven: 16, 36

- Spitz, Leo (*Ramon Rodriguez*): 94
- Springer (*Neil Ross*): 63-64
- Starscream (*Chris Latta; Charlie Adler**): 13, 31(*n*), 32, 33-34
- Sweeps: 34, 64
- TakaraTomy (also as Takara): 11, 13, 14, 16*n*
- Targetmasters: 43, 44-46, 48
- Teletraan I (*Casey Kasem*): 93
- Three Laws of Robotics: 23-24
- Thundercracker (*John Stephenson*): 29
- totalitarianism: 29, 32, 36, 37
- Transformers* (2007 film): 12, 16, 18*n*, 19, 24, 26, 27, 31-32, 31*n*, 34, 40, 47, 48, 52, 53, 67, 68, 70*n*, 73, 74, 77, 78, 84-85, 90
- Transformers* (brand/franchise): 11, 12*n*, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 33, 41, 50, 58, 59, 61, 62, 63, 66, 67, 72, 76, 79, 82, 84, 91, 95, 99, 100, 101, 102
- as transmedia property: 11, 12, 16, 102
 - development of: 13-17
 - reinventions of: 16, 102
- Transformers* (IDW Comics series): 11, 32*n*, 61*n*, 102
- Transformers* (live-action film series): 11, 12, 16, 18(*n*), 20, 22, 32, 40, 52, 99, 102
- American interventionism in: 82, 84-89, 101
 - Arabs in: 82, 94-96, 101
 - Autobots in: see "Autobots, political philosophy of"
 - Decepticons in: see "Decepticons, political philosophy of"
 - misogyny in: 67
 - gender and sexuality in: 66-71, 73-78, 79
 - politicians in: 20, 52-58, 59
 - support for military in: 20, 53-59, 84-87, 89-90, 90*n*, 95, 100
 - technophobia in: 47-50, 58, 100
- Transformers* (Marvel Comics series): 11, 14, 16, 42*n*
- Transformers* (race): 15, 22*n*, 24, 33, 41, 42*n*, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50, 53, 55, 61, 62*n*, 78, 83, 84, 91, 96
- gender and sexuality in: 62-71, 72, 100
- Transformers Animated*: 12, 16, 62*n*, 102
- Transformers Civil War*: 14, 22, 50, 71, 78
- Transformers* toys: 13-14, 15, 17, 50, 62, 65, 71
- Transformers: Armada*: 12, 16
- Transformers: Car Robots*: 16*n*
- Transformers: Cybertron*: 12, 16
- Transformers: Dark of the Moon*: 12, 16, 18*n*, 32, 23, 26, 30, 32, 35-36, 47, 49, 52, 54, 56, 68, 70*n*, 76, 77, 78, 88-89, 90
- Transformers: Energon*: 12, 16
- Transformers: Generation One*: 12, 15, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 30, 31, 33, 48, 55, 59, 61, 75, 95, 101, 102
- American interventionism in: 82-84, 101
 - Arabs in: 82, 90-94, 96, 101

- Autobots in: see "Autobots, political philosophy of"
- Decepticons in: see "Decepticons, political philosophy of"
- embrace of technology in: 46-47, 58, 99-100
- gender and sexuality in: 62-66, 67-72, 78-79, 100
- politicians in: 50-52, 54, 59
- technophobia in: 40-46, 58, 99-100
- Transformers: Generation Two*: 12, 15, 16
- Transformers: Prime*: 11, 12, 15, 16, 62*n*, 102
- Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*: 12, 15, 16, 18*n*, 23, 25, 27, 47-48, 49, 54, 55, 57, 66, 67, 70*n*, 73, 75, 85-87, 89, 90, 94
- Transformers: Robots in Disguise*: 12, 16*n*
- Transformers: Super-God Masterforce*: 12
- Transformers: The Headmasters*: 12
- Transformers: The Movie*: 12, 14, 15, 23, 34, 46, 63, 64, 65, 92
- Transformers: Victory*: 12
- Transformers: Zone*: 12
- Trypticon (*Brad Garrett*): 91, 92
- Unicron Trilogy: 12, 16
- United States Congress: 49, 58
- United States military: 18, 20, 23, 48, 49, 52-59, 61, 79, 83*n*, 84-87, 89-90, 90*n*, 95, 100
- United States of America: 11, 13, 23, 25, 27, 43, 45, 55, 82
- Autobots as representation of: 27-28, 83
- embrace of technology in: 20, 40, 41, 46-47, 58, 99
- foreign policy of: 17-18, 20, 26, 37, 82-91, 95-96
- gender and sexuality in: 20, 61-79, 99
- interventionism of: 20, 82-91, 96, 99, 101
- liberalism in: 23, 25, 27-28, 100
- self-image of: 20, 23, 40, 70-71, 84-85, 90, 96, 101
- technophobia in: 20, 40-50, 58, 99-100
- view of Arabs in: 20, 90-95, 99
- view of evil in: 20, 29-30, 33, 34, 36-37, 101
- view of good: 23, 27-28, 36-37
- view of military: 54, 58, 90*n*
- view of politicians in: 20, 40, 50-58, 59, 99, 100
- United States presidency: 52-53, 57-58, 84, 95
- Vietnam War: 86
- War on Terror: 49
- Watergate scandal: 50, 52, 59, 100
- Witwicky, Carly (*Arlene Banas*): 64, 71, 72-73, 75, 79
- Witwicky, Daniel (*David Mendenhall*): 64, 73
- Witwicky, Sam (*Shia LaBeouf*): 16, 25, 56, 57, 61, 74, 75, 76, 77-78, 79, 94, 100

Witwicky, Sparkplug (*Chris Latta*): 72,

75

Witwicky, Spike (*Corey Burton*): 30, 44,

46n, 61, 71-72, 73(n), 79

World War Two: 30, 58, 82