

The Culmination of Shakespearean Villainy in *The Transformers: The Movie* (1986)

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the Shakespearean inspired rise and fall of Starscream (Christopher Collins), one of the many robots killed off in the 1986 animated film *Transformers: The Movie*. Originally released with the intent to market toys to children, Hasbro saw death in the film as a practical approach to write off characters of discontinued toys. This essay examines scriptwriter Ron Friedman's approach of crafting Starscream as a "metallic Iago" who never quite got it right when trying to usurp his leader. In addition, when Starscream finally seizes control, he commemorates the moment with an over-the-top coronation ceremony straight from a film set in the Shakespearean Middle Ages. The scene is meant to lampoon his lust for power, and his quick, violent death is meant to put the character to rest. However, Starscream's death only seems to make him more popular, a popularity that has persisted for 40 years.

INTRODUCTION

Although not a commercial success and criticized for killing off characters to coincide with Hasbro's toy line production, the 1986 animated film *The Transformers: The Movie* (Dir. Nelson Shin) connected with fans and "has had a lasting legacy within the franchise, and to this day is one of the cornerstones of the entire Transformers phenomenon" (Frost 685).¹ Before the live-action films that began in 2007, the 1986 animated film was the only foray into the box office for the transforming alien robots, and it featured star-studded voice work by Leonard

Nimoy, Judd Nelson, Eric Idle, Robert Stack, and Orson Welles. Today, the film celebrates a "cult following...particularly among the now adult fans of the franchise" (Bainbridge "Transformers" 28), and numerous works have explored the continued popularity of the 1980's incarnation of Transformers among adults (Bainbridge "Fully"; Fast and Örnebring; Geraghty; Johnson; Wolski). Ron Friedman, the author of the first two drafts of the film's script, witnessed the cult following firsthand, and he found that fans "know and love all of" the Transformers characters,

¹ The film has seen release on every major format beginning with VHS, Betamax, and LaserDisc. The past five major releases include the first DVD edition (Kid Rhino, 2000), the 20th Anniversary (Sony BMG, 2006), the first Blu-Ray edition (Sony BMG, 2007), the 30th Anniversary (Shout! Factory, 2016), and the 35th Anniversary on 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray (Shout! Factory, 2021).

including the focus of this essay, Starscream (Christopher Collins), who Friedman describes as “the treacherous and cowardly Shakespearean villain” (*I Killed Optimus Prime* 28).

Starscream, whom Friedman had spent several years developing through the first two seasons (1984-1985) of the *Transformers* cartoon series, was crafted as “a metallic Iago unable to sway his lord, Megatron, who is channeling an ignoble Othello” (103). In the 1986 animated film, Starscream finally saw his moment to usurp Megatron (Frank Welker), the leader of his faction. In his zeal, Starscream commemorated the event with a coronation scene (00:32:26–00:33:53) complete with trumpet fanfare, a faux bishop with a crown, and a cape, all elements borrowed from earlier medieval cinematic coronations such as Laurence Olivier’s *Richard III* (1955). Such a scene is out of place with futuristic alien robots in outer space, as well as with everything viewers had learned about Transformers up to this point in the franchise. However, the filmmakers used this hodgepodge scene to play up the delusions of grandeur of the short-lived king, giving Starscream a dramatically tragic, Shakespearean ending.

Viewed within no other context, *The Transformers: The Movie* may fit into Shakespearean scholar Eric S. Mallin’s definition of a “non-adaptation,” as it “takes up Shakespearean thematic elements” while paying “no overt homage to Shakespeare” (1). However, outside the film, Friedman, an unapologetic bardolator, has made numerous statements in writing and on panels that reveal “William Shakespeare has always been my primary inspiration and muse” (*I Killed Optimus Prime* 194). For the film, he declared a strong desire for “audiences to really care, and feel something about the story they’ll be paying to see,” and “Shakespeare was particularly helpful to me” in the writing process (161, 195).

This essay will provide a brief history and overview of the Transformers continuum leading up to *The Transformers: The Movie*, as well as the marketing interests of Hasbro during the film’s production that aimed to eliminate discontinued toys such as Starscream. These marketing interests enabled Friedman to explore the concept of death in the film, allowing him to craft a tragic ending for his “treacherous and cowardly Shakespearean villain.” Finally, this essay will explore the out-of-place medievalism of the coronation scene and how its elements were used to lampoon Starscream’s lust for a crown. What will become apparent is that although *The Transformers: The Movie* is a futuristic animated Sci-Fi film made with the explicit purpose of marketing toy robots to children, the filmmakers were inspired by Shakespeare and Shakespearean films in their storytelling and mise-en-scène. The result was the creation of a death scene that had the opposite effect initially desired by Hasbro, as Starscream is still a popular character and toy 40 years after his initial discontinuation.

TRANSFORMERS (1984-1986)

Transformers, as an intellectual property of toys, debuted in the U.S. in 1984 as a result of a longstanding collaborative partnership between U.S.-based Hasbro and Japan-based Takara that dates back to 1971 (Johnson 153-196). These robot toy figures have been compared to a Rubik’s Cube (Dixon 139; Fleming 125), as they could be twisted and shifted into a robot form and into

some vehicle or device, inspiring their franchise name. With the express purpose of promoting the toy line, Hasbro commissioned an animated television series, as well as two comic book series that ran concurrently in the U.S. and U.K. (Hidalgo 69). Hasbro and Takara, now Takara Tomy, have continued their partnership, drawing “upon each other’s innovations,” repackaging new stories and toy lines in a “transnational” process that reuses characters and plot devices for each iteration within their respective markets. The process has successfully kept Transformers “in a constant state of evolution” (Johnson 181), and, in 2024, Transformers returned to the box office with its first animated film since 1986 with Josh Cooley’s *Transformers One*.

The basic outline of Transformers has remained the same since it originally launched in the U.S., and it focuses on a species of alien robots fighting a civil war that eventually spreads to Earth. At the beginning of the franchise, Hasbro tells us the civil war is between the “heroic Autobots and the evil Decepticons” (Budiansky 33). Groups from each of these factions left their home planet of Cybertron and while fighting in space, they crash-landed on Earth four million years before the present day. These shipwrecked Transformers survived but were offline and dormant. A volcanic eruption in 1984 reawakened the ship’s computer which then promptly reconfigured the robots to transform into earth-based vehicles, devices, or weapons, and, from there, the war picked back up for 65 episodes across the next two years (Frost 589-689). That brings us to *The Transformers: The Movie*. Released in the summer of 1986, this film jumps 20 years into the future of 2005. Viewers quickly learn that the civil war is still raging, and the “treacherous Decepticons” have conquered Cybertron while the “valiant Autobots” persist on the planet’s moons (00:04:09–00:04:30).

THE TRANSFORMERS: THE MOVIE AND THE MARKETING INTERESTS OF HASBRO

From the beginning of the franchise, the writers of Transformers toiled to ensure that each robot had their own backstory and personality, and Friedman tells us that “the enormous cast of characters” was one of “the biggest inescapable problems I had to solve elegantly and fast” when writing the film (*I Killed Optimus Prime* 191). To meet this challenge, Friedman tells us he relied on Shakespeare, as “no other writer was able to handle such large casts, and dramatize the trigger points of human conflict better” (195). Friedman made personalities, speech patterns, and motivations unique for each character. Where robots existed in both the first two seasons of the television show and in the movie, filmmakers took care to continue the characters’ personalities with the same voice actors.

When Hasbro assigned Friedman the extra task of writing off discontinued toys in *The Transformers: The Movie*, he proposed the idea of killing off characters, something that had not occurred in the first two seasons leading up to the film. Hasbro jumped at the idea and even provided a list (Frost 681). Friedman later explained that presenting death in the film was not because he was a “bloodthirsty savage,” but because he wanted “to raise the stakes, giving the surviving characters opportunities to grieve, suck it up, and add a more profound dimension to their reactions, actions and speeches, to give the

story more gravitas, that is the weight which life and conflict lay on each of us" (*I Killed Optimus Prime* 161, 166-167). Furthermore, by raising the stakes, "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" (99).

The result is a violent film, even though the principal victims are all robots. They are shot, driven over, torn apart, exploded, eaten, digested, and even melted in hot, liquid metal. According to the *List of Deaths Wiki*, there were at least 73 characters visibly dead or killed, or wounded so extensively that they were reincarnated (repurposed) into new characters ("Starscream"). A complete body count is not possible for *The Transformers: The Movie*, as one planet and two moons are destroyed entirely, and another planet is nearly destroyed, killing millions.

Hasbro received plenty of blowback for this approach, especially because Optimus Prime (Peter Cullen), the most popular character in the franchise, was one of the victims, "in accordance with the tactic of killing off toys when they reach a sales peak" before introducing the next replacement (Dixon 265). Even Friedman has lamented, "Unfortunately, I think my presenting the 'somebody needs to die notion' started the corporate thinking that led to Hasbro handing Optimus Prime a death sentence" (167). Friedman attempted to soften the death of Optimus by playing up one of the new characters as a young King Arthur of sorts, but it fell flat with viewers (Manning 199-201, 209-211). However, not all the film's deaths are lamented, and fandom arguably remembers one of them, Starscream, fondly.

SHAKESPEAREAN VILLAINY IN *THE TRANSFORMERS: THE MOVIE*

Two characters who enjoyed continuity from the first two seasons to the 1986 animated film were Starscream, a Decepticon known for his screechy voice, and his leader Megatron, known for his brute ruthlessness. Although both Starscream and Megatron share a goal of defeating the Autobots in the civil war, Starscream maintains an underlying higher purpose of replacing Megatron as leader of the Decepticons. In Friedman's crafting of the two characters as a metallic Iago and an ignoble Othello, he kept them at odds with each other. Reflecting on the dialogue between the two, he tells us:

I was thinking Shakespeare. I was thinking Shakespearean villainy in which the villains are well spoken, in which they express their contempt for each other in ways that are memorable, in which you can see their evil machinations that are each based on the same phenomenon, which is "I'm the one that's important. I'm the only one that matters. I am the bringer of all goodness and knowledge." When those people confront each other, it should be a festival of fireworks and Shakespeare did that brilliantly. So my attempt was to do that. ("Q&A with *Transformers The Movie* Writer Ron Friedman from TFcon Toronto 2019," 00:20:19-00:21:02)

The first two seasons of *Transformers* played through this dynamic often, as Starscream would seemingly turn on Megatron, but then cower away when the opportunity for easy usurping had passed. When he was caught in his

Starscream's lust for a crown and the coronation scene are both reminiscent of Laurence Olivier's film adaptation of *Richard III* (1955)."

treachery, Starscream suffered verbal and physical abuse and even exile, but he more often escaped unscathed, living to betray another day.

At the start of *The Transformers: The Movie*, Starscream remains at Megatron's side, still "pouring honeyed poison, or outright contempt into Megatron's titanium ear holes to which an unimpressed Megatron always responds with withering disdain, and belittlement" (Friedman 103). Starscream challenges his leader, but always in a way that appears to be helpful with a tinge of sarcasm and plausible deniability. This conversation follows after they work together to successfully hijack a shuttle and massacre the Autobots onboard:

Megatron: This was almost too easy, Starscream.

Starscream: Much easier, almighty Megatron, than attacking the real threat—the Autobot's moon base!

Megatron: You're an idiot, Starscream. When we slip by their early warning systems in their own shuttle, and destroy Autobot City, the Autobots will be vanquished forever. (00:08:00-00:08:24)

Here, Starscream goes along with Megatron's current plan and blandishes his leader as "almighty," but insinuates that if he were in charge, he would take a different, better approach, all within earshot of the other Decepticons. The scene demonstrates that Megatron continues to tolerate Starscream's subtle insubordination, just as Othello tolerated Iago's initial lies until Othello began to doubt himself. The framing of the scene in *The Transformers: The Movie* is similar to that of Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995). Megatron/Othello (Laurence Fishburne) stare forward in contemplation, waiting for Starscream/Iago (Kenneth Branagh) to finish "pouring their poisoned honey" (Fig. 1). The viewer can sense the waning patience in the leaders while the usurpers ramble on. Megatron/Othello seemingly grit their teeth in silence. But Megatron, as the "ignoble Othello," would never reach the same stage of self-sabotage as his Shakespearean counterpart, and Starscream would need to act more boldly. Audiences had watched Starscream try and fail to usurp his leader, and the metallic Iago would finally take one step too far in the film.

After a lengthy battle on Earth ended with the severe wounding of Megatron and the Decepticons retreating to Cybertron, their ship is unable to maintain the weight it is carrying. Starscream steps in and asks the Decepticons for a solution to "lighten our burden" if they are ever to make it back home. Another Decepticon declares, "In that case, I say it is survival of the fittest." Starscream gleefully asks, "Do I hear a second on that?" All the uninjured Decepticons declare they are in favour while all the wounded Decepticons vote against. Starscream says,



Fig. 1 | Starscream suggests an alternative to his leader's current plans in Shin's *The Transformers: The Movie*, 00:08:11. Sunbow Productions, 1986. Iago (Kenneth Branagh) works on the downfall of Othello (Laurence Fishburne) by disguising lies as concern in Parker's *Othello*, 00:52:53. Columbia Pictures, 1995.



Fig. 2 | The coronation of Starscream at the Decepticon Hall of Heroes, in Shin's *The Transformers: The Movie*, 00:32:30. Sunbow Productions, 1986. The crown looms large (literally) in Olivier's *Richard III*, 00:12:39. Sony Pictures, 1955.

"The ayes have it!" and Decepticons start tossing each other out into space (00:26:48-00:27:21). Starscream personally seizes the weakened Megatron and stands at the door to space and declares with a smile and wink, "Oh, how it pains me to do this." Megatron struggles to respond, "Wait, I still function." Starscream releases his former leader, "Wanna bet?" Megatron fades away into space screaming Starscream's name (00:27:23-00:27:38).

The preceding sequence reinforces Starscream's conniving approach of plausible deniability, mimicked from Iago. Starscream never suggested anyone should be thrown out into space; he was only following what the majority wanted. This sequence keeps with the Iago persona that Friedman crafted for Starscream. In the first act of *Othello*, Iago convinces the gullible Roderigo to join him in informing Brabantio of his daughter's rendezvous with the title character. However, before Roderigo comes down to meet the accusers, Iago flees after convincing Roderigo to stay, keeping Iago's name and face out of the controversy. Iago rushes to ensure that he is by Othello's side as an ally when Brabantio later confronts Othello (1.1.158-173).

With Megatron seemingly gone, Starscream immediately declares himself the new leader of the Decepticons. However, this is a culture where the strongest rule, and even though Starscream finally got one up on Megatron, the fallen leader was not at his strongest. The Decepticons reject Starscream's declaration. Others promote themselves as "the most powerful" or "superior," and thus, more worthy of rule. A fight ensues, and in the end, Starscream somehow wins the dispute (00:27:39-00:28:35). What follows is the coronation scene of Starscream assuming leadership of the Decepticons, which is a scene straight from a medieval film, but with robots in outer space.

TRUMPET FANFARE, AND THE CORONATION AND FALL OF STARSCREAM

Cinematic medievalism, the creation of the Middle Ages on film, began in 1895 with a kinetoscope by Thomas Edison, featuring a short of Joan of Arc (Harty and Manning 8). Today, medieval films proliferate the box office and streaming services, and over the past three decades, there has been a boom in medievalism studies focused on film (Harty; Finke and Shichtman; Elliott; Amy de la Bretèque; Harty and Manning). Yet, this scholarship does not focus solely on films set in the Middle Ages, but also how unlikely productions borrow from the period. Starscream's coronation in *The Transformers: The Movie* makes it one such unlikely production, and the scene was modified from the initial script drafts to further lampoon the appropriated medievalism of it. The result features the "Decepticon Hall of Heroes" on Cybertron (Friedman, *The Transformers: The Movie* script 45). This open-air pavilion features two rows of large statues of unknown robots, leading up to a round platform with 23 steps (Fig. 2). Although there is no visible throne, the final script described it as "the closest thing the Decepticons have to a throne room" (Friedman and Dille 44).

The first thing the viewer hears is trumpet fanfare. On top of the platform is Starscream in a large purple cape on his shoulders, which "looks slightly ridiculous," according to the script (44). Astrotrain (Jack Angel), another Decepticon, acts as a bishop holding up a large golden crown adorned with red

The purpose of the coronation ceremony is the culmination of the metallic lingo's delusions of grandeur to one day lead and have followers."

jewels (Fig. 3). As Astrotrain begins to crown Starscream, the fanfare starts again. An annoyed Starscream screeches, "Get on with the ceremony!" The camera cuts to five Decepticons blowing trumpets. The trumpeters exchange looks and continue with the fanfare until Starscream fires a perfect shot to clip the ends of the trumpets, leaving the trumpeters disappointed. While his supporters keep onlookers in-line at gunpoint, Starscream is crowned, he looks around with satisfaction, extends an arm to his new subjects, and announces, "Fellow Decepticons, as your new leader, I..." (Fig. 4).

Let us first examine the medievalism of this moment. The scene features trumpet fanfare, a faux bishop with a crown, a would-be king with a cape, and a podium. Each of these can be what medievalist Andrew B.R. Elliott identifies as a "historicon," a term he coined to define a film's "visual conventions which each aim to evoke to the spectator an element of 'medieval-ity'" (182). Elliott provides numerous examples of historicons including castles, princesses, banquets, and knights, and these "symbolic tropes, images or sequences of events" act as "signs of medieval-ness" to audiences (193). The coronation ceremony in *The Transformers: The Movie* provides audiences with a familiar sequence: trumpets blare, a bishop crowns the king, and the king addresses his subjects.

Starscream's lust for a crown and the coronation scene are both reminiscent of Laurence Olivier's film adaptation of *Richard III* (1955). Early in the film, the title character (Laurence Olivier) delivers a monologue, originally delivered in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 3* (3.2.167-173), where he tells the audience:

Then, since this Earth affords no joy to me
But to command, to check, to o'erbear such
As are of better person than myself,
I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,
And, whiles I live, t' account this world but hell
Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head
Be round impaled with a glorious crown.
(00:11:36-00:12:10)

Under an oversized crown that dangles from the ceiling (Fig. 2), Richard declares that he will lie, cheat, and murder his way to the throne with a smile, just as Starscream had successfully done over the course of two seasons of *Transformers* to finally achieve his grand moment in the animated film. Richard's eventual coronation scene in the 1955 film could be seen as a model for Starscream's coronation, as there is a bishop, crown, cape, podium, and trumpet fanfare. A giant gold crown is suspended above the podium in *Richard III* while a giant golden Decepticon emblem looms over the podium in *The Transformers: The Movie* (Fig. 2). The placement of these symbols indicates to audiences that the elevated platform is where the ruler resides

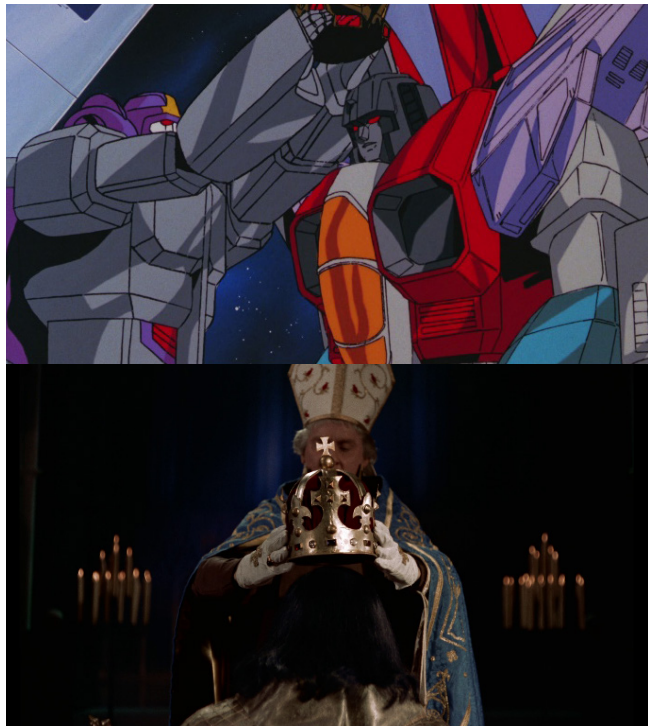


Fig. 3 | The faux bishop crowns the king in Shin's *The Transformers: The Movie*, 00:32:32. Sunbow Productions, 1986. The coronation of the title character in Olivier's *Richard III*, 01:51:34. Sony Pictures, 1955.



Fig. 4 | The new king addresses his subjects in Shin's *The Transformers: The Movie*, 00:32:51. Sunbow Productions, 1986. Richard III basks in his glory in Olivier's *Richard III*, 01:53:07. Sony Pictures, 1955.

over his subjects. Upon the crowning of Starscream/Richard, there is a moment where the ruler revels in silence (Fig. 4). The onlookers and the audience are subjected to the new kings' indulgence of their moments, as if posing for a painting. Both scenes are framed below the kings, so the viewer is looking up. The new ruler stands above all. This follows the preceding scene where the king has bowed or knelt momentarily to receive the crown (Fig. 3).

Medievalism studies scholarship has thoroughly demonstrated that historical fidelity is typically not the intention or even to the benefit of filmmakers when it comes to medieval films, because "to be authentic a film need not conform to the historical reality (whatever this might have been), but only to what the audiences *think* the period looked like" (Elliott 215). For example, although trumpet fanfare is a common aspect of medieval films, it is entirely a post-medieval creation, as "surviving evidence on the medieval horn and trumpet...offers precious little help in re-creating their music" (Haines 46-47). As such, the trumpet fanfare we know today has its origins in modern medievalist movements such as the Romantic orchestral tradition (47-48).

Turning back to the coronation scene in *The Transformers: The Movie*, the film differs from earlier versions of the script. The second draft only describes a faux bishop with a crown and the platform. Instead of trumpeting fanfare, one Decepticon "intones ritual from an ancient book," and Starscream wants him to "get on with the ceremony! Your future monarch is waiting!" In this draft, these ceremonial words are recited: "In accordance with ancient ritual, we, the Decepticons of Cybertron, herewith anoint and extol thee, noble Starscream and proclaim thee King until time ceases to flow and..." The ceremony is interrupted, and Starscream exclaims, "Get on with it! Complete my investiture!" (Friedman, *The Transformers: The Movie* script 45). While there are no trumpets to annoy Starscream in this draft, there are key words that are fit for a cinematic medieval coronation—investiture, king, monarchy, herewith, anoint, noble, and extol. There is even use of "thee," to provide a Shakespearean feel among the alien robots who have all somehow spoken English for millions of years. The use of such archaic, "mock-medieval" (Elliott 193), or "pseudo-medieval" language (Osberg and Crow 40) is another sign Elliott has identified to convey "medieval-ness" to the viewer (193).

The trumpets were a post-script addition entirely. While Friedman's second draft calls for an ancient book to delay the coronation, Flint Dille's modified script uses no such props to annoy Starscream who just wants to "Get on with the ceremony" (Friedman and Dille 44). The trumpets were added during the storyboarding process (Chung 2A), and it is clear the filmmakers were influenced by medieval film to further lampoon Starscream's moment. The ceremony is out of place for everything we know about the Transformers based on the first two seasons in 1984 and 1985, and thus far in the film. Quite simply, the Decepticons are not a crown culture.² Megatron led



Fig. 5 | Trumpet fanfare from alien robots ends after their trumpets are destroyed in Shin's *The Transformers: The Movie*, 00:32:34-43. Sunbow Productions, 1986.

the Decepticons through brute force, and he kept his troops in line because he was the strongest. There were no ceremonies or crowns; there was just Megatron barking orders. When Megatron was gone, the Decepticons still believed that the strongest should lead and they were willing to fight over this belief, as they did on the shuttle. The purpose of the coronation ceremony is the culmination of the metallic Iago's delusions of grandeur to one day lead and have followers. His desire to evoke some ancient custom that, if it did exist was not being followed, further emphasizes how out of touch Starscream was with his fellow Decepticons.

Starscream's coronation ceremony had its origins among humans on Earth, not among his fellow alien robots. The ancient book in Friedman's second draft lent some credibility to the moment, even if the other Decepticons were not enthusiastic about participating. Megatron might have forsaken the old ways, but there was at least an artifact that suggested Starscream was not inventing anything. Without the ancient book in the film, the ceremony instead appears merely to be Starscream's interpretation of how rulers were crowned on Earth instead of how rulers were determined on Cybertron, especially among the Decepticons. Said another way, the ceremony is appropriated and anachronistic. As such, when a challenger arrives, the Decepticons stand by and watch instead of defending their new leader.

² Thanks to Dawn Manning for making this laconic statement during a screening of the film.

Starscream attempted to redefine the customs of the Decepticons by introducing a cinematic medieval ceremony.”

THE END OF STARScream's REIGN AND TRUMPET FANFARE

The film corrects the deviation from Decepticon practices quickly and Starscream has little time to revel in his moment. When a challenger arrives, Starscream demands to know “Who disrupts my coronation?” and Galvatron (Leonard Nimoy), unknown to any of the ceremony participants at this point in the film, swoops in from space to answer, “Coronation, Starscream? This is bad comedy” (00:33:04-08). A bewildered Starscream asks, “Megatron, is that you?” (00:33:09-10). An earlier scene revealed Megatron floating through space before encountering Unicron (Orson Welles), a planet-sized robot with reincarnation powers (00:28:36-00:32:19). This new Galvatron appears to retain Megatron’s memories, but he has a new body, personality, and voice actor. Galvatron responds, “Here’s a hint,” transforms into a large cannon, and fires a single shot at Starscream (00:33:11-15). The Decepticons on the podium, who just crowned Starscream, jump off to safety. Starscream is engulfed in electrical currents, and his color fades to grey, reminiscent of other Transformers who had died earlier in the film. Then Starscream crumbles into ash. His crown drops and tumbles down the steps to Galvatron’s feet (00:33:25-34). The crown, which loomed high on the podium, has tumbled to the lowest point on the ground.

The crown, which meant everything to previous kings such as Richard III and Starscream, means nothing in this world. Instead of picking up the crown, Galvatron slowly steps on it and drags it under his foot, with the animation showing every crinkle of the metal and the shards of gems splintering (Fig. 6). With a smoldering pile of ash on the podium, Galvatron turns to the Decepticons who have simply stood in shock, and he asks, “Will anyone else attempt to fill his shoes?” (Fig. 7). Galvatron is framed below the podium, which is clear of the faux-bishop and other participants. However, the angle is low, and the perspective makes Galvatron appear larger than the podium, as he takes up the screen top to bottom. The only thing on the podium are the ashes of the metallic Iago. The Decepticon emblem still looms above the podium, but even that is lower than Galvatron. He makes no attempt to climb the steps and instead stands eye-to-eye with the onlookers. He needs no cape, crown, or podium to assert his rule. There is a moment of silence until an onlooker asks, “What’d he say his name was?” Galvatron identifies himself, and the Decepticons immediately chant “Hail, Galvatron” over and over while the same trumpet fanfare, this time without trumpets, plays in the background (00:33:44-53). The brevity of Starscream’s rule coupled with Galvatron’s quick ability to assume leadership of the Decepticons demonstrates just how out of place the medieval coronation was for Cybertron. The slow, methodical destruction of the crown emphasizes that the lapse in medieval revelry is over.

Make no mistake, this brief scene in *The Transformers: The Movie* is a medieval ceremony, in the sense that it imitates

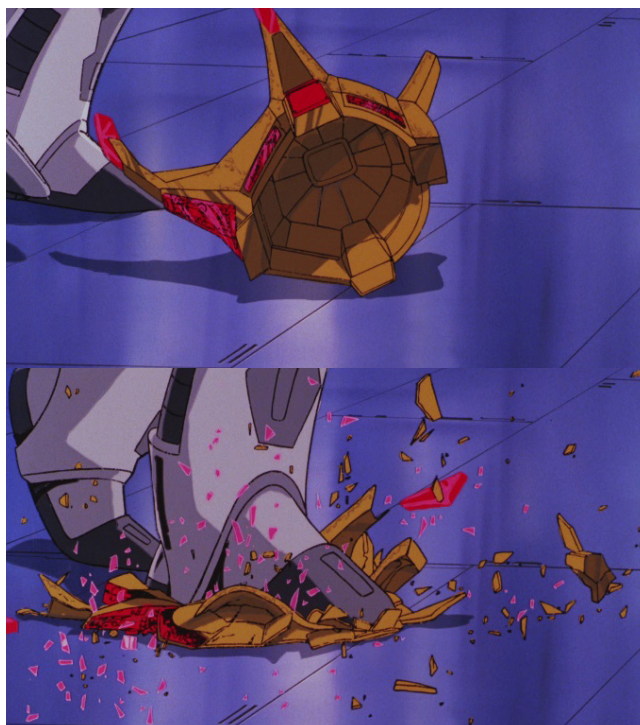


Fig. 6 | The crown falls before the challenger’s feet, ready for the taking, but he instead crushes it in Shin’s *The Transformers: The Movie*, 00:33:34-36. Sunbow Productions, 1986.

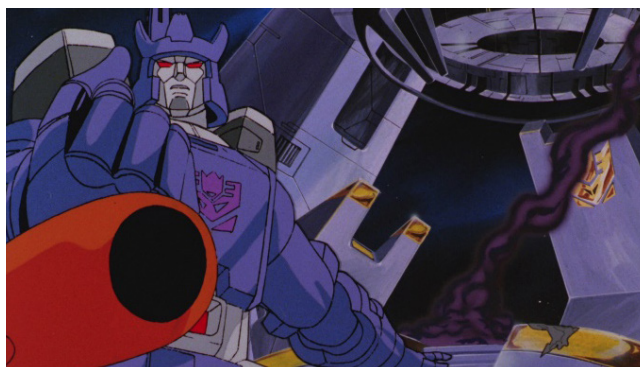


Fig. 7 | The victorious awaits any would-be challengers while the previous king is a smoldering pile of ash on the platform in Shin’s *The Transformers: The Movie*, 00:33:39. Sunbow Productions, 1986.

similar scenes from films set in the Middle Ages, but this is most evident with the presence of trumpet fanfare (Fig. 5), visually and audibly. As music historian John Haines points out, “Almost as soon as medieval cinema began, the trumpet fanfare” was “placed on screen in stereotypical way[s],” meaning, “players swiftly raising their instruments to their mouths and blowing” (45). Haines further emphasizes that the trumpet fanfare is “the ultimate diegetic musical expression of the Chivalric Middle Ages in cinema” (66), and, I would add, on Cybertron. This is another historicon in Elliott’s model (182), but it is an audible cue, not just a visual one. As mentioned, we hear the trumpet fanfare again as the Decepticons chant “Hail Galvatron,” well after the trumpets were destroyed earlier by an impatient Starscream. The fanfare from absent trumpets is

fitting, as Haines also points out that, within cinema, “it is the *sound* more than the *sight* of the trumpet...that says ‘Middle Ages’” (66, emphasis added). Shakespearean recreations have used the sound, not always the sight, of trumpets in a similar fashion. For example, during the crowning of Edward IV (Cedric Hardwicke) in *Richard III* (1955), the king proclaims, “Sound drums and trumpets,” and trumpets are heard but not seen (00:11:03). Later, trumpet fanfare is also heard after Richard III’s coronation, again absent of visible trumpets (01:52:28-31). With Starscream in ashes and the crown crushed, the sound of trumpet fanfare afterward provides one final parting shot to mock the slain king.

Starscream attempted to redefine the customs of the Decepticons by introducing a cinematic medieval ceremony. They were prepared to accept these customs, even if it was through malicious compliance like blowing their trumpets just a little too long. However, once a stronger challenger arrived and disposed of the king, the Decepticons immediately rejected the medievalism and reverted back to following the strongest leader.

STARSCREAM’S DEATH AND THE EFFECT OF HIS POPULARITY

In the case of Starscream, Hasbro’s phasing out of the character did not hamper fandom’s appreciation of him. As one critic of the death of Optimus Prime still admits, “the many deaths...lend the film some extra gravitas” and “it works in the film’s favour,” even if “the reasoning behind it was pretty cynical” (Frost 682-683). The scene of his coronation and ultimate demise instead cemented his legacy. In the *Unofficial Guide to Transformers* (2001), avid collector J.E. Alvarez declared Starscream “everyone’s favorite Decepticon” (13). Even Flint Dille, one of the writers for the film, could not hide his glee on audio commentary for *The Transformers: The Movie* when Starscream appears: “He’s probably my favorite Transformer...I just always liked him. He’s just such a treacherous swine” (“Audio Commentaries” 00:07:50-00:07:57). Yet, the 1986 animated film struck a chord

with fans, and they have clamored for the doomed king since. Through Hasbro and Takara’s transnational strategy of starting up new incarnations of shows, movies, and toys, Starscream is always part of the story. For example, the two companies have released more than 45 traditional toys of the original Starscream incarnation alone through 2025 (“Starscream_(G1)/toys”).

Friedman has explained that in his attempt to give each character their “all important ‘face time’ so an audience could... give a shit,” he had meant that he had to craft “memorable individuals with distinct personalities, idiosyncratic attitudes, catchy speech patterns, and humor wherever appropriate” (*I Killed Optimus Prime* 212). In order to craft memorable scenes, such as “gilded royal processions,” Friedman freely admits he relied on Shakespeare for inspiration (2019, 195). Among Shakespearean tragedies, Starscream’s reign was shorter than Richard III’s, but it was no less memorable for Transformers fans.

By crafting characters and interactions inspired by the Bard and incorporating a medieval coronation ceremony that was purposefully ill-suited for these alien robots, fans appreciated that the metallic Iago took one step too far at the wrong time and met with such a graphic demise. They appreciate the Shakespearean-inspired drama and the misguided medievalism Starscream pushed on his fellow Decepticons to cement his new, albeit brief, rule. Along with toys, the scene has played out in other incarnations of Transformers, as Starscream remains the eager usurper who never quite gets it right, over and over again, for 40 years now. While Hasbro approved using death in its film’s narrative to phase out toys, the coronation and death of Starscream cemented the metallic Iago’s legacy among fans. ■

“For Ron Friedman (1932-2025), whose imagination and candor continue to inspire.”

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