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Women, science fiction spectacle and the mise-en-scène of space adventure in the *Star Wars* franchise

American science fiction cinema has long provided a fantasy space in which some variation in gender conventions is not only possible but even expected. Departure from normative gender scripts signals visually and thematically that we have been transported to another space or time, suggesting that female agency and female heroism in particular is a by-product of elsewhere, or more precisely what we can term elsewhere. As a consequence perhaps, science fiction franchises such as the *Alien* and *Terminator* films became staples of genre and of feminist film criticism from the 1980s onwards, with scholars drawn to female protagonists that are read and re-read as either complex and transgressive or as superficial instances of commercial cinema's response to developments in gender culture. It is noteworthy that these female heroines in 1980s and 1990s cinema were deployed in films that centred thematically on an opposition between human and alien or human and machine, displacing preoccupations of gendered or racial differences onto science fiction's defining preoccupation with what it is to be human.

From the 1970s the *Star Wars* series/franchise has offered space adventure largely for boys and men (I refer to on screen protagonists rather than audiences in cinemas)¹ While Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia character demonstrated the vitality of supporting female figures in adventure narratives, the emphasis of subsequent 'episodes' was firmly on melodramatic themes of male redemption. As Christine Cornea observes, 'there is really no question as to who rules this empire and who has privileged access to the mystical "force", as these powers are passed from father to son' (Cornea, 115). For Cornea and other scholars of science fiction, these are fundamentally patriarchal story worlds. The *Star Wars* franchise centres on the staging of vast imperial power struggles played out through a master/apprentice relationship and intimate contests between father and son; both effectively stand in for and supplement rebellions against authority, whether familial or galactic. As Cornea notes, scholars have tended to critique these films as childish and conservative with respect to race, gender and the broader contexts of US politics.

However, more recent instalments in the franchise - *The Force Awakens* (J.J. Abrams, 2015), *Rogue One* (Gareth Edwards, 2016) and *The Last Jedi* (Rian Johnson, 2017) – have centred on more complex, or at least more explicitly heroic, female protagonists. While skeptical of the possibilities of genre cinema to present more than one woman at the centre of a fiction, So Mayer sees the *Star Wars* universe as ‘leading the way’ in a ‘minor resurgence of women in genre films’ (2017, 33). Taken together these recent iterations of the franchise suggest that it is possible to shift the association of space combat with boy’s own adventure. The construction of Rey (Daisy Ridley) in *The Force Awakens* as an intuitive pilot able to master machines, as well as an apprentice-in-waiting, points to the possibility of incorporating a female hero without reference to explanatory paternal backstories or intimations of essential femininity (typical strategies exploited in mainstream cinema). This facility to rewrite, or perhaps more accurately refocus, the conventions of the series stands in contrast to the cinematic reboot of *Star Trek*, a venture which reproduces a good deal of the problematic gender hierarchies of the earlier series and film texts.²

This article then seeks to explore the gendered work of the *Star Wars* franchise within the generic frame of science fiction. In response to the special issue’s focus on the female astronaut I give particular consideration to the visual articulation of heroism and of space itself. An idea of space, of multiple planets and systems and the possibility of travel between them, is fundamental to the *Star Wars* franchise. Yet the figure of the female space pilot has only latterly come into focus in these hugely profitable films. In the context of this special issue around women in space, I explore here the mise-en-scène of adventure in the *Star Wars* franchise, focusing on the most recent films in particular. Space and the juxtaposition of planets with spacecraft provides one of the series’ recurrent establishing shots, indicating points of arrival and departure; along with the representation of light speed through a vanishing point, such shots serve to signal distance in both spatial and temporal terms. Although narrative and thematic elements are important aspects of the argument presented here, the article elaborates the centrality of setting and landscape in the twenty-first century films, notably the construction of multiple worlds as sets for melodramatic action. Female heroism is staged in the films I explore here in a cinematic space of

visual effects and spectacle across diverse settings including desert and forest landscapes, mechanized interiors and of course, space itself. I argue that these spectacular settings are important both visually and thematically, elaborating key themes of freedom, loss and redemption in and through the ground, the environment and space.

In the first section of this article I discuss *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* in relation to melodrama, highlighting the combination of galactic and intimate conflicts and an emphasis on the figure of the failing/redeemed father. The second section turns to a consideration of the visual positioning of heroic women in relation to environment and space. Space travel across multiple worlds is a fundamental dimension of the *Star Wars* films. I ask how female protagonists are positioned in relation to the imagery of spaceflight and to events that take place on the ground. These questions of form open up issues of mobility and agency - as they are visually presented in fictional worlds - which are important for a consideration of science fiction's staging of female adventure narratives.

Melodrama and science fiction worlds in the *Star Wars* franchise

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977) was a blockbuster hit on its original release, its reference points less the achievements in spaceflight and lunar exploration of the previous decade than the adventurous tales of other worlds of the type exemplified by *Flash Gordon* (US, Frederick Stephani, 1936).³ As is well known, the first film was sub-titled 'Episode IV' in the manner of a serial, suggesting that audiences were joining an established narrative world. A further two films were made following the success of *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983), with three prequels produced between 1999 and 2005 detailing the events that led up to the original film as well as an animated film and television series, *The Clone Wars* (US, Cartoon Network, 2008-2014). A third trilogy of films began with *The Force Awakens* in 2015. The nostalgic visuals favoured in this film and in the following year's stand-alone film *Rogue One* underline a desire to retrospectively celebrate but also to rewrite the films produced decades earlier. That rewriting focused most conspicuously on an inclusivity with respect to

gender and ethnicity; certainly, this inclusivity was widely noted within reviews and commentaries, even those that dismissed the moves as relatively superficial. There are also notable differences with respect to the role accorded to setting, environment and to technology.

Already located in science fiction's elsewhere/elsewhen (via the franchise's appeal to its location 'a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away'), *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* locate female protagonists in the melodramatic structures of masculine conflict and redemption that the whole series exploits so fully. Thus, as I will discuss, *Rogue One's* Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones) seeks and is reconciled to her father, while in *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* Rey bonds with (and ultimately replaces) both father-figure Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and mentor Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), two characters from the original series of films. The mobility of these female characters, and their gradual movement from positions of cynical or resigned isolation to active participation in larger (galactic) events, aligns them with the position more often reserved in science fiction/adventure films for male characters. It is, I argue, a space of female heroism that is enabled by the expansive otherworld landscapes and familiar dramas of intimacy and connection which characterise science fiction adventure.

While science fiction is a diverse genre frame, melodrama as a mode of story-telling can be seen at work in commercial cinema much more broadly. Thus, the juxtaposition of melodrama with more specific genre locations (for example, the space travel and other worlds of science fiction) is well recognised in film studies. As Linda Williams writes 'the noun *melodrama* functions to denote a certain form of exciting, sensational, and, above all, moving story that could then be further differentiated by more specifications of setting or milieu and/or genre' (17). For Ben Singer, film melodrama couples pathos with sensationalism, working to agitate moral outrage on the part of spectators who find themselves 'observing extreme moral injustice' (40). Key to the melodramatic mode is virtue evidenced through suffering; indeed, as Jonna Eagle (2017) argues this sense of virtue under siege is frequently linked to nationalist discourses in American cinema. Melodrama centres on the figure of the victim-hero, and as Williams notes in relation to action-oriented versions of the

form, 'suffering that calls for deeds' (Williams, 29). These deeds are explicitly staged in and across landscapes that challenge the hero, ensuring that the *mise-en-scène* gives visual form to the conflicts that underpin the genre.⁴ In both *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* a tipping point occurs which eventually drives the heroic figure to take action, to become involved in the ongoing struggle against tyranny. In the former, Finn (John Boyega) first runs from the First Order after the battle and massacre of villagers in the opening sequence, while in the latter Jyn's cynicism is overcome on seeing a hologram of her father. Given the science fiction framing of the *Star Wars* films it is perhaps unsurprising that the call for action – which leads Rey, Finn and Jyn Erso to action based on collective hope, even faith – is bound up in mobility across multiple worlds and through space. Action requires travel across vast distances with technologies of transit and weaponry a vital part of the *mise-en-scène*. In what follows I will tease out some of the ways in which the female protagonist – and by extension, female heroism – is constituted in and through the other world terrains within which she is positioned.

The original trilogy in the *Star Wars* franchise figures galactic events through an adventure narrative and an intimate family drama. The adventure narrative centres on resistance to imperial rule, setting out the moral injustice against which the characters rebel. The empire in turn is bent on retaining and extending power via the use of weaponry - the construction and destruction of super-weapons capable of destruction on an industrial scale is visually contrasted to the version of dueling associated with the Jedi Knights who fight with light sabres, weapons both archaic and futuristic. The narrative structure turns on questions of time: plans detailing a weakness in the design of the 'Death Star' must be got to resistance headquarters in time to avert disaster; battles between small forces and large armies stage individual acts of heroism under pressure of time with countdowns intensified by cross-cutting techniques. Alongside these events and the spectacular battles and just in time escapes they entail, an intimate family drama unfolds. A restless young man, Luke Skywalker, is entranced by the image of Princess Leia, seen in a holographic message appealing to Obi-Wan Kenobi for help. Together with roguish pilot Han Solo and his co-pilot Chewbacca, Luke seeks out Leia and opposes the plans of the villainous Darth Vader and the Emperor whom he serves. Leia is subsequently

revealed to be Luke's twin sister while Vader is revealed as their father, a once heroic man consumed by darkness (the visual mapping of black and white onto evil and good respectively is suggestive of a simple moral structure which also opposes technology/weaponry to instinct/belief). After seeking training from a mentor on another world, Luke ultimately succeeds in appealing to his father's 'good' (i.e. family/paternal) feelings and Vader dies redeemed and returned to his former identity, Anakin.

As should be evident from this capsule account, adventure and family drama contextualize each other in the first *Star Wars* trilogy in a manner that is characteristic of melodrama. Luke's traumatic discovery of his parentage is followed by a period of exile, learning and redemption. Luke's rescue of his father and victory over the emperor is woven through the other characters' successful attack on the empire's forces and the destruction of the advanced weaponry through which the emperor seeks to subject the galaxy. Themes of family unity and disruption, loyalty and betrayal underpin the melodramatic story-world. The generic frame of science fiction is important to how the *Star Wars* films stage these events – intimate/familial drama and combat on a large scale - across multiple worlds. Combat takes place on and within diverse environments as well as, of course, space itself. Moreover, as we will see, the yearning for travel, for family or connection and for the belonging of home becomes associated not so much with a particular place (one that is left and then returned to, say) but with spacecraft as mobile sites of belonging. That association is perhaps most overtly, later self-consciously expressed in relation to the Millennium Falcon, a craft which is explicitly referred to as 'home' and is piloted by characters including Han Solo and Chewbacca, Luke Skywalker, Rey and Finn.

How are the themes of family melodrama – including those of inheritance and home - played out in *The Force Awakens*? Is a dutiful daughter figure positioned differently given the insistent father/son couplings of the series? As with Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Rey is both in the middle of nowhere (on the desert planet Jakku) and at the centre of things. For Luke, this was a question of his biological father; for Rey her ability with the 'force' is not explained as such, her absent family leaving open that question of heritage and inheritance. As the title suggests, Rey

begins to discover her power through the course of *The Force Awakens*, culminating in her quest for a mentor/master as she meets Luke in the final shots. The key relationship she develops in the film is with Finn, a Stormtrooper who rebels against his training and subjection. Both are figures without family, isolated in the world; both express uncertainty as to their direction and both ultimately commit to each other and to the larger battle. A second important relationship – developed more fully in *The Last Jedi* – is with and against the villainous and conflicted Kylo Ren (Adam Driver). Formerly a pupil of Skywalker, Ren is the son of Han Solo and Leia, thus connecting the family conflicts of *The Force Awakens* to both previous generations and earlier films. The franchise foregrounds precisely such generational narratives, perpetual conflict staged over different worlds and times. Captured by Ren, Rey's thoughts and fears are laid bare, including her perception of Solo as a father figure. In turn Rey is able to perceive Ren's fears, specifically that he will not achieve the strength of his grandfather Darth Vader. These familial fears and hopes work to suggest a connection between the two, a mutual understanding, drawing Rey into the melodramatic conflicts of generations set up in the original trilogy.

Motherhood is far less prominent than fatherhood in the *Star Wars* films, although the juxtaposition of Rey and Leia towards the end of *The Force Awakens* suggests the potential for such a trajectory (the imagery of Jyn Erso rescuing a young girl and restoring her to her mother in *Rogue One* also points to the resonance of maternal figurations). Leia seems convinced that because Han is Ren's father he will be able to persuade him to return to the family/light ('if you see our son, bring him home'); yet when they do meet, the rogue son kills his father, committing himself to a path of violence and grief (in *The Last Jedi* Ren is played more overtly as an angry adolescent, unsuited to a paternal position of authority; in turn Leia will admit that her son is now gone). In this context, Rey's climactic fight with Kylo Ren, which follows immediately after his patricide, offers a melodramatic enactment of good versus evil as well as articulating themes of connection and belonging. During their duel Ren offers to teach Rey, in effect to take up that paternal position, an offer she rejects; indeed, this is presented as a decisive point in their fight with Rey realizing her own powers and defeating Ren. Their duel takes place on the 'Starkiller Base' – an amplified Death Star built within/from a planet – the surface of which consists of

snow-covered woods, rendered Gothic by the increasing darkness as the sun's power is drained. The setting recalls Rey's terrifying vision, foregrounding her interiority. The duel thus relates to and stands in for the larger conflict, situating the female hero at the heart of a melodramatic struggle.

Rey is introduced as a character in *The Force Awakens* via a close-up; in line with the relationship that they will forge through the course of the drama, the shot visually echoes a preceding image of Finn at a moment of personal conflict. Horrified by battle and humanized for the viewer by the revelation of his face, Finn is rebuked by his commander and replaces his bloodstained helmet. This gesture is followed by a brief shot of space – suggesting distance - before cutting to a hatch being wrenched open to reveal Rey in the same position within the frame. Her head too is covered, a blue headlamp and goggles rendering her appearance alien. A longer shot shows us Rey as a figure amongst the shadows, using ropes to deftly navigate the wrecked technological space that she is scouring for saleable parts. Like Finn among the Stormtroopers, Rey is a small figure in the scene; covered by her work clothes and dwarfed by the ruins of technology, she too is subsequently uncovered and rendered human. Outside Rey is also visually dwarfed by the desert and the space debris scattered around the sands, while the depiction of her exploitative work conditions and solitary meal suggests her social insignificance. Rey is thus introduced as an isolated yet self-sufficient figure. A scavenger, she searches for valuable parts amongst the wreckage of starships; as I'll explore in the next section, this imagery underlines both the character's association with spaceflight and her initial confinement to the ground. From the beginning she carries a staff, a version of an archaic weapon which signals Rey's ability to protect herself – but also her need to do so. It is striking then that Rey is economically framed in this sequence in relation to both science fiction themes of human identity in a technologized world and melodramatic themes of vulnerability and social inequality.

As the film's title suggests, *The Force Awakens* is, in part, a narrative of self-discovery detailing the awakening of Rey's connection with the 'force' and her shift to heroic status. This development is not unexpected given the parallels – visual and thematic - between Rey and Luke Skywalker and the film's status as both reboot and

remake.⁵ The first scene to explicitly align Rey with the powers of the force takes place underground in an evocation of the Gothic which equates the mysticism of the 'force' with power and horror. Rey has travelled to a lush green planet, Takodana, so that the group can seek the help of Maz Kanata (Lupita Nyong'o), an ancient figure who is uncannily perceptive. Just as we are introduced to Rey following the portrayal of Finn's interior conflict, his choice to leave Takodana - to run from the First Order once more - is immediately followed by Rey's own inner turmoil. Watching Finn depart, once more left behind, Rey hears cries; turning her head she looks offscreen, thus missing Finn's backward glance. The sounds lead Rey underground to a chest in a chamber in which she finds Luke's lightsaber. Touching it brings terrifying visions which hurl her across time and space: a blue, illuminated corridor which begins to collapse; a rain-soaked red planet where R2D2 and Luke are glimpsed; Kylo Ren killing a man and turning to the camera as if to see her/us; Rey as a young girl being restrained and calling for her family to come back. The adult Rey looking on turns to see a craft flying upward and away; as she stumbles the image gives way to a snow-covered wooded terrain in which she encounters Ren, foreshadowing their duel at the end of the film.

Running away within the vision, Rey falls back to reality, badly shaken; when she asserts that she must return to Jakku, Maz tells her both that the family she waits for will not return and that her connection with the lightsaber suggests a different trajectory: 'that lightsaber was Luke's and his father's before him and now it calls to you'. Prompted by this Gothic moment of revelation, Rey flees in fear into the woods, suggesting that belonging brings with it fear. However, as the settlement comes under attack Rey turns to fight, demonstrating the courage that defines heroism in the narrative. Rey then encounters Kylo Ren in the woods and is eventually stopped in her tracks, rendered unable to move or to defend herself. In narrative terms, her capture allows Rey to discover and exercise her powers and also to stop Finn from running; he is set on a new quest to save her such that Rey both turns to fight herself and prompts her companion to do so too. This vision sequence and the action that follows also raises – and sidesteps – the question of how to locate a female character in the fictional world of *Star Wars* with its focus on father/son dynamics. Rey's origins are left obscured while her connection to Luke – via the lightsaber and the closing shots of the film – suggest a relationship to the family at the heart of the

story-world. Once again while science fiction emphasizes an expansion of the world via the multiple systems and species depicted, family melodrama shrinks the world to the intimate, personal struggles of individuals and their connections to each other.

Given the efforts to connect *The Force Awakens* to the established story-world of the franchise, it is interesting to turn to *Rogue One*, a film that is not an 'episode' but rather a stand-alone '*Star Wars* story' featuring multiple characters and settings. Both centre on heroic female figures marked by traumatic childhood experiences of loss, yet they are constructed as heroic in quite different ways. *Rogue One* traces the retrieval of the plans that initiate the action in the original 1977 film. As with the melodramatic emphasis of the original trilogy, science fiction themes of machinery and power are here framed by a family drama, notably via a morally ambiguous paternal figure. The film begins with the home already in a state of disruption; the arrival of a spacecraft signals threat, the young Jyn running towards her parents' home. The impression given is of danger long expected; Jyn is told to prepare ('gather your things – its time') as her mother communicates with Saw Gerrera (Forest Whitaker) that 'he's come for us', the latter's response 'you know what to do'. If the plan was escape it is only partially successful, since Jyn's scientist father Galen (Mads Mikkelsen) is taken to work on the Death Star and her mother killed. Jyn escapes however, hiding underground until Gerrera comes for her. Her relationship with these two paternal figures defines Jyn throughout the film, suggesting the familial themes already discussed in relation to Rey and *The Force Awakens*.

When we discover Jyn as an adult she is incarcerated, consolidating her status as subjected and her potential for heroic action in line with the victim-hero of melodrama. Like Rey she is quickly shown to be capable of protecting herself via a brief scene of combat, her record of fraud and violence situating her character as an outcast. Jyn is liberated by opponents of the empire in the hope of making use of her connection to Saw Gerrera, who raised her, and to her father; thus, it is her relationship to paternal figures that gains Jyn her freedom and draws her into the film's action. Reunited with Gerrera we learn that he too, like her father, left her underground: 'you left me behind!' she rebukes. Gerrera reveals that his motivation

was to protect her from others in the cadre who wanted to use her as a hostage. 'Not a day goes by that I don't think of you.' Saw then shows Jyn a holographic message from her father in which he too affirms how much she has been in his thoughts and his devotion to her. Galen explains his hidden plotting against the forces of empire even as he has been engaged in the military/scientific project of building what audiences recognize as the Death Star. Intercut with preparations for an attack on the nearby city – an attack delivered by the weapon on which her father has worked and from which she will barely escape ('just in time') - the hologram recalls Leia's message in the original film setting up a quest that is both vital to resistance efforts and deeply personal.

Initially asked about her father by rebel leaders, Jyn indicates that she finds it easier to think of him as dead. She agrees to help locate her father for the chance of freedom rather than politics. Yet having disavowed struggle for political reasons, Jyn is drawn into action by her father's love for her and his desire for revenge. Her response to his image and his words is intensely emotional in contrast to the terse performance of the character to that point. The nexus of science fiction and melodrama is played to full effect in this sequence; as the message cuts out with the rumbling of the ground following the Death Star's strike, Jyn drops to her knees, the spectacle of destruction accompanying the pathos of her father's message. The presence of Saw Gerrera, the man who raised her, calling out as she runs 'save yourself, save the rebellion, save the dream' doubles down on an emotional sense of paternal fidelity that drives Jyn through the remainder of the film.

Ground and space

In its initial iteration *Star Wars* was often understood as pastiche. While its primary genre location is science fiction, the franchise certainly draws upon multiple genres for its visual imagery and thematic resonance. An emphasis on territory – bases, command posts, colonies - links *Star Wars* firmly to discourses of empire and to the war film as genre; the films in the franchise regularly feature scenes of ground, air and space battles as well as the close combat associated with adventure. The language of resistance and rebellion suggests insurgency, meaning that war persists

beyond the battlefield in ways resonant for contemporary audiences. An emphasis on the fighter pilot – whether in terrestrial or space combat - speaks both to military iconography and to the astronaut of science fiction. In turn, space signals the vastness of terrain that is fought over in the *Star Wars* films. As I'll explore in this section, the imagery of space and its relationship to the multiple worlds the franchise imagines is vital for the visual and thematic articulation of female heroism in *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One*. I explore the contrast between space and the ground, noting the different ways in which the female astronaut/fighter traverses terrain.

The crawling text used in the *Star Wars* films – itself a nostalgic device alluding to 1930s serial form – plays over an image which conveys the enormity of space. Despite its nomenclature, the *Star Wars* franchise relatively rarely explores the mysteries of space *qua* space. Of course, space combat is a fundamental of the films, whether climactic and decisive or mid-narrative skirmish. Yet such battles typically use the visual language of the war film – the one-on-one dogfight, the targeting of a particular site – played out both within a planet's atmosphere and in space. Indeed the battle in space to enter the atmosphere and thus the battle below, provides narrative tension in *Rogue One*, while in *The Force Awakens* action in space is dependent on the actions of those on the ground. Space is central to both narrative and spectacle; and yet the mystery and terror of space – a vast and deadly area that freezes and asphyxiates humans – does not haunt the series as it does so many science fiction films.

The image of Leia propelling herself through space in *The Last Jedi* – made poignant by the death of actress Carrie Fisher following production – underlines how rare that imagery is within the series. Neither is the vastness of space a particular point of reference for the fictional world of *Star Wars*. Of course, the size of the galaxy is acknowledged, evident in the reference to the possibility of Finn getting to the 'outer rim' to hide from the First Order, or the missing section of the map to the planet where Luke Skywalker is based, information sought by both sides. Yet, distance is repeatedly minimized in the interests of narrative economy by the portrayal of craft that travel rapidly, at times almost instantaneously (*The Last Jedi* departs from this

convention with its slow pursuit through space). In any case, the elsewhere and elsewhere imagined within the franchise is premised on spaceflight as commonplace, tied to the military and economic structures of empire. The logic of that conception of distance as insignificant is evident in the connection between Rey and Kylo Ren in *The Last Jedi*, allowing them to speak and even touch across worlds, as well as the projection undertaken by Luke Skywalker in the climactic confrontation with Ren (his physical body, it is suggested, has remained on the island).

It is territory rather than space that is key in *Star Wars*, a film franchise characterized visually by fantastic worlds and thematically by the terrain, whether lush or barren, technological or 'natural'. How then are the female heroes I explore here imagined in relation to space and to territory? For the most part in the franchise to date, spaceflight is understood as a masculine business, linked to an aspiration to escape the mundane which shackles men to the ground. The image of Luke looking longingly to the sky in *A New Hope* speaks to his desire for adventure, neatly opposed to the image of Rey who initially looks to the sky not to escape but in hopes of her family returning. Even so, the lines she scratches on metal to record time suggest an association of terra firma with imprisonment; our expectation is that she will ultimately want and need to fly. Rey's deft navigation of the Millennium Falcon through Jakku's terrain and through the wreckage of spacecraft that she has scavenged for a living establish her firmly as the hero of the story. In *The Last Jedi* she will also 'man' the Millennium Falcon's guns, consolidating the military associations of the space pilot in the *Star Wars* films as well as her command of machinery.

The Force Awakens begins by following the crawling titles with a tilting camera movement that shifts from space with its myriad pinpoints of light to a luminescent planet, its surface white and blue. Across the surface the shadow of a spaceship intrudes with several smaller craft also silhouetted against the planet's reflected light. The film takes us from this sinister visual evocation of dark and light to a sequence which details the arrival of Stormtroopers on a desert planet at night, the exchange of valuable information, and the introduction of several of the principle male characters: Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac), Finn, the robot BB8 and villain Kylo Ren.

The visual contrast in this sequence, in common with many sequences in the film, is that between blue/black and red/yellow tones – the former suggesting technology and space, the latter fire and land. The flamethrowers wielded by the imperial troopers set the desert village ablaze against the night sky in a visually striking image of destruction. The basic structures of which the village consists – fabric, wood, stone; an interior lit by candles – is set against the technology and weaponry of the First Order. The massacre in this opening sequence and the mundane details of Rey's existence set out shortly after point to the dangerous and laborious character of life on the ground.

Though both are mobile figures associated with agency and heroism, Jyn Erso and Rey are positioned very differently in relation to the *mise-en-scène* of space: Rey is a pilot and mechanic, while Jyn is persistently associated with the ground. We first see Jyn as a child, witness to the murder of her mother and capture of her scientist father by an imperial officer who she will herself confront at the film's climax. The planet on which they are hiding – making a living as farmers – is both lush and barren. Landscape is an element of *mise-en-scène* which is more than a backdrop for action; it evokes themes and conveys connotations which indicate a character's trajectory. The distinctive landscape composition here renders an environment that is black, white and green eliminating virtually all other colours. The rich black soil appears in bands alongside the green foliage. Jyn hides low to the dirt while watching her parents' confrontation with imperial forces. As I've noted, Jyn takes refuge in a cellar that has been dug within a cave; doubly underground then, she is closely aligned with the earth. In contrast to Rey's upward gaze, Jyn typically looks downwards or across the space she inhabits. Several shots through the course of *Rogue One* feature Jyn within a spacecraft looking out of the window, her gaze remaining at eye-level or focused downwards. Jyn's ability to fight is located on the ground rather than via spaceflight; her skills are demonstrated early on in the scenes on Jeddha, the film making use of the conventions of the urban war film to represent a city in turmoil. Jyn's toughness, cynicism and later her doggedness render her less spiritual (although there is a brief reference to prayer) and more visceral, able to survive in diverse environments.

Rogue One depicts Jyn Erso travelling upwards in two key sequences, but both emphasise her relationship to the ground rather than to flight. On Eadu, as her companion Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) has Galen Erso in his sights – he is under orders to assassinate rather than rescue Jyn’s father – she climbs a long staircase up a cliff leading to the platform where her father, his plot unmasked, is in danger. This world presents a visual contrast to the desert and dusty city of Jeddha seen earlier. Arriving in a rainstorm at night the landscape is pictured as rocky and treacherous, black and blue dominating the colour scheme. Jyn’s ascent towards her father is frustrated; first a rebel attack and then the force of the engines of a departing spacecraft propel her backwards. The second scene of Jyn climbing is at the film’s climax; power having failed, Jyn and Cassian scale data stacks to retrieve the Death Star plans, a sequence intercut with the bravery and loss of the other members of their small team. As they climb towards their goal they are attacked by Orson Krennic (Ben Mendolsohn), thus setting up a confrontation with the man who killed Jyn’s mother and took her father in the opening scene, a coupling of the larger adventure story with that of Jyn’s personal history. Once Cassian is hit, Jyn climbs alone – the film clearly visualizes her now heroic character in an upward direction, including a daring leap through a vent which rapidly opens and closes. At the top of the tower Jyn is positioned on a platform jutting out over the blue waters beneath and blue sky above. In mid-air, the air battle going on around her, Jyn looks up only once, in time to see danger. Hauling herself back onto the platform and with Cassian overcoming Krennick, Jyn sends the plans to the rebel alliance above. Unable to escape the base in time, she herself will not leave the ground again; descending in the elevator with the wounded Cassian we see the two embrace against a beautiful background of light and water, their deaths signified by a white screen as the effects of the Death Star are felt. As with the film’s opening sequence, striking natural environments are brought into use to establish the character of Jyn as heroic and grounded.

Jyn’s groundedness, her association with the earth, has to do with the status of *Rogue One* as a standalone story, one in which all the principle characters die. *The Force Awakens* functions differently in relation to the larger story and so does its hero, Rey. Rey is introduced, as we’ve seen, framed by abandoned spacecraft,

associated with an imagery of flight aborted. The mundane routines of work and survival position Rey as small within the landscape yet significant within the film. She is seen eating her meal sat on the sand, positioned against an abandoned AT-AT that she has made her home, both a nostalgic visual reference to the earlier films and an evocation of technology as waste. What seems to be a point of view shot shows the desert sands and blue sky, a craft in the distance heading upwards and the camera tilting to echo that movement. In the next shot we see Rey putting on a battered helmet – associating her again with flight - before rescuing and repairing BB8 and beginning her adventure, effectively the end of a life of waiting for her family to return. The revelation of Rey's skills as a pilot in a spectacular escape from the planet surface locates her as a hero who has long had the potential to escape the ground. Yet for a good part of the film Rey longs to return home to await her family. On arrival at Takodana to seek help from Maz Kanata, Rey is in awe at the lush green world and mass of water, remarking 'I didn't know there was this much green in the whole galaxy'. This revelation of the variety and beauty of other worlds points to the pleasures of adventure, not least the chance of escape from isolation and mundane work. Picking up on this sense of elsewhere, the setting for the duel between Rey and Kylo Ren towards the end of *The Force Awakens* visually indicates how far Rey has come – the contrast between the darkness, snow and trees of the Starkiller Base and Jakku's bright, barren deserts is striking. The duel ends with the terrain on which the two fight cracking apart; a chasm appears between them, separating them physically and reserving their conflict for future episodes. Like Jyn, Rey's journey then takes her through radically different (and beautiful) environments. Rey however, is not rooted to the ground but a figure of mobility, escaping the scene of action as the planet is torn apart.

Conclusion: Just in time and too late - melodrama, science fiction and home

Linda Williams usefully explores the temporal narrative logic that pervades melodrama, in particular the climactic race against time so common to the form. She writes 'The rescue, chase or fight that defies time, and that occupies so much time in the narrative, is the desired mirror reversal of the defeat by time in the pathos of "too late"' (35). Juxtaposed with scenes of space combat which define the series, the duel

between Rey and Ren in *The Force Awakens* exemplifies the thrilling temporality of melodrama: it is both 'just in time' and 'too late'. The evocation of melodramatic action through a fracturing environment, as discussed above, points to a concern with violence towards the natural world as much as social justice. It would be too strong to suggest that *The Force Awakens* deals with environmental themes in any consistent way; yet Rey's constitution as a female hero escaping from a desert planet strewn with space junk and enraptured by the sight of woods and water speaks powerfully to these contemporary concerns.

The narrative logic of melodrama – characterized by coincidence and misunderstanding as well as rescues just in time – is also evident in *Rogue One* around the quest for Galen Erso; Jyn seeks to find and take him back to the rebels to explain the trap he has set in the Death Star, but Cassian is under orders to assassinate Erso, the conflicting goals sensed by other members of the group. Pathos too is at work around the brief reunion between Jyn and her father on Eadu. She is both just in time and too late; his dying words – 'I have so much to tell you' - reiterate the joy of reunion and the pain of loss. Such a juxtaposition of events just in time and too late is also at stake at the climax of *Rogue One*: the team led by Jyn and Cassian succeed in getting the Death Star plans to the rebels – via a CGI version of Leia, just in time to set up the action of the 1977 film – yet for them it is too late. As discussed above, the pair seem to accept death and to find comfort in the success of their shared efforts.

The *Star Wars* reboot shows the empire and the First Order respectively to be evil, willing to destroy worlds as well as individual lives. Yet the rebel alliance too is problematic, unwilling to act as when Jyn's impassioned calls to the council – 'the time to fight is now!' - fall on deaf ears. Just as the plotlines focus on both ideological affiliation and family drama (the latter making the former resonant and meaningful), an idea of belonging relates not so much to larger ties of belief but to smaller groups defined by loyalty and friendship. An exchange between Jyn and Cassian, following his decision to lead a group of rebels backing her, reinforces the point. She tells him, 'I'm not used to people sticking around when things go bad'. His response, 'Welcome home,' suggests that she has found a place with him, if not with the rebels. Another

character, Baze Malbus (Jiang Wen), refers to Jyn as 'little sister,' reaffirming the familial basis of their group endeavor. Both home and family, or better connection, are terms associated not with place (terrain) but with the group. This is in line with the community ethos of the war film and the science fiction genre's emphasis on multiple possible worlds.

In this context it is telling that a battered spacecraft, the Millennium Falcon, serves as the most explicit site of belonging or homeliness in both *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*. One of the innovations of the original Star Wars film was its presentation of technology as lived-in, as failing or as junk; *The Force Awakens* reiterates this trope when Rey describes the Falcon as 'garbage', stealing the craft only as a last resort. In another dimension of temporality it is worth noting that the Millennium Falcon is central to the nostalgia the reboot plays out for an original trilogy that was itself nostalgic. As Vivian Sobchack writes, with reference in part to *Star Wars*, 'The nostalgia mode tends... to conserve its mediated "past" and "remember" pop images transparently – in a politically "unconscious" and transparent way' (1997, 276). As this suggests, postmodern culture involves nostalgia for times that never existed and science fiction is preoccupied with temporal/spatial displacements. As such the twenty-first century reboot of the Star Wars franchise, and in particular its self-conscious foregrounding of female heroism, represents a particularly intriguing instance of (gendered) nostalgic remembering.

Science fiction involves a manipulation of space and time, what I have called here the elsewhere and the elsewhen, allowing characters to traverse vast distances across imaginary worlds, while making use of recognisable reference points and visual iconography such as the Earth seen from space. Temporality and historical change are of course important issues for feminist accounts of gender. Thinking through these issues in relation to science fiction requires being cognisant of multiple registers from changing commercial priorities (e.g. the significance of female audiences for the Disney Corporation), to perceptions that gender equality is a question of historical time. The latter means that future or other worlds are both more and less conducive to articulations of female heroism and agency; to the extent that they are familiar, normative gender scripts can be seen to predominate in science

fiction's imaginary worlds, yet to the extent that elsewhere/when is also an invitation to imagine gender differently, these are also spaces in which such scripts can be amended. In different ways *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* centre on female heroes who demonstrate not only agency but ingenuity and an ability to endure, qualities typically valorized in American cinema. They rework the nostalgic address of the original trilogy in fascinating ways that highlight the rich potential of science fiction as a fantasy genre for representing and negotiating gender codes.

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¹ As Megan de Bruin-Molé (2018) argues, girls and women engaged with *Star Wars* fandom from the beginning of the franchise. Thus the relationship of *Star Wars* to feminism is renewed, rather than initiated, by more recent films such as those discussed here.

² The case of *Star Trek* is perhaps more complex than this passing reference suggests, in part due to the distinctions between film and television versions of the franchise.

³ The original 1936 series – consisting of thirteen episodes – was followed by multiple film and later television iterations of the Flash Gordon character.

⁴ Williams, for examples, maps melodrama through a discussion of *Way Down East* (1920) and *Titanic* (1997), both films involving climatic scenes of life and death amongst extremes of landscape.

⁵ *The Force Awakens* reprises the narrative structure and characterization of Star Wars to a significant extent. Christopher Orr's review of the film, entitled '*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is a Mashup Masterpiece' draws out the extent to which the film is 'ensnared in its own nostalgia'. *The Atlantic*, December 16th 2015 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/star-wars-the-force-awakens-is-a-mashup-masterpiece/420684/>)