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Is *Jojo Rabbit* an Anti-Hate Satire?

Although (because?) superhero films make a lot of money, they're not culturally prestigious and generally get passed over by the Oscars. However, stung by accusations of racism, the Academy finally offered some overdue recognition to nonwhite superhero film *Black Panther*, which won three Oscars in 2018.[1] Given that the Academy was becoming more open to nonwhite filmmakers, it could be seen as a canny move on Waititi's part to produce a film starring children, aimed at a broad audience, with an unambiguous moral message addressing a historically significant event (like the Holocaust), and release it in "Oscar season," (that is, late in the year).[2] Waititi's films have been male-oriented, but here was a chance to court a broader audience with an adaptation of a book recommended by his mother.[3] In fact, Waititi had written *Jojo Rabbit* earlier, but it had languished until the success of *Thor* lent him the opportunity to make the film.[4]

Jojo Rabbit was a PR coup. The film's 2020 Oscar win (for best adapted screenplay) seemed to consolidate a new era of Hollywood recognition for ethnic diversity, complementing the Korean *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019) becoming the first foreign language film to win best film. In his acceptance speech, Waititi dedicated his win to "all the Indigenous kids all over the world who want to do art and dance and write stories."[5] In a world increasingly blighted by racism and intolerance, surely it's important, Waititi suggests, "to educate our kids about tolerance and continue to remind ourselves that there's no place in this world for hate."[6] And the best way to do that is to go and see his latest movie, the themes of which are, by accident or design, ideally positioned for a US film industry seeking to distance itself from present US government policies. If Waititi's statement above seems platitudinous by his standards, we should

bear in mind that publicity for this film was carefully orchestrated, given its potentially controversial theme and the adverse reactions of some critics.[7]

Satire

I want to focus on the term "anti-hate satire" that was used to characterize and market the film.[8] Satire is (usually) comic, which fits my focus, but also implies something more current, political, and edgy than comedy.[9] How far is this true of *Jojo*? Or is the term merely a marketing ploy, as one reviewer suggested: "Loudly calling a movie an 'anti-hate satire' strikes me as caution masquerading as boldness, in the marketing department at least."[10] Adding a sheen of political relevance to a sentimental story can be viewed as the ideal recipe for Oscar success: "It's this year's model of Nazi Oscar-bait showmanship: 'Life Is Beautiful' made with attitude."[11]

On the other side of this argument is the contemporary rise in far-right extremism, exemplified in NZ by the Christchurch mosque shootings on March 15, 2019, when a white Australian terrorist, Brenton Tarrant, killed fifty-one Muslim people in a racially and religiously motivated attack,[12] described by New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern as an "extraordinary and unprecedented act of violence."[13] There is also global concern at the number of democratically elected governments with nationalistic, right-wing agendas, such as Donald Trump's in the US. Trump's autocratic, populist style of demagoguery has been compared to that of Hitler.[14] In this sense, an anti-fascist satire might seem timely. However, calling it an "anti-hate satire" suggests condemnation less of a political movement than of a type of rhetoric. "Hate speech" is defined in NZ law by the Human Rights Act 1993 as publishing or distributing "threatening, abusive, or insulting . . . matter or words likely to excite hostility against or bring into contempt any group of persons . . . on the ground of the colour, race, or ethnic or national origins of that group of persons."[15] Such a law could potentially be used against anyone, irrespective of their politics or ethnicity. The vagueness of "anti-hate" led one reviewer to suggest that "[T]he actual target of 'Jojo Rabbit' isn't really the haters, it's those who would presume to hate the haters."[16] In other words, the movie is aimed at an apolitical mainstream, its message that "there's good and bad in everyone."

The method of satire, however, is precisely to ridicule a social group or person: "For all the satirist's high-minded aims, he [*sic*] works with tools—the lash, the pointed pen, the flaying knife—that inflict pain."[17] "Othering is the essence of satire and humor."[18] Some might say that satire is different from hate speech in that it uses the weapons of wit—irony and double entendre. However, irony and double entendre are also used by alt-right groups, who have appropriated "innocent" signs such as the curled finger "okay" sign, so that viewers can no longer know if the sign is used naively or knowingly (a probable example of the latter was Brenton Tarrant's use of it in a court appearance in April 2019).[19]

The object of satire should be contemporary, but parallels between historic and contemporary fascism are implicit in *Jojo*, the closest being the opening montage of Nazi crowds "sieg-heil"-ing Hitler to the strains of the Beatles' German-language version of "I Want to Hold Your Hand."[20] But Beatlemania is hardly contemporary, so the equation of pop music fans with Nazis seems more amusing than pointed. In contrast, another recent "Nazi comedy," the German-language *Look Who's Back!* (David Wnendt, 2015) placed a miraculously revived Hitler in present-day Germany, which made the link between periods more compelling. A further aspect of satire is that while it paints with broad strokes, using stereotyping to present complex realities, its targets must be believable: "Satire . . . is a rhetorical means to the production of difference in the face of a potentially compromising similarity, not the articulation of differences already securely in place."[21] Satire must convince audiences of their potential culpability—for example, in *Look Who's Back*, crowds mobbing Hitler to get a "selfie" do not seem far removed from contemporary behavior. There is nothing like this in *Jojo*. Nevertheless, Waititi notes, "I experienced a certain level of prejudice growing up as a Māori Jew," and parallels have been drawn between postcolonial trauma of indigenous peoples and the Holocaust.[22] US anti-Semitism was satirized in a 2004 *South Park* episode about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). In the episode, Stan and Kenny ask Mel Gibson for their money back, not because the film was anti-Semitic but because it was "a crappy film." This mixing of moral and aesthetic standards is something that Waititi has perpetuated in the marketing of *Jojo*.

Critical Reception

Waititi has suggested the film had been "divisive" on account of its subject matter, Nazism, implying that controversy had arisen from the film's bold confrontation of racism and hate speech. "I never wanted to make something that was very easy, because for me, if it's too easy, then what's the point? . . . People say, 'Oh, it's divisive,' but where I come from, 'divisive' is not a swear word. It's a means to create discussion."[23] However, the film's reviews suggest that the controversy was not over the film's subject matter but its artistic merit. Most reviewers didn't question the film's ostensible aims, but rather its success in achieving them: "the finished film . . . although clearly sincere in its intentions, is neither sharp nor funny enough to cut to the heart of its subject matter"; "If the premise is risky, the execution is depressingly not so."[24]

According to many reviewers, the intertextuality that features in all of Waititi's films seems to function here as a substitute for diegetic reality rather than an enhancement of it. Waititi's knowledge of Nazism seems based largely on fiction. He even suggests himself, perhaps flippantly, but pertinently in the light of the present argument, that "I didn't do any research. I didn't base him on anything I'd seen about Hitler before. I just made him a version of myself that happened to have a bad haircut and a shitty little mustache. And a mediocre German accent."[25] The casting of Jojo as a small, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy recalls, some reviewers point out, the protagonist Oskar of Volker Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum* (1979), another film about Nazism set primarily in Germany leading up to and including WWII.[26] The difference is that Oskar, a stunted child-man, is a mute witness to the horrors of Nazism and war, while Jojo is a conventional protagonist who renounces politics, somewhat predictably, for love. Intertextuality is also implicit in the characterization of the film as "the first hipster Nazi comedy," implying a (self-consciously) anachronistic approach, with Waititi playing a "stylized goof-head version of Adolf Hitler, who speaks in aggressive anachronisms ('That was *intense*!' 'I'm stressed out!' 'Correctamundo!' 'That was a complete bust!' 'So, how's it all going with that Jew thing upstairs?'), sounding like a petulant mean-girl version of the Führer."[27] Similarly, another review suggests that Jojo's Germany:

> looks like a theme park reproduction, and its inhabitants are like costumed cartoon mascots (Sam Rockwell and Rebel Wilson are Hitler Youth leaders, Stephen Merchant a *Raiders of the Lost Ark*–esque Gestapo agent). Jojo's antisemitic beliefs are all cod-Borat non-sequiturs—at one point, he asks Elsa where "the Jew Queen lays her eggs"—while Waititi's Hitler won't feel particularly outrageous to anyone who remembers the pure, deranged gusto of Dick Shawn's similar turn in *The Producers* 52 years ago.[28]

Jay Nilsson notes, "During the 1990s irony became a source of contention in American culture. For some it came to be defined—in opposition to honesty and sincerity—as apolitical, as synonymous with apathy, and as an expression of moral relativism."[29] Implicit here is the characterization of hipster youth irony as universal, and hence meaningless—hence *Jojo*'s ironies are both too broad and too crude to offer genuine critique.

Another reason alleged by Waititi for the film's controversy is its comic treatment of Nazism—but as suggested above, Nazis have been screen comedy fodder since Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940).[30] A BBC TV *Smith & Jones* sketch from 1989 displays many of the Nazi stereotypes from Waititi's film, prefiguring Captain Klenzendorf (Sam Rockwell) almost exactly.[31] Many reviewers suggest that the film's comic tone is incongruous, forced, or superficial: a "smug surface-level audacity" in a film "that employs a repetitive wink as it proudly trots out its central gimmick, recasting Hitler as a buffoonish imaginary friend for maximum lols":

> There is no suggestion that anything on screen remotely impinges on the real world: Nazism and the Holocaust specifically are presented as goofy can-you-ever-believe-they-went-for-this-rubbish? one-offs. As satire it's a dismal dereliction of duty; as comedy, a one-note joke that wears out fast.[32]

The comedy, rather than satirically reinforcing the message, almost seems to exist separately from the more serious part of the film. Critics commented on the film's "uneven" tone and awkward mixture of humor and sentiment.[33] One possibility would be to read this as camp (as in *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*), but in a satire the expectation is that humor should

reinforce rather than detract from the central theme. One reviewer suggests that "Waititi is not, at his core, a satirist. A comic filmmaker with some serious ideas, sure, but that isn't really the same thing as satire."[34] Indeed, Waititi's feature films tend, in his self-referential fashion, to poke fun at themselves rather than at an external target. Parody (which takes aesthetics as its object) is more Waititi's style than satire.[35] Satire is often marked by a strong moral tone, condemning particular social groups or personages—not something particularly apparent in Waititi's mostly affable oeuvre. *Jojo Rabbit*, in contrast, has been accused of didacticism.[36]

Reverse Racism

However, Waititi has previously used satire in his nonfilmic work, and usually the subject is racism. "Give Nothing to Racism," the NZ Human Rights Commission TV advertisement he fronted in 2017, and "Drive By," a *Flight of the Conchords* episode he wrote and directed in 2007, share with *Jojo Rabbit* the satiric device of role reversal, in this case a nonwhite person playing a racist, a device used in a modified form in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*.[37] Another precedent is African American comedian Dave Chappelle's 2004 skit about a blind white supremacist, Clayton Bigsby—the joke being that he was played by Chappelle himself.[38] Despite the whole *Conchords* series being set in New York, Waititi avoids African American race discourse, alluding to it by a joke:

> **Dave:** You're [i.e., New Zealanders are] pretty much the most hated people in America right now.
> **Jemaine:** What about black people?
> **Dave:** They don't like you either.

Waititi partly depoliticizes the issue by playing down links to blackness. An Indian fruit stall owner named Sinjay (Aziz Ansari) refuses to serve the Conchords because they are New Zealanders. Much humor derives from the fact that the Conchords are so unassertive ("New Zealanders all mumble, I can't understand you!" is one of Sinjay's taunts) that they are frequently confused with people from other English-speaking countries, which their American friend Dave conflates with "the redcoats, the oppressors." Deliverance comes when Sinjay oversteps: "Too bad

New Zealanders are a bunch of cocky a-holes descended from criminals and retarded monkeys . . . riding round on your kangaroos all day." Bret replies: "You're thinking of Australians." Sinjay eventually apologizes for having confused them with other white people (of course, white racists commonly confuse nonwhite ethnicities; ironically, Clement is Māori). Situating the series in the US means that the Conchords experience a "crisis of identity" as their national identity is no longer transparent or self-assured. They experience a mild version of "otherness," though nothing like the kind of racism directed toward, say, African Americans.[39]

In the second example, "Give Nothing to Racism," Waititi fronts the public service advertisement himself, drawing on his (real) status as 2017 Kiwibank New Zealander of the Year. Black-and-white film, a suit (for most of the advertisement), a rigid posture, use of direct address, and classical music all add further gravitas to his appeal: "I'm calling on . . . my fellow Kiwis to support a very important cause. Racism [pause] needs your help to survive. You may not be in a position to give much to racism . . . you don't have to be a full-on racist, just being a tiny bit racist is enough . . ." The advertisement parodies a charity appeal, asking the audience to give "just a little" to racism. Like the Conchords example, the humor of the text is based on a nonwhite person apparently being racist. Identifying the audience as "my fellow Kiwis" suggests that Waititi thinks the joke is one that New Zealanders will get, but the subtext is that Waititi is serious, because he really does think that "Kiwis" are racist. The term "Kiwi" is often identified with the dominant ethnic group—Pākehā.[40] NZ Labour MP Tāmati Coffey recently compared news coverage of Waititi's Oscars win with another article in which a Māori filmmaker was sued. Waititi was described as Kiwi, the filmmaker as Māori. Coffey stated, "Negative stories involving Māori call the person out for being Māori. If the individual attains success, Māori are escalated to 'Kiwi.'"[41]

The "Give Nothing to Racism" commercial is clearly satirical, but is Waititi satirizing institutional racism or institutional anti-racism? No one uses the term "racism" more than anti-racists, and after a while its repetition starts to sound parodic. On the other hand, white supremacist groups also claim to be victims of racism.[42] The ambiguity of Waititi's performance strongly suggests the trickster. This takes us back to the definition of comic play as an action that negates conventional meaning. The problem about the trickster is that you can't tell what he or she means. In

"Give Nothing to Racism" TV advertisement for Human Rights Commission (NZ), featuring Taika Waititi, 2017.

contrast, Chappelle's character is racist toward blacks, so the evidence of the absurdity of his stance is irrefutable, highlighting the problem with reverse racism as used by Waititi: if you choose to ignore the irony, it can simply look like black people being racist to whites.

In *Jojo Rabbit*, Waititi is also playing a racist. As noted above, however, he makes little attempt to play Hitler realistically; it's a buffoonish parody. Another point of difference from the above examples is that New Zealanders are not the focus—Waititi is venturing into unfamiliar territory, and this could affect the success of his satire. A lack of familiarity with the source material could affect the quality of the film, and other Pasifika/NZ directors have adapted more easily to working with European stories and settings (Toa Fraser's *Dean Spanley* [2008], for example).

Jojo in Relation to Waititi's Other Films

Waititi is playing a father figure to a boy character, as he did in *Boy*. In terms of "comedian comedy," the Hitler character is also a comic performance that is in places (like the opening scene of the film) played directly to camera (via a mirror), and Jojo is also involved in this direct address. This convention breaks the fourth wall and throws the fictional

premise of the film into relief (the risk is that it also trivializes the subject matter of the film, which could be counterproductive if the film is a satire). It opens a fantasy space (as in *Boy*) which the father-son duo share and cocreate to some degree. Notably, though, Boy's father is also a real character, which opens up narrative possibilities (interactions with other characters, for example) lacking here because of Hitler's imaginary status. The narrative of both films is to some degree about the child becoming disillusioned with the father figure. However, *Boy* also features an intermediary figure—child/man Michael Jackson, through whom the character differences are mediated and to some degree resolved. There is no third party in *Jojo*. *Boy*'s ambiguous resolution has the effect of validating the child's perspective; we come to see the world as he does, to some degree. But in *Jojo*, the narrative follows a more traditional trajectory of disillusioning Jojo with Nazism and teaching him (through love) how to be an adult. In effect, the satire's message is that only some blue-eyed, blond children are stupid enough to believe in Nazism. Or adult caricatures, as all the Nazi characters are. "Caricature has traditionally appealed to a broad audience (unlike satire) because of its relatively simple techniques, and a typical form of caricature is constructed as overstated satirical representations of people's character, looks, and behavior."[43] Thus the satire is ineffective, as it does not implicate the audience enough for them to feel culpable.

The use of a child's perspective (another Waititi leitmotif) in a film about Nazism is nothing new—the Holocaust's horror is such that it can be represented only by someone who does not understand it, as in *The Tin Drum*, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Mark Herman, 2008), and *Life Is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997). Such a device could be satirical—Menippean satire can feature the picaresque adventures of an everyman character, whose gullibility and incomprehension of the outlandish scenes he or she witnesses heightens audience awareness of their incongruity, as in *Gulliver's Travels*, for example.[44] *The Tin Drum* and, to some degree, *Life is Beautiful* fit this model. *Look Who's Back* also pairs Hitler with a series of child-men or women who are oblivious to the main character's evil potential. For this device to be effective, evil has to be believable, but in *Jojo*, none of the Nazis are sufficiently threatening.

All of Waititi's films up to this point (with the possible exception of *Eagle vs Shark*) have been male comedies. In contrast, this film could

engage with Waititi's maternal Jewishness, and indeed he has stated, "My film is a love letter to my mother and to all single mothers" (which could also relate to his spouse, Chelsea Winstanley, from whom he has apparently been separated for some time).[45] But Waititi is on unfamiliar ground, with two major female characters and a love story (another narrative mostly absent from his oeuvre).[46] So how do these characters and scenarios fit into the comic narrative? Jojo's mother (Scarlett Johansson) and Elsa, the Jewish fugitive (Thomasin McKenzie) may have some funny lines and scenes, but they are basically serious characters in a conventional narrative: Jojo learns to transfer his childish love of his mother into his adult love of Elsa, a device made less credible by the obvious maturity gap between the two leads (although consistent with Waititi's usual characterization of male-female relations). It's hard for any character to cast off the childish connotations of a name like Jojo. As Jojo becomes more involved with Elsa, Hitler and the cast of funny Nazis fade into the background and romantic melodrama takes over, introducing the uneasy tension between comedy and sentiment noted by reviewers. Melodrama is also arguably the genre most implacably opposed to satire, further blunting the intended message. Such lines as Rosie's "They'll never win. That is the power you have—as long as there is someone alive somewhere, then they lose. They didn't get you yesterday, or today. Make tomorrow the same" typify the platitudes of the second half of the film, which ends with a Rilke quote as far from satire as one could imagine: "Let everything happen to you/ Beauty and terror/ No feeling is final/ Just keep going."

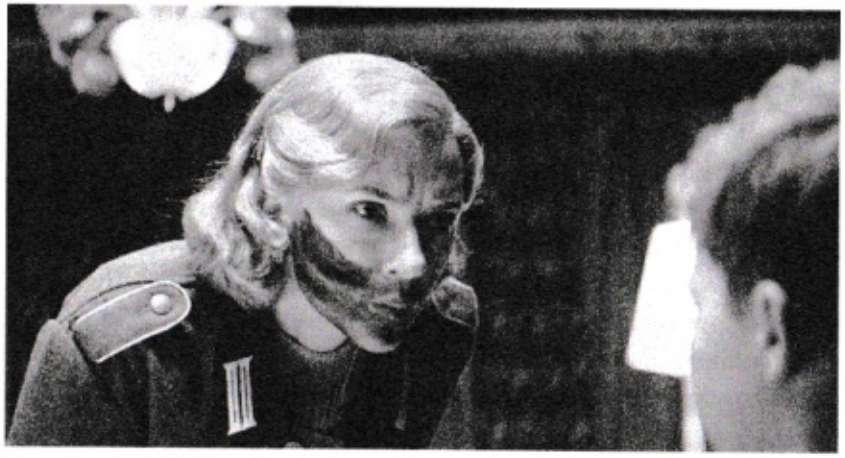
However, the two female leads give strong performances, and this arguably has the effect of broadening the film's appeal, which would have helped its Oscar chances. Elsa and Rosie are continuous with women in Waititi's other films—they're both "ball-busters," literally in Rosie's case, when she floors Captain Klenzendorf with a knee to the groin. Waititi's women are often the "real" men: a scene where Rosie blacks up her neck and chin to look like stubble and delivers a stinging rebuke to Jojo in the persona of his father is one of the most striking in the film. Elsa also uses fear, intimidation, and wit to put Jojo in his place:

Jojo: Tell me everything about the Jewish race.
Elsa: Okay. We're like you but human. Done.

The film also develops the relationship between Elsa and Rosie, culminating in an exchange where Rosie rhapsodizes about being a woman, her speech culminating in the following lines: "You'll go to Morocco, take up lovers and make them suffer, look a tiger in the eye and learn to trust without fear. That's what it is to be a woman." Given that Rosie is to some degree modeled on Waititi's mother, how much can we read into "look a tiger in the eye," as presumably she must have looked Taika in the eye on many occasions? Equally, Waititi might have felt that confronting his mother (clearly a formidable woman, going by his many comments about her and the characterization of Elsie and women in general in his films) was also eyeing a tiger.

Failed Camp?

Almost every Waititi film has a camp aspect to it, from Sakaar in *Thor: Ragnarok*, to antipodean camp in *Wilderpeople*, to men dressing as vampires in *Shadows*, as their favorite animal in *Eagle vs Shark*, and as Michael Jackson in *Boy*. In *Jojo Rabbit*, Waititi tries to make Nazis camp, but arguably it doesn't work. It's not that Nazis can't be made camp—as "Springtime for Hitler" shows. It's just that in most Nazi comedies, the Nazis are either at least partly metafictional (that is, there are characters playing or impersonating Nazis within the diegesis, as in *To Be or Not To Be* [Ernst Lubitsch, 1942], *The Producers* [Mel Brooks, 1967], and *The Great Dictator*) or else they are fish out of water (as in *Look Who's Back*). These strategies put a protective layer of irony around the evil characters—either they are being mixed up with people dressed as Nazis, or they are aberrations. But in *Jojo*, the Nazis are literally Nazis. The Hitler character is imaginary, but he's also Hitler. This lack of a fictive element, or a containment strategy, makes it hard for a critical audience to reconcile the conventional wisdom of Nazi evil with the buffoons we see on screen. Of course, we see evidence of their evil—the death of Frau Betzler, for example. But this feels as if it belongs in a different movie to the one with the Nazis in it. The only time the two worlds come together, in my opinion, is the above-mentioned incident when Frau Betzler "blacks herself up" as Herr Betzler (a German soldier) and berates Jojo. This is the one genuinely threatening moment in the film. It's because Waititi understands scary women. It's also, ironically, a moment of bush camp, because it features



Frau Betzler (Scarlett Johansson) as drag king in *Jojo Rabbit* (2019).

a drag king, a woman impersonating a man. It's not funny, but it is arguably more convincing than the japery of the rest of the film.

Jojo is basically a film of two halves, with a broadly comic opening transitioning somewhat awkwardly into a melodramatic love story. Neither of these halves is particularly satirical—in the first part, the Nazis are too much like caricatures, and in the second half, the comic tone mostly dissolves into sentiment. A satire should make people reexamine their own lives and behavior. However, the film has been popular, and its awards success has raised Waititi's profile. Its message of tolerance for other cultures, however cloyingly expressed, seems timely in contemporary US, where Californian liberalism and Trump authoritarian populism are increasingly at odds.[47] It seems improbable that this standoff will result in a stream of anti-Trump satire, however, as Hollywood cannot afford to alienate US audiences, so *Jojo*'s indirect satire-lite fits the bill perfectly for the time being. Is there something that Waititi can learn from the film's torrid reception? Perhaps that the opinions of film critics are not very consequential.

Conclusion

So far, Waititi's Hollywood sojourn can be deemed a success. Both *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Jojo Rabbit* have been popular, *Ragnarok* was critically well reviewed, and *Jojo* won an Oscar.[1] Waititi's latest coup is cowriting and directing the next *Star Wars* movie.[2] As with Marvel, there's a policy of using "hot" directors to keep the franchise fresh. Both Marvel and *Star Wars* are owned by Disney, who bought LucasFilm in 2012. Disney has followed the three George Lucas–directed prequels of *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005) with another trilogy of sequels: *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (J. J. Abrams, 2015), *Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* (Rian Johnston, 2017), and *Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker* (J. J. Abrams, 2019). Many fans and critics were disappointed with the Lucas-directed prequels, and the director's tinkering with the first three films.[3] As one fan put it, "Has he fulfilled his destiny or destroyed his legacy?"[4] The phrase "the Lucas Effect" sums up Lucas's huge influence on contemporary film, for good or ill, with some arguing that control can destroy creativity, as discussed in the documentary *The People vs George Lucas* (Alexandre Phillipe, 2010).[5]

The Disney takeover could be seen as a new start, and *The Force Awakens* was generally liked by fans and critics,[6] balancing new elements (a female heroine, a bit more casting diversity) with familiarity (reappearances of Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, and Mark Hamill, and a plot lifted straight out of the first *Star Wars* film [*A New Hope*, George Lucas, 1977]). However, the next installment, *The Last Jedi*, although critically praised and reasonably successful, attracted the wrath of conservative fans, who objected to the film's "progressivism," including its casting diversity and the irreverent treatment of some of the stalwarts (in particular Luke Skywalker).[7] Director Rian Johnson reportedly commented, "If someone's responding to diversity negatively, fuck 'em," in response to fans who "whine about 'SJWs' [Social Justice Warriors] and take issue with the movie having women and people of color in lead roles."[8] Another analysis made comparison with Gamergate and the backlash to the all-women

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Chapter 10

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Conclusion

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