

On Fatigue

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Abstract

In an age of superheroes the hero's journey represents a threshold of transformation within "thresholds of transformation, which demand a change in the patterns not only of conscious but also unconscious life" (Campbell p. 8). It has rendered "the deed of the hero" (Campbell, p. 202) superfluous, without responsibility, and unable to function as the framework for their own mythology. The *deus ex machina* now "struts and frets his hour upon the stage [...] Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing", whereupon the hero "com'st to use thy tongue" and tell thy story quickly." (Shakespeare, p. 147). There is only absolution for the story over and over, again and again, whenever the hero encounters a threshold. In being absolved, however, this threshold represents, in kind, a point of stress, in a series of stresses, which distort the transformation of the hero, into a hero, causing it to fatigue. This fatigue is the basis for what a number of critics and scholars refer to as "superhero fatigue [...] given the dominate [sic] box office profile [this] sub-genre has held for the last several years [since 2018] and the proliferation of superheroes to come" (Doran, n. p.).

Keywords: Superhero fatigue, narrative, film

This paper considers the concept of fatigue in relation to Rian Johnson's *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (dir. 2017) and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, given Campbell's influence on the development of George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, née *Star Wars* (dir. 1977). It also considers what it is that constitutes the *Last of the Jedi* with what Campbell refers to as "the boon brought from the transcendent deep [which] becomes quickly rationalized into [a] nonentity, [when] the need becomes great for another hero to refresh [...] what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned a thousand thousand times, throughout the millenniums of mankind's prudent folly" (p. 202). This folly represents "the hero's ultimate difficult task" as a hero, but when the hero represents the transcendent as a superhero, or as a *Jedi*, the boon is redoubled and what has been taught becomes greater than "the word" (Campbell, p. 202) of the hero what preceded them, and those, and thus the difficult task goes beyond the ultimate towards the unlimited. It cannot be rationalized into a nonentity in order to refresh what has been taught even if "the wisdom brought forth from the deep" (Campbell, p. 202) can be learned. The lesson is repeated. It gets taught over and over, again and again, as a point of stress in a series of stresses instead of thresholds, which distort the transformation of the hero, causing it to fatigue.

There are "two worlds" to mythology, according to Campbell, "the divine and the human... pictured only as distinct from each other—different as life and death, as day and night" (p. 201), the world from the deep, the lesson from the word, what separates the human from the

hero and that which facilitates their transformation. These two worlds are merged in *Star Wars*, however, the word comes from the human, through fiction from George Lucas. The hero has no “adventures out of the land we know [and] into darkness” despite that “the two [worlds] are actually one” and the same, through “a forgotten dimension of the world we know” (Campbell, p. 201). This land is instead unfolding from the darkness, *Episode* after *Episode* of *Star Wars*, as an “exploration of [this] dimension” (Campbell, p. 201) of the world we know, yet do not know, but “re-enter [as] such” (Campbell, p. 204). These two worlds, for example, represent the *Resistance*, née the *Rebel Alliance*, and the *First Order*, née the *Galactic Empire*, as dimensions of a *galaxy far, far away* (Johnson dir. 1977, min. 00:00:10), the one having unfolded from the other through the rise and the fall of the *Old* and *New Republic*. The transformation of the hero is also reflected in this world, unfolding from the divine and the darkness, and thus what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned over a thousand thousand years threatens the divine and the darkness, which can no longer be pictured only as distinct from each other.

“For over a thousand generations, the Jedi Knights were guardians of peace and justice” in this *galaxy*, where the “lightsaber” described by *Old Ben Kenobi*, née *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, is “the weapon of a Jedi Knight”, and the lesson of “a more civilized age” as well as a forgotten dimension, “before the dark times, before the [*Galactic*] Empire” (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 00:32:00–00:34:00). The *lightsaber* is also a symbol of the hero and the darkness in *Star Wars*, where the divine can be pictured only as distinct from the human what wields it because it is “no match for a good blaster at your side” (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 00:57:00–00:58:00) despite that “the Force... is... created by all living things... [and] binds the [*galaxy*] together” (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 00:34:00–00:34:30). This symbol also represents a threshold for a Jedi Knight, especially when *Luke Skywalker* can “feel something” like “the Force” through the *lightsaber*, “the first step into a larger world” (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 01:00:00–01:00:20) of Jedi Knights and Jedi Masters. The *lightsaber* dual, furthermore, between *Obi-Wan* and *Darth Vader*, née *Anakin Skywalker*, on the *Death Star* (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 01:27:20–01:30:00), also represents another threshold, or the clash between the divine and the darkness, through the *lightsaber*, through what has been taught correctly as a lesson, but incorrectly learned as a point of stress in a series of stresses, which distort the transformation of *Luke* into a *Jedi* rather than a Jedi Knight.

The lesson remains incomplete, because *Vader* “strike[s] down” *Obi-Wan* and *Obi-Wan* “transcends life [through a] peculiar blind spot” (Campbell, p. 135), even if the wisdom brought forth from the deep can be learned with the *Force* (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 01:27:00–01:30:10). It becomes quickly rationalised into a nonentity, when “The balance of perfection is lost. The spirit falters and the hero falls” (Campbell, p. 208). This nonentity also represents the “sacrifice of a visible entity for a transcendent good” (Campbell & Moyers, p. 7), and thus the difficult task goes beyond the ultimate towards the unlimited, where “it become[s] more powerful than you can possibly imagine” (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 01:27:00–01:30:10). It is a transformation within a transformation yet without a change, as an absolute, which facilitates the difficult task through the destruction of the *Death Star* in a series of stresses without the *lightsaber*. The “use [of] the Force” (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 01:52:30–01:53:00), however, when *Luke* makes the trench run, cannot be pictured only as distinct from the human because *Han Solo* destroys a *TIE Fighter*, causing another *TIE Fighter* to panic into *Vader* (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 01:53:30–01:54:00) who becomes literally and figuratively unbalanced. It threatens the transcendent deep in order to refresh what has

been taught yet remains incomplete, and *Vader* escapes, despite that *Luke* destroys the *Death Star*.

“You will [instead] go to the Dagobah system”, *Ben* instructs *Luke* through the spirit of the *Force* in Irvin Kirshner’s *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*, “There you will learn from Yoda, the Jedi Master who instructed me” (dir. 1980, min. 00:13:00–00:13:30). The hero’s ultimate difficult task is to now “unlearn what you have [incorrectly] learned” about the *Force*, but when *Luke* cannot lift the *X-Wing* out of the bog with the *Force* as a point of stress, the spirit falters. *Yoda*, as a superhero, as a Jedi Master, must transcend life, as an absolution, and lift the *X-Wing* out of the bog through the *Force* in order to refresh what has been taught yet remains incomplete as a lesson (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 01:08:20–01:08:50). *Luke* cannot “believe” *Yoda*, however, for *Luke* can only feel something like the *Force* through the lesson of the *lightsaber* (dir. Kirshner 1980, min. 01:12:30–01:12:50). It becomes quickly irrationalized into an entity, for example, when *Luke* dismembers the *Wampa* on *Hoth* with the *Force* through the *lightsaber* (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 00:09:00–00:10:00). It cannot be rationalized back into a nonentity, furthermore, when *Luke* destroys the vision of *Vader* on *Dagobah*, against what *Yoda* has instructed, and thus the face of *Luke* is reflected in the face of *Vader* (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 01:02:00–01:01:05:10). This face represents what has been taught correctly as a lesson within a lesson, but incorrectly learned as a point of stress, because *Vader* dismembers *Luke* on *Bespin* in a series of stresses with the same *lightsaber* through the *Force*, causing it to fatigue (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 01:39:30–01:49:35). The lesson is repeated when *Vader* reveals to *Luke* that “Obi-Wan never [taught] you what happened to your father”, despite that “He [taught] me enough” (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 01:50:00–01:50:40), and the hero literally and figuratively falls.

The sacrifice of a visible entity for a transcendent good, that is, cannot be sustained as a nonentity. *Luke*, for example, will not “sacrifice Han and Leia” *Organa*, née *Leia Skywalker*, to refresh what has been taught, so *Obi-Wan* “cannot [therefore] interfere” (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 01:23:30–01:23:50). It is the human, rather than the transcendent deep, which can, and does, interfere when *Luke* calls out to “Ben” (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 01:52:00–01:52:30) after the fall, almost like the “unsuccessful husband” in “Refusal of the Call” (Campbell, p. 5, p. 57). Instead, he calls out to “Leia” (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 01:52:00–01:52:30), because “Only a fully trained Jedi Knight, with the Force as [their] ally, will conquer Vader, and his Emperor” *Palpatine*, née *Senator Palpatine*, née *Darth Sidious* (Kirshner dir. 1980, min. 01:23:20–01:23:30). The lesson remains incomplete, “That is to say, the [human] may have to come and get him [again]. For the bliss of the [transcendent] deep... is not lightly abandoned” (Campbell, p. 192). This bliss also represents the sacrifice of a visible entity for a transcendent good when *Yoda* transcends life through another peculiar blind spot in Richard Marquand’s *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (dir. 1983, min. 00:44:20–00:44:30). *Luke* “come[s] back to complete” the lesson, yet he “already know[s]... that which [is] need[ed]” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 00:40:00–00:40:40), having “constructed a new lightsaber” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:23:30–01:23:40). “Remember, a Jedi’s strength flows from the Force”, despite that *Luke* “must confront Vader. Then, [and] only then, a Jedi will you be.” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 00:40:40–00:41:10).

Luke represents the deed of the hero without being a Jedi per se, especially when the need becomes great for another hero with the *lightsaber*. The *lightsaber* duel, between *Obi-Wan* and *Vader*, is repeated between *Luke* and *Vader* on the *Second Death Star*, where it “would [otherwise] be a threat to [the *Emperor*]” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 00:47:00–00:47:20). It is instead an opportunity, for “the *Emperor* knew, as [*Obi-Wan*] do[es]” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 00:47:00–00:47:10), that the *Emperor* is “looking forward to completing [*Luke*’s] training” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:30:20–01:30:30), what has been taught correctly as a lesson, but incorrectly learned as a point of stress. “Come, boy. See for yourself. From here, you will witness the final destruction of the [*Rebel*] Alliance, and the end of your insignificant rebellion”, before *Luke* turns towards the *lightsaber*, towards the unlimited, and that which is now “unavoidable” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:34:30–01:36:00). It is only when the transcendent deep threatens the human through the darkness, when “your friends on the Endor moon will not survive”, that *Luke* “take[s]” up the *lightsaber*, and again, when *Vader* threatens *Leia*, that *Luke* dismembers *Vader* with the *lightsaber*, causing it to fatigue (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:50:50–01:52:50). This fatigue represents a Jedi’s strength as a threshold, but again the spirit falters, *Luke* hesitates, and the lesson remains incomplete yet somehow completed. *Luke* is not a Jedi Knight or a Jedi Master, despite throwing away the *lightsaber*. *Luke* is now a “Jedi, like [the] father” what preceded them (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:53:20–01:53:45). Indeed, *Luke* not only succeeds, but supersedes the role of the hero as a superhero.

The lesson is repeated, however, when *Luke* becomes the sacrifice of a visible entity for a transcendent good, just like *Obi-Wan* and *Yoda*, the heroes what preceded them, and those, because “*Obi-Wan* has [not] taught [*Luke*] well [enough]” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:48:20–01:48:30). This sacrifice is “the price for [a] lack of [learning]” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:55:00–00:55:31) that cannot transcend life. *Luke* cannot be “turned”, or learned as it were, to re-enter as such, and thus *Luke* must “be destroyed” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:54:20–30). It is only when *Vader* is reminded of the human as a “father” that *Vader* com’st to use thy tongue, as an absolution, against the darkness through the divine, throwing away the *Emperor* like the *lightsaber*. The balance of perfection is lost and the *Emperor* falls into the transcendent deep. There is only the human, and with the death of *Vader* “nothing can stop that now” (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:58:50–01:59:40). *Vader* cannot transcend life in quite the same way against the divine, or through the darkness, and so they die like a human. This death also reveals what it is that constitutes “the [*Last*] of the [*Jedi*]”, “The Crossing of the Return Threshold” (Campbell, p. 71) as a superhero, with a newfound responsibility for the up and coming hero’s journey, and absolution for their story. The “mask [is] off”, and the human within the hero is finally exposed (Marquand dir. 1983, min. 01:58:50–01:59:40), conflating the two worlds.

These two worlds are diverging when *The Force Awakens* again in J. J. Abram’s *Star Wars: Episode VII* (dir. 2015). The hero’s ultimate difficult task is also repeated through the destruction of *Starkiller Base* as “another *Death Star*” (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 01:32:25–01:32:40), but it is *Poe Dameron* the human, rather than *Rei* the hero, who ultimately destroys the *Base* as a point of stress in a series of stresses causing it to fatigue. The deed of the hero is “to [instead] find... *Luke* [*Skywalker*] and [to] gain his help” (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 00:01:00) through absolution, given “that Jedi Master *Luke Skywalker* will return and restore a spark of hope [...] against the rising [darkness]” (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:00:30). “The prince[ss] beholds, dumbfounded, not only [their] friend transformed into the

living personification of the Support of the Universe, but the hero” (Campbell, p. 216), and thus the wisdom brought forth from the deep becomes quickly irrationalized into an entity, this Jedi Master *Luke Skywalker*. The need becomes less and less for another hero like *Rei*, because even if “you strip away the myth”, *Luke* becomes “a legend” (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:59:20–00:59:50). There is a disconnect, however, between what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned as a lesson when *Kylo Ren*, née *Ben Solo* prays to *Vader* in order to refresh, and to “forgive”, through absolution, what “I feel... again. The pull to the light... Show me again, the power of the darkness... Show me, grandfather, and I will finish what you started.” (Abrams dir. 00:58:50–00:59:50).

The *lightsaber*, furthermore, can no longer be pictured only as distinct from the human, despite that *Finn* née *FN-2187* cannot defeat *FN-2199* (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 01:16:20–01:17:00) or *Kylo* (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 01:53:20–01:58:00) with the inordinately divine *lightsaber*. The human is still a threat to the transcendent deep, because *Kylo* does not “have the strength” to wield the *lightsaber* against *Han* without their “help” (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 01:48:00–01:48:20). This strength cannot sustain the nonentity, the *Ben Solo*, who was “weak and foolish, like his father” (min. 01:46:45–01:56:50) as a hero what preceded them. The strength that *Kylo* seeks through “pain” instead (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 01:47:40–01:47:50) becomes superfluous, and superhuman, through the remaining personification of the Support of the Universe, “that lightsaber” which belongs to this Jedi Master *Luke Skywalker*, and thus “belongs to me [*Kylo*]” (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 01:51:50–01:52:00), the son of the grandfather who preceded them. It is only when *Rey* defeats *Kylo* with *The Force* through the *lightsaber*, that the “distinction” (Campbell, p. 202) between the two worlds is temporarily restored, as a point of stress that is literally and figuratively “torn apart” (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 01:47:30–01:47:50) as a fracture on *Starkiller Base*. “The map—it is complete”, the “dear friend” who is also “missed” (Abrams dir. 01:02:20–01:02:30) finally *Awakens*. The transcendent deep is exposed, and *Kylo* can “complete his training” (min. 01:58:30–01:58:40) and the lessons of those that came before.

“But the [*Resistance*] has [also] been exposed. As the First Order speeds towards the [*Rebel*] base, the brave heroes [must] mount a desperate escape. . . .” (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:01:00–00:01:20). This escape is quickly thwarted, despite that *Poe*, this time with help from other humans, defeats a *Dreadnought* of the *First Order* (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:03:30–00:12:10). Indeed, there are only “dead heroes” where there were “leaders”, for their sacrifice cannot transcend life anymore, “I need you to learn that.” (Johnson dir. 2015, min. 00:26:20–00:27:00). It cannot sustain the visible entity for a transcendent good, and thus the spark of hope is thrown away when *Rei* offers the *lightsaber*, the boon brought from the transcendent deep “of a good question for another time” (Abrams dir. 2015, min. 01:09:05–01:09:10). Jedi Master *Luke Skywalker* represents a transformed yet visible entity for a transcendent good, which goes beyond *Luke* and “The Call to Adventure” (Campbell, p. 45). *Luke* has instead come “to this island to die”, because “It’s time for the Jedi to end” as a lesson, while the word of the hero what preceded them “will never train another generation of Jedi [again]” (Johnson dir. 2015, min. 00:25:30–00:26:45). This lesson has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned as a point of stress in a series of stresses where “the Jedi are romanticized [and] deified. But... if you look at their deeds, the legacy of the Jedi is failure. Hypocrisy [and] hubris” (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:59:15–00:59:30), causing it to fatigue.

It “was a Jedi Master who was responsible for the training and creation of Darth Vader”, and it was “a Jedi who saved [*Vader*]” (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:59:35–00:59:50), even though *Vader* saved *Luke*. The née of a threshold of transformation, within thresholds of transformation, which demand a change in the patterns of the superhero’s journey née the hero’s journey. *Rey* “need[s]” a “teacher” (Johnson dir. 2015, min. 00:25:20–00:25:30), but also “need[s]” *Luke* “to bring the Jedi back, because Kylo Ren is strong with the dark side of the Force” and the lesson that *Rei* does not “know [enough] about” (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:47:35–00:48:00). The visible entity for a transcendent good has thrown away the lightsaber, however, the symbol of the hero, which is why “the dark place” is “calling” to *Rei*, “between” conscious but also unconscious life (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:48:00–00:51:10), reflected in the darkness (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 01:14:00–01:16:00). “And this is the lesson” that *Luke* has learned, that the “Force does not belong to the Jedi”, but to the hero what wields it even when the *Force* is a “Balance” (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 00:48:00–00:51:10) between the divine and the darkness. When *Luke* “saw darkness” in *Kylo* “during his training”, and went to interfere, *Luke* was “left with [the] shame... [and the] consequence” as a Jedi “Master [who] failed” what preceded them, and thus here endeth the lesson (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 01:18:40–01:19:39). *Kylo* and *Rey* are being drawn together through the transcendent deep in order to learn from the gaps in one another’s training.

It is only when *Luke* embraces the *Force* without the *lightsaber* itself against *Kylo* and the darkness, that what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned a thousand thousand times can no longer be repeated. The *lightsaber* duel, furthermore, between *Luke* and *Kylo*, represents an opportunity, rather than a threshold or a point of stress, for the *Resistance* to escape, just like *Obi-Wan* did unto *Luke* back on the *Death Star*, for now “The circle is now complete.” (Lucas dir. 1977, min. 01:27:20–01:30:00). It is the blue of the old *lightsaber*, rather than the green of the new *lightsaber*, which represents this lesson learned, and the clash between the divine and the darkness through the transcendent from the deep. “Pass on what you have learned. Strength, mastery. But weakness, folly, failure also. Yes, failure most of all. The greatest teacher, failure is.” (Johnson dir. 2017, min. 01:23:00 –01:24:30). This failure represents *Luke*’s own absolution as a superhero, and with it the absolution of the human and the hero in the place of the father and the grandfather what absolved them. The balance of perfection is restored, the spirit transcends, and the hero rises. “The rebellion is reborn today. The war is just beginning. And I [*Luke*] will not be the last Jedi” (Johnson dir. 2015, min. 02:16:10–02:16:40), but the *Last* of the *Jedi*.

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