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Article Title: The Past, The Present & *The Mandalorian*

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Abstract: Drawing on the notion that nostalgia enables a continuity of identity, this article explores how the aesthetics of the Disney+ lynchpin property, *The Mandalorian* (2019-Pres.), facilitate a return to, and continuity of, masculine heteronormativity in the face of rapid and widespread change within the *Star Wars* cinematic franchise. Focusing on the excess of style, the reduction in scope and scale of the narrative aesthetics, the role of the star as an agent of the past, the conceptualization of hyper-masculine fatherhood, and the role of the feminine in the articulation of narrative, this article reveals how *The Mandalorian* constructs a narrative concerned with fatherhood. Moreover, this article demonstrates how, by appropriating nostalgia in the restorative mode to allow a continuity of idealized masculine identity, *The Mandalorian* is positioned as the would-be masculine heir to the legacy of the original trilogy.

Keywords: The Mandalorian, Star Wars, Disney+, nostalgia, masculinity, heteronormativity

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Introduction

Drawing on the notion that nostalgia enables a continuity of identity (see Sedikides & Wildschut 2018; May 2017; Wilson 2005; Davis 1979), this article explores how the aesthetics of the Disney+ lynchpin property, *The Mandalorian* (2019-Pres.), facilitates a return to, and continuity of, masculine heteronormativity in the face of rapid and widespread change within the *Star Wars* cinematic franchise (see Wood et al. 2020; Brown 2018;

Koushik & Reed 2018; Scott 2017). Launched in the run-up to the theatrical release of the final instalment of the sequel trilogy, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams 2019), *The Mandalorian* can be read as a reaction to the diverse nexus of fresh characters and social contexts explored in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015) and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Abrams 2017). By re-establishing a predominately masculine lens and simplified narrative structure, *The Mandalorian* revisits the *Star Wars* aesthetics of the past, forming a conceptual binary with the ostensibly 'more enlightened, more progressive' (Jenkins & Hassler-Forest 2018: 29) optics of J. J. Abrams' sequel trilogy. *The Mandalorian* functions, therefore, as a nostalgic response to such change, redressing the 'feeling of loss, lack and longing' (Pickering & Keightley 2006: 921), as experienced by an older subset (Hall 2019) of the male dominated *Star Wars* fandom (Brown 2018).

In making this response, series creator and executive producer Jon Favreau provides a sentimental reconstruction of the heterocentric narrative aesthetics and gender roles (see de Bruin-Molé 2018; Butler 2018; Condis 2014; Johnson 2014; Atkinson & Calafell 2009) of the original trilogy: *Star Wars: A New Hope* (Lucas 1977), *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (Kershner 1980) and *Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi* (Marquand 1983). This process of remediation purposefully deploys a commodified style that defers the content of *The Mandalorian* 'to its evocation of a generalized feeling of pastness' (Grainge 2002: 59), thereby gratifying the nostalgic desire to live the 'old aesthetic artifacts through once again' (Jameson 2008: 547), and reestablish a continuity of heteronormative masculine identification with the franchise.

To demonstrate how Jon Favreau's series generates nostalgia for a heteronormative masculine past in the *Star Wars* franchise, this article conducts a close reading of the first season of *The Mandalorian*, focusing on the excess of style and the reduction in scope and scale of the narrative aesthetics, the role of the star as an agent of the past, the

conceptualization of hyper-masculine fatherhood, and the role of the feminine in the articulation of narrative. Before doing so, however, it is important to first explore the processes of nostalgia at play within the *Star Wars* cinematic universe and set out the conceptual framework for nostalgia as an agent of identity continuance.

Nostalgia, the Continuity of Identity and the Star Wars Cinematic Universe

The concept of nostalgia has been subject to much reconceptualization within the academy (Specht & Kreiger 2016). Historical considerations of nostalgia as a state of moral decay or pathology (Fuentenebro de Diego & Valiente Ots 2014) have given way to multifaceted debates as to the nature of this phenomenon (see May 2017; Pickering & Keightley 2006). Recent work has focused on how nostalgia facilitates a recognition of the past 'as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future' (Pickering & Keightley 2006: 921). This is nostalgia in the reflective mode (Boym 2001). Operating as 'a recuperative adoption of the past as a lens for examining the present' (Bevan 2012: 552), nostalgia performs a 'critical function in the present beyond that of mere retrogression' (Loveday 2014: 729).

It follows, therefore, that positive affect interpretations of nostalgia often position this phenomenon as an expression of agency that seeks to 'to enlighten, liberate, or to come to terms with change' (Gillespie & Crouse 2012: 443). In doing so, nostalgia is situated as a 'useful emotion' (Cheung et al. 2013: 1484) which has the 'capacity to help individuals find meaning' (Sedikides & Wildschut 2018: 48), contributes 'to motivated goal pursuit, psychological equanimity, and psychological or even physical health' (Sedikides & Wildschut 2018: 57), and 'elevates self-esteem, fosters social connectedness, and alleviates existential threat' (Sedikides et al. 2008: 307). Framed in this fashion, nostalgia is a future-oriented, 'self-relevant, social, and predominantly positive emotion serving key psychological functions' (Stephan et al. 2015: 1405). As such, where the experience of the present differs

from the experience of the past, nostalgia facilitates engagement '*in* the present by connecting with a sense of belonging in the past' (May 2017: 412, original emphasis).

Such a modality of nostalgia has long been central to the *Star Wars* cinematic franchise (Brooker & Hassler-Forest 2018). Indeed, 'nostalgia and politics seem to be the two reliable constants in the way that *Star Wars* films are talked about across decades' (Golding 2019: 12). From the outset, the *Star Wars* franchise has demonstrated a nostalgia for itself by engaging in a mode of serial nostalgia, remediating its own imagery, within its own diegesis, to construct a mediated past for its audience (Golding 2019; Brooker & Hassler-Forest 2018). Simultaneously, however, and particularly so in the Disney era instalments, there is also a progressive and forward-looking dynamic, providing a more culturally diverse experience (Brooker & Hassler-Forest 2018) that demonstrates how *Star Wars,* 'as a decades-old media franchise, [...] continues to adapt and respond to the times it finds itself in' (Golding 2019: 17).

The instalments of the *Star Wars* franchise function, therefore, as complex 'nostalgia film[s]' (Jameson 2008: 547), seeking to 'revive the past by [...] looking to the future' (Golding 2019: 142). They do so, not by evoking a specific bygone era—none of us has lived a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away–but by evoking cultural experiences. The original trilogy 'drew on and revived older forms of Hollywood entertainment' (Freeman 2018: 66), such as the 'Saturday afternoon adventure [...] serial' (Golding 2019: 12), modernizing them for a contemporary audience. The prequel trilogy, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (Lucas 1999), *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* (Lucas 2002) and *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas 2005), added political complexity and depth to the mythos of the original trilogy, functioning 'as a long flashback [...] explicitly all about the past, and how things reached the point where we came in at the start of *A New Hope*' (Brooker & Hassler-Forest 2018: 294). The sequel trilogy reproduced 'many of the thematic concerns and visual characteristics'

(Sanna 2016: 83) of the original trilogy, but also marked the decline of the original protagonists, providing a literal and symbolic transition between eras that served 'to cede narrative agency to the new, younger protagonists' (Golding 2019: 179). The anthology films, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Edwards 2016) and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Howard 2018), revisited the past to retcon franchise history 'suggesting that the Star Wars cast was always more diverse than we saw at the time' (Brooker & Hassler-Forest 2018: 295).

These dialectics of nostalgia and progress form a contentious dynamic within the franchise. '*Star Wars* is complex and multifaceted. It is intelligent, it is concerned with the past and questions of legacy, and it is profoundly—yes, even politically—hopeful for the future' (Golding 2019: 17). Yet, for all the progressive intentions of the franchise, it is this inherent concern for legacy (Brooker & Hassler-Forest 2018) that opens the franchise up to criticism, where 'its nostalgic veneer allows us to bliss out [...] and ignore our pressing social and political problems [...] in a sheen of reminiscence of the better yesterdays of a conservative past' (Golding 2019: 17). This latter point appears to overwhelm *The Mandalorian*, which abandons the progressive elements evident in the other Disney instalments, to restore the primacy of a heteronormative masculine experience.

It is this notion of the restoration of heteronormative masculine experience which is of principle concern to this article. The remediation of an older *Star Wars* aesthetic in *The Mandalorian* does not appear to facilitate a progressive (re)negotiation of the past as with the sequel or anthology trilogies. Rather, the narrative aesthetics of *The Mandalorian* encode the return of a masculine heteronormative lens directly into the texts, thereby constructing a 'binary opposite of the modernist ideal of progress' (Sloan 2014: 530). This is nostalgia in the restorative mode, 'manifesting itself in [...] reconstructions of monuments of the past' (Boym 2001: 41).

Such restorative conceptualization of nostalgia ‘almost invariably relates to a sense of unhappiness with the present, against which the past or, rather, an idealized version of the past, is favourably compared’ (May 2017: 404). This reluctant nostalgia forms a sense of ‘temporal dislocation or exile as a result of becoming a member of the older and less “relevant” generation’ (May 2017: 412). In what can be read as a narcissistic regression or escape, nostalgic consumers use such objects to recite themselves outside time (Baudrillard 2005). In this mode, ‘[w]hen the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning’ (Sloan 2014: 534), with producers commodifying artifacts (Grainge 2002) that function to ‘deflect threats of identity discontinuity’ (Jing 2006: 360) in a form of ‘niche marketing’ (Grainge 2000: 32).

This recitation is demonstrated by the ‘Hollywood tendency in the 1990s and the early 21st century towards non-original modes of production [...] characteristic of a developing aesthetics and politics of nostalgia’ (Höpker & Kuhn 2007: 75-76). The value of nostalgia, therefore, is ‘evident not only through references to the ideas of the past but also to the media of the past’ (Sloan 2014: 535), which summon ‘comforting images’ (Davis 1979: 102) to sooth the discomfort of loss. Whether such nostalgia is a yearning ‘for something that actually existed, a longing for something that never did, or a glamour that disguises our day-to-day experiences, the image is still powerful, still evocative, still compelling’ (Brogden & Patterson 2007: 223), and it is one that, in *The Mandalorian*, appears to have become an ‘intoxication, a cloying elixir, and a romance with [...] fantasy’ (Kitson & McHugh 2014: 488).

The Style, the Star, Fatherhood and Femininity in The Mandalorian

> After the fall of the Galactic Empire, lawlessness has spread throughout the galaxy. A lone gunfighter makes his way through the outer reaches, earning his keep as a bounty hunter (disneyplus.com 2019).

While the official Disney+ blurb does not mention the genre by name, *The Mandalorian* is a Western, and Westerns, by nature, are nostalgic (Neale 1983). Moreover, '[t]he Western, born from an earlier period and out of a nostalgia for a mythic American past, [...] clearly privileges male protagonists and masculine settings' (Roberts 1997: 61). This is the essence of *The Mandalorian*. From the opening scene of the first episode, we encounter the titular Mandalorian, Din Djarin (Pedro Pascal), alone amidst a lingering shot of a dangerous and desolate landscape, his cloak billowing over one shoulder, his pistol strapped to his side and his body covered from head to toe in a visage reminiscent of the iconic imagery of Clint Eastwood in *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* (Leone 1966). He is a man of few words and deliberate actions, who inhabits a galaxy of hard men and harder places. Existing on the fringes of society, Djarin is a loner, set apart from the denizens around him, who, like the cinematic gunslingers who preceded him, and the series as a whole, draws on the harsh signifiers of the untamed frontier to 'symbolize the struggle between man and nature' (Roberts 1997: 61).

When Djarin does interact with others, such as in the bar fight that concludes the cold open to the first episode and frames the series, the language he speaks is that of considered aggression. In an exclusively masculine encounter, Djarin silently displays his superior capacity for violence, singlehandedly killing three large and hostile adversaries. His performance represents a well-trodden exhibition of controlled hyper-masculinity common to action cinema, drawing attention to verbal restraint and physical excess (Tasker 1993). This leaves the 'lesser' masculinities around him, the bartender (John Beasley) and, later, his Mythrol bounty (Horatio Sanz), to try, unsuccessfully, to de-escalate the situation via fearful and deferent placations to Djarin's masculine capital. From the outset, therefore, the narrative is overwhelmed with a style that is restorative of the outdated tropes of the Western, and is 'shot through with nostalgia, with an obsession with images and definitions of masculinity

and masculine codes of behavior, and with images of male narcissism and the threats posed to it by women, society and the Law' (Neale 1983:10). Consequently, in *The Mandalorian*, effective masculinity is equated with physical power and dominance. This dominance is mostly located on the body and realized through the enactment of violence, which often occurs in the pursuit of personal goals or the defense of identities perceived as inferior to hyper-masculinity.

Indeed, in the first three episodes of the series, there is a distinct lack of meaningful engagement with feminine identities. The only exception to this is the Armorer (Emily Swallow), who inhabits a position of skill, power and respect within the Mandalorian Tribe. Seeming to fulfil a matriarchal leadership role, the Armorer forges Djarin's armor, keeps the Tribe's culture, mediates disputes, and bestows knowledge, and yet, the Armorer's position as powerful female leader is somewhat constrained by being spatially restricted to the enclave and appearing in limited scenes. This results in a narrative where femininity is almost entirely absent or, if present, marginalized. Coupled with the fastidious attention to detail in the recreation of the landscapes, peoples, objects and costumes of the original trilogy, this omission of the feminine appears to restore an imagined and solely masculine *Star Wars* of the past that never actually existed. Where there is time in the first three episodes to pause the narrative and enjoy lingering gazes upon familiar masculine images such as stormtroopers, speeders and droids, or revel in demonstrations of masculine prowess via extended and violent set pieces with recognizable antagonists such as Tuskan raiders or Jawas, there appears to be no such time to explore aspects of the feminine.

Instead, the first three episodes follow only Djarin's story. This functions as a stripped-down narrative mode, operating against the conventional structuring practices of continuing drama television, which predominantly focus on the intercutting of multi-arc storylines (see Yorke 2013; Calvisi 2016). By reducing the scope and scale of its narrative,

The Mandalorian responds to the 'the present [as] value-laden and politicized. In contrast to the idealized past, the present is contrasted as overly complex and unsatisfying […] in this way, nostalgia celebrates a constructed clarity that may or may not reflect contemporary social conditions' (Gillespie & Crouse 2012: 443-4). In doing so, *The Mandalorian* resists the progressive complexity of representation present in the storylines of the contemporaneous prequel trilogy and anthology films, providing a tight narrative focus anchored solely in the masculine. Consequently, the idealized past drawn upon by *The Mandalorian* 'is highly selective and glosses over the complexities and inequalities of the past' (Gillespie & Crouse 2012: 444) to construct a nostalgic refuge from the present of the *Star Wars* cinematic franchise.

In that refuge, the focus is on negotiating and establishing masculine relationships. Central to that negotiation is the notion of mutual respect for masculine aptitude developed between exceptional males. The first three episodes follow Djarin's acquisition of a high value bounty for The Client (Werner Herzog), which transpires to be a child (colloquially referred to as Baby Yoda). In pursuit of this asset, Djarin interacts with a range of other masculinities, where there is a constant reinforcement of that exceptionalism.

The agent of the bounty hunters' guild to which Djarin belongs, Greef Karga (Carl Weathers), reveres Djarin above all others for his exceptional skill in acquiring assets and rewards him for his aptitude by introducing Djarin to The Client, an associate of a dangerous imperial remnant. The Client similarly reveres Djarin for his reputation as a bounty hunter, however, Djarin is cautious around The Client, wary of the masculine symbols of power that he controls – most notably, a group of heavily armed former imperial stormtroopers. In the shootout that leads to Djarin's acquisition of the Child, Djarin forms a partnership with the masculine-programmed IG-11 assassin droid (voiced by Taika Waititi), valuing the enhanced

fighting ability of IG-11, who also recognizes that working with Djarin will statistically improve their chance of acquiring the asset.

Where Djarin's relationships with Karga, The Client and IG-11 are built on a reciprocal admiration for masculine power, Djarin's relationship with the former imperial slave, Kuiil (voiced by Nick Nolte), who helps Djarin locate and later protect the Child, is built on a reciprocal admiration for displays of masculine mastery. Djarin respects Kuiil's mastery of mechanical engineering and Kuiil is impressed by Djarin's capacity to master new abilities, silently nodding his approval as Djarin conquers Blurrg-riding with little to no training. In this way, *The Mandalorian* simultaneously foregrounds the aesthetics of male power and aptitude as a spectacle of hegemonic masculinity.

Notably, however, this process of mutual admiration is located firmly on the level of the middle or older aged male. In *The Mandalorian*, Kuiil's repeated use of the finality 'I have spoken', articulates an assumed masculine hierarchy, derived from age and experience, where those around him, including Djarin, are allowed no further debate on the topic he has closed. Youthful masculinity, as represented by the aspiring bounty hunter Toro Calican (Jack Cannavale), is, by contrast, treated with contempt. Djarin encounters Calican in one of the original trilogy's most iconic locations, the Mos Eisley Cantina on Tatooine. Unable on his own to catch Fennec Shand (Ming-Na Wen) for his bounty, the youthful Calican asks for help from the older, more experienced Djarin. Djarin agrees to help, forming a temporary partnership with Calican.

Throughout their partnership, Calican is presented as inferior to Djarin and Shand. He is unable to catch Shand, requiring the older male to get the job done. Once Djarin has captured Shand, Calican proves susceptible to Shand's manipulative tactics, leading him to appear to kill Shand and turn on Djarin, hoping to claim the bounty on Djarin's head instead. This brings about a confrontation between Djarin and Calican, where Djarin kills Calican

with a single shot. Here, *The Mandalorian* positions youthful masculinity as arrogant, impulsive and foolish. In disposing of Calican, Djarin cleanses the Mos Eisley Cantina—and, by extension, Tatooine—of this unwanted intrusion, symbolically inverting the concurrent ceding of 'narrative agency to the new, younger protagonists' (Golding 2019: 179) in the sequel trilogy, thus deflecting 'threats of identity discontinuity' (Jing 2006: 360) for the aging male fan base.

In establishing this primacy of the mature male, *The Mandalorian* draws upon the star as a nostalgic agent of the past. Icons of the high concept eighties action cinema, such as Carl Weathers, Nick Nolte and Clancy Brown (portraying Burg), or veteran actors, such as Werner Herzog and Giancarlo Esposito (portraying Moff Gideon), generate a nostalgic excess within the series by drawing on pre-sold elements of their identity.

> Stars are, to some extent, predicated on a style – a particular set of physical characteristics, demeanor and attitude. This emphasis often overwhelms the character being portrayed so that the character is identified more strongly with the star than as an integral part of the unique story (Wyatt 1994: 53-55).

Such narrative encounters engender in *The Mandalorian* a sense of nearness of the past that disrupts the 'distinctly felt spatio-temporal chasm between now and then' (Kitson & McHugh 2014: 488). This is the star persona working in a restorative mode to 'rebuild the home that is lost' (Bevan 2012: 548).

These images of the older male evoke, for good or for bad, connotations of fathers and fatherhood. Indeed, the key masculine relationship explored in *The Mandalorian* is the relationship between Djarin and the Child. At its heart, therefore, *The Mandalorian* is a narrative principally concerned with fatherhood or, more specifically, the primacy of the hyper-masculine father as care provider. Fatherhood, and the relationship between fathers and their children, has long been a central concern of the *Star Wars* franchise (Golding 2019).

The Mandalorian, firmly locates this concern on the masculine, establishing the relationship between father and child as the principle structuring agent.

Once Djarin has acquired The Client's asset, he begins to bond with the Child, who finally loosens Djarin's tongue. This humanizes Djarin – so much so that, after collecting his bounty for the Child, and upon learning that the Child is in danger, Djarin decides to rescue the Child and, in the process, breaks the code of the guild. In rescuing the Child, Djarin kills everyone who gets in his way, apart from Dr. Pershing (Omid Abtahi), who also attempted to protect the Child himself. In letting Pershing live, Djarin values Pershing's actions, but frames the masculine care provided by Pershing, a medical expert, as inferior to the care that can be provided by Djarin.

To be an effective father in *The Mandalorian*, therefore, you have 'to be more than good-hearted and human; you [have] to be strong, decisive and powerful' (Jeffords 1994: 169). Herein, *The Mandalorian* again restores outdated definitions of masculinity and masculine codes of behavior, looking back to the thematic of the eighties action cinema, where the problems of the world were blamed on a crisis of feminization, which only a return of the hard-bodied hero/father could resolve (Jeffords 1994). Furthermore, it is this notion of fatherhood, or the primacy of the protective care of fatherhood, that finally allows *The Mandalorian* to explore aspects of the feminine.

'Prior to *The Force Awakens*, the *Star Wars* films focused primarily on their central male protagonists' (Brown 2018: 339). Consequently, in the original and prequel trilogies, representations of femininity would largely 'focus on a single female hero among a group of men' (de Bruin-Molé 2018: 229). Presented as the damsel in distress (Rubey 1978) and/or love interest (Stuller 2010), the strengths of these supporting characters, such as resourcefulness (Brown 2018), toughness (Rubey 1978), independence (Johnson 2014), and leadership (Atkinson & Calafell 2009), 'were often offset by their eroticization, and

diminished as each story arc progressed' (Brown 2018: 340). It was not until Rey (Daisy Ridley) assumed the central role in Abrams' sequel trilogy (de Bruin-Molé 2018), taking responsibility for her own success or failure in a performance of hybrid gender identity (Wood et al. 2020), that 'the *Star Wars* series managed to finally foreground a female hero who is neither limited nor defined by her gender' (Brown 2018: 340).The exceptional capacities belonging to Rey as the protagonist of the sequel trilogy are not, therefore, tied to her gender. Rey has survived adversity because of her determination of will and superior ability as a scavenger. Furthermore, Rey protects and advances her agency and independence by shifting between a number of other skilled identities, such as mechanic, pilot, fighter, care giver and Jedi. Ultimately, in the narrative of the sequel trilogy, it is the combination of these abilities, not gender, that define and realize Rey as a multifaceted and complex character.

The Mandolorian disrupts this 'critique of both hegemonic masculine heroism and passive feminine representation' (Wood et al. 2020: 562), purposefully re-centering the masculine as the protagonist, and as a lens though which to view the feminine. The first meaningful engagement with feminine identities takes place over a third of the way into the season. When Djarin travels to the remote and non-industrialized planet Sorgan in order to find some sanctuary from his former guild who are now hunting him down, two new and prominent female characters are introduced in the narrative – Cara Dune (Gina Carano) and Omera (Julia Jones).

Dune is introduced as a female analogue of Djarin who challenges the traditional ownership of masculinity. Presented as a physical and combative equal to Djarin, Dune represents a progressive version of masculinity that disrupts gender norms. Dune forms a bond with Djarin via the same process as Karga, The Client and IG-11, establishing mutual respect between exceptional masculinities via a performance of violence. As soon as Djarin sees Dune, he is wary of her as he was with The Client. This leads to a direct physical

confrontation between the two where they fight to a draw, which subsequently forms the basis of their relationship for the remainder of the series – one of mutual respect for their capacity and aptitude for violence.

Dune's progressive masculinity in *The Mandalorian* is, however, tempered by heteronormative lensing. Dune's female masculinity is deemed an acceptable and 'approved female masculinity' (Halberstam 1998:28) as she is tamed by an apparent lack of sexual orientation, and by her support of Djarin's assumed heterosexuality. This framing can be seen to resist or subdue a queering of Dune, as 'when and where female masculinity conjoins with possibly queer identities, it is far less likely to meet with approval' (Halberstam 1998:28). Dune's masculine traits function to empower her in relation to the other female identities around her. She is presented as a powerful warrior because of her masculinity. Dune is still, therefore, a sentimental reconstruction of the heterocentric narrative aesthetics and gender roles. She is not a threat to masculinity. She is a part of it. She is a celebration of it.

Omera, by contrast, functions to return *The Mandalorian* to the notion of the damsel in distress. That said, Omera is not presented in an entirely passive light. As a young widow, and the apparent leader of a rural farming community which is beset by a marauding gang of raiders, Omera demonstrates a strong image of feminine determination and resourcefulness, putting herself in grave danger to ensure the safety of her daughter when all others flee. Yet, despite her determination and resourcefulness, Omera still has to ask Djarin for help. By making this plea for help, Omera's narrative aligns with the nostalgic aesthetics of the Western or the medieval tale of the noble knight. In making this alignment, *The Mandalorian* again functions to restore a dated narrative formula, where the matriarchal farming community, and its female leadership, appears incomplete, incapable of protecting itself, and requires the presence of powerful masculinity to restore order.

Accepting, Djarin enlists the help of Dune, and together they travel to the village. Unlike Dune, however, Omera, being a safe feminine mode of femininity (Halberstam 1998), is given a sexual identity. Again, drawing on outdated notions of masculinity that valorize the traditional masculine ideals of strength, power, and resiliency and equate them with heterosexual desirability (Brown 2016), Omera uses her sexual identity in an attempt to remove Djarin's hyper-masculinity and have him settle down with her in the village to raise the Child – a proposition that Djarin ultimately rejects.

Together Djarin and Dune educate and train the villagers for their confrontation with the raiders. However, in doing so, Djarin must frame and validate Dune's feminine masculinity as acceptable, informing the villagers that they need to listen to her as she was a Rebel Alliance shock trooper. However, no such validation is required for Djarin; he is accepted as is and given primary authority on account of his masculinity. Ultimately, with the help of Djarin and Dune, the villagers fend off the raiders and the village is saved. Omera plays an active role in saving the village and Djarin decides that he will leave the Child with Omera. This trust in the safety of maternal parenting is, however, only temporary.

When a bounty hunter arrives at the village intent on collecting the bounty on the Child, it is Dune who provides the protection by killing the bounty hunter and, in response, Djarin decides against leaving the child. The maternal protection offered by Omera, who saved the village and kept her own children alive against the threat from the raiders, is deemed insufficient in comparison with the protection offered by Djarin, and he leaves with the Child. Having exhausted her facility to Djarin, this is the last we see of Omera in *The Mandalorian*, in a rejection of her mode of femininity, Dune, by contrast, is rewarded by becoming a trusted ally in Djarin's protection of the Child.

This insufficiency of motherhood to provide effective safety for the Child serves as a recurring theme throughout the series. Other potential sources of maternal care for the Child

are either demonstrated to be inadequate or dismissed by Djarin. Peli Motto (Amy Sedaris), the operator of bay three-five at the Mos Eisley spaceport, discovers the Child while carrying out repairs on Djarin's ship. Initially Motto decides to care for the Child in Djarin's absence in order to extort more money from him, however, this soon gives way to genuine care and affection for the Child. In this context, Djarin again seems happy to temporarily leave the Child in her care. However, Motto and the Child are taken hostage by Toro Calican, requiring Djarin to return and save them. Finally, Dune is also rejected, and rejects herself, as a potential provider of care. When Djarin is injured during a confrontation with the forces of Moff Gideon and appears incapable of surviving, he asks Dune to take the Child and make sure he is safe. However, Djarin only trusts her care temporarily, instructing her to hand the Child over to the Mandalorian covert as a foundling, hoping to perpetuate his hyper-masculine identity by having the child follow in his footsteps.

The insufficiency of maternal care is contrasted not only with the superiority of Djarin's care, but also with other masculine care providers. When looking for someone to care for the Child while Djarin and Dune return to confront the imperial remnant, Dune asks Djarin who he trusts. Djarin trusts Kuiil. Kuiil in turn trusts the IG-11 droid, which he has reprogrammed to become the ultimate hyper-masculine care provider for the Child. Together, Kuiil and IG-11further elevate the significance of this paternal mode of care, by giving their lives in order to protect the Child, restoring another common theme of the eighties action cinema – the 'spectacle of male individualism in the act of self-sacrificing fathers' (Jeffords 1994: 167).

The three prominent feminine identities within *The Mandalorian* operate in relation to this maternal-paternal dynamic: Fennic Shand, the Armorer and Xi'an (Natalie Tena). On the surface, these three female identities seem closer to the notion of a 'female hero who is neither limited nor defined by her gender' (Brown 2018: 340). However, much like the

femininities of the original trilogy, and in the case of Shand and Xi'an particularly, their agency is quickly 'diminished as each story arc progressed' (Brown 2018: 340). Shand, presented as a dangerous and elite mercenary, who is able to easily out-fight Calican, is captured with relative ease by Djarin. Once captured, she assumes the role of the femme fatale, sowing division between Djarin and Calican, only to be abruptly shot and left for dead by Calican. Shand then assumes the role of the damsel in distress as her prone body is approached by what appears to be a masculine figure.

Xi'an, the single female among a group of mercenaries, works with Djarin on a job to rescue her brother. During the mission, Xi'an is presented as a confident, self-assured woman of decisive action, willing to carry out ruthless acts, while the masculinities around her dither. Yet, she too is diminished as her narrative progresses. Positioned as a gatekeeper to Djarin's dark past, the male mercenaries she works with, as well as Xi'an herself, tease that she has had a past intimate relationship with Djarin, causing her strengths to be 'offset by their eroticization' (Brown 2018: 340). In the end, with her usefulness exhausted, Xi'an is abandoned by Djarin and locked up in a New Republic prison ship.

This leaves only the Armorer, a secondary character, confined to the margins of the narrative, who is neither limited nor defined by her gender or sexuality. Ultimately, it is to the Armorer that Djarin must defer, receiving the wisdom, knowledge and weaponry necessary for him to protect the Child. And, in the closing scenes of the first season, it is the Armorer who officially anoints Djarin as the Child's father, naming them a clan of two, before single handedly defeating five storm troopers with only her tools. It is in this singular instance that femininity is positioned as superior to masculinity, with the Armorer better performing masculinity than any of the male identities around her and holding her ground when neither the protagonists nor the rest of her Tribe could do so.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, the narrative aesthetics of *The Mandalorian* function to facilitate a return to, and continuity of, masculine heteronormativity in the face of rapid and widespread change within the *Star Wars* cinematic franchise. They do so by harnessing the processes of nostalgia as a continuation of identity to form a restoration of an idealized and masculine *Star Wars* of the past. This restoration functions to appease the sense of loss and discontinuity of relationship with the franchise for an older male subset of the fandom. By providing a sentimental reconstruction of the heterocentric narrative aesthetics and gender roles of the original trilogy, *The Mandalorian* forms a conceptual binary with the ostensibly progressive sequel and anthology films.

The use of nostalgia has long been central to the *Star Wars* franchise, which often evokes a feeling of pastness in order to mediate the franchise legacy for the fandom and ensure a continuity of physiognomy for the *Star Wars* universe. In *The Mandalorian*, however, rather than looking to nostalgia as a critical tool through which to enable a dynamic and reflective relationship with the past that is positive and optimistic about the future, nostalgia is used to construct a refuge from the present of the *Star Wars* cinematic franchise.

Drawing heavily on the narrative aesthetics of the Western, *The Mandalorian* deploys vivid imagery of masculine protagonists and masculine settings that overwhelm the narrative to restore outdated definitions of masculinity and masculine codes of behavior. This forms a narcissistic response to the threats posed to such conceptualizations of masculinity by new and progressive gender representations within the contemporaneous sequel and anthology trilogies. In making that response, *The Mandalorian* re-centers the *Star Wars* narrative on the masculine, reducing the spatio-temporal distance between the past and present by appropriating iconic masculine identities of the eighties action cinema, and stripping away the value-laden, overly complex and politicized present of the franchise, to celebrate, admire and revel in exceptional masculine abilities and relationships.

Central to this re-centering is the negotiation of femininity as secondary to masculinity. In restoring an idealized masculine past, *The Mandalorian* disrupts the reconfiguring of hegemonic masculine heroism and feminine passivity taking place within the sequel and anthology films, providing an aesthetic that foregrounds the insufficiency of femininity in achieving the central aim of the narrative – the protection of the Child. *The Mandalorian* is a narrative concerned with fatherhood. Moreover, in using nostalgia in the restorative mode to facilitate a continuity of idealized masculine identity, *The Mandalorian* is positioned as the would-be masculine heir to the legacy of the original trilogy.

Limitations

The central consideration of this article concerns the extent to which the *The Mandalorian* is encoded with a remediation of the narrative aesthetics of the original *Star Wars* trilogy 'to manage change and make sense of it, through a symbolic denigration of change and a wishful return to the stability of the past' (Jing 2006: 360). As to whether the individual consumer can move beyond this restorative interpretation and use nostalgia as a critical tool, focusing on 'positive, productive, [and] active uses of the past' (Pickering & Keightley 2006: 938), remains outside the methodological scope of this article.

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