Let the Past Die: Killing the Gender Binary.

"A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away"—cue John Williams *Star Wars* theme—George Lucas created the world of Star Wars (1977); with the release of the first film, "A New Hope", a movement began that set into motion a new way to perceive and produce film, politics, gender, and culture. Star Wars, classified as a science fiction series, created a microcosm of American culture masked in the special effects of a galaxy far away: a clear lens of right and wrong (dark and light, Jedi and Sith), and a sense of hope in which the minority (the rebels/resistance) will always prevail against the evil reigns of capitalism (the Empire).

Star Wars' vast reach through the decades has been unavoidable with three trilogies—1977-1983, 1999-2005, 2015-2019—seven tv shows, 380 books and graphic novels, 140 games, and a countless amount of merchandize. The influential power Star Wars has cannot be denied. Since the Disney franchise bought the Star Wars franchise in 2012 for over 4 billion dollars (Business Insider), the series has been using its influential power to morph into a truly revolutionized push for gender and ethnic equality.

The beloved original trilogy inspires a sense of longing for many fans and critics, yet Disney's first *Star Wars* film, "The Force Awakens", disappointed many by following the same story arc as the original trilogy. The second film, "The Last Jedi", however, seemed to try to rebel against the originals by showing aspects of the arc, especially the gendered arc, and then having the stereotypical male hero fail—old and new. The newest film, "The Last Jedi", written and directed by Rian Johnson, repeats the phrase/idea "let the past die; kill it if you have to". Looking at the film, we see how Johnson not only kills the past beliefs about *Star Wars* as a whole, but he overtly critiques and modifies the gendered archetypes of the original trilogy.

"The Last Jedi" begins by panning down onto a planet which holds the last of the resistance base (the good guys); the camera zooms in on a female officer—Carrie Fisher's daughter, Billie Catherine Lourd—commanding the rest of the fleet to escape the planet before it explodes by a blast from the New Order (the bad guys). Our attention is then brought to one of the new leading male characters, Poe Dameron, who decides to blow up the opposing ships, against orders from General Leia. Dameron orders an attack, consisting of four men and three female pilots, on a suicide mission to take down the New Order's main ship, the Dreadnought. The attack loses the resistance's entire bombing fleet, but they destroyed the ship.

A cocky heroic pilot who disobeys orders to blow up a huge ship that destroyed a planet follows the exact story arc of many of the past films: Luke blows up the Death Star, Luke blows up the second Death Star, Poe blows up the Star Killer Base (a third Death Star). The fascinating element Johnson changes is that Poe Dameron is not looked at as a hero; instead, he is demoted by Leia:

LEIA: You're demoted.

POE: What? Wait! We took down a dreadnought.

LEIA: At what cost?

POE: If you start an attack, you follow through.

LEIA: Poe, get your head out of your cockpit. There are things you can not solve... By jumping into an X-wing and blowing something up! I need you to learn that.

POE: There were heroes on that mission.

LEIA: Dead heroes, No leaders". (Johnson)

Poe represents the past arc, "the male hero", and Leia represents the new hero: empathic, reasonable, and the ability to see the bigger picture of a situation—the attack lost their whole

fleet. Johnson shows Poe Dameron doing everything right for the "alpha male" archetype, yet Dameron fails.

Poe Dameron's character presents the old stereotype of the heroic male. In an article by Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden titled "Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar", the authors examine the male archetype and show the progression of the alpha male into the "new man". Gillam and Wooden present a strong claim, explaining how Disney/Pixar has evolved the previous two-dimensional male, the "alpha male", by creating a more complex male breaking the gender norms. The "new male" first endures emasculation. Gillam and Wooden, then, examine the "homosocial" connections these protagonists develop, which is when two males bond over the objectification of a female/female figure. "With the strength afforded by these homosocial intimacies, the male characters triumph over their respective plots, demonstrating the desirable modifications that Pixar makes to the alpha-male model" (Gillam and Wooden 6). By showing an emotional bond, these characters are now allowed to have depth in their journey: a more three-dimensional character.

We can see Gillam and Wooden's "homosocial" arc of the "alpha-male" with the original trilogy: Luke Skywalker and Han Solo bond over their infatuation towards Princess Leia. Both of their actions are defined by the desires of Princess Leia: Leia is a part of the rebels, Han and Luke join the rebels; Leia is passionate about the galaxy, Han and Luke gain passion for the galaxy. Yet, we never see the "new man" because these characters are never emasculated, nor do we see them using emotions or asking for help—they win by using "macho force" to blow things up, as we see with Poe Dameron.

The original character, Han, is killed off by his son, the new main villain Kylo Ren, because he was weak. Johnson has Kylo Ren go through a similar "new male" archetype that

Gillam and Wooden express, which also blurs the line of protagonist and antagonist. During one of the first acts of "The Last Jedi", Kylo Ren is emasculated by the "Supreme Leader Snoke", a two-dimensional male antagonist, because of the "weakness" in emotions that Kylo Ren shows. In the previous installment Kylo Ren was defeated by the "girl" Rey. Snoke brings Kylo Ren into his chambers to question him about a failed battle:

> SNOKE: Hmm. The mighty Kylo Ren. When I found you, I saw what all masters live to see: Raw, untamed power...and beyond that, something truly special. The potential of your bloodline. A new Vader. Now, I fear I was mistaken.
>
> REN: I've given everything I have to you...To the Dark Side...
>
> SNOKE: *[referring to Ren's helmet]* Take that ridiculous thing off. *[Ren takes off his helmet, revealing his bandaged facial scar]* Yes...there it is. You have too much of your father's heart in you, young Solo.
>
> REN: I *killed* Han Solo. When the moment came, I didn't hesitate!
>
> SNOKE: And look at you. The deed split your spirit to the bone. You were unbalanced, bested by a girl who had never held a lightsaber! YOU FAILED!!! *[Ren tries to attack Snoke, but he blasts Force lightning into the ground which ricochets into Ren, blasting him back; the Praetorian guards draw their weapons in response]* Skywalker lives! The seed of the Jedi Order lives! As long as he does...hope lives in the galaxy. I thought you would be the one to snuff it out. Alas, you are no Vader. You are just a child in a mask. (Johnson).

Snoke emasculates Kylo Ren by relating him to the past antagonist Darth Vader. We see Vader, a two-dimensional villain, die, as Ren (his grandchild) introduces a new male antagonist. After the scene, Ren connects with the main female protagonist Rey. Instead of the model that Gillam

and Wooden introduce, Johnson has “the new male” Ren bond with Rey—like the “homosocial” model. Ren and Rey bond over their betrayal of Luke Skywalker, but also for their need of his approval. They are telepathically connected through the force—where they can see/feel/talk to each other from different planets—against their will. Yet, as they continue to fail—Ren is unable to kill his mother (Leia), and Rey is unable to have Luke teach her the ways of the force—they begin to work together to reach their goals. Using equal amounts of honesty, emotional maturity, and asking for help to overcome their fears, Ren and Rey become the balance of both feminine and masculine characters.

During Ren and Rey’s conversations, Ren repeats the phrase “Let the past die. Kill it, if you have to”. When they finally reunite in person, the duo destroys the “supreme leader” and together defeat the opposing soldiers. After the battle, Ren tries to convince Rey to follow him by saying, “It's time to let old things die. Snoke, Skywalker, the Sith, the Jedi, the Rebels; Let it all die. Rey...I want you to join me. We can rule together and bring a new order to the galaxy!” (Johnson). Though Ren is referring to all the qualities that make up the films Star Wars, Johnson also symbolizes the past stereotypes that characters were forced to perform: the male heroic quest, the alpha male, the female two-dimensional princess, and the submissive female.

Using the phrase “let the past die”, Johnson compares the two new male (Ren) and female (Rey) characters with the—now secondary—original characters, Luke and Leia; we see that “Let the past go” mostly refers to their archetypes. Johnson takes the beloved Luke Skywalker, and places him on an island where he has been hiding away with his self-pity for an untold number of years. Luke failed as a hero—letting Kylo Ren turn to the dark side—so he decided to give up his powers, the force, and rot away until he died. Luke realizes, in his isolation, that every heroic attempt of the Jedi, he names through all the movies main plot points,

turns into failure, and that the real way to succeed is to accept that the Jedi did not own the force, it was a part of everyone and living thing. By using Luke to walk the audience through the flaws of the past films and the rise of the Jedi's narcissism, which leads to them getting too headstrong, believing they are the only right ones, and then creating monsters who rebel, Johnson points out the flaws in the "alpha-male" as a whole. Luke undergoes this isolation to embrace more "feminine" qualities.

As Luke's arc develops, Johnson contrasts it by Leia's consistent behavior throughout the saga. Princess Leia has been known through the decades as a symbol of the strong female character. In the article "The Portrayal of Female Characters in the Star Wars Film Saga", Vilma Vainikka puts Leia and the other two leading Star Wars female characters, Padmé Amidala and Rey, through a lens of "the token female". Vainikka examines how the each "token" female in each Star Wars trilogy, amongst other films, is the "only ones [females] given significant roles. They are also overwhelmingly surrounded by male characters of importance." (12) Vainikka presents this claim about the female character by using a theory called "Smurfette Principle":

> The "Smurfette Principle", which means "any instance of a cast of characters (human or animated) in a book, movie or television show that [is] skewed heavily male, or in fact include[s] literally only one token female (usually stereotyped and in the role of sidekick/little sister/love interest or any other version of an ornament beside the male characters and their adventures. (Day 203)

The Smurfette Principle applies to the Star Wars films, or at least to the original trilogy and the prequel trilogy, in the sense that Leia Organa is Luke Skywalker's sister and Han Solo's love

interest. In the original trilogy, Leia still heavily depended on the main male characters, which kept her in the gender binary of the stereotypical female.

But one of the most interesting aspect of Johnson's "The Last Jedi" is that the female characters do not fit into "the Smurfette Principle". Rey is the prominent leading hero of the new trilogy. She is strong, compassionate, level headed, always trying to help others, and her deep desire is to be reunited with her family—who are a mystery to both her and the audience. Leia presents as a strong powerful leader, a wise guiding force, the true hero of the past trilogy, and—we find out—she is extremely powerful with the force, yet Leia uses the force to enhance her intuition. The beautiful addition that Johnson adds to "The Last Jedi" appears in the three-secondary female leads. Because there are a decent number of females, the two main, the three secondary, and about six who are shown enough to remember their names, Johnson has broken the "Smufette Principle" to produce a balance of gender amongst the characters: "kill the past".

The past/current archetypes for leading females fall into two stereotypes: the Smufette Principle, and the "Princess" model. Often the two types are intertwined, aka Princess Leia, to create both a "token" female and a princess for girls to look up to and boys to sexualize. The advancement of the two-dimensional male to a "New Man" who takes on more feminine emotions begins the progression of change for a "new female" to be heard. Carina Chocano beautifully breaks apart the standard model of the "princess" and contrasts it with a revised model that Disney has been producing in her chapter "Let it Go", in her book *You Play the Girl.* Chocano writes "Fairy tales involving princesses are also among the few popular entertainments made for girls that feature girls as protagonists.", but she points out that these modern tales continue an archetype to keep women "a princess forever" (211). Chocano shows how the princess models keep women in a "girl-like" state, and where women constantly see life—

themselves and others—with the eyes of the male gaze. Using the movie *Frozen,* Chocano demonstrates the pattern of the new princess. The main protagonist, Elsa, goes on an alpha male journey—anger, isolation, powers get stronger, must save the village alone—ending with showing "true love" and "tears" to save the ones she loves.

Rey, the new main protagonist of Star Wars, goes on a similar journey as Chocano points out with Elsa. She goes on a hero's journey to save the resistance by going on an isolated journey to an island, thus strengthening her powers. Johnson, though, does not have her ending with love for anyone or as domestic puppet to save "the village". Instead Rey joins Leia and the rest of the resistance fighters to work as one to save the group.

In addition to Rey, Princess Leia also shows glimpses of the princess that Chocano presents, yet in the newer films she rejects the model to create a true hero for women and girls to become. Leia has vocally denounced the title "princess" to transform into a new female hero: General Leia. Chocano comments on the modern female protagonist who, "must reject the role of the princess and act instead like a celebrity: lucky, grateful, and humble, the beneficiary not of privilege but of random, unbiased, equitable chance" (Chocano 207). Instead of "rejecting the role to act like a celebrity", Leia rejects the role to become a leader and hero. Once she rejects the binds of the "token princess" role, she transforms into a powerful—force user—female who leads her army towards victory.

Johnson character's contrast to the standard characters may seem minuscule in a bigger picture, but history shows that Star Wars' influence has a strong power throughout change in film. Chocano's chapter "Real Girls" details the uncanny aspects of RealDolls—sex dolls that are personized and constructed to mimic a real replica of a female—and the effect film's have had on the creating these "Frankenstein" female dolls. One of the beginning lines Chocano uses

demonstrates the idea of the RealDoll but adds much more about films influence on women in general. “You can learn a lot about the longings and generalized gender anxieties of an era by the kinds of fake women it dreams up” (141). Women are living sex dolls for men, dreamt up and created by the male gaze in cinema. By presenting a “new female” who is not a “token princess” and by showing the past male archetype failing unless receiving help by the “new female”, Johnson has set into motion a new gender archetype.

To fully understand the impact of Johnson’s new gendered archetypes, it is important to break down the definition and meaning of the word “gender”. Judith Butler, American philosopher, gender theorist, and professor at UC Berkley, is a leading voice in gender and sex studies. Butler presents gender as “gender performative”, which is the theory that “gender” is a cultural construct that is “predetermined” at birth by assigning infants a gender: boys are put into blue clothes, girls into pink, and gendered toys.

Butler describes in the book *Gender Trouble*:

> The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. (Butler 57)

Gender is a presentation, even an act, that every individual preforms: though, it may not be a conscious performance—like an actor—or a persona which is easily changed. Thus, using this model we can see that the social constructions presented by film and media, like the Star Wars franchise, have a great effect on the identities we put onto infants and older. Johnson is

producing a new social construct that allows for a more gender fluid and neutral model, which will be slowly integrated throughout the generations.

Star Wars, as an influential and revolutionary force, has taken the stereotypical binaries in the original trilogy, and transformed them into a gender non-binary structure. “The Last Jedi” broke box-office records the moment tickets went on sale. Though the Star Wars backstory film, “Solo: A Star Wars Story” (2018), reverts more the old gender stereotypes, the new model has still been set into motion to become a future standard. “Pop culture now operates on an infinite, self-referential, constantly accelerating feedback loop. Meaning is contested almost as quickly as it’s produced. Eventually, there comes a point when an archetype is subverted so many times that it ceases to mean anything” (Chocano 208). The old archetypes have been overdone and have been “let go”. “Solo: A Star Wars Story” flopped in the box office perhaps because it plays to the old meanings of gender that people do not relate to anymore: critics found it to be an over played story arc. The use of all emotions—intuition, strength, asking for help (working together), listening, and leadership—is now needed to be a true “hero”.

“The Last Jedi” ends with Leia and Rey, being the last of the heroes, flying into the universe in the Millennium Falcon. The film then pans to a different world, Canto Bight, zooming into a young boy—who shows signs of using the force while playing with his Jedi toys—looking up towards the sky for hope and inspiration. This scene shows that the future for our kids is not the lone male hero who fights his way to victory, but instead present Leia and Rey as the new idols and models to look up to. Johnson has killed the flawed stereotypes to present a more balanced gender-neutral model for new generations to come.

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