

# **Geeks, Gamergate & Ghostbusters**

How movies are responding to toxic fans



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### How movies are responding to toxic fans

When games tried to better represent women and people of color and game critics were critical of games that weren't as diverse as they would like, they received massive amounts of backlash from fans who weren't just critical, but so hateful they would send racist and misogynist messages, death threats and even dox the people involved. This organized hate campaign is now known as Gamergate (Massanari, Suellentrop) and it was the start of a renewed discussion surrounding so-called toxic fans. Gamergate did not just affect games, it trickled into other areas as well – like movies. When an all-female reboot of the 1984 classic movie *Ghostbusters* was announced, its trailer quickly became the most disliked trailer on YouTube and its stars were bombarded with misogynist and racist comments, mostly from male fans who were incensed by their beloved movie being remade with women. (Blodgett & Salter 2018 – 133) And when new *Star Wars* movies came to cinemas, its most toxic fans once again attacked what they felt didn't fit in their fandom. Even making a new cut of one of the sequel movies, removing all scenes with women.

Toxic fans and the mechanisms behind their existence and actions have been studied more extensively in fan studies in the last few years. In Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett's book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media* and Suzanne Scott's *Fake Geek Girls* for example the relationship between masculinity and toxic fandom is explored. Earlier, Henry Jenkins also wrote about gender and fanfiction in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, describing fans as "textual poachers". Within fan studies though, there remains a hierarchy between fans and the cultural objects they are a fan of. Their communities, their fanfiction and their positive or negative reactions are studied as a response to the movie/game/book etc. Even Jenkins, who discusses how fans creatively work on and "poach" the texts they are a fan of, still implicitly places these texts first. But when fans respond to cultural objects before they even exist and can influence the creators and cultural objects (through social media campaigns) while they are being made, a different approach is necessary.

With this thesis, I want to fill a gap in the discussion, analyzing toxic fan reactions and looking at the way movies themselves have adapted and responded to toxic fans. The movies I will discuss in this thesis seem to be directly adapting and responding to answer to organized toxic hate campaigns against them. By combining fan studies and film studies to analyze this relationship, I want to contribute to the discussion on the changing and more mutual relationship between (toxic) fans and movies in both these fields. So that the wider implications of this mutual relationship and the forces attributing to toxic fans can be clearer.

The dynamic between movies and fans seems to have changed. My question is: How has the relationship between toxic fans and movies changed and how has it impacted the movies themselves? To answer this question, I will be using case studies, discussing *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Ghostbusters* (2016), and the Star Wars sequel trilogy: *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens*, *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* and *Star Wars: Episode IX – The Rise of Skywalker*.

In the first chapter I will lay the foundation by first looking at fandom and toxic masculinity. I will discuss how masculinity and femininity have been framed in geek spaces and how these gendered framings have impacted the way fandom operates, notably excluding female fans and really any fan who isn't a straight cisgender man. Discussing how fandom and toxic masculinity are related and what exactly toxic masculinity is and more specifically, toxic geek masculinity.

Next, I will discuss Gamergate, a toxic hate campaign in 2014 aimed at a group of mostly women gamers and journalists who spoke about more (gender) diversity in games and games journalism. This is important to my thesis because, I will argue, Gamergate has continued to expand into the relationship between movies and (toxic) fans, with similar (misogynist & racist) hate campaigns against certain target movies such as *Ghostbusters* (2016). Because *Ghostbusters* (2016) is one of the first movies to experience such a similar hate campaign, as well as clearly respond to it in the movie itself, I will analyze the original 1984 *Ghostbusters* movie and the 2016 reboot. With my analysis focusing on the way the reboot responds and relates to both the original, as well as toxic fans.

And in the final chapter I will analyze a more recent (2015-2019) example of a movie franchise, the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, which was the target of a similarly toxic hate campaign. And which, I will explain, responded to this campaign within the movies as well but in a very different way. By analyzing these movies using the background information on toxic geek masculinity and Gamergate, I want to look at the way these hate campaigns influenced by Gamergate have impacted the movies they targeted and how movies relate to these attacks.

## CHAPTER 1: FANDOM & TOXIC MASCULINITY

In this chapter I will be examining some key concepts that are important to my thesis. I will be analyzing films to look at the role of toxic fandom and toxic (geek) masculinity in their reception as well as their response in the next chapter. But how can we define toxic fandom and toxic (geek) masculinity? Where do they originate, how do they relate and how are they constructed?

First, it's important to understand that in discussions of fandom and "geeks" gender has always been a very important aspect. We cannot discuss the ways that toxic masculinity is constructed without talking about how femininity is constructed. And this is true as well for toxic *geek* masculinity and the way femininity is framed in geek spaces. Geek masculinity is essentially formed in opposition to femininity. There was and still is a "continual rejection and negative framing of femininity" in geek spaces. (Salter and Blodgett 2017 - vii)

The gendering of geeks and nerds as male is as old as the internet itself. In 1991 Lori Kendall studied masculinity amongst computer-using men and observed how these young (mostly white) men worked to emphasize their own masculinity, while distancing themselves from women and sexuality. (Salter and Blodgett 2017 - 8) In Kendall's book *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online* (2002) she studies nerd masculinities in digital spaces and concludes that the "gendered social context" of these spaces often "casts women as outsiders unless and until they prove themselves able to perform masculinities according to the social norms of the group." (3) And, "once "gendered meanings permeate and inform" interactions within a particular digital space, thereby creating a set of gendered norms of participation that "conform to dominant masculinity standards," (4) the effect of nondominant groups on those social norms will be minimal regardless of how much their membership increases.

Years later, in a 2016 study, Lauren Rosewarne surveyed media stereotypes of internet users. Her list of stereotypes includes "the netgeek", "neckbeard", "cyberbully", "hacker" etc. All of these stereotypes are heavily associated with masculinity. As she says: "since its inception, the internet has largely been thought of as male - dominated by men, shaped by men, understood by men." (39) And, she argues after demonstrating the high number of male netgeek characters she discusses, "the internet is still frequently presented on screen as gendered." So, masculinity and "geekiness" are intertwined and across all definitions of so called "geeks", masculinity remains a defining quality. (Zékány and Cerwonka 2011).

Of course, masculinity as a concept is primarily a cultural product, and consists of specific behaviors and characteristics as opposed to the biological differences between sexes.

(Calhoun and Oxford University Press) So the definition of masculinity can be very varied between cultures as well as within a culture. However, some traditional notions that are associated with masculinity are among other things: aggressivity, competitiveness and sexual promiscuity/prowess. In their book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett point out the apparent and interesting contradiction “between geek-signifiers and the expressions identified with masculinity” (8). The male characters/heroes in geek media are often hypermasculine with all the classic characteristics associated with masculinity. Muscular, aggressive/dominant and “good” with women. But the stereotypical geek is not at all muscular, has bad social skills (probably doesn’t have a girlfriend) and bad hygiene.

Salter and Blodgett posit that actually, the geeks that may not conform to the stereotypical hyper masculine stereotype can perform this hypermasculinity through computer-aided interactions. Through geek media they can perform aggression and violence without being very muscular or “dominant” in real life. (8) In this hypermasculine fantasy, female characters are “predominantly supporting characters, who are either to be rescued or assistants to the leading male character ... the attire and body image of the female characters are often very sexy ... yet male characters are portrayed in a normal or masculinized way.” as Yi Mou and Wei Peng note in their examination of video game trailers. (2008) This trend is visible not only in video games but in books and movies as well. Think of the geek who becomes a hero trope in superhero movies like *Spider-Man* (2002) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) where scrawny awkward men get turned into more traditionally masculine heroes.

To understand the toxic *geek* masculinity that Salter and Blodgett discuss in their book, we need to look at the origins of the term toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity as a concept has its roots in the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement, or MMM.<sup>1</sup> Initially the concept wasn’t used the way it usually is now, as a way of talking about how toxic masculinity can be weaponized to harm women. Instead, says Suzanne Scott in her book *Fake Geek Girls*, male writers in the movement that started in the 80’s as a response to second wave feminism used “toxic masculinity” to describe how men and boys were responding to a perceived “crisis” in masculinity. (86) Male scholars and organizers in the movement did see toxic masculinity as being toxic to both men and women but mostly used it to discuss its impact on men.

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<sup>1</sup> The MMM can be seen as an early form of the later “men’s right” or MRA activist groups. (Scott 87)

Scott argues that it's in this time period in the 1980's when men's activist movements were on the rise that the "fanboy" became incorporated into hegemonic masculinity and the growing integration of computers into the dual realms of work and leisure, allowed for the "reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity to include aspects of the once subjugated masculine stereotype of the nerd." (86) Fanboys had historically been excluded from this hegemonic masculinity despite having all the markers associated with hegemonic power: maleness, whiteness, straightness. (86) This exclusion, says Scott, has become a core component of the fan identity of the fanboy.

So, when geek and fan culture started becoming more mainstream, a contradictory identity was formed. Although this exclusion and feeling of not fitting in and being oppressed is still part of the geek fanboy identity, it no longer matches the reality. A reality in which (digital) fan culture has exploded exponentially and fandoms that used to be seen as geeky like Marvel comic books have become mainstream blockbuster films. As fanboys actually gain hegemonic power, they fear this power might be "doled out too arbitrarily to those who have not "earned" it." (Scott 87) And this is why "gatekeeping" is performed by (mostly straight white) male fans/geeks.

**Gatekeeping.** The fact that geeks and "geeky" media are seen as masculine is problematic in itself. And female geeks have been fighting against this stereotype and advocating for more inclusive and well-rounded female characters in all types of geek media (games, books and movies). But when they do, or even when they are visible as female geeks they immediately encounter "gatekeeping", where (usually male) fans shut out other fans who do not meet their standards in the community. Often women<sup>2</sup> who are fans of something that is seen as a male fandom (like superheroes, comics or games) are accused of being "fake geek girls" and only pretending to be a fan for attention (from men). They are immediately questioned about their knowledge on the subject to test if they are a "true" fan. Men are not subjected to the same boundary-policing. Of course, when a fandom is seen as female, like the *Twilight* movie fans, female fans are actually ridiculed for their devotion and knowledge of the fandom.

An example of this persistent idea that girls/women are usually faking being a geek can be seen in the so-called "idiot nerd girl" meme that Scott discusses in her book.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> This is also often true for anyone who isn't a white cisgender heterosexual man. People of color and LGBT+ geeks are subject to much of the same gatekeeping.

<sup>3</sup> An Internet meme is "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission," commonly taking the form of an easy-to-imitate and -disseminate image or video. (Scott 102)

format of the meme is the same girl with changing text, always referring to the fact that the “idiot nerd girl” is pretending to be a fan of something but doesn’t really know about it. In the example below (figure 1), she says she likes *Star Trek* and then mentions Luke Skywalker, who is of course a protagonist in *Star Wars*, not *Star Trek*.



Figure 1

Such a seemingly silly meme is actually quite interesting as a reflection on the underlying cultural and social conditions that produce memes like these. In Limor Shifman’s writing on memes, he argues that although “memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures.” (15) The message of this meme, that as a female fan you will never be seen as an authentic “real fan” and should always be able to defend your fandom, connects to what Ryan Milner calls the “masculine participation structure” of many memes in that “the constructed centrality is male” and women are often constructed as “stupid, irrational, and inconsistent.” (67)

Another image that provides some insight into how female fans are seen is the following one (figure 2) which is discussed by Scott in *Fake Geek Girls*:



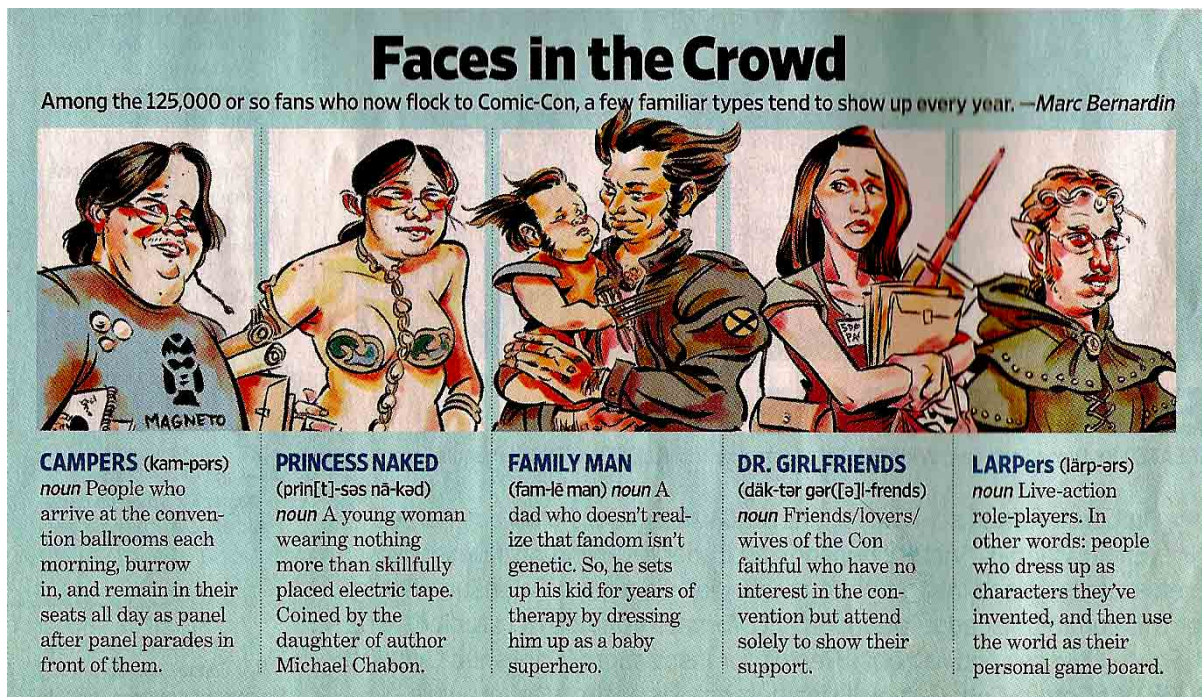


Figure 2 (Sidebar image parodying fan stereotypes from an Entertainment Weekly special issue on San Diego Comic-Con 2008. Marc Bernardin, “Faces in the Crowd,” Entertainment Weekly, July 25, 2008, 35.)

In this image you can see the only female fan stereotypes are “Princess Naked” and “Dr. Girlfriends”. In both cases the female fan is viewed through a (hetero) male lens. She is either a “Princess Naked” and only participates in fan culture to be seen as sexy by male fans, or she is “Dr. Girlfriend” who doesn’t care about fandom at all and is only there because of a male friend/lover. Either way, the female fan is not a “real” fan, but only doing it for men.

The idiot nerd girl meme and the stereotypes depicted in the “faces in the crowd” comic is part of a narrative around the “fake geek girl”. The fake geek girl is unpacked by Scott in her book of the same name. Her emphasis in unpacking the term is on the word “fake”.

The “fake” fangirl (...) implies deceit, infiltration, and performance, rendering it far more pernicious and effective as an anti-fan gatekeeping strategy. The “fake geek girl” presents a zero-sum game for female fans, not only because “fakeness” is predicated on the notion that fan affect is quantifiable and must be authenticated but also because within this paradigm, only male fans (or those who align themselves with an affirmational notion of “authentic” fan culture) are empowered to define and delimit what constitutes a “real” fan. Accusations of “fakeness” can always be applied without grounds, and “proving oneself” becomes an ongoing challenge, and one that is ultimately impossible to achieve. (101)

**The “manosphere”.** Toxic fandom and toxic geek masculinity go hand in hand with broader misogynist movements and identities. With fan culture becoming more and more mainstream, male (and mostly white, cisgender hetero) fans have reacted with backlash. This backlash also reflects the growing cultural influence of the alt-right and Men’s Right’s movements. (Scott)

Just like fan culture has become more mainstream and visible, so has popular feminism. And like the gatekeeping backlash in fandom, there is also a backlash against popular feminism: popular misogyny. That is,

at its core, a basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms. this popular circulation helps contribute in heightened ways to a misogynistic political and economic culture, where rape culture is normative, violent threats against women are validated, and rights of the body for women are either under threat or being formally retracted. (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 172)

Some men, under the umbrella of toxic masculinity feel like they and their rightful place in society is being attacked when confronted with popular feminism. In response to this threat, communities of men centered around different premises have formed. All these (mostly online) communities can be categorized under the umbrella of the so-called “manosphere”. (Cohen) This includes Men’s Right’s activists, incels<sup>4</sup>, pick-up artists and MGTOW<sup>5</sup>’s. The men who enter the manosphere and adhere to one of the groups, usually aren’t hegemonically masculine but actually fit more into the geek stereotype. And therefore, these same men are also mostly the ones who consider themselves geeks/nerds/fanboys etc. and who react in anger when feminist “killjoys”<sup>6</sup> react to or want to change sexist stereotypes in geek media. And Gamergate, says Scott, can be seen as a sort of boiling point within “nearly a decade of simmering and subtle messaging that female fans are an encroaching force that needs to be repelled.” (28) It is also a “moment of convergence between growing strains of misogyny within geek culture and the growing influence of the alt-right in culture at large.” (28) These two movements overlap in demographic as well as origin and organization, on platforms like

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<sup>4</sup> Incel = involuntary celibate

<sup>5</sup> MGTOW stands for “Men going their own way” – essentially giving up on women

<sup>6</sup> Sara Ahmed has suggested that the feminist killjoy is a figure who “kills joy because of what she claims exists,” namely, structural inequalities,<sup>79</sup> and fandom killjoys are likewise those who dare to acknowledge all that is “un-fun” about fandom for people of color, women, and queer people. (Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*)

4chan and Reddit where you can post anonymously. They both are angered by what they feel is a politically correct (PC) culture and use similar strategies to harass and attack, by organizing barrages of sexist and racist slurs on social media and doxing for example.

## CHAPTER 2: GEEKS, GAMERGATE & GHOSTBUSTERS

In this chapter, I want to start with what I consider a good starting point in discussing the current state of (toxic) fandom, masculinity and misogyny in geek spaces: the movie *Ghostbusters* (2016). The response to the trailer of this reboot of the 1984 movie of the same name and the online discourse surrounding the film, as well as the time period, close to the event now known as Gamergate, are representative of larger trends that can be seen to influence all the films in this thesis.

I would argue that *Ghostbusters* (2016) is the first movie that was at the receiving end of a similarly toxic hate campaign as Gamergate. It also, interestingly, responds to these toxic fans within the film itself. This is a ‘trend’ I see in multiple films/franchises that were released after *Ghostbusters* (2016). To understand how Gamergate influenced and maybe even overlaps with the hate aimed at *Ghostbusters*, it’s important to understand what Gamergate is, what the dynamics at play were and who the people behind it were. So, before I go into the reaction to *Ghostbusters* itself and analyze the film, I will discuss the events and concepts that are at the core of Gamergate.

**Geeks & Gamergate.** In august 2014, a year before the *Ghostbusters* remake was announced, a group of women gamers and journalists who spoke about more (gender) diversity and better representation in games, were subjected to mass online abuse. What is now known as ‘Gamergate’ because of the Twitter hashtag that was used, began with the online harassment of game designer Zoe Quinn after a malicious blog post by Eron Gjoni, a “jilted ex-lover” (Massanari 6) who accused her of “cozying up” to games journalists to get positive reviews of her game *Depression Quest*. This was later disproved, but by then she had become “the centerpiece and token figure in a hateful campaign to delegitimize and harass women and their allies in the gaming community” (6) and orchestrated a “disturbing hub of discussion” (7) in online spaces.

After Zoe Quinn, Gamergate widened its scope to include everyone who was perceived to be “trying to cram liberal politics into video games.” (Suellentrop) Within Gamergate the people (Game designers, gamers, critics and journalists) who among other things wanted to see better and more realistic representations of women and minorities in games, were (and are) seen as ‘social justice warriors’ aka SJW’s. These SJW’s were seen to be trying to “ruin” video games with feminism and “political correctness”. Almost all of the targets of Gamergate were women, who were faced with awful sexist and racist comments, rape threats, death threats and even doxing. Doxing is when your personal information, phone

number and address for instance, is published online. This can lead to what is known as “swatting”, which happened to independent filmmaker and editor Ashley Lynch. Gamergate’s 8chan (an online forum) branch “Baphomet” sent a SWAT team to her house with false police reports claiming she had firearms and explosives. This is potentially life threatening because misinformed police might shoot at a perceived armed and dangerous suspect.

Gaming journalist Chris Suellentrop writes in *Can Video Games Survive?* (2014) in The New York Times:

For all of us who love games, GamerGate has made it impossible to overlook an ugly truth about the culture that surrounds them: Despite the growing diversity in designers and in games — games about bullying, games that put you in the role of a transgender woman, games about coming out to your parents — there is an undercurrent of “latent racism, homophobia and misogyny,” as the prominent game designer Cliff Bleszinski wrote in March, before GamerGate even began.

Supporters of Gamergate claim they just want to improve video-game journalism and don’t want their games to be influenced by feminism or so-called political correctness. But their actions more resemble an orchestrated campaign of harassment against women who make or write about video games. And their threats and harassment affect these women and the gaming industry. At least three women, two game developers and one critic, fled their homes after receiving violent threats. Because of pressure from Gamergaters, Intel pulled advertising from the website Gamasutra, that featured a critical column from Leigh Alexander calling mainstream game culture “an embarrassing cesspool of adolescent consumerism.”

(Suellentrop) Prominent female game critic Anita Sarkeesian, who created the YouTube series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* had to cancel a talk at Utah State University after an email promised “the deadliest school shooting in American history.” Actress and gamer Felicia Day was doxed almost immediately after publishing an essay describing how sad Gamergate made her and a petition was made to fire game critic Carolyn Petit as a writer for the website Gamespot because she complained that the game *Grand Theft Auto V* “has little room for women except to portray them as strippers, prostitutes, long-suffering wives, humorless girlfriends and goofy, new-age feminists that we’re meant to laugh at.”

These are just a few examples of the many critics, game designers and journalists who were threatened or faced (attempted) hacking of their online accounts. As Ashley Lynch says in her article *Bustin' makes boys feel sad*:

There's an overwhelming attitude amongst Gamergaters (and similar communities) that they are being besieged by women and minorities, and that the culture, having spent so long catering to the needs of straight, white men, is being slowly stolen from them. YouTube is aswarm with videos of angry young men complaining about women and SJWs.

Suellentrop compares the backlash of Gamergate to the “irritation that people who like Michael Bay movies experience when film critics prefer something more quieter or more difficult” and speculates that “the relative invisibility (of games) in the wider culture had given some players the wrongheaded impression that it's their private preserve.”

But are gamers, or geeks to broaden the concept, really that invisible? The label ‘geek’ is a contested term, often and historically associated with mockery and an outsider status. I would argue that there is a sort of cognitive dissonance at play in geek identity due to the changing nature of ‘geekdom’ and what it means to be a geek.<sup>7</sup> And that this outdated outsider identity is at the core of some of the geeks who participated in Gamergate and similar campaigns. This is also what Anastasia and Bridget Blodgett argue in their book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, in which they argue that the term has shifted significantly over the last two decades to become an “insider label: a self-identified term that brings with it a connection to an apparent subculture that is increasingly dominant both in popular media and in US economic and cultural structures.” (6)

The shared cultural identity that gamers and geeks feel connected to is based on a shared historical perspective and “creation mythos”. Misogyny is an important part of the creation of this myth. (Salter & Blodgett 2017). All of the stereotypes associated with ‘geeks’ are strongly associated with masculinity, as Lauren Rosewarne shows in her survey of media stereotypes of internet users: “since its inception, the Internet has largely been thought of as male— dominated by men, shaped by men, understood by men. Certainly, as illustrated via the high number of male netgeek characters, the Internet is still frequently presented on screen

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<sup>7</sup> The term ‘geek’ is somewhat US centric and can also be understood in other contexts as “nerd, fanboy/fangirl, otaku, etc.” (Salter and Blodgett 2017 - 6)

as gendered”. (Rosewarne 39) In her study of masculinity among computer-using men during the era of geek codes and forums (1999) Lori Kendall also noted how “nerds” on computer forums—themselves young and mostly white—worked to emphasize their own masculinity while distancing themselves from women and sexuality. Studies of geeks more recently have noted how little has changed. Éva Zékány’s survey of the geek in cyberspace noted that across all definitions of “geekiness” masculinity remains a defining quality (Zékány and Cerwonka 2011, cited in Salter and Blodgett 2017 - 8)

Katherine Cross sees this not as an explicit connection but more a “blindness to sexism and aversion to any political discussion”. (Cross, cited in Blodgett and Salter 2018 - 137) From this point-of-view, anyone who brings up politically related identity issues, is the instigator of trouble in an otherwise so-called apolitical world of entertainment. Gamergaters see SJW’s as a corrupting force within the community that must be fought. The rhetorical power of labeling “SJWs” as enemies fits with the existing patterns of networked misogyny, as Banet-Weisner and Miltner explain the concept in their paper *#Masculinitysofragile: culture, structure and networked misogyny*. Networked misogyny refers to the way misogyny is currently hosted in online networked communities that all interlink and can therefore multiply and enlarge itself to direct vitriol and violence at women in online spaces. Think, the Manosphere I discussed in the previous chapter. (Banet-Weiser & Miltner 2016).

As Cherie Todd explains in her commentary on Gamergate in *Women’s Studies Journal*:

The GamerGate controversy represents a small group of gamers who do not want to see the culture of gaming change; however, their actions have brought attention to an important cultural shift that is occurring in the gaming community. Not only have these attacks on women heightened concerns related to how gaming is being portrayed via the media (which in turn affects public perceptions of gaming) but they have also effectively demonstrated the extent to which sexism and misogyny have become culturally embedded over time. (66)

The story of geeks and ‘geek masculinity’ is an essential part of the story of masculinity as represented in media more broadly and “its origins reveal an essential alignment with a type of toxic straight white masculinity that is rooted deeply in current cultural struggles. (Blodgett and Salter 2017 - 6) It’s important to realize that what lies at the root of Gamergate goes much further than just the gaming community. The similarities between Gamergate and the reaction

to a movie like *Ghostbusters* (2016) prove, that “toxic geek masculinity” extends into the world of film as well. Understanding Gamergate prepares us for understanding the reasons why this seemingly harmless movie attracted such vitriol online.

**Gamergate & Ghostbusters.** “Gamergate is in crisis. A new feminist enemy has emerged, a villain even more diabolical than women with opinions in the game industry: Now, females are busting ghosts!” (Brianna Wu - Why the new ‘Ghostbusters’ is Gamergates worst nightmare)

In 2015 a remake of the classic movie *Ghostbusters* was announced. The original 1984 *Ghostbusters* was a science-fiction comedy movie about a supernatural security service, featuring an all-star and all male ghostbusting squad. It became a huge hit, leading to a sequel, a number one single, cartoon series, games and more. The remake followed years of speculation about a sequel/remake from fans wanting more of the ghostbusters.

The premise of this new movie was exactly the same, except this time the ghostbusters would all be women instead of men. Politics immediately entered the conversation surrounding the remake when the day after the remake was announced the future president of the US, Donald Trump (then just five months away from announcing he was going to run for president) posted a so-called “TrumpVlog” in which he angrily said: “They're remaking Indiana Jones without Harrison Ford, you can't do that. And now they're making *Ghostbusters* with only women. What's going on?!” (Trump 2015) This “off-the-cuff” question about “the proper role of women in popular culture” would be a harbinger of things to come. (Nieborg and Foxman)

When the trailer for the film was released on YouTube, it immediately became the focal point for a surge of Internet nerd rage, becoming the “most disliked in YouTube history,” with over a million dislikes at the time of writing this. (Blodgett and Salter 2018 - 133) *Ghostbusters* and its four female stars, Kristen Wiig, Kate McKinnon, Melissa McCarthy and Leslie Jones all became the target of online harassment similar to the women who were attacked during Gamergate in July 2016. Like Gamergate, the attacks were part of a coordinated misogynist campaign. Trolls posting sexist and racist comments, memes and videos in reaction to the film. The primary victim was most definitely the only black woman, Leslie Jones. Her website and personal accounts were hacked, nude photos stolen from her iCloud and posted online, and the hackers published her address, phone number and personal information. In the many horrible comments on social media (mainly Twitter) racist comparisons between Jones and Harambe the gorilla were made in a racist meme that has



followed Jones ever since. Defenders of Jones tweeted under the hashtag #IStandWithLeslie. (Massie)

As Aja Romana says in her article for news and opinion site *Vox* about the hack, the situation became even more “overtly political than it already was” when Hillary Clinton tweeted at Jones: “no one deserves this - least of all someone who brings us so much joy. I’m with you -H”. Clinton’s tweet was sent just hours after she called out a growing online alt-right movement in a campaign speech. The same primarily online community of conservatives and right-wing extremists that spent weeks harassing Leslie Jones. Clinton argued then-presidential nominee Donald Trump had aligned himself with these conservative extremists, nationalists and white supremacists whose ideas, Romana argued at the time “may be becoming less and less “fringe” due to the alt-right’s push into the mainstream.” Jones had landed in the middle of a “complex ideological divide and a culture war that seems to have no end in sight.” (134)

In their article *Ghostbusters is for boys - Understanding Geek Masculinity’s role in the Alt-right*, writers Blodgett & Salter argue that the timing of the movie’s release was significant in achieving its cultural significance. That’s because it coincided with the 2016 election season in the US, “where an intense ideological battle grounded in race and gender was playing out and receiving international attention.” (134) With Hillary Clinton facing ‘alt-right icon’ Donald Trump in the general election. (Karpf, D. 2017). Director Judd Apatow made the same connection, saying: “I would assume there’s a very large crossover of people who are doubtful *Ghostbusters* will be great and people excited about the Donald Trump candidacy” (Lee)

And of course, the movie followed shortly after the events of Gamergate which obviously continued to affect our understanding of the relationship between media, culture and its users or ‘fans’. In the online article *Why the New ‘Ghostbusters’ is Gamergate’s Worst Nightmare* Brianna Wu, who was a target of Gamergate harassment herself, explains the logical shift in targeting video games, female game designers, journalists and scholars to the female cast of a *Ghostbusters* remake. She says both attacks were based on a “toxic male sense of ownership over geek culture”. Gamergaters base their identity on the games (and media) they consume and feel that gamer culture belongs to them as it’s historically been seen.

Culture critic David Sims from the journalistic publication *The Atlantic* says: “*Ghostbusters*... has become a rallying cause for a swathe of fans who are beginning to resemble a movement not unlike the Gamergate nightmare that continues to plague the world

of video games” (Sims 2016). It’s important to note that the attacks on the *Ghostbusters* remake were not solely informed by misogyny and racism. There were of course legitimate criticisms and nostalgia plays an important role as well.

***Ghostbusters* (1984) and masculinity.** To understand the backlash against the 2016 *Ghostbusters* remake, let’s first take a look at the original movie from 1984 and how it plays into its intended audience, male geeks. More specifically, geeky men who could recognize themselves in the main characters. The plot is simple, a group of scientists (Peter Venkman, Ray Stantz and Egon Spengler) are investigating paranormal occurrences. When they first encounter one, some things go wrong and they are all fired. Their research is disbelieved and discredited. In response, they start their own venture: “the Ghostbusters”, a paranormal investigation and “busting” service.

The original movie was released in the 80’s, a time when the hyper-masculine action hero was all over the big screen. Muscular and aggressive heroes played by Steven Seagal, Chuck Norris, Bruce Willis, Jean-Claude van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger etc. These action heroes are strong, aloof, unemotional, can seduce many women but also don’t need any intimacy. They fit the ideal toxic masculinity sets for men. Whereas the ghostbusters are nerdy academics, not very muscular, out of shape, dressed in crumpled jumpsuits. Venkman, Stantz and Spengler are basically geeks and the perfect characters for their geek audience to identify with and live their fantasies vicariously through. In fact, Stantz and Spengler are played by Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis, who wrote the film. As I discussed in chapter 1, male geeks base their identity on feeling ostracized and not fitting in as well as the exclusion of anyone who doesn’t fit their narrow idea of what it means to be a “true” geek. And this almost always excludes women and femininity. As a viewer, we are made to identify with the male geek Ghostbusters and empathize with them by excluding women. *Ghostbusters* is a perfect example of how geek masculinity works.

Venkman especially seems to be the embodiment of a geek fantasy. He is cocky and a hustler. After “fixing” an experiment just to seduce one of his students, the university Dean tells him: “You seem to regard science as some kind of dodge or hustle”. Spengler is very socially awkward and tells a flirting woman that he collects fungus. And Stantz is still very childish and wants to buy headquarters that have a fireman’s pole so he can slide down them. The ghostbusters bust ghosts all while wrecking hotel rooms and creating chaos. Their recklessness and quirky personas mark them as a kind of anti-establishment heroes. And when

society needs them, they can finally have their revenge against the people that have excluded and ostracized them all their lives.

Taking a closer look at the few female roles in the film and how they relate to men, we can see they are entirely objectified and viewed through a male gaze. Film theorist Laura Mulvey coined this term in *Screen Magazine* in 1975 to describe the way the “male” camera frames the position of women on the screen. Using psychoanalytic theory, she argues that “the sexualized image of woman says little or nothing about women's reality but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected onto the female image.” The image of a woman seen from a male gaze does not refer to actual women, but the male unconscious. They are a canvas to project fears and fantasies about women onto. Women cannot relate to these female characters because what they see does not resemble their own fears or desires at all.

So, what roles do women have in the 1984 *Ghostbusters*? There are pretty much five female roles of any significance in the movie. First, there's the librarian. In the opening scene she gets stalked and assaulted by a ghost. Then there's the hotel maid who has to pick up after the guys make a mess chasing a ghost in her hotel. Instead of helping her clean up or explaining, they just stare awkwardly while she cleans up the mess. The female real estate agent who sells them the fire station that will become their base, stands back the entire scene in which she is showing them the station while the men are talking.

Then there is dr. Venkman's student who is a pretty blonde girl he obviously likes and wants to seduce. In one scene he tests her psychic powers by showing her the back of a set of cards and asking her to tell him what's on the other side. She asks if it's a star, and he says it is. When the camera shows the audience it's clearly not a star, it's a circle. As the audience we're in on the joke he's playing on her. She's really happy and proud of herself because he makes her believe she can tell which card it is. But really, he only lets her believe she's right to get her to like him. After the test he flirtingly asks her to come back this evening to “work” with her some more. She agrees and he responds by saying she's a “legitimate phenomenon.” Further making fun of her non-existent gift and taking advantage of her gullibility.

Janine, the ghostbusters' receptionist asks for more help because she's been working for two weeks without a break, to which Venkman replies nonchalantly: “Janine, someone with your qualifications would have no trouble finding a top-flight job in either the food service or housekeeping industry.” All of these characters are disposable and mostly serve to further the image of Venkman's nonchalant and cocky persona. Many of the jokes in this comedy film are rooted in the way the male characters (especially Venkman) look at the women.

Last, but certainly not least there is Dana Barrett, arguably the most significant female character and played by Oscar-winning actress Sigourney Weaver. She's one of the ghostbusters first clients. As soon as she walks in, we are looking at her through a male gaze. It's clear Venkman thinks she's attractive, as he jumps over a counter to help her and later offers to take her to her apartment and "check her out", which he immediately corrects to "check out her apartment." But the insinuation is clear. Once in her apartment he flirts with her, but she fends off his advances. While he's walking out the door backwards, he says: "I'll bet you're gonna be thinking about me after I'm gone." She sarcastically replies, "I'll bet I am" and tries to close the door in his face. He sticks his head back in and asks: "No kiss?" To which she shoves his head back out.

Afterwards a ghost in her house appears inside her chair and pretty much gropes her in a way that is suggestive of sexual assault. With arms grabbing her breasts, coming from between her legs and silencing her screaming. (See figure 3) This scene and what follows seem like a punishment for her daring to refuse Venkman's advances and maybe even her intelligence and independence.



*Figure 3*

The ghost (Zuul) then takes possession of her body. So, the woman who dared to say no has her free will immediately taken away. And while she is possessed, she tries to seduce Venkman while dressed in a sexy robe, lying on a bed and posing seductively. "You want this body?" and she asks him to: "take me now". He realizes something isn't right, so he has to fend off her very obvious advances and she has to be "saved" by a man making jokes at her expense. Venkman is now in the position of power to refuse her advances.

While she jumps on him (literally) he jokes “time to make a rule never to get involved with possessed people.” They kiss, while she is possessed, and he has made it clear he knows she is. He then says, “actually it’s more of a guideline than a rule.” Making it clear he actually doesn’t mind that she is clearly not consenting and herself because she is possessed, but he still enjoys the advances. They roll around on the bed and she says: “I want you inside me.” He replies, “No I can’t, sounds like you’ve got at least two people inside already.” Dana Barrett is presented as a strong female character, intelligent, playing the cello and standing up to rude men. But she is also reduced to also a damsel in distress, who becomes sex crazed. To the amusement of Venkman and the audience.

In the final showdown the ghostbusters face the antagonist Gozer, who appears in the form of a red eyed demonic woman. (Figure 4)

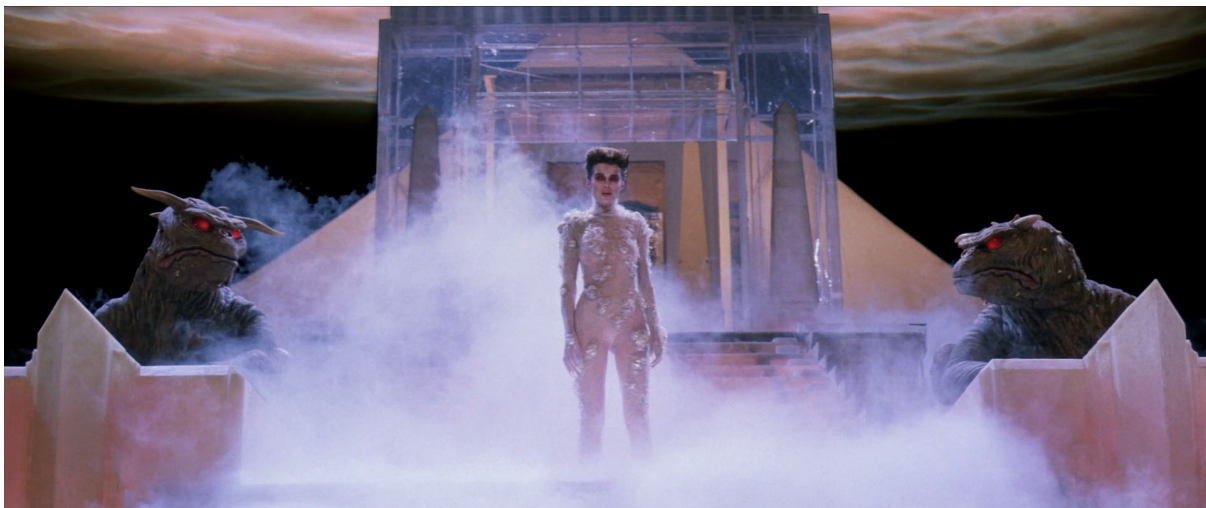


Figure 4

Before trying to attack her, Venkman declares: “Let’s show this prehistoric *bitch* how we do things downtown.” Gozer lets them choose the form she will destroy them in. Stantz accidentally thinks of the Stay Puft marshmallow man, a symbol from his childhood. Only after Gozer appears in this more palatable form, can they destroy it. By crossing the streams of their proton streams, a phallic (and homoerotic?) reference to crossing streams when peeing. When Gozer is defeated they save the damsel in distress, Dana, who immediately embraces Venkman in gratitude. In the end, they succeed not only in defeating the ghost, saving the city and proving their worth after being outcast, but Venkman also succeeds in “winning” the woman.

*Ghostbusters* (1984) might have felt like a fresh take on masculinity and male friendship in a time of hypermasculine action movies, but it's portrayal of women in service of

male fantasies puts it firmly in the tradition of the male gaze. Women are mostly portrayed as pretty but confusing creatures to the geeky male main characters. When they resist their advances, they are punished for it by the movie. And when we laugh at the movie, the female characters are not in on the joke, but the butt of a joke. And we as the audience laugh at them and with the men.

**The *Ghostbusters* remake: a gender-swapped response.** The 2016 remake of *Ghostbusters* features a very similar plot to the original 1984 movie, except of course the main characters genders. This time, instead of four men, four women are busting ghosts. We start out with three female scientists: Erin Gilbert, Abby Yates and Jillian Holtzmann, who are later joined by subway worker Patty Tolan.

A bold gambit right of the bat, given the love for Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd and co, is that *Ghostbusters* (2016) doesn't acknowledge or exist in the same universe as its 1984 predecessor. It does however follow down a very similar path. Initial proof of genuine ghostly activity at the beginning of the film in a scene before we're introduced to the ghostbusting team. Which in both movies has a skeptic (Dr. Peter Venkman/Erin Gilbert), a true believer (Dr. Raymond Stantz/Abby Yates) and an oddball (Louis Tully/Jillian Holtzmann). In the remake, the women are also clearly social misfits, as attested by the comment: "All the other kids were getting drunk and going to parties. And we were like, uh that's stupid! Plus, we weren't invited to any parties." Their faith in ghosts is confirmed in similarly slimy scene, they form a team, set up shop in Manhattan, hire an extra pair of hands and soon attract attention for their paranormal protection. There's a possessed nemesis, or two, before city officials get involved and forces conspire to set free an ectoplasmic extravaganza - and the perfect chance to save the city and regain public trust and adoration.

But it's not just the ghostbusters themselves who have been gender-swapped, the first victim of a ghost we see isn't a hapless woman this time, but a man with a very shrill and high-pitched scream. When shortly after, we are introduced to Erin Gilbert, a theoretical particle physicist, she is being talked down to by a man. He asks her: "Darling, this is what you're wearing?". She seems unsure of herself, answering questions to fit what the other person wants to hear. A man comes to Erin for help with a ghost and a joke is made at the expense of the screaming man who saw the ghost, "I believe it made him soil himself". And a dirty joke referring to a fart, "from the front" makes it clear that in this version the women are reclaiming dirty humor and taking the power to laugh at themselves as well as men. We as the viewer are explicitly positioned to identify with Erin. She is not the cocky main character

Venkman we identify with in the 1984 version played by Bill Murray, but actually comes across quite insecure and sweet.

Most fans would agree that Bill Murray is the “cool” main character of the first movie and his cocky flippant persona effectively shapes the entire team and movie. The women in *Ghostbusters* (2016) however, come across entirely differently. The film highlights their modesty and insecurity. Erin talks about being made fun of for seeing ghosts: “They didn’t believe me. I had to go to therapy for years and kids at school found out and they would laugh at me and make fun of me. Call me ghost girl.” Erin’s relationship with her old friend Abby is a very important part of the movie. Friendship and a sort of sisterhood. “Abby was the only person who believed me”. The women are busting ghosts, but also repairing old friendships.

Instead of getting revenge on a vague sort of establishment, in the remake the women are fighting against sexism. References to sexism are in many interactions in the movie and is the basis of their ostracism. Erin is fired from her job by her male boss after “years of ass-kissing” after a video of her saying ghosts are real is posted on YouTube. Later, when they ask for funding from a man, he doesn’t even remember the existence of their department and is portrayed as grossly incompetent compared to the intelligent women. Abby gets angry and says: “You’re only dean because the last dean went to jail!” to which he responds: “are you saying I’m not qualified?”. He clearly is very unqualified and immature. They are told to “suck it”. The obvious (and on-the-nose) commentary is that incompetent men are in power instead of competent men, because of sexism. The ghostbusters in this movie aren’t just facing ghosts as their enemy but being ignored or underestimated because of their gender as well. They are constantly dismissed by male superiors, the mayor and online trolls.

The gender swaps aren’t just arbitrary, they have an effect on the character and clearly the intent was to deliver commentary on the gender roles in the 1984 film. Their first client Patty (played by Leslie Jones) works in a subway station where she spots a ghost. She comes to the ghostbusters for help and instead of being just a damsel in distress, she joins them to become a ghostbuster herself. They also hire a male receptionist called Kevin, played by Chris Hemsworth. His character is played as the male equivalent of a bimbo, very handsome but also very dumb. (Patty calls him a “big dumb dude” at one point) Just like the 1984 version, in this one Erin is obviously very attracted to the receptionist. In his interview for the job, Erin makes sexual innuendo jokes, asking him to “pull it out” to show his work. However, in this version, the secretary isn’t the butt of the joke, but Erin is. We see Abby laughing at how smitten she is and reprimanding her for being inappropriate.

And it's not just the gender swaps that are clear references (and critiques) of the first film, so are the many cameos of actors from the original and many other references. The remake obviously tries to do its own thing, but also keeps referring and repeating the original, making comparisons even more inevitable than they already were because of all the parallels. *Ghostbusters* (2016) takes every opportunity to give a shout-out to the original. Except for the retired Rick Morales, all six of the original major ghostbusters appear in cameos, even the late Howard Ramos in the form of a bust (see figure 5) as do two of its major ghosts.



Figure 5

Bill Murray (who played the cocky Venkman in the original) plays a famed and smug paranormal debunker Martin Heiss, with “the council of logic and data”. (Figure 6) When the women have finally caught a ghost, he visits their lab and asks to see the proof. Abby doesn’t want to because it’s dangerous, but Erin seems desperate to prove they’re not “fake” ghostbusters. Abby tries to convince her not to do it by saying: “We have finally succeeded at doing the thing that we have talked about since we were little kids. And you wanna risk it all, for him? Who cares if you impress him?” But Erin releases the ghost anyway, it escapes and throws Heiss out of the window, killing him.





Figure 6

Heiss' skepticism of the women and his claim they're just pretending to catch ghosts, is not the only time they're accused of being fake. In the streets a man follows them with a camera and asks Erin: "Were you born a fraud, ghost girl? Freak". Being called fake and frauds, takes on a different light when we think about how women are often excluded from geek/fan spaces by gatekeeping men who call them fake. And Erin's urge to prove herself also makes sense in this context.

And it's no coincidence that their initial nemesis is epitomized by the worst kind of male geek who feels slighted: Rowan North. Wronged, ignored and ridiculed by the world, out to get revenge, preferably on the opposite sex. Besides the ghosts, Rowan is pretty much the main antagonist. He was bullied his entire life and works a lowly job in a hotel where everyone calls him a freak. His character is the epitome of a slighted male geek.

In one scene, we see him in the basement of the hotel, where he plots his revenge. There are many diplomas and prizes hanging on the wall. Looking into a mirror he says to himself: "You have been bullied your entire life, now you will be the bully. Trust in your abilities and the universe shall bend before your will." And later he mumbles: "This world cannot be cleansed fast enough" as he walks through a crowd of "normal" people. This lashing out reaction against feeling left out and underappreciated seems to mirror that of many young men online. And the "now you will be the bully" attitude also fits that of many of the geeks who attack anything or person they perceive to be encroaching on their territory. The movie specifically aligns him with these men, when he says: "Luckily I am not the only one seeking revenge. Behind me are millions of souls. Souls which have been cast aside. Souls who see the world as it truly is, garbage. Garbage that needs to be cleaned up. *They're mostly dudes.* When these barriers are destroyed, an army of the undead will return to pester the

living.” Rowan casts himself, and men in general, as the victim. He tells Abby she must not know how it feels to be denied basic dignity and respect. Which she immediately denies, replying: “Not really. People dump on us pretty much all the time.” She is trying to tell him they are the same, both outcasts who have been called freaks, but he is so blinded by gender he cannot see their similarities.

In the final showdown, Rowan purposely kills himself to become a ghost and uses the scientific findings of Erin and Abby’s work to open a portal to the ghost world. Letting all the ghosts flood New York in an apocalyptic event. When Rowan becomes a ghost, he first takes possession of Abby to take revenge in what seems like an echo of the original’s possession of Dana. But this time, after Abby vomits some ectoplasm Patty slaps ghost Rowan out of her and he takes possession of the male secretary instead. He obviously enjoys this new body and its strength, riding a motorcycle and punching people. “I should have worked out more when I was alive.” It’s the ultimate imagined geek fantasy. The scrawny and awkward Rowan finally gets to have the body of a muscular hyper masculine man. Unlike the 1984 version though, the possessed Kevin does not try to seduce Erin.

When Abby provokes Rowan by asking him to come get his virginity out of the lost and found, he tells them they “shoot like girls”. Eventually after leaving Kevin’s body Rowan reappears as the *Ghostbusters* logo ghost. “Is this what you want, something more familiar?” (Figure 7&8)



Figure 7



Figure 8

Eventually they defeat Rowan, who has (in another reference to the original) become a huge stay puft marshmallow man, by aiming their plasma guns at his groin. So pretty much by hitting him in his “manhood”.

The movie's constant references and commentary of the original end in a final after credit scene where Sigourney Weaver makes a cameo appearance as Dr. Rebecca Gorin, Holtzman's mentor. Weaver's new role in the remake seems like a clear rectification of her original damsel in distress character in the 1984 version. Not only is the film constantly referring to its predecessor, and subverting its male gaze, it's also very aware that the fans of the first film will be watching this one and probably won't like it. It also seems like the backlash that the film got before it was even made, has led to a certain level of defensiveness that was built in or incorporated into the film at a script level. The cast and director were definitely aware of the backlash, even during the shooting of the film. As I have argued, a reaction to the criticism is woven into the very story by playing with repeating and altering the original. And as if the story and gender-swapped characters weren't enough to make us aware the *Ghostbusters* remake is in direct dialogue with the geeks that were such fans of the original, and its problematic male gaze, one scene directly addresses them.

In this meta-scene after posting a video to YouTube of their first successful encounter with a ghost, the team reads the comment sections to find misogynist remarks. Erin reads one aloud: “Ain't no bitches gonna bust no ghosts.” The scene is an obvious reference to the thousands of misogynist comments that were left under the trailer for the remake, which became the most disliked trailer on YouTube ever. Abby responds by saying they are going to prove themselves and “you shouldn't be reading this stuff; you're not supposed to listen to

what crazy people write in the middle of the night online.” Basically, calling the people leaving nasty remarks under the trailer crazy. (Figure 9&10)

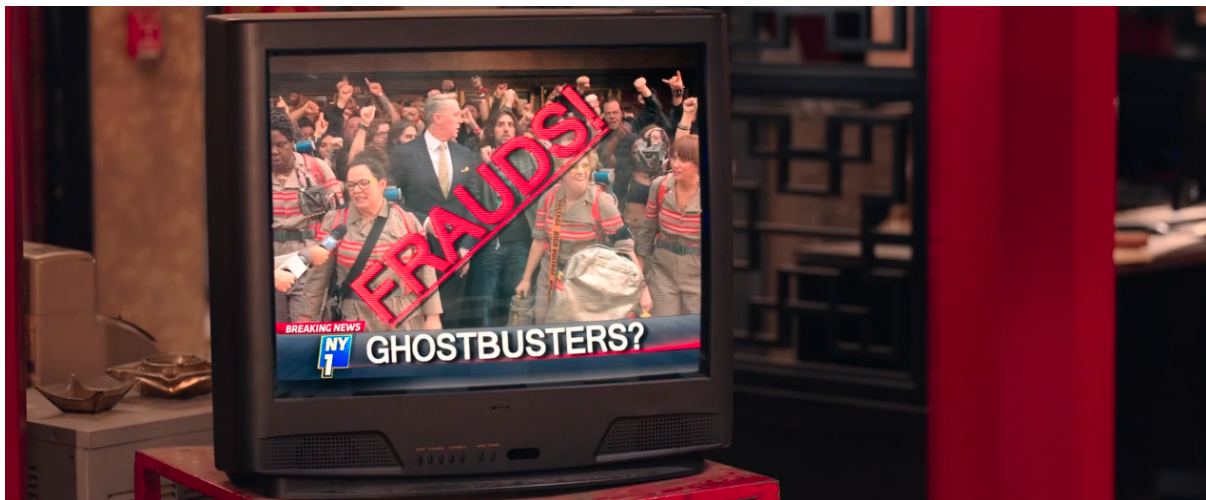


Figure 9

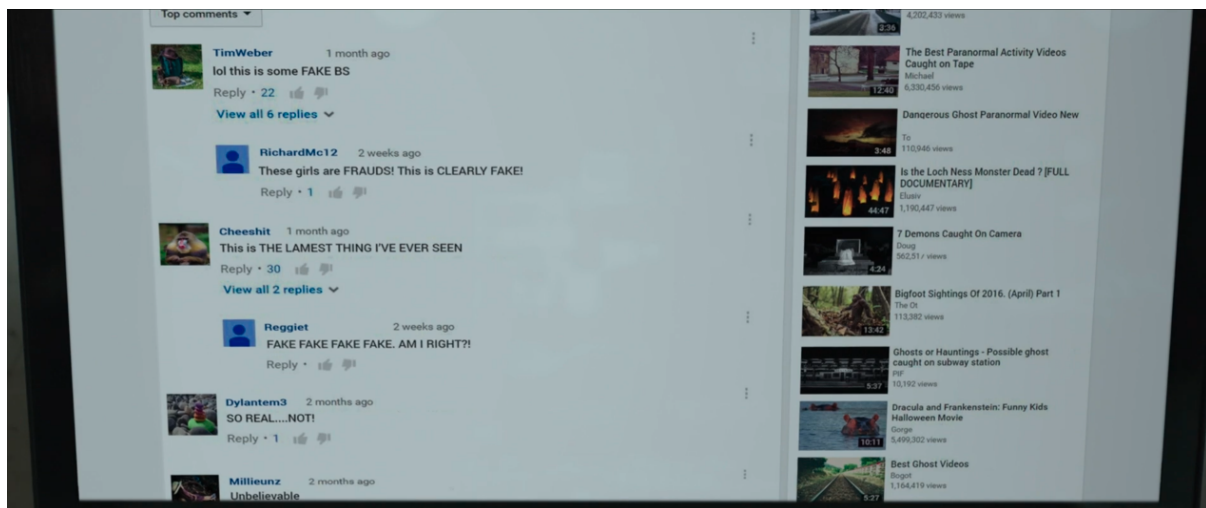


Figure 10

Co-writer Katie Dippold acknowledged the intentionality behind the scene in an interview:

The YouTube stuff was organic to the story; Erin’s character is someone who is trying desperately to legitimize herself, so she keeps putting up these videos, hoping to get validation, which you are just not gonna get from the internet (...) The basic story of them putting the video online and reading comments was always there (...) The original line in the script was, “I wanna slap dem wit dis dick.” (Zakarin)

This acknowledgement that they altered the script because of critical comments serves as an intertextual reminder of the conditions under which *Ghostbusters* was produced: as a text, it was necessarily in conversation with the fictive identity collective deeply invested in

undermining and hating it for existing. Likewise, the very villain of *Ghostbusters* (a lonely white man rallying “ghosts” to his cause) can be interpreted as a metatextual response to this identity and its construction (Salter and Blodgett 2018 - 143). The ongoing impact of the extreme right’s increasing prominence in American politics and social media on the production of narrative texts is yet to be seen, but *Ghostbusters* offers a powerful case study attesting to the potential conflicts. The central events, including the brief disappearance of a black woman star from Twitter following the ongoing and grotesque harassment and the colonization of a media property’s advertising as an extreme right meeting ground, are recurring events in geek media. (Blodgett and Salter 2018 - 141-143)

Director Paul Feig is clearly aware of his film’s self-referential nostalgic nature but equally adamant it was the right call. “This was a hard balance to get and some people think we did too much, other people think we got it just right. I mean, I know every audience I’ve sat in, people are just delighted every time one of the original things from the original movie pop up. Yeah, I’m gonna say it, we liked it! We’re very happy. We’re not gonna back down, we’re very pleased with our movie. (Blu-ray director’s commentary of *Ghostbusters* 2016)

And while a certain type of toxic fanboy can’t handle this clearly some audiences objected more to what they saw as a regression in originality, humor and edge. Though the reboot, as Feig puts it, “brought a new generation their own ghostbusters,” in particular young girls, the disappointing overall reaction has likely spooked chances of further adventure for the female ghostbusters. Indeed, another *Ghostbusters* movie, helmed by Jason Reitman, son of the original director, has been announced. Reitman’s awkwardly phrased pledge to “hand the movie back to the fans” (Barfield et al.) only fueled more gender infused controversy. Leslie Jones, who was one of the actresses most affected by the sexist and racist attacks, tweeted: “So insulting. Like fuck us. We didn’t count. It’s like something Trump would do. (Trump voice) “Gonna redo Ghostbusteeeeeers, better with men, will be huge. Those women ain’t Ghostbusteeeeeers.” Ugh so annoying. Such a dick move. And I don’t give a fuck I’m saying something!! (Figure 11)

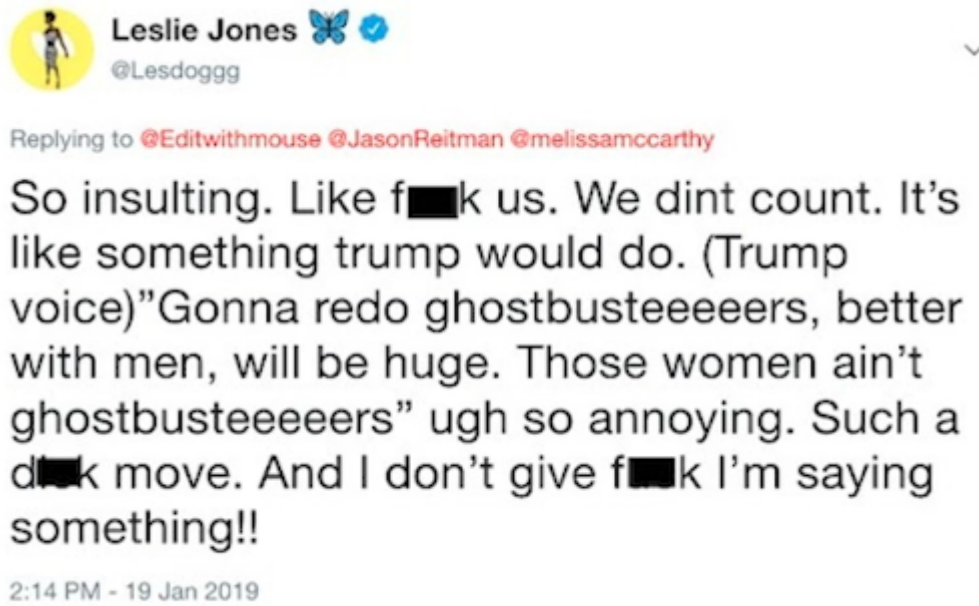


Figure 11

To which Reitman and Feig responded, by expressing their admiration for each other. (figure 12 &13),



Figure 12



Figure 13

the vitriolic reaction from some so-called fans has revealed a much darker side to ostensibly light entertainment.

In a sense, having women be the ghostbusters this time, feels in line with what the first movie tried to do. Buck a trend of hypermasculine heroes by giving the “underdog” the role of the hero. The ghostbusters are supposed to be the ones who save the world, even though nobody expects it of them. The bad-faith attacks of the remake align more with the villains of the original, the small-minded establishment who didn’t approve of Venkman and his friends going against the grain and tradition. And the fact that none of the anger aimed at the remake not being original wasn’t aimed at the *Ghostbusters* sequel in 1989 and the enthusiasm for another remake that “hands the movie back to the fans”, underlines the sexist component of these attacks. Because the implied fans are probably male. And in light of the male gaze and sexism in the original *Ghostbusters*, I would argue the remake isn’t about women taking over the franchise, but more about women taking back control over themselves and their own bodies.

## CHAPTER 3: STAR WARS AND THE FANDOM MENACE

In the previous chapter I analyzed the way *Ghostbusters* (2016) dealt with toxic geek masculinity by subverting the tropes and sexism of the original movie, as well as responding to the sexist and racist hate campaign it received before anyone had even seen the movie. After Gamergate and *Ghostbusters* (2016) the relationship between movies and their fans has only become more tense and complicated. The direct link between fans and the creators of their favorite movies is unprecedented and combined with a rising tension between calls for diversity and sexist/racist fans, movies are almost forced to deal with this new relationship. Resist the small group of vocal and often toxic fans or capitulate to their demands. The *Ghostbusters* case shows a movie resisting nostalgia and even explicitly criticizing toxic fans.<sup>8</sup> However, in this chapter I will be discussing a movie trilogy that received a similar barrage of misogynistic and racist hate on an even larger scale. And, I will argue, actually capitulated to toxic fans: the Star Wars sequel trilogy.

The 1977 science-fiction adventure movie *Star Wars*<sup>9</sup>, about Luke Skywalker and his journey to becoming a Jedi Knight whilst saving the galaxy by fighting the Empire and Darth Vader was the beginning of a massive franchise spanning over three movie trilogies, video games, theme park attractions, (comic)books, tv shows and more. The *Star Wars* franchise is massive, and so is its devoted fanbase. Fans have even created an entire online encyclopedia with information about the *Star Wars* universe called Wookieepedia, which currently has almost 160.000 articles. Star Wars is one of the ultimate geek fandoms and has had and still has a large impact on popular culture.

***The Force Awakens.*** So, when a new sequel trilogy to the beloved films was announced and the first new movie, *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* was released in 2015, the stakes were high and so were fans expectations. In the movie, directed by J.J. Abrams, we're introduced to new main characters who will interact with old favorites to restore peace in the galaxy. Most notably, the main character Rey played by Daisy Ridley who is a desert scavenger with the Force, and ex-stormtrooper turned good guy Finn played by John Boyega. Just like *Ghostbusters* (2016) the film hadn't even been released before a small group of toxic fans started attacking it with sexist and racist comments. Daisy Ridley was forced off social media (Miller) and trolls started the racist #BoycottStarWarsVII hashtag, saying the film was

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<sup>8</sup> Although a new remake called *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* written by the son of the man who directed the original 1984 movie is underway, that probably will please the "traditional" fans more.

<sup>9</sup> Later renamed to *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*.



“anti-white propaganda” because of black actor John Boyega playing a stormtrooper. (Kamen) A vocal but small minority started a racist troll campaign “designed to elicit shock and outrage from SJW’s” (Kamen) but the movie was mostly well received by critics and most fans.

Compared to the next film in the sequel trilogy, *The Force Awakens* was relatively uncontroversial. It was a soft attempt at “trying to course correct decades of homogenized storytelling with little representation for anyone outside of straight white men.” (Knight) But the second film, *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi*, was directed by another director who was not afraid to more directly deliver commentary on the old movies as well as react in opposition to current social anxieties: Rian Johnson. *The Last Jedi* was massively controversial and kickstarted another wave of toxic geek backlash. One that, I would argue, was on the same level as Gamergate if not worse.

***The Last Jedi.*** A gap between film critics and the audience is not uncommon, but usually it’s critics who don’t rate a popular film highly. This time, a majority of film critics were very positive. On the movie rating aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes, *The Last Jedi*’s critic score was around 90% “fresh”. The audience score was the lowest out of all the *Star Wars* movies though, currently sitting at a low 43%. *The Last Jedi* was heavily criticized by a small but very vocal and sometimes aggressive minority of fans. This group of fans mostly criticized certain plot points and (the portrayal) of some of the main characters. The very low audience score wasn’t just composed of genuinely disappointed fans but was likely also cyber vandalized by alt-right fan groups. “The gulf is an anomaly, which we know both because moviegoers gave largely positive assessments of the film to the polling firm ComScore and because a member of an alt-right fan group proudly told HuffPost that dissatisfied fans sent bots to deliberately lower the Tomatometer.” (Zakarin)

Although *The Force Awakens* was the first movie in the new sequel trilogy, *The Last Jedi*’s story really hands the *Star Wars* story over to a new generation. A more diverse generation, that isn’t just composed of white men. The protagonists are a white woman, black man, Latino man and a south-east Asian woman. The villains are two white men. Predictably, this situation led to gatekeeping. As Emily VanDerWerff says in her article about the situation: “when you consider that Star Wars fandom has long been presided over by white guys, it’s natural this would lead to angry policing over what Star Wars is and isn’t. And that policing can be ugly and lead to toxic fandoms in which people who aren’t white men don’t feel comfortable.” (VanDerWerff)

In her essay on gender, sexuality and moral agency in *Star Wars*, Veronica Wilson (2007) argues, the first two trilogies of the *Star Wars* saga reflect patriarchal and hegemonic values, even calling the films misogynist and homophobic. Although there are female characters, like Leia, power within the films is given to the men. The galaxy is dominated by men. Traditionally feminine characteristics are associated with darkness and seem to inevitably lead to decay. For example, Anakin's attachments to his mother and his wife and mentor are what lead to his descent into darkness. (Becoming Darth Vader) So, it's not surprising that fans of the older trilogies which had decidedly different gender representation might have to get used to a leading female protagonist and more diverse representation.

Of course, *Star Wars* fans have always been critical of their own favorite movies. Famously, director George Lucas received a lot of hate for making some changes in the original movies in a remastered version. In a shoot-out between smuggler Han Solo and a bounty hunter named Greedo, Han originally obviously shot first. In the remastered version released in 1997 though, Greedo shot first, missed and only then did Han shoot back. Fans were not happy with the change at all and "Han shot first" became a recurring meme on blogs, shirts and e-mails and is still a subject of contention. "A Han Shot First moment occurs when a previously unified fandom is suddenly given two realities to choose between. Once an HSF moment occurs, it's impossible to bring the fans back together. And Star Wars has experienced many such HSF moments since." (Broderick)

The "Han shot first" moment was really the beginning of many divides within the *Star Wars* fandom. Not only were fans expressing their discontent, but they were taking it to another level by taking matters into their own hands. Actor Topher Grace cut all the prequel movies together and reduced them to one 85-minute long film. The "Machete Order" is a well-known way to reorder the films. And a 70-minute long critical "demolition" of *The Phantom Menace* was uploaded to YouTube, with all seven parts having over 9 million views. (Broderick)

Since then, it's only become easier to instantly distribute and amplify content that criticizes or changes the original movie, which I will discuss later. And the "Han shot first" moments seem much more loaded with all sorts of political and racist or sexist undertones. So, to understand the nature of the criticisms and the backlash *The Last Jedi* received, let's look at one of the comments from disgruntled fans on an online petition to "Have Disney strike Star Wars Episode VIII from the official canon" with 116.783 signatures.

This commenter thinks the movie is terrible because it doesn't "focus on the things most of us have loved about the franchise since childhood". There is an element of nostalgia and a resistance to change. He also feels the movie has "forced feminist views":

This movie is terrible because rather than focus on the things most of us have loved about the franchise since childhood has been ignored and replaced by a bunch of left-wing social justice bullshit. Lack of character development and forcing feminist views has also taken away from the story. The force is not female, the force has no gender and let's keep it that way and not destroy the character of Luke. For shame Disney.  
(Scott Toelke)

And a commenter on Rotten Tomatoes accuses the movie of having SJW concepts and "neutering" every positive male protagonist and throws in some gatekeeping at the end, claiming you must be only a "casual" fan if you like the movie:

If you like stunning visuals, superficial character development, a choppy, incoherent, illogical plot, plot holes, SJW concepts such as capitalism is bad, animal abuse is bad, "make love not war", every bad guy being a white male, and neutering every positive protagonist male in this movie, or you are only a casual fan of Star Wars, you'll probably like this movie. (Johnny S. on Rotten Tomatoes)

I chose these particular comments because they encompass a large group of similar complaints and bad reviews, which almost all mention the movie being "too SJW", forcing feminist views, "ruining the old movies" and involve gatekeeping, sexism and racism. Having read these and many other comments on different social media, I can distill the reasons for their anger into a few main complaints, which I believe relate to the same toxic geek masculinity I have discussed in the previous chapters as they all have to do with how male and female characters should be portrayed and behave.

Firstly, in a very similar fashion to the *Ghostbusters* remake, angry fans accuse *The Last Jedi* of being "too progressive", "too political", and having a so-called "SJW agenda". The complaint that the movie is too political, or more political than the previous trilogies is strange considering *Star Wars* movies have always contained multiple layers "often involving subjective critiques of contemporary politics" (Bay 4) Its creator, George Lucas, has said the series was partially a comment on the Vietnam war, with the "evil, oppressive,

technologically and economically superior Empire” representing the US and the Rebel Alliance being inspired by the “less advanced, but resilient” South Vietnamese forces. (4). This commentary wasn’t even very subtle, in the prequel trilogy the Trade Federation is led by “Nute Gunray”, named after US Republican politician Newt Gingrich. (4).

Then, there’s the complaints about how the hero from the original trilogy, Luke Skywalker, behaves in *The Last Jedi*. They feel the movie has ruined his character and Luke does not behave like the hero they see him as. Luke Skywalker’s actions and character do not fit into their idea of who he is or should be. This probably has to do with an element of nostalgia, as well as an idea of what a “masculine” hero should behave like. His behavior, becoming a recluse and “giving up” on fighting with the Resistance, was seen as cowardly. Luke dying was also a disappointment to fans who loved his character.

Then there are the multiple criticisms of the roles played by women in the movie. They were unsatisfied when after speculating wildly about the abandoned Rey’s parentage, it turns out in *The Last Jedi* that Rey’s parents are insignificant – nobodies who abandoned her. Rey is also seen as too powerful too quickly at using the Force and a “Mary Sue” (“she never received any training and is still able to demonstrate powers equal to a master jedi” & “Rey is still Mary Sueing all over the place”)<sup>10</sup> They did not like the characters of Admiral Holdo and Rose Tico either, both women. Admiral Holdo’s character is seen as a “smug and unlikable” character because she refuses to inform Poe Dameron (a man) when he arrogantly demands to know her plan. And when Admiral Holdo sacrifices herself in a heroic move by using a lightspeed jump to ram into a Star Destroyer, certain fans complained the maneuver was unrealistic and questioned why this tactic was never used before. (Ingolfsland 2020)

Criticism of Rose Tico’s character ranged from her being pointless or unnecessary, as well as criticisms of the way she is very on-the-nose about her morals. This was perceived to be an attempt a shoehorning in political correctness and a so-called “SJW” moral. Most notably saying to Finn: “That’s how we’re going to win. Not fighting what we hate but saving what we love.” Of course, Yoda from the original trilogy was pretty philosophical and vague as well, but he never received the same criticisms.

Toxic fans didn’t just leave it at nasty comments online. The impact of Gamergate’s tactics of attacking certain targets en masse, can be seen with *The Last Jedi* as well. Similarly to the *Ghostbusters* remake, most of the wrath was focused on the female characters and actresses and had its roots in a sense of toxic geek male entitlement as well as gatekeeping

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<sup>10</sup> Comments left on the petition. <https://www.change.org/p/the-walt-disney-company-have-disney-strike-star-wars-episode-viii-from-the-official-canon>

who can and cannot be a part of the *Star Wars* universe and in what way. The brunt of the fans anger fell on one of the only non-white women again, targeting Vietnamese American actress Kelly Marie Tran, who played the role of Rose Tico. She received so much racist and misogynist abuse, she had to delete her Instagram. Later she wrote about her experience in an essay for *the New York Times*, saying: “Their words seemed to confirm what growing up as a woman and a person of color already taught me: that I belonged in margins and spaces, valid only as a minor character in their lives and stories.” and “I know the opportunity given to me is rare. I know that I now belong to a small group of privileged people who get to tell stories for a living, stories that are heard and seen and digested by a world that for so long has tasted only one thing. I know how important that is. And I am not giving up.” (Tran)

MRA’s, men’s right’s activists, also made a 46-minute so-called “*de-feminized fan-edit aka chauvinist cut*” of *The Last Jedi*. (See figure 14 for the description added to this edit)

The Last Jedi: De-Feminized Fanedit (aka The Chauvinist Cut)

Specs: 1280x720, x264, 46 minutes, MP3 2.0 audio

Basically The Last Jedi minus Girlz Powah and other silly stuff.

It would probably be easier to make a list of things that were kept instead of things that were changed. Hardly any scene got away without cuts.

The resulting movie is (wait for it ...) 46 minutes long.

Yeah I know, it's not ideal. It's made from a CAM source (the most recent HDTC one with the Asian hard subs, which is pretty watchable). It has issues. But it had to be done.

You will probably enjoy it most when you view it less as a blockbuster movie and more as some kind of episode from some non-existent mediocre Star Wars series.

Here's a short rundown of changes (spoilers! full list in description.txt):

- No whiny/reluctant/murderous psycho Luke.
- NO HALDO! She simply doesn't exist. Her whole subplot doesn't exist. The Kamikaze is carried out by Poe. (= Poe dies.)
- Leia never scolds, questions nor demotes Poe.
- Leia dies. Kylo kills her.
- Kylo is more badass and much less conflicted and volatile.
- Kylo takes on more of Snoke's guards, Rey struggles with a single one.
- No bomber heroism by china girl in the beginning.
- No Canto Bight.
- No superpowered Rey.
- Luke is not a semi-force-ghost and is smashed by the first laser cannon shot. (sorry, I just had to!)
- Phasma is finished after the first blow by Finn. (Women are naturally weaker than men, she isn't force-sensitive, and we know nothing about any exo-skeleton in her suit)
- Asian chick speaks less, doesn't bully Finn, Finn doesn't try to escape, she is never formally introduced. She is just there and occasionally smiles at Finn or screams "Finn!". She has no sister. Serves her right for all the heinous stuff she did.
- Lots of little cuts reducing the number of female facial shots. Too many to count. (Pun intended.)
- Quite a few scenes rearranged so that the flow of the shortened movie is still somewhat coherent.

Obviously it's far from perfect. The source is not even on DVD-level. Some of the technical edits were slacked because why not, it's a CAM source (e.g. some masks and Snoke disappearing). Sometimes there's an extreme zoom despite the mediocre quality. There are plot holes and continuity errors and some cuts are not as smooth as they should be, especially audio transition-wise. But for what it's worth, it can now at least be viewed without feeling nauseous about most of the terrible big and small decisions they made in this film. Also, at least the intro sequence is now very watchable and actually much cooler without all of Leia's nitpicking. Now it's all one united Resistance fighting without inner conflict and that's much more satisfying to watch. Due to the extreme shortening, the whole movie is much more fast-paced now, at times unfortunately also rushed due to a lack of usable filler footage

Figure 1

In this cut, most of the scenes with women have been cut out of the movie and only the male characters left in. The creator describes it as “basically the last Jedi, minus girlz powah and other silly stuff.” Its description is full of sexism and racism, describing Rose Tico as “asian chick” and another character as “china girl.”

What this attempt at changing the movie shows, except for the obvious sexism and racism, is a sense of ownership and entitlement over the text as well.

Particular ire is directed at Rose, the much-celebrated first ‘Asian chick’ to appear in a key role in the Star Wars franchise. The fan artist’s statement goes so far as to state that Rose deserves to be awkwardly cut out of the film, noting that it ‘serves her right for all the heinous stuff she did’. This ‘heinous stuff’ appears to be deigning to be a female character of color within a franchise that white male fans claim ownership over and doing things like occasionally speaking or potentially ‘bullying’ male characters. (Scott - *Towards a Theory of Producer/fan Trolling* 154)

It’s impossible not to notice that, again, most of the harassment stems from (white) men. And that once again, they perceive female characters mere presence and independence as an attack on masculinity and an invasion of “their” fandom. In the “*chauvinist cut*” the power is literally taken away from Rey and given to Kylo Ren (son of Luke Skywalker and Leia who is working for the Empire), who “is more bad-ass” and takes on more guards than Rey. It is telling that Kylo Ren is made to be the hero in this cut, when the type of masculinity he portrays is a “toxic, entitled, violent, and exploitative one” (Salter and Blodgett 2017 - 199) In discussing Kylo in their book on toxic geek masculinity, Salter & Blodgett see parallels between Kylo Ren and voices within geek culture. A parody “emo Kylo Ren” Twitter account even amassed over 700,000 followers and had the line “ren’s right’s activist” in its description. An obvious parody of the men’s right’s movement. One of the tweets posted was a play on Gamergate’s motto: “what if men just have naturally different levels of force ability” (199)

As Caitlin Bush wrote in her article on the *chauvinist cut*, however sincere the creator may be, *The Last Jedi chauvinist cut*, “even if it is the work of a particularly bored troll, is a product of this supposed proprietorship over a fictional world and its fictional characters” (Busch 2018).

What is so different about this toxic backlash compared to the “Han shot first” moments when the original movies were released though? Obviously, the internet and

increased accessibility to creators as well as more possibilities for fans to meet in like-minded online communities, increasing their sense of righteousness and ability to organize together en masse. But the current cultural situation can't be ignored either. *Star Wars* became enmeshed in what some have called “the Culture Wars”, again proving the overlap between the alt-right and Gamergate-like movements.

Within the reactionary nationalist movement known as “the alt-right”, movies (and other media like games) seem to have become a tool to talk about their world view and attack anything that they feel goes against it. As Jordan Zakarin explains in his article *How the alt-right and nostalgic trolls hijacked geek pop culture*, “No longer are people simply crying foul about the nuances of Jedi teachings, an overabundance of cuddly creatures, or whether plot points properly follow the Hero's Journey. And even when those subjects are targeted with ire, it's sometimes as a delivery mechanism for a more insidious agenda”. Rants from white nationalist Stefan Molyneux and Infowars' Alex Jones, who accused *The Last Jedi* of being a “social justice warrior mess” have gotten hundreds of thousands of views.<sup>11</sup> (Zakarin) You can imagine a clickbait title about a popular movie franchise raking in many viewers who can then be introduced to alt-right talking points in an entertaining way, and sucked further into more videos. Conservative commentator Ben Shapiro called Finn and Rose “useless characters” and complained that protagonist Rey was too good, too fast, at using the Force, calling her a “Mary Sue”. A “Mary Sue” is a derogatory word, used to describe a particular kind of (female) character. Although the meaning of the word varies, the website *TV Tropes* describes the term as being “generally slapped on a character who is important in the story, possesses unusual physical traits, and has an irrelevantly over-skilled or over-idealized nature.” The use of the word Mary Sue originates from a 1974 Star Trek fanfiction called *A Trekkie's Tale*: “Lt. Mary Sue ran the ship and ran it so well she received the Nobel Peace Prize, the Vulcan Order of Gallantry and the Tralfamadorian Order of Good Guyhood.” Mary Sues are heroines who are too good and too easily skilled. But calling any female character that is strong and can fight, a Mary Sue, can quickly turn a “theoretically valid objection into a sexist dig, one that indicated he was angry more with the new trilogy's focus on a woman than any unrealistic Padawan learning curves.” (Zakarin 2018)

That toxic fans express sexist and racist criticisms of the movie, doesn't mean there isn't valid criticism of the movie, but it does seem that alt-right groups and toxic fans/trolls

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<sup>11</sup> It's important to note that being angry at *The Last Jedi* can be profitable. Popular anti *Last Jedi* videos on *YouTube* get hundreds of thousands of views, translating to thousands of dollars in revenue from *YouTube*'s ad-sense program when the videos are monetized.

use textual complaints or dislikes as “code for something more fundamental than sudden concern for the logic of space myths.” (Zakarin) In addition to the deepening diversity of the Resistance, the messaging of the new trilogy (specifically Episode XIII) deconstructs the inherent exceptionalism that played such a major part in the earlier trilogies’ mythos, where greatness results from lineage and tradition over everything else. (Walker)

***The Rise of Skywalker (and retcons).*** I have argued that the backlash against *The Last Jedi* is very similar in nature to the one that the *Ghostbusters* remake experienced. With similar mechanics, motives, organization and toxic geek masculinity playing a large role. Nostalgia plays a role in both, as they both are based on an existing movie or movies. Both these films are part of a changing dynamic between films, fans and the internet. There are a few key differences between the two though. *Ghostbusters* (2016) received most of its backlash before the movie had even come out, *The Last Jedi* faced the brunt of it after the fact. Both movies reference and play with the legacy of the movies that they are a continuation or remake of. But whereas *Ghostbusters* (2016) could reference and embed a response to the backlash within the film, *The Last Jedi* could not as it only received most of the backlash once people had a chance to see it. But, as I will show next, it could respond in the movie after it: *The Rise of Skywalker*. Unlike *Ghostbusters*’ defiant and mocking response to its toxic fans, I would argue that *The Rise of Skywalker* actually took the most “toxic” criticism to heart and many of the things toxic fans disliked. Many film critics thought similarly, saying it “placates legions of misogynist trolls angry that a female hero has agency over her own story.” and “deals a devastating blow to the inspiring journey that Rey has been on.” (Knight)

Throughout the build-up to *The Rise of Skywalker*, Abrams (who was back to direct) stated multiple times he was going to honor what Johnson did, not allowing fan reactions to get in the way of telling a good story. But Abrams also told *the Times* that he questioned *The Last Jedi*’s turn away from the straightforward *Star Wars* narrative, to instead be “full of surprises and subversion and all sorts of bold choices.” It was “a bit of a meta approach to the story,” Abrams said. “I don’t think that people go to *Star Wars* to be told, ‘This doesn’t matter.’” (Abad-Santos and Wilkinson) As soon as *The Rise of Skywalker* was released, many were not convinced that Abrams (and the film studio) hadn’t allowed the backlash to get to them and accused the movie of “retconning” many of the controversial decisions.

Kelly Marie Tran in *The Rise of Skywalker* was treated so fucking horribly. Literally pushed to the side and ignored by Finn in a scene after asking if he needs help,



absolutely insane. The most blatant feeding into of hate from *The Last Jedi* in *The Rise of Skywalker*.

@MichaelCookFilm (Michael Cook Dec 22, 2019)

Retcon is short for retroactive continuity and basically means that the “form or content of a previously established narrative is changed.” (A Short History of 'Retcon' – Merriam Webster dictionary) A famous early example of a retcon is when fictional detective Sherlock Holmes died in one of Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories, he later retroactively said the death had been staged and Holmes could continue his adventures.

So, let’s look at some of the major changes or “retcons” between *The Last Jedi* & *Rise of Skywalker*, split into a few main categories.

*Rey*. Rey’s parents were a mystery in *The Force Awakens*. *The Last Jedi* explicitly made it clear that Rey did not have any familial link to the characters from the original trilogy. She is told her parents were nobodies, drunks who left her for some drinking money. She was therefore not defined by the past or a name, but by her own actions and talent. She was free to choose her own family. Her power her own, not passed down. This is a key theme in *The Last Jedi*, but *Rise of Skywalker* negates it when it reveals that Rey is in fact the granddaughter of Palpatine from the original movies, Dark Lord of the Sith. Kylo Ren says to her: “You don’t have power; you have his power.” Complaints from fans that Rey had too much power and was a boring Mary Sue, are assuaged because her power is explained by her heritage. With this “retcon” *Rise of Skywalker* not only rejects the reveal from *The Last Jedi*, but the message of the film entirely. The idea that anyone can be a hero or a Jedi. In the end, Rey rejects her biological family and considers herself a Skywalker, tying herself to the original hero characters.

Symbolically, this inability to let go of the previous films characters link to the new generation, indicates an unwillingness to truly let go of nostalgic fans and their demands in favor of new fans. Although Rey is even more powerful at using the force than in *The Last Jedi*, pulling down a ship from the sky, and shooting lightning from her fingers to destroy a ship, from a feminist point of view her agency has been taken away. Her power not her own but sourced from a man. There is also a long training scene dedicated to showing the audience that Rey is training her powers as a Jedi, which could also be interpreted as a response to the Mary Sue “she has no training and is too powerful” comments. And although she has used Anakin/Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber already in *The Last Jedi*, in *Rise of Skywalker*, she won’t

take the weapon until she is “worthy” of it. As Madilyn Ivey says in an article about the retcons: “suddenly Rey feels that she must earn the saber. This development is confusing and, frankly, sexist, as Luke never had to earn the same saber when he used it in *A New Hope*.”

*Admiral Holdo*. One of the complaints aimed at Admiral Holdo in *The Last Jedi* was her heroic move to take on the enemy fleet by destroying it with her own in a lightspeed jump. This is now known as “The Holdo Maneuver”. Critical fans asked: why was this move only used now and why weren’t they using it all the time? This is addressed in *Rise of Skywalker* when Poe Dameron says it’s a one in a million shot and couldn’t work again after it’s been brought up. Making it seem like Holdo’s maneuver is less a result of her calculated thinking and skill and more just a result of some luck.

*Rose Tico*. Rose Tico was perhaps most heavily criticized in *The Last Jedi* and is entirely sidelined in *Rise of Skywalker*. The character was an essential part of The Last Jedi and Finn’s arc. She was also heavily disliked by a vocal group of toxic fans, who essentially bullied actress Kelly Marie Tran off Instagram for playing her with sexist and racist comments. Instead of continuing Rose’s story and seeing how her role in the Resistance develops, she is relegated to the background in a pretty harsh contrast to her presence in the previous film.

Finn and Rose shared a sweet connection in *The Last Jedi*, culminating in a kiss after Rose saved Finn's life. *Rise* mostly ignores this relationship and its consequences on Finn's character development. Even worse, the movie mostly ignores Rose, a charming and uplifting character with a lot of heart. After the abuse Kelly Marie Tran suffered online, it's no wonder that fans feel that the decision to minimize Rose's role was a way of catering to a more toxic side of the fanbase. (Ivey)

In *The Last Jedi*, Rose is an essential and main character, but in *Rise of Skywalker* she only has a couple of minutes of screen time and her budding romance with Finn is completely dismissed. There is not much to say about her role in *Rise of Skywalker*, because she might as well have not been in it. This drastic sidelining of Rose’s role seems like another way *Rise of Skywalker* catered to criticisms of *The Last Jedi* and the hate aimed at Kelly Marie Tran for playing Rose.

Of course, it’s not just fans who can tweet their responses to movies. Rian Johnson who directed *The Last Jedi* let his opinions be known. In the wake of the toxic attacks against

*The Last Jedi* and everyone who worked on it, Johnson made it clear he thought Gamergate and its consequences were at the heart of the angry harassment.

I'm always amazed how few people know about Gamergate. It's not only the key to understanding so many violent harassment campaigns going on today, it's lots of the same people angry about the same stuff using the same playbook. — Rian Johnson (@rianjohnson) July 9, 2018

In a more subtle way, Johnson also showed his support of actress Kelly Marie Tran who received the brunt of the most toxic misogyny and racism and was pretty much absent from *Rise of Skywalker* by tweeting a picture of her accompanied by a crown emoji, the day after *Rise of Skywalker* was officially in theaters. (See figure 15)



Figure 15

There is an unprecedented ability for fans to directly access filmmakers, studios and actors. And the reverse is true as well, directors or actors can immediately respond when they are being attacked online or questioned about movies.

Star Wars actors have gotten in on the HSF moments too. Oscar Isaac, who played pilot Poe Dameron, has told every news outlet who will listen that he thought he and John Boyega's character, former stormtrooper Finn, should have had a romance.

Meanwhile, Boyega spent New Year's Eve trolling Reylo's on Twitter, arguing that his character should have ended up with Rey. (Broderick)

The link between a movie and its writers, producers and director(s) is more direct and immediate than ever before. And when a (small) group dislikes or disagrees with certain choices, they can amplify their voices on social media. And not only are the filmmakers themselves aware of any backlash, so are fans and viewers because of news. So, movies are forced into a more direct response to their viewers. And this leads to what I would call a sort of meta-response within the film. Both the *Ghostbusters* reboot and the new *Star Wars* trilogy show the trickle-down effect of Gamergate in the harassment campaigns aimed against them, informed by a toxic geek male sense of entitlement and gatekeeping. They also both show how movies are adapting and responding to these attacks, in subtle and more overt ways.

## CONCLUSION:

In this thesis I have discussed the influence of toxic fans on movies themselves and the mutual relationship between these toxic fans and creators. First, I discussed how gender plays an important role in the forming of toxic fans, as often toxic fans are men who perceive themselves as outsiders because of the historical exclusion of so-called geeks from the traditional concept of hegemonic masculinity. And although this perception of being oppressed no longer matches the reality, with fanboys actually gaining power, they act protectively in defending their identity. An identity they gatekeep from anyone who does not fit their idea of a geek or fan, mostly women, people of color or anyone who is not a white straight male.

Of course, these gatekeeping toxic fans are met with resistance from (female) critics and movies that are actually trying to cater to their diverse fandoms and changing social norms by having a more diverse cast and telling stories that aren't just from the perspective of a male hero. With Gamergate as a boiling point, showing just how misogynist and racist certain fan groups can be, organizing targeted hate campaigns, having been influenced by alt-right and men's right's activist communities online as well. Gamergate being only the start, with similar toxic hate campaigns also affecting movies. In this thesis I discussed two of these instances in different movies.

First, I discussed the 2016 *Ghostbusters* remake featuring an all-female cast of main characters. This movie was uniquely suited as a target for toxic geeks, as the original 1984 movie was basically a celebration of (toxic) geek masculinity. Fans of the original were sorely disappointed to realize the remake actually criticized that same toxic geek masculinity in explicit and implicit ways. The release also coincided with the US election, with both presidential candidates commenting on the movie. Exemplifying how movies have become (more) part of political discourse. The reaction by some displeased fans was extreme, posting sexist and racist comments in a coordinated intimidating fashion, mostly directed at black actress Leslie Jones. Doxing her by publishing her address, phone number and hacking her accounts to post private nude photos publicly. The attack was symptomatic of a toxic sense of male ownership over geek culture and an entrenched racism and sexism in the geek community. But not only did *Ghostbusters* (2016) respond to the sexism in the original movie, it also responded to the toxic backlash it had gotten when the movie was announced. Most explicit was a scene in which the characters literally respond to comments under a YouTube video of the *Ghostbusters* that resemble the ones the actresses and movie had to deal with in real life. The scene was a reference to the hundreds of thousands of comments under

the trailer for the movie and was confirmed to be intended as a response by the writers. This direct response within a movie signals a new way of movies relating to their most toxic “fans”.

*Ghostbusters* responded defiantly to toxic fans, but in my last chapter I discussed the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy which received a similarly toxic and coordinated hate campaign, mostly in response to the second movie: *The Last Jedi*. In this case the third movie was obviously influenced by toxic fans and online opinion. Whereas *The Last Jedi* tried to add more diversity and sway the series in a new direction, the final movie in the trilogy backtracked all the major elements in *The Last Jedi* that had elicited backlash. Most notably and damningly by almost entirely removing the character which had received the most sexist and racist backlash from gatekeeping fans, Rose Tico.

So, coming back to my main question: how has the relationship between toxic fans and movies changed and how has it impacted the movies themselves? I have demonstrated in this thesis how toxic masculinity and toxic fans are related and how gatekeeping, sexism and racism play a role in the coordinated attacks against certain movies. I have also shown how the movies (and the people involved in them) have explicitly embedded responses to these attacks in the plot and scenes. This new level of communication between movies and fans is a direct result of the coordinated attacks by toxic fans. Movies resist these criticisms but worryingly also capitulate to some of its most misogynist and racism influenced criticism, as is the case with *Star Wars*. Movies are being weaponized in larger conversations, mostly in online anti-feminist and alt-right communities. This is a significant new level in the mutual relationship between fans, creators and movies and shows how much influence toxic fans have on film, and society. Therefore, this influence of certain toxic fandoms (who are in turn tied to certain larger political movements) on movies and vice versa, deserves to be very closely examined.

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