

A (S)HERO'S JOURNEY:
PATHS TO RE-WRITING MYTHS
IN THE *STAR WARS* FRANCHISE

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By

FEDERICA GIANNELLI

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OR

Dean
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9 Canada

ABSTRACT

The *Star Wars* franchise shares a common storytelling thread with ancient myths, which have consistently centered on individuals experiencing life-changing journeys that influence their—and others’—world forever. How did *Star Wars*, now owned by the media conglomerate Disney, contribute to the process of making myths persistent throughout history? The key to this persistence seems to have been media adaptations: the franchise has re-written and re-interpreted tropes from previous mythologies and cultural products using the intertextual practices of contemporary visual media forms (film, TV series and animation). By using theories of intertextuality and adaptation, my dissertation analyzes how *Star Wars* re-writes and adapts two dominant mythologies in American culture—the Campbellian monomyth and the American Western mythos—in the new movies of the saga and in the series *The Mandalorian* and *Forces of Destiny* to explain the process of mythical re-writing in contemporary media.

The aim is to advance the field of cultural studies by investigating how and why mythical representation has survived in *Star Wars* through the commodifying cultural mechanisms involved with re-distributing myths in contemporary media. I will also analyze the larger issues that mythical portrayals in *Star Wars* represent about American culture, especially their ability to depict American identity. My dissertation sheds light on how mythical storytelling in the new *Star Wars* movies, *The Mandalorian* and *Forces of Destiny* helps disrupt old dominant American ideologies of male- and white-centred heroic models to offer diverse representations of gender and ethnicity. My analysis shows that despite contradictions the new *Star Wars* hints at positive changes in the representation of American identity. This change signifies that the adaptable polysemic nature of myths—their ability to incorporate new meanings—is key to this process of ideological shifting. Also, my analysis provides evidence that this process of mythical revival becomes possible by adopting, as in Disney’s case, cultural production mechanisms that center around media technologies and commercialized products. Disney’s commodification results in turning myths into materialistic possessions for contemporary audiences to interact with, as my analysis of the *Star Wars* “Princesses” dolls and the “Baby Yoda” puppet suggests.

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For my family and Heitor

“Don’t adventures ever have an end? I suppose not.
Someone else always has to carry on the story.”
J.R.R. Tolkien—*The Fellowship of the Ring*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Setting up the Mythical Journey

When George Lucas said in an interview that *Star Wars* is a modern myth, I imagine the most skeptical readers raising their eyebrows.¹ What would *Star Wars*, a commercial space-opera franchise, have in common with mythical expressions such as the Greek or Norse mythologies, the poem *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2,000s BC), the Middle English prose *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485), or more recently *The Lord of the Rings* franchise (1954-2021)? These cultural products seem strikingly different—some are oral storytelling, whereas others are written and then adapted into different media such as film, and they appear in different genres and at different points in history. However, these cultural artifacts share a common mythical storytelling thread that centers on individuals who embark on life-changing journeys that influence their—and others'—world forever. I will argue that the characteristics that make myths persistent throughout history are their flexibility. But how did *Star Wars* contribute to this process? The key to this persistence seems to have been media adaptations: the franchise has re-written and re-interpreted tropes from previous mythologies and cultural products thanks to the intertextual practices of contemporary visual media forms (film, TV series and animation). Considering the fact that *Star Wars* draws on myths and appears in different media forms, to answer the following questions: how and why has mythical representation survived in *Star Wars*, beyond the mere repetition of formulaic storytelling from several cultural sources? What larger issues do the mythical portrayals in *Star Wars* represent in relation to American society and culture? And, what are the cultural mechanisms ingrained in commercializing practices that are involved with the adaptation and

1. For more information about George Lucas' life and work, some helpful readings include: Baxter, *Mythmaker: The Life and Work of George Lucas*; Jones, *George Lucas: A Life*; Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of a Multibillion Dollar Franchise*.

reproduction of myth in contemporary media, and make myths commodities to be owned? My focus will be on investigating how *Star Wars* re-writes and adapts two dominant mythologies in American culture: the Campbellian mythos and the American Western monomyth. My goal is to demonstrate that these myths are mirrors of American identity and to highlight how they are moving toward more inclusive representations of gender and ethnicity but are also deeply contradictory, hegemonic and controversial.

But why are these myths, and myths in general, still culturally ubiquitous? As Gérard Bouchard points out, mythical storytelling survives to keep communities together by responding to the human need of making sense of the world and to offer communities with ethical frameworks for desired behaviors. He writes that myths

have a powerful influence on how a society develops, [...], by providing institutions with a symbolic foundation by bolstering ideologies and solidarity, by allowing societies to rally around specific objectives or goals, manage their tensions, and heal their divisions, and by giving them the means to rally and respond forcefully after a crisis or a traumatic event (7-8).

In other words, myths are shaped by the societies that produce them and as cultural objects offer worthy perspectives on how those societies view themselves, a perspective I will take in my analysis of the mythical landscape of the *Star Wars* franchise. My work will investigate the changes in the portrayals of the hero's journey and heroism in *Star Wars* commercialized media (film, TV series and animation) to explain the regeneration of mythical ideologies in American (trans)media stories. To do so, I will compare scenes, characters and tropes in the franchise using theories of cultural adaptation (Linda Hutcheon, Julie Sanders, Robert Stam) and intertextuality (Julia Kristeva, Graham Allen, George Letissier, Gérard Genette). These theories will help me explain that re-writing practices deeply ingrained in intertextuality have enabled old mythologies to transform and survive in modern media through commercializing processes of cultural production and consumerism.

I will also address the central role of Disney, which acquired the *Star Wars* franchise from George Lucas in 2012 for a staggering \$4 billion (Katz par. 2), in the re-distribution and revamping of myths and of the hero's journey narrative model through contemporary media forms. As "America's greatest popular creator" (Lawrence and Jewett 181) and one of the global capitalist entertainment conglomerates, Disney has helped audiences re-familiarize themselves

with myths and fairy tales and it has also been instrumental in commercializing their modern renditions through targeted merchandise. Disney's acquisition not only of *Star Wars* but also of the Marvel superhero franchise and several movie production companies that keep Disney's entertainment pipeline going (most prominently these days through the online entertainment platform Disney+) is part of a long history of capitalizing on mythic storytelling. Because the company holds a *de facto* monopoly on of many American heroes' and heroine's journeys, Disney's role in the revamping of myths will be part of this work and of my analysis of *Star Wars*. I will focus particularly on the company's motives behind its current more inclusive representation of gender and ethnicities that seemingly distance Disney from some of its past problematic portrayals—for example, *Pocahontas*, *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *Brave*—and will highlight how the changes and contradictions still subtly side with dominant, problematic Americanization and whitewashing of heroes and heroines.

Studying critically mythical representations and storytelling in *Star Wars* will help fill the gap that Gérard Bouchard has identified in the study of myths. He argues that myths have become so *ideologically transparent* that they are not critically addressed or studied properly as cultural objects because “having been deeply internalized, they are taken for granted and surrounded by an aura that enables them in large part to avoid being questioned” (9). This everlasting presence of myths as ancestral stories that all societies share to some degree in their unconscious explains in part the re-popularization of mythologies through the *Star Wars* franchise. The saga makes ample use of mythical representations of heroic models and of the hero's journey in film, novels, TV series and, more recently, videogames. But it is precisely because myths have been so deeply ingrained into the human psyche as “a comprehensive body of ideas and beliefs” (Thompson 265) that they need to be analyzed and contextualized from a cultural and historical perspective in their most recent iterations of the *Star Wars* franchise. Because they can help us unpack portrayals of American cultural identity, they help us understand what ‘American’ means and where it comes from.

As the Introduction, Chapter 1 will include a section about the origins of *Star Wars* as a postmodern pastiche that reworks several genres, media and pop culture references. The goal is to discuss the saga's popularity over the years by describing the cultural influences that helped *Star Wars* develop its own re-writing of mythical storytelling and explain its relevance as a cultural object. This section is followed by a general introduction that explains the core aspects of

Campbell's monomyth and of the American (Western) myths. I will include a summary of examples of the narrative formulas and tropes of these myths that are repeated in *Star Wars* to introduce the images and motifs that will be analyzed in subsequent chapters. The second part of Chapter 1 also includes a methodology section that explains the basic notions related to adaptation, intertextuality and cultural studies at play in the re-telling of myths and that will constitute the theoretical backbone of my dissertation.

Chapter 2 will focus on analyzing the new movie trilogy of *Star Wars* (*The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker*) to discuss the main female protagonist Rey. The chapter tracks down the intertextual connections between Rey and the hero's journey both in the Campbellian and in the American monomyth to identify how these mythical models portray American identity and culture. This analysis addresses the re-writing of classic heroic model in both sets of *Star Wars* trilogies to discuss the cultural production mechanisms that have helped re-distribute myths in contemporary media through more inclusive, albeit contradictory, heroic representations. I will first address how the movies and Rey's narrative arc are a consistent critique of the classic Campbellian-Western male heroic model adopted by the saga in the past. Although I provide evidence that Rey's portrayal is a sign of more women-friendly mythical representations that hint at a subversive adaptation of myth, I will also provide evidence that these new portrayals are fundamentally hegemonic.

Rey still heavily draws her characteristics from both the traditional American monomyth stereotypes of the lone hero and of the innocent heroine-helper. Because Rey is often "masculinized," she reinstates some of the classic male hero's mythical features to appeal to the male audiences that have traditionally ensured the commercial success of the saga. Making the heroine's representation dependant upon familiar male heroic models may suggest that instead of investigating nuanced ways of representing women's empowerment in media, American culture perceives gender equality as simply "becoming a man" and, therefore, it may regard male mythical models of behavior the only way for describing the desired "American character" in women as well. Nonetheless, my analysis of Rey also reveals that this kind of media representation is important in American culture because it normalizes placing women in positions of power. The chapter will also explain that Disney's change to a more inclusive heroism mirrors the adoption of empowering gender representations in the entertainment industry but it is also a

strategy to ensure that female audiences, not previously targeted directly by *Star Wars*, would constitute an opportunity to expand the consumer base of this successful franchise.

Chapter 3 will focus on the Princess character, an evolution of the heroine portrayed in traditional myths and folklore. This mythical trope is worth addressing to understand mythical revivals in Disney's *Star Wars* because the company has used this motif extensively in its storytelling to represent women and, therefore, it can offer further insight on the evolution of gender representation in contemporary re-distribution of American myths. The chapter will address how the Princess trope is contextualized in the *Star Wars* franchise, both before and after Disney's acquisition, and will examine how it relates to animation and themed toys to contribute to the process of mythical re-writing. I will analyze the children-targeted animated TV series *Forces of Destiny* and its dolls, with a particular focus on the portrayal of the Princess character through Rey, Padmé and Leia, to provide evidence that Disney actively challenges this classic trope as part of the re-writing of gender representation in the new *Star Wars* products as well as the re-writing of women's roles in fairy tales.

I will first describe the aspects that distinguish the Princess character from the heroine of the myth and how the two relate. Then, by looking at specific animation choices in *Forces of Destiny* I will argue that this animated version of Disney's *Star Wars* has helped with the re-distribution of a new mythology of the Princess, who appears as an empowered action-heroine and challenges traditional patriarchal narratives. Animation is often deemed a medium where "freedom of expression is only limited by the artist's imagination" (Ray 81), and I will describe how some of the artistic and narrative choices in the series support the ideological disruption of gender representations, although others go against this function and convey a contradictory messaging. This ideological dichotomy carries over to the dolls that are based on the series. I will describe how, as paratexts, these toys embody both Disney's hegemonic attempt to "write back" at fairy tale narratives in which women had little agency and offer evidence of re-distributing myths as a commercialized, consumerist experience. The inconsistencies in gender representation in *Forces of Destiny* and its dolls, I conclude, is an expression of the dichotomies in how women are viewed by American culture, which sees their desired behaviors as a mix between "Princess-like" qualities and independent masculine agency.

Chapter 4 will focus on the web Disney+ series *The Mandalorian* and how it re-writes the legacy of the Western hero, the central character of the American monomyth. I will analyze the

protagonist Din Djarin, the titular Mandalorian—an “Othered” underdog who hunts bounty for a living, and how this character reproduces and updates the heroic/anti-heroic features of the “Han Solo” model, a classic mold of the Western predestined hero, thanks to his relationship with the mysterious Child, named “Baby Yoda” by the fans. I argue that *The Mandalorian* offers a venue for American culture to explore the meaning of masculinity. The show makes the hero “Other” and questions the predominant ideology of white heroic masculinity in the “vigilante” Western hero trope. The chapter argues that the serialized nature of the show, along with its innovative technological delivery that helps explore several cinematic genres, is essential to re-writing and renewing the Western mythos in American culture. On the whole, my dissertation looks at ways mythical storytelling in *Star Wars* helps challenge dominant ideologies while, at times, recuperating hegemonic cultural formations. My work also addresses the fundamental role contemporary media play in mythical dissemination through processes of adaptation.

1.2 Explaining the Popularity of *Star Wars* and its Connection to Myth

As a very successful franchise that relies on commodification practices, the *Star Wars* brand, now owned by Disney, is a multimedia conglomerate that produces and distributes interconnected stories through media (i.e. movies, TV series, animations, books, comics and videogames) in coordination with the selling of themed merchandise that help audiences re-engage over time with old and new *Star Wars* content. This definition is important to reframe George Lucas’ statement that the success of *Star Wars* depends on its status as a modern myth.² His point is perhaps a bit far-fetched. Rather than an actual myth, *Star Wars* is better understood as a commercializing adaptation of ancient mythologies across several media platforms that provide the opportunity to look at those old stories through modern lenses that make them representative of American society. This premise also helps explain the success of the saga over the years and its ability to engage with a wide range of audiences. In a 1977 interview with *American Film*, Lucas stated that “a whole generation has grown up without fairy tales. And you just don’t get them anymore, and that’s the best stuff in the world—adventures in far-off lands”

2. Much has been written about *Star Wars* as a saga and as a franchise. Barr et al., *Ultimate Star Wars* could help readers familiarize themselves with this complex narrative universe thanks to its encyclopedic nature and visuals that make it easier to identify characters, narratives and locations. Among magazines, *Star Wars Insider—2016 Special Edition*, an issue of the official *Star Wars* magazine, and *The Ultimate Guide to Star Wars* also include facts and behind-the-scenes useful for understanding the *Star Wars* phenomenon.

(Zito 13). Lucas heavily relied on many mythological, religious, folkloric and pop-culture influences to build the core narrative of *Star Wars* through re-writing. This adaptation process made the saga extremely successful because audiences were able to easily connect with sources already so ubiquitously familiar to them. Chris Taylor writes that Lucas “had digested hundreds of fairy tales by 1975, as he attempted to boil down some basic story scripts for the *Star Wars* script” (169). *Star Wars* is made of extensive intertextual threads: the franchise is influenced by Arthurian legends, as well as texts such as Isaac Asimov’s *Guide to the Bible*, Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* and, later, Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Although Lucas was familiar with Joseph Campbell’s work, he more conveniently acknowledged his debt to the monomyth and the hero’s journey in the 1980s—only after developing a close friendship with the scholar. Regardless of Lucas’ potential motivations to justify the “mythical” heritage of his work, it is evident that these mythical influences run throughout the saga, particularly in the classic trilogy: *A New Hope* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *The Return of the Jedi* (1983).

However, beyond its mythical substratum, *Star Wars* has also been particularly appealing to audiences because it re-writes various forms of well-known popular culture, especially, but not exclusively, from American media. *Star Wars* adapts traits from Western movies “such as John Ford’s *The Searchers*, [...] the obscure French comic series *Valerian and Laureline*” (Thompson 267), as well as Akira Kurosawa’s *The Hidden Fortress* (1958). The movie deeply influenced Lucas, so much so that *A New Hope* replicates in part the same storyline and its Samurai characters, who would become the model for the stoic Jedi. Also, the aesthetics of World War Two-themed cinematic action emerges from the starfighter space scenes, the stormtroopers’ weapons, and the Empire’s Nazi-like attire and representation. As Chris Taylor writes, Lucas has “variously compared [*Star Wars*] to a Spaghetti Western, *Sword and Sorcery*, *2001*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Captain Blood*, and the entire James Bond franchise—and that was all before the original movie was even filmed” (27). Lucas’ adaptation of fairy tales and mythical tropes turned *Star Wars* into a complex, nostalgic, postmodern pastiche particularly emblematic of late capitalist cultural productions. The franchise’s future-through-the-past lenses filter idealized bygone times that fill in for Western societies’ contemporary inability to “achiev[e] aesthetic representations of our current experience” (Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 117). The saga appeals to people’s nostalgia by offering them a creative homage culturally relevant for audiences

already acquainted with sci-fi popular culture and, therefore, already familiar with the underlying commodified products that inspired it.

However, the overarching theme beloved by many fans was its space setting, “real enough to excite interest but unexplored enough to be mysterious” (Taylor 27). It constituted the perfect opportunity to revisit a deeply rooted foundational myth in American society: the myth of the Frontier and its heroic Western cowboy hero. Although the *Star Trek* series (1966-1969) had already revamped the Western genre by bringing back this colonial mythos, Lucas thought that a space setting for his movies could be full of potential because there was still “a bigger, mysterious world in space that is more interesting than anything around here” (Zito par. 45). As such, Lucas embraced the premise of the mythos underlying many classic Western movies. Lucas’ myth of the Frontier in space was also adapted from the sci-fi comics and serials from his childhood, such as *Buck Rogers* (1929-1967) and *Flash Gordon* (1936-1940), which made his space opera flashier and attracted the attention of younger audiences. Both these serials dealt with space heroes who stood up against evil forces with the aid of a beautiful woman—an element that Lucas would later re-write in the stories of Luke Skywalker, Han Solo and Princess Leia Organa. Also, Lucas was familiar with “Edgar Rice Burroughs’s novel *A Princess of Mars*, whose hero, John Carter, rescues the spunky princess of the title” (Jones 172). This narrative was well mixed with Lucas’ knowledge of “sci-fi comic novels like *The Stainless Steel Rat* and *Bill, the Galactic Hero*, whose title character was a frustrated farm boy” (172), a clear model for his protagonist Luke.

Along with its rich pop-culture layers, the immense popularity of *Star Wars* may be also explained by its ability to build on past mythical traditions through its very commercialized and commercializing nature. The saga offers a rendition of sci-fi that renews myths through interconnected media products that audiences can consume multiple times. This commodification was possible thanks to the design of this franchise as an expansive space universe. Audiences have been exposed to hundreds of novels and comics—“more than 125 million copies of ‘Star Wars’ books [are] in print, and 115 titles have been best-sellers” as of 2013 (Alter par. 5). Recently, the saga expanded to TV series as well—*The Clone Wars* (2008-2020), *Rebels* (2014-2018), *Forces of Destiny* (2017-2018), *Resistance* (2018-2020), *The Mandalorian* (2019-2020), and *The Bad Batch* (2021). The franchise was also able to exploit the motifs of the hero’s journey as a perfect storytelling device for a multitude of videogames for various consoles, games that

allowed players to be in their heroes' shoes. These games included *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011-2021), *Star Wars Battlefront I and II* (2015-2017), *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* (2019) and *Star Wars Squadron* (2020).

Various kinds of merchandise have been corollary products to these transmedia adaptations of *Star Wars*, creating a paratextual apparatus that has helped amplify the mythical narrative of the saga and lead older and younger generations of audiences to re-engage with *Star Wars* stories over and over through consumerist experiences. According to Charles Lippincott, who was responsible for the promotion of *A New Hope*, the merchandise “created new ways for us to engage the audience, which resulted in more fan fervor. Before the film opened we had Alan Dean Foster’s novelisation and the Marvel *Star Wars* comics. After it opened, we had posters, costumes and clothing” (Lepitak par. 13) and the Kenner toys, now among collectors’ most favorite items. Since the 1970s, *Star Wars* has been able to capitalize on this mechanism, generating a net worth of around \$70 billion (Fernandes par. 3) as it “clearly pioneered a method of reaching its fans” (Lepitak par.14). Long past the times when mythical storytelling happened among communities gathered around fireplaces, the late-capitalist system of mythical production of *Star Wars* has shaped audiences’ experiences of mythical portrayals around the desire for owning *Star Wars* commodities, which helped heighten further the popularity of the saga.

Another possible explanation for the incredible success of the franchise is the ability of *Star Wars* to capitalize on its timeless qualities and speak to present American society. On top of its adaptation of myths and its commercializing push, the franchise also centers on the themes of protecting freedom and democracy and the consequences of their demise. The saga also addresses the trope of fighting unjust powers, which have ideologically constructed the identity of the United States since its birth as a nation. Any *Star Wars* story is a successful fight against a regime of dictatorship and oppression symbolized by the evil Empire and, thus, functions as a soothing mechanism for social anxieties. This coping mechanism is evident if we look at the historical conjuncture in which the saga was created and why it gained traction with younger American audiences, who were the most restless about the events happening at the time in the country. After World War Two, the United States experienced a series of destabilizing political events oriented around tensions with Russia, including the Cold War (1947-1991), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), and the Vietnam War (1955-1975), along with ongoing social anxiety over a potentially imminent nuclear war leading to total annihilation. Leah Deyneka comments that

these events heightened social divisions and “left Americans disillusioned with the government [..], scandalized by Watergate, and suffocated by the stalled economy” (31). Lucas responded to these uncertainties by turning *Star Wars* into a hopeful fictional universe that celebrated an idealized vision of American identity deeply imbued with the mythos of the American hero fighting for the common good against regimes, represented by the Empire—the evil Nazis—in the movies. These heroic traits, embodied by Luke, Han and Leia in the original trilogy, reinforce one of the functions of mythical storytelling that Paul Heike defines as conveying a “‘counter-presentist’ effect [that] may trigger social and political change, and instigate revolutionary acts” (30).

Lucas continued to replicate a similar mythical trajectory in the prequel trilogy, *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *The Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *The Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Anakin Skywalker’s turning from Jedi hero to the villain Darth Vader, the fall of the Republic and of the Jedi code embodied by the “perfect knight” Obi-Wan Kenobi—the events that led to the rising of the Empire—were cautionary tales about the viability of traditional heroic models and whether they are feasible to face the crises of democracies. The trilogy, set around twenty years before *A New Hope*, investigated issues of individual civic responsibility and the use (and abuse) of individual powers under the guise of safeguarding the common good as a way to explore the dark side of the American heroic models. The movies were a commentary on George Bush’s declaration of total war against terrorism and consequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq after the attacks on September 11, 2001.

The new *Star Wars* that developed after Lucas sold the franchise also tended toward reframing its mythical storytelling to engage more subtly with current social issues. Heike attributes the persistence of mythical representations in American culture to the adaptability of myth, which has progressively evolved to enhance “the voices that have been silenced, rejected, and excluded from the American foundational mythology through acts of epistemic violence” (12). The new trilogy, *The Force Awakens* (2015), *The Last Jedi* (2017) and *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), seems to follow this changed mechanism in mythical storytelling. The movies seem to address the underrepresentation of women in the saga by giving the franchise its first female Force-sensitive protagonist in Rey, along with co-protagonists Finn and Poe Dameron, played by an African American and a Latino actor respectively, as opposed to the older trilogies mainly focusing on white male heroes—Luke, Han, Obi-Wan and Anakin. The new *Star Wars*

aimed for more inclusiveness to sustain the business success of the franchise through a more prominent representation of diversity to audiences. The new movies address issues of centralized powers discriminating against minorities and taking away democratic rights, symbolized by the ominous return of the Emperor Palpatine. These movies also responded to particular events in American history, interrogating current issues of democracy and power: the swift passage from Barack Obama's presidency, which implemented social reforms and advocated for more social and ethnic inclusiveness, to the social regressions caused by Donald Trump's governance, which adopted divisive and ultra-conservative policies.

The characteristics that make *Star Wars* a postmodern mythical re-writing, but also a core representative of contemporary "Americanness," are well summarized, and perhaps a bit exaggerated, by Andrew Gordon, who defines the saga a "masterpiece of synthesis, a triumph of American ingenuity and resourcefulness, demonstrating how the old may be made new again" (73). Despite its hyperbole, this statement emphasizes that the saga has shown remarkable possibilities for intertextual re-writing that have helped renew and propagate mythical representations over the years and ensured the popularity of the franchise, as described in this section. So far, I have identified and highlighted the fundamental points that will be central to my analysis of *Star Wars* and its connection with myth as the following:

- 1) Re-writing based on intertextual practices is a central process that *Star Wars* uses to adapt and re-interpret the Campbellian and American monomyths and, thus, this process becomes key to the innovation of mythologies in contemporary media;
- 2) *Star Wars* has ensured its longevity by making itself historically relevant: it adapted its mythical portrayals as commentaries upon the history of the United States as a nation and American culture. This feature reinforces *Star Wars* as a reflection of "Americanness" that explains its ongoing popularity over the years;
- 3) A savvy commodifying strategy, which was adopted by Lucas first and more recently by Disney producers, has turned the experience of the "mythical" from the original sacrality of its "aura" into a primarily technologically filtered experience. This process, I will argue, has turned contemporary mythical expressions into materialistic possessions to be consumed and owned.

1.3 Defining Myths: Understanding the Monomyths Adapted in *Star Wars*

In order to understand how *Star Wars* adapts and re-writes mythical storytelling, it is necessary to first define the notion of myth in general, as well as the specific features of the Campbellian myth and of the American mythos that the saga reworks. This section focuses on explaining the hero's journey, discussing definitions of traditional heroism, and describing the gender-specific differences between the traditional hero and the classic heroine that both mythologies represent. I will complement the description with brief examples from the *Star Wars* universe. This section does not include all the references to the mythical motifs in the saga and it does not intend to be an exhaustive list—other scholars have focused on this aspect and produced several helpful accounts.³ The objective of this section is rather to highlight the aspects of mythical storytelling that will be the base for my analysis of intertextual practices of adaptation and cultural production. Subsequent chapters will address the ways the franchise challenges, and at times hegemonically adopts, traditional mythical traits.

Johnathan Smith and his co-authors, who have written about the similarities and differences between different storytelling genres, specifically define myths as origin and creation stories that deal with both supernatural and religious dimensions. They are “accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience” (“Myth”). Mythologies are, therefore, synonymous with ancient forms of storytelling, a “vital cultural force” (Thompson 265-266), but regardless of the age in which they are produced, they share some common aspects. Many notions of myth define them as stories that describe the range of human experience and that are used as paradigms of behavior for others. Richard Slotkin, for instance, envisions myths as a group of intertwined cultural products originally passed down

3. For a detailed analysis of the tropes of the Campbellian monomyth that can be found in the *Star Wars* saga, see: Collins, “*Star Wars*, the Pastiche of the Myth and the Yearning for a Past Future;” Frankel, *Star Wars and the Hero's Journey: Mythic Character Arcs Through the 12-Film Epic*; Geraghty, “Creating and Comparing Myth in Twentieth-Century Science Fiction: ‘Star Trek’ and ‘Star Wars’;” Gill, “Re-envisioning Myth in *Star Wars*: Episode VII: *The Force Awakens*;” Gordon, “*Star Wars*: A Myth for Our Time;” Henderson, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*; Kuiper, “*Star Wars*: An Imperial Myth;” Mackey-Kallis, “The *Star Wars* Trilogy” in *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home*; Palumbo, “George Lucas’ Original *Star Wars* Trilogy” in *The Monomyth in American Science Fiction Films: 28 Visions of the Hero's Journey*; Thompson, “In That Time...” in *A Galaxy Far, Far Away: Epic Myth-Understandings and Myth-Appropriation in Star Wars*.”

orally through generations and enacting “the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors” (*Regeneration* 6). Susan Mackey-Kallis highlights myths as “archetypal stories [that] offer dark and unsettling images and recount difficult and often terrifying experiences” but that “ultimately affirm the value of life and provide a primer, a set of instructions, for living” (14).⁴ This means myths are about finding guidance in life for self-discovery. As Joseph Campbell, the first contemporary mythologist, writes:

Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance.

We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are. (*Power of Myth* 4)

At the same time, experiencing mythical storytelling has to do with connecting with the supernatural and with the divine—Slotkin defines this as mythopoeic perception (*Regeneration* 7). However, myth is also about connecting with others. Bouchard compares sharing myth to the creation of an imagined community (in Benedict Anderson’s sense) that originates from a shared collective imaginary (13), whereas Slotkin and Campbell write about it in terms of myth as aid for the definition of a shared Self, that “reconcile[s] and unite[s] [...] individualities to a collective identity” (Slotkin 8). In that sense, myths create shared roots that cement communities together through the telling and re-telling of stories over time. The fact that myths are apt to be re-written and adapted is, for Northrop Frye, what gives mythical storytelling a “real sense of profundity [...] from [...] the accumulation and constant recreation” (61-62) that was able to carry myth forward to present times. A more recent theorization of modern myth by Jesper Skytte Sodemann defines myth as a rhizomatic “web of material digressions and distraction, [...] a

4. Mackey-Kallis also provides an insightful account about the five explanations for the seemingly universal nature of myths (see 16-17). She argues that some scholarship sees the birth of myths from the experiential, as all humans share stories that portray life, death, joy and griefs; other branches rely on the theory of diffusion, adducing the archetypal nature of myth to the process of mythical telling and re-telling; others from geographical factors that influenced the development of specific stories. Other scholarship relies on the explanation of myth as a divine/spiritual inspiration, while others see it originating from the biology that wires human to respond to certain cues in a certain way—Mackey-Kallis notes this is the most controversial and less accepted theorization.

substantive multiplicity, a single root which is many things “in-between” both psyche and matter, order and chaos” (62). This approach highlights mythologies’ connection to the material/technological world that allow them to inhabit multiple hegemonic and disruptive dimensions at the same time, as well as to produce multiple interpretations mediated by mechanical reproductions.

In Campbell’s gendered view of heroism, at the centre of the monomyth is always one powerful being: the hero. This individual is the “eternal man—perfected unspecific, universal man [...] [who] has been reborn [...] to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed” (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 18). Luke, the protagonist of *Star Wars*, is shaped after this divine hero model as he finds himself initiated into his supernatural potential—using the elusive Force—but only mastering it at the end of his heroic quest. Mackey-Kallis articulates further the Campbellian characterization of the hero as a “cultural visionary/prophet/messiah” (27) who creates a connection between the human world and the divine. Luke conforms to this description especially in *The Return of the Jedi* with his monk-like attitude and ability to connect with the unseen—the Force ghosts of his Masters Yoda and Obi-Wan. At the same time, the hero in the classic version of the monomyth is either shunned or almost at the margins of his community, as “the orphaned son of royalty. Unaware of his true identity, he is consigned to a life of drudgery and exile” (Gordon 78). Again, Luke resembles this monomythical model: his apparently inconsequential social position as an orphaned farm boy hides his bloodline as the son to Darth Vader and, therefore, his abilities as a strong Force user.

The narrative of the hero’s journey in the classic monomyth is predominantly male—and Campbell assumes that mythical heroines follow the same storytelling patterns as their male counterparts. Campbell does not question the gendered representations of women in myths, who are mainly portrayed as fulfilling women’s only accepted roles in traditional patriarchal societies: Virgin, Mother or Crone—the three stages of reproductive life (see *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 63-65 and in particular the chapter “The Virgin Birth” 275-290). Valerie Estelle Frankel observes that the monomyth makes the woman the object of the heroic journey, rather the protagonist. She writes that “Campbell had called the feminine the ‘goal’ of the quest—the princess needing rescue. While the hero represented the logical, powerful side of the personality, the feminine offered him creativity, nurturing, and intuition” (*From Girl to Goddess* 3). Frankel further comments that “the true goal of the heroine is to become [the] archetypal, all-powerful

mother” (*From Girl to Goddess* 4) and source of life. Although this interpretation could be read as empowering, it also paradoxically reinforces the tie of the heroine’s journey to her predestined biological role.⁵ Some of these traditional aspects emerge in Luke’s sister Princess Leia, for example, whose maiden status and white dress reminds audiences of virginal innocence in *A New Hope*, even though she is portrayed as a fighter like the male heroes. The heroine of the myth has progressively become a cluster of contradictions that have shaped traditional models of femininity because “before the Victorians’ program of censorship and diminutizing heroines (and Walt Disney’s even more extreme version of the same), fairytale heroines were brave, resourceful, and clever, accustomed to saving themselves and their princes” (*From Girl to Goddess* 7). The Princess trope eventually was reworked to embody helplessness that is carried out in *The Phantom Menace*. Queen Padmé Amidala is called an “angel” by child Anakin and represents a similar form of idealized womanhood presuming that women must be observed at a distance. My focus on gender in *Star Wars* will help to correct the outdated masculinizing views of heroism proposed by Campbell and will offer a more in-depth analysis of the saga than is possible using Campbell’s framework.

Of equal importance in exemplifying the structure of the monomyth is the hero’s quest. The heroic journey is about fulfilling a “life lived in self-discovery” (Campbell, *Power of Myth* xiv). The quest that the hero/heroine embarks on features three story phases, as Campbell writes in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and expands in his interviews in *The Hero’s Journey*. These mythical phases can be found in all iterations of the *Star Wars* saga. The initial stage of the myth, the departure act, focuses on the hero/heroine’s call to adventure due to an imbalance in the hero or heroine’s community. In *Star Wars* this phase of the journey is represented by the death of

5. There is a variety of sources about the specific phases of the heroine’s journey, both from scholars and writers’ perspectives. For example, Murdock, *The Heroine’s Journey: Woman’s Quest for Wholeness* is a direct response to Campbell’s male-centered depiction of the heroic journey and is the first to look at the heroine of the myth as a character in her own right. Schmidt, *45 Master Characters: Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters and Ballard*, and, more recently, Carriger, *The Heroine’s Journey: For Writers, Readers, and Fans of Pop Culture* contain helpful descriptions of modern heroine’s journeys and examples from movies, literature and culture in general, even though these books address writers to help them produce convincing heroine’s narratives. Nancer, Calder, Daley, and Jackson, *The Heroine Journeys Project* particularly breaks down all the heroine’s traditional attributes and her heroic phases. This website offers a critique of the limitations of the classic heroine’s model by including stories and accounts that break the mold and do not correspond to the traditional model.

Luke's relatives in *A New Hope*; Anakin's escaping slavery by winning the Pod Race and meeting with the Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn in *A Phantom Menace*; and Rey being hunted down by the Empire in *The Force Awakens*. Then, the initiation act follows, where the hero/heroine is called to pursue a quest and faces several trials. The saga begins when Luke is asked to find Obi-Wan Kenobi and bring the Death Star plans to Princess Leia; Anakin's is becoming a Jedi; and Rey's quest initiation is helping BB-8 reach safely the Resistance.⁶ The mythical journey also usually involves the meeting with a "supernatural helper" (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 66) who guides the hero/heroine to fulfill their destinies, a wise individual in the form of hermit or wizard. In the case of *Star Wars*, the role is shared by Jedi Masters: Obi-Wan leads Luke to discover the Force, and later Yoda helps the young boy become a Jedi in the original trilogy; in the prequels Qui-Gon Jinn is the first to detect Anakin's abilities and to later bring him to the Jedi Council to be trained; in Rey's story Luke and Leia act as the wise Masters who lead Rey to control her powers and fulfill her potential.

The myth reaches its acme when the hero/heroine meets the divine and confronts a Father figure or a personification of darkness by facing a final ordeal "in the deepest chamber of the Inmost Cave" (Vogler 159), a location of evil far away from the comfort of the threatened community. For Luke this means facing his father Darth Vader; for Anakin, it is about confronting the growing darkness inside himself, even though his story arc spirals into an anti-heroic conclusion; and for Rey it is about facing the evil Emperor Palpatine. The final stage of the myth is the return act when equilibrium is re-established as the hero/heroine restores the lost order and goes back to his or her community with a solution to the initial imbalance. In the saga, this stage is represented by Luke and a redeemed Darth Vader defeating the evil Emperor at the end of the classic trilogy; and in Disney's *Star Wars*, the same narrative trajectory is repeated by Rey years later when she defeats Palpatine. In the prequels, however, it is harder to identify a conclusive positive resolution phase for the hero character because these movies represent Anakin's anti-heroic journey, rather than his heroic enlightenment.

The narrative structures that *Star Wars* shares with the classic Campbellian myth are evident. However, the classic mythological tropes evident in the saga are transformed by a more specifically American adaptation: the myth of the Western Frontier and its iteration of heroism. In "The Significance of the Frontier in the American History" (1893), Fredrick Jackson Turner

6. BB-8 is an astromech droid owned by Resistance pilot Poe Dameron.

theorizes for the first time the mythology of the West. He identifies the colonization of the Frontier as the building act of the United States as an independent nation. He writes: “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. [...] The advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines” (11) that could constitute the foundation of American identity. This concept, further developed by Henry Nash Smith and Richard Slotkin, and others, has entered the American collective imaginary by outlining the Frontier “as a transformative space [that] has often been considered as a *pars pro toto* for the nation [...] from which its future could be built [...] and for developing epic cultural scripts of Americanness” (Heike 312). The hero’s journey has become in fact the unifying trope of American pop culture, starting from the Western genre. Campbell’s theorization is limited because it does not consider the role of media in the re-telling of myth. John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett argue instead that monomythical adaptations have survived in American culture precisely because they transitioned from oral storytelling into technomythology, a process in which the development of modern audiovisual media has “enhanced the apparent realism of myth” (*The Myth of the American Superhero* 8). This becomes evident if we look at the countless forms of American pop media that share the common story of a male loner who ethnocentrically saves the United States—and more often the world—despite all the odds. From Superman to John Wayne’s cowboy characters, American pop culture belongs to (male) heroes who surge from being “everymen” to self-declared saviors using their special abilities, often in the form of superpowers, to bring back balance to the scattered social order in their communities—the premise is similar to the classic myth.

However, according to Lawrence and Jewett, America’s contemporary mythic expressions repurpose the departure, initiation, and return act of the traditional hero’s journey as the core aspects of American pop culture. In this way, it was possible to reinvent the hero’s journey as a narrative structure that tells the mythic roots of the United States as a nation. The process resembles, for Lawrence and Jewett, a cultural adaptation of sorts that has served and is serving as a “powerful center for symbolic education” (*Captain America* 27) for the younger generations who use and consume new digitized cultural forms. While grasping onto traditional notions of heroism such as self-sacrifice for the common good, the core of the American monomyth revolves around the idea that it is an American citizen’s right to take on the mantle of heroism by standing up against social or institutional injustice by all means necessary when the community

to which one belongs and the “American way of living” are threatened. This leitmotif is clearly the narrative engine of the *Star Wars* saga: it is represented by the perennial battle between a few brave individuals fighting for liberty against totalitarian forces—the Rebellion against the Empire in the classic trilogy and the Resistance against the New Order in the new movies.

The reason this myth has persisted lies with how popular culture copes with times of increased social crisis in American history. The monomyth spikes cyclically through the reiteration of hero and superhero narrative reboots in pop culture including, but not limited to, *Batman*, *Superman*, *Star Trek*, and the Marvel superhero universe adapted from comics into a successful franchise. In all these examples, the American monomyth offers reassuring stories of good people prevailing over evil. This mythos has served over time to compensate for political uncertainties and social upheavals as the United States went through the Great Depression, the civil rights movements, the Cold War, the Vietnam War and, more recently, the War on Terrorism and the alleged threat posed by the Islamic “Other.” The monomyth gives America “a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud the moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they [Americans] can vicariously (through the identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them” (Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* 48). Therefore, the American pop culture monomyth satisfies the need of Americans to feel a sense of security and illusory control over the reality around them. The American monomyth exists for the popular conviction that, in the end, the American values of “freedom and justice” will prevail.

However, Lawrence and Jewett note how this monomythic narrative justifies the Western hero’s use of violence as the only viable resolution of social issues, rather than promoting a peaceful dissent through democratic means. For example, *A New Hope* ends with the explosion of the Death Star in space with thousands of Imperials on board, and a similar end awaits the second Death Star in *The Return of the Jedi*, thus demonstrating that the Rebellion is built on using the most destructive violence to wipe away their enemy at all costs in the name of freedom. In other American comics, movies, and other new digitized forms of cultural expression such as videogames, these narrative patterns keep repeating themselves by starting from the same premise: the American hero’s community is first an idyllic place, untouched and uncorrupted by external forces: “Paradise is depicted as repeatedly under siege, its citizens pressed down by alien forces too powerful for democratic institutions to quell. When evil is ascendant, Eden becomes a

wilderness in which only a superhero can redeem the captives” (*The Myth of the American Superhero* 26). The idea of being under siege presupposes that Otherness—an external entity or group of people—poses a threat to the community’s stability, represented by the idealized old Republic times in *Star Wars*. The authors track American heroism and its relevance to the depiction of the “threatened community” motif back to the historical foundations of the United States as a country with the constructed image of a nation of fearless colonizers taming the wilderness against the uncivilized locals. Commenting on Theodore Roosevelt’s writings about the West, Richard Slotkin associates this fight as an expression of male power: “The test of true virility is willingness to engage in ‘righteous war,’ the archetype of which is the Indian war or ‘savage war’ of The Winning of the West” (*Gunfighter Nation* 52).

In other words, this image has shaped Americans’ idea of themselves as one of Benedict Anderson’s potential “imagined communities.” The depiction of this “imagined community” also presupposes the ideologically charged narrative that presents European colonizers as victims who constantly need to defend themselves and fight against the threat of rebellious Indigenous Peoples. This narrative was popularized by the touring Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows at the end of the nineteenth century, which “first acted to the conquest of the West” (*Captain America* 30). The plot has been a common thread further consolidated by many nineteenth-century Western genre narratives and novels that, according to Lawrence and Jewett, represent the earliest form of American literature—the Indian captivity narratives where white Europeans trying to tame the West suffered because they were held hostage by the native populations. In *Star Wars*, this role is mostly covered by the aliens. Examples include Chewbacca, Han Solo’s faithful furry sidekick and representative of “domesticated savage,” the bounty hunter Greedo who wants to capture Han and sell him to Jabba the Hutt, and the Tusken Raiders, the “wild” desertic people of the planet Tatooine.

This notion of defending oneself from Otherness relates to Slotkin’s idea that the United States sees itself as a nation built on a mythic version of the West, a place where only the bravest and toughest individuals can survive. Slotkin observes that Western movies have idealized the West through the gunfighter figure, who offers “a ‘gunfighter’ understanding of ‘how the world works.’ That understanding is essentially ‘hard-boiled:’ the world is a hostile place, human motives are rarely good, and outcomes depend not on right but on the proper deployment of might” (*Gunfighter Nation* 402). In cinematic mythic accounts, the West is a space of hardships

for colonizing an El Dorado where the law is sparingly applied and the local populations are hostile. This motif recurs in American pop culture, including in recent examples such as James Cameron's space colonization story *Avatar* (2009) or Bioware's videogame series *Mass Effect* (2007-2017).⁷ Slotkin sees the myth of the frontier as America's attempt to "explor[e] new moral grounds" (*Regeneration* 370) through a new kind of "consummatory myth-making [...] in order to establish a new faith, a new sense of cultural identity, a new basis for moral order" (370-371). Han Solo, resourceful smuggler and bad boy with a heart of gold, is the perfect *Star Wars* example of this remnant of the Western hero who is able to navigate the lawlessness of the space frontier using his blaster and his wit.

The most disturbing aspect of this conception of monomyth is the aura of anointment and predestination for which only "special" individuals are able to fulfill the American heroic quest. Through violence and vigilantism, they are the only ones bestowed with the (sacred) duty of saving the country and preserving its allegedly threatened cultural values from the Othered intrusion (Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* 27). In the case of *Star Wars*, this predestination is mostly indicated by bloodlines: the Skywalker family is extremely gifted in the Force, as is the Emperor Palpatine, and therefore they are the Chosen Ones who are able to fight his evil grip on the galaxy. Lawrence and Jewett write that these core features of the American monomyth show a strong connection with Richard Slotkin's idea that America's moral values emerge from a regeneration through "violence as the means of both cleansing the wilderness and regenerating true faith in the believing community" (*The Myth of the American Superhero* 112). Thus, Joseph Campbell's leitmotif of the classic hero on a path of self-discovery combines with the American monomyth that acts as "tales of redemption" (6), where the American hero is a Christ-like figure with special abilities that "reflect for the hope of divine, redemptive powers" (7).

However, unlike in Campbell's heroic journey, the classic "happy ending" is harder to achieve for the American hero of the Western mythos—namely marriage and/or the return to his community. In the case of *Star Wars*, the American mythos is adapted to offer a more "fairy-taleish" ending because the show targets young audiences and families and the saga uses lighter

7. For readings about the neo-imperialist narratives in *Mass Effect* see: Fuchs et al. "Playing Serial Imperialists: The Failed Promises of BioWare's Video Game Adventures." For the colonial undertones of *Avatar*, see: Veracini, "*District 9* and *Avatar*: Science Fiction and Settler Colonialism."

narrative tones compared to the dramatic Western genre. *The Return of the Jedi* concludes the classic trilogy implying that Han and Leia will become a steady couple and that Luke is set for a future as the next Jedi Master. In the typical mythos, however, not only is the hero an outsider, but he also shows the ambivalence of fighting for freedom while belonging to an above-the-law “pop-fascist dimension” (*Captain America* 29) that allows American heroes to live as “unelected, law-transcending figures [who] exercise superpowers to overcome foes” (29). The fascist implication of this kind of mythical narrative is that authorities are ultimately unable to protect common people from evil, thus triggering the conundrum that the democratic values on which the United States is founded can be dangerously bent—the whole premise of Luke, Han and Leia’s heroism and storylines in *Star Wars*. In this way, American heroism produces distorted ideologies of grandeur inevitably associated with “destroy[ing] evildoers through selfless crusades” (43) but also, it is necessary to add, ideologies that may fuel toxic masculinity.

From the description of the American monomyth, it is evident that it is ideologically linked primarily to the affirmation of masculinity and of the male Western hero. This feature is particularly evident in the classic and prequel *Star Wars* trilogies, whose narrative revolved around the coming-of-age stories of two male heroes—Luke and Anakin. The American mythos reinforces a patriarchal *status quo*, “to signify metaphorically on the male experience of settlement in a patriarchal fantasy of ‘exploring’ the ‘virgin land’” (Heike 329). Like the traditional Campbellian mythos, however, the American monomyth also finds ways of integrating women in its ideological system offering its own version of heroine. She is mostly shaped after Protestant value of redemption from “sloth, jealousy, hardness of heart” (*The Myth of the American Superhero* 65). Unlike the male hero, whose quest is dominance of the West, the heroine’s mission is to embody virtuosity and achieve the moral conversion of others. Lawrence and Jewett mention that the early American heroine is a Heidi or Mary Poppins-like figure who rejects the violent ways of their male counterpart and opts for redeeming people and communities through leading by example. American heroines are also traditionally associated with childhood or early adolescence in earlier instances of the mythos, such as the titular character Pollyanna or Laura Ingalls in *The Little House on the Prairie*. Therefore, like for the male hero, “the pattern of sexual renunciation, selfless virtue, and miraculous powers remain” (67), although the American monomyth also develops a later version that falls into more mature, reassuring categories of “mother and nurturing presence in the West” (Heike 327). Analyzed through modern feminist

lenses, this description reminds us of a domesticated heroine figure limited to the exclusive embodiment of passive feminine features such as generosity and a tamed personality. These qualities, which were also common to Campbellian heroines, are also clearly the remnants of the Victorian angel in the house as an idealized version of a feminine woman who

solved problems by selfless love and virtuous cheerfulness. She is a model of moral purity, seeking nothing for herself, while loving others in a generous but sexually chaste manner. Female redemptive power requires a soul and body uncontaminated by sexual passion. [...] [A] perfect conformity to post Puritan virtues of cooperativeness, cheerfulness and submissiveness. (*The Myth of the American Superhero* 69-71)

When it comes to the representation of the American heroine in *Star Wars*, the outcome is ideologically complicated, even though its presence is a further confirmation of the attempts at renewing mythical storytelling. Although the *Star Wars* female leads distance themselves from the most conservative, passive aspects of the Western heroine, they seem at times to also embrace contradictorily some of the most traditional traits of the mythos, therefore reinforcing the hegemonic functions of contemporary mythical storytelling. For example, despite being the heroes' love interests, Leia and Padmé are fundamentally de-sexualized characters like the traditional American heroines. The American heroine's moral stance is reiterated in the *Star Wars* characters as well because they are portrayed as ethically superior, and fundamentally led by good heartedness like the traditional American heroines, to set the example for their people to follow. However, as modern heroines, Leia and Padmé also turn these traditional moral qualities into action by leading the Rebel Alliance against the Empire and the Naboo insurrection against an unlawful blockade, respectively. Rey follows this new trend of making the heroine an active protagonist of the heroic quest and she distances herself the most from the heroine of the American monomyth by embracing the heroic behaviors of male heroes. Even though Rey is at the centre of changing gender representation in the saga, her masculinized portrayal also reveals hegemonic contradictions in the representation of the mythos in contemporary media, along with a controversial re-writing of the heroine-Princess in the saga.

I have in this section described the core narrative traits and tropes of the Campbellian and American mythos. The focus has been on analyzing the hero and the heroines of traditional mythologies, the characteristics of the hero's journey, and highlighting the mythical portrayals of these tropes in *Star Wars*. My purpose was to set up the context for studying the saga's mythical

representations in the coming chapters. Against the mythological background of the franchise, I will show in subsequent chapters how these tropes are adapted and what changes in meaning they undergo within the context of American culture.

1.4 Methodology: Intertextuality, Adaptations and Cultural Re-Writings

While the previous section addresses *what* mythological representations have been carried forward by *Star Wars*, this section explains *how* the tropes of the Campbellian and Western myths have been integrated by the franchise. My argument explains the contemporary re-interpretation of myths as the result of intertextuality and adaptations, which cultural producers use to adopt and tailor with mythical themes and stories to contextualize them for American audiences and as representative of American culture. This section outlines the most important concepts related to my definition of intertextual re-writing and its connection with media and explains the backbone of my analytic approach to the study of mythical storytelling in *Star Wars*.

Affirming that old mythological tropes and characters appear in multiple mythic texts was a well-known structuralist approach. In the 1950s, Claude Lévi-Strauss' s Saussurean approach to the study of mythology looked at myth as language, "as part of human speech" (430), to identify the underlying structures that myths shared across cultures. According to Lévi-Strauss, this linguistically grounded approach offered a more rigorous study of myths than James Frazer's and Edward Tylor's anthropological approaches, and Carl Jung's psychological method, which he criticized because they were based on interpretation of mythical meanings rather than more rigorous science. In particular, Jung believed in the existence of archetypical mythical figures and motifs that were a "symbolic expression of a process taking place not in the world but in the mind. That process is the return of the ego to the unconscious—a kind of temporary death of the ego—and its re-emergence, or rebirth, from the unconscious" (Segal 4). By looking at the narrative repetitions in myths, Lévi-Strauss instead focused on the idea that "myth is made up of all its variants" (435) and that it "exhibits a "slated" structure which seeps to the surface [...] through the repetition process" (443) of discrete narrative structures.

Lévi-Strauss's study was useful at the time because it was among the first to investigate the narrative links between versions of myths and theorize their systematic networking and repetition over time. However, this method was culturally de-contextualized and asynchronous, lacking focus on a cultural analysis that could have answered questions concerning why and how these mythical narrative repetitions happened over time in several iterations across the world.

Even though I recognize the importance of identifying mythical patterns and formulas as part of the structuralist study of myths, my preferred approach is grounded in poststructuralism and cultural studies. These two methods allow me to provide better explanations for the recurrence of myths based on the historical and cultural contexts that have produced those mythical repetitions, as well as to offer the opportunity to interrogate the change in their cultural meanings for contemporary audiences.

Theories of intertextuality, which are at the core of poststructuralism, can be helpful to understand how myths are adapted. Intertextuality was, in Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin's original definitions, initially theorized only to analyze frameworks of literary texts. Developing Bakhtin's theory, Kristeva summarizes the nature of intertextuality:

Bakhtin was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure.

What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of the "literary word" as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context. (*Desire in Language* 64-65)

However, if we expand the notion of text beyond the "literary word" to include any kind of cultural product—art, architecture, cinema and all our various contemporary media forms—it is possible to use intertextuality to study the systems of connections that link all kinds of cultural sources together. Hence, intertextuality is what allows us to understand the "productions of complex patterns of encoding, re-encoding, allusion, echo, transposing of previous systems and codes" (Allen 169) and how these patterns remain in conversation with one another as new cultural products get integrated with new meanings and added to the cultural system(s). In the study of myth in the *Star Wars* franchise, for example, this concept helps trace the ideological re-interpretation of mythical tropes to "updated" representations that rely on more inclusive notions of gender and ethnicity, especially in the newer trilogy following Disney's acquisition.

Using intertextuality to explain the cultural persistence of myth over time also leads to another important notion that exemplifies the process behind intertextual mythical connections in contemporary cultures. If intertextual systems are the result of carrying forward past meanings, re-interpreting them and mixing them with previous (or concurrent) cultural systems, adaptation and re-writing across texts and media are the transposition mechanisms at the centre of this

process. Robert Stam compares this process in literature to “orchestrating a polyphonic diversity of materials” (61) that in the case of cinema becomes for him similar to a “cannibalization [...] [where] cinema becomes a receptacle open to all kinds of literary and pictorial symbolism, to all types of collective representation, to all ideologies, to all aesthetics, and to the infinite play of influences within cinema, within the other arts, within culture generally” (61).

Using Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial studies, Julie Sanders goes as far as explaining this active engagement of adaptations with their “mother” sources as a vector for the hybridization of cultures because adaptations can ideologically challenge the *status quo*. They can turn subordinated, disruptive meanings and voices into mainstream ones, so re-writing processes help “articulate a debate about dominance and suppression that is crucial for any consideration of intertextual relationships” (18). However, although adaptations can actively engage with the meanings of their “master sources,” they also can be dichotomous and hegemonic, therefore turning into a complicated process that creates an uncomfortable space between new and old ideological frameworks. The original and prequel *Star Wars* trilogies, for example, attempt to re-write the Princess trope by turning against the damsel in distress stereotype, but at the same time they tie the female leads to their role as love interests of the main heroes, therefore making the re-writing of the Princess at times contradictory and at times supportive of patriarchal ideologies (see Chapter 3).

Despite the contradictions, adaptations are nonetheless active cultural products resulting from “intertextual dialogism” (Stam 64) that operates through “the discursive practices of a culture” (64) that connect, situate and diffuse the text (literary or media alike) with its underlying cultural influences. This is why the mythical representation of evil in *Star Wars* is, for example, historically located as a metaphor for the “great fascist evil” that the United States faced in the twentieth century, therefore “mythifying” the fight against fascism as the new heroic epic quest. Adaptation becomes, thus, an act of mythopoesis in itself because “myth is never transported wholesale into its new context; it undergoes its own metamorphoses in the process. [...] [It is a] gesture at the metamorphic and transformative process of adaptation: the term functions literally as well as metaphorically” (Sanders 64). Re-writing older (mythical) cultural products through a historical and social recontextualization makes them relevant again as “a form of transculturation” (Hutcheon 146) that allows them to endlessly intersect with each other and with the ideological frameworks of the target cultures that adapt them.

Another central aspect I will address in my intertextual analysis of mythical adaptations in *Star Wars* is the influence of media on the delivery of mythical re-writings. Disney is a perfect example of a global entertainment company that has successfully exploited the tendency to adapt storytelling across multiple media forms. Re-writings function as transpositions that “take a text from one genre and deliver it to new audiences by means of the aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process” (Sanders 20). This means that intertextual re-writings do not work only among literary texts but also in films, TV series, comics and videogames.⁸

Although The Frankfurt School scholars pre-date the study of intertextuality, some of their observations on the connection between culture and non-literary media, at times bleak, indirectly imply that the reproduction of cultural artifacts through various media is a form of intertextual transposition. In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), Walter Benjamin famously condemned the technological replication of culture, and particularly cinema, as the primary cause of the death of aura in the works of art. Benjamin observes that contemporary culture relies on copying as the main mechanism for cultural production, but he believes that, as a result, the unique authenticity of the original artistic product, “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220), is irremediably

8. Extensive scholarship on various forms of adaptations has focused on studying the contemporary distribution, production and reception of culture across media platforms, especially new media, under the umbrella term “transmedia storytelling.” This is the increasingly common global form of cultural production adopted by large corporations to stretch out stories into spin-offs, sequels, and prequels in many concurrent media at the same time, which leads to the creation of story worlds and mines for revenues within franchises. Henry Jenkins, in particular, has theorized that changes in audiences and in media aesthetics and ownership has led to a convergence based on “participatory culture” (*Convergence* 3) and “collective intelligence” (4) that should make us rethink “what it means to consume media” (“The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence” 37). A big part of the focus of this scholarship is, thus, on how audiences interact with transmedia products, how changes in media aesthetics and media ownership influence cultural production itself. For more on transmedia storytelling see: Klastrup and Tosca, “Transmedial Worlds—Rethinking Cyberworld Design;” Gambarato, “Signs, Systems and Complexity of Transmedia Storytelling;” Hayati, “Transmedia Storytelling: A Study of the Necessity, Features and Advantages;” Bourdaa, “‘Following the Pattern’: The Creation of an Encyclopedic Universe with Transmedia;” Ryan, “Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality;” Voigt and Nicklas, “Introduction: Adaptation, Transmedia Storytelling and Participatory Culture;” Thon, “Converging Worlds: From Transmedial Storyworlds to Transmedial Universes.” For transmedia storytelling analysis that focuses on the *Star Wars* franchise, see: Guynes and Hassler-Forest, editors. *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*; Nardi and Sweet, *The Transmedia Franchise of Star Wars TV*.

lost in the process. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have expanded this idea by emphasizing that the culture industry delivered by the new media technologies is characterized by “unending sameness” (50), a concept that Baudrillard’s scholarship would later use to theorize postmodern mass culture as never-ending simulacra, copies without origin that shatter the very notion of reality.

If we look at these theorizations, their common thread is a pessimistic interpretation of Benjaminian thoughts that negatively links the reproductive capabilities of media technologies to an alleged empty process of cultural production that simply replicates “codes and clichés within culture” (Allen 177). This statement implies, if we apply it to the study of mythology, that the hero’s journey simply repeats endlessly in the same way in every kind of media, with no significant changes occurring among the resulting cultural products—Fredric Jameson’s idea of pastiche as blank “imitation of a peculiar mask” (*Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 17) comes to mind. However, the *Star Wars* franchise has proven that even though it is a pastiche of genres and mythical influences, it has been able to transform enough the hero’s journey through the use of visual media to incorporate new meanings. The saga has become a mirror of American society by delivering an adaptation of myth that is culturally, historically and geographically located, as already addressed in this chapter. The processes at play are hence those of transposition. Although cultural studies theories are central to the understanding of the production and consumption of media culture, and although the existence of formulaic cultural patterns is undeniable, this kind of analysis overlooks the potentialities for adaptations as some of the most prolific, generative cultural productions that inject new life into myth. Re-writings based on intertextual approaches, as we have seen in this section, actively engage with their “origin” sources by providing ideological commentaries, critiques or endorsements. At times these re-writings fully subvert the initial premise of those sources to adapt them for new audiences, and to tell new stories and re-popularize old ones, although these adaptations are not exempt from contradictions. For these reasons, an intertextual analysis that relies on theories of adaptation and cultural studies is appropriate to studying the evolution of mythical representations in contemporary media and, particularly, *Star Wars*.

Chapter 2

Star Wars Heroes, New and Old

American sci-fi popular culture does not lack independent, capable heroines. From Ellen Ripley in *Alien* (1979) to Captain Kathryn Janeway in *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001) American heroines have displayed qualities, such as wits, resourcefulness and, often, superpowers, once attributed only to male heroes. Following this trend, in 2015 the *Star Wars* universe changed forever with the release of *The Force Awakens*, the first Disney-produced movie of the franchise whose protagonist was a woman who could use the Force. Designed as a blockbuster responding to changing times, the new trilogy adopted a cinematic storytelling strategy where American heroism is democratic and not primarily male-centered anymore: the film modified the focus of previous movies from the traditional Campbellian model of the hero's journey dominated by masculine rites of passage.

While critics deemed *The Force Awakens* a full-on remake of *A New Hope* (1977) with innovative twists (Mendelson, VanDerWerff, Robinson), director J.J. Abrams responded that his film “very consciously tried to borrow familiar beats so the rest of the movie could hang on something that we knew was ‘Star Wars’” (Jagernauth par. 2), but the rest of the trilogy would revamp the universe with new stories. This process of adaptation, motivated by ensuring franchise continuity, was central to Disney's goal of injecting new life into the saga to attract new generations of audiences, while not alienating older ones. In this chapter I will analyze how the new *Star Wars* movies portray the American heroine's journey. The purpose is to highlight the innovative but simultaneously hegemonic cinematic representations of women in *Star Wars* as a result of the movies' adaptation of the heroic ideologies of the Campbellian and American Western monomyths and to highlight their ongoing influence in the way America sees itself as a

nation. I will use intertextual and adaptation theory to compare the mythological features that Rey, the new quasi-feminist lead of the saga, combines with Luke and Anakin's storylines by adapting, while challenging and even repeating, mythic tropes and traditional stereotypes of classic (male and American) heroism. To do so, I will compare elements from the new trilogy, *The Force Awakens* (2015), *The Last Jedi* (2017) and *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), to the older trilogies.

Star Wars is about individuals who go on a Campbellian journey to find their true purpose, meeting mentors, friends and enemies along the way, up to the final confrontation with a patriarchal nemesis whom the young heroes need to defeat in order to enter adulthood and restore order in their threatened community. Both the old and new *Star Wars* combine mythical heroic ideologies, addressed in Chapter 1, that shape the protagonists of *Star Wars* as (lone Western) heroes and heroines who live on the solitary frontier of the West that, as a "promised land" "woven intricately into the fabric of the U.S. political economy" (Hausladen 2-3), still shapes ideologically the myth of America as a nation. Through an analysis of Rey, I will highlight how the ideological changes in these mythologies help describe "Americanness," and in particular how American culture sees women, at a time when the United States have experienced social and political shifts. As Robert Collins puts it: "resurgence of traditional myth at the popular level seems always to represent a yearning for a future in which former values will be reasserted" (9).

Star Wars meets the human need for *exempla*, functioning as a substitute for "the tale[s] told round the campfire of history" (D'Ancona par. 15) that help "make sense of frightening times" (Taylor 77). However, it should not be forgotten that the saga also builds on cinematic storytelling mechanisms of adaptation to re-interpret well-known narrative formulas through inclusive gender representations that expand the commercial success of the saga. This chapter describes this process of "mythical re-writing" as a common practice of contemporary movie-making and falls within the larger scope of my dissertation to investigate how *Star Wars* changes the portrayal of mythologies and the ideology of American heroism. My work will shed light on the intertextual mechanisms of cultural transmission that have helped monomythologies survive in the Benjaminian "age of mechanical reproduction" and that have hegemonically adapted them to become culturally relevant for present-day United States.

2.1 Intertextuality and Adaptation

Intertextuality functions as the cultural *modus operandi* through which *Star Wars* has been able to adopt, renew and propagate both the classic Campbellian mythos and the American Western monomyth in its transmedia products. If we expand the notion of texts to include media text, Gérard Genette's work suggests that "any text is a hypertext, grafting itself onto a hypotext, an earlier text that it imitates or transforms" (*Palimpsests*, ix). Intertextuality, first theorized by Julia Kristeva and later expressed by Genette as "relations between texts, [and] the ways they reread and rewrite one another" (ix), implies a constant "conversation" among textual/cultural objects and their re-interpretation, where "texts invoke and rework other texts in a rich and ever-evolving cultural mosaic (Sanders 17). This theorization presupposes the idea that re-writing past cultural production into the present is the engine that allows the evolution of cultural meanings but also drives the coexistence of multiple, ambivalent signifiers in cultural products. The practice of adaptation, as Julie Sanders notes, is the central manifestation of intertextuality (1). She defines adaptations as "reinterpretations of established texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an 'original' or sourcetext's cultural and/or temporal setting, which may or may not involve a generic shift" (19), therefore implying that adaptations may endorse or critique the "original" sources they re-write. While *Star Wars* is not an adaptation of a single literary source *per se* like the movie trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, it certainly adapts and encodes several well-known genres and tropes of popular culture. I will use this theoretical framework based on intertextuality and adaptation to analyze the democratization of heroism that results from the saga's re-writing of ancient, male-centered mythological tropes and hero stereotypes in Western film. The goal is to identify how the process of adaptation is central to developing hegemonic meanings that at times challenge and at times reinforce the traditional concept of American masculine heroic identities.

2.2 Shifting Heroic Models

The Frontier has always been central to America's sense of identity, as seen in Chapter 1. Not only did it offer the ultimate motivation to make all land "American" through the expansion to the West, but it also idealized the features of "Americanness" by turning the West into the proving grounds of "true American character."¹ The "civilization" of the West has been

1. Richard Slotkin summarizes well the mythos of the American Frontier as "a mythic region whose wildness made it at once a region of darkness and an earthly paradise, a goad to

extensively featured across media since the nineteenth century and was later re-popularized through American cinema, especially in the Western. *Star Wars* best revived and adapted the Western genre adding to the commercial success started by *Star Trek*, which reworked the theme of conquering the Frontier as a sci-fi Imperialism in space. These franchises took the West to space as a response to the U.S. race to space in the 1960s and 1970s that “rather reinvent[ed] the Western by repositioning its essence not on the old frontier but in an entirely other galaxy” (Brode 5). Similarly, the new *Star Wars* trilogy addresses present history. By capitalizing on the success of the Western, it transforms its representation of the American monomyth to respond to recent U.S. historical anxieties. The aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror has paved the way for ongoing preoccupations with how national peace can be threatened by the “Other,” posing questions of who and what “American” is, while ramping up nationalist sentiments. In recent years, questions have been raised about which interests the government supports, which minorities it disregards, and who is a “hero” and what are the “right” or “acceptable” means to show public dissent against the government and its agencies.

However, while *Star Trek* critiques America’s colonialist undertones, in Lincoln Geraghty’s view the saga does not powerfully question the ideology of the Western because it is unable to productively engage with the past. He writes: “*Star Wars*, apart from its timely inception at the close of the seventies, relies upon the mediation of ancient myth to address American problems rather than being linked with newsworthy topics of the present day” (“Creating and Comparing Myth” 198). Conversely, I would argue that the power of *Star Wars* is precisely to question the genre because it addresses it at a “mythical” level that makes it trans-temporal and thus able to re-imagine issues of the West and of American identity. The pastiche-like world of the classic *Star Wars* is about unwilling “everymen” heroes who stand up for freedom and for self-affirmation against oppressive authorities—farm-boy Luke and the smuggler Han—a feature which refers to the traditional Western. Its characters face the same existential conundrums Western heroes faced, as Joseph Mady exemplifies in his analysis of the genre:

civilization and a barrier to it; whose hidden magic was to be tapped only by self-reliant individualists, capable of enduring the lonesome reach; whose riches were held by a dark and savage enemy with whom white Americans must fight a war to the knife, with the future of civilization itself as the stake” (*The Fatal Environment* 11-12).

The main reason westerns often seem passé is that they throw conflicts and characters into stark relief. At first glance, these are straightforward narratives about heroes and villains, Good and Evil. What I have noticed, however, is that the great westerns rarely offer a predetermined reality. The films express a longing for simple, timeless truths, but those truths become real only when the characters decide to fight for them. The great westerns thus pose significant questions about life in a culture that, more than one hundred years after the closing of the western frontier, continues to celebrate violence as a civilizing force. In westerns, one rugged individual must answer for all of us: *What's worth fighting for? How should we fight?* And, perhaps most importantly, *Where are we headed if the fighting continues indefinitely?* These questions are as relevant as ever, and so are the films that ask them. (2-3)

The women in the genre address specific cultural traits too. John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett argue that traditional Western women embody virtues—sweetness and good heartedness—that passively inspire and redeem others through their good deeds rather than through violent actions like the cowboy-heroes of the myth. For example, Pollyanna and Laura Ingalls' "heroic quests" were to help their respective communities by spreading—inherited directly from the early Puritans' tradition of redemptive femininity (See *The Myth of the American Superhero* 68-80).² The women in Western movies "assert the good woman's role in bringing civilization to the frontier [...] through being the primary devotees of education, family, religion, and nonviolence" (Studlar 54). Gaylyn Studlar writes that, with the exception of John Ford's Western movies, the genre's unkind portrayal of women mostly criticizes the "domestic" qualities the heroines embody that "continually threaten the masculine enterprise of taming the land, which provides the defining qualities of masculinity that the Western seeks to validate" (44). Jane Tompkins goes deeper and argues that the American Western heroine's poor representation is caused by power of communication and emotional depth denied by the Western hero's masculine silence:

2. Puritanism rejected the idea of Saints as redemptive of others and considered them instead figures who could set the example for believers, but since it is in human nature to look for mythological or cultural *exempla* of behavior, Puritans translated this ideal into "a need for embodiments of redemptive love that would have a superhuman capacity to redeem, yet would stay dramatically ordinary" (Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* 68-69).

Women, like language, remind men of their own inferiority; women's talk evokes a whole network of familial and social relationships and their corollaries in the emotional circuitry. What men are fleeing in Westerns is not only the cluttered Victorian interior but also the domestic dramas that go on in that setting (66).

So, how do these aspects apply to heroism as *Star Wars* adapts the American mythos?

And what features does Rey embrace? In the new trilogy, Rey mostly rejects the passive “Heidi figure” envisioned by the traditional American mythos. As a young woman of action who knows how to handle herself in difficult situations, she adopts behaviors that reference the Western male heroes, and more specifically from Luke's and Anakin's narratives. She abandons her life on the impoverished planet Jakku to discover her Force sensitivity and her destiny to fulfill, as Luke and Anakin do. However, *The Force Awakens* adds a layer of tragedy to Rey's story by reinterpreting the trope of the hero who is a nobody seeking his or her own place in the world. Her life is portrayed as harder than her two male counterparts. Unlike Luke, who has his adoptive aunt and uncle, or Anakin, who was born a slave but has his mother, Rey is completely alone without any guidance—solitude has made her utterly independent. The cinematic language of *Star Wars* predominantly suggests this independence through action-oriented scenes where Rey shows off the skills learned during her rough childhood on Jakku. In her first scene in *The Force Awakens*, panoramic shots show her tiny figure as she parkours inside the gigantic remnants of an old Imperial ship (Figure 1)—this ability will help her escape from Kylo Ren's captivity later in the movie. Better than Luke and Anakin, Rey adopts the fundamental masculinized feature of the “self-made” man living on the Frontier that “molded the distinctive character of Americans, shaping traits such as individualism, hard work, and self-reliance” (Nash 3).

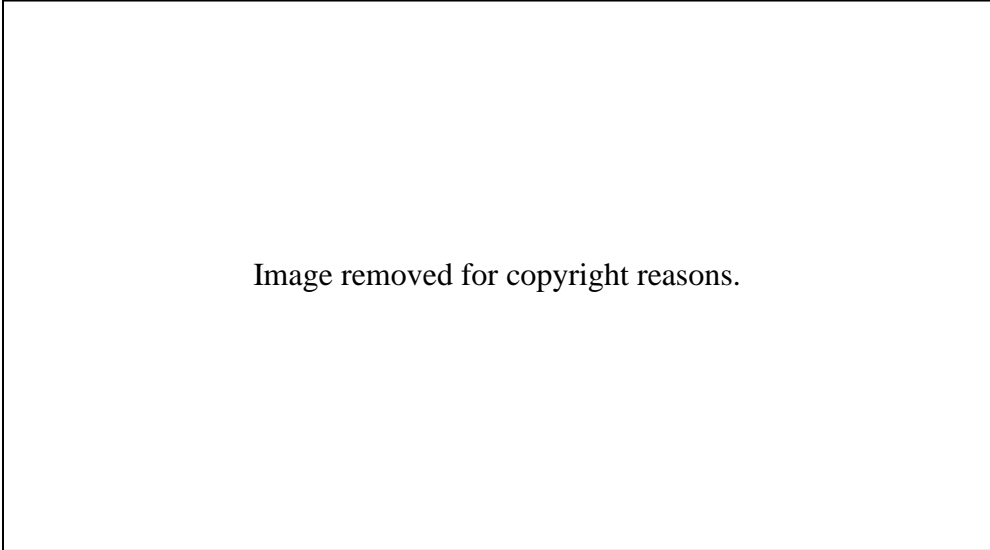


Image removed for copyright reasons.

Fig. 2.1 Rey descending in the Imperial ships to scavenge for parts. *The Force Awakens*

The way the scavenging scene is shot conveys the idea that she confidently and easily faces the daily dangers of the Western landscape to survive in a hostile environment where her work for the alien Unkar Plutt pays poorly in food rations. Rey, protests to him that her scavenged pieces “last week [...] were a half portion each” (18:34), but Unkar refuses to pay her more, reaffirming his power in the outpost and his male dominance over Rey. This idea is reinforced by how the sequence is shot: Rey is framed slightly from above and distanced from the camera, appearing smaller to affirm her subordination to Unkar. The antagonistic relationship between the two characters, which replicates Richard Slotkin’s notion of the Frontier myth, indicates that the mythos ideologically defines “Americanness” by “those same ‘laws’ of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of Social Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’ as a rationale for social order, and of “Manifest Destiny,” (*The Fatal Environment* 15). *Star Wars* innovates the myth since the heroic agent—Rey—is a woman to indicate that “Americanness” democratically belongs to anyone no matter one’s gender or origins. However, this kind of cinematic adaptation presupposes that women embody the same “American” qualities as the men of the mythos, which is empowering but revealed to be problematic when it does not address the complexities of being a woman. However, despite the lack of uniqueness in Rey’s portrayal, the fact that a woman was placed at the centre of the re-writing of male-dominated mythos in a major American franchise indicates that at least this particular iteration of American culture is emphasizing that women can be seen in position of power like the men.

Nonetheless, the saga offers a complicated definition of American identity. While Rey showcases a true American self-made hero's qualities, the casting of Daisy Ridley with her British accent leads to question who or what "American" identity is, and it seems to further confirm that the adaptation of the mythos is wired toward democratizing (globalizing?) heroism.³ This process also speaks of the ever-changing intertextual nature of adaptations themselves that adjust to the times in which they are produced. According to Linda Hutcheon, "stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments by virtue of mutation—in their "offspring" or their adaptations. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish" (32).

This flourishing is evident in the way the new *Star War* re-instates old heroic tropes through newly evolved versions of heroism and gender expectations. In *The Force Awakens* during Finn and Rey's first meeting on Jakku, the ex-stormtrooper is under the impression that the girl needs help to escape the First Order. Rey resents his concerns because she does not like—and is not used to—being a woman who needs saving, a stark difference with the traditional Western heroines. First, when the droid BB-8 tells her that Finn has his master Poe Dameron's jacket and could be a thief, she easily throws Finn to the ground with her staff. A shot later in this sequence shows the characters kneeling, mid-portraits close to the camera as an indication of their equal status, but Finn in a grand gesture takes and holds Rey's hand to escape to safety to emphasize his role as "savior." Rey tells Finn several times "stop taking my hand!" (30:41) while running—a perceived belittlement of her ability to take care of herself. Leaving the passive "Heidi" model behind, Rey becomes the (once male) agent of cultural change who was able "move culture to the next level of consciousness," as Susan Mackey-Kallis theorizes (225).

As Nicole Sperling points out, "Finn is forced to abandon those quaint traditional gender-role ideas that were programmed into him since birth by the dictatorial First Order" (26), while Valerie Estelle Frankel interprets Finn and Rey's interactions positively because they "respect each other as partners and potential love interests with neither of them weakened or objectified because of it" (*Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism* 164). Unlike the Frontier woman of the traditional mythos, Rey is independent and does not let her male counterparts make assumptions

3. At the same time, and more generally, Rey's British accent may be a hint to her true origins—this accent in *Star Wars* usually indicates "the evil guys," people raised within or associated with the Empire (with the notable exception of the Jedi Obi-Wan).

about her (in)ability to deal with situations. This scene is a major moment of role inversion within the American mythos, signifying a change in Disney's *Star Wars* that follows the company's efforts to adapt the mythos to depict more empowering women. Rey embodies what Jeffrey Brown wrote about the action heroine; she is "the poster-girl for whichever cultural fantasies and/or fears are currently in vogue. The action heroine is a lightning rod for public debate because she is an in-your-face challenge to basic cultural assumptions about gender roles in real life and fantasy" (6).

The initial Finn-Rey interaction is set up to echo a similar one between Luke and Leia in *A New Hope*, but then disrupts it as a site of gender contestation. This adapted scene challenges the classic fairy-tale narrative dynamic where the hero saves the damsel in distress from danger—a common trope in the American mythos where lone cowboy heroes save defenseless Frontier women. When escaping the Death Star to rescue Leia from prison, Luke heroically saves her from stormtroopers. As the upbeat music of the Rebel Blockade theme emphasizes the male heroic moment, Luke grabs Leia and they are seen in a full shot jumping to the other side of a bridge using a rope (Figure 2), not before Leia plants a chaste kiss on his cheek "for luck" (1:29:11). While Leia challenges the classic Princess mold on several levels throughout the saga—she is a fighter, a leader and a politician—this particular scene alludes to classic storytelling dynamics that pose women in passive positions. This type of scene also implies that females must respond with romantic or sexual expressions of gratitude to thank the hero for saving her. Vladimir Propp notes that in the folk tale, whose narrative functions often overlap with those of myths, "the bride is earned or obtained through fulfillment of the task" (67). Therefore, the conclusion of the story always implies the objectification of women. Brown argues that this aspect applies to the action heroine of American popular culture as well to cater to a male audience "sexual desires, and even as a form of commodification" (*Dangerous Curves* 10). Rey's lack of objectification clearly goes against this typical portrayal and advances the heroine's role in the American mythos, as well as its portrayal of relations among genders.

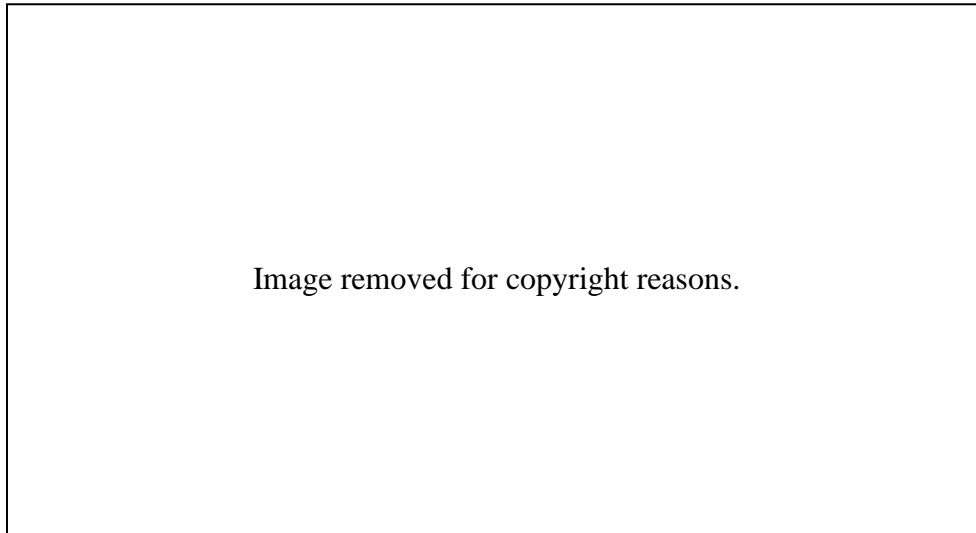


Fig. 2.1. Luke and Leia jump on the other side of a bridge on the Death Star. *A New Hope*.

By giving Rey the same qualities as the other male heroes in the saga, the new route of Disney's *Star Wars* indicates more consistent women's empowerment that "seems to value the contributions that female fans have made to *Star Wars* from the very beginning [...] [and] a recognition of the growing demographic diversity in the United States" (Jenkins and Hassler-Forest 26). However, Rey's role as harbinger for heroic change has been criticized by labeling her as an omnipotent Mary Sue.⁴ This commentary relies on sexist conceptions that avoid "a nuanced discussion and assumes a female character shouldn't be ridiculously overpowered like Superman" (Frankel, *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism* 179). These positions supported by critics, usually male, who "instinctively dissect [female characters] in a way that they usually don't for male heroes" (Framke, "What is a Mary Sue?" par. 41). However, with the new *Star Wars* trilogy now concluded, what may have appeared as overpowering in the first movie was an early narrative clue that foreshadows Rey's heritage as Palpatine's descendant. The criticism against Rey comes from the fact that she discovers her force sensitivity and learns to master her powers effortlessly within the span of a few scenes in *The Force Awakens*, unlike Luke who

4. The term "Mary Sue" usually indicates a female character, especially within the sci-fi genre, who is presented as perfect. The name originates from Lt. Mary Sue, a *Star Trek* fan-fiction character in the story "A Trekkie's Tale," who has flawless qualities and represented a "parody of fanfic authors who insert themselves into the narrative as the aforementioned perfect characters, living out their fantasies of impressing all their favorite characters and changing all their favorite fictional worlds for the better" (Framke par. 10). Because fanfiction is usually written by women, and the characters they write about are often female, "Mary Sue" has also grown to be increasingly a gender-biased term.

develops his powers over the span of three movies. In a close shot of her face emphasizing her power and effort, she pushes back Kylo Ren's powerful attempt at "Force-raping" her mind to discover Luke's location, and soon after she mind-tricks a stormtrooper to release her from her the First Order's captivity—referencing Obi-Wan's experienced Jedi move in *A New Hope*. In addition to these moments, Rey knows about piloting starships and is a talented mechanic, an echo of young slave Anakin on Tatooine.

However, Frankel identifies that this kind of representation in modern mythological storytelling makes female characters appear to be either the "helpless princess sobbing for rescue, or be the knight, helmeted and closed off in a cubicle of steel" (*Girl to Goddess* 3). By masculinizing Rey, the saga seems to hegemonically repeat traditional mythical male-centred narratives and past ideologies of the Western mythos to ensure success with audiences who are familiar with and are used to consuming these stories in popular culture. However, Rey embodies masculinized traits when ethically needed for her survival and to stand up against oppression, traits inherited from the Frontier hero. She does not get intimidated by Unkar as he tries to push her to sell BB-8 in exchange of sixty food rations, but she simply replies "the droid's not for sale" (19:07), standing up against him as a Western hero against the local villain. She keeps doing what is morally right when she skillfully fights Unkar's henchmen as they then try to violently acquire BB-8 in a series of full shots that showcase her physical prowess. This reveals an important point about Rey: she is also a fighter. John Thompson points out that this aspect is adapted from the Campbellian monomyth where "the hero must engage in a series of violent struggles to reach his goal, for which he's amply rewarded. [This is] a necessary aspect of personal growth" (269).

However, inheriting classic, masculinized traits without critically addressing the underlying gender power relations is also problematic. On Takodana, Rey meets Maz Kanata. The movie adapts Yoda's mentoring role for Luke in the original trilogy, choosing for this film a character present in previous myths as the wise woman. Glen Robert Gill defines the alien Maz Kanata as a mythological mystic persona, an "initiating maternal figure sometimes called the wine maid or the ale wife which are traditional metaphors of spiritual transcendence and/or unconscious descent" (8). In Maz's castle, Rey feels drawn to Luke's lightsaber, the symbol of Jedi power. In alternate close-ups of the two characters' faces that emphasize the importance of the conversation, Maz tells Rey: "That lightsaber was Luke's. And his father's before him. And

now, it calls to you” (1:06:47). The undercurrent intertextual reference to the sword that in mythic tales is a signifier of ultimate “phallic” male power is not new in mythological storytelling—one of the most famous ones is the all-powerful Excalibur in the Arthurian cycle. For Luke receiving his father’s lightsaber from Obi-Wan symbolizes his rightful inheritance of his father’s power and a metaphorical passage to maturity and manhood.

Instead, in the case of Rey the lightsaber has a stereotyped significance that has been drawn from traditional older myths, consistent with ambivalent representations of gender in *Star Wars*. The weapon indicates that Rey is seeking the phallus that she lacks. Not literal “penis envy” as Freud would have defined it, but in Luce Irigaray’s words, the lack signifies for a woman “the sexual advantages, reserved for men alone: ‘autonomy,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘power,’ and so on; but it also expresses her resentment at having been largely excluded, [...] from political, social, and cultural responsibilities” (51). The movie indicates that by inheriting the lightsaber Rey has acquired her status as men’s equal and she can finally access the secret male knowledge that the heroines of the American mythos were previously denied. Therefore, *Star Wars* also becomes a re-writing of the past mythical milieu to expose and criticize the discourse of subordination endured by the heroine of the mythos, a process Adrienne Rich defines as “re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18).

2.3 Bringing the Heroine’s Traditional Qualities Back into the Myth

While including significant innovations, the saga doesn’t abandon completely the feminine qualities of the traditional Western heroine, thus confirming that cinematic adaptations can be sites of cultural change but also of contradictions and hegemonic contestation. Rey inherits the Western heroine’s good heart to temper her masculine energy. Left in the shady Unkar’s hands, she somehow manages to develop generosity and a strong moral compass as a traditional American heroine. Examples of Rey’s traditional feminine features are visible in initial scenes of *The Force Awakens* where she does not think twice about saving BB-8 from the scavenger Teedo who “has no respect for anyone” (15:32), as Rey points out, without knowing that it carries the map crucial to find Luke. As the movie script describes the scene, BB-8 “BEEPS to her—something SWEET this time. That he is alone, scared, has no one else. This makes her stop.” While the scene includes shots of Rey seemingly annoyed by the droid’s presence, a nod of her head silently indicates her willingness to help and reveals her good heart

triggered by the defenseless droid: she helps him reach safely the Niima Outpost even though she does not know him.

Another instance that helps align Rey with the traditional heroines of the mythos is her response to her first killing soon after meeting the smuggler Han Solo, her personal hero, on Takodana. Han is to Rey “a father figure with no sexual tension [...] [who can] help her forward” (*Star Wars Meets the Era of Feminism* 164) by offering her a job on his ship, the Millennium Falcon, and giving her a gun. She tries to refuse, stating with skepticism: “I think I can handle myself.” Han replies: “I know you do. That’s why I am giving it to you” (55:34-55:37), and when he asks her whether she knows how to use it, in a medium shot where she tries the weapon by aiming with one eye closed—and indication of her boasting, she brushes him off: “Yeah, you pull the trigger” (55:41). Seeing his younger reckless self in her, he warns her: “There’s a little bit more to it than that. You got a lot to learn” (55:44-55:47), implying that she may not be ready to live with the consequences of killing. Triggering the heroine’s self reflection after meeting a mentor figure is drawn from typical Disney’s storylines. This is the process through which Disney heroes learn their moral compass and indicates the role the company is playing in cinematic adaptations that reshape gender representation: “Disney movies clearly tell us that youth, not age, knows best [...]. Still, truly wise adults do exist and should be given full attention; children and adolescents can learn much from such mentors” (Brode, *From Walt to Woodstock* xv).

Rey is soon forced to shoot a stormtrooper who is looking for her in the woods. She kills the soldier with no hesitation, but not without giving a look of regret at the gun, a small empathic turn that the (Western) heroes Luke and Anakin never show. Luke doesn’t feel any remorse for killing thousands on the Death Star in *A New Hope*, and Anakin, just a child, cheers the first time he uses starship blasters against enemies in *The Phantom Menace*. The American heroine’s acts of killing in the post-Disney *Star Wars*—at least at the beginning—are never natural or completely de-humanized but go through an ethical process. While inhabiting the masculinized clothes of American heroism, Rey offers an empathetic side that is traditionally associated with femininity in the Western monomyth and that it is adapted back into the story to provide a more rounded heroic figure, rather than to re-affirm her domesticity.

Because Rey’s predecessors Leia and Padmé are pre-Disney-*Star Wars* heroines, they lack Rey’s on-screen growth resulting from mentorships and are simply presented as “power girls”

with reduced emotional complexity. In *A New Hope* Leia effortlessly uses her blaster to kill stormtroopers on Tantive IV and on the Death Star. Following the tropes of the Western genre, she uses violence for the greater good—to escape the Imperials and send the Death Star plans to the Rebellion. In *The Phantom Menace*, teenager Padmé also shoots resolutely and without remorse the separatist droids invading her planet, but she is mainly killing machines, not humans. As an “everyman” person, Disney’s Rey embodies the modern American heroine, a more relatable, resourceful (Frontier) woman, better than the other two who, as royals, received special training to kill as needed.

2.4 The Beginning of the Journey

Another feature that Rey’s *Star Wars* cinematically adapts from both the Campbellian and the American mythos is starting the heroic journey by leaving the comfort zone of “home.” Replicating Luke and Anakin’s paths, Rey leaves her community on Jakku because of external threatening forces, resembling the formula of the victimized Western hero who is forced to leave.⁵ This is shown in the scene where Rey is chased by the First Order’s TIE fighters as she helps the ex-stormtrooper Finn and BB-8 escape them, and the only solution is stealing the “garbage” Millennium Falcon from Unkar and piloting it with ease.⁶ This scene is a self-

5. Campbell writes that “This first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the ‘call to adventure’—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented [...] but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight. The hero can go forth of his own volition to accomplish the adventure (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 53). Drawing from Vladimir Propp, Arthur Berger points out that “there are two kinds of heroes: ‘victim heroes,’ who suffer from the actions of a villain, and ‘seeker heroes,’ who agree to go out in the world and liquidate some “lack” or perform some task demanded of them. The heroes always defeat the villains but the kind of plots they are involved in differ” (15), and these aspects are applicable also to mythological tales.

6. The droids BB-8, R2-D2 and C3-PO intertextually relate to Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), one of the many sci-fi influences that permeates *Star Wars*. C3-PO’s shape, for example, winks at the droid Maria, portrayed in Lang’s movie poster, and the buzzing of robotic figures in *Metropolis* is often replicated by Lucas throughout the saga. However, the robotic characters in *Star Wars* represent a different take on the human-machine interaction present in Lang’s movie. In *Metropolis* the leitmotif is a critique of capitalism that may lead to urban dystopias where fears of machines controlling humans is rampant—fueled by the negative representation of the robot Maria as the manifestation of technological de-humanization of people within capitalist systems. Conversely, in Lucas’ universe technology is seen as complementary to positive human progress and not

reference to R2-D2 and C3-PO's first landing on Tatooine at the beginning of *A New Hope*, as they escape planetside to bring the plans of the Death Star to Obi-Wan Kenobi. Therefore, she displays again how the franchise's new heroine assumes a masculinized, "active" role once associated with male heroism in past iterations of the Western mythos. The cinematic adaptation of *Star Wars* constructs the American mythos as a cultural space of multiplicity, contributing to modify the traditional ideology of the myth itself. As Neil Campbell argues, the West constantly renews its ideological frameworks in a way "that looks outward as well as inward, forward as well as back, willing to think of borders as inherent and productive to its construction rather than negative and in need of constant policing" (*The Rhizomatic West* 24).

By relying on adding references with innovative meanings, *Star Wars* keeps the representation of the American monomyth as a work in progress, while mixing it with older Campbellian tropes. As Mackey-Kallis argues, only "a responsive myth" (233) survives. The Western culturally adapts "despite the fact that 'the West' has been settled for almost a century now. The best examples of this myth are those that continue to engage some of the central philosophical debates with which the western and American culture still grapple" (233). Therefore, by building up Rey's story through mythical connections that make heroism a gender-diverse matter, Disney shows that the American mythos has not yet concluded its safekeeping function of constructing an "Americanness" with which audiences can relate.

2.5 Resisting the Heroic Call

Joseph Campbell identifies the resistance to the call, after the initial heroic hailing, as the subsequent step of the journey that requires the hero to respond to "unknown demand of some waiting void within" (59). The new *Star Wars* re-writes the American mythos to incorporate this trope. Like Anakin, whose heart never left Tatooine and who longs for his lost mother throughout his life, Rey in *The Force Awakens* is reluctant to leave Jakku because she is waiting for her parents. A traumatic flashback sequence shows her begging them to come back, and a shot of her pictured from above as a small crying girl enhances the sense of abandonment. An earlier scene hints about her traumatic childhood: even after years, she keeps count of the days since her parents left in her AT-AT "leg-house."

intrinsically evil. His droids have complex personalities, support their human friends, and are often non-threatening, comedic sidekicks.

Similarly, Luke refuses his heroic journey. At first reluctant to follow Obi-Wan, Luke decides to leave Tatooine as a result of his uncle and aunt's death at the hands of the Empire. This life-changing event is summarized by his words to Obi-Wan: "There's nothing for me here now" (*A New Hope* 42:17) and in an earlier shot when the camera frames him from the back looking at his family's burned skeletons and facing the symbolic death of the barren desert. According to Douglas Brode, this scene resembles—and I would add that it is intertextually drawn from—a similar one in John Ford's Western movie *The Searchers* (1956). Luke's sequence replicates the scene where the young Martin Pawley, played by Jeffrey Hunter, aware of a potential danger runs home ahead of his mentor, Ethan Edwards, played by John Wayne, only to find the Edwards' homestead on fire and is too late to help—the event will trigger the characters' "call to adventure" to rescue Ethan's kidnapped nieces. As *The Searchers* and *Star Wars* suggest, loss is one of the core features for the American hero's journey. Anakin hero's journey is used as a self-reference to shape Rey's around the idea of loss. He has to leave his mother Shmi in slavery to start his Jedi training. A touching scene in *The Phantom Menace* shows him as he departs with the Jedi Qui-Gon, but he runs back to hug his mother wondering if he would ever see her again—a trauma he never overcomes and that would eventually lead him to embrace the Dark Side. In *The Force Awakens*, a similar scene is articulated differently than Luke's and Anakin's. A close shot shows Rey and Maz Kanata holding hands as a sign of understanding and support, and Maz convinces Rey to accept her loss to move forward in her mythical journey, telling her: "Whomever you're waiting for on Jakku, they're never coming back" and that "the belonging you seek is not behind you... It is ahead" (1:07:13-1:07:36).

Star Wars re-interprets the idea of loss as heroic trigger by combining it with Campbell's notion that the journey is in service of others: the American mythos ideologically constructs Americans as heroes who fight for their own nation, like Luke Skywalker. Like a Western hero, he is "the powerful individual who has developed from a powerless one to an authoritative and influential one who changes the nature of his cultural reality by adhering to his own intuitive sense of righteousness and expresses this self-culture through his actions" (Vinci 13). Therefore, the loss theme in *Star Wars* presupposes, like in the traditional Western genre, that American heroism develops from suffering. In popular culture, life on the Frontier has always been presented ideologically as full of hardships as the heroic settlers attempted to civilize the wilderness and Indigenous populations. Leone's Spaghetti Western took this feature to the

extreme, leading American heroism to be identified with martyrdom. In his movies the hero: “would slip up and pay the consequences; [...] But it made his character more human, in contrast to his superhuman ability with a gun. It also ensured that the hero being tortured was a staple ingredient of the spaghetti-western formula” (Hughes 10). *Star Wars* reinscribes Leone’s Spaghetti Western tradition of heroic martyrdom to perpetrate the idealization of American heroism where self-sacrifice is the manifestation of total ideological commitment to the superseding “American cause,” and simply serving others is not deemed enough as heroic behavior.

2.6 Overcoming the Savior Complex

Lawrence and Jewett note that the Western hero always embodies a Christ-like self-sacrificing quality to trigger his own redemption or the redemption of others, especially in Leone’s movies (*The American Monomyth* 6-7). According to Brode, this trope recurs in the Western as the American genre par excellence, which makes “*Star Wars* [...] about the death of one way of life [...] and the birth of another [...] as an origination myth, precisely what tales about conquering the frontier were for generations of Americans” (8). Rey’s story replicates this model of male-centred redemptive heroism, like Anakin and Luke who sacrifice themselves to bring balance to the Force. In *The Rise of Skywalker* Rey fulfills the savior’s destiny when she decides to face Palpatine instead of joining him. She tells him: “I haven’t come to lead the Sith. I’ve come to end them” (1:44:51). In this sequence she is visually surrounded by the shadows of past Sith who like in an ancient Greek theatre have come to witness her failure and her (alleged) impossibility to succeed. The sequence is used as a juxtaposition with her showdown with the Emperor, the personification of evil, to make the scene more heroic. By defeating the Emperor against all odds, Rey accomplishes Anakin’s (failed?) prophecy as a Chosen One by bringing balance to the Force, saving her friends and the Resistance, as she sacrifices her life in the process.

The heroic redemption-sacrifice cycle is anticipated earlier in the movie. Kylo Ren tempts Rey in the Emperor’s old throne room located in the destroyed second Death Star (Figure 3), saying: “Look at yourself. You wanted to prove to my mother that you were a Jedi, but you’ve proven something else. You can’t go back to her now, like I can’t. [...] The Dark Side is in our nature. Surrender to it.” (1:16:55-1:17:16). After refusing, she defeats Kylo but is unable to kill him because she feels there is good in him: “I did want to take your hand. Ben’s hand” (1:22:18-

1:23:00). Rey’s intervention makes him remember who he was, and he redeems himself for murdering his father Han Solo—and later gives his life to resurrect Rey. This scene is adapted from and mirrors *The Return of The Jedi* when the Emperor encourages Luke to give in into hate and into the Dark Side to kill his father, so that the young Skywalker could replace Vader by his side. Luke fulfills his heroic journey by replying to the Emperor: “I’ll never turn to the Dark Side. You’ve failed, your highness. I am a Jedi, like my father before me” (1:54:14). This line reinforces how the monomythical journey is constantly self-referential and folds back on itself: Luke’s goal is to follow his father’s Jedi path. While as a Christ-like figure he is tempted by the Dark Side, unlike his father he never gives in. This exemplifies how *Star Wars* perpetuates but also re-writes the savior/redemption mythical trope in its cinematic adaptation(s). However, even though the throne room is the same in both movies, in Rey’s scene the setting is decaying and in ruins, a symbolic indication that the old heroic ways have to make room for new ones.

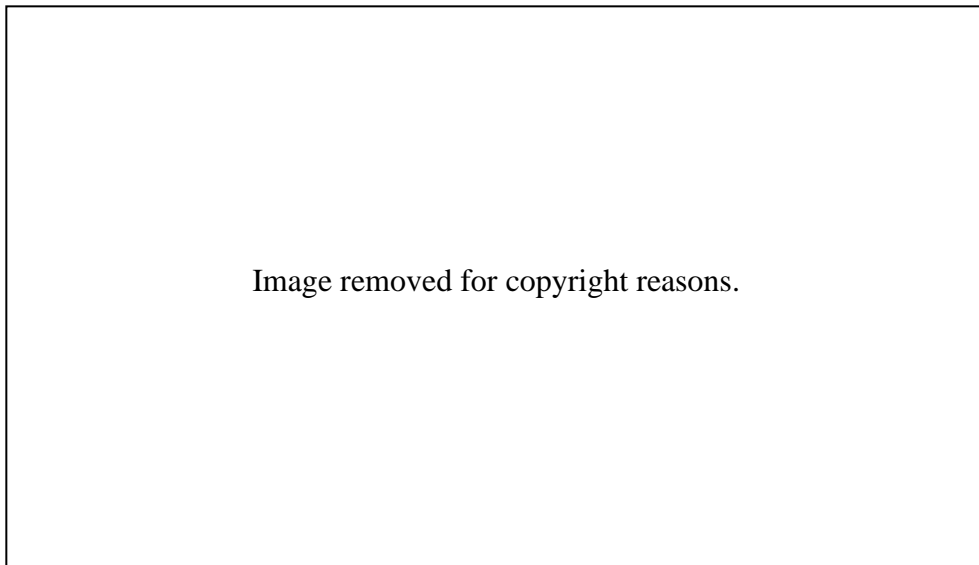


Fig. 2.2. Kylo Ren tempts Rey in the old Emperor’s throne room. *The Rise of Skywalker*.

Rey and Luke fulfill their heroic journeys by redeeming the supposedly unredeemable ultimate evil—Kylo and Vader. The adaptation of the hero or heroine as embodiment of hope returns from the Campbellian and the American mythos: these mythologies reassure us that the efforts will be repaid in the end by re-establishing equilibrium with darkness. This type of redemptive heroism in Rey and Luke was what America needed to build up again the mythological representation of a constructed identity as a “force for good” after the devastation of Vietnam—and more recently the disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan—had shaken and

questioned the role of the United States in global politics. Geraghty correctly points out that “for *Star Wars*, mythology is a historically based series of symbols and characters that connect with human society and tell us how things were done in the past” (198). The cinematic reinterpretation of historical anxieties in *Star Wars* implies that America cyclically experiences a nostalgic, Jamesonian, postmodern, return to a future past through cinema, and through this franchise in particular. Revamping the American mythos was the answer to these uncertainties:⁷

Heroes have been cast down through such national catastrophes as Vietnam and Watergate, when the lines between good and evil grow cloudy, and when sexual identities have been redefined by the women’s movement. Meanwhile, we have created a machine world for ourselves, a world that seems drained of spiritual values, a world in which we feel impotent and alien. We desperately need a renewal of faith in ourselves as Americans, as good guys on the world scene, as men and women, as human beings who count, and so we return temporarily to the simpler patterns of the past. (Gordon 82)

While the classic and new *Star Wars* trilogies reclaim heroism to reinstate America’s constructed identity, the prequels warn against taking this ideology to the extreme. Through Anakin’s anti-heroic downfall in Vader, this mythos cautions against American exceptionalism expressed through the idea of the “Chosen One.” The underlying theme of the prequels is about the United States as a nation that considers itself above others, entitled to “export democracy,” as shown during its War on Terror. Anakin’s over-confidence in his role as a Christ-like Chosen One defines his exceptionalism: he is a child born from an immaculate conception, likely “conceived by midichlorians” as Qui-Gon speculates in *A Phantom Menace*. Anakin’s recklessness, such as when he uses Padmé as bait to capture her assassin and uncover the Separatist conspiracy in *The Attack of the Clones*, clashes with his own free (heroic) will because “the Jedi [...] train highly efficient, wise guardians, not super-powerful free agents who can

7. Jameson himself comments on the pseudo-historical pastiche nature of the saga: “*Star Wars*, far from being a pointless satire of such now dead forms, satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which on some first level children and adolescents can take the adventures straight, while the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artefacts through once again” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 169-170).

exercise their powers to do whatever they want” (Taliaferro and Beck 118). The saga seems to justify Anakin’s sense of entitlement due to his status as “Chosen One.”

While Rey is exceptional in her skills, unlike Anakin she is not affected by a God-like heroic hubris presupposing exceptionalism as a core value of American identity. Fearing Padmé’s death, in *The Revenge of the Sith* Anakin is even willing to learn Dark skills “to save people from death” (47:02). Palpatine convinces him that “good is a point of view” (45:31) and that he is right by acting in the name of his own desires to justify his actions. The representation of the myth justifies the idea that society “can be only saved by someone with courage and strength enough to transcend the legal order so that the source of evil can be destroyed” (Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America* 29). Anakin’s beliefs in his own omnipotence indicate the “pop-fascist dimension” (Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America* 29) of the American mythos’ portrayal in the saga.

Even though Rey makes the representation of American heroism positive in *Star Wars*, Christ-like Anakin’s downfall proves the toxic entitlement behind the “savior” model. In a scene in *The Attack of the Clones*, he gives in to his remorseless rage, marked by the sound of dramatic music that indicates his corruption, and he kills the whole village of Tusken Raiders who tortured his mother Shmi to death—not dissimilar from the murdering of Indigenous Peoples in Western movies. This scene is paralleled with and foreshadows a sequence in *The Revenge of the Sith* when he kills all the innocent Jedi younglings in the temple, leading to the execution of Palpatine’s notorious Order 66, a decree of Jedi genocide. Like the traditional American hero who tears down the democratic institutions he is disappointed with, Anakin turns into a fascist power and “become[s] the very thing [he] swore to destroy” (1:47:06), as Obi-Wan tells him.⁸ Donald Trump’s supporters’ assault to the Capitol building on January 6th, 2021, is an example of this kind of American “heroic” tradition—after all, his 2020 re-election “juggernaut campaign” (Johnson, “Trump Campaign” par. 2) was incidentally named “Death Star.” Therefore, because

8. The Jedi’s extermination is a form of twisted Sith redemption to ensure Palpatine’s populist power rises, and “American hero” Anakin becomes the tool for it. The American hero creates the perfect male fantasy of heroism because he offers “for the fantasy life of every schoolboy an opportunity to be transformed by a magic word into the all-powerful redeemer” (Jewett and Lawrence, *The Myth of the American Superhero* 44). Therefore, the idea that extraordinary behavior is an intrinsic quality of American heroism and identity may lead to dangerous extremisms.

American monomythical heroes like Anakin are largely consumed and diffused through popular mass-produced entertainment, contrasting heroic models keep clashing with more balanced, positive heroic examples such as Rey in child-friendly products such as *Star Wars*.

2.7 It's All About Destiny

In Lucas' universe, the idea of being predestined to heroism, inherited from the American monomyth, is evident in the Skywalker family as a dynasty of people destined to greatness and able to stand up against totalitarian intergalactic powers that aim to eliminate any freedom in the galaxy. Anakin, well before he becomes Vader, is deemed by Qui-Gon Jinn and by the Jedi Council as the "Chosen One who will bring balance to the Force." Jedi Masters Obi-Wan Kenobi and Mace Windu repeat this line several times to reinforce how Anakin is legitimately set apart from the other Jedi—a reaffirmation of his "American hero" status. His predestination is even scientifically confirmed by his midichlorian count—the scale for how powerful someone is with the Force. As Obi-Wan says: "Even Master Yoda doesn't have a midichlorian count that high" (*The Phantom Menace* 50:56). Passed down to Anakin's children Luke and Leia, this power marks "heroism" as a birth right. This is where the American Western mythos of *Star Wars* contradicts itself, offering the illusion that heroism belongs to everyone, while disguised elitism reveals the hegemonic nature of the saga.

These contradictions in *Star Wars* mirror the same dichotomies that plague current political and cultural discourses in the United States, as indicated by some fans' reception of *The Last Jedi*. The most extremist right-wing political fringes in the United States have tried to reclaim the "purity" of *Star Wars* with a racist, sexist backlash that fuelled hate speech against the movie and its cast on social media, especially through the Facebook group "Down with Disney's Treatment of Franchises and Fanboys." One of the administrators of the page summarized the alt-right hate speech telling the *Huffington Post* that "Poe Dameron (played by Oscar Isaac) is a 'victim of the anti-mansplaining movement,' that Poe and Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) are in danger of being 'turn[ed]' gay, and that men should be reinstated as rulers of 'society'" (Bradley and Jacobs par. 4), a clear reaction against Rey as the lead of the film. Morten Bay explains this polarization as a reflection of the equally polarized political climate that emerged as a result of Trump's presidency in the United States. He writes that: "*The Last Jedi* is unique in that it landed in the Trump era, acting as a lightning rod at a time when most cinemagoers had chosen a political side for or against the president and adopted the "obsessions

and resentments” of their political camp, with social media acting as the primary battleground” (5).⁹

The alt-right movement has vehemently brought the political side of *Star Wars* under the spotlight, but the myth of American exceptionalism that the movement wants to reclaim from the saga has been there as an undercurrent of American culture for a long time. As Brode points out, heroism is a bestowed trait in *Star Wars* because the hero “secretly is born to the nobility, and [...] accepts, if only after hesitation, his assigned role by a greater force that governs the universe as the “deliverer,” societal and religious, for his people: Moses; Arthur, Davy Crockett at the Alamo, Luke Skywalker” (“Cowboys” 9). This elitist view of heroism subsequently challenges the hero’s portrayal as a defender of freedom in the American mythos because “the idea of a natural aristocracy composed of martial heroes was [...] central to fascism” (Jewett and Lawrence, *The Myth of the American Superhero* 276). In *The Rise of Skywalker*, Kylo reveals Rey’s lineage: she is related to the Emperor Palpatine. Despite the convoluted back story, Rey is not a “no one,” as Kylo remarked in *The Last Jedi*, but is in fact royalty.¹⁰ This elitist concept seems to contradict the ideological discourse of the new *Star Wars* that democratically bestows heroism upon everyone and, therefore, produces a hegemonic adaptation of the Western mythos in the saga.

However, as a contradictory product, *Star Wars* also challenges the idea of predestination. Following the cultural processes described by Stuart Hall, *Star Wars* constantly changes in a “double movement of containment and resistance” (Hall 443) like the rest of popular culture at large: it centralizes new meanings that defy the establishment, while marginalizing others once dominant. Rey’s defiance of heroic predestination is represented in the cavern scene of *The Last Jedi*. The Dark Side cave on Ahch-To alludes to a Campbellian monomythical element deemed “representative of the underworld to which the hero descends” (Mackey-Kallis 26) to face shadows and inner struggles. Rey hopes that the Dark powers in the cave would reveal her parents’ identity, but instead the scene is shot by duplicating her image endlessly in mirrors

9. For more details about debates between the right and left wings of *Star Wars* fandom, see Stephen Kent’s podcast *Beltway Banthas* and his book *How the Force Can Fix the World*, where he addresses how *Star Wars* deals with current American politics and “cancel culture.”

10. While the movie suggests that Rey is his granddaughter, the novelization reveals the more disturbing fact that she is likely Palpatine’s daughter via one of his failed clones who couldn’t be used to host his spirit, but who could continue his bloodline through more natural means. The clone eventually rebelled against the Emperor and tried to save Rey by leaving her on Jakku.

(Figure 4), signifying that her origins are irrelevant because the only person in charge of her heroic quest is herself, despite any initial possibilities of predestination to heroism. Within the larger context of the American mythos, this cinematic adaptation is pivotal to portraying the heroine who leads the way in her own path. The scene also mirrors Luke’s descent into the Dark Side cave on Dagobah in *The Empire Strikes Back*. The sequence shows dark colors and in slower motion to indicate that it takes place in Luke’s subconscious. Here he faces a Dark Force manifestation that resembles Darth Vader and by defeating him reveals his own face under the mask—his fear of becoming evil like Vader and a cinematic clue revealing their familial bonds and heroic destiny. While Rey’s descent into the cave is similar to Luke’s, she sees facing her limitations as an opportunity to lead the way to learn the answers she needs.

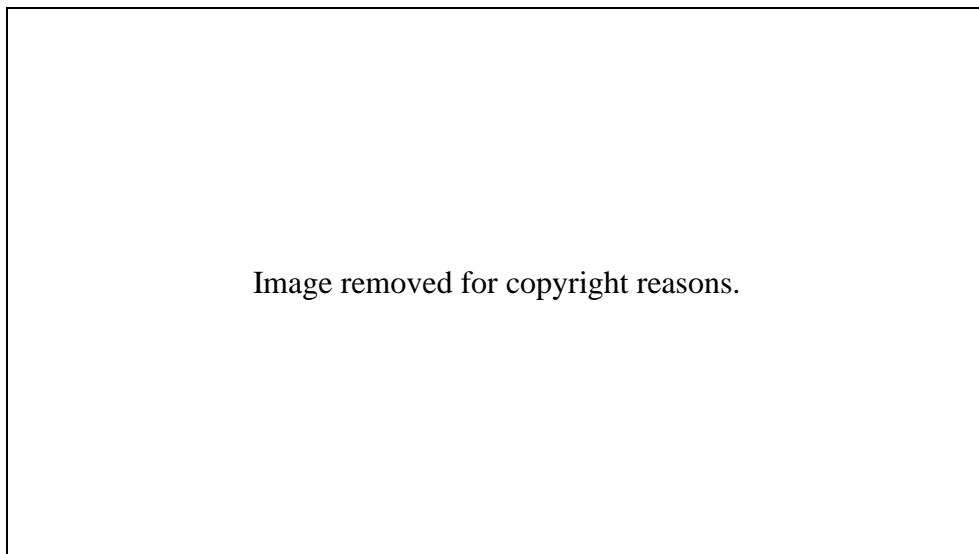


Fig. 2.3. Rey in the Dark Side cave sees herself in mirrors. *The Last Jedi*.

However, the idea of destiny is once more addressed in contradictory ways in *The Rise of Skywalker*. The ghost of Luke tells Rey that even though he and Leia knew she was a Palpatine, they decided to train her because “[Leia] saw your spirit. Your heart. Rey, some things are stronger than blood. Confronting fear is the destiny of a Jedi. Your destiny. If you don’t face Palpatine, it will mean the end of the Jedi, and the war will be lost” (1:32:05-1:32:29). While refuting her Dark destiny as a Palpatine, Rey seems co-opted by another predestined future as herald of the Light. At the end of the movie, after Palpatine’s defeat, an old woman sees Rey burying Luke and Leia’s lightsabers in Tatooine’s sand and asks: “Who are you?” She replies: “Rey...Rey Skywalker” (2:11:36). The close-up of the two weapons shows them slowly

disappearing in the sands. The scene symbolically indicates that the old generation's ways of the Force are concluded—and she wields a new lightsaber with a yellow crystal. Her choice of color, rather than the light blue or green of Leia's or Luke's sabers, suggests that she may try to acknowledge both the Light and Dark Side within her.¹¹ Returning to Tatooine, the Western setting where it all began, is a cyclical conclusion of the myth, but also new beginnings. Rey sees the Skywalker twins' Force ghosts smiling benevolently on her as she claims the Skywalker heritage: despite the contradictions, as an American heroine Rey has found her path to forward the portrayal of the mythos.

2.8 Gaining Complexity

The most important part of Rey's journey is to embrace both the Light and the Darkness, whereas Luke is mainly concerned with how she “went straight to the Dark” (50:57) in the cave. On a symbolic level, acknowledging the darkness without being influenced by it also means for the heroine to access a deeper emotional level that the American hero has been denied. As Tompkins writes, “the Western hero's silence symbolizes a massive suppression of the inner life. And my sense is that this determined shutting down of emotions, this cutting of the self off from contact with the interior well of feeling, exacts its price in the end” (66). Disillusioned with the Jedi Order, Luke has silenced himself and denied his inner feelings by refusing to feel the Force. He is not dissimilar from the quiet cowboy of the American mythos whose inner world is barely conveyed by a look, unlike Rey, who is emotionally open.

The difference between the two is evident in *The Last Jedi* scene where Rey feels the balance with the Force for the first time. Rey's ability to connect with emotions is conveyed by close-ups of her face as she describes the never-ending cycle of life and death, light and darkness on Ahch-To. With a parallel montage, the scene matches her words with alternating images of the life and death on the island to show the audience what Rey feels and sees. Luke is positioned in the same frame as Rey but is kept slightly out of focus to indicate visually that he is disconnected from the Force—a statement to his “silent Western hero” status. Rey feels attracted to the Dark Cave out of curiosity, but Luke is scared of her power. This contrast is exemplified by their dialogue. Rey says: “That place was trying to show me something.” Luke replies: “It offered you

11. In the *Star Wars* Universe the lightsaber color often gives away the alignment of the wielder: red is for evil, caused by the wielder trying to dominate the crystal, while blue, white and green represent good.

something you needed. And you didn't even try to stop yourself." However, Rey correctly points out: "But I didn't see you. Nothing from you. You've closed yourself off from the Force. Of course you have" (51:00-51:22).

Even though Rey is undoubtedly the result of previous mythic influences, she signifies an evolved stage of the American mythos that offers modern audiences more complex heroic characters who do not trust blindly ancient prophecies like Anakin, or who simply follow paternal heritages like Luke. As an imperfect human being, the American hero(ine) now ideologically questions her goals. This development follows Julie Sanders' take on mythic paradigms that are adapted across media, providing "a series of familiar reference points and a set of expectations which the novelist, artist, director, playwright, composer, or poet can rely upon as an instructive shorthand, while simultaneously exploiting, twisting, and relocating them in newly creative ways, and in newly resonant contexts" (81). From a cultural analysis perspective, film in *Star Wars* as a cultural technology directs a progressive ideological shift in the discourse of mythical heroism within American popular culture. The use of camera movements and juxtapositions of images that have been described so far help re-write old heroic tropes in *Star Wars* to achieve André Bazin's description of cinema as "a relay station, a sort of aesthetic 'transformer.' The meaning is not in the image, it is in the shadow of the image projected by montage onto the field of consciousness of the spectator" (26), thus contributing to creating new meanings. As a hegemonic producer of (counter)culture, Disney has actively been leading this process by balancing out its support of the conservative establishment with exhorting younger generations to question the *status quo*:

Disney films [...] champions one's growth as an individual entity over conformity to the crowd and its current code. Still, here we encounter the full complexity of the Disney vision. For the individual's responsibility to the social order cannot ever be overlooked, any more than in Greek tragedy. What must be achieved is a difficult, delicate, but necessary balance between the two. (Brode, *From Walt to Woodstock* xxi)

Disney's cinematic adaptation of the American mythos in *Star Wars* places itself within this tradition. Through Rey Disney highlights the limitations of the ideological framework that has historically constructed the American myth and heroism and heads toward a representation which, as the Western genre it embodies, is perpetually in flux because "it changes shape and frequently turns into its opposite" (Tompkins 48).

Rey's central function is to transform the conservative legacy of "the older generation [seen as] as legendary figures—as mythic models to be lived up to" (Gill 4). In one of the scenes in *The Last Jedi*, camera movements indicate the shift between the Jedi's past and their present and how the future must change. A camera movement slides horizontally showing Yoda's ghost from the back as he observes Luke moving up the stairs leading to an ancient tree on Ahch-To that contains the Jedi's Holy Texts. Luke intends to burn them to destroy what they represent, but he hesitates. The camera moves back to Luke as he suddenly turns, feeling the presence of his old Master. Yoda anticipates Luke's actions by burning down the tree because in his view the Texts are irrelevant (Figure 5), and it is Luke's anti-heroic fragility as a human being that constitutes the only lesson Rey can learn from him. He says: "Pass on what you have learned. Strength. Mastery. But weakness, folly, failure also. Yes, failure most of all. The greatest teacher, failure is. Luke, we are what they grow beyond. That is the true burden of all masters" (1:23:33). It's a moment of major cinematic storytelling inversion that opens Jedi ideology to change.

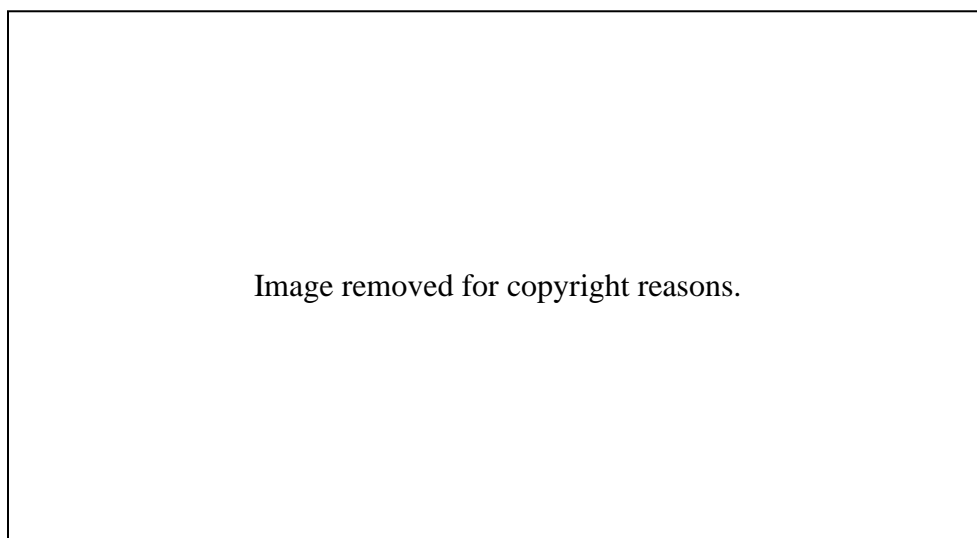


Fig. 2.4. Luke and Yoda's ghost (right) observe the tree containing the Holy Jedi Texts burning.

The Last Jedi.

However, at the end of the movie a seemingly unimportant close shot of a drawer in the Millennium Falcon reveals that Rey has saved the Texts. The fact that the shot looks almost accidental suggests that their importance as ideological paradigms to Rey is limited. Even though she preserved them and uses them as needed, Rey reshapes the Jedi Order (and the meaning of heroism) on her own terms. At the beginning of *The Rise of Skywalker* Rey finds clues in the

books for a map to the off-charted Exegol—the legendary hidden Sith world where Palpatine hides and the First Order forces are gathering. While for Luke the texts are the physical manifestation of the dogmatic burden of the past that needs to be destroyed, for Rey they are simply a tool. This different attitude reveals the modern American heroine’s lack of concern with ideologically safeguarding the myth as is.¹² As she tells Luke in *The Last Jedi*: “The galaxy may need a legend. I need someone to show me my place in all this” (1:01:38).

Luke’s final statement that “it’s time for the Jedi to end”—*The Last Jedi*’s larger motif—is summarized by his final sacrifice where he channels all his Force abilities to stop Kylo from swiping the Resistance away, and not to “save [his] soul,” as Ren spitefully says. Luke’s death represents a major narrative shift in the representation of American heroism in mainstream pop-culture because the white male hero does not survive and dies not for patriotic duty, glory or heroic martyrdom—as many Western movies have shown—but for the sake of others. Melissa Hilmann’s commentary about the scene expresses well this inversion in representation:

This kind of sacrifice is something we’re used to seeing from extraordinary female characters (see every extraordinary woman from Charlotte in *Charlotte’s Web* to Eleven in *Stranger Things*). In *TLJ* [*The Last Jedi*], the central white male hero of the original films dies to save an exceptionally diverse, gender-balanced group of people who are, as Poe says, the “spark that will light the fire that will destroy the First Order.” Not “save the galaxy;” not “save the Republic.” This is not about saving something from corruption. It’s about ending the old order and creating something completely new. (par. 7)

However, the adaptation of the myth becomes once more hegemonic when Rey is conveniently deemed “the last hope of the Jedi” in the opening crawl of *The Rise of Skywalker*. The saga uses a simple fairy-tale-like recap that refers to *A New Hope* when it needs to make its products more immediately identifiable to the audiences. The franchise, designed by Disney to be consumed by a variety of audiences in episodic chunks and stand-alone instances, requires simplifications and reminders of its narrative thread to avoid alienating audiences. This also

12. However, it needs to be noted that the attitude of relying on sacred texts is also part of the American “character” because, while a nominally secular country, the United States has justified its right to separate from England on pseudo-religious foundations—in the 1776 Declaration of Independence men are said to be created equal by God. Rey’s behavior most directly refers to the old-fashioned American tradition of “Jeffersonian” pragmatism that relies on the didactic function of text that sees fit editing out knowledge for the sake of the greater good.

further proves that adaptation also works as a hegemonic process that sacrifices ideological consistencies to meet the commercial demands of the cultural products it produces.

2.9 Like Father, Like Son...

The intertextual nature of the American heroine of *Star Wars* is reiterated through another core trope of the Campbellian monomyth: the redemption achieved through a showdown between the young hero and a father figure. The symbolic clash between generations expresses how the American mythos in the saga is also about the battle of emerging powers against dominant (oppressive) ones that resist the change, signalling the fluid nature of power systems and worldviews over time, which Hall defines as the eternal “dialectic of cultural struggle” (447). The presence of the father-son trope in *Star Wars* is an evolution of the mythos that ideologically exhorts the young to rise against the establishment and corrupted institutions when they fail to care for the American people’s interests. Jewett and Lawrence see that this ideology is fueled by American popular culture at large, including *Star Wars*: “Others can see our dominating military power as motivated by purely defensive objectives that will protect the innocent. While critics in other countries view such statements as self-deluding, they are perfectly consistent with the image of the selfless superhero encouraged by our most popular entertainment” (*The Myth of the American Superhero* 15).

This ideology centers around heroes facing their “doubles” as a necessary step to fulfill their journey because their nemeses represent their “evil and submerged half. This conflict also represents a war with the father figure and a struggle for dominance” (Frankel, *From Girl to Goddess* 2-3). The battles between Luke and Vader, and Rey and Palpatine indicate *de facto* that the American mythos ideologically justifies the rise of new leaders through inevitably pushing back old systems of power—both the Emperor and Vader are the last remnants of the “old religion” that must fall because it is corrupted. At the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke faces Vader in combat but is defeated, losing his hand, because he has not completed his training. Vader delivers one of the most iconic lines in movie history—“No, I am your father!”—revealing that he was Anakin, Luke’s parent. The dramatic tone of the struggle is heightened by a shot of Luke’s face as he is seen barely standing injured on one of the antennas of Cloud City, a sign of both his physical and emotional pain. In *The Return of the Jedi* a second father-son epic battle happens, highlighted by the cold bluish colors used for the setting and by the characters wearing both black, suggesting their likeness despite their differences. Unlike in the traditional mythos

Luke refuses to kill Anakin/Darth Vader despite his evil deeds. He tells Vader: “[Anakin Skywalker] is the name of your true self. You’ve only forgotten. I know there is good in you” (1:24:00). This is Luke’s way to fulfil his mythic structure by confronting Vader—his own darkness:

He amputates Vader’s mechanical arm [...]. But the frayed wires protruding from Vader’s sleeve remind Luke of his own mechanical hand. Once again, Luke sees how easily he could become like his father, and that perhaps he has already begun the journey.

Suddenly, Luke resists. (Taliaferro and Beck 124)

The Emperor retaliates by electrocuting Luke with his Dark lighting bolts. Seeing his son Luke in pain, Vader attacks and defeat his evil mentor—another battle against a nemesis—by throwing him in the Death Star pit, finally fulfilling his destiny as he “sacrifice[s] his own inflated sense of self” (125) and metaphorically brings “the ‘elixir’ that saves the community” as a conclusion of his journey” (Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* 272).

The Rise of Skywalker reworks the motif of the generational power struggle self-referencing the final showdown in *The Return of the Jedi*. The movie reproduces the choice of cold colors that give the scene an unsettling aesthetics, but on a larger scale than in the old trilogy. Rey faces a clone reincarnation of the Emperor, now stronger than ever because he is channelling the power of all the Sith who came before him. As Rey’s double, Palpatine dramatically reveals to her: “Long have I waited for my grandchild to come home. [...]. I wanted you here, Empress Palpatine. You will take the throne. It is your birthright to rule here. It is in your blood. Our blood” (1:44:08-1:44:46). Rey responds by using the last skill that her Master Leia has taught her before dying. She manages to connect with all the dead Jedi who came before her and channels their power to defeat the evil Emperor. Close-ups of the two characters’ faces alternate to increase the suspense of the moment and Rey’s heroic effort (Figure 6).

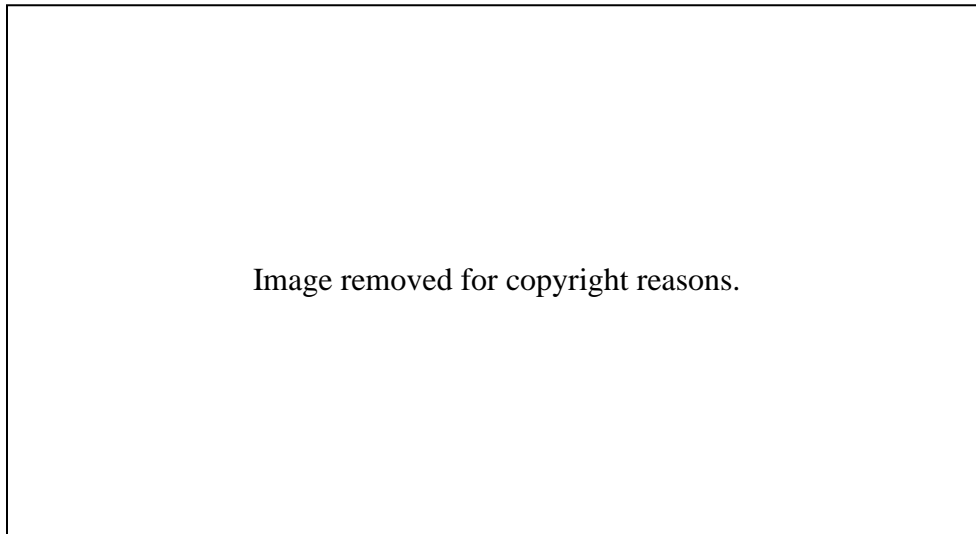


Fig. 2.5. Rey (right) faces the clone of the Emperor Palpatine. *The Rise of Skywalker*.

While certainly the confrontation between Rey and Palpatine resembles the father-son generational clash between Luke and Vader, the channeling of her predecessors' Force can be interpreted as a statement that heroism is not on the shoulders of one hero/heroine, but it is a collective effort and responsibility that includes the legacy of those who have come before and stood up for the same beliefs of freedom and social justice against oppressive powers. This scene confirms that *Star Wars* keeps adapting Campbellian and Western myths while branching out its meanings within the complexity of American cultural history. Rey's channelling of past Jedi heroes signifies metaphorically remembering the legacies of the social movements that have historically advocated for freedom in the United States since the 1960s: the American feminist movement, the anti-Vietnam movement and the equal rights movement. *Star Wars* relies on the idea that the Emperor Palpatine's persisting evil forms exemplify that tyranny can also be transmitted from past generations.

The showdown scene between Rey and Palpatine alternates with scenes where the Resistance heroes and their ships attempt to stop the First Order fleet from leaving the planet Exegol. This scene alludes to *A New Hope*, where against all odds the Rebel alliance, including Luke, leads a desperate final attack to the Death Star. The image of American heroism here portrayed is about a few courageous white male fighters standing against a totalitarian regime. In both instances, the appearance of the Millennium Falcon saves the day. In the 1977 movie, the scene is focused on how Han's bravery saved the Rebellion, even though Chewbacca was also vital, "like the cavalry in a Western film, complete with a "sunset" illumination" (Callahan 101)

as he swoops down. The pattern replicated the story of the (lone) Western hero who dominated popular culture.

In *The Rise of Skywalker*, Lando Calrissian, portrayed by African-American actor Billy Dee Williams, in a pseudo-Marxian move uses the Falcon to call for help across the galaxy and brings back hundreds of what a shocked Imperial officer calls “people” or, in other words, the masses: untrained individuals with no military background who lost everything because of the First Order and want to destroy it. While in the classic American (Western) mythos the action always revolves around the solitary hero, co-heroes such as Lando are a common feature in the Campbellian monomyth and, subsequently, in fairy tales. Arthur Berger comments that the overall *Star Wars* narrative relies on Propp’s classic fairy tale structures where the “hero generally cannot function on his own; he needs others, [...] he is part of something bigger than himself” (16). This variation, adapted in the new *Star Wars* movies, is used to signify the democratization of heroism in the saga as a shared responsibility.

Considering how Rey and the Resistance defeat the Emperor and the First Order, it is clear how the American hero’s journey has significantly changed over time, and Rey’s story, a result of ongoing mythical adaptations, reflects the changes in how American society sees itself through its stories and media. The presence of a heroine at the centre of the re-writing of myths that have been relevant for American society and were once dominated by men indicates that some segments of American culture are normalizing the portrayal of women in position of leadership in its media. This shift may be interpreted through John Storey’s stance on cultural changes. He states that the emergence of counter-meanings that rework grand narratives—as in the case of the American Western mythos in *Star Wars*—is the doing of postmodernism as it embraces “a plurality of voices from the margins, with their insistence on difference, on cultural diversity, and the claims of heterogeneity over homogeneity” (386). *Star Wars* storytelling has detached itself from old forms of patriarchal heroism and the myth of the Chosen One. The hero/heroine are indeed those who save the galaxy, but their efforts are re-framed as part of the collective uprising of the masses which feel called to stand up against injustice. *The Force Awakens* summarizes this concept through the words of Maz Kanata, played by Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong’o, who wisely says that there is only one fight: “Against the Dark Side. Through the ages, I’ve seen evil take many forms. The Sith. The Empire. Today, it is the First Order. Their shadow’s spreading across the galaxy. We must face them. Fight them. All of us” (1:00-22- 1:00-41). It is a

“wake up call” that exhorts Americans to rise against the institutions that have caused inequalities to safeguard the democratic principles on which the United States are founded.

2.10 Conclusions

My analysis of the *Star Wars* characters’ heroic journeys repeated and adapted over time has helped demonstrate that the franchise uses the cinematic medium to represent a renewed mythology that questions, but at times embraces, the male-centered narratives of the Campbellian and American Western mythos. My analysis has helped address the influence of these heroic models on how American culture views gender, highlighting a change toward more inclusive representations of heroism that challenge ancient male-centred models. Rey is not the first canonical female Force user featured extensively in the franchise as a lead—Ahsoka Tano in the animated TV series *The Clone Wars* takes credit. However, Rey is the first one who is a movie lead, and who despite some inconsistencies has helped re-shape gender representation in the franchise after Disney’s acquisition. Despite the backlash received from alt-right fringes, Rey shows that women matter like men, although the fact that she is often masculinized in the movies indicates that American media—and hence, American culture—are still negotiating ways to represent women when they are in positions of power.

As a heroine of this renewed, yet hegemonic, mythology, Rey poses herself as the expression of the desires of contemporary post-feminist audiences who, being more sensitive to gender issues and attentive to their representation, expect more equality and complexity in female character development, even in so-called middle- and low-brow pop cultural forms. In a *Huffington Post* article that lists several examples of diverse representations in American media and why they matter from a social and cultural perspective, Caroline Bologna writes that Rey’s appearance in *Star Wars* “was ground-breaking both within the male-dominated realm of the fictional universe and in the real world, as she inspired countless young girls with her heroism” (par. 22). Rey embodies a more diverse, democratic version of heroism that encompasses the Western lone redemptive hero stereotype as well as of the Puritanical “Heidi” figure. As my analysis indicates, these underlying ideologies are still present in American culture as a way of coding desired masculine, and now also feminine, models of behavior. However, the fact that the heroine’s representation is still caught up with these traditional heroic tropes also suggests that the franchise continues to rely on narrative structures and formulas familiar to the audiences to keep renewing its success.

The processes of cinematic adaptation and intertextuality have a central role in the production of dichotomous meanings in the new *Star Wars* movies, in line with Disney's functions as a producer of American culture. On the one hand, Disney has historically been seen in the mainstream as the American entertainment media mega-conglomerate supporting conservative social values packaged with feelings of goodness and happiness. On the other hand, the company has also been a surprisingly forward-thinking source of countercultural inspiration to young audiences through its movies, which told young people for the first time that it was possible to rebel against the establishment "to strike out against those who would repress youthful freedoms, even if this necessitated employing violence as a last resort" (Brode, *From Walt to Woodstock* xvi).

With Rey, Disney tried to detach itself from its usual representation of women fulfilling typical feminine roles as male supporters and damsels in distress. This chapter has helped establish that intertextual relations constitute the cultural thread that diversifies myths, ideologies and politics of representation in popular culture. But have traditional views on gender disappeared from Disney's commercializing strategies to market *Star Wars*, especially to younger audiences? And what is the role of intertextuality in these marketing strategies? To answer these questions, Chapter 3 will examine the Princess trope, which Disney used extensively to represent women, in the animated *Star Wars* series *Forces of Destiny* and its dedicated doll line. Despite its hegemonic, contradictory representation of female characters in *Star Wars*, the analysis of the Princess motif will be also helpful to better understand the mechanism of myth revival as a commercialized experience.

Chapter 3

The Princess Strikes Back:

*Forces of Destiny and the Capitalization of the Disney Princess*¹

In Disney's *Brave* (2012), Merida breaks the mold of the helpless Disney Princess and becomes her own hero: she excels at archery, horseback-riding and refuses to be betrothed, so much so she competes in the Highland games to win her own hand—eventually succeeding. The movie is one of most recent Disney products that offers a direct critique to women's traditional roles in fairy tales and myths and, in particular, to the Princess character. Disney's new trend embraces a feminist revamping that transforms women characters into action heroines. As discussed in the previous chapter, the new *Star Wars* movies, which relaunched the franchise after Disney's acquisition of the brand in 2012, seem similarly to align with the company's alleged commitment to depicting empowered women leads. Rey, the protagonist of *Star Wars*, and Jyn Erso, the lead of *Rogue One* (2016), for example, emerge as strong action heroines who fully embrace their leadership and fighting skills and significantly advance women's presence in the “galaxy far, far away” of *Star Wars*.

The previous chapter addressed how the new *Star Wars* challenges the idea of passive heroines in the classic monomyth and in the American mythos. But what about the Princess character, so ingrained in Disney's storytelling, who has evolved from the classic mythical heroine yet who still embodies some traditional views of gender roles and femininity?² Can we really affirm that traditional Princesses have disappeared from all new *Star Wars* products? Even

1. A version of this chapter was published in *The Transmedia Franchise of Star Wars TV*, edited by Dominic Nardi and Derek Sweet, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 97-117.

2. The word Princess is capitalized when referring to the archetypal figure of the folklore, in addition to when it is used as a personal title of a character (i.e. Princess Leia).

though these adaptations break away from the past, in what ways are they still hegemonically complicated? What happens when these adaptations are delivered by the animated medium, which historically targets children as a preferred audience? And, what is the connection between animated stories and toys in the process of re-distribution of myth? To answer these questions, I will discuss how Disney's *Star Wars: Forces of Destiny* (2017–2018), an animated web series, uses serialized streaming and themed toys to develop a new “Princessification” trend. The series, developed by Lucasfilm Animation, was released first on Disney's YouTube channel, then on the Disney Channel and more recently the streaming platform Disney+. The series was released to expand the presence of female characters in the *Star Wars* universe. The show challenges traditional gender representations by turning the Princess into a democratized heroine but it also repackages the character's traditional mythical traits through targeted marketing to children. This is evident in the use of the series as a support for the sale of its themed dolls, which aimed at reproducing the incredibly profitable business model of the Disney Princess Line media franchise, established in 2001. This dualism helps delineate the idea that modern mythological adaptations strive for innovation to survive the test of time, even though they struggle with eradicating the negative gender ideology associated with traditional female figures of the myth.

The intertextual connections that sustain the re-writing of the Princess trope are key to understanding the re-distribution mechanisms of myths that occur between the main media products of *Star Wars*—the movies—and other cross-media such as *Forces of Destiny*. While the previous chapter focused on the re-writing mechanisms of the mythical heroine with a primary focus on the use of cinematic medium in *Star Wars*, this chapter further examines these adaptation processes when applied to the Princess trope and from the angle of animation. This perspective can help explain the hegemonic processes of cross-adaptation that Disney uses to revive mythical forms and to meet Disney's commercializing goals. This analysis will help me provide further evidence that the “mythical” has turned into a full-fledged consumerist experience in contemporary cultural production.

By using intertextual theories of adaptation and by exploring the notion of ideological re-writing in mass cultural production, I will compare Rey, Leia, Padmé and narrative elements in *Forces of Destiny* with their renditions in other *Star Wars* movies and with the traditional Princess trope. The goal is to describe how the series uses certain animation techniques to re-write fairy tales for younger audiences that ideologically “talk back” to outdated gender

representations. Despite the contradictory results, the adaptation of the Princess character in *Star Wars* is an example of how integrating new meanings into mythical narratives may also lead to re-discovering some of the ancient functions of fairy tales as models of behavior, especially for—but not limited to—female audiences. Fairy tales were once oral accounts that women passed down to one another as popular wisdom that could help them navigate life, as these stories “mapp[ed] escape routes from bad betrothals, abject circumstances, and toxic marriages” (Tatar, *The Heroine* 112). This educational function, Maria Tatar argues, was lost when male writers and scholars such as the Grimm brothers co-opted fairy tales into written collections. Their versions of fairy tales shifted the stories to patriarchal narratives that celebrated passive heroines and erased the most gruesome details (physical violence, incest, rape) that could serve as warnings to women, according to Tatar’s analysis (*The Heroine* 94-104).

One of the premises behind the re-writing of the Princess trope in *Forces of Destiny* seems to address this issue by disrupting the male gaze that guides the traditional representation of women in myths. *Forces of Destiny* is framed through a narrative proclaiming that “the choices we make, the actions we take, [...] shape us into forces of destiny,” as Maz Kanata solemnly recites at the beginning of each episode. Therefore, the series is marketed with the implicit message to children that only by taking charge through their actions can they make a change in the world and be the real-life protagonists of their own stories, no matter what part of the galaxy they are from and regardless of their social position. This democratizing ideology that turns the Princess character into an agent for change is supported by the show’s doll line, which features equally senators, smugglers, queens, and warriors, unlike the traditional Disney Princess Line which only includes classic Princess characters. As part of my analysis, I will examine the function of *Forces of Destiny*’s short three-minute episodes as narrative animated interpolations spreading a subtle advertisement that encourages girls to buy the themed dolls. As Kailash Koushik and Abigail Reed point out, Disney’s gesture toward diversity also “serve(s) the primary purpose of selling goods to audiences” (5) through a marketing strategy exploiting female audiences’ desire to recognize themselves in movie characters and products.

Although *Forces of Destiny* significantly downplays the classic version of the Disney Princess and advocates for a change in gender representation in *Star Wars*, its design as a cultural artifact ancillary to the movies eventually reveals how mythical portrayals in cinematic animated form are still fundamentally hegemonic as they resist the integration of counter-meanings in their

narratives. My analysis will help support the idea that, thanks to the use of animated media forms and the support of paratextual toys, *Forces of Destiny* establishes Disney's *Star Wars* as a cultural engine that keeps old mythologies and fairy tales alive through new culturally diverse lenses that are filtered through consumerism, despite ideological contradictions.

3.1 Once Upon a Time...

So far I have addressed in this dissertation mainly how *Star Wars* adapts the elements and tropes of the Campbellian monomyth and the American mythos. Shifting my focus to the analysis of a trope such as Princesses, who pertain to the narrative categories of folktales and fairy tales and not primarily to that of myth, signifies acknowledging how these genres relate to one other and how their boundaries have often proven flexible over time. Unlike myths, which focus on superhuman beings, folktales and fairy tales mostly feature common individuals, and at times aristocrats, dealing with the supernatural or with extraordinary events. The structure suggests a myth "reversal" that centers on the human experience as opposed to the exceptionality of myth, which often focuses on the divine. According to Johnathan Smith and his co-authors, despite the differences these genres are deeply interconnected because they often share the same motifs with various degrees of importance and overlap with "encounters between ordinary, often humble, human beings and supernatural adversaries such as witches, giants, or ogres; contests to win a bride; and attempts to overcome a wicked stepmother or jealous sisters" ("Myth").

As a modern pastiche of mythical, folkloric and fairy tale tropes, *Star Wars* unsurprisingly shares some of the traditional features of these genres in its approach to the re-writing of the Princess trope. In our collective imaginary a Princess is a young, beautiful damsel in distress who, in elegant robes, waits for a charming hero to save and woo her—the classic image of the Disney Princess since the 1930s. Far from being invented by Disney, these characteristics have deep roots, which Vladimir Propp describes well in his analysis of the traditional fairy tale Princess's limitations and features: she has a little "sphere of action," and her role is not to "do," but to endure events as a passive victim until an external narrative force is applied. Rather than leading the action, she is used as a catalyst for the male protagonist's narrative development, such as being kidnapped and subsequently saved, or she may "demand that the hero conquers the dragon" (68), as Propp notes. The Princess's exceptional beauty also fulfills the traditional feminine function of potential bride who attracts "a suitor [to achieve] marriage" (Tatar, *The Hard Facts* 79). Therefore, the Princess's voice in traditional fairy tales is limited or subordinate

to fulfill the male protagonist's quest or needs. While the pre-Disney *Star Wars* movies have adapted these features to a more emancipated modern context, both George Lucas' Princess Leia Organa and Queen/Senator Padmé Amidala may seem familiar to the audience because of their similarity to Princesses from previous media forms. Saving Leia from the Empire's grip is the initial leitmotif of *A New Hope*, and the trope continues with Padmé's rescue from the Separatists' assassination attempts in *Attack of the Clones*, which ends with the hero Anakin marrying the beautiful former Queen of Naboo.

Despite the apparent narrative traditionalism of *Star Wars*, Lucas' *avant-garde* Princess Leia started to wreck feminist havoc in *A New Hope* (1977). As "a new stage in the ongoing presentation of the fairy-tale princess in jeopardy" (Merlock and Merlock Jackson 77) Leia is abrasive, straight to the point, and not afraid of outsmarting and overpowering the male characters around her *à la* second-wave feminism, challenging the motif of the damsel in distress in fantasy stories. However, in *Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Leia also contradictorily presents the features of a classic Princess because her story centers on a traditional love-hate romance trope with Han Solo, a scruffy "bad boy" scoundrel. This love motif catalyzes Leia's narrative in the Original Trilogy—she is enslaved, and possibly abused, by Jabba the Hutt in *Return of the Jedi* (1983) only because she is trying to free Han from the carbonite.

So, is Leia really a new Princess? Despite our desire for empowering female representations in popular culture, Leia shows how the modern, allegedly emancipated Princess character struggles with innovative gender representations. On the one hand, the persistence of the Princess trope in *Star Wars*, regardless of the nuances of its gender portrayal, represents the intertextual adaptability of fairy tale motifs in contemporary media. Julie Sanders writes that "if fairy tale and folklore make themselves particularly available for continuous re-creation and rewriting it is partly because of their essential abstraction from a specific context" (84), which means they function well intertextually because they are formulaic, universal descriptors of human experience. On the other hand, the re-writing of the Princess character in *Star Wars*, even before Disney's acquisition, speaks of the commodifying use of old and newly adapted Princess tropes in commercial fantasy franchises to capitalize on themed action figures, clothing and various merchandise. This capitalization process indicates that the survival of the "mythical" in contemporary cultural forms, intended as the rich heritage comprised of myths and folktales at

large, not only is about reviving storytelling practices but is also about “owning” and consuming the myth itself through themed products.

This process indicates that, regardless of whether the Princess trope caters to oppressive or progressive feminine qualities, capitalist modes of cultural production exploit women’s representations to expand audiences and sell more consumer goods. The classic Princess, who embodies traditional values of femininity and domesticity, has been co-opted into multiple products and media—online streaming, cinema, and television—that attempt to modernize the Princess archetype.³ The result of this process is a cultural mythical framework where each component adapts the Princess trope with various degrees of “modernization” and capitalizes on the Princess’s representation by re-producing and fragmenting the gendered meanings associated with this trope.

Because of their formulaic nature, mythical tropes such as the Princess motif seem very apt at transforming and being adapted through transmedia storytelling and, therefore, thrive within capitalist modes of cultural production. Fredric Jameson’s theories explain how intertextual repetition in late capitalist culture stems from “the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (*Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 18), although in his view this postmodern cultural process lacks any ideological critique of the past. However, if we look at this process from the perspective of adaptation and re-writing, the back and forth between the old Princess trope and its feminist revamping in contemporary media does indeed represent a moment of critical questioning. This means that adaptations, and mythical adaptations in particular, respond to Sanders’ claim that intertextuality as a process opens up for both ideological endorsements and critiques through “a rather more complex hybrid of the two stances” (106). Therefore, this dualism highlights the dichotomous nature of mythical re-writings, with the Princess trope being a perfect example of this ambivalent, and often not clear-cut transposition in contemporary media. This finding is consistent with what emerged from my previous analysis of the adaptation of other motifs from the Campbellian and American monomyths in *Star Wars*.

Jameson’s explanation of postmodern fixations with the repetition of “pastness,” in whatever mythical form desired, helps contextualize the traditional media representations of

3. Recent examples other than *Star Wars* include the *Princess Diaries* (2001-2004) movie series and the (non-Disney) irreverent Netflix animated series *Disenchantment* (2018-2021).

women. In the context of mass-produced culture, women are commodified and objectified through images created to benefit the male gaze as “an object of vision: a sight” (47), as John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*. Laura Mulvey expands this idea in her analysis of commercialized, mass-produced representations of women in Hollywood, representations which reveal women’s fundamentally Othered status in a patriarchal system where they are “bearers of meaning, not makers of meaning” (7). These aspects were co-opted in *Star Wars* too. Despite their shift toward gender empowerment, Leia and Padmé also function as “the ideal Princess girlfriend” titillating the fantasies of the male audience, producing women’s stories that seem ancillary to the male gaze in the franchise, and replicating their traditional “bridal” role in fairy tales. Conversely, in the new Disney movies making Rey a lead was a systematic move to transform the franchise into more “women-friendly”—even though the female *Star Wars* fan base is a well-documented phenomenon since the saga’s inception. Both the old and new *Star Wars* created a kind of Princess to respond to its audiences’ needs. Not only does this dichotomy reveal the hegemonic grey areas of mythical re-writings as they are put in conversation with contemporary times, but it is also “emblematic of [Disney’s] growing tendency to commodify the core tenants of social movements and repackage them in a fashion better suited to their global market interests” (Koushik and Reed 5).

The company’s process of re-writing the characteristics of the Princess over the years represents its adaptability as a cultural producer to capitalize on consumers’ need for modern escapist fairy tales. After World War Two, Disney’s animated films, produced by men, replicated the Princess as the bearer of traditional, domestic (and domesticated) gender roles and nuclear family values to “restore [fairy tales’] conservative features” (Zipes 193) as a response to, for example, women’s social emancipation in the 1950s and 1960s. As Sam Higgs observes, Disney movies associated this new, self-determined woman with the villain—the jealous Evil Queen (*Snow White*, 1937), the evil stepmother Lady Tremaine (*Cinderella*, 1950), and heartless witch Maleficent (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959) (65). Instead, the Classic Princesses of these movies were reassuring feminine figures who embodied “romantic myths” of normalized subordination (Wilde 134). As Higgs acknowledges, the 1990s third-wave-feminist Princess assumed more assertive active roles, although they still reinforced patriarchal, heteronormative values.⁴ For example,

4. In addition to issues of gender representation, the depictions of Renaissance Princesses also show flawed portrayals of race and misrepresent minorities through racial stereotyping. For

Ariel renounced her freedom for a barely-known Prince (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), while smart Belle married the Beast who abused her (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991). The animated form used by Disney for the adaptation of the Princess trope highlights how the medium can influence mythical re-writings in hegemonic ways. As Kaustubh Ray writes: “homogenization and subsequent commandeering of animation by the power structures creates myths that obfuscate peripheral perspectives of looking at discourses outside dominant frameworks that readapt and redefine in order to perpetuate” (89). This happens because animation makes the “imaginative” real and through its drawings creates realities that are not bound to the technical constraints of the traditional cinematic medium—in a way paving the way for the imaginative capabilities of computer-generated stories. This ability to materialize the unreal and its endless possibilities contributes to seeking change while replicating the ideologies of the *status quo*.

With a shift in the ideological framework governing gender representation, a parallel ideological change happened in Disney’s animated movies. Around the mid-2000s, Disney’s co-opting of feminism to respond to audiences’ needs for recognition resulted in stronger female leads, a decision to remove “the word ‘Princess’ [...] from the titles, and [that] the male love interest had to be given more to do” (Higgs 68) after *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) flopped at the box office. Regardless, Higgs notes that the capable, independent Revival Princesses such as Tiana, Rapunzel in *Tangled* (2010), and Merida in *Brave* (2012) were weaker because their uniqueness was portrayed as a social exception (69). Conversely, *Frozen*’s Elsa (2013) and the title character of *Moana* (2016) heighten Disney’s “feminist” shift, abandoning for the first time any romantic happy endings for the Princesses, while carrying forward old gender representations—Moana as God Maui’s unwilling “mother,” and Elsa’s emasculating freezing powers excluding a heterosexual romance (Streiff and Dundes 2).

As Sarah Wilde points out, Disney’s shift toward post-feminist positions has caused Princesses to be “repackaged with positive associations of bravery, compassion and loyalty that girls can adhere to, [as] self-acclaimed princesses in the form of everyday girls” (133). Despite Disney’s claim of refuting the concept of girls as “Princesses,” critics highlight how popular media, including Disney’s Princess Line and the *Star Wars* franchise, are still pervasively

example, *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998) offer racial stereotypes of Indigenous and Chinese people, and shamelessly appropriate Othered cultures—an issue not addressed in Higgs, “Damsels.”

entrenched with sexist representations of women's subordination. Although Rey is not officially a Princess—at least until *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) revealed that she was related to Emperor Palpatine—some of the features she embodies are very close to Leia and Padmé, earlier *Star Wars* royals, and are at times akin to the classic Princess character. This ambivalence between innovation and traditionalism indicates that the Disney Princess re-writing always inhabits both stances within contemporary media, and it provides evidence that hegemony is an inescapable trait of mythical storytelling genres, particularly in *Star Wars*, as emerged throughout this dissertation.

3.2 *Forces of Destiny* and the Disney Princess Trope

Influenced by Disney's co-opting of female audiences to meet globalized marketing strategies, *Forces of Destiny* tries to substitute the image of the traditional passive Princess with female characters in the official *Star Wars* canon who take action and go on adventures, but it also associates them with traditional female traits seen in Disney's *Frozen* and *Moana*. As Valerie Estelle Frankel writes, "this cartoon [*Forces of Destiny*] is the girliest *Star Wars* ever... and also the most Disneyesque" (*Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism* 261). However, precisely because it is a cartoon, the series offers the opportunity for its animated images to rethink gender norms as well. This analytic function responds to the animated medium's core feature, because "above all, the animation narrative [is] built around expressive possibilities of the anarchic. They are another deterritorialising object, a tribute to the power of the naked line as transgressor" (Klein 1). The series disrupts gender assumptions by teaching lessons about teamwork, kindness and bravery to young female audiences, and it shows how easily the two franchises—Disney and *Star Wars*—overlap in their messaging. For the company it was easy to mix the new characterization of Princesses with *Star Wars* tropes in *Forces of Destiny*, as "the themes—compassion, care for 'all living things,' lessons in humility, bravery in the face of overwhelming odds—are pretty much in the core of *Star Wars*" (Kurka par. 12).

However, while the *Star Wars* movies are targeted to adults, *Forces of Destiny* "stick[s] to simple messages, uncomplicated humor, and easily solvable problems" (Martinelli par. 3) for a younger audience. *Forces of Destiny* mostly features Leia, Padmé, and Rey because, as the stars of the main movies, they are more easily recognized by young girls, which means for the company easily increasing the number of online views of the episodes and better promoting the sale of toys based on these three characters. Because the new Disney Princess trope presupposes

“normal” girls becoming heroines, the remaining characters featured in the series and toys are non-royal women from movie spin-offs and other animated series, such as Jedi Padawan Ahsoka Tano (*The Clone Wars*), Jyn Erso (*Rogue One*), Rose Tico (*The Last Jedi*), Qi’ra (*Solo*), and Sabine Wren and Hera Syndulla (*Rebels*). In its attempt to break the Princess mold, the episodes show how the *Forces of Destiny* women were not born into privilege but are set on a path of making a change by standing up for justice and for helping people and friends across the galaxy, similar to modern Princesses such as Disney’s Merida, Elsa and Moana. They set up a positive model of independent behavior for young girls—with the cultural implication of embracing resourcefulness as the way-to-go “American quality.” By focusing on these features, *Forces of Destiny* reclaims the function of animation as deliverer of both possibilities and impossibilities. Animation “can seemingly make the “impossible” possible and has the potential to communicate with young and old alike, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or nationality, [...] making it a very attractive medium [...] to recount stories, ideas, and opinions to a diverse range of cultures” (Selby 7) and, clearly, for the re-writing of mythical storytelling.

At the same time, the series also follows the late capitalist features of the animated medium itself as “the best and the worst of American mass culture [that was] condensed, as indeed all of our civilization has become, into small, brilliantly manipulated blasts of imagery” (Klein 1). The story pattern adopted in every *Forces of Destiny* episode reinforces capitalist modes of postmodern cultural production based on the repetition of the same, unoriginal narrative nodes to “sell” an empowering story to young audiences. In every episode, a problem involving Empire enemies and saving people usually comes up, the main female characters use their wits or work together to solve it, and the episode concludes with the characters learning something about the meaning of heroism and friendship. Although the narrative seems unimaginative, it also positively portrays heroines with skills usually associated with male *Star Wars* characters, such as Han Solo and Luke Skywalker, thus making the point that the new Disney Princess is as capable as men: she fights and uses the Force, repairs and operates vehicles, and plans on-the-spot successful rescue missions. Also, this apparent storytelling repetition indicates at a deeper level the heritage that children’s shows often share with ancient storytelling practices, and how these practices are re-written into contemporary media. *Forces of Destiny* intertextually appropriates the structure of fairy tales and myths in the way it is characterized by the reassuring,

educational didactic narrative for children that every time the hero must prevail, and the social order would be re-established in the story.

The series is structured as an anthological, non-chronological collection of short stand-alone moments within the *Star Wars* universe—an echo of TV ads. For example, episodes such as “Padawan Path,” (season 1, episode 4) which features Ahsoka as Anakin Skywalker’s Jedi student during the Clone Wars, is shown alongside “Beasts of Echo Base” (season 1, episode 5) where Leia of *Empire Strikes Back* fights a big Wampa monster on the icy planet Hoth—twenty years ahead of Ahsoka’s adventures in the *Star Wars* timeline. But what do these add to Leia and Ahsoka’s character development? In “Ewok Escape” (season 1, episode 3), for example, Leia helps the Ewoks fight Imperial troops on the Forest Moon of Endor, a scene that echoes *The Return of the Jedi*, while in “Happabore Hazard” (season 1, episode 15) Rey proves her scavenger abilities to despicable merchant Unkar Plutt, who scolds her in a similar scene adapted from *The Force Awakens*. These scenes function as a source for back-story details or show how some characters, who never met in the main *Star Wars* storylines, crossed paths as they helped each other fight the Empire or the First Order. It is unclear how these moments may add to the characters’ overall development arc as empowered versions of the new Princess trope; however, they function on a more practical level as short, animated ads to help marketing the themed dolls to children. YouTuber Jenny Nicholson comments that in fact “the point of [these] web episodes is to establish a compelling jumping off point for children to imagine their own stories with their dolls” (7:16-7:23).

The episodes’ narrative structuring as mini spin-offs of the main stories has uncertain degrees of impact on the *Star Wars* “Princesses” storylines because the show is designed as support content for the saga. Therefore, scenes are used as a “filler” and become less relevant to the complexity of the characters or their narrative evolution. This ancillary positioning has the purpose of securing future revenues and narrative freedom for future developments of the *Star Wars* franchise. As per Disney’s current policy, tie-in media must not constrain *Star Wars* writers in future movies or TV series, which are the primary sources of canon and the big moneymakers. Although intertextuality keeps functioning in the case of *Forces of Destiny* as the substratum that keeps the series connected to the larger franchise, it also leads to a weaker production of counter-representations of gender compared to the new *Star Wars* trilogy, which offers more consistent mythical re-writings of its Campbellian and American Western monomyths.

As a self-contained product, *Forces of Destiny* indeed shows more proactive female leads, and this indicates a deeper conversation about gender inclusiveness that the franchise has never achieved before. Some viewers' reception of the show aligns with this reading and indicates that audiences are receptive to these conversations. For example, one of the YouTube comments below "Sands of Jakku" (season 1, episode 1) by user Frank Donatelli notes that adding more women "is stellar! I love how this new star wars era we're in is doing ever [*sic.*] it can to be as inclusive as possible." The intertextual repetition of the same narrative structures and images of the revised Princess trope illustrates how women's emancipated representations in the media are also a way of attracting the niche audience of female viewers previously ignored by mainstream cultural production. The practice of re-packaging old stories and characters through new lenses is Disney's common *modus operandi* for attracting existing customers back to their products, an "old wine in a new bottle" (Koushik and Reed 6) strategy that problematically exploits the need of a marginalized group—women—to be recognized. Megan De Bruin-Molé notes that although *Star Wars* abounds with female leaders challenging male-centric systems, their ability to effectively oppose the oppressions of the patriarchy is limited because "they rarely succeed in toppling the galaxy's patriarchal customs and politics" (230).

3.3 Princess Leia

Although the *Forces of Destiny* Leia is a Disney (Princess) product, her contradictions as a modern Princess who is independent yet utterly tied to feminine roles are inherited from Lucas' saga. As "a strong woman" (Bowman 163), Leia is the narrative catalyst of the classic trilogy—she sends the plans to destroy the Death Star to Obi-Wan Kenobi through the droid R2-D2 in *A New Hope*. Leia signals a new era where princesses cannot be "salvaged simply with a kiss" (Merlock and Merlock Jackson 80). Ray Merlock and Kathy Merlock Jackson see her as the end of the traditional Princess because she defiantly challenges Luke when she is rescued, although Diana Dominguez notes she "does step aside [...] when it is wise to do so" (116). Also, unlike her brother-hero Force-user Luke, her greatest assets are her political skills, and she is concerned "with the larger chess game of Republic vs. Empire" (Merlock and Merlock Jackson 85). Leia has provided a model for subsequent female sci-fi characters as "the first feminist action hero" (De Bruin-Molé 238) paving the way for characters such as Ellen Ripley in *Alien* (1979) and Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (1984). However, Leia has been criticized for being an enabler for the male characters (Dominguez), and for failing to empower because of her infamous *Return*

of the *Jedi* slave bikini, a blatant objectification according to actress Carrie Fisher.⁵ Scholars such as Cole Bowman argue that “Bikini” Leia embraces her sexual power by choking the patriarchy—Jabba the Hutt—with her slave chain (166), while others such as McDowell describe as “abject subjugation” (111). Frankel also dismisses this scene, because Leia is shown as a sub-human and being “the galaxy’s only female, this definition extends from her to all women” (*Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism* 20). This lack of a definitive interpretation of the representation of “Bikini Leia” further supports my claim that, ideologically, the Princess is always an ambiguous figure who embodies dichotomous features on screen for the sake of appealing to different audiences.

Even though Leia is fully clothed in *Forces of Destiny*, the series appropriates again her Princess image as the movies did and adapts it to capitalize on it with younger audiences, thus showing how women “are separated from the control over their bodies” (Von Werlhof 16) in capitalist systems. Like on-screen Leia, cartoon Leia shows independence while being a traditional figure. In “Ewok Escape” (season 1, episode 2) she frees Ewoks captured by Imperial soldiers with the Ewok Wicket’s help. Leia shows compassion for the defenseless creatures and tells Wicket that, together, they need to help them. Her caring feminine attitude opposes the stormtroopers’ racism, which expects the submission of alien “lesser” populations. One of the stormtroopers says: “They’re primitives. I’m surprised the Empire didn’t deal with them when we arrived” (1:06-1:10). While complaining how “primitive” the Ewoks are, the Imperials are framed in a slight low-angle close-up that shows in the background Wicket setting up a lasso-style trap for them on a tree, signifying that the Ewok species is smart and resourceful, not “primitive.” The rest of the episode alternates a quick succession of frames that highlight the Princess’s stance as an action heroine: Wicket succeeds at tying the Troopers and lifting them up a branch. As Wicket is not heavy enough, he ends up being lifted on the branch as well. With a very athletic jump, Leia saves the day becoming the active heroine of the story. She grabs Wicket to bring him back to the ground and makes the troopers hit their heads on the tree branch—the bad guys always lose in animations for children, as in *Star Wars*.

5. In her memoir *The Princess Diarist*, with her usual humor, Fisher offers a deep commentary about nobody was concerned that wearing that “slave bikini” would have led to her objectification ever since: “Never have been asked if I thought I’d been objectified by silently wearing a gold bikini, while seated on a giant laughing cruel slug, while everyone chatted gaily around me?” (246).

However, the scene is drawn in unrealistic ways and the characters are sketched in bright colors typical of cartoons to erase the violence and exaggerate the Troopers' function as a comic relief. The background of these scenes is sketched using light lines and blurred colors that remind of one of the principles adopted by Disney's animation: the background looks static and faded to highlight the characters and their presence. By doing so, Leia's actions visually pop up, appearing even more heroic and helping to emphasize her central role in this re-adapted mythical storytelling. In this kind of faded sketching style, "subtle tones (close in value) behind the figures and along the 'path of action' can suggest much while showing very little" (Thomas and Johnston 248), a technique that was adopted in the classic animated films *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), for example. Although this oneiric 2D animation style, which runs throughout the series, evokes very traditional Princess stories, in *Forces of Destiny* it has the function of supporting the narrative to remodel the Princess as a character with her own agency. By doing so, this kind of animation style contributes to visually supporting the ideological shifts that the Princess trope is undergoing in the series and reinforces the idea that the medium used to portray myths also influences how the mythological storytelling is delivered. At the same time, however, an animation style that juxtaposes the characters with a slightly out-of-focus background conveys the idea that the new, empowered adaptation of the Princess trope is viable only in fantasy environments that remind the audience of fairy tales, relegating it to the myth rather than to "the real world."

Despite recognizing the Empire as the enemy, after the battle of Endor Leia shows kindness to the Stormtroopers in "An Imperial Feast" (season 1, episode 14). In this episode, the Ewoks are shown preparing a banquet where the main course about to be cooked is... the Stormtroopers. Han and Chewie cheerily stand by without intervening while wondering whether they "should let them" (0:42) cook the Imperials. The camera is placed in front of Han and Chewie so the audience does not see Leia approaching the characters from the back. The use of this staging choice has the effect of helping subvert the expected course of the narration, and therefore, it supports the Princess character's role as a disruptor of negative masculine behavior represented by Han and Chewie's idleness.

Chewie and Han are drawn from the back, while the camera faces Leia, whose multiple quick looks of disapproval to both of them reaffirm her leadership role. The choice of perspective and her central position in the frame indicates Leia's dominance of the scene as she reminds Han

that they “must treat the enemy fairly” (1:01) and continues with her not-so-accidentally slapping of a tree branch on Han’s face to make her point (Figure 7). The use of a slapping branch on a character’s face is an action common in cartoons used primarily to make the audience laugh, as this episode reiterates. In addition, this funny interlude has the narrative function also of reminding audiences—especially older ones—of the bickering between Leia and Han. However, at the same time, this seemingly innocent animation choice also possibly reveals a deeper meaning that hints at Leia metaphorically slapping patriarchy in the face and contributing to further establish the Princess character as a disruptor of toxic male behaviors. This helps further construct the argument that *Forces of Destiny* uses seemingly conventional animated techniques to ideologically challenge the old gender tropes built around the Princess character.

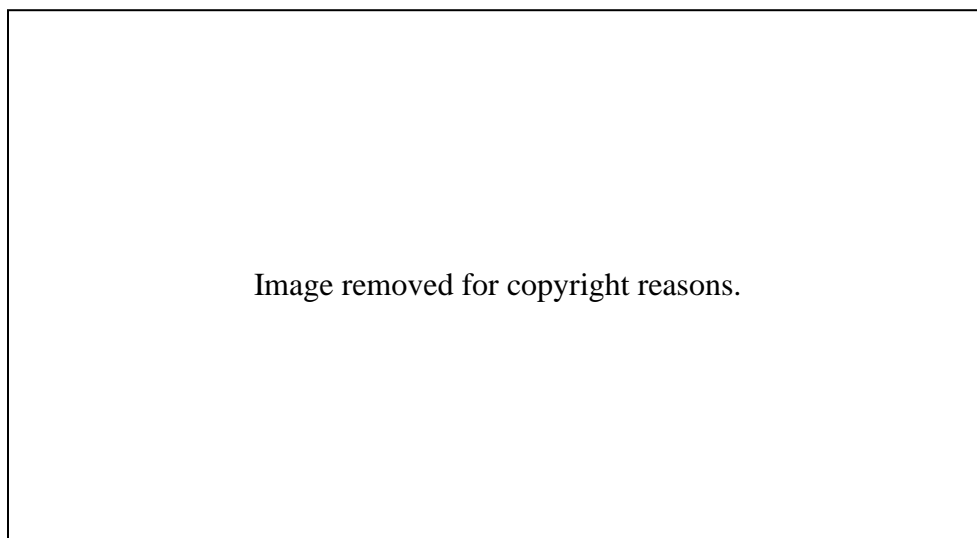


Fig. 3.1. Han Solo (right) get slapped in the face by a branch bent by Leia (off-camera).
“An Imperial Feast” (*Forces of Destiny*, season 1, episode 14).

This sequence also introduces Leia’s main action block in the episode where she proceeds to save the Stormtroopers from being cannibalized by the Ewoks. This scene has Leia stand up assertively while at the same time repackaging the image of Princesses like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty from fairy tales as inherently good-hearted and helpers of lesser creatures. This messaging shows how younger audiences continue to be exposed to traditional feminine images through superficially more proactive roles. And like Cinderella, Leia gets a pretty, feminine dress from the Ewoks as a reward for being good in exchange for her combat outfit. This juxtaposition of *Star Wars* Princesses with feminine clothing shows Disney’s savvy marketing strategy: the “Endor” Leia doll includes the dress along with her soldier camouflage suit to add a “girlier”

option to the doll line, which mainly features work suits, to attract more customers used to playing with traditional “feminine” toys.

But Leia’s embodiment of the Princess trope also positively embraces an updated version of femininity, even though it seems an *ad hoc* choice to heighten the audience’s interest in the show. In “Bounty of Trouble” (season 1, episode 8), she shows how the new Princess is one of the people, like Disney’s Tiana. When she meets Sabine Wren on Tatooine to exchange Imperial data for the Rebellion, she refuses the hierarchy of titles because she thinks everyone is equal in fighting the Empire.⁶ The scene that best conveys this idea is the montage of the closing scene and its animation style, which is consistent with animated forms producing “a non-regulatory or subversive space by virtue of [their] very artifice” (Wells 16). The two characters are shown in a medium shot opposing each other to signify equality. In this scene, the animation adopts a mechanic of opposing movements to convey dramatically the sense of sisterhood between Leia and Sabine—another indication of the use of animated techniques in *Forces of Destiny* to emphasize the modern Princess as a democratized heroine who is equal to commoners. Leia and Sabine are sketched to appear running in different directions. Although the movement seemingly suggests separation, this animation style works by juxtaposition to convey the idea that the characters are united by a same cause. The concept is reinforced as Sabine says, “Leia, you keep fighting in the inside, I will keep fighting from the outside,” and Leia replies, “I hope one day we’ll fight together” (2:21-2:22). The cartoon movement techniques used in this episode help support the ideological re-writing of the Princess character by removing her aristocratic unattainability and, thus, the cultural expectations shaping the Princess’s traditional representation.

Aligning with “girl power” philosophy, *Forces of Destiny* is also the first in the *Star Wars* official canon to show Leia finally wielding a lightsaber (“Traps and Tribulation,” season 2, episode 14). It is empowering to see Leia at ease with the Jedi’s signature weapon, and it is perhaps an “Easter Egg” anticipation of *The Rise of Skywalker*. This lightsaber wielding sequence is designed to reinforce the ideological ambiguity and contradictions of the Princess in the larger male-centric *Star Wars* universe. Most of the shots in this episode focus on Luke as the action hero who actively confronts the giant monster Gorax. Leia, who is kept in the background trying

6. Sabine Wren is a female Mandalorian warrior who joined the early Rebellion against the Empire. She is one of the protagonists of the animated series *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014-2018).

cut the ropes of a trap to help neutralize the monster, appears secondary along with the Ewoks. Luke then throws his lightsaber at Leia, who in a dexterous swing capably cuts the rope and comments that “it’s better than a spear” (1:48). Seeing her enjoyment at using the weapon, Luke is quick to remind her in a humorous tone to give it back (Figure 8)— she has to symbolically surrender again the male power acquired. This scene represents the contradictions Leia embodies within a franchise where Lucas made the Force mainly a man’s business. In *Forces of Destiny*, wielding a lightsaber is a means to an end rather than an epiphany or turning point in Leia’s story: it fails to show her true potential as a Force sensitive, which would have posed her on the same level as Luke. In *The Return of the Jedi* Luke made it clear that his sister Leia shared his same powers because “the Force is strong in [their] family.” She can use these abilities to an extent—she can sense Luke’s feelings at times and their sibling connection in *The Return of the Jedi*, but her powers were never explored as part of her identity.⁷

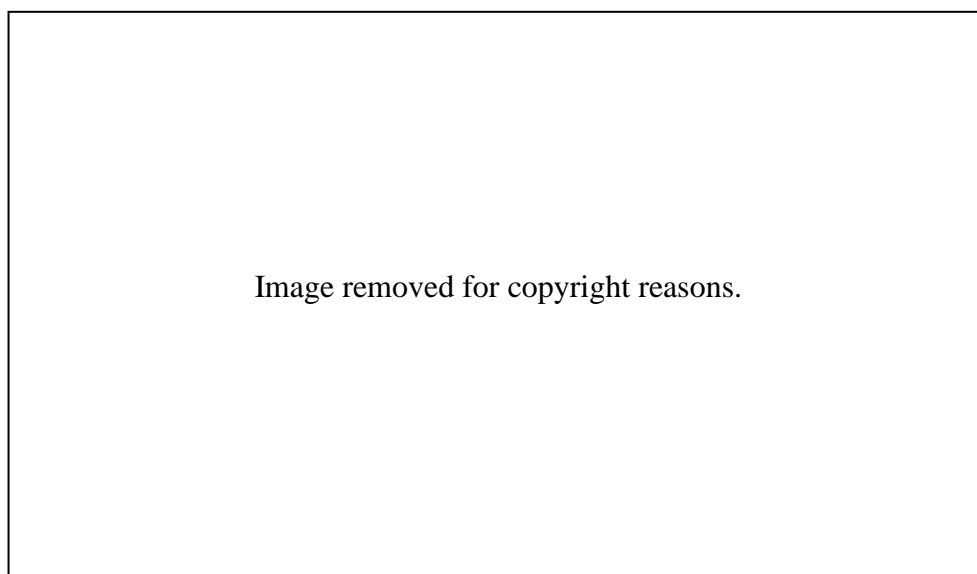


Fig. 3.2. Luke tells Leia (right) to give him back his lightsaber. “Traps and Tribulation” (*Forces of Destiny*, season 2, episode 14).

In the new Disney trilogy Leia is portrayed as a capable General of the Resistance and a leader of freedom, abandoning formally the gendered title of “Princess.” Her “Force powers were indisputable after *The Last Jedi* [...], when she was blasted into the cold waste of space, and by

7. Leia’s refusal to use her powers over the years is explained *a posteriori* in *The Rise of Skywalker* through flashbacks. Danielle Burgos writes that, because of Carrie Fisher’s passing, this was a necessary canonic explanation needed for her storyline resolution in *The Rise of Skywalker*.

sheer instinct guided herself back to safety” (Burgos par. 6).⁸ In the Expanded Universe tie-in novels, made non-canonical after Disney’s acquisition of the franchise, Leia was primarily portrayed as a politician, but she did complete her Jedi training under Luke’s guidance. Like *Forces of Destiny*, *The Rise of Skywalker* tries to re-integrate this storyline into Leia’s character *a posteriori*. In the movie Leia is also shown as a Jedi Master with her own lightsaber. This rightfully places her within the Jedi legacy, confirming Disney’s strong statement that power and heroism are not exclusively male anymore and that the “traditional Princess” is a thing of the past. However, at the same time, the extent to which this innovation revolutionizes the reading of Leia is unconvincing because the choice serves mostly to fulfill the fans’ long-time wish to see her a Jedi. This sentiment is summarized under the “Traps and Tribulations” YouTube video by the viewer sithlordsoup: “Finally, Leia canonically wielding a lightsaber.”

Most importantly, the greatness of Leia’s Force sensitivity is further confirmed in *The Rise of Skywalker* in a scene made mostly of archival footage of Carrie Fisher. This scene exemplifies the importance of Leia passing on Jedi knowledge to the next generation, but in passing it on to *Rey*, the film provides a feminist revision of the traditionally masculine pursuit of instruction. While training *Rey* in the forest after Luke’s initial lessons, Leia is seen holding Luke’s lightsaber and symbolically handing it on to *Rey*. She is teaching the girl how to complete an impossible warrior trial designed to test her Jedi abilities. It is also implied that under Leia’s guidance, not Luke’s, *Rey* is learning the exceptional skill to connect with the dead Jedi, a key technique that will cause Palpatine’s demise later in the movie. Leia’s wise, all-powerful role abandons the Princess trope to represent a heroine at the mature stage of her journey: “In many primitive societies, old women are specialists in those critical moments when the designs of culture are threatened by a breakthrough of nature—birth, illness, and death—moments when we are reminded of our animal origins and human limits” (Meyerhof 75). Leia is akin to the wise woman of the myth who leads *Rey* and her community in the moments when they need her the most. Her interactions with *Rey* help the young woman shape the end of her journey: Leia is the reassuring, yet challenging, voice that drives *Rey* to both believe in herself and to do better,

8. Burgos also continues to explain how Leia’s refusal to use the Force was to preserve her role as a fair political leader because “in *Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge–Black Spire*, a canon book following *Last Jedi*, it’s even addressed why Leia never used the Force before—her mastery over it was so great she actively suppressed it to avoid accidentally influencing the democratic process” (par. 6).

whereas Luke is openly scared of the young woman's potential. Unlike Luke, Leia tells Rey to fully embrace herself by delivering lines such as: "never be afraid of who you are" and "nothing is impossible."

But Leia's powers never achieve complete fulfillment, indicating that both cinematic and animated adaptations of the mythos in *Star Wars* showcase the ambiguity of gender representation when attempting to re-write ideologically charged tropes such as the Princess one. Similar to *Forces of Destiny*, a brief flashback scene, told from Luke's perspective, shows that Leia did her Jedi training and had her own lightsaber. However, in the name of familial, patriarchal bonds, Leia decides to renounce a role as an active Jedi because of a vision of her son Ben turning to the Dark Side. Leia uses her powers to reach out to her son to turn him back to the Light Side. Unlike Luke, who uses the last of his powers to violently confront Kylo, Leia uses hers to redeem him, symbolically healing him and contributing to his rebirth as Ben Solo. According to Frankel, this scene is positive because "Leia's quest [...] parallels her brother's in the power of the feat and what it costs her" (*Star Wars and the Hero's Journey* 116), thus equalling Leia's heroic status to Luke's and "clearly show[ing] the character's influence on the storyline" (116). However, I would argue that this scene is controversial because Leia, only seen in the shadows, lies down on a bed while the camera follows her hand as a metaphor for her life leaving her body (Figure 9). This scene depicts Leia's symbolic self-sacrifice to preserve the male family bloodline, and her death fulfills the archetypical regenerating powers of the heroine/wise woman of the Campbellian myth at the end of her life cycle. This representation also suggests that American culture consistently carries forward the patriarchal, male-centric views associated with older women: "To the patriarchy, death is the cutoff to ambition and rule, the final 'debt' that robs men of all they possess. Thus they cringe from the crone, who is associated with great age, entropy, death, and even doomsday" (Frankel, *From Girl to Goddess* 288).

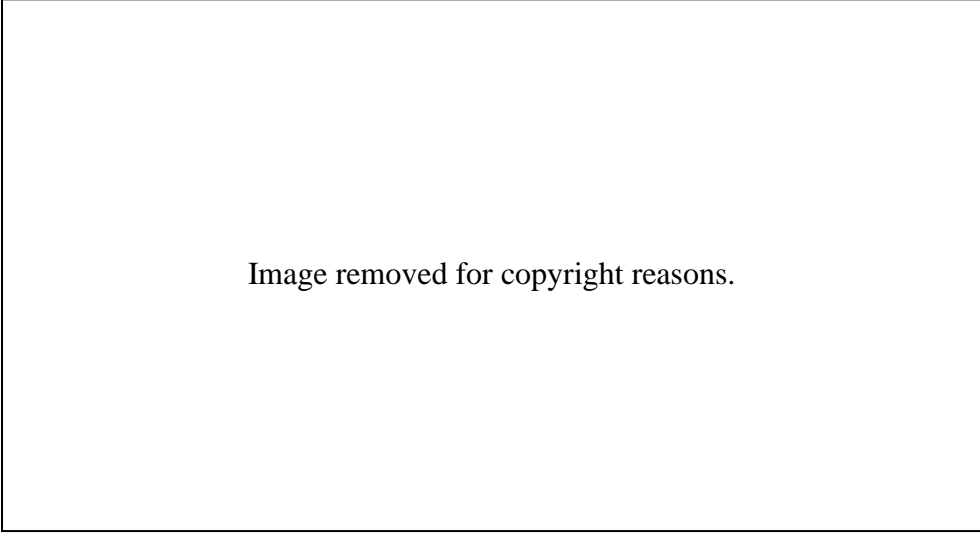


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Fig. 3.3. Leia's death. *The Rise of Skywalker*.

The seemingly innocent lightsaber-wielding scene in *Forces of Destiny* summarizes Leia's contradictory narrative arc in the franchise and how the adaptation of myth in *Star Wars* continues to tend toward contradictory renewals, thus making myth adaptations a complex hub for controversial cultural production: it's okay to be an emancipated (Disney) Princess, but not too much for the sake of the traditionally male-centric Jedi Order, which, as a new generation of *Star Wars* women, Rey seems to challenge. After Leia's passing in *The Rise of Skywalker*, Luke's ghost appears to Rey on Ach-To and gives her Leia's lightsaber, which she symbolically surrendered as a symbolic renouncement of her Jedi powers. Luke tells Rey that Leia "had sensed the death of her son at the end of her Jedi path. She surrendered her saber to me and said that one day, it would be picked up again by someone who would finish her journey. A thousand generations live in you now. But this is your fight." (1:33:16-1:33:39). This statement indicates that the generation of heroines to which Leia belongs was unable to achieve the full empowerment they deserve, and it is now the duty of Rey's generation to complete that path.

3.4 Padmé Amidala

Padmé, Luke and Leia's mother, Queen of Naboo and later senator of the Old Republic, further exemplifies the contradictory elements of the modern Princess tropes adopted by Disney to re-write mythical adaptations within the franchise. While Frankel sees her as the positive epitome of the 1990s feminist "girl power," a successful woman who can have both a career and love (*Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism*, 44), according to Merlock and Merlock Jackson, Padmé loses all the strength she showed in *The Phantom Menace* (85-86) in later movies. Her

narrative arc turns from the story of a woman who stands up against injustice to a woman in a complicated love story with Anakin Skywalker: “an abused, broken woman [...]. Similar in type to Ophelia and Jocasta, facing pregnancy, betrayal, and defeat, perhaps she even represents the post-1970s backlash against feminism” (Frankel, *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism* 85). Bowman agrees, writing that “her importance [...] can be seen as being reduced to the births” (165) of the twins. Padmé’s intelligence is also undermined as the tragic, inconsistent heroine of a bad romance.⁹ This includes her denial of Anakin’s murderous tendencies despite the evidence that he slaughtered the Tusken Raiders on Tatooine and the children in the Jedi Temple, followed by her willingness to stay with him. She also shows increasing passivity and reliance on Anakin’s lack of judgement which leads her to be almost strangled by Anakin while heavily pregnant and, finally, her story concludes with death as a weak woman who “lost the will to live” after childbirth.¹⁰ Padmé is the epitome of the Princess victim. She shows the effects of capitalism as “patriarchy’s latest expression” (Von Werlhof 16) that expropriates women from the “results of their labor, from their children, and from their vital powers” (24).

Like Leia’s bikini, Padmé’s attire in the prequels has been deemed anti-feminist. Her elaborate attire becomes a symbol of passivity and womanly restraint because it often limits her movements, while marking her as royalty. This further indicates the repackaging of the Princess trope in the *Star Wars* saga—even though in *The Clone Wars* Padmé is often “seen fighting for the needs of those living without basic necessities” (Frankel, *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism* 89). In *Forces of Destiny*, she takes charge as a signature of the positive aspects of the modern Princess, and her clothing represents this change. The choice of animating Padmé with her combat suits signifies giving her more depth as a proactive character, and some of the animation choices used to represent her offer insight about the re-writing of myths. Her outfits in the series, which appeared in the prequel trilogy, are sketched with “no frills,” opting for simple lines and solid colors—white, brown and black—to convey the idea that her royal status is not necessarily associated with feminine clothes (Figure 10). These outfits symbolize Padmé taking charge of her story in *Forces of Destiny* as a positive evolution of the modern Princess while

9. See Cavelos, “Stop Her, She’s Got a Gun!” and Frankel, *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism*.

10. This line is delivered by the medical droid helping Padmé deliver her twins in *The Revenge of the Sith*.

conveying to young audiences the alleged equality of women in the labor force in multinational capital systems. This is another example of the ways in which the visual tools of the animated medium are used to support the dismantling of the traditional Princess story in *Star Wars*.

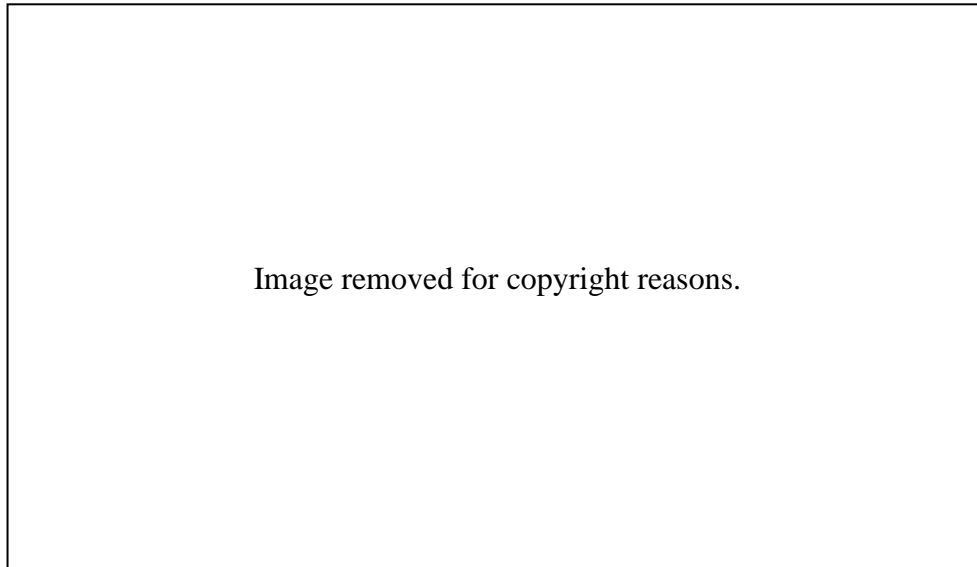


Fig. 3.4. Padmé (right) wears a comfortable combat suit like the Jedi Apprentice Ahsoka Tano (left). “The Imposter Inside” (*Forces of Destiny*, season 1, episode 6).

This approach is replicated in “The Starfighter Stunt” (season 1, episode 13), where Padmé pairs up with Ahsoka to learn space combat. The episode uses camera shots that replicate a typical *Star Wars* space scene to make the point that the female protagonists are like the male heroes of the saga—a similar space scene is present in *The Revenge of the Sith* featuring Anakin and Obi-Wan. This is conveyed in the animation of this episode particularly by the use of fast timing. Timing—how long the action takes in animation—is central to tell characters’ story because “every action, whether big or small, is described by speed and interprets someone’s current state of mind” (Pluralsight par. 6). The episode alternates a quick montage of Ahsoka and Padmé framed in their starship cockpits with action shots of a malfunctioning droid that starts targeting them. The use of fast timing impacts how Padmé’s story is told. This animation choice helps emphasize her resourcefulness and ability to react and to face difficult situations, thus supporting the re-writing of the Princess character as a modern heroine. She takes charge and “outsmarts” the droid by hiding in debris and then blowing it up. Padmé is depicted as empowered in this episode. Abandoning her restraining senatorial dresses for a spacesuit, she is

represented as a confident, capable fighter and pilot, resembling Disney’s Merida in *Brave*, who embraces her warrior spirit rather than being a passive Princess (Figure 11). The episode also offers the message to young audiences that women need to support one another: the episode concludes with Ahsoka complimenting Padmé for her good instincts—a vital battle skill for the Jedi.

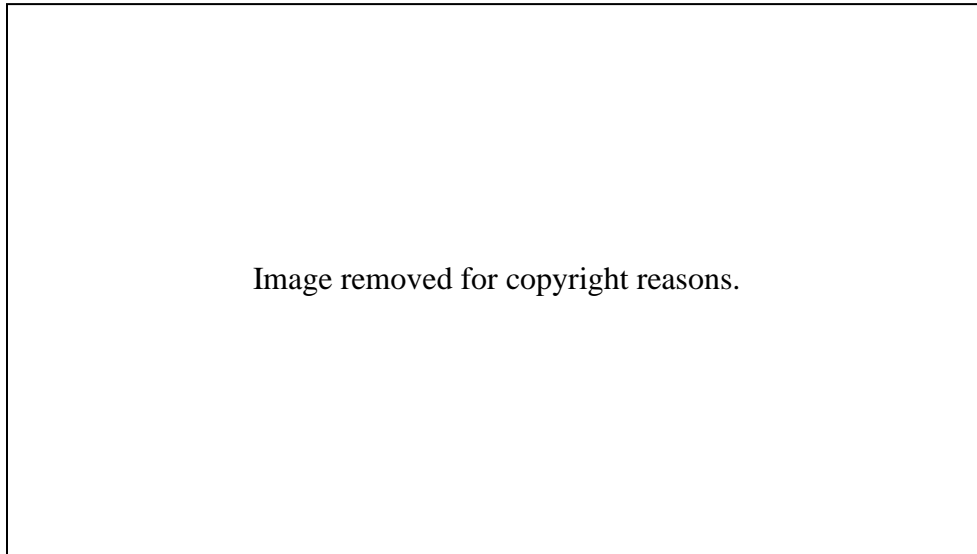


Fig. 3.5. Padmé wearing a Naboo pilot suit and piloting a combat starship. “The Starfighter Stunt” (*Forces of Destiny*, season 1, episode 13).

Forces of Destiny tries to depict Padmé as more than Anakin’s objectified love interest, a trope which is put on hold in “Unexpected Company” (season 2, episode 2). While on a mission with Anakin and Ahsoka, Padmé’s ship is attacked by the separatist blockade. Padmé takes charge, instructing Anakin and Ahsoka what to do and operating the ship’s weapons. Ahsoka eventually pilots the ship to safety, but the episode fails to be fully empowering. Padmé needs to be saved in the end by Anakin—after a sudden black screen full of smoke, a common visual cue to convey suspense in both cinema and animation. He is seen embracing her, worrying for her safety as he tells her, “I’ve got you” (1:45). As in other episodes of the series, Padmé continues to inhabit the contradictory space of the modern Princess, between action heroine and passive damsel in distress who reinforces gender stereotypes, not dissimilar from Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White*.¹¹

11. The same “passive Princess” narrative is repeated in “The Imposter Inside,” (*Forces of Destiny*, season 1, episode 6) which echoes a scene in the film *The Attack of the Clones* where

“Monster Misunderstanding” (season 3, episode 10), set around the time of *The Phantom Menace*, is another example of the ambiguity of contemporary mythical representations. Padmé is still Queen of Naboo in this episode, the most “Princessy” one of the series. It shows her royalty and her alleged Princess qualities such as keeping justice and being kind to innocent creatures, like Leia in “Ewok Escape.” The fast-paced montage technique adopted in the animation of this episode suggests her active role as a leader. When a Sando Aqua monster mother attacks the storage where her baby is located, Padmé asks her guards how they usually handle these monsters, but they do not know. She, then, orders the guards around to investigate the issue and the most important scene of the episode shows her at the centre of the frame shooting the chains to free the Sando Aqua monster’s baby from the poachers who want to kidnap it. Symbolically indicating that the patriarchal system does not have all the answers, this scene has Padmé take charge and save the baby. She asks the guards to arrest the poachers, saying, “Sometimes the best solution isn’t the most obvious one” (1:52), a lesson encouraging young children to think outside of the box.

While *Forces of Destiny* reworks Padmé’s modern Princess trope through positive teachings for young viewers, she is only featured in four episodes out of the 32 that aired over two seasons, making her a secondary character compared to Leia and Rey. This suggests that Padmé may be included in the series to offer an alternative to the oppressed version of this character in the prequels, but does not achieve a full Princess revamp, thus embodying well the contradictory ideology of gender representation in *Star Wars*. Despite her positioning in the background of the series, Padmé is featured as one of the prominent *Forces of Destiny* dolls in part to honor her role in the prequels, and in part for marketing the “revamped” Princess rhetoric further. Although some animation techniques adopted in the series support Padmé’s character development as an independent heroine, *Forces of Destiny* aligns with the hegemonic use of animation as a marketing tool for doll sales and, in general, it is similar to the commodifying modes of cultural production associated with other *Star Wars* animations and products.

Anakin saves Padmé in her bedchambers from an assassination attempt, except that this time it is Ahsoka who saves her; unlike the movie, where she plays bait, Padmé contributes to fighting the killer back, actively cooperating with Ahsoka.

3.5 Rey

The ideologically ambiguous adaptation of the Princess trope continues with Rey, the first “Princess non-Princess” in *Star Wars*. As described in the previous chapter, Rey marks Disney’s attempt to discard the elitist image associated with the lead *Star Wars* female characters.

However, like her predecessors, a democratized repackaging does not resolve the contradictions of the gendered representations of *Star Wars* and relies again on a traditional Princess model as a paradigm for gender portrayal. As Frankel puts it: “Rey is [...] not the royal child brought up in secret like Luke and Leia or the Force-created child of prophecy like Anakin. For the first time in the films, the Force could belong to anyone” (*Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism* 183). This analysis may be in part questioned after the dramatic revelation that Rey is in fact the daughter of one of Palpatine’s imperfect clones in *The Rise of Skywalker* and its novelization. Ultimately, she is the legitimate heiress to the Imperial throne, thus suggesting that *Star Wars* women never truly escape royalty. However, unlike Leia, who pretends to be an everywoman, Rey is still one of the people, the epitome of a working-class girl; an orphan on the sandy planet Jakku, a “completely self-sufficient” (163) scavenger, she is a nobody for most of her life—as Kylo Ren harshly remarks in *The Last Jedi*.

As addressed in the previous chapter, Rey is an “anti-chosen one” on a path to become a hero defined by her own choices rather than by her dark Sith heritage, as symbolically indicated by her decision to take on the title Skywalker at the end of *The Rise of Skywalker*. While Disney’s intertextual re-telling of old stories is a well-known strategy for rebooting franchises, some argue that the problem with Rey is that she is too much, too soon: a street-smart Wonder Woman who knows how to pilot, fix things, and use the Force without training, while Luke realistically seems a lost boy caught up in galactic history. However, scholars such as Koushik and Reed perhaps do not focus on Rey’s positive empowered, pro-active qualities when they comment too simplistically that “one cannot expect [Rey] to function well when she has been copied and pasted into a story that was made for a man and has centuries of historical baggage associated with it regarding traditional gender roles” (7). Although Rey’s story undoubtedly owes much to Luke’s—she unwittingly incurs the ire of a galactic (fascist) superpower, and then discovers her Force sensitivity—she embodies the “true American” quality of resourcefulness.

This skill emerges through Rey’s action-packed scenes in *Forces of Destiny*. In “Sands of Jakku” (season 1, episode 1), Rey survives the dangers of the desert with BB-8 because of her

ability to improvise. The preferred animation movement adopted in this episode is horizontal, having Rey cover lots of ground back and forth as a way to emphasize her effortless physical skills. This technique, like many of the visual choices in this animated series, further challenges the outdated ideologies of the Princess character. Most of the episode consists of a quick montage of her running and using her staff skills to escape a junk-feeding nightwatcher worm who wants to eat BB-8 (Figure 12). This sequence may be read as Rey offering a positive behavioral model for children and advocating for women to stand up and affirm their place in society as skilled, independent individuals. However, the episode concludes with alternating medium frames of Rey's smiling face and of the monster's eyes, a common visual cue in both animations and film to indicate connection among characters. This exchange signals that Rey understands that the creature only chased BB-8 because it was hungry, so she feeds scrap metals to the monster. This generous act, which copies Leia and Padmé's narratives in *Forces of Destiny*, repeats the leitmotif that a Princess's core features must be not to hold grudges and to be selfless. Rey's traits as a more traditional Princess coexisting with her action heroine ones provide further evidence that *Star Wars* animation repeats mythical adaptations where women's representations, as in the films, continue to be ideologically regressive and controversial.

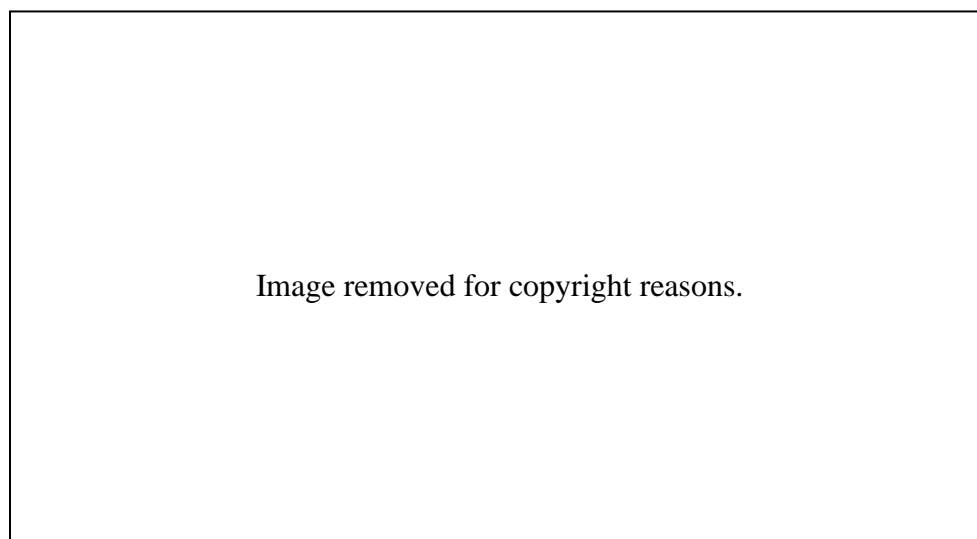


Fig. 3.6. Rey and BB-8 (left) run away from a sand monster. "Sands of Jakku" (*Forces of Destiny*, season 1, episode 1)

In contemporary media, representations of "strong" women reveal "a still male-dominant society's own contradictory responses to women's demands for equal treatment, equal pay, and

equal status” (Byerly and Ross 26). Rey represents this divide by embodying active skills to keep up with the men as a post-feminist character reclaiming her place in a male-centric commercialized franchise. In “BB-8 Bandits” (season 1, episode 2), Rey shows an “Anakin-like” dexterity when winning a speeder race with the scavenger Teedo. In “Tracker Trouble” (season 1, episode 10), she embodies the new Princess’s value of good teamwork, similar to Padmé in “Unexpected Company,” while proving herself as capable as Han Solo and Chewbacca. Rey finds a bomb on the Millennium Falcon, and she suggests to Chewie that the only way to survive is to throw the device into space. While teamwork is not anti-empowerment per se, Rey’s reaction may be problematic because instead of taking credit for saving the ship she attributes the success to her supportive role to the Wookiee. In the last scene of the episode, as she sits in the co-pilot seat next to Han, she is framed looking back at her companions Chewie and Finn, saying, “We make a good team!” (2:08). The scene highlights Rey as a supportive role rather than a leader. Acquiring a new proactive role is hard to accomplish for women in capitalist societies when they are still confined to traditional roles to supporting male characters. This is problematic because it reinforces the idea that contemporary mythical adaptations remain fundamentally traditional in many aspects. The ambiguity of these adaptations indicates indecisiveness about challenging the *status quo* established by the traditional Princess’s “domesticated” qualities of as a paradigm for American women’s desired traits.

However, not all is negative in Rey’s portrayal of the new Princess trope. She paradoxically challenges the show’s stance on teamwork in “Happabore Hazard” (season 1, episode 15). She seems to fully embody again pro-feminist sentiments of self-reliance when Unkar bluntly tells her that she will never be able to retrieve a ship for him “because it is no job for [a girl]” (0:30), and because she has no friends to help her. The camera is positioned in a low angle shot to indicate Unkar’s overpowering Rey, though she does not look intimidated. A big alien animal is sitting on the ship in the desert, and this makes the ship’s retrieval even more complicated. Rey replies that she will prove him wrong, and she does so as a real modern (Disney) Princess by helping the animal breathe better. In return, the beast helps her carry the ship back to the bazaar, much to Unkar’s surprise. While Rey tells him sarcastically that she has found a new animal friend, the motivation behind Rey’s action is selfish: she wants to retrieve the ship and get rations from Unkar (Figure 13).

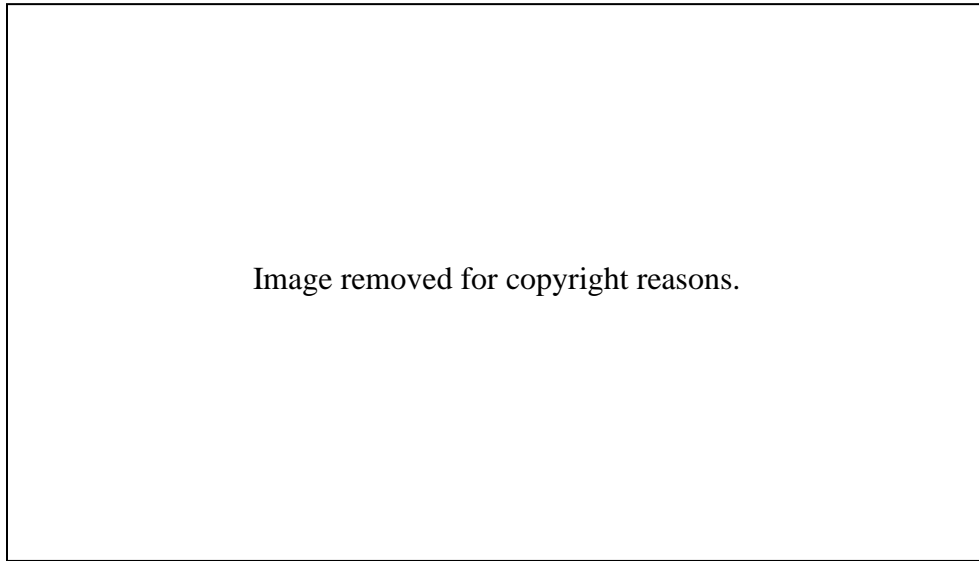


Fig. 3.7. Rey demanding her payment from Unkar and her new animal friend in the background.
“Happabore Hazard” (*Forces of Destiny*, season 1, episode 15).

This may be one of the few moments in *Forces of Destiny* where the mold of the Princess trope as a perfect, utterly selfless woman is challenged to make way for a more realistic depictions of a woman who tries to survive on a hostile planet using the mechanics of contemporary capitalism to her advantage—the exploitation of biological life for personal gain through “the transformation of all labor, all life [...] into capital” (Von Werlhof 16). Unlike Leia and Padmé, who are throughout represented as stoic versions of the Princess’s caretaker role, Rey more realistically depicts a fundamentally good character who helps others while helping herself in practical ways. She uses capitalist mechanics when she sees fit to fight the oppressions of the patriarchal system endured on Jakku. Therefore, she offers the potential messaging to young girls that if they are unable to defeat the system, they must use it for their own gain, while boys may see this representation in line with that of their favorite male action heroes in the saga, and thus, they could learn to see women as leaders and equals from a young age. An argument could be made, however, about how children of different ethnicities could fail to fully benefit from the same positive messaging because a lack of ethnic diversity in the *Forces of Destiny* characters, who are mainly white or Othered aliens. By not seeing themselves represented in the cartoon, these children may not absorb the same egalitarian messaging that could appear clearer to Caucasian children. This gap reflects the lack of diversity in major *Star Wars* productions as a whole—*The Mandalorian* being perhaps a first step towards change, as we will see in Chapter 4.

Despite the inability to ideologically challenge gender stereotypes for all young audiences, on a more practical level, Rey and *Forces of Destiny* indicate the use of animation and its conventionalities as vectors for interpreting real world issues and deeply engaging with “conventional notions about femininity and masculinity [that] may work to reframe primary cultural texts that appear to question the very definition of girlhood” (Van Fuqua 207).

These forward-thinking shifts and contradictions in the female characters of *Forces of Destiny* can be contextualized within Disney’s historical role as a center of American cultural production that has both retained and challenged the social *status quo* over the years. According to Douglas Brode, Disney’s reworking of fairy tales in its animated movies has coincided since the beginning with moments in American history when women’s social roles underwent major shifts and disruptions (*Multiculturalism and the Mouse* 171). Disney’s new *Star Wars* stories have done exactly that. Torn between innovation and traditional mythical Princess roles, the female characters in the new trilogy and *Forces of Destiny* express in a more direct manner the need for social change advocated by the women’s movement since the 1960s. In recent years, women in the United States and worldwide have found themselves at the center of a new wave of cultural discourses supporting social empowerment and equality both in public and private life. In 2017, the scandal involving Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, who sexually assaulted high-profile women in the entertainment industry, led to the MeToo movement, which advocates for people, and women in particular, to share their experiences of sexual abuse and harassment committed by prominent individuals, and to the TimesUp movement, that advocates for a safe, equal and fair workspace for women.

Disney’s role in producing *Forces of Destiny* within the revamp of the larger *Star Wars* franchise has confirmed once more the company’s function as the creator and spreader of cultural myths. While Disney has not directly responded to women’s contemporary social movements through *Star Wars*, it has made a point to echo more progressive stances on women’s representations in its media products, albeit imperfectly as seen in the ambivalent nature of *Forces of Destiny* and its characters. As Brode writes, the company has always responded to women’s conditions since the beginning of the feminist movement:

Women can, Disney early on insisted (and Germaine Greer later reaffirmed in *The Female Eunuch*), have it both ways, though only if, like Disney’s role-model characters, they firmly believe in themselves—as individuals and as women. Since each incarnation offers

a unique variation on this theme, the essential similarity implies, to paraphrase Joseph Campbell, that what we encounter is the heroine with a thousand faces. This concept lived on, long after Disney's death, in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998). (171)

However, Brode's analysis does not address the complexity and, often ambiguity, that the Disney's heroines embody. As demonstrated by the analysis of Leia, Padmé and Rey, this contemporary Disney heroine is far from having a "thousand faces" as traditional Campbellian heroes do. Disney's allusive use of animation in *Forces of Destiny* to represent the Princess trope has indeed helped the company place itself once again within the conversation about gender and representation in American popular culture. However, its mythical adaptation of femininity is perhaps comparable to the ancient depiction of Janus bifrons, the Roman God of opposites: in American culture womanhood seems characterized by two complementary, yet dichotomous, ideological sides that cater two constructed dimensions of femininity—the sweet, loving Princess on one side and the independent action heroine on the other side.

Not only does this dichotomy signify the hegemonic nature of commercialized media, but it is rooted in the way the animated medium brings the renewed Princess trope to life in the series. As analyzed in this chapter, the Princess's progressive qualities are conveyed through certain animation techniques and styles (use of colors, characters' movements, action build-ups) to support the re-writing of the trope. However, the conventional use of these well-established techniques does not push, reinvent or experiment with the animated medium itself. Even though the series contributes to building a *Star Wars* universe where women can be finally seen as leaders, in *Forces of Destiny* the original "anarchic," disruptive nature of animation seems to be in part lost. It does not gesture strongly towards new possible realities for the modern version of the Princess character, but towards an ideologically ambivalent re-writing. If we read this dichotomous outcome through my initial hypothesis that the re-writing of contemporary mythical storytelling is deeply influenced by the capabilities of contemporary media, we can find that a lack of ideologically challenging adaptations corresponds to a lack in exploiting the potentialities of animation itself. Regardless, even though it is at times contradictory, Disney's mythical representations also evolve toward new directions that contribute to the re-distribution of myths that offer complex ideas about gender to younger and older audiences.

3.6 The *Forces of Destiny* Princess Dolls

By bringing the *Star Wars* characters “to life,” the *Forces of Destiny* dolls, produced by Hasbro, offer young audiences an outlet parallel to the animated series to engage through play with the mythological adaptations of *Star Wars*. The result for Disney, on one hand, is to further democratize the image of the modern Princess-action heroine and, on the other hand, to replicate her ambiguous mythical re-writing in the *Forces of Destiny* doll line by turning myth into a consumer experience. These implications highlight the ideological connection between Disney’s animated series and its commodity intertexts that target primarily young female children. Because toys are embodiments and reproductions of real or fantasy worlds as animated media products are, the dolls become intertextual extensions of the *Star Wars* franchise as ideological signifiers of the characters they represent. The dolls (Figure 14), a product specifically designed for female children’s consumption, are a further example of Disney’s commercializing push as a global producer of culture that offers contrasting ideas about gender representations through toys.

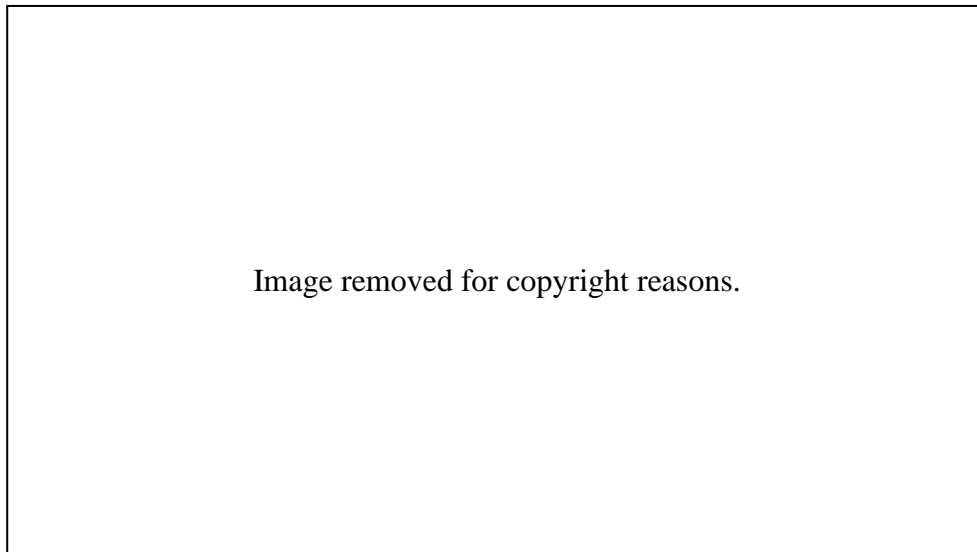


Fig. 3.8. From the left, some of the *Forces of Destiny* dolls: Sabine Wren, Jyn Erso, Rey (*The Last Jedi* version), Rey (*The Force Awakens* version), Leia (*The Empire Strikes Back* version) and Leia (*The Return of the Jedi* version). Image courtesy of Blue Ducky.

Disney’s signature strategy has always been to develop a strong relation between *ad hoc* promotional goods and its media products to both expand the profits of the company and to give audiences multiple ways of engaging with Disney stories, thus turning the act of buying themed products into an integral part of the storytelling experience. Mickey Mouse’s success in the 1930s

was due to the creation for the first time of merchandise which could redirect audiences to related cinematic products:

Although these transmedia opportunities were seen as objects that could promote the Disney characters, the means for engagement were the stories themselves. Media such as radio and television were initially viewed by Walt and Roy only as promotional opportunities. Over time, stories were created specifically for these media, and television in particular came to provide the public with a new way to relate to Disney characters.

(Lee and Madej 79)

The fact that *Forces of Destiny* was developed with a line of toys in mind follows this tradition as well as the original *Star Wars* films did—George Lucas was, after all, one of the first moviemakers after Disney to develop the concept of commercializing themed products that would keep the audiences in conversation with his movies.

The *Forces of Destiny* dolls, like the animated drawings, are designed with realistic, proportioned faces that resemble the good looks of the real actresses in the *Star Wars* movies. Like the casting choices for the actresses, the dolls' design supports the notion that classic beauty associated with a slender body type is still a prerequisite of the 21st century Princess action heroine. However, the makeup on the dolls' faces is minimal to produce a "girl-next-door," natural style. While the minimal makeup on the dolls' faces contrasts with sexualized (non-Disney) doll products such as Bratz, which rely on heavy makeup and revealing clothes to represent teenagers, the fundamental quality of these dolls is what they can do. They have bendable arms and legs to allow children to make the dolls strike poses and "move" as part of the playing experience. The way children can play with the dolls reinforces the idea that they are not to be passively held or dressed as traditional dolls are—they are not only to be looked at, but to be played with. Therefore, the toys echo the empowered image at the core of *Forces of Destiny* by advocating for an "active" play style for girls to replicate the characters' adventures in the series and make-believe to "become their own hero." YouTuber Jenny Nicholson's review of the series emphasizes the characters being presented as "strong and competent and good role models" (8:31-8:34) to also market the dolls this way. The process at play with the dolls is similar to what Joy Van Fuqua writes about the *PowererpuFF Girls* (1998-2019) animated series and its merchandise:

when it comes to consuming the commodity intertexts, this activity is explicitly gendered as female; the merchandise intertexts unequivocally construct young girls as the ideal consumers. In this way, the intertexts re-frame the girl-power message of the primary text in such a way as to equate consumerism with empowerment. (206)

The commercializing push is evident with the choice of characters selected to be in the *Forces of Destiny* doll line. The dolls show different versions of the most well-known *Star Wars* characters to tickle girls' imaginations and multiply the opportunities for commercialization. As the franchise leads, there are three versions of Leia, three of Rey, and one of Padmé. Ahsoka Tano, Jyn Erso and Sabine Wren—more niche characters featured in TV series and a spin-off movie—have only one version. Leia, for example, wears both the white *Empire Strikes Back* suit in “Beasts of Echo Base” (season 1, episode 5) and her iconic *A New Hope* white dress with “cinnamon bun-like” hairstyle in “Bounty of Trouble” (season 1, episode 8) which is sold alongside R2-D2. Disney's choice of mixing the image of the pretty Princess with an action-oriented heroine is also supported by the dolls' clothing options. The toys mainly come with practical, active clothing rather than the complex, more feminine gowns seen in other Disney and *Star Wars* movies. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Leia also has a third “Endor” version accompanied by an Ewok Wicket doll. Padmé does not wear her signature white combat suit, but only her Naboo pilot dress, because this would have created two products of the line that looked too much like Leia in *Empire Strikes Back* and, therefore, would have jeopardized future sales—why produce or buy two dolls that are practically the same in clothing and physical features? Rey, the most well-known to young children because of the recent movies, comes with all the practical outfits of *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*. The toys match the same clothes seen in the movies to help girls immediately recognize the characters and identify with them. As “feminist” dolls, the toys also make a point of not objectifying *Star Wars* women and positively encourage girls to wear practical clothing, finally rejecting the “Slave Leia” bikini era. These elements create a desire to buy the dolls using a well-known visual strategy that helps girls “be like Leia or Rey.” As Scott points out, “paratexts serve a gatekeeping function, greeting certain audiences and deterring others, and toys serve this function more forcefully than others” (142).

The Princess action-heroine's contradictory gender representation in *Forces of Destiny* highlights an equally ambiguous message for younger audiences. Like *Frozen* and *Moana*, the series and the dolls contribute to expanding traditional female gender roles while updating these

models to align with a time when women are more often seen in positions of leadership. This complicates the relationship between Disney products—the *Star Wars* re-branded ones in particular—and children’s understanding of ethics and gender roles. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that children’s beliefs are deeply influenced by cartoons, animation, and toys, which they identify with and see as reproductions of real-life social dynamics.¹² This fact, combined with the format of *Forces of Destiny* as a series of short web sketches secondary to the main *Star Wars* storylines, proves how the show is an *ad hoc* packaged product for inducing younger female consumers to buy the related merchandise and, therefore, making the exposure to mythical adaptations also a commodified experience. *Forces of Destiny* capitalizes on the new “girl empowerment” movement that wants to see female audiences finally acknowledged in the *Star Wars* franchise. The idea that girls have agency is expressed in the action-oriented sentences in the voiceover used in the doll ad that says they “can save the universe using Princess Leia’s quick thinking” (0:07-0:09), “help Rey save her friends by tapping into the power of the Force” (0:18-0:21) and “play out [their] own adventures” (Hasbro 0:21-0:23). At the same time, the dolls are a response to the bad publicity obtained by Disney in 2015 when there was limited merchandise of Rey available upon the release of *The Force Awakens*, despite the fact that she was the protagonist. The outrage of fans led to the #WheresRey social media movement asking for changes to Disney’s *Star Wars* products because Rey’s exclusion “*especially* doesn’t make sense in instances where Finn is included but Rey is not. Doing so reeks suspiciously of sexism” (Framke par.5). Darlena Chuna’s *Time* article about the lack of Rey toys and the #WheresRey movement summarizes well that children *need* inclusive representations in *Star Wars* merchandise because toys have the power to impact how children construct gender relations when they are older, although this position seems to be quite conventional:

Little girls need to see themselves as heroes. Little girls need to see that they can grow up to be powerful and good. Little girls deserve a chance to imagine strength and perseverance in their own gender. They deserve someone to look up to. Just as important,

12. For more information about the influence on children concerning the portrayal of gender in Disney movies see: England and Collier-Meek, “Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses;” Hine and England, “From the Sleeping Princess to the World-Saving Daughter of the Chief;” Coyne et al. “Pretty as a Princess,” and Kassay, “Barbie Princesses and *Star Wars* Clones.”

so do little boys. Little boys need to see that women are strong and fierce, and that women characters are just as magnetic as men characters. (par. 6-7)

This progressive form of commodification of the “strong woman” model to push capitalist accumulation in part challenges Suzanne Scott’s definition of merchandise as stronghold for traditional values, “their overwhelmingly conservative and hegemonic functionality” (139). However, as expressions of a fundamentally male-centric franchise that still capitalizes on the values of a patriarchal adaptation of myth, the dolls ultimately fail to be all-girl merchandise. The line also includes a furry Chewbacca and a Luke Skywalker, who were featured in minor roles in the series, as well as Kylo Ren, the villain of the new Rey-centric movies, who did not appear at all. This strategy could be interpreted in two ways: these paratexts could be produced to introduce young girls to the *Star Wars* universe at large, but also to attract and not completely alienate younger male audiences from purchasing them, thereby co-opting them into the *Forces of Destiny* marketing. This raises again questions about the gendered nature of *Star Wars* toys, which are always targeted to boys even when designed for girls. Both instances reinforce how in merchandise production what is “female” is commodified. Women are either being acknowledged as a target audience or not acknowledged at all. Nonetheless, *Forces of Destiny* and its merchandise show how the representation of myth in *Star Wars*, with its contradictions and complications, keep relying on the Disney Princess character to change gender meanings and turn a trite trope into the deliverer of new ideologies that provide us with insights into how American culture views gender.

Perhaps the key to understanding the contradictions in this fairy tale character that returns in *Star Wars* and its dolls lies in Maria Tatar’s words: “The refusal to remain silent becomes the hallmark of today’s new heroine [...]. Speech in the form of contradiction becomes their [the heroines’] tool, the way to reveal that timeless truths are in fact nothing but socially constructed and historically contingent fictions” (*The Heroine* 105). As seen in the saga’s adaptation of the American mythos and the Campbellian monomyth in the previous chapter, the Princess trope survives in different, more or less modern, embodiments that become functional to connect younger generations with mythical tales that tackle, perhaps imperfectly, obsolete representations of gender.

The inability to set a consistent vision about gender identity in American media and toys seems to suggest that America culture is divided about women’s social role. In the examples

analyzed in this chapter women seem to be perceived, on the one hand, as “Disney Princesses,” thus indicating that American still constructs gender ideology around qualities such as good heartedness and supporting others as it was expected from heroines in the traditional American mythos. On the other hand, *Forces of Destiny* also showcases that American women can appear in leadership roles, be independent agents of their own fate and can thrive by themselves using wit and resourcefulness. Because these behaviors were only a prerogative of men in the traditional American mythos, the shift indicates that American culture is trying to incorporate new media representations that encourage equality among genders. These contradictory American views on gender emerge in *Forces of Destiny* without pointing to a definitive resolution. Most importantly, this ongoing conversation about gender representation in American media provides evidence that the *Star Wars* universe and its mythical adaptations offer the same ideological function identified by Tatar in fairy tales as builders of social truths and that American culture is trying to re-write new fictions about itself and about gender identity.

Chapter 4

The Mandalorian: Reclaiming Counter-Narratives in the Western Genre

A silent gunslinger meets a cute baby alien. In 2019 the *Star Wars* franchise changed forever the representation of the Western with the release of the web series *The Mandalorian* on the streaming platform Disney+. For the first time, the franchise was not about the Skywalker family's saga. As the first *Star Wars* live-action series ever produced for the franchise, *The Mandalorian* uses the serialized nature of TV shows to change the representation of heroism in the American (Western) mythos, whose function as “national identity-making” and “a shared history” (Geraghty “Creating and Comparing Myth” 192) is tightly connected to the portrayal of Americanness. In this chapter I will demonstrate how the show subverts the idea that Othered individuals such as aliens, bounty hunters and criminals should always stereotypically be sketched as “the bad guys” who oppose traditional hard-working, rule-abiding “Americanness.” In particular, I will focus on highlighting the mythical storytelling aspects of *The Mandalorian* where “the Subaltern speak” better than other *Star Wars* products and American media in general. This analysis falls within the larger argument of this dissertation that mythical storytelling has been able to renew itself and support marginalized voices through the experimental capabilities of technologies adopted by contemporary media, even though this process of adapting myth is not exempt from hegemonic contradictions.

In this chapter I will analyze how *The Mandalorian*'s revamping of the Western genre criticizes the traditional representation of heroism as an attribute exclusive to white Americans. I will focus on the Mandalorian Din Djarin's evolution from an anti-heroic, shunned, Othered bounty hunter who act only for self-interest—traits that traditionally belong to Western (anti) heroes—to an unexpectedly heroic, selfless father figure. I will argue that this change revamps the American mythos into a new, nuanced version of Neo-Western subgenre thanks to Disney's TV serialization format, whose expanded narrative adapts and re-writes traditional heroic tropes. The storytelling connections that *The Mandalorian* creates through parallels and juxtapositions

with both the larger *Star Wars* universe and the classic Western genre will help provide evidence that re-writing practices drive cultural change by engaging with the ideology of heroism in American culture.

First, I will analyze how the classic (fantasized, sci-fi) Western space, rendered through some innovative cinematic technology, reinvents the classic Western setting, transforming it from the Frontierman's colonized blank canvas to an Othered space where only Othered individuals able to adapt can thrive. Then, I will use theories that address issues of Otherness (including Gayatri Spivak's and Homi Bhabha's) to explore how the titular character Din Djarin inherits the classic Western's lone hero model but, as an Othered character, consistently challenges the white ideology of American heroism and, therefore, contributes to democratizing heroism as a quality that can be equally embodied by ethnically and socially diverse characters. Although at times the ubiquitous heroic ideology of the lone vigilante hero re-emerges as a consequence of the hegemonic nature of mythical storytelling, I will evaluate Disney's changes to the character through *The Mandalorian*. I will compare Din's characteristics to the stereotypical model of the smuggler Han Solo, the classic cowboy embodying traditional American heroic masculinity.

In the final part of the chapter, I will analyze Grogu (aka "Baby Yoda")'s alternating heroic and anti-heroic behaviors as an Othered character to point out how this oscillation further challenges the traditional American mythos by establishing a grey ideological and moral definition of "hero." Subsequent to the analysis of the reshaping of heroic traits in *Star Wars*, this chapter will further highlight the process of democratizing heroism that turns heroes into imperfect figures and, hence, makes them look more human. Grogu will serve as an example of how *The Mandalorian* contributes to the re-popularization of the American mythos through audiences' engagement with this character, especially on social media, while serving the commodifying needs of the contemporary culture industry. As Ryan Poll points out, "popular culture is a space of diversity. All stories can and should be told simultaneously and adjacently" (par. 11). By highlighting the intertextual process at work within this re-distribution of the mythos as a beacon for diverse heroism, I will compare characters, tropes and scenes of *The Mandalorian* with *Star Wars* movies and instances of the Western genre to further support the idea that processes of adaptation and re-writing ingrained in the serialized nature of the show are fundamental mechanisms for constructing a democratized American heroic identity that challenges the white, colonial foundations of the Western mythos and represents a shift in how

American society sees itself and notions of masculinity. The analysis will also serve to comment on Disney's new direction as a diversified (and diversifying) global producer of culture that renews mythical storytelling because, as LucasFilm president Kathleen Kennedy points out, "there is truly a new *Star Wars* story for everyone" (qtd. in Patten par. 10).

4.1 Reclaiming the Otherness of the Western Space

Disney's *The Mandalorian* recreates the sense of death pervading Western movies. Not only does the death motif offer homage to the genre, but it also recentralizes Otherness as the cultural milieu of the show. The series achieves this revamping using adaptation as "a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself" (Sanders 18) that is based on processes of "addition, expansion, accretion, and interpolation" (Sanders 18) with the aim of offering a new take on the source text, the American monomyth, through the lenses of Othered locations that suggest the colonial premises of the myth have shifted. The setting of the very first scene in *The Mandalorian* is Maldo Kreis, a planet that is a self-reference to Hoth's arctic environment in *The Empire Strikes Back*. The first episode of *The Mandalorian* starts *in medias res* with a close-up of a gloved hand holding a beeping tracking fob, followed by a sudden cut to a helmeted figure in a cape, who is framed from the back. As we follow the Mandalorian, we see him walking away from the camera to a dark settlement with scattered buildings in the snowy landscape of Maldo Kreis—a typical Western movie sequence where the cowboy enters a new town for the first time. The *mise-en-scène*, dominated by icy grey and brown colors, conveys the loneliness and unwelcoming environment of the "Wild West," a Western-like alienating effect that emphasizes the Otherness of the place. This process takes the form of a re-writing or renewal of the myth by turning the Western space itself into "almost the same but not quite" ("Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" 127), as Homi Bhabha said of similar spaces of colonial discourse. At the same time, the alienating chromatic effects make the setting immediately recognizable to the viewer. In Western movies, the deserts, sterile, harsh environment is traditionally portrayed as inhospitable for the European colonizer. Barren places become the physical manifestation of the Otherness that heroes confront and defeat, to help support the ideological narrative that "American resourcefulness" is the only quality that allows colonizers to survive on the Frontier, "a primitive, primal world" (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 63) to be tamed.

The Mandalorian uses some revolutionary televisual technologies to help represent a new version of the space of the Western that challenges the ideological premises of the mythos. The series pioneers the use of “The Volume,” “an innovative technique that brings visual effects to the forefront of the production process” (Baver par. 1), making the tool—technically called StageCraft—an integral part of the creation of the mythical storytelling and of its physical spaces. This videogame-like technology developed by Industrial Light & Magic for *The Mandalorian* immerses the actors in simulated computer-generated settings rendered in real-time that are shown on wraparound LED screens (Figure 15). The system is connected to a camera that, as it moves around, changes the perspective and angles of the environments shown on the screens, a so-called parallax effect. The use that *The Mandalorian* makes of “The Volume” reminds me of Georges Letissier’s definition of art as “a living mosaic, a dynamic intersection of signifying practices, and in short as kinetic processes of transposition and transmutation” (*Rewriting/Reprising* 3).

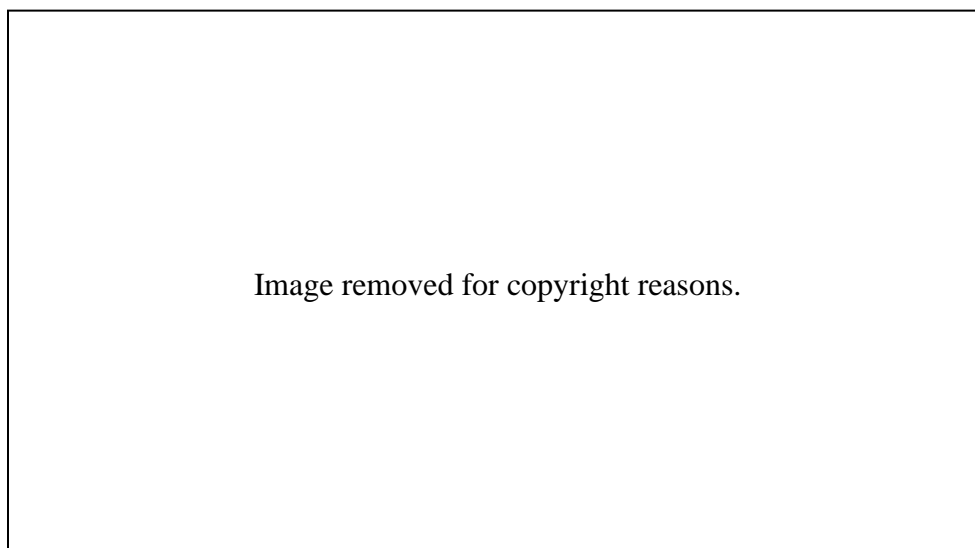


Fig. 4.1. “The Volume” reproducing the Western-like setting for the scene where the Mandalorian first enters the settlement on Maldo Kreis. Image courtesy of Coldeway.

Using the same LEDs framework, “The Volume” can become any setting. “The Volume” allows producers to endlessly generate and intertextually replicate the multiple cinematic Western Othered spaces of the saga—with the added benefit of cutting costs of shooting in real locations

and speeding up production times.¹ This technology helps *The Mandalorian* respond to what Richard Slotkin identifies as the main feature of the cultural adaptation—and renewal—of myth where “each new context in which the story is told adds meaning to it, because the telling implies a metaphoric connection between the storied past and the present” (*The Fatal Environment* 16). The strength of “The Volume” is its ability to put centre stage what was once in the background in the *Star Wars* universe, and this may be one of the most important aspects of this tool that helps influence the storytelling. In other words, by visually making the inconsequential objects and the marginalized characters central to the mythical narration of the saga, “The Volume” is able to “Other” the future-past Western scenography of *The Mandalorian* and to visually direct the ideological shifting of contemporary mythical storytelling. “The Volume” delivers this shift in the representation of “Western-ness” through an intertextual dialogism both with the genre’s setting and with the larger *Star Wars* franchise. Robert Stam defines this practice as “an intersection of textual surfaces. All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and confluences and inversions of other texts” (*New Vocabularies* 204). The narrative reversal of the mythos happens by visually setting *The Mandalorian* at the outskirts of the galaxy in the inhospitable Outer Rims, obscure places mostly ignored by the *Star Wars* movies, instead of focusing on planets of central importance. By setting the main story in locations considered as Other, *The Mandalorian* narratively shifts its storytelling focus from the Skywalker-centred—white—heroic saga to a democratized, Othered heroic journey that centers around “everyday” stories and characters. If we take the decentralization of heroism in *Star Wars* as a metaphor for representing American society, heroism shifts from a quality only ingrained in a few “Chosen” heroes of the monomyth to being accessible to everyone, and therefore, it suggests a new cultural narrative where social well-being becomes everyone’s responsibility. Othered groups have always lived at the margins of the American mythos: they were either treated as “savage villains” or ignored by the whitewashing

1. Although the economic advantages of tools like “The Volume” are undeniable compared to shooting movies on location, a counter argument to their use could be the risk of potentially disengaging from local populations even more, especially in non-Western countries. In the past, these populations have gained economic benefits from hosting cinematic productions, and all-digital productions could prevent these groups from accessing opportunities in the future. Another more cynical consideration of not shooting on location could be the potential perpetuation of the objectification of these populations, who might become even more disconnected from the cinematic productions that attempt to represent them as “Other.”

of Western movies, where the Frontier was predominantly a “white matter.” By democratizing heroism and making it an attribute shared by Othered groups, *The Mandalorian* plays an important role in dismantling old racial ideologies of American culture.

On the surface “The Volume” may appear simply as an accessorial machine producing special effects that reflect the standard CGI practices adopted by contemporary mass-produced movies. However, this tool is very different from special effects that simply overlap real sets or from green screens that are replaced by images. “The Volume” bends images and perspectives as an immersive simulator that unifies the actors’ responses to the setting and to spatial cues. Carl Weathers, who plays Bounty Hunters’ Guild agent Greef Karga, considered this technology superior to green screen as it helps actors together on set experience the same visual context, actors who “didn’t have to pretend anymore” (“Technology” 23:11) and make the environment up in their heads. This simulation capability of “The Volume” makes actors’ performances even more convincing and, as a result, help audiences feel the delivery of the mythical storytelling through the actors as a shared experience that turns the mythical into more *real*. Like in a videogame, this technology reworks the digital space around the actors to create the illusion of re-creating a more tangible mythical space. This process turns the delivery of mythical storytelling itself into a more realistic experience for the audiences. As a result, the use of “The Volume” in the show reinforces the argument that contemporary mythical storytelling becomes so intertwined with technology that it blurs boundaries with its medium, paraphrasing (and updating) Marshall McLuhan’s famous theorization that the medium is the message.

“The Volume” achieves this medium-storytelling integration, this intertextual creation of the mythical realities of the show, by weaving a thread of spatial interconnections among locations. It conveys the Otherness of the space through the simulation of the desolated Maldo Kreis. It is an intertextual visual thread that *The Mandalorian* also carries over in the desertic planets Arvala-7 and Tatooine, and in the red-and-black volcanic desolation of Nevarro, which are all at the centre of action in the show and reinforce its connection with the Western genre. However, *The Mandalorian*’s “The Volume” changes the premises of the American monomyth. The show re-works the motif that the environment hardens the “American character” by having its protagonists symbolically adapt to the barren Western land rather than trying to tame it as the classic cowboy-hero of the mythos would do. This renewal as a space of narrative subversion and ideological questioning is explored through the episodic structure of the show that allows for

expanded branched storytelling. Din comes back multiple times to these obscure planets throughout season 1 and 2.² Each time, his ability to adapt emerges (like Rey's resourcefulness in *The Force Awakens*, as discussed in Chapter 2) at least initially seeming to replicate the classic Frontier survivalism within inhospitable environments.

For example, in "Chapter 1: The Mandalorian" Din needs to ride a wild Blurrig to reach the location where the Child (Grogu), his target, is kept. Against the sandy colors of the desert, the camera follows the Mandalorian as he is thrown off the beast, a symbolic indication that the nature on the planet is against men's taming. The alien Kuiil teaches Din how to ride. The scene, intertextually adapted from the Western *The Big Country* (1958), where Gregory Peck struggles to tame the stubborn horse Old Thunder, is used as a comic relief from the *gravitas* of the Western scenery: an ugly, small untamed beast challenges the exceptionally skilled Mandalorian. After Din falls multiple times, Kuiil reminds him that "You are Mandalorian! Your ancestors rode the great Mythosaur. Surely you can ride this young foal" (25:52). This line motivates Din to ride the animal, since his heroic predecessors faced even greater dangers. Although this scene superficially suggests Din's dominance over the untamed wilderness of the land, as exemplified by the colonial discourse in Western movies numerous times, Din's ability to handle the Blurrig is reframed as being functional to his bounty hunting activity.

Din's adaptability is reinforced by an earlier scene in the episode when Din single-handedly kills a giant ravinak creature, one of the hidden dangers living under the ice on Maldo Kreis, in order to survive and cash his bounty. A wide-angle camera shot makes the Mandalorian look insignificant compared to the monster to emphasize his adaptive, rather than domineering, abilities as a Western hero. Although this replication ideologically reinforces the myth of American resourcefulness by implying that Din is forged by adversities and ever-looming danger, it also shapes the hero as a survivor rather than mainly a colonizer. This scene aligns with Jane Tompkins's description of the Western setting and its "its aura of death, both parodied and

2. Maldo Kreis appears in "Chapter 1: The Mandalorian" and "Chapter 10: The Passenger;" Arvala-7 is the setting of "Chapter 1: The Mandalorian," "Chapter 2: The Child" and "Chapter 7: The Reckoning;" Nevarro is more frequently revisited throughout Din's adventures and appears in "Chapter 1: The Mandalorian," "Chapter 3: The Sin," "Chapter 7: The Reckoning," "Chapter 8: Redemption," Chapter 10: The Passenger," "Chapter 12: The Siege," and "Chapter 14: The Tragedy;" Tatooine recurs in "Chapter 5: The Gunslinger," "Chapter 9: The Marshal," "Chapter 10: The Passenger," "Chapter 14: The Tragedy" and "Chapter 16: The Rescue."

insisted on in place names like Deadwood and Tombstone, is one of the Genre's most essential features. [...] Though death is what the hero is always trying to avoid, and what we continually escape along with him, death is constantly being courted, flirted with" (24). Therefore, the idea of death, the ultimate Otherness, emerges from the alien and alienating landscapes of *The Mandalorian* through its fantasmagoric representations recreated by "the Volume."

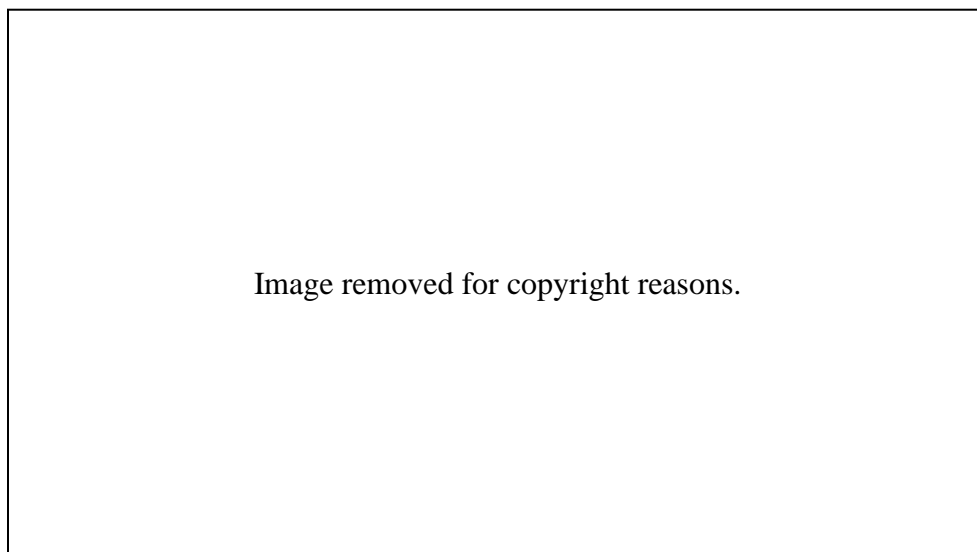


Fig. 4.2. The Mandalorian walks down the streets at night. "Chapter 9: The Marshal" (*The Mandalorian*)

The show re-creates this Othered ambience with *ad hoc* scenes, such as in "Chapter 9: The Marshal." The camera follows Din, with the child Grogu floating in a pod at his side, as he slowly walks down heavily graffitied streets (Figure 16) that evokes the back alleys of American cities such as Chicago or New York that evoke the urban Western subgenre. The camera cuts to the Child, who looks concerned about many pairs of red feral eyes lurking in the dark streets—an implicit reference to the street dangers in the United States. This symbolical digital reconstruction delivered by "The Volume" channels the urban Western vibes of the show through a pastiche of genres that becomes the tool for *The Mandalorian* to perpetuate the classic trope of death. This build-up of genres is further exemplified in the next scene between Din and the shady alien gangster Gor Koresh. The way the scene is shot resembles the typical exchange between the protagonist and the villain of a Western movie, mixed with the "mob" genre—Koresh reprises *The Godfather's* Don Corleone's character, the epitome of underground danger. The camera frames the characters sitting side by side next to a fighting pit, and it alternates their medium-shot

portraits to enhance the growing tension as Din questions the mobster about the location of other Mandalorians. As in a typical Western movie conversation where threats are put on the table, Koresh tells Din: “Thank you for coming to me. Normally, I have to seek out remnants of you Mandalorians in your hidden hives to harvest your precious shiny shells. Beskar’s value continues to rise. I’ve grown quite fond of it. Give it to me now or I will peel it off your corpse.” The Mandalorian replies like a classic cowboy who shows only strength and confidence: “Tell me where the Mandalorians are and I’ll walk outta here without killing you” (6:04-6:32). The exchange soon escalates into a massive fight where Din easily knocks off the mobsters and forces Gor to give him the information.

This violence again evokes the sense of death pervading the Neo-Western ethos of the show and is a representation of fierce masculinity celebrated by American culture. It visually echoes bar fights in traditional Westerns, particularly mimicking Sergio Leone’s movies that were imbued with danger, while sanitizing the gore of the “blood-drenched violence” (Hughes vii) to make the show palatable to younger audiences. *The Mandalorian*’s pastiche re-familiarizes audiences with the foundational ideology of the violent Frontier in the United States and the death ingrained within that ideology, as identified in my analysis of the new *Star Wars* trilogy in Chapter 2. “The Volume”’s self-referential use to re-familiarize audiences with a pastiche of genres also implies that contemporary mythical storytelling becomes a postmodern experience deeply mediated by technologies that attempt to re-distribute the myth through adaptive re-writings that engage with “the old” to produce “the new.”

4.2 Re-writing Tatooine’s Colonial Counter-Narrative

“The Volume”’s *mise-en-scène* alternating alien and sketchy locations also visually indicates that violence and danger are still pervasive in telling the story of the American monomyth. Jane Tompkins identifies these aspects as the catalyst for making people “hard, austere, sublime” (71) in the classic movies of the genre. Tatooine, which in *The Mandalorian* “acquires an actual character rather than serving as a handsome backdrop” (Cosh par. 6) draws from this trope. Mos Eisley in the movies was deemed “sparse, Western, and Sergio Leone-like” (Taylor 390), a place that old Obi-Wan describes to Luke as a “wretched hive of scum and villainy” in *A New Hope*. Therefore, the place also represents alienating Otherness because it embodies a threshold for the outlaws of the criminal underworld. The movie almost perfectly replicates the typical saloon scene where the hero needs to fend off dangerous, staring characters:

Obi Wan cuts a troublemaker alien's arm off using his lightsaber without anyone in the establishment blinking an eye. As Leah Deyneka writes, Mos Eisley "like the old west, [...] is governed by the will of the gun or in this case the blaster and lightsaber. It is appropriate that in this setting Luke and Obi-Wan encounter their next set of hero partners, Han Solo and his Wookiee companion Chewbacca" (35), who represent the old-stock of gunslingers, scoundrels and outlaws of traditional Western movies more than any other characters in the saga.

The Mandalorian brings Mos Eisley back to life, but its re-working assumes counter-narrative undertones in a process that both Julie Sanders and Peter Widdowson would identify with intertextual practices of "writing back" to redefine master narratives and historical accounts (Sanders 100, Widdowson 166). This process embodies the double function of enhancing the Othered lawlessness of the Western to challenge its traditional features and as a signifier that the representation of the American mythos is still part of American identity, as I addressed in the analysis of the new trilogy's planet Jakku (See chapter 2).³ This is also possible because the series' form has the ability to revisit locations through its extended episodic timeframe that overcomes the cinematic constraints of the *Star Wars* movie trilogies. Thomas Bacon agrees that "*The Mandalorian*'s episodic, long-form approach to storytelling is better suited to developing a strong sense of place" (par. 6). This is evident since the first moments Din spends on the planet in "Chapter 5: The Gunslinger." As he silently walks down the sandy town, suddenly the scene cuts to a medium shot of bloody stormtroopers' helmets impaled on pikes on the street for everyone to see—a "down-with-Imperialism" symbolism that challenges the ideological foundations of the Western genre that relied on the affirmation of European colonization. The camera moves laterally to mimic Din's point of view as he walks down the street. The scene immediately contextualizes the show within a post-Empire timeline, one in which Jabba-The-Hutt is dead

3. One of the first scenes featuring the sandy desolation of Jakku portrays, through a landscape shot of the silent remains of a giant Imperial dreadnaught ship in the sand, a visual signifier of a violent past battle that ended in annihilation and left a permanent mark of decay on the land. Rey's Jakku is portrayed as a junkyard planet with rough outposts where people live on the edge of survival—a self-reference to Tatooine's Mos Eisley. The Niima Outpost on Jakku, where Rey trades, is named after a criminal Hutt like the alien/gangster Jabba in *The Return of the Jedi*. Like in every old Western movie, the shady name indicates a place full of rogue characters. While both Tatooine and Jakku are only the starting points of the *Star Wars* heroes' journeys and appear only briefly compared to other locations in the saga, they remain impressed in audiences' imagination due to the well-known intertextual substratum of the Western.

and Tatooine has become free, even though it has turned as a consequence more chaotic and dangerous than under the hated Imperial rule.⁴

In a game of mirroring, Din's steps are a self-reference to Luke and Obi-Wan's, as he enters the same cantina where the two characters met Han in *A New Hope*. In *The Mandalorian* the bar is almost empty and silent (Figure 17). This quietness contrasts with the bubbly, "jazzy" swing song played by the Cantina band when Luke walks into the bar, an intertextual homage itself to Benny Goodman's 1930s piece "Sing Sing Sing." The now silent establishment conveys desolation compared to the buzzing alien crowd shown in *A New Hope*, when the Cantina was a hub for bounty hunters to hang out and look for jobs. This metaphorically indicates that the "old Western ways" of the American myth that dominated popular culture persist, but the storytelling that conveys them is challenged.

In the present-time cantina, the droid-bartender drily tells the Mandalorian that "the Bounty Guild no longer operates from Tatooine" (8:23) when Din asks about potential work. In a typical Western movie montage, the scene cuts to a close-up of a figure listening on the corner to enhance the dramatic momentum. This re-writing of the original *Star Wars* source is at play once more because the man, Toro Calican, is shown sitting in medium frame with his legs lifted on the table as Han did in a parallel scene in *A New Hope*. Like Han, Toro seems a young scoundrel looking for trouble. However, *The Mandalorian* now reverses the narrative: it's Toro who offers Din a job that entails capturing the dangerous mercenary Fennec Shand. Unlike Han's experienced demeanor, Toro inverts the formula of the genre in *The Mandalorian*. While Han

4. Tatooine is in itself an example of (American) imperial attitudes. George Lucas appropriated the original geographic name of the Tunisian town Tataouine, which he used as a location for his desertic planet. This act is in itself an erasure of the real-world place and of the local Tunisian cultures, which in *Star Wars* become transformed in the wild, unintelligible Tusks or the infantilized, "cute" Jawas. The fact that a Hollywood production went to a former French-colonized African country to create the exotic Middle-Eastern-like setting for a futuristic Orientalized landscape highlights the Othered gaze persistent in American media that cannot envision an Other who "talks back" even in sci-fi narratives. (The Wordpress site *Orientalism: The Phantom Menace*, analyzes Tatooine in detail through the lenses of an Orientalized space of silencing.) Lucas also left the setting for Luke's farm behind in the desert, a symbolic relic of the capitalist exploitation of the place that perhaps has given something back to Tunisia as a popular themed touristic destination. However, like the status of chaos in *The Mandalorian's* Tatooine, Tataouine has become an equally restless political hot zone. As of 2015, the country was hit by terrorist attacks and Tataouine had "become known as a station for Isis" (Beaumont-Thomas par. 5) and a gateway for weapons potentially to be used by terrorists (North Africa Post).

had the stereotypical cowboy bravado, Toro doesn't have any confidence. He simply states "This is my first job. You can keep the money, all of it. I just need this job to get into the Guild" (9:49-9:56). This subversion indicates that the traditional cowboy model based on one-layered characters shaped around boldness and showing-off does not represent the renewed American mythos *The Mandalorian* embraces and, therefore, traditional heroism is questioned challenging the definition of American masculine identity.

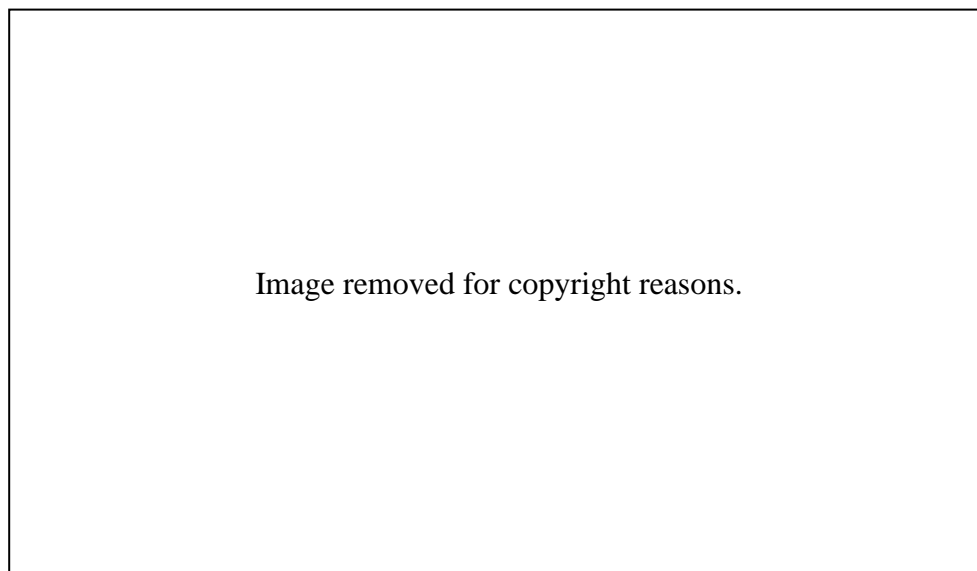


Fig. 4.3. Mos Eisley cantina in *A New Hope* (top) and in *The Mandalorian* (bottom). Image courtesy of Lindberg.

The series takes Din and Toro to the open Tatooine desert, as the *Star Wars* saga did before with other characters. Tatooine, the landscape of Luke and Anakin's storylines, is synonym with looming demise for *Star Wars* heroes. This idea is set for the first time by the scene where C3-PO and R2-D2 wander endlessly in the hot sands and canyons at the beginning of *A New Hope*. The camera makes them look smaller to convey how powerless they are compared to that environment, and as they pass by a giant skeleton of a krayt dragon, the scene indicates that not even the apex predator of the planet can escape the death of the Western landscape. Later in the movie, without Obi-Wan's timely intervention, Luke would have died at the hands of the "savage" Tusken Raiders, the Indigenous population of Tatooine. They attack Luke without warning as he lies looking with his binoculars in the sand, as they are presented as another looming danger of the Western setting. The *Star Wars* prequels reinforce the colonial discourse around Indigenous populations as animalistic just like the classic trilogy did. Anakin

blames them for the death of his mother Shmi, whom they kidnapped for apparent no reason, perpetuating the narrative of the “mindless savages.”

Although the intertextuality at play in the *A New Hope* scene and in the prequels orients towards re-inscribing the anti-Indigenous sentiments of the traditional Western, *The Mandalorian* conveys a more complex association with Otherness and death. For the first time, *Star Wars* openly adopts a counter-colonial approach by acknowledging the Indigenous population of Tatooine as legitimate rather than simply depicting Tusken as Othered brutes. In *The Mandalorian*, Tatooine’s storyline is rewritten and expanded to offer a counter narrative that criticizes the lack of Indigenous Peoples’ “serious presence as individuals” (Tompkins 10) in the storytelling of the American mythos. *The Mandalorian* claims a potentially intertextual disruptive function “to write back to an informing original from a new or revised political and cultural position” (Sanders 98). The series re-writes Luke’s *A New Hope* scene to question the Tusken’s negative representation and to support a “narrative inversion” within the series’ shaping of the new Western. This ideological subversion is exemplified by the first scene when the Mandalorian meets the Tusken in the series. Din and Toro head on speeder bikes to the deep desert (“Chapter 5: The Gunslinger”). The camera adopts a first-person perspective replicating Toro’s point of view to enhance the audience’s identification with him. Through his binoculars we see two banthas with their Tusken Raiders besides them on the screen. Identifying with the colonizer’s imperialist perspective, he suddenly exclaims: “Tusken Raiders. I heard the locals talking about this filth.” Din replies that “Tuskens think they are the locals. Everyone else is just trespassing” (13-34-13:41).

Unlike other *Star Wars* characters, Din acknowledges the problematic fact that Tatooine is a colonized planet and respects the Tusken as its original inhabitants. This helps *The Mandalorian* subvert the traditional role inhabited by the Western protagonist of the mythos as the “master” of the land who is a positive “heroic agent of an expansive colonial society” (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 64). The Mandalorian’s interaction with the Tusken reveals a different kind of American mythos that exposes the power relations of the colonial discourse by reframing the hero as someone who understands Otherness and points out injustices rather than being complicit with the master narrative. As the Tusken sneak up on the Mandalorian and Toro, Din negotiates safe passage through the desert instead of reacting with violence. He reminds Toro to “relax” and ends up offering the binoculars as payment to the Tusken for passing on their territory. In

contrast, Toro's reaction is that of the colonizer: he mistrusts them and puts immediately his hand on his blaster, as the stereotypical cowboy of Western movies would do when confronting the local populations. This is a reference to and a critique of the classic mythical violent-fueled model where "the pioneer submits to regression in the name of progress [...] in order to regenerate the present" (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 63). The scene is striking for its balance. It alternates medium frames of the Tusken on one side and Din and Toro on the other side, thus showing them as equals (Figure 18). Nobody visually overpowers the other, making the cowboy(s) look like they are on the same level as the Others, an uncommon feature in traditional Western movies.

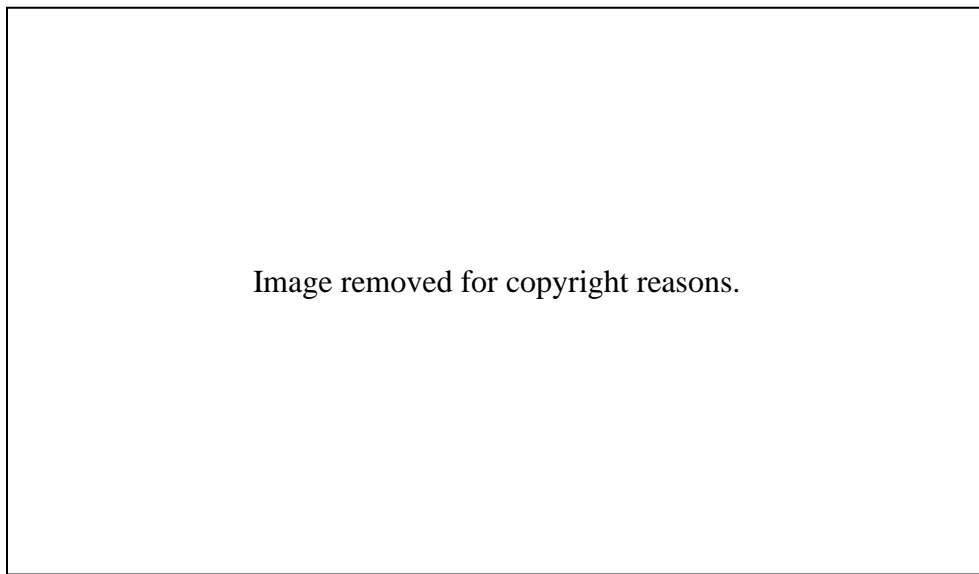


Fig. 4.4. The Mandalorian and Toro Calican (far right) negotiating safe passage with the Tusken Raiders (left). "Chapter 5: The Gunslinger" (*The Mandalorian*).

While this is only a brief exchange, it is enough to show the series' re-writing the Western formulas to develop Din as a non-conventional heroic figure who crosses cultural borders, unlike the other *Star Wars* heroes. Not only does the scene show that Tusken can communicate through a complex sign language but the Mandalorian is also portrayed as able to use their language. Conversely, *A New Hope* and *The Attack of the Clones* negate the Raiders the ability to speak and simply relegates them to performing inhuman, scary sounds as unintelligible savages would do. Before producing *The Mandalorian*, *Star Wars* could be mostly categorized as a dominant cultural product perpetuating "epistemic violence," "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (Spivak 280-281).

The ideological inversion adopted by the show indicates a possible shift in the American attitudes toward depictions of ethnicities, as a sign that the country has started addressing the diversity of the ethnic groups composing the nation. The fact that Whiteness is not the core identifier of the hero in this new Western—the “American” genre par excellence—is evident both in Din’s backstory and, at a more general level, in the casting choice for the character. Din is himself an Othered individual. In “Chapter 1: The Mandalorian,” a flashback shows that Din “was once a foundling,” as he mentions to the Mandalorian Armorer. The scene portrays him with a close-up of his face covered by the armour, as he stoically and silently remembers the trauma of losing everything as a child as part of an ethnic decimation. In the flashback, he is carried in his father’s arms while his family is trying to escape droids’ attacks and the camera frames him from above—an indication of his powerlessness—and then he is hidden away by his parents, who die in an explosion soon after. “In Chapter 8: Redemption” it is revealed in another flashback sequence that he was saved by a group of Mandalorians, the Death Watch, who adopted him and welcomed him to become a Mandalorian himself. This means Mandalorian culture sees Otherness as a strength because what ties them together is not ethnicity or someone’s origin but a shared code of honor called the Way of the Mandalore.

In addition, the casting of Chilean-American Pedro Pascal as the titular character of the show is also indicative of *The Mandalorian*’s revision of the Western’s reliance on white protagonists.⁵ This casting choice challenges the prejudiced stance that American media often offer through common stereotypes that depict Latin-American people as “illegal immigrants” or “criminals.” It was not a coincidence that the production and release of the show happened during the latter stages of Donald Trump’s presidency, which was fuelled by strong anti-Latino feelings

5. It should be clarified, however, that the featuring of non-white protagonists is not new in traditional Westerns. During the 1960s and 1970s the production of European Westerns and Italian Spaghetti Western movies, from which *The Mandalorian* draws inspiration, often featured Latinos and non-white non-American actors along American stars because the “films’ main selling points was their multinational casts” (Hughes xvi), and had Spanish/Italian crews to support the production. The locations were also fundamentally Othered, but were designed to recreate the American Frontier in this Italian/Spanish filtered version of the American mythos. The films were often shot outside the Cinecittà Studios near Rome or in the Spanish Almerian desert in Andalusia, “a stark, barren land that has suffered centuries of erosion” (xviii), that simulated the fantasy of the arid American Frontier. Although these elements fundamentally complicate the ideology of whiteness behind the Western genre, the main narrative re-instated in these movies traditionally involved the white hero saving towns or seeking revenge, while scarcely featuring “Indians” at all, a *de facto* mythical erasure of Indigeneity on the Frontier.

and racist stances against marginalized groups in general. The show gives the titular character a cultural in-betweenness that other heroes of the saga such as Luke and Han Solo lacked, reinforcing positive steps towards the democratization of American heroism better than the new trilogy (see Chapter 2) or *Star Wars* animated series such as *Forces of Destiny* (see Chapter 3). This shift indicates Disney's increased attention to disrupting the classic ideology of Western heroism in media products. It provides a more realistic representation of American identity that embraces the diversity of the United States is founded upon and places the series at the centre of the social critique typically pursued by the Neo-Western genre. As Susan Kollin writes, any Western-like cultural production that "acknowledges Hollywood's legacy... but that resists this hegemony in an effort to seek another form of storytelling" (142) when constructing identities of Otherness belongs to this post-Western category.

The Mandalorian keeps expanding this shift toward Othered heroes in season 2, when Din goes back to Tatooine as the initial step to help Grogu (aka "Baby Yoda") reunite with the Jedi. His main goal gets derailed, as he finds himself in "Chapter 9: The Marshal" mediating between the colonizers of the remote Mos Pelgo town and the Tusken Raiders. Din convinces the two groups to unite forces and destroy a giant krayt dragon threatening their survival. The story tricks the audience with a beginning that replicates the traditional colonially-biased Western. Like Ringo Kid's ambiguous revenge-driven cowboy figure in *Stagecoach* (1939), Din is not completely selfless in his actions, getting involved with the two groups only because of Marshal Cobb Vanth's promise to give him his Mandalorian's armour in exchange for his service.⁶ However, the series once again re-writes the protagonist of the Western as someone who crosses cultural boundaries because of his in-betweenness and as a "subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" 89). Din's adaptability is indicated by one of the main counter-colonial scenes in the episode. The camera shows the Mandalorian, Vanth, and a group of Tusken sitting around the fire, discussing how to face the beast's threat. The camera shows all of them at the same level and positioned in a circle, indicating equality among the characters in the frame.

6. Vanth is not a Mandalorian himself, and based on the Mandalorian code, Din has to claim his armour. Audiences immediately recognize that the armour, which belongs to Boba Fett, is an early self-reference to this fan-favorite character's reappearance in the series, confirming that he indeed survived the Sarlacc Pit in *The Return of the Jedi* (1983).

However, Vanth, as Toro previously did in the series, distrusts the Tusken, and he does not regret killing them in the past, saying, “They raided our village. I defended the town” and proceeding to further comment that “these monsters can’t be reasoned with” (28:00-28:08). His language perpetuates the narrative of the Other as “inherently disposed to cruel and atrocious violence” (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 53). As Din continues to communicate with the Tusken in their sign language, Vanth asks what he is telling them, and he simply replies: “Same thing I’m telling you. If we fight amongst ourselves, the monster will kill us all.” His line encourages cooperation rather than dismissal and distrust, reinforcing his role as a mediator rather than as a stereotypical trigger-happy cowboy/bounty hunter. This constructs the fictitious Frontier of *Star Wars* in a different way from the classic American mythos, questioning the American “border as cultural signifier of a pioneering, male ‘American’ spirit always under threat from races and cultures beyond the border” (Bhabha, “The Other Question” 22). Later in the episode Din further delivers the line that convinces the Mos Pelgo people to fight alongside the Tusken, and that clearly reveals *The Mandalorian’s* disruption of the colonial narrative previously portrayed by the saga. He says:

I know these people. They are brutal. But so is the Dune Sea. They’ve survived for thousands of years in these sands and they know the krayt dragon better than anyone here. They are raiders, it’s true. But they also keep their word. We have struck a deal. If we are willing to leave them the carcass and its ichor, they will stand by our side in battle and vow never to raise a blaster against this town until one of you breaks the peace. (33:54-34:26)

As the harsh Western landscape shapes the cowboy, the harsh Tatooine shaped the Tusken Raiders. Din’s words reinforce the idea that they are intelligent, sentient creatures and “survival is their biggest priority. [...] The Tusken Raiders are far more than the ‘animals’ Anakin called them in his tantrum following [their] massacre” (Agar par. 4) to punish them for his mother’s death.

The adaptation practices that shape *The Mandalorian* reveal the role that intertextuality itself plays in dismantling old mythical ideologies and creating new, progressive ones using well-known mythical tropes and stories that inform new perspectives on American national identity. As Gary Hausladen writes, the “conquering and taming the American West are an essential element in the view of ourselves as a nation” (4-5). Although the ideology of the Frontier

remains, *The Mandalorian* drops the problematic idea of heroic “taming of the land” to emphasize that learning to respectfully coexist and collaborate with others and to adapt to the environment could become part of the foundational myth of the American nation. In addition, the inversion of the colonial discourse in the series exemplifies Disney’s complex role as a company whose products and stories target new markets—the once marginalized audiences that *Star Wars* did not address directly—but also as an ideological shifter and cultural agent within American society, offering a more realistic representation of the Other’s point of view in American media that was uncommon in classic Western portrayals.

4.3 Othering the White Cowboy of the American Myth

As a New Western cowboy, Din Djarin addresses the issues within the classic version of the genre. This disruptive role helps American audiences familiarize themselves with new (counter-colonial) stories that may aim eventually to replace the classic American myth as a foundational story. As Susan Kollin points out, the classic Western’s “continual obsession about white masculinity, its emphasis on violence as means of securing white encroachment across the continent, and its recurring theme of civilization’s triumph over frontier savagery” (126) has made the genre outdated and “something of an embarrassment in an era of feminism, multiculturalism, and ecology” (126). In particular, *The Mandalorian* specifically juxtaposes and engages with the essential traits of the Western referencing the way-to-go cowboy character in *Star Wars*, Han Solo. Han, a smuggler and exceptional pilot, is the epitome of the handsome American white hero who conveys a strong, confident virility that “appeared and continues to appear in American popular culture [...]. Lucas’ inclusion of Han Solo provided American audiences with a recognizable masculine identity” (Callahan 99). Han’s clothes—boots, tight pants with a gun holder at his side and a vest—alludes to the typical cowboy’s attire in many movies, making his identity visually identifiable and familiar to audiences.

Although the intertextual processes that bring the “Han’s cowboy model” back to *The Mandalorian* seem to hegemonically support the replication of white masculine traits, the show reworks this concept and conveys the idea that the new American’s hero identity is non-white. Hence, in the new *Star Wars* anyone—though predominantly (and problematically) of the male gender—could potentially identify with the Mandalorian as a heroic figure. Any man could be inside the Mandalorian’s armour (Figure 19). As Valerie Estelle Frankel writes, “masks suggest facelessness, deliberately presenting a stoic face to the world, or perhaps no face at all” (138) in

The Mandalorian. Most importantly, the masked armour represents the opportunity to Other heroism in this re-writing of the American myth because Din's identity or ethnicity is impossible to determine until the very end of Season 1. The revelation of Din's face uncovers Pedro Pascal's Latin physical features and clearly mark his ethnicity. This discovery potentially subverts the audience's expectations around the classic physical traits the hero in American cinematic products, more commonly featuring actors, such as Clint Eastwood, with white ethnic traits. Pascal's appearance generates in *The Mandalorian* a disruptive function that exemplifies the ideological re-writing of the mythos by challenging the centrality of white masculinity as the dominant category for the Western hero. At a general level, this shift further secures Disney as a disruptor of stereotypical representations of national identities in contemporary American media. This new approach is evidently part of the company's push toward challenging its past hegemonic role in representing stereotypes of ethnicity in movies such as *The Three Caballeros* (1944), *Peter Pan* (1953), *Pocahontas* (1991) and *Mulan* (1998), among many others, combined with controversial heteronormative gendered, "Princessified" products in its movies, as addressed in in Chapter 3.⁷

7. However, for Douglas Brode, Disney's disruptive role as "an early proponent of diversity" (*Multiculturalism and The Mouse* 8) was there all along because of its use of caricatures to sketch inequalities and social injustices across all ethnic groups as a proof of the company's forwardness, although an argument could be made that laughing at ethnic groups that already are underprivileged is more ideologically charged than criticizing (white) capitalism with characters such as Scrooge McDuck, for example.

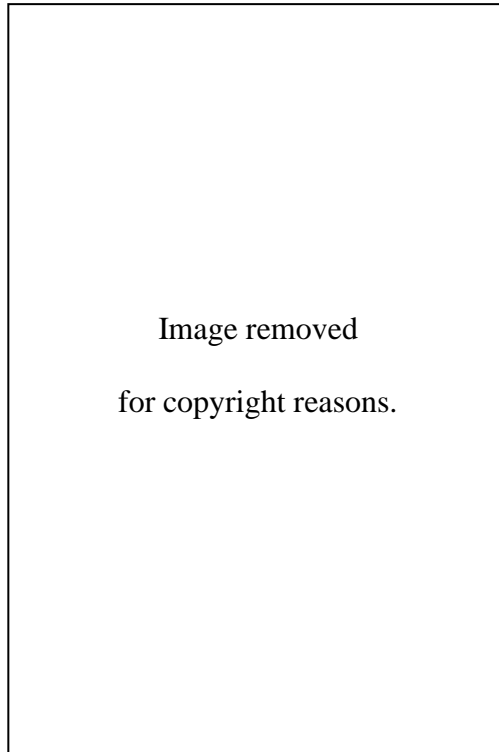


Fig. 4.5. Poster of Din Djarin to promote the Season 1 of *The Mandalorian*. The poster helps showcase the centrality of the Mandalorian armor and the Western motifs of the show.

Starwars.com.

Combined with the goal of rebranding, the choice of introducing a masked protagonist also aligns with the fascination of *Star Wars* with the cultural milieu of masked warriors from Kurosawa's samurai movies. These films, for example, are clearly present in the design of Darth Vader's armor and Captain Phasma's attire in the new trilogy. The costumes create a visual continuity within the franchise and its larger intertextual cinematic subtext that reinforces the connection between heroism and warrior culture in the contemporary representation of the American mythos, even though *The Mandalorian* injects some democratizing changes. Din's consistent armor-wearing is also explained by a narrative reason that reinforces his portrayal of heroism as Othered. Because he follows the Way of Mandalore, he can never remove his helmet in front of others or else he is dishonored as a warrior. Din simply accepts this as a hardcore, matter-of-fact code to live by: "you just can't ever put it back on again" ("Chapter 4: Sanctuary"), he says.

On a more practical level, the mask makes every Mandalorian look the same and, therefore, indicates social equality despite one's origins, at the same time that it reinforces the

militarism, conformism and potentially nationalistic tendencies hidden in their creed, not completely dissimilar from the evil Empire. The fact that Mandalorians accept people who share their values regardless of their ethnicity reinforces the idea that the modern protagonist representative of Disney's new Western ethos in *Star Wars* is a hybrid and hybridized character who overturns the cultural foundations of a genre that has always been synonymous with celebrating white European colonial domination. As a contemporary expression of American culture, Din's presence as a new development in the franchise helps solve the conundrum Homi Bhabha found in dominant narratives. Bhabha criticizes these accounts because they simply recycle the colonial discourse over and over: "in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory" (*Location of Culture* 35). With Din, *Star Wars* makes the hero-protagonist of the Western a truly ethnically diverse "everyman," a move which helps larger chunks of diverse audiences identify with Din.

However, despite significant steps forward toward a democratized ideology of heroism, *The Mandalorian* also reveals a complicated relationship with the traditional traits of the American mythos. This complexity helps point out how despite their ideologically disruptive role, intertextual processes of mythical re-writing bear potential hegemonic implications. Although Din significantly innovates the cowboy of the monomyth, some classic traits remain through parallelisms with Han Solo's heroic model. Replicating a traditional pistolero of the West, Han's identity is defined by action. He is a practical man who relies more on his gun than on believing in ideals—at least at the beginning of the saga. The line delivered to Luke in *A New Hope* clearly conveys this concept. Han says: "Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid" (1:01:09). This line, delivered with Han's signature defiant "cowboy look," exemplifies the character's "shoot-first-ask-questions-later" approach that white Europeans have adopted in colonizing the United States.

Han's tendency to react violently to situations is also emphasized later in the movie. His exchange with Luke reinforces the idea that the American trigger-happy cowboy model of behavior is positive because it emanates from desired masculine qualities such as courage. When Han quickly shoots a Stormtrooper as he enters a command room on the Death Star, Luke, who represents the voice of reason and a less aggressive masculinity, correctly points out: "You know, between his howling [referring to Chewbacca] and your blasting everything in sight, it's a

wonder the whole station doesn't know we're here." Han just replies: "Bring them on! I prefer a straight fight to all this sneaking around" (1:09:02-1:09:06). Han's cockiness replicates a key feature of the American cowboy myth. This trait is also presented in *A New Hope* in the scene between Han and the alien Greedo, who wants to bring the scoundrel to Jabba to collect the bounty on his head. The two characters are shown both sitting at the Mos Eisley Cantina table, framed in medium alternating shots to indicate the conversation between them is balanced. Then, the camera assumes Greedo's point of view, looking at Han to suggest that the alien is soon to be deceived by the cowboy. Han talks his way out of the dangerous situation by distracting Greedo, trying to explain why he lost Jabba's cargo: "Even I get boarded sometimes. Do you think I had a choice?" (50:36). He delivers the line while discreetly preparing his gun and then just nonchalantly shoots Greedo from below the table (Figure 20). The viewers can see the move while Greedo cannot, thus cinematically connecting Han with the renegade, violent behavior of the stereotypical cowboy.

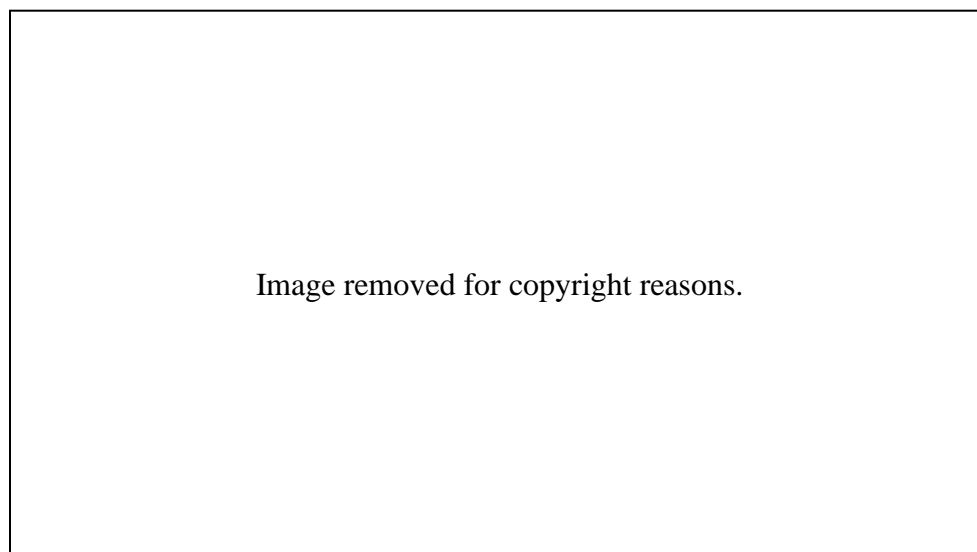


Fig. 4.6. Han Solo (left) sitting across Greedo in the Mos Eisley cantina. *A New Hope*.

As Han relies on his blaster to survive like a typical Western hero, Din embodies the same tradition. However, the series adopts an ambivalent stance by making, on the one hand, violence as a trait even more stereotypically "American" and, on the other hand, by rejecting the classic Western hero's aggressive ways. In "Chapter 2: The Child," with Kuiil's help Din negotiates with a group of Jawas who stole all the pieces of his ship on Arvala-7—the Jawas are a self-reference to *A New Hope*'s Tatooine and embody traditional Western Othering traits. However, behaving

like a traditional Western cowboy, Din is less agreeable with these Othered creatures than with the Tusken Raiders. His primary response is violent since he was wronged by the Jawas—a typical Western hero’s reaction. Kuiil advises him: “You need to drop your rifle.” But Din protests: “I’m a Mandalorian. Weapons are part of my religion” (13:24). When Kuiil tells him that he will not get his parts back except through peaceful negotiation, Din agrees reluctantly. The series represents Din’s weapons and armors as a direct extension of his Mandalorian culture—mirroring the gun-oriented American segment that supports the ownership and use of weapons as a direct expression of Americans’ constitutional right to defend themselves. However, unlike American extremists and Han’s trigger-happy tendencies, Din represents a more self-reflective American Western protagonist who can discern when gun culture should be left aside and, in doing so, he encourages audiences to do the same. He is seen leaving the weapons aside and sitting on the ground across the Jawas. Although the show uses alternating medium frames to indicate an oppositional relationship among the characters, the montage also suggests Din’s willingness to find a non-violent way to solve things when needed.

The Mandalorian also revises the Western’s tendency, as in Clint Eastwood’s characters in Sergio Leone’s “Dollars Trilogy,” of depicting an uncommunicative, silent cowboy with a face of steel. The Mandalorian’s helmet allows the New Western cowboy to reinforce the myth of the American hero as a man of action with a limited emotional range. The metal mask prevents Pedro Pascal from using his facial expressions to convey emotions. Most of his performance comes from his body movements and his voice tone, and his ability to deliver “brusque lines” that he alternates with stark silences. An example is in “Chapter 1: The Mandalorian” when he is framed silently entering a cantina on Maldo Kreis to capture a Mythrol alien bounty. The cantina door suddenly opens and Din in medium frame enters. The light from outside renders his figure a shadow and indicates his mysterious cowboy identity as he silently heads toward the counter—a replica of bar scenes common in the Western genre.

One of the trawlers in the cantina tries to pick a fight with Din, telling him, “You have spilled my drink” (1:45-1:47), but Din responds with silence. The scene alternates with frames of the scared bartender who tries to defuse the situation by offering the trawler a drink on the house. The trawler and his companion comment about the Mandalorian’s beskar armour implying their interest in taking it away from Din because it is very rare and valuable. Without uttering a word, the Mandalorian kills them in a blink of an eye, showing how he is lethal and dangerous, and

leaving everyone else in the cantina speechless. First, he uses a lasso to neutralize one of the trawlers by grabbing him by his feet—another cowboy reference—and then Din kills him with his gun after the other tries to use a blaster on him. The Mandalorian's combat moves and the move he makes when pulling out his gun, shot from the front to emphasize the quick motion, is a direct reprisal of the typical "pistolero move" in classic Westerns and a reinforcement of the series' traditional Western heroic model. Then, the camera frames him from the front, impassible. He puts a hologram of his bounty on the table. The Mythrol alien asks: "Is that a bounty pick? Is that me? Look, there must be some mistake... I can get you more credits." Din drily replies with few carefully chosen words: "I can bring you in warm... (touching his gun) or I can bring you in cold" (3:02-3:20). It is evident that *The Mandalorian* inherits the traditions of the genre where "most, if not all, of the historical Western heroes were of rather dubious, even criminal nature, in real life" (Winkler 517). This complicates the use of intertextuality in the series, acknowledging that, along with its function as an ideological disruptor, its use as a hegemonic tool persists in contemporary mythical representations in popular culture.

With these fundamental innovations, its portrayal of heroism suggests that Disney does not shy away completely from the complicated ideologies of toxic masculinity upon which the classic American heroic model is founded. The shadiness surrounding American Western heroism comes back through the series' hints to Din's dark past. In "Chapter 6: The Prisoner," Din meets lawless characters from his younger years while looking for jobs as he tries to keep Grogu safe. Ran, the job's commissioner, remembers the old days, saying: "We were all young, trying to make a name for ourselves. Yeah, but running with a Mandalorian, that was... That brought us some reputation" (3:14). Migs Mayfeld, an ex-Imperial soldier now in Ran's crew, asks him what Din got out of working with his crew. Ran comments: "You remember what you said, Mando? Target practice. [Laughing] Target practice. Man, we did some crazy stuff, didn't we?" (3:28). Din, as usual, is framed by the camera silently, not providing further comments or explanations, enhancing the mystery of his heroic persona. Ran's line, vague enough to leave the audience to fill in the meaning of "crazy stuff," reveals how Din was a cold-blooded individual pursuing his selfish goals.

This potential coldness of the character is emphasized later in the episode. The Twi'lek Xi'an, who seems to have had an affair with the Mandalorian, defiantly tells Mayfeld: "Ask him

about the job on Alzoc III.”⁸ To which, Din replies sparingly and with a stoic attitude, as per his usual cowboy behavior: “I did what I had to.” The alien tries to push him: “Oh, but you liked it. See, I know who you really are,” implying that he was, and still is, a bloody pistolero (10:56-11:08). This characterization once again mirrors Han’s selfish demeanor. After rescuing Princess Leia in *A New Hope*, Han makes it clear to her that he is interested only in the money he could get out of the situation. In this scene they both sit in the Millennium Falcon cockpit opposite each other to indicate their contrasting motivations, with the camera framing them from the back. As a cowboy driven by greed, Han tells Leia drily: “Look, I ain’t in this for your revolution, and I’m not in it for you, Princess. I expect to be well paid. I’m in it for the money.”

In depicting the titular character as a complicated figure with a shady past, *The Mandalorian* appears at first to replicate the traditional American (Western) mythos, as the franchise did previously with Han, rather than seeking a newer path. However, despite the contradictions, the depiction of American heroism is fundamentally revised through Din’s portrayal compared to the larger *Star Wars* universe. *The Mandalorian* makes a point of exploring the existence of a grey area between the Light and the Dark. The franchise seldom explored the coexistence of ambivalent heroic traits in the Jedi’s heroic narratives, which tended to polarized representations of either heroic figures like Rey and Luke Skywalker, or “good guys turned evil” like Darth Vader. Disney’s shift with *The Mandalorian* represents a shift towards re-envisioning past mythical storytelling and introduces more complex masculine models in American culture. While Din is at times a classic pistolero, he also has a moral code to which he abides. This integrity is also important for reshaping the representation of minorities on screen and helping challenge the biased portrayal of colonial stereotypes of Othered character in American media.

The Mandalorian warrior code Din follows, based on honor, makes him kill enemies when necessary rather than for the sake of killing, contrary to what Xi’an speculates. Later in “Chapter 6: The Prisoner,” Din proves this quality. He opposes killing a guard on the Republic prison ship he is trying to rescue an inmate from—the mission objective. Din stands up against Mayfeld, saying, “We’re not killing anybody, you understand?” because eliminating people is not part of the mission. Upon finding and releasing the prisoner Xi’an, Mayfeld and the Devaronian alien

8. In the episode emerges that the character Xi’an seems to have collaborated with Din on several criminal jobs years prior and knows him very well.

Burg betrays Din and try to leave him behind on the prison ship. The Devaronian is another self-reference to *A New Hope* that exemplifies how *The Mandalorian* intertwines with the larger universe of the franchise. This species of alien is one of the most memorable in the brief Mos Eisley cantina scene for his two sets of horns and devilish resemblance that conveys the idea of pure evil. In dramatic sequences shot in the red light of the ship's activated alarm—a sign that the Republic forces are on their way—Din neutralizes each of the crew members. The way each sequence is shot and how they conclude seem to imply that he killed everyone out of revenge because of their betrayal, but a short frame at the end of the episode subverts the audience's expectation of how this version of the American myth should unfold—and disrupts the cowboy's typical vengeful narrative. Mayfeld's crew is shown in total dismay while locked up in the cell where the prisoner was kept—the Mandalorian spared all of them and brought them to justice. To complete the mission alone and cash Ran's money, Din is seen escaping with the prisoner who, unlike the Mandalorian, does not have a code of honor and does not care that his former crewmates, including his sister Xi'an, are captured by the Republic.

On the one hand, Din's refusal to use excessive violence reinstates the evolved Neo-Western's trend to represent the hero as someone who partakes in violence only when provoked, as John Wayne's last movie *The Shootist* (1976) suggests. In this version of the mythos "violence became more acceptable when it was symbolically denied" (Lawrence and Jewett 105). On the other hand, the fact that Din as a Othered character represents the Western hero who sticks to a higher code of behavior that guides his morality is representative of a more positive American heroic identity, as masculine and non-white, that the new *Star Wars* strives to portray through the genre's renovation. The new Western flourishing in *The Mandalorian* offers "an alternative framework that deterritorializes established traditions, displacing static myths with complex, intersecting strands" (Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West* 4). This storytelling process makes the notion of the hero more rounded by adding *chiaroscuros* to his depiction and challenging traditional masculine Western stereotypes. These challenges, as an important part of how the series re-distributes the American monomyth, have considerable potential to destabilize traditional American male heroic models.

4.4 Family Bonds: Mitigating Toxic Masculinity in the American Mythos

As analyzed so far, Din's role as a positive Othered hero with some grey areas is a game changer for contemporary media representations of the American myth. However, another important point of innovation in Din's portrayal of the American hero's masculinity is how he changes the motivations and the foundation of the hero's strength as part of his heroic journey. In the classic American heroic model, and in its underlying Campbellian myth, the male hero measures his self-worth and identity with his actions, or through external self-referential validations. Contrary to this model, Din builds his heroic persona from and gains strength through the familiar bonds he develops with an orphaned "Child," the fifty-year-old alien Grogu. As Lisa Cuklanz and Ali Erol write, Din's "primary concern is the well-being of the Child and the maintenance of their relationship" (557).

Although the motif of the warrior mentoring the orphan is well known to the cloak-and-sword Japanese genre and is therefore not particularly innovative, it helps re-write *The Mandalorian's* new Western genre by leading to a more humanized heroic protagonist. One of the images constantly re-purposed throughout *The Mandalorian* is Din being followed by Grogu in a floating pod, and it is summarized by one of Din's one catchphrases: "Wherever I go, he goes" ("Chapter 9: The Marshal" 4:46). The series reprises the 1970s Japanese series *Lone Wolf and Cub*, which is "the most direct nod to Japanese storytelling since Lucas took the Princess, General, and the bumbling comedy duo from Kurosawa's 1958 masterpiece [*The Hidden Fortress*] and threw them into the depths of space" (Knight par. 3). Unlike *The Mandalorian*, the protagonist of the *Lone Wolf*, however, is fueled by pursuing revenge on his enemies for the death of his wife, and in doing so, he follows a more traditional portrayal of mythical avenging heroism.

A difference between *The Mandalorian* and the Japanese series is the transformative relationship between Grogu and Din, which becomes the foundation for building a more heartwarming kind of American heroism. Din's classic "silent hero" persona is challenged by the meeting with Grogu. Clearly Din's mirroring image, the child reminds the Mandalorian of his unresolved childhood trauma and helps him emotionally challenge his "cowboy stiffness." In "Chapter 1: The Mandalorian" a short final sequence anticipates the transformative connection that the two characters develop. While looking for his coveted target on Arvala-7, the tracking fob leads Din and the assassin droid IG-11 to an old floating pod, disguised at the back of a

storage area. The camera, identifying with Din’s—and the audience’s—point of view and then switching to third-person perspective again, moves with anticipation towards the pod along with Din. The Mandalorian opens the pod, revealing a bundle of covers, while the camera moves slightly closer. Switching the camera perspective to behind the pod, where the audience can see a set of big ears framed against the dark, a surprised Din tells IG-11: “Wait! They said fifty years old...,” to which he replies: “Species age differently” (35:26-35-27). The camera shows a close-up of the pod, and a little hand moves the covers revealing Grogu, an infant belonging to the same species as Master Yoda (Figure 21).

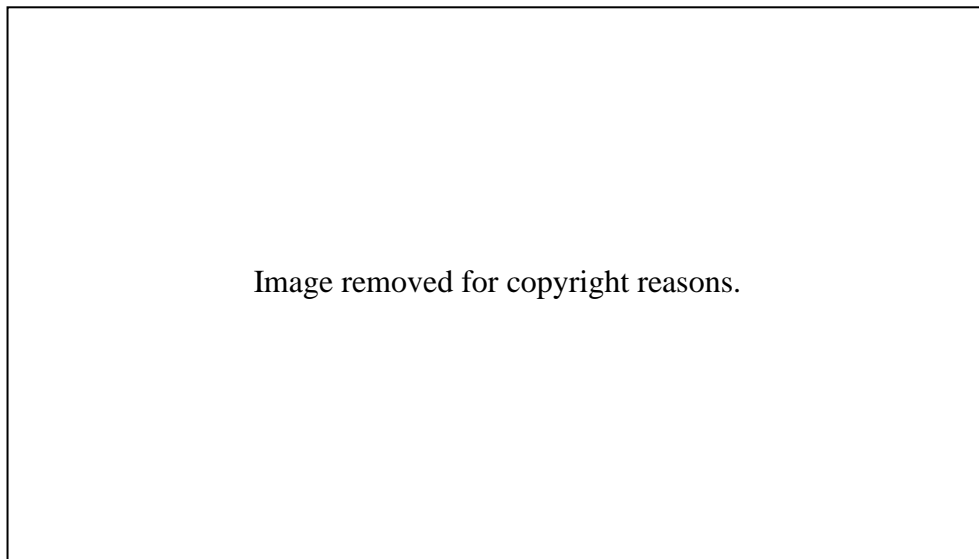


Fig. 4.7. Grogu’s first appearance in *The Mandalorian*. “Chapter 1: The Mandalorian.”

The way the shot is framed, slightly from above, makes “Baby Yoda’s” big eyes and ears dominate the screen, to evoke a sense of cuteness, frailty, and innocence, as well as triggering Din’s sense of protection. IG-11 wants to eliminate the creature, but Din refuses, suggesting that they should bring him back alive to the client. Without a word, a close-up of the Mandalorian’s helmeted, impassible face shows a sudden red light—he blasts the droid, symbolically representing the demise of his cold bounty-hunter side. The scene concludes with an iconic frame that anticipates the strong connection between Din and Grogu. The two characters, stylized in the dark, almost touch each others’ fingers (Figure 22). Frankel interprets the scene as one that “reclaim[s] Mando’s own innocent wonder” (141) through the lenses of the classic hero’s journey. However, this image also helps challenge the unemotional male stereotypes of the Western genre. The image intertextually recalls Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* and

preannounces Grogu and Din’s meeting as a life-changing moment. Symbolizing a Divine catalyst for change, Grogu “awakens” Din’s emotional, caring side suppressed in his life as a Mandalorian bounty hunter and re-writes the typification of the Western hero as a loner with no attachments.

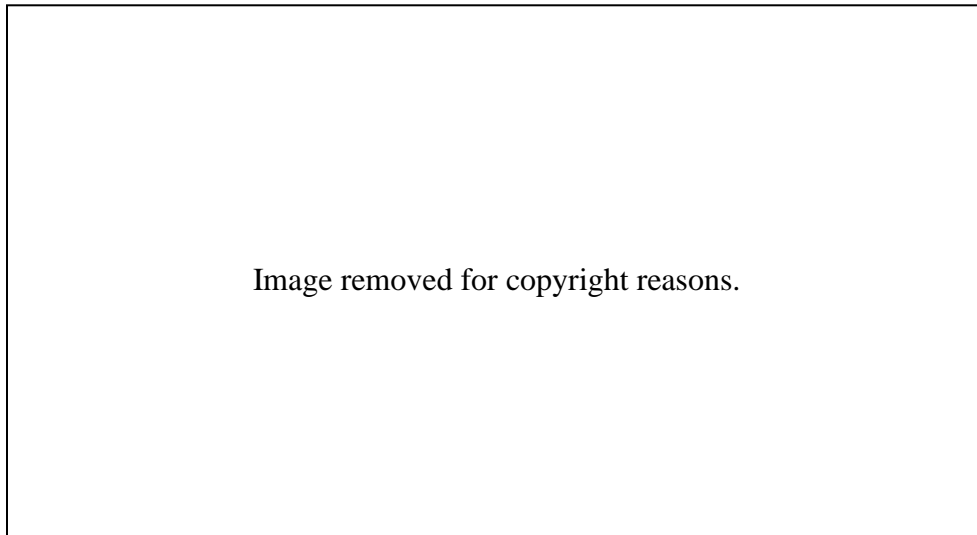


Fig. 4.8. The Mandalorian and Grogu touch hands. “Chapter 1: The Mandalorian” (*The Mandalorian*).

The characters’ connection is expanded in “Chapter 2: The Sinner.” When Din brings Grogu back to the client who commissioned the hunt, he is worried that he will be harmed, and seeing the child’s pod discarded in a back alley makes him have second thoughts about the ethics of selling an innocent child for money. He goes back to rescue Grogu, the same way he was rescued by Mandalorians in his childhood, using his freshly made “whistling birds” projectiles to eliminate former Stormtroopers.⁹ This apparently inconsequential narrative choice indicates that Grogu is so valuable to him that he sacrifices these mini missiles, which are rare in Mandalorian weapon-worshipping culture, to save the child. Din’s growing emotional attachment to Grogu develops as a form of self-projection: he cares for him because he sees himself in this Othered orphaned child hunted by unknown forces, as he once was. “Baby Yoda”’s Otherness to audiences and to Din is evident: he is a little green alien unable to verbally communicate, he is old but looks like a baby, he has no familial bonds. To American audiences, Grogu is also

9. “Whistling birds” are tiny missiles that Din can shoot from his gauntlet and explode upon contact. They have a tracking mechanism that binds them to the target.

familiar because he echoes the numerous Latin American migrant children who cross the U.S.-Mexican border illegally every year, and whose inhuman detention in designated facilities under Donald Trump's administration was a well-known fact to the American public by 2018.

Therefore, Disney uses this character, and *The Mandalorian's* neo-Western generic conventions more generally, to provide a commentary that could give audiences the opportunity to interpret how Otherness is negatively framed within the context of contemporary United States.

Din changes because of Grogu's influence. His objective switches primarily from bounty hunting, a self-serving money-making activity, to selflessly keeping the Child safe and ensuring his well-being.¹⁰ This change actively re-writes the classic Western male hero's motivations, a "functional concentration on civilized goals (i.e., the defense of property and Woman)" (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 301-302) that often led him to inhabit the "avenger" role rather than that of protector. In "Chapter 4: Sanctuary," Din sees Grogu peacefully playing with other children in a village on the planet Sorgan, and he initially intends to leave him behind because he's happy there. He tells mercenary Cara Dune: "I'm leaving him here. Travelling with me... That's no life for a kid. I did my job, he's safe. Better chance at a life" (31:41-31:53), even though, as Cara points out, "it's going to break his little heart" (31:59) because of his attachment to the

10. In season 2, Din's willingness to put the child before his cowboy values and warrior creed is summarized by his line: "Moff Gideon, you have something I want. You may think you have some idea of what you're in possession of, but you do not. Soon, he will be back with me. He means more to me than you will ever know." Din delivers the line with a deadly matter-of-fact tone as a hologram message to the villain Gideon, which cinematically enhances the dramatic moment. In "Chapter 15: The Believer," Din's goal of getting the codes for locating Gideon is his priority so that he can retrieve Grogu, whom Gideon kidnapped for experimenting because of his Force-sensitive DNA. While at the beginning of the first season of the series Din's belief in his heroic Mandalorian oath is unshakable, season two shows him putting his beliefs in perspective and accepting that is right to do anything necessary to keep his adopted child safe. He goes as far as taking off his beskar armour and wearing Imperial armor to infiltrate a hidden rhydonium refinery on Morak. Eventually, he breaks his Mandalorian oath by removing his helmet in front of Meyfeld and the officer Valin Hess in order to keep their cover. Mayfeld, who unexpectedly helps Din with retrieving the codes instead of betraying him as he did in "Chapter 6: The Prisoner," reinforces the idea that Din, like everyone else, is justified in leaving empty ideological beliefs aside to fight for the thing he cares the most—his family:

You said you couldn't take off your helmet off, and now you got a stormtrooper one on, so what's the rule? Is it you can't take off your Mando helmet, or you can't show your face? 'Cause there is a difference. Look, I'm just sayin', we're all the same. Everybody's got their line they don't cross until things get messy.

Mandalorian. He only changes his mind because he has not finished protecting him. A scene later in that episode shows Grogu as he is seen eerily through a bounty hunter's viewfinder to signify the little alien's everlasting role as an innocent target. More practically, Disney uses this dynamic to expand the story arc and give a more solid narrative motivation to continue the protector-heroic thread throughout the series. This narrative choice sets up a lucrative serialization for Disney that exemplifies the use of this trope as a money-making strategy and that re-distributes the American mythos.

Therefore, through *The Mandalorian* Disney offers the possibility of a new form of heroic storytelling. The representation of the myth in past products of the saga relied on the existence of an unchangeable American (Western) heroism to which one had to abide. This trope is initially imported into *The Mandalorian*, exemplified by mixing Han Solo's heroic classic features with the Way of Mandalore code of behavior. However, the show's serialization, which allows for a deeper character development, puts human relationships and protecting familial bonds at the centre of this revised ideology of heroism, one that focuses on the Other even when these bonds are not determined by blood as in Din and Grogu's case. The show is the sign that the United States is perhaps starting to come to terms with its complex colonial past by offering a heroic figure who would have been once depicted as the villain threatening social stability in the original Western. In other words, "the essence of adaptation and appropriation renders the mythical archetype specific, localized, and particular to the moment of the creation" (Sanders 71), and this process drives the re-writing of the ideological foundations of the American monomyth.

4.5 The Dark Side of the Moon: Playing with an Ambivalent—and Profitable— Heroic Model

Disney's use of Grogu in *The Mandalorian* keeps expanding the use of intertextuality as a process that re-envision American heroism of the Western mythos through different lenses that redefine the hero's identity. If we followed the classic structure of the Western movie, Grogu seems to inhabit the role of the Othered sidekick who often offers comic relief for the audiences. For example, in "Chapter 12: The Siege" the camera frames him in a tiny corridor of Din's Razor Crest as he is trying to help his "dad" fix the ship. However, despite Din's warning, Grogu lets two polarized wires touch and he gets an accidental electric shock. The camera cuts to Din surrounded by a cloud of smoke and then back to Grogu, who happily coos as if to say "All good! I am alive!". Later in the episode, Grogu's role as a "drama breaker" is expanded as he sits with

other children in school. When one of the kids refuses to give him macarons, Grogu uses the Force to steal the goodies. The camera takes its time filming him as he cutely (and mischievously) eats all the remaining biscuits. Mini stories such as these are disseminated throughout *The Mandalorian*. These scenes function as comedic relief within the larger storytelling of the show and often counter-balance Din's action-packed sequences and the *gravitas* of his heroic role. However, these *intermezzos* also evoke an infantilized portrayal of Otherness such as Tonto's in *The Lone Ranger* (both the 1956 and 2013 movies employ this trope) or animalistic Otherness, as Chewbacca exemplified in the classic *Star Wars* trilogy. Both Grogu and Chewbacca symbolize the colonial Other who appears subordinated to the main hero of the story in the strategic representations of the colonial discourse that tends to depict "the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest" (Bhabha, *The Other Question* 23). Chewie, while a positive character, is mostly an unintelligible "big walking carpet" (as Leia calls him in *A New Hope*) who in most scenes ends up being filtered through Han, the only one who understands him and translates for him. As a Othered character, Chewie is mostly framed in positions of support to Han's plans rather than being at the centre of the action, which reinforces his marginality.¹¹ Grogu is also in part marginalized because similarly to Chewbacca does not speak. He only expresses himself mainly by making sounds, which Din and other characters interpret according to their own perspectives, thus reiterating Spivak's idea of the unintelligible Other.

However, despite Grogu's at times controversial portrayal, he also actively resists these colonial models of subordination previously expressed in *Star Wars*. Because "the general mode for the postcolonial is citation, re-inscription, re-routing the historical" (Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* 217), the show often takes the Othered Grogu to centre stage through the re-writing of traditional heroic models. By having him behave like a white hero would, Disney turns the colonial discourse upside-down so that the subaltern can speak with his actions, if we were to rephrase Spivak's theorization. Echoing Din's selfless behavior, for example, Grogu's heroic persona emerges when he needs to defend the people he cares about. His selfless heroic qualities are mainly represented when he uses his special powers to help his friends at the cost of his own

11. Examples include when Chewie is instructed to "fly casually" to deflect Imperial forces in *A New Hope*, or when he impersonates a captive of Princess Leia—disguised as the bounty hunter Boushh—to be handed over to Jabba The Hutt in order to save Han from prison in *The Return of The Jedi*.

well-being—a self-sacrificing heroic attitude common in both the American mythos and the previous movies in the saga, as exemplified by (white heroes) Rey and Luke (see Chapter 1 of this dissertation).

In “Chapter 2: The Child,” for example, Grogu does not hesitate to use the Force to stop a giant mudhorn charging at Din to give him time to kill it. By using a close-up of Grogu’s tiny hand lifted and a sudden cut to the charging animal, the camera affirms the child’s heroic moment. The mudhorn seems unable to move and slowly floats in the air. The next frame shows again Grogu with his eyes closed and his little hand lifted, evoking the pose of the classic (*Star Wars*) savior that re-inscribes the traditional positive heroic features of the American mythos, as well as the Orientalist trope of the mysterious sensei. Although the effort of using the Force is too much for Grogu, evidence by his visible shaking, he selflessly perseveres until Din is safe. The little alien ends up passing out in his pod for several hours as a result of the effort. These images allude to Master Yoda, the other notable member of Grogu’s alien species, whose tiny body conceals the mightiness of his powers. The sequence seems to adapt a similar one featuring Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*. In that scene, Yoda, eyes closed and hand lifted (Figure 23), effortlessly pulls out Luke’s X-Wing starship from a swamp to show the young Skywalker how the Force works. However, Grogu’s scene is in fact a significant rewriting of the takes of pre-Disney *Star Wars* on Othered characters. Yoda’s presence is a supportive role, like Chewbacca for Han, as a functional character for the hero’s heroic journey and self-discovery rather than having validity of its own, whereas Grogu’s actions directly result in his becoming the *de facto* hero of the story.

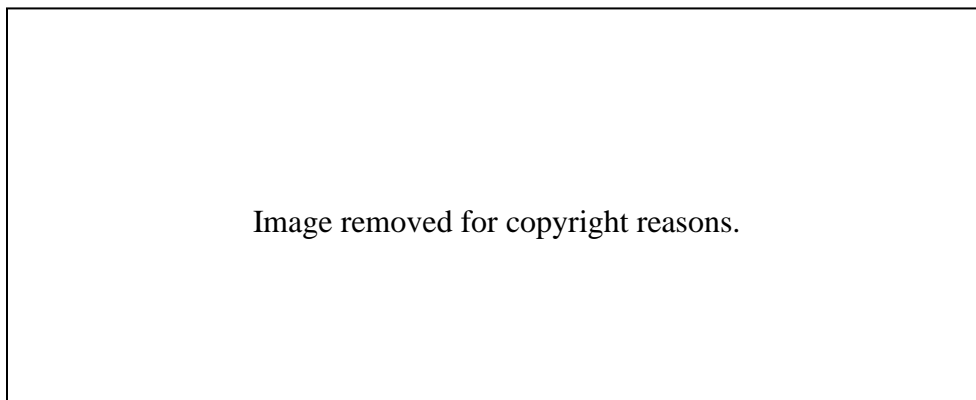


Fig. 4.9. Grogu uses the Force on the Mudhorn (off-camera). “Chapter 2: The Child” (*The Mandalorian*).

The differences between Grogu and Yoda also explain the intertextual processes at work in the show that help reinforce Disney's role as a re-inventor of American mythical storytelling. Grogu is a nostalgic reference to the old *Star Wars*. Although Grogu has been designed to attract younger audiences, his subtextual connection with Yoda aims to re-capture the attention of older generations already familiar with the *Star Wars* franchise. *The Mandalorian* does so by playing on the thread of nostalgia. It uses a parallelism between Grogu and Yoda as enigmatic figures who are "intertextual fairy-tailish" magic aids and narrative disruptors. In an interview, George Lucas said that Yoda "is a mystery character. He's a magical character. He has no background. He comes and he goes. He's the subversive secret mysterious stranger that enters the film and then exits at the end." Grogu mirrors these aspects in his inability to talk and share his story, which helps perpetuate the fairy-tale mystery behind Grogu as an orphaned child-hero—the staple trope of many traditional myths.¹² This connection with Master Yoda also highlights the fundamental mechanism of re-incorporating older storytelling tropes and references into contemporary cultural production, which could be interpreted through Fredric Jameson's idea of reclaiming a "pastness" that induces nostalgia in older audiences. As Shannon Symonds, a curator at the Strong National Museum of Play, says: "There's something about [Yoda] that connects with people, no matter who you are or what your age is" (Klara 23). Adults see a version of a beloved childhood character under a new, yet similar, guise, and therefore, Grogu

12. After two seasons, the audience knows little of Grogu's planet of origin or family, though some of his backstory is revealed in "Chapter 13: The Jedi," a storytelling choice that contributes to keeping this character surrounded by mystery. In the episode, Din finds the Jedi Ahsoka Tano, Anakin Skywalker's former padawan, to fulfill his promise to "reunite [the Child] with his own kind," [...] "an order of sorcerers called Jedi" ("Chapter 8: Redemption"), as the Mandalorian Armorer told Din to do. Ahsoka is another intertextual reference the show makes to the larger universe—*The Clone Wars* series in this case—reinforcing its connectedness to the saga as a whole. As Force users, Ahsoka and Grogu share conversations by reading each other's thoughts. She is the one to disclose that he "was trained on the Jedi temple on Coruscant and many Masters trained him over the years. At the end of the Clone Wars, when the Empire rose to power, he was hidden. Someone took him from the Temple, [...]" Also, this revealed connection with the Jedi order places Grogu within the mythic heroic legacy of the exceptional Force-sensitive heroes of *Star Wars*. Grogu's special powers are in this version of a Galaxy Far, Far Away rare, and Din and most of *The Mandalorian's* characters are not able to comprehend them. Conversely, this reference is an intertextual game that Disney designs with its audiences, who immediately recognize the connections with the larger *Star Wars* universe, but also uses this trope as part of intertextual processes of mythic re-inscription and innovation to re-popularize both the franchise and Western genre.

fulfills “a deep [...] longing to experience [*Star Wars*] again” (Jameson 169) by evoking Yoda’s mythical features.

Grogu continues on the trajectory of re-incorporating past mythical tropes by replicating the traditional self-sacrificing savior model already deployed with Luke in the classic *Star Wars* and with Rey in the new trilogy. As for these characters, Disney seems to ingrain Grogu’s uniqueness—or better, heroic exceptionality, if we follow the traditional definitions of heroism in the American mythos—to associate his heroic status with special superhuman abilities and selflessness. In “Chapter 7: The Reckoning,” Grogu is framed by the camera as his tiny figure slowly approaches Karga, who was poisoned and about to die, and he lays his hand on the man’s arm to use his healing powers. The scene is framed by music that conveys expectation and builds up Grogu’s intervention as a savior. However, the use of the Force puts strain on Grogu. Force healers “pour their own life energy into it, healing the target, although at the expenditure of the user’s own vitality,” as Wookieepedia reports (Force Healing par. 1). The persistence of heroic self-sacrifice means, on the one hand, that traditional modes of storytelling are still prevalent in Disney’s depiction of the American mythos and that, on the other hand, these modes are finally attributed to characters who were once left at the margins, thus actively challenging the traditional representation of the colonial discourse in American media.

However, Disney does not aim to create a model that offers an unattainable vision of heroism as the classic American myth implied. The company’s mythical re-writing moves Grogu away from the uni-dimensional portrayal of the American Western mythos to a humanized character who helps democratize the idea of heroism by assuming that heroes are fallible and, therefore, can do bad things, too. Like Din’s heroic ambivalence, Grogu mirrors his placement as an in-between figure characterized by grey areas—he is a sweet Othered Force-sensitive orphan, but with a dark side. This topic is addressed in some scenes in the series that seem to invoke trite heroic tropes but in fact hide deeper implications about heroism. In “Chapter 8: Redemption,” Grogu, Din, Karga and Cara Dune end up trapped by Moff Gideon in a building as they refuse to give up the child and stormtroopers end up using a flamethrower to trap them in the building. Grogu once more uses his Force powers. The scene is shot in a celebratory way that enhances the heroic moment. The camera frames his small figure from behind as he steps in front of his friends and a huge ball of flames approaches him in slight slow motion, with cuts to his friends’ worried faces. As Grogu raises his hands and closes his eyes to use the Force, an epic tone frames the

scene to enhance the heroic momentum and to highlight the mightiness of his powers. He effortlessly diverts the flames at the soldiers, killing a few of them.

Grogu does not appear to show any remorse for killing the soldiers, as if doing so were simply a natural act needed to protect Din and his friends. Although Grogu is fifty years old, the fact that he is presented as a child problematically introduces a thin ideological line surrounding heroic deeds and who does them. By justifying doing bad actions in the name of heroism, the show disturbingly provides perhaps more susceptible younger audiences with the messaging that violence is an acceptable route when family and friends are threatened by external forces. This complication emerges in the scene where Grogu sees Din and Cara arm wrestling. A quick back and forth of medium camera shots of the three characters builds up momentum and foreshadows that something is about to happen. Grogu is seen staring intently at the two, and with a sudden evil look fissuring his eyes, he uses a Force-choke move on Cara, who is framed by the camera gasping for air—an indication of Grogu’s dangerousness and unpredictability. Grogu releases her because Din, worried, says, “No! No! Stop! We’re friends, we’re friends. Cara is my friend!” (“Chapter 7: The Reckoning” 13:59- 14:12), but Grogu shows no remorse for his deed. The show adapts Darth Vader’s famous choke move to create an eerie assonance and insinuate doubt in the audience’s mind that Grogu may not be the perfect heroic figure one would expect him to be. His use of violence is gratuitous in this scene and implies that, although heroic figures may have good qualities, Disney’s iteration of the American hero may have significant flaws, a choice that provides further evidence of the company’s role at the forefront of contemporary cultural re-invention of mythical storytelling.

Taking advantage of the serialized nature of the show, which allows Disney to re-visit and expand storylines, a scene between Grogu and Ahsoka introduces *a posteriori* an unconvincing hint that may explain Grogu’s anti-heroic behavior by adducing it to a difficult past. She says that after the Jedi persecution “his memory becomes...Dark. He seemed lost, alone.” Later, she says “he’s hid his abilities to survive over the years” (“Chapter 13: The Jedi” 19:36-23:17), detecting much anger and fear in him. By showing Grogu’s anti-heroic behavior, *The Mandalorian* implies that heroism, once an unquestioned essential trait of the American mythos, is also ideologically debatable. In this way, mythic representations become more democratized because audiences can more easily relate them to the *chiaroscuros* of human experience. However, the fact that this new

information about Grogu appears almost at the end of Season 2 suggests that Disney's complication of mythical heroism comes as something of an afterthought.

However, if on the one hand, Grogu's anti-heroic behavior is helpful to ideologically challenge the myth, on the other hand, this complicates the good work the show does of dismantling the stereotypes of the colonial discourse that frame the Other as the incarnation of evil. This dichotomy also confirms Disney's fluid position as a company constantly negotiating hegemonic positions within its most recent *Star Wars* cultural products: the company juggles to balance the needs of audiences more aware of issues of identity politics ethnic issues with old ideological patterns well naturalized in its cinematic storytelling, as well as in pre-Disney *Star Wars* stories. Discourses of inclusivity are becoming more prominent in American society, and therefore, the mythic representations of *Star Wars* are also working to create a new "sense of collective cultural capital" (Geraghty, "Creating and Comparing Myth" 192) while continuing their basic function as a glue of national identity. However, the controversial placement of Grogu within a grey area of heroism is further complicated by his Otherness as an alien, displaced child. The potential risk for Disney is to appear to use diversity as a tokenization strategy to commercially popularize this character and the show with younger age groups in its attempt to modernize the *Star Wars* franchise and "keep it up" with the changed times. The diverse group of families, children and young adults who are the target audience of *The Mandalorian* find appealing that "Baby Yoda," as an ethnically diverse child they can easily relate to, becomes the unofficial protagonist of the series. Adults feel protective about him, and children want to play with him in his toy version.

Grogu is by definition an objectified "Other." As a miracle of Disney's technology, he is a (very expensive) sophisticated toy: he is an animatronic doll designed to look like a toddler (Figure 24), a sixteen-inch green creature with big eyes and ears and tiny mouth and nose. He is animated by a team of puppeteers who excel at making him simulate emotions through head tilts, cooing and small gestures that at time resemble those of a cat or a puppy to visually and audibly convey the idea of "cuteness" to the audience. Actor and director Werner Herzog, who plays the Client hiring Din to hunt Grogu in on behalf of Moff Gideon in "Chapter 1: The Mandalorian," has defined the puppet "heartbreakingly beautiful" (Sharf par. 3), and he felt it was so realistic that he even started directly directing the puppet because he thought everyone on set "should commit to the magic" (Sharf par. 2) of thinking he was alive.

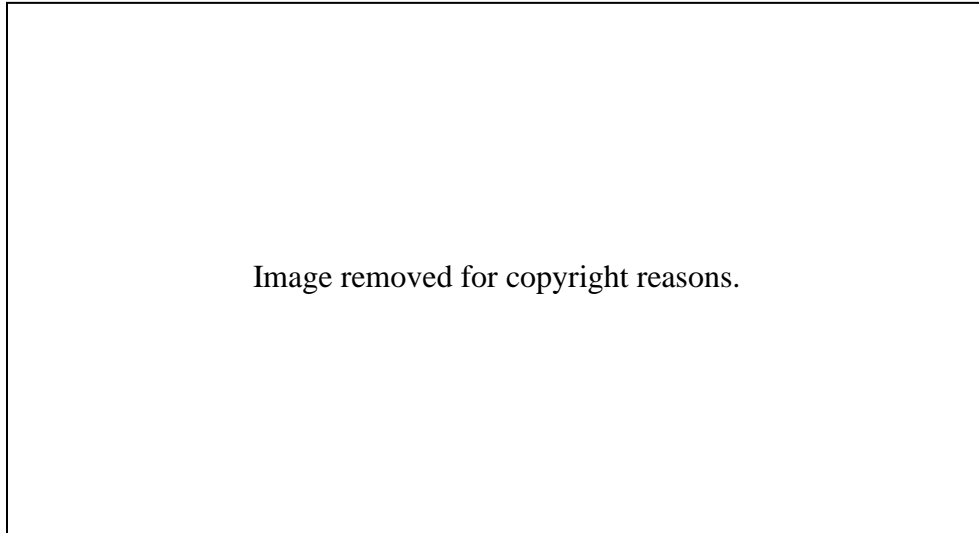


Fig. 4.10. A puppeteer moves the Grogu animatronic doll. "Making of Season 2 Finale," *Disney Gallery Star Wars: The Mandalorian*.

So, what does it mean to attribute the contradictory definers of American heroic identity to a doll? Having a very sophisticated animatronic puppet able to simulate effectively heroic traits and behaviors reinforces the concept that mythical storytelling has become a deeply mechanized process intertwined with experimental technologies. These technologies seem to have become the sole deliverers of myth in contemporary Western cultures. Like "The Volume," the Grogu doll's simulation of realistic behavior actively contributes to making the experience (and delivery) of mythical storytelling as immersive as it can be for the cast interacting with the child-like puppet, resulting in performances that are more convincing and emotionally charged for the audiences. Pedro Pascal summarizes this effect well by saying that Grogu is able to engage everyone at a very deep level because he "activates your primal childhood dreams" ("Practical Effects" 16:03), perhaps responding to the evocative core functions of mythical storytelling. However, one may question the implications that simulating, "materializing" and "objectifying" heroic ideologies through a doll may have, as it perhaps uncovers the artifice of heroism as an ideological construction in American culture. Disney's use of the Grogu puppet as a beacon for American heroic values, which can be reproduced in large scale for the audiences' possession, also further indicates the fundamental commodification of contemporary mythical storytelling.

Therefore, the re-distribution of the American mythos appears to be tightly connected with commodifying processes of cultural production. These processes are not new for a franchise such as *Star Wars*, which has capitalized on merchandise and action figures since its inception.

However, these processes also highlight the materialist mechanisms that are leading the re-popularization of mythical storytelling through serialized products such as *The Mandalorian*. Grogu has become literally an overnight sensation. Using traditional marketing strategies, the series creator's Jon Favreau pushed for Grogu's existence—and merchandise—to be kept a secret “to ensure that fans wouldn't expect Baby Yoda's reveal in the series' first episode because toy catalogues often ended up spoiling large surprises for other projects” (Hersko par. 7). Favreau openly opposed Disney's corporate-oriented tendency of jumping on distributions to pump up the attention for the release of *Star Wars* movies and series. This different marketing approach for *The Mandalorian* doubled the hype (and revenues) of the company over the long-term because the sense of surprise both triggered the success of the serialization, contributing to “gain the streaming platform over 94.9 million subscribers” (WION Web Team par. 2), and also generated an unmet product desire with audiences who could not immediately buy “Baby Yoda” toys.

The Grogu puppet, along with its toy-replicas, in part make the “mythical” lose its ephemeral, mysterious nature. With its memorable quirks, the Grogu doll makes heroism more “tangible” and “real” by turning it into something that not only can people be, but an object they can also possess. The show itself used its episodic nature to contribute to the commodification of the renewed myth fuelling the “Baby Yoda hype” in every episode with dedicated “Baby Yoda moments.” The series particularly teases children's fantasies of having Grogu as a toy-friend, a move that may be interpreted as a smart and subtle advertisement for the toy sale, while aligning with the series' narrative arc. Grogu swallowing frogs and “Baby Yoda” sipping broth have both become familiar images for children, who can replicate at home the little alien's cute motions and adventures with the objects from the show that many of the Grogu action figurines comes with.¹³

13. In “Chapter 4: Sanctuary,” Grogu ends up with Din in a small village on the planet Sorgan while hiding from other bounty hunters. Here, Grogu befriends a group of local children. They look after him as he plays with a fish, seemingly developing a genuine attachment. When he tries to hilariously swallow a whole live frog in a subsequent scene—something he did already in “Chapter 2: The Child,”—he spits the animal out upon seeing the children's disgust. Many of the Grogu action figures and dolls often come with a small frog, so that children can replicate the “disgusting” experience at home like their on-screen counterparts. Another iconic scene in the same episode involves Baby Yoda sipping broth. The camera frames Grogu between Din and mercenary Cara Dune's arms as they are blocking each other on the ground after a long fight scene. Staring at them, Grogu looks unbothered while sipping a small cup of broth. The two characters stare back at him as they hear him loudly sipping the liquid to interrupt them, as if he

The audiences responded to the show by boosting further the hype for “Baby Yoda” toys as they turned Grogu into a ubiquitous Internet presence through social media posts and fan art, which served as free, bottom-up advertising for “Baby Yoda”’s merch sales in the months before the release of the products. *The New York Times* writer James Poniewozik summarizes this “Baby Yoda” craze very well:

Baby Yoda, all week on my social media and news feeds. Baby Yoda GIFs and Baby Yoda memes. Baby Yoda messing with the control panel of Mando’s spaceship. Baby Yoda raising a tiny hand to summon the Force. Baby Yoda, berobed and enigmatically sipping broth, the cup digitally altered to say, “My house / My rules / My coffee.” And this, I realized, is what “The Mandalorian” really is—at least from the standpoint of what TV is becoming in the year 2019. “The Mandalorian” is merely the ship. Baby Yoda is the cargo. (par. 9-10)

The appropriation practices of drawing from *The Mandalorian* “master text” to create memes and fan art show how not only are intertextual practices vital for Disney’s cultural production but also for audiences’ bottom-up processes of cultural participation in spreading the mythical storytelling of the saga through new media. This process contrasts with the idea that “cultural consumers [are] passive and malleable automatons who inevitably fall prey to a direct injection of dominant ideology via media and cultural products” (Demont-Heinrich 667). Viewers contribute to propagating the American myth by repurposing Grogu through memes and social media images, a process that makes them active participants in the democratization of the mythos. Julie Sanders discusses this intertextual process of active absorption and reworking by audiences and readers: “Each moment of reception is individual and distinct, albeit governed by manifold conventions and traditions, by prior knowledges and previous texts: the old story becomes in this respect a very new one, told—and read—for the first time” (81).

4.6 Conclusions

In the nineteenth century the technologies of the railroad and of the telegraph symbolized the pioneers’ “civilizing work” in the West. As new ways of connecting people across the United States, these technologies paved the way for shaping the myth of the Frontier “as a place of windfall profit, of plenty, of magic, of positive transformation” (Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*

is saying, “what is all the fuss about this?” This image is used as another humorous interlude in the action-packed episode, consolidating Grogu’s role as a comic relief with audiences.

41). In *The Mandalorian* the use of both the Grogu puppet and “The Volume” plays a similar role, delineating how the medium and technologies through which we tell stories are central to spreading new forms of mythical storytelling with shifted ideologies. These technologies, expressions of capitalist modes of cultural production, have become the vectors through which *The Mandalorian* re-routes and develops the new ideologies at the core of the modernized American mythos: the practice of ethnicizing protagonists striving for inclusivity and the practice of commodifying merchandising to engage audiences with mythical storytelling. As analyzed earlier in this Chapter, “The Volume” accomplishes this process by simulating alien landscapes, while the “Baby Yoda puppet” fosters the re-writing of the myth with its unique way of engaging with audiences by rekindling nostalgia for Master Yoda.

The Grogu puppet delivers the message of an Othered character who embodies (more or less controversial) heroic traits and, therefore, becomes the vehicle for Disney to disseminate, and at the same time commodify, the new portrayal of mythical (imperfect) heroic models. This framework culturally reinforces the possibility of reaching a more humanized hero who may cater to a more diverse American identity and who can actively challenge toxic masculine behaviors. *The Mandalorian* is a product of the “globalization of culture [that] ultimately conceives culture as highly fluid, malleable, and fundamentally hybrid” (Demont-Heinrich 670). This shapeshifting quality, founded on processes of intertextual re-writing and repurposing of Western tropes as well as the traditional cowboy “Han Solo model” in the saga, makes the show fertile ground for questioning the ideological foundations of the American monomyth. As in John Ford’s Western movies, the Neo Western *The Mandalorian* revolves around characters with “a spectrum of identities and differences” (Shohat 216), but the series, while sometimes hegemonic, uses this diversity—and the Grogu puppet—to turn the colonial discourse upside down.

As addressed in this chapter, this counter-colonial re-writing has also been achieved through the Western settings of the show and thanks to the videogame-like technique of “the Volume” that both evokes and challenges the ambience of the classic Western movies by making the settings alien and Othered, but also familiar to audiences. Because the landscape becomes the extension of the civilizing work of the Western hero in the classic myth, “The Volume” and its simulated *mise-en-scène* are inherently connected to the re-writing of the American mythos. By Othering the scenography of *The Mandalorian*, this technology creates fertile ground for shifting traditional heroic traits and attributing them to characters who were Othered, dismissed, and

marginalized in previous instances of the *Star Wars* saga. This embrace of inclusivity, which resulted in an extremely positive public response, showcases the attempt to inject new life into the franchise to engage with and directly address diversified audiences who belong to marginalized groups and to challenge the predominance of heroic whiteness as the paradigm of the American mythos.¹⁴ Although some narrative and representational choices in *The Mandalorian* are part of Disney's money-making practices for revamping the franchise, as it did with the new trilogy and with *Forces of Destiny*, the show also proves the genuine survival of mythical storytelling in contemporary American media. *The Mandalorian*'s heroes are imperfect beings who have light and shadows in them and, therefore, they are closer to human experience than any *Star Wars* character have ever been. *Star Wars* has once more a great story to tell.

14. For more information about the popularity of the show see Bacon, "The Mandalorian Might Have Been Too Successful For Disney."

Conclusion

Previous scholarship produced about myths in *Star Wars* mainly focuses on identifying connections with the traditional monomyth and the hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell. My dissertation has expanded the analysis of *Star Wars* to look at how the saga connects with both the traditional monomyth and the American (Western) mythos. My work has showed that processes of re-writing and cultural adaptation are central to understanding the evolution of these myths. I have also explained that mythical heritage in *Star Wars* has evolved from celebrating exclusively white male heroism into heroic models for American viewers that embrace more ethnic diversity and modern views on gender, however flawed and frustratingly contradictory. This change signifies a potential shift in the way America tells stories about its foundational myths and, hence, about the way it constructs its identity as an imagined community and, especially, how contemporary media view masculinity and femininity.

My dissertation has shed light on how the mythical storytelling in the most recent *Star Wars* products such as movies, *The Mandalorian* and *Forces of Destiny* helps disrupt traditional ideologies of male- and white-centred heroic models. The traditional American mythos constructs American identity on a masculine typification of heroism that celebrates allegedly infallible, trigger-happy, "macho men" figures who save the day against corrupted powers (Han Solo) or those violent male characters who *become* tainted powers (Anakin Skywalker). Conversely, Din Djarin in *The Mandalorian* questions toxic heroic traits to offer a portrayal of an American masculine self who positively represents an Othered group, who is still manly but not afraid of becoming vulnerable, and who changes his self-serving behaviors because of friendship and family. Aspen Nelson comments that this new representation of heroism "will encourage the

toxic [*Star Wars*] fanboys who only want masculine characters to see that masculinity comes in a vast array of shapes, sizes and colors” (par. 8).

The mythical representations of heroines in *Forces of Destiny* and the new *Star Wars* movies also challenge the subjugation of women in the traditional American myth, which reflected their ancillary position to men within American culture. Disney’s *Star Wars* women fight the misogynistic traits of the traditional, Puritanical heroine-Princesses as they embark on action-packed, yet imperfect, quests to reclaim their centrality in mythical narratives once only dominated by male heroes and to show that they can be as impactful as men to define American identity. However, this ideological change has not been exempt from backlash, as “Hollywood’s shift from focusing on yet another man’s experience to a woman in a leading role of hero is a hard pill for some men to swallow” (Hatzipanagos par. 7). This kind of reception suggests that representational changes striving for balance in gender equality are resisted by the most conservative fringes of American society, while other more accepting groups try to embrace them.

Regardless of the contradictory reception of the new *Star Wars*, I envision the mythical changes in the saga as a signifier that the adaptable polysemy of myths—their flexibility in incorporating new meanings—has been key to the process of ideological shifting. Also, my analysis has pointed to the idea that this process of mythical re-distribution and revival becomes possible by adopting, as in Disney’s case, cultural production mechanisms that rely heavily on media technologies and commercialized products that keep relaying stories to multiple audiences and through different forms. Therefore, my findings point to the conclusion that heroic models have become a “consumable” paratext that turn myths into materialistic possessions, as my analysis of the *Star Wars* “Princesses” dolls and the Grogu puppet has suggested. The upcoming *Star Wars* products currently in the pipelines will be in line with both re-writing myths under new lenses and with commodifying mythical storytelling itself for audiences. Therefore, my research will be helpful to provide the basis to further analyze the re-distribution of myths and ideologies in American culture.

My work will be helpful in looking at, for example, *The Book of Boba Fett*, released in December 2021. The show is once more a good indicator of Disney’s increased reliance on commercialized re-writing processes. Like *The Mandalorian*, this show centers around the adaptation of the American monomyth. Featuring Temuera Morrison as the titular character, *The*

Book re-writes the cowboy gunslinger trope in the Tatooine desert. This basic plot indicates that the saga's return to the desert means a constant return of American culture to adapt the myth of the American Frontier. The series is a spin-off from Fett's appearance in *The Mandalorian* and the character got his own show because he is an extremely popular character within the fandom. Both reasons suggest that Disney will keep relying on capitalizing mythical storytelling in the future. Also, the show proves to be a further example of democratizing and embracing diverse heroism. Morrison said he drew from his Maori background to shape Boba's warrior attitude using his haka and traditional staff-fighting knowledge on screen, as seen already in *The Mandalorian*. This background will most certainly help capitalize on and re-write the bounty hunter Fett as a more complex, ethnically diverse character and, thus, will contribute to show that Othered groups can be heroes of stories, not just villains.¹

The mythical re-writing of heroic female figures seems to follow the same trajectory. *The Book* includes a co-protagonist lead woman who is also ethnically diverse. The cast choice for Fett's business partner, mercenary and assassin Fennec Shand, who also appeared in *The Mandalorian*, is American-Chinese-Malaysian actress Ming-Na Wen. Her character's reception indicates that although a fringe of male fans resisted accepting more heroines in *Star Wars* (see Rey's case), the views around empowered gender representation are now more positive. Wen confirmed she felt "genuinely emotional as well as such a satisfying relief that [her] character is well received, because the *Star Wars* fans are very, very strong in their opinions and they know what they like" (Huver par. 11).

As in *The Mandalorian's* case, *The Book of Boba Fett* replicates the modalities of mythical distribution through serialized products on Disney+ streaming platform that allows for an expansive, branched adaptation of the American mythos, along with themed products such as toys that commercialize it.² This development with *The Book* proves to be consistent with my findings about myths becoming an extension of consumerist media experiences, and Disney will likely repeat the formula with other TV productions. For example, although there is currently little information about Disney's upcoming *Obi-Wan Kenobi* series (2022), it seems likely that

1. See Johnson, "Temuera Morrison Brought his Maori Culture to Boba Fett and it Couldn't Have Been a Better Move."

2. Before the release of *The Book of Boba Fett*, the toy company Hasbro has announced Boba Fett and Fennec Shand's themed action figures as part of *Star Wars: The Black Series* collection to support the release of the series. See Cranswick.

the show will return to reflect upon the meaning of heroic masculinity in American culture. The series will focus on the Jedi Obi-Wan in the years he watched over Luke on Tatooine during the rise of the Empire. Again, the seemingly constant return to Tatooine as the American Frontier expresses further the circularity of the American culture that returns to re-write classic notions of heroism.

More shows seem set to follow this course of exploring mythos under new lenses of gender and ethnic diversity in the next couple of years. These include *Ahsoka*, another *The Mandalorian* spin-off with Cuban-American Rosario Dawson playing the Jedi titular character; *Andor*, spin-off of the movie *Rogue One* featuring Mexican Diego Luna reprising his role as Cassian Andor; and *Lando*, focusing on the scoundrel Lando Calrissian, which will place at the center of the story a Black protagonist in the titular character.³ Although little is known about these series at the moment of writing, the main characters and casting choices reveal shifts in the ideological representations of heroes in American media. Therefore, my dissertation will help future scholarship compare and contrast the future heroic or anti-heroic models to be offered by Disney's *Star Wars*. My work will help identify whether ideological shifts in these products are consistent with the changes addressed in this work, as well as to study how the mythical commodification processes will evolve along future media products of the saga.

3. For more information about upcoming *Star Wars* productions see Shepherd and Edwards, "Every new *Star Wars* Movie and TV Show Confirmed So Far."

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