

Tribal Medievalisms

Studies in Medievalism XXXIV

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Founded by Leslie J. Workman

Previously published volumes are listed at the back of this book

Tribal Medievalisms

Edited by
Karl Fugelso



Studies in Medievalism XXXIV 2025

Cambridge

D. S. Brewer

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The epigraph is from an unpublished paper by Lord Acton, written about 1859 and printed in Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 212.

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Arthurian Legend and the Death of Optimus Prime in *Transformers: The Movie* (1986)¹

Scott Manning

There would be a day – there must be a day –
when he would come back.

T. H. White²

[T]he greatest Autobot of them all – Optimus Prime – will return.

Narration added at the end of later releases of *Transformers: The Movie*³

Before the live-action Transformers films that began in 2007, *The Transformers: The Movie* (1986) was the brand's only foray to the box office, and it featured star-studded voice work by Leonard Nimoy, Judd Nelson, Eric Idle, Robert Stack, and Orson Welles.⁴ Explorations of medievalism in the Transformers have been few and brief, and none has yet explored *Transformers: The Movie*.⁵

¹ For Mom, who was more distraught than her sons were over the death of Optimus Prime.

² *The Once and Future King* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), 631.

³ The earliest home release of *The Transformers: The Movie* to feature this added narration was released in the UK (London: V.I.P. Video Gems, 1987), VHS.

⁴ This was the last film of Orson Welles. *The Transformers: The Movie*, dir. Nelson Shin, writ. Ron Friedman (De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986). Eric Idle, of course, played Sir Robin the-not-quite-so-brave-as-Sir-Lancelot and other characters in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones (EMI Films, 1975).

⁵ There are only a few examples of medievalism studies scholars exploring medievalism in Transformers, including Peter Konieczny, "The Transformers and the Middle Ages," *Medievalists.net*, June 26, 2014, <<https://www.medievalists.net/2014/06/transformers-middle-ages/>>, last accessed March 8, 2024; Geert Van Iersel, "Robots and Jets as Knights and Warhorses: The Transformers does Arthurian Britain," paper presented at Le

Yet, there is much “more than meets the eye,”⁶ to borrow the trademarked phrase from Hasbro that describes the giant alien robots who disguise themselves by transforming into vehicles, planes, guns, and everyday electronic devices. With no time travel or flashbacks to the Kingdom of Logres, the animated-film features elements reminiscent of King Arthur and Excalibur, which the film’s scriptwriters have admitted were direct inspirations. Yet, the film’s Excalibur trope is more akin to the Grail, especially with its mysteries, powers, and behaviors. There are even quests, wastelands, and other features often associated with Grail legends.

The impetus for incorporating Arthurian elements into *Transformers: The Movie* was the decision by Hasbro to kill off the brand’s most popular character, Optimus Prime, a decision that not all the scriptwriters agreed with. This essay will establish a brief history and overview of the Transformers continuum leading up to the 1986 animated film, as well as the marketing interests of Hasbro during the film’s production. These marketing interests led to the intentional (and unintentional) Arthurian inspirations employed during the scriptwriting process, as a means to romantically handle the death of Optimus Prime and the aftermath. Furthermore, Hasbro’s reaction to the blowback from fans, who were upset over the robot’s death, was to hastily promise his return. What will become apparent is that, although *Transformers: The Movie* is a futuristic animated sci-fi film made with the explicit purpose of marketing toy robots to children, core aspects of the film, as well as its legacy, are inspired by or reminiscent of Arthurian legend.

Transformers as a Transnational, Transgenerational Media Franchise

Transformers, as an intellectual property of toys, debuted in the United States in 1984 as a result of a collaborative partnership between Hasbro and Takara

XXIV^e Congrès de la Société Internationale Arthurienne, Université de Bucarest, July 26, 2014; Michael A. Torregrossa, “Guy Ritchie and Michael Bay (Oh My): The Challenges of Contemporary Visions of Camelot on Screen,” paper presented at Mid-Atlantic Popular & American Culture Association, Philadelphia, PA, November 10, 2017; and Kevin J. Harty, “James Bond, A Grifter, A Video Avatar, and a Shark Walk into King Arthur’s Court: The Ever-Expanding Canon of Cinema Arthuriana,” *Arthuriana* 30.2 (2020): 89–121 (102–3, 118n148). In *Transformers: The Last Knight* (2017), the robots take part in the struggles of the literal King Arthur and Merlin. Owing to panning by critics and audiences, Harty concluded it was a “failed attempt to engage the Arthurian legend.” See his chapter, “Cinema Arthuriana and the Knights of the Not-so-round Table,” in *The Arthurian World*, ed. Victoria Coldham-Fussell, Miriam Edlich-Muth, and Renée Ward (London: Routledge, 2022), 488–504 (497).

⁶ Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 171.

(now Takara Tomy) that dates back to 1971.⁷ In 1983, Hasbro licensed patents from Takara on toys that had descriptions such as “reconfigurable toy assembly” and “toy gun convertible into robotic-humanoid form.”⁸ Dan Fleming captured the spirit of the main feature of Transformers toys by describing them as “like a sort of mechanical Rubik’s cube,”⁹ which could be shifted into a robot, some earth-based vehicle or device, and back again. Hasbro then hired Griffin-Bacal Advertising and Marvel Comics Group to establish the franchise name, taglines, characters, personas, and an overall backstory.¹⁰ To promote the new toy line, Hasbro commissioned an animated television series that aired new episodes between 1984 and 1987,¹¹ as well as two comic-book series that ran concurrently in the United States and the United Kingdom until 1991.¹² Over the past forty years, the franchise has

⁷ The common narrative on the history of the Transformers toy franchise begins in 1983 with the story that an executive at Hasbro stumbled upon designs from Takara at a toy show. However, the Hasbro-Takara collaboration is much older. Takara licensed molds of the original twelve-inch-tall G.I. Joe line from Hasbro in 1971. Takara produced these toys as cyborgs instead of American soldiers. Throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s, Takara continued to tweak these toy lines, making the humans smaller and smaller and equipping them with robotic suits and eventually vehicles that could transform into robots. Takara even released some of these transforming toys in America in 1982. In 1983, Hasbro licensed the patents for these transforming toy robots from Takara. Hasbro worked with Marvel Comics Group and the ad agency Griffin-Bacal to produce and trademark names like “Optimus Prime” and “Megatron”; the Transformers brand; sayings like “More Than Meets the Eye”; character profiles; and an overall backstory. Ever since, Hasbro and Takara have taken turns over the past forty years reinventing and repackaging the Transformers. For the most thorough exploration of the beginnings of Transformers and the relationship between Hasbro and Takara from 1970 through 2007, see Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 153–96. A more succinct narrative is available in Jason Bainbridge, “Fully Articulated: The Rise of the Action Figure and the Changing Face of ‘Children’s’ Entertainment,” *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24.6 (2010): 829–42 (836–37).

⁸ Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 172. The licensed toy-designs came from two separate Takara toy lines: Diaclone; and Micro Change. Hasbro combined the designs for American audiences under the single brand of Transformers. Hasbro’s success inspired Takara who repackaged their toys to match the Transformers brand in Japan the following year. By 1991, the two toy-companies had generated more than \$950 million in sales of Transformers worldwide. Pablo Hidalgo, *Transformers Vault: The Complete Transformers Universe Showcasing Rare Collectibles and Memorabilia* (New York: Abrams, 2011), 9–10, 22, 30.

⁹ Dan Fleming, *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 125.

¹⁰ Hidalgo, *Transformers Vault*, 57–58, 87–88, and Bainbridge, “Fully articulated,” 837.

¹¹ *The Transformers* television series (Marvel Productions and Sunbow Entertainment, 1984–87).

¹² Although the UK title borrowed heavily from the US title, the UK publication made significant changes to the original material and added more stories. In addition, the UK line was initially published bi-weekly before moving to a weekly schedule. As a result, the UK title ran for 332 issues, whereas the US title ran for only eighty issues during the same period. *The Transformers* 1–80 (Marvel Comics, 1984–91), and *The Transformers* 1–332 (Marvel UK, 1984–91). Hidalgo, *Transformers Vault*, 69. For a detailed breakdown of each issue,

ebbed and flowed in popularity, as Hasbro and Takara took turns drawing “upon each other’s innovations,” repackaging new story and toy lines through more cartoons, comic books, and video games.¹³ Derek Johnson refers to this process as “transnational” when examining Hasbro and Takara’s abilities to localize a global brand through multiple iterations, and the formula has been successful in keeping Transformers “in a constant state of evolution.”¹⁴

Today, most people are likely to associate Transformers with the series of live-action films that began in 2007 and have collectively grossed more than \$5,200,000,000 at the box office worldwide through 2023.¹⁵ However, cartoons and comic books outside of the live-action films remain active as well, along with numerous toy lines produced in the United States and Japan and distributed worldwide.¹⁶ Both Hasbro and Takara have aimed to keep Transformers fresh but familiar, resulting in what Derek Johnson has dubbed a “transgenerational” strategy that encourages adults to introduce their children to the toys of their childhood from decades past.¹⁷ The forty-years’ worth of Transformers worlds created, destroyed, exchanged, and repackaged

as well as changes and additions made during the UK run, see Ryan Frost, *Transform and Roll Out: The Unofficial and Unauthorized Guide to the Transformers Franchise, 1984–1992* (Canterbury: Telos Publishing, 2018), 63–576.

¹³ For example, in the 2000s, there were four different Transformers animated series originally produced and released in Japan that were later dubbed and released in the United States: *Transformers: Robots in Disguise* (2001–2), *Transformers: Armada* (2003), *Transformers: Energon* (2003–4), and *Transformers: Cybertron* (2005–6). For more on them, see Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 180. Since 2001, three different publishers have held the license to Transformers in comic-book form: Dreamwave (2001–4), IDW Publishing (2005–22), and, currently, Skybound Entertainment, an imprint of Image Comics (2023–). For more on them, see Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 181.

¹⁴ Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 181.

¹⁵ There have been seven live-action Transformers films so far, all distributed by Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks: *Transformers* (2007), *Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Dark of the Moon* (2011), *Age of Extinction* (2014), *The Last Knight* (2017), *Bumblebee* (2018), and *Rise of the Beasts* (2023). “Box Office History for Transformers Movies,” *The Numbers*, <<https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Transformers#tab=summary>>, last accessed March 18, 2024.

¹⁶ As of this writing, *Transformers: EarthSpark* (2022–) is airing on Paramount+ and Nickelodeon and a second season is in the works. Mercedes Milligan, “Paramount+ Boots Up ‘Transformers: EarthSpark’ Season 2,” *Animation Magazine*, February 1, 2023, <<https://www.animationmagazine.net/2023/02/paramount-boots-up-transformers-earthspark-season-2/>>, last accessed March 16, 2024. Also, Image Comics’ ongoing *Transformers* series is currently on issue six and the first three issues have seen second printings. “Transformers,” *Image Comics*, n.d., <<https://imagecomics.com/comics/series/transformers>>, last accessed March 16, 2024. In the realm of toys, Hasbro reported a 25% growth in revenue from its Transformers brand in 2023. “Q4/FY 2023 Earnings,” Hasbro, February 13, 2023, slide 12, <<https://investor.hasbro.com/static-files/f5f1a394-b6ab-48a7-becc-8c9dd4a730d9>>, last accessed March 16, 2024.

¹⁷ Hasbro and Takara take different approaches here, as the US children’s market remains strong, but Japan’s is shrinking. See differences in strategies in Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 189–95.

for local and global markets are too vast for a single essay, so, with only a few asides, this essay will focus on the *Transformers* continuum of the 1984 and 1985 US cartoon seasons and the 1986 animated film.

The Future of 2005 in Transformers: The Movie (1986)

It is necessary to set the stage for the scriptwriting of *Transformers: The Movie* because the marketing interests of Hasbro led to the incorporations of Arthurian elements from scriptwriter Ron Friedman. In 2020, Kevin J. Harty described *Transformers* as “essentially giant alien robots engaged in a continuing extra-terrestrial civil war that has spilled over onto earth.”¹⁸ Because of the transnational and transgenerational strategies of Hasbro and Takara, Harty’s description would ring just as true for the start of the franchise in 1984. The warring factions, typically the heroic Autobots and the evil Decepticons, have been at war for millions of years, fighting for control of their home planet of Cybertron, “which like themselves, was made of silicon and metals.”¹⁹ In each repackaging of the *Transformers*, the Autobots are almost always led by Optimus Prime, or, if he has died in battle, one of his replacements, Ultra Magnus or Rodimus Prime. Similarly, the Decepticons are often led by Megatron, or his reincarnated personality, Galvatron. These factions, leaders, and backup leaders were all present in *Transformers: The Movie*, and other incarnations of *Transformers* (for example, the live-action films) have incorporated them along with other characters, myths, and plot devices first established in the 1986 animated film.²⁰ As such, the film has served as core source material for the franchise, and, although the film was not a commercial success in the box office, it remains extremely popular among fandoms.²¹

Transformers: The Movie takes place in 2005, twenty years after the end of the second season of the *Transformers* television series (1985). The television

¹⁸ Harty, “James Bond,” 118n48.

¹⁹ Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime (So Sue Me): Confessions of a Hollywood Screenwriter* (Los Angeles: I. L. I. Productions, 2019), 116.

²⁰ Jason Bainbridge, “*Transformers: The Movie*: Making Modern Mythology the Marvel Way,” in *Marvel Comics into Film Essays on Adaptations Since the 1940s*, ed. Matthew J. McEniry, Robert Moses Peaslee, and Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 27–38 (36).

²¹ With its first home-media release in 1987, *The Transformers: The Movie* has seen nearly two-dozen home releases in the United States alone, and it has been released on every known format including Betamax, VHS, LaserDisc, DVD, Blu-Ray, Ultra 4K Blu-Ray, and, of course, streaming. Notable releases in the United States include: (Thousand Oaks, CA: Family Home Entertainment, 1987), VHS; (Los Angeles: Kid Rhino, 2000), DVD; 20th Anniversary Special Edition (New York, NY: Sony BMG, 2006), DVD; 30th Anniversary edition (Los Angeles: Shout! Factory, 2016), Blu-ray; and 35th Anniversary edition (Los Angeles: Shout! Factory, 2021), 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray.

series and comic books all existed to sell toys, and Hasbro had a vested interest in how the story of the first Transformers movie was told. With a red-hot toy such as Transformers, the obvious logic is to introduce more and more characters for children to purchase.²² The goal of this character-creating process is to establish a “puppet-like consumerism, and a condition of endless dissatisfaction.”²³ Ron Friedman, the writer who produced the first two drafts of the movie’s script, was empowered to introduce new characters, but he also had to provide meaningful stories, or at least personalities and motivations, for each of them, which included nearly two-dozen new characters in *Transformers: The Movie*.²⁴

But introducing new characters was not sufficient for Hasbro. Even though the film took place twenty years in the future, old toys had to be recognized. Flint Dille, the story consultant who was part of the team that finalized Friedman’s script, described some of the difficulties encountered with this mandate:

We had all these characters. We had to pay off the old characters and bring in the new characters. And you had to show every character in his robot form and then show every character in his transformer form. And I don’t know if anybody back in [Hasbro] had a checklist.²⁵

Friedman saw an opportunity in sending off old characters with discontinued toys, many of whom were dominant figures in the first two television seasons thus far. Friedman decided that he “wanted characters to die in the picture. Die.”²⁶ And he clarifies that this was not owing to some macabre desire, but because he wanted “audiences to really care, and feel something about the story they’ll be paying to see.”²⁷

²² Hasbro shipped an estimated \$70,000,000–\$80,000,000 worth of Transformers toys in the 1984 holiday season. Hidalgo, *Transformers Vault*, 14.

²³ Bob Dixon, *Playing Them False: A Study of Children’s Toys, Games and Puzzles* (London: Trantham Books, 1990), 265.

²⁴ There are multiple ways to count the number of new characters. If we go simply by new toys that could be purchased, then there were seventeen. If we add the remaining autonomous characters that were not purchasable toys, then there were an additional six. There were also large crowds of thousands, even millions of robots revealed on new planets. See Frost, *Transform and Roll Out*, 687.

²⁵ Nelson Shin, Flint Dille, and Susan Blu, “Audio Commentary,” *The Transformers: The Movie*, 20th Anniversary Special Edition, DVD, dir. Nelson Shin (New York: Sony BMG, 2006).

²⁶ Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, 161.

²⁷ Friedman further emphasizes that the “stakes have now been raised. It is no longer let’s pretend mayhem because those friendly and familiar Autobots are now dead. The dark prospect of Death changes the value of everything.” Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, 99, 161.

In a way, death could be seen as the next step in evolution of the *Transformers* franchise. During its first two seasons, *Transformers* had already gained recognition as a violent television show. One contemporary study determined that the series depicted “an average of 23 violent acts per half hour,” which included melees, shootings, and explosions.²⁸ However, because the victims in the cartoon series were often robots, not humans, and they did not die, the show seemingly escaped public outcry or Federal Communications Commission intervention. And Friedman’s emphasis on killing was seen as a novel extension. Hasbro not only embraced the demise of characters, but they also pushed Friedman to kill off the beloved leader of the Autobots, Optimus Prime, something Friedman confesses was “the last thing I wanted to do.”²⁹

Optimus Prime (Peter Cullen, the same voice in the live-action films), was truly a chivalrous warrior, always protecting humans from the careless Decepticons, even at the risk of his own safety. The character profile on Optimus, produced for the scriptwriters on the television series and later condensed for the back of toy packages, tells us that:

He has the personality of an Abraham Lincoln. He can be immensely kind and his compassion extends to all that lives, including the creatures of Earth. Yet he will battle unceasingly to protect the weak [...] the only weakness he could be accused of having is being too compassionate and concerned with the safety of others. He would be a more effective military commander if he were more ruthless, but then he wouldn’t be Optimus Prime.³⁰

Hasbro colored him a “patriotic red, white, and blue,” and he transformed into a semi-truck.³¹ Optimus was in every episode of the first two seasons and when he was not leading the Autobots in battle, he was providing fatherly wisdom and guidance to robots and humans alike. While Ron Friedman foresaw the potential repercussions in killing off such a character that kids had watched for two years across sixty-five episodes, Flint Dille later joked “I was acting under orders,” and then explained “we had absolutely no idea” that we were killing “an icon”:

²⁸ Joan E. Aitken, “The Role of Language and Gender in *The Transformers*: An Analysis of Messages in Cartoons for Children,” (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender, October 1986), 18.

²⁹ Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, 167.

³⁰ Bob Budiansky, *Transformers Universe 2* (Marvel Comics Group, 1987), 24–25.

³¹ Bainbridge, “*Transformers: The Movie*: Making Modern Mythology,” 30.

We just thought we were getting rid of the '84 product line. I mean, we knew Optimus Prime was a main character; we didn't know there would be kids that would be crying, and one kid would lock himself in his room [...] I didn't know I'd be sitting around 20 years later at some convention and having somebody ask me why I killed Optimus Prime.³²

But during production, Friedman could not talk Hasbro out of the prospect, while others did not appreciate the ramifications of killing off “an Abraham Lincoln.”

And that brings us to a future of 2005 where the film tells us that the Decepticons have gained the upper hand in the civil war along with control of Cybertron. Meanwhile, the Autobots maintain a home base on Earth while preparing to strike back at the Decepticons from secret bases on two of Cybertron’s moons. Megatron (Frank Welker) and the Decepticons intercept an Autobot shuttle on a supply run from the moons to Earth, killing all the Autobots onboard. They intend to sneak into the Autobots’ base with a surprise attack. However, before the Decepticons can land, a new, younger Autobot – Hot Rod – recognizes the ploy and opens fire on the hijacked shuttle. The Decepticons prematurely begin their own assault from outside the base as a result, and the Autobots go into a defensive mode, leading to a major battle featuring more deaths and fatal wounds between both sides. This multi-day battle takes up just more than thirteen minutes of the film – measured from the first to last shot fired – and has major repercussions for the war.

The chain of events described, thus far, in the production of *Transformers: The Movie* would lead directly to Arthurian legend. Hasbro wanted to send off old characters who were being written off the show. Friedman wanted to use the opportunity to kill *some* characters to increase the drama for the viewer. Death was the next step in a show that was already accepted as violent. Hasbro embraced the idea of killing off characters and ordered that Optimus Prime be among the body count. Openly protesting, Friedman moved forward with the death of Optimus. Realizing the gravity of losing such a character, Friedman sought to ensure the death had meaning while making the aftermath as palpable to the viewer as possible.

Hot Rod Will Be My Arthur

Ron Friedman has been vocal on his intentions in the movie’s characters and story, as well as his inspirations. In his book, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, he provides a part-autobiographical, part-writer’s instruction manual, focusing heavily on his work on *Transformers: The Movie*. Among the many lessons

³² Dille, “Audio Commentary,” *The Transformers: The Movie*.

Friedman emphasizes is the need for a story, a quest. There must be an unlikely hero who goes through challenges before finding his way at the very end. In his lengthy list of examples, Friedman eventually turns to Arthuriana, “And it’s the same for the boy, Arthur Pendragon, who becomes the legendary good King Arthur, and in the countless movies and television versions of the Arthurian Legend in which Arthur behaves heroically and nobly.”³³ Friedman evokes Disney’s *Sword and the Stone* (1963) as one such example before continuing:

The boy, Arthur, has no idea he’s destined for greatness, no idea that he alone will have the strength to pull the magical sword, Excalibur, out of the stone, or that he’s been chosen to lead his people. And when he does pull the sword free he is bewildered, uncertain, and unready. But with Merlin’s help, he ultimately puts it all together [...]. [T]he boy, Arthur before he becomes king, was the paradigm for the sort of hero to replace Optimus Prime, the hero unaware, the young, likeable, modest lad, who has never thought of himself as hero material, but is catapulted into that role by death-dealing circumstances.”³⁴

After all this consideration, Friedman tells us he “decided that young Hot Rod would be my Arthur.”³⁵

Upon the release of *Transformers: The Movie*, Hot Rod (Judd Nelson) was among the entirely new characters never seen by viewers before. Friedman portrays him as young, cocky, and brash, much to the chagrin of his “old timer” friend, Kup (Lionel Stander), who warns that Hot Rod will never be an old timer if he does not listen to instructions.

Hot Rod is quick to join a battle and cares little for his own safety. This comes to a head during the climax of the battle on Earth. The Autobots and Decepticons all seem content to cease fire while their two leaders fight it out in a sort of duel of champions. As one book on the history of Transformers describes it, “Optimus Prime and Megatron confront each other and agree to hand-to-hand combat.”³⁶ Optimus issues the challenge by proclaiming, “One shall stand, one shall fall,” and Megatron accepts. The fight is intense and methodical, with wounds suffered by both opponents from punches, kicks, guns, laser swords, and one makeshift spike from debris. Eventually, Optimus Prime appears poised to land the killing blow on Megatron. However, in his enthusiasm, Hot Rod violates the duel and jumps in the middle, contrary to Kup’s warning to “Stay away, lad. That’s Prime’s fight.” Megatron

³³ Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, 174.

³⁴ Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, 174, 175.

³⁵ Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, 175.

³⁶ Optimus Prime makes the dramatic declaration upon first confronting Megatron at the battle. Frost, *Transform and Roll Out*, 679.

overpowers Hot Rod in a brief melee, and he uses the young Autobot as a shield. Megatron then lands several shots in the torso of Optimus, who, chivalrous until the end, refuses to fire his own gun while Hot Rod is in the way. Although Optimus eventually wins the duel and though the Decepticons retreat in response, he is severely wounded. Hot Rod rushes to his fallen leader, “Optimus, forgive me.” Friedman’s boy Arthur appears anything but heroic at this stage of the film.

The Matrix of Leadership as Excalibur, But More Akin to the Grail

From the lore introduced in *Transformers: The Movie*, viewers learn that Optimus carried an ancient relic within his chest, the Matrix of Leadership. This sparkling blue orb encased in a gold sphere with handles on opposing sides is immediately a mystery. While Optimus lies dying, he tells weeping onlookers, “Do not grieve. Soon I will be one with the Matrix.” Optimus then explains that he must pass on the Matrix to the next leader of the Autobots, Ultra Magnus (Robert Stack). Although Magnus initially says he is not worthy, Optimus retorts, “Nor was I, but one day, an Autobot will rise from our ranks and use the power of the Matrix to light our darkest hour.”³⁷ As Optimus holds out the Matrix from his deathbed, he drops it. The onlookers rush to catch the relic before it hits the floor, and it is Hot Rod who makes the save. He immediately hands the Matrix to Ultra Magnus who then conceals it in his chest. Watching this moment of the film, Dille exclaimed, “Look who catches it! Here’s our foreshadowing here. [Hot Rod] catches it, but it’s not for him. But we’re kinda getting a sense that maybe Arthur has pulled the sword out of the stone here.”³⁸ Friedman sought to mimic Hot Rod after a young Arthur, and Dille’s reaction demonstrates how other writers accepted the inspiration.

But what is the Matrix of Leadership? Dille reflected, “We had a lot of debates on exactly what the Autobot Matrix was.”³⁹ While both Friedman and Dille likened it to Excalibur, Friedman further described the Matrix as “the cybernetic, philosophical, physical and mystical core of Autobot leadership itself – the godhead.”⁴⁰ Friedman’s description of the Matrix is on par with Albert Pauphilet’s description of how the Grail is depicted in one of the early Arthurian romances, which was “immaterial, omnipresent [...] omnipotent and possesses miraculous grace: it is the symbol of God.”⁴¹ If the

³⁷ “Yeah, I think I ripped that off from Winston Churchill,” admitted Dille, “Audio Commentary,” *The Transformers: The Movie*.

³⁸ Dille, “Audio Commentary,” *The Transformers: The Movie*.

³⁹ Dille, “Audio Commentary,” *The Transformers: The Movie*.

⁴⁰ Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, 102–3.

⁴¹ “immatériel, omniprésent, entouré des êtres célestes, il a la toute-puissance et la grâce miraculeuse: c’est le symbole de Dieu.” Albert Pauphilet, *La Queste del saint Graal* (Paris: Librairie Honré Champion, 1980 [1923]), ix.

Matrix is “the godhead,” and if the Grail is “the symbol of God,” then these relics are more than mere kingmakers.⁴²

There are other parallels between, on the one hand, the Matrix of the animated film and, on the other hand, the numerous incarnations of the Grail. For example, while we may attribute Optimus Prime’s death to the mortal wounds that he sustained dueling Megatron, Optimus does not die until he relinquishes the Matrix. The light goes out of his eyes, and his red, white, and blue color turns dark gray. The Grail in Arthurian legends often gave unnaturally long life, even in deadly situations. For example, the *Queste del saint Graal* from the thirteenth-century *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* tells us how King Crudel imprisoned Josephus and his companions for forty days without food or water, but the Grail “provided their earthly nourishment” (*LG* 6:53–54).⁴³ Likewise, the Grail, or at least the power behind it, kept King Mordrain alive for 400 years with unhealed wounds, so that he would live long enough to see the knight who would fulfill the Quest for the Holy Grail (*LG* 6:54–55). In the *Queste*, the knight was Galahad, and when he finally met and embraced Mordrain, the king passed (*LG* 6:160–61). Outside of the *Queste*, there is the Fisher King’s father in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* (c. 1191) and Titurel in Wolfram of Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (c. 1210), both of whom are sustained by the Grail.⁴⁴

Although there are Transformers depicted as young (Hot Rod) and old (Kup), many of these robots live for millions of years, and none had been depicted as dying of old age during the first two cartoon seasons or in the animated film. If not for this apparent immortality, we might quickly associate Optimus Prime’s long life with his close proximity to the Matrix, as we might associate the Grail with the extended lives of Josephus, Mordrain, the Fisher King’s father, and Titurel. In the animated film, one of the characters tells us that Optimus’s “wounds are fatal,” and while we might interpret the act of relinquishing the Matrix as all Optimus was capable of completing, it can also be interpreted as the Matrix being the only thing keeping him alive with fatal wounds.

⁴² For a short summary on the conflicting Arthurian lore and popular retellings between the swords Excalibur and Caliburnus, see *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 147–48.

⁴³ All English translations are from *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, trans. Martha Asher, E. Jane Burns, Carleton W. Carroll, Carol J. Chase, William W. Kibler, Roberta L. Krueger, Norris J. Lacy, Rupert T. Pickens, and Samuel N. Rosenberg, 10 vols. (rpt. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010). *Lancelot* parts I through VI are in volumes 3–5, and the *Queste del saint Graal* is volume 6. References are *LG* with volume and page number.

⁴⁴ In “A Son, His Father, Some Nazis and the Grail: Lucas and Spielberg’s *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*,” in *The Holy Grail on Film: Essays on the Cinematic Quest*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 158–72 (159), Joseph M. Sullivan evokes Chrétien and Wolfram in his analysis of the Grail in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

The Unworthy Approaching the Grail or Attempting to Open the Matrix

Returning to *Transformers: The Movie*, there is a moment where Galvatron (Leonard Nimoy), new leader of the Decepticons, attempts and fails to open the Matrix. He was aware of the relic's existence, but he is not entirely sure of its power. Galvatron had stolen the Matrix after killing Ultra Magnus, but not before Magnus also attempted to open the Matrix. Surrounded by Decepticons threatening to kill him, Magnus curses, "Open, damn it! Open! Prime, you told us the Matrix would light our darkest hour." Chased to the ends of the galaxy, watching most of the Autobots killed off at this point in the film, and now threatened with his own death, Magnus cannot conceive of a darker moment than this. For both Ultra Magnus and Galvatron, Friedman explains that they are "unable to exercise [the Matrix's] power" and they "could not for the same reason The Wicked Witch of the West couldn't swipe Dorothy's red slippers, and nobody but Arthur could yank that sword from that stone. It was not in their stars."⁴⁵

But there are larger repercussions for two unworthy robots attempting to open the Matrix. While Magnus was executed, Galvatron, arguably, caused more death and destruction when he attempted to unleash the power of the Matrix in front of a massive planet-eater known as Unicron (Orson Welles). At this point in the film, the viewer only knows that Unicron is scared of the Matrix, describing it earlier as "the one thing, the only thing that can stand in my way." Unicron responds to Galvatron's threats by transforming into a giant robot, eating Galvatron, and then attacking Cybertron, killing countless Transformers in the process. Returning again to the *Queste del saint Graal*, those who were unworthy could not even approach the Holy Grail. Consider how King Mordrain came too close to the Grail, even when he was warned by a divine voice. The king did not listen, and a cloud materialized, which blinded and paralyzed him (*LG* 6:54). Lancelot, too, was unworthy to approach the Grail. And when he pressed too close, "he felt a breath of air, so hot it seemed to be mixed with fire, strike him violently in the face." The experience incapacitated Lancelot for twenty-four days, each day representing one year he had spent in sin (*LG* 6:156–58). In the *Prose Lancelot*, also part of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, the knight Bors discovered the Grail room, but "when he tried to go in, he saw a sharp, shining sword ready to strike him if he went any farther" (*LG* 5:307). While the scriptwriters likened the Matrix to Excalibur, there were no consequences for failing to pull the sword from the stone, aside from bruised egos. Like those who approached the Grail, there are consequences when the unworthy attempt to open the Matrix.

⁴⁵ Friedman, *I Killed Optimus Prime*, 106.

The Quest(s) for the Matrix

No Grail is seemingly complete without a quest. In the second and third acts, *Transformers: The Movie* breaks up the remaining robots into smaller groups, encountering new worlds, battles, duels, and wastelands. The film relies on interlacing to follow these threads, the same storytelling technique employed heavily by Arthurian romances, and, at one point in the film, there are no less than five active threads to follow.⁴⁶ And among these threads include several quests for the Matrix.⁴⁷

Unicron initiates the first quest. After he reincarnates the severely wounded Megatron into Galvatron, Unicron orders his new warrior to hunt down Ultra Magnus and destroy the Matrix. Galvatron initially pursues this quest with enthusiasm, but he is forced to continue through Unicron's threat of torture, which the planet-eater is able to do from afar, seemingly telepathically. Galvatron presses through several false starts and endings before finally killing Ultra Magnus. As described earlier, Galvatron then uses the Matrix to threaten Unicron, hoping to free himself of the torturous hold.

With the Matrix now out of Autobot hands, the remaining Autobots eventually merge their story threads on the planet of Junkion, a wasteland made of literal metallic junk occupied by Mad Max-like robots. They discuss the loss of the Matrix and conclude that without it, "there is no hope at all." Hot Rod, now assuming more of a leadership role, determines that they must venture out to recover the Matrix from Galvatron at all costs, even if it means encountering the planet-eater Unicron. The Autobots agree unanimously and immediately take off aboard two ships.

The moment the Autobots settle on their new quest to recover the Matrix in *Transformers: The Movie* is reminiscent of the beginning of the Grail Quest in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), when Arthur instructs his knights, "We must find what was lost: the Grail. Only the Grail can restore leaf and flower. Search the land, the labyrinths of the forest to the edge of within. Only the Grail can redeem us."⁴⁸ The Autobots determined that the Matrix is their "only hope" and they must pursue it to the ends of the universe to "light our darkest hour."

⁴⁶ During the middle act a group of Autobots are marooned on the planet of Junkion; Kup and Hot Rod are being sentenced to death in a mock tribunal; a third group of Autobots are looking for Kup and Hot Rod; Galvatron is seeking the Matrix; and Unicron is watching all the events from afar. A good place to start on interlacing techniques in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is Douglas Kelly, "Interlace and the Cyclic Imagination," in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. Carol Dover (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 55–64.

⁴⁷ Unrelated to the film, one story line in the comic-book series of *Transformers* includes a hunt for the then-missing Matrix, titled "Matrix Quest." Simon Furman, *The Transformers* 62–66 (Marvel Comics, 1989–90).

⁴⁸ *Excalibur*, dir. John Boorman (Los Angeles: Orion Pictures, 1981).

The animated film's interlacing of story threads converges at Cybertron, where Unicron is actively trying to destroy the planet. One of the Autobot ships makes its way inside Unicron by crashing through one of his eyes. The ship is destroyed in the process and the Autobots onboard are again split apart. This time, they are in a new wasteland, a labyrinth inside this belly of the beast, that one writer describes as, "like some kind of demented, hellish maze."⁴⁹ Separated from his companions, Hot Rod becomes a knight errant wandering this wasteland in no particular direction, looking for his companions, looking for the Matrix. He eventually sees the ancient relic, seemingly suspended in air, glimmering in the darkness. He learns, however, that it is held by Galvatron, and now Hot Rod must face his final challenge. Both robots engage in a lengthy melee, their metallic bodies clanging like the plate armor of medieval knights, and Hot Rod eventually wins this duel.

The Lineage of the Grail and the Matrix

On his deathbed, Optimus told onlookers, "Soon, I will be one with the Matrix," but this vague statement is not immediately explained. Optimus is not seen or heard from in the movie again until Hot Rod wrests control of the Matrix from Galvatron and starts to open it. The voice of Optimus says, "Arise, Rodimus Prime," and the young Hot Rod is transformed into a new, larger Autobot, a newly minted knight, dubbed by the previous king. In the *Queste del saint Graal*, the Grail companions encounter Joseph of Arimathea, who arrives on a throne carried by angels, and later, his son, Josephus (*LG* 6:163–64, 170). Both were previous bearers of the Grail, and they were long passed. Joseph appeared when Galahad was able to mend a broken sword that had wounded Joseph, an adventure that no other knight was able to complete.⁵⁰ Both Joseph and Josephus had a spiritual connection to the sacred relic that was only unveiled by Galahad. The connections of these previous bearers of ancient relics are similar – Joseph to the Grail and Optimus to the Matrix – and this connection is not made real in the respective stories until the chosen ones – Galahad and Hot Rod – have initiated the acts that had been tried and failed by others who were unworthy.

And just as the *Queste* tells us that only Galahad, the chosen knight, can complete the Grail Quest (*LG* 6:7), *Transformers: The Movie* provides foreshadowing of young Hot Rod's destiny. First, there is the moment Hot Rod catches the falling Matrix from Optimus Prime's hand, described earlier. Second, there is a moment when the Autobots first learn of Unicron, which

⁴⁹ Eric Garneau, "Dare to Be Stupid: The Fetishization of Heavy Metal and the New in *Transformers: The Movie*," in *Marvel Comics into Film Essays on Adaptations Since the 1940s*, ed. Matthew J. McEniry, Robert Moses Peaslee, and Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 52–59 (56).

⁵⁰ For example, Gawain tried and failed to mend the broken sword (*LG* 4:354).

had just destroyed two of Cybertron's moons and ate some of their Autobot companions in the process. Ultra Magnus, the leader initially selected by Optimus Prime, determines to venture out and face this new menace. One Autobot quips, "And what do we do when we get there? If that thing crunches moons, it's gonna make short work of us." Magnus responds, "Maybe the Matrix can stop it." Hot Rod interjects excitedly, "You're right, it can!" Kup asks, "What do you know about it, lad?" To which, Hot Rod responds, "I don't know. I just got this feeling."⁵¹ Although the *Queste*'s foreshadowing is much more on the nose,⁵² both narratives let the audience know that a specific knight is destined to achieve the quests of the Grail and the Matrix.

The Transformative Power of the Matrix

The Grail had the mystical powers to make new men out of their wielders. For example, while Galahad was the predestined Grail knight in the *Queste*, he becomes king of Sarras in the process (*LG* 6:169–70). Similarly, when Hot Rod finally wrests control of the Matrix from the unworthy Galvatron, the young, unlikely heroic Autobot opens the Matrix to "light our darkest hour." The event brings a magical ending to the final battle sequence of the film, destroying Unicron, saving Cybertron, and, according to the film's final scene, initiates a "new age of peace and happiness." In addition, there is the transformation of Hot Rod into Rodimus Prime, which was more than just size. The character profiles written up for the movie and television series tell us that Hot Rod:

is the all-American boy Autobot [...]. who has dreams of doing great stuff and being as heroic as Optimus Prime [...] He tends to follow the rules until they bug him – and he sometimes learns, to his regret, that disobeying orders wasn't exactly smart. And he often acts without thinking in an effort to do the right thing – and this gets him and sometimes his friends in trouble.⁵³

This trouble is clear when he ignores the warnings of Kup and interferes in the duel between Optimus Prime and Megatron, resulting in the death of Optimus. But once Hot Rod has opened the Matrix and transforms into Rodimus Prime, he now "speaks with the savvy of a seasoned veteran [...] He possesses acute military prowess [...] is an expert tactician with exceptional maneuverability in battle [...] His only weakness is his compassion for

⁵¹ My thanks to one of the pre-publication readers for pointing out this connection.

⁵² In a single day Galahad's arrival is announced by a hermit who says he will complete the adventures of the Grail; Galahad pulls a sword from a stone floating in a river; and he sits in the Perilous Seat, which suddenly bears his name (*LG* 6:7–9).

⁵³ Bob Budiansky, *Transformers Universe 4* (Marvel Comics Group, 1987), 22.

other living creatures.”⁵⁴ In the United States, the larger Rodimus Prime toy retailed at \$14.99 compared to \$12.99 for the smaller Hot Rod toy, and both were on shelves for the release of the movie in 1986.⁵⁵

The production of *Transformers: The Movie* evolved in a way that put pressure on scriptwriter Friedman to kill off Optimus Prime and promote his replacement. Friedman’s instinct was to turn to Arthurian legend for both the would-be leader and the means of which he would mature into that leader. The Grail bestows unnaturally long life and even makes kings, and opening the Matrix eliminates problems, brings light to darkness, and transforms the wielder into a new being. Age, wisdom, experience, and a higher retail price become instantaneous.

The Light of the Grail and the Matrix

Although the Matrix had been hidden in Optimus Prime’s chest for millions of years and most Transformers have never seen it, they all seem to recognize it instantly. In this way, the Matrix is again akin to the Grail of Arthurian romances or John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981) – elusive, mysterious, but overwhelming when it is in the room, as opposed to the unassuming, carpenter’s cup of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989).⁵⁶ As Raeleen Chai-Elsholz and Jean-Marc Elsholz have demonstrated, *Excalibur*’s overuse of intense light throughout the film is reminiscent of Arthurian romances, from Chrétien de Troyes to Malory.⁵⁷ For example, in one moment in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, a knight approaches the Grail room and “saw a great brightness, as if the sun had made its home therein, and the brightness was constantly increasing” (LG 5:307).⁵⁸ But, as Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz demonstrate, the light in *Excalibur* is more than effects, especially when the Grail Quest is completed, as “Light flows through [...] repairing, restoring, and healing.”⁵⁹

Light also plays a heavy role in *Transformers: The Movie*. Using only 2D animation and no CGI, director Nelson Shin revealed how the animators had portions of images “exposed four or five times” to achieve the bright effects of

⁵⁴ Budiansky, *Transformers Universe*, 23.

⁵⁵ Sears Christmas Wish Book (1986), 529, <http://www.wishbookweb.com/FB/1986_Sears_Wishbook/>, last accessed May 18, 2024.

⁵⁶ *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, dir. Steven Spielberg (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1989).

⁵⁷ Raeleen Chai-Elsholz and Jean-Marc Elsholz, “John Boorman’s *Excalibur* and the Irrigating Light of the Grail,” in *The Holy Grail on Film: Essays on the Cinematic Quest* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 98–111 (98).

⁵⁸ This is only one addition to the several examples provided by Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz, “John Boorman’s *Excalibur*,” 98.

⁵⁹ Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz, “John Boorman’s *Excalibur*,” 109.

lasers and glimmering.⁶⁰ These techniques come into play when Megatron is reincarnated into Galvatron and when the eyes of dying robots go dark. But light is most apparent with the Matrix, an object whose only express purpose is to “light our darkest hour.” There is the sparkling of the blue orb inside and the shine of the golden case that surrounds it. When Hot Rod catches the Matrix after Optimus Prime drops it, the light from the Matrix reflects on all surfaces in the room. Hot Rod then lifts the Matrix up like a bishop holding the chalice during mass, and the room goes dark, but light streams aggressively from the Matrix. Hot Rod later sees the Matrix in the darkness of Unicron’s belly, and its light reflects on the surrounding uneven surfaces. As Hot Rod is dueling Galvatron, the fight turns to Hot Rod’s advantage when the Matrix becomes brighter, and he rips it from a chain around Galvatron’s neck. When Hot Rod, now Rodimus Prime, fully opens the Matrix, the blue orb breaks apart into smaller crystal shards and the center of the orb then shines so brightly that the screen almost goes white. Unicron begins falling apart from the inside, but there is no physical thing attacking him. Instead, light begins shining through holes forming in his body. And when Unicron explodes, light shines through the pieces of his body and then dissipates entirely, the Matrix having achieved its purpose for the moment.

The concept of the Matrix in *Transformers*, like that of the Grail, appeared out of nowhere and found proliferation quickly. As Richard Barber points out, prior to the appearance of *Li Contes de Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1180), “no one would have known anything of the ‘holy thing’ called the Grail,” but within thirty years, “romances which took up Chrétien’s unfinished tale were widespread” in multiple languages.⁶¹ In 1986, no viewer of *Transformers: The Movie* had heard of the Matrix of Leadership. Twenty-three years later, the ancient relic had appeared in multiple comic-book series, cartoon series, and live-action films, in works produced in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. Each incarnation of the Matrix has added or modified the backstory, powers, and even its appearance.⁶² The fates of the Grail and Matrix also change from author to author, but the two have intersected at least once in film. The ancient city of Petra has served as the hiding place of both the Grail and the Matrix in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), respectively.⁶³

⁶⁰ Shin, “Audio Commentary,” *The Transformers: The Movie*. Similarly, there were technical challenges with the light employed for *Excalibur*. Chai-Elsholz and Elsholz, “John Boorman’s *Excalibur*,” 109.

⁶¹ Barber, *Holy Grail*, 27.

⁶² For each appearance of the Matrix in *Transformers* continuums, the most comprehensive source is “Matrix of Leadership,” *Transformers Wiki*, <https://tfwiki.net/wiki/Matrix_of_Leadership>, last accessed March 20, 2024.

⁶³ *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, dir. Michael Bay (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 2009).

The Once and Future “Greatest Autobot”

Returning to the death of Optimus Prime, Shin explained, “We tried to play that moment as a human dying. It’s not just a robot dying. You can feel the emotions here. You can see humanity.”⁶⁴ In the death scene, there is slow, melodic music that climaxes when the light in Optimus Prime’s eyes goes dark. The one human present in the scene visibly sheds tears. The blowback against seeing Optimus die was overwhelming, so much so that later theatrical releases of the film added a voiceover narration before the credits, “The battle is over, but the galaxy spanning adventures of the Transformers will continue and the greatest Autobot of them all – Optimus Prime – will return.”⁶⁵ The producers of the film have reflected, “[I]n retrospect we might not have killed Optimus Prime off if we had to do it all over again.”⁶⁶ Dille, who admittedly did not realize the implications of the character’s death, believes “The funny thing [...] is it probably gave the movie its resonance,” referring to the interest he observed from fans twenty years after the film’s release.⁶⁷

Conversely, Friedman recognized the implications of killing Optimus immediately. When asked about it more recently, he explained, “You cannot kill big daddy in the family [...]. You just can’t do it and you shouldn’t do it.” When Friedman realized he had to go through with killing Optimus Prime in his script, he told the producers, “If I do, he’ll come back to life. You have to bring him back to life.” He claims they told him, “Never. Not going to happen.” Friedman retells these anecdotes with glee and points out how killing and resurrecting the Autobot leader has become a trope, “Now every episode of anything new in Transformers, they kill Optimus Prime [and] he’s back by the second act.”⁶⁸

Optimus Prime’s death, the reactions from fans, and the response by Hasbro to reverse course and hint at his return are all reminiscent of “The Once and Future King” trope from Arthurian legend. T. H. White, who creatively translated the phrase “REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS” from Malory to arrive at the title of his collected works on King Arthur, tells us at the end, “There would be a day – there must be a day – when he

⁶⁴ Nelson Shin, “The Death of Optimus Prime,” *The Transformers: The Movie*, 20th Anniversary Special Edition, DVD, dir. Nelson Shin (New York: Sony BMG, 2006).

⁶⁵ The voiceover was not available in US releases of the film, but it was included in several releases in the United Kingdom and later Australia, including the first UK release (London: V.I.P. Video Gems, 1987), VHS.

⁶⁶ Joe Bacal, “The Death of Optimus Prime.”

⁶⁷ Flint Dille, “The Death of Optimus Prime.”

⁶⁸ Comments made at TFCCon in Toronto, July 14, 2019. Video available at “Transformers Writer Ron Friedman on Optimus Prime & Megatron’s Death and Including Arcee in the Film,” August 15, 2020, YouTube <<https://youtu.be/QDQYLzeakOA>>, last accessed May 17, 2024.

would come back.”⁶⁹ Likewise, the appended voiceover on later releases of *Transformers: The Movie* tells viewers that “the greatest Autobot of them all – Optimus Prime – will return.”⁷⁰ There was no official plan at the time, but the producers realized the blunder and they did what they could to undo the damage.⁷¹

In the last episode of the third season of the original *Transformers* cartoon series (1987), Optimus Prime is brought back to life when there is yet another darkest hour.⁷² Prime learns of the events of the film and that a new menace in the form of a plague is infecting robotic and biological creatures alike, across all known worlds. Optimus Prime first seeks guidance from the collective wisdom of past Autobots, which was stored within the Matrix, reminiscent of Galahad learning from Josephus and Joseph in the *Queste*. The wisdom of the Autobots tell Optimus Prime that the only hope is to open the Matrix. The resurrected leader opens the Matrix to, as one reviewer put it, “magically cure the entire galaxy, in one of the most terrible cop-out endings imaginable,” disappointed with the seemingly magical solution to the story.⁷³

Yet, Optimus Prime was still unavailable as a toy in 1987, and it was not until 1988 that he was released as a larger, stronger version, dubbed Powermaster Optimus Prime. This new version of the Autobot leader retailed at \$26.99, compared to the \$23.99 retail price of his discontinued version in 1985.⁷⁴ Hasbro eventually discontinued *Transformers* in the United States in 1990, owing to declining sales and competition from new franchises such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. *Transformers* continued as a toy line in Europe and Japan. Among the many reasons for the initial decline of *Transformers* in the United States is, as Ryan Frost has noted, the discontinuation of fan favorites, which were replaced by new, unfamiliar characters.⁷⁵ Yet, this was part of Hasbro’s strategy at the time. Once a toy had reached its sales peak, they would discontinue it and replace it with the next hot thing. For Optimus, that time came in Christmas 1985, when the supply could not meet the demand for the most popular selling Transformer. In 1986 Hasbro

⁶⁹ T. H. White, *The Once and Future King*, 631; Original Latin phrase in Malory, *Works*, 2nd edn., ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), 717, book XXI, line 35.

⁷⁰ *The Transformers: The Movie* (London: V. I. P. Video Gems, 1987), VHS.

⁷¹ Flint Dille admitted to the lack of any plan to bring back Optimus Prime. Dille, “The Death of Optimus Prime.”

⁷² “The Return of Optimus Prime, Part 2,” *The Transformers* s3e30 (Sunbow Productions, 1987).

⁷³ Frost, *Transformer and Roll Out*, 745.

⁷⁴ *Sears Christmas Wish Book* (1985), 438–39, <http://www.wishbookweb.com/FB/1985_Sears_Wishbook/>, last accessed May 18, 2024; *Sears Christmas Wish Book* (1988), 446, <http://www.wishbookweb.com/FB/1988_Sears_Wishbook/>, last accessed May 18, 2024.

⁷⁵ Frost, *Transformer and Roll Out*, 762–63.

hoped that kids would clammer for the new Ultra Magnus toy.⁷⁶ But, as Frost points out, “[M]any kids were pining for their favourites to return. Powermaster Optimus Prime (1988) was immensely popular when it came out, not just because it was a good toy, but because it was *Optimus Prime*.⁷⁷

When Hasbro reintroduced Transformers to the United States, they always made sure to include familiar characters. Among all the Transformers toys, Optimus Prime has by far the most incarnations, attesting to the appeal of The Once and Future “Greatest Autobot.”⁷⁸ Just as proliferators of Arthurian legend have reiterated the same prophecy from the Middle Ages that King Arthur will return, Hasbro has ensured that its target audience can rightfully anticipate the return of Optimus Prime.

Arthurian Myth Transformed

As Norris J. Lacy has remarked, “[T]he Arthurian myth, for better or for worse, is constantly being remade.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Jason Bainbridge has identified Transformers as “like a modern myth” that has become “a story to be repeated, taken apart, rebuilt and repeated again for generations.”⁸⁰ Josh Cooley, director of *Transformers ONE* (2024), experienced the depths of this modern myth when “Hasbro gave me this bible of the entire history of Transformers, which is, as you probably know, massive [...] it was like this Tolkien-esque scale.”⁸¹ Of course, the four decades of Transformers is a far cry from the nearly nine centuries of Arthuriana, but if Transformers is a modern myth, then it is one influenced by and reminiscent of Arthurian myth, intentionally and unintentionally. Although *Transformers: The Movie* is made predominantly of robots, it is a violent film, and we can trace the intentional Arthurian elements directly to Friedman’s desire to increase the drama for the viewer. These robots are shot, torn apart, exploded, eaten, digested, and melted in hot, liquid metal. A complete body count is not possible, as Unicron alone eats one planet and two moons before he even attacks Cybertron. Millions die in the process.

⁷⁶ Hasbro strategy in Dixon, *Playing Them False*, 265.

⁷⁷ Frost, *Transform and Roll Out*, 762.

⁷⁸ For the most comprehensive list of Optimus Prime toys, see “Optimus Prime (G1)/toys,” *Transformers Wiki*, <[https://tfwiki.net/wiki/Optimus_Prime_\(G1\)/toys](https://tfwiki.net/wiki/Optimus_Prime_(G1)/toys)>, last accessed May 19, 2024.

⁷⁹ Norris J. Lacy, “Mythopoeia in *Excalibur*,” in *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, rev. edn., ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 34–43 (34).

⁸⁰ Bainbridge, “*Transformers: The Movie*: Making Modern Mythology,” 36.

⁸¹ Quoted in Spencer Perry, “*Transformers ONE* Director Confirms New Movie’s Canon Status (Exclusive),” *ComicBook.com*, April 18, 2024, <<https://comicbook.com/movies/news/transformers-one-director-confirms-new-movies-canon-status/>>, last accessed May 17, 2024.

Friedman's desire to kill off Transformers was embraced by Hasbro, which asked him to take it further by killing off Optimus Prime. Friedman understood the problem later surmised by Jason Brainbridge, "In trying to reduce Prime back to a commodity that could be replaced, [Hasbro] had failed to consider the individual appeal of the character they had created."⁸² So, in the hopes of making the best of his assignment, Friedman sought to replace Optimus Prime with a young King Arthur archetype. And, through multiple iterations of the script, the power to transform this kid into a king came through the Matrix of Leadership. While various iterations of Transformers have modified the origins of the Matrix, in *Transformers: The Movie*, it was a mystical relic with grandiose power, and it was sought by everyone in the film through various quests. It had the power to transform, light the darkest hour, and bring peace to the galaxy. As with the power of the Grail in Boorman's *Excalibur* film, according to Lacy, "Viewers even remotely familiar with the Arthurian story will doubtless not be surprised that the Grail is the remedy."⁸³ Before Hot Rod opens the Matrix, *Transformers: The Movie* ensures viewers know the Matrix is going to do something powerful.

With its futuristic 2005 setting, interactions that take place mainly between robots in outer space, and its heavy-metal soundtrack that has been described as "fetishized,"⁸⁴ *Transformers: The Movie* is not an obvious film for medievalism studies. However, as Kevin J. Harty has stated, "Perhaps in our search for a cinematic translation of the Arthurian myth, we have been looking in all the wrong places."⁸⁵ The constant remaking, or transforming, of Arthurian myth will continue to provide new and interesting places to find medievalism. Some of these places are out of this world, but there is often more than meets the eye.

⁸² Bainbridge, "Transformers: The Movie: Making Modern Mythology," 29.

⁸³ Lacy, "Mythopoeia," 38.

⁸⁴ Garneau, "Dare to Be Stupid," 58.

⁸⁵ Kevin J. Harty, "Looking for Arthur in All the Wrong Places: A Note on M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*," *Arthuriana* 10.4 (2000): 57–62 (61).