STAR WARS: The Force Awakens
Psychoanalysis and Film
by Martin Mares
The brand new movie from the STAR WARS universe is filled with many references to Freudian and Jungian motives. One might say that this could be possibly applied to almost every single movie, but the case of STAR WARS universe is one of those movies that became another culture phenomenon such as Lord of the Rings, Batman or Star Trek. The original trilogy and prequels were examined numerous times by fans and experts altogether. Regarding psychoanalysis, people also examined previous six movies in connection with George Lucas and his life, relationships and behaviour and how all of them were projected during the process of creation of the entire universe of STAR WARS. The entire franchise was sold by Lucas to Disney and this decision undoubtedly helped to push SW beyond concepts rooted more or less in 1970/80s ideological, political and cultural background. Interpretation of original SW trilogy for Lucas is more than clear - SW is all about relationships, father/son issues and restoration of democracy in the Galaxy framed by Cambell’s “Hero’s Journey” theory. Indeed, it was very American and very 1970s. JJ Abrams, who was hired as a director of The Force Awakens re-contextualised Lucas’ “New Hope” to fit into the multicultural society of 2015, though the movie remained capable of producing the significant portion of nostalgia for older fans. However, people of colour, feminism and modern topics such as the crisis of identity, environmentalism or disillusionment can be found in The Force Awakens as well. On the other hand, the newest instalment of SW saga is figuratively calling for application of Freudian, Jungian, and Kleinian theories. Last, but not least I cannot forget to mention Erik Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development and a few feminists’ ideas about female/male gaze or apparatus theory in a general way. This essay will also try to explain possible diagnosis of the main villain Kylo Ren/Ben Solo, but rather in a short way, since the psychoanalysis of this character would provide enough material and discourse to write a paper exclusively about him. Nevertheless, I hope that my overall analysis of the most recent STAR WARS movie will be able to figure out something useful in a field of psychoanalysis and possibly raise some provoking questions.

The main arch of the story is similar to the story of 1970s A New Hope, though changes have been made to reach modern standards for blockbuster movies. Instead of a young man as a hero carefully following Hero’s Journey, we have a female heroine Rey following a rather very loose form of Cambell’s or Jung’s concept. Typical archetypes were not entirely abandoned, but many characters got more complex personalities or roles and therefore it is quite challenging to attach them to classic templates suitable for a mentor, a maiden, a trickster and so forth. However motifs such as heroic character crossing the threshold, meeting friends and
sidekicks, undergoing the adventurous journey, the ordeal and return with the elixir are all there.

At the very beginning, it is necessary to realise one important issue – separating the creator from his creation. George Lucas sold the entire STAR WARS universe to Disney and they hired J.J Abrams as a director of the last movie *The Force Awakens*. If STAR WARS is something like the modern mythos or the legend, then J.J Abrams can be compared to a medieval bard or troubadour, who only tries to re-interpret the classical (original trilogy) from George Lucas. There are many similarities between episode IV and *The Force Awakens*. Both Luke and Rey live their unsatisfied life on the desert planet; both became unintentionally involved in the rebel conspiracy only to find themselves later in a position of de-facto one of proud heralds of resistance and key figures of rebellion. There is similar lethal space station – Death Star I/Starkiller Base that is almost indestructible, but it is destroyed at the end of the movie nonetheless. Both movies have the iconic scene of “bar/lounge/saloon/cantina”. Is it crucial if we watch the scene in Mos Eisley Cantina or Maz Kanata’s Pub for the first time, or we have a sense of an overwhelming familiarity rather? Did J.J Abrams directly pay the homage to the original trilogy? The answer appeared to be more complex than that.

There are several scenes such as X-Wing cockpit or Millennium Falcon’s cannon hatches viewpoints that operate with apparatus intentionally in the same way like the original trilogy to look similar and bring the spectator a pleasurable experience. It is like a reunion with “old friends” or should I use rather “old imaginary friends”? Let’s take for example Millennium Falcon wildly manoeuvring like in the good old days and later Han Solo with Chewbacca stepping onboard of their beloved spaceship, saying: “We are home, Chewie!”. It is one of those moments when seasoned fans (between 30 to 60 y.o., some of them coming to see the movie with their children and families) are suddenly emotionally touched, and some of them even start to cry. The same could be applied to the scenes such as the reunion of Han Solo with Leia after long years of separation due to their dysfunctional marriage or the final scene of Rey with Luke Skywalker. The sight of old and gray Mark Hamill in a Jedi Robe removing his cape in mythical-idealised like slow-motion shot seen from Rey’s point of view is simply astonishing. These sublime moments throughout the movie are strengthened by the fact that many actors from original trilogy agreed to reprise their role - Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, Peter Mayhew, Anthony Daniels (C3-PO) and already mentioned Mark Hamill. In a case that actors and character are both death, J.J Abrams with the help of apparatus and new technology at least brings back the voice of deceased characters. This can be seen in the case of
Rey’s journey deep down to cellars (like deep down to unconscious) below Maz Kanata’s Castle and following dream sequence speaking to Rey in a form of mixed Alec Guinness’ and Ewan McGregor’s voices of Obi-Wan Kenobi. Apparently this would not work for newcomers and people unfamiliar with original SW trilogy that barely know who Alex Guinness was and the fact that he played Obi-Wan Kenobi in *A New Hope*.

Another great example is a scene with holographic chess aboard the Millennium Falcon and Finn’s surprise when he accidentally switches them on. Holographic chess will have very different impact on seasoned fans as oppose to newcomers. On the other hand, JJ Abrams uses older characters such as Han Solo as a person passing on general knowledge of SW universe, who helps to initiate both young characters such as Rey or Finn and young spectators as well. Perhaps, the most powerful scene is Han Solo’s explanation to Rey and Finn that all that they heard about the Force, the Jedi, and Luke Skywalker are not just myths, but it is true, all of it. I believe that all these scenes should serve to fans of the original trilogy to awaken the feeling of “being at home” or “I’ve already been there, and I’ve already done that.” It has the same effect like remembering pleasant moments from our childhood when we are visiting these places physically or while we are checking old photos. On the other hand, these experiences also serve as a mirror of the real world. Force Awakens captures visible disillusionment in our society both in Europe and in the USA as oppose to the enthusiasm of 1970s in the USA and 1990s in Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. “A New Hope” no longer works for both older and younger generations, and it has been rather replaced by many problems originated from unresolved conflicts during Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development. Young people more or less suffer from crises of identity/role confusion, growing up in dysfunctional families, attachments to false idols (myths of celebrities) or inner struggle between individuality and conformity. Same unresolved conflicts during childhood and adolescence affect Rey, Finn or Kylo Ren/Ben Solo in the movie and mistakes from middle and late adulthood of Han Solo, Luke Skywalker or Leia Organa are same as problems haunting real people of their age. Finn would most likely fit into the role of the boy from the orphanage, who desperately wants to escape the institution - the symbol of conformity and become autonomous being searching for new friends and possibilities. The New Order represents not only the mirror image of Nazi movement between WW I and WW II, but its group psychology with motifs of role suction and role engulfment reminds us of modern world corporations and poor treatment of employees. Finn’s escape with Resistance’s pilot ace Poe Dameron is very symbolic - Tie Fighter is tied to the spaceship in a hangar and Finn is unable to fly away
with Poe, but their manage to cut the rope, symbolically cutting the umbilical cord and escape through the yoni-shaped hole. On the other hand, Rey was abandoned by her family on wasteland-like planet Jakku, and she had been clearly unable to resolve this problem that might contribute to the development of melancholia and Rey’s refusal of accepting the role of a mate aboard Millenium Falcon with Han Solo. However, her melancholia is successfully resolved, though Han Solo’s tragic death appears to be the much-needed real loss of loved father-substitute. Following replacement with other mother/father-like characters like Maz Kanata, Leia or Luke Skywalker might help her to deal with her grief and the fact that real parents will never come back. Poe Dameron who stands for typical masculine character and the patriarchal role of the elite fighter. The elite pilot in the Resistance who is throughout the movie praised and admired for his individual, exceptional and elite qualities, might easily pass for a modern concept of a “feminine man” based on his body language, face expressions, and affections towards Finn during their reunion.

The wayward son of Han Solo and Leia Organa is probably the most interesting character in the whole movie. He apparently suffers from many diagnoses such as splitting of his personality, projective identification/idealising transference in a case of his grandfather Darth Vader (de facto assuming the role of Darth Vader based on Ren’s imaginations about Vader) and general inability to recognise the Self and the Other. Erikson's role confusion during the development and Freudian theory of unsuccessfully resolved Oedipal Complex form the solid ground to a horrific formulation of Ren’s state of mind. Freudian partial identification might be seen in Ren’s feelings that long-deceased Darth Vader had something in common with him. Vader played the role of desired ideal father - a role that was in Ren’s eyes falsely occupied by Han Solo and later by his mentor Luke Skywalker. In other words, Ren is more fascinated and attached to his idea of idealised Darth Vader and his very intimate perception of their relationship. This fantastic relationship works via Ren’s comfort object - Vader’s partly incinerated helmet which “helps” Ren to overcome anxiety, fear, and sadness. Vader’s Helmet is somehow able to communicate in Ren’s imaginations and Ren speaks to the helmet as well and usually seeks symbolic approval of his vile actions like Hamlet speaking to Jovrick’s skull. Above mentioned hypothesis might suggest that Vader’s helmet also serves to the lonely Ren as an imaginary companion and sign of delusions can be found as well. This exaggerated dependency on Vader’s phantasy is bolstered by Ren’s counter-dependency in a case of his father Han Solo and his mentor Luke Skywalker. We can hardly deny genes, and the issue of nature/nurture plays the significant role in this case.
In the real world, we can hardly deny that there is more or less something from our parents or grandparents “deep inside us” and we might not be able to avoid same mistakes like they did and therefore we can only repeat their failures. Apparently Kylo Ren sees both men responsible for his misery, failure and his inability to resist the Dark side. I believe that somewhere deep inside, Ren hates himself, and he wants to destroy himself, but his defence mechanism projected this hatred towards Han Solo and Luke Skywalker. Ren's periods of narcissistic rage and sadism during torture scenes with Poe Dameron and Rey shows us how strongly he is driven by his emotions. Ren’s vulnerable psyche became easily manipulated by the evil “puppeteer” The Supreme Leader Snoke, who cleverly used Ren’s failed attachments and imposed the image of his grandiosity and deference onto Ren to turn him against his family. It was not a big surprise that Han Solo’s desperate attempt to redeem his son failed and ended with Ren’s execution of Oedipal murder and Solo’s fall into the abyss, very much like Kronos was thrown to the abyss of Tartarus by his son Zeus. However Ren wants to hide his emotions under his mask, and his mask, therefore, works both as a real and the symbolic mask which helps him to embody his Persona in Jungian terms - the role of Darth Vader. At the same time, Kylo Ren is very well aware of mistakes of his predecessors – he wears the armour to protect his body due to his fear of symbolic castration, but there is the steep price that must be paid for this - Ren’s stamina and movement are significantly compromised. Nevertheless, it turns out to be ineffective during the final lightsaber duel with Rey on a snowy surface of the Starkiller Base, where Ren is symbolically castrated - heavily wounded and defeated by Rey partly due to his lightsaber inability to withstand the contact with the frozen soil few moments after he proposed Rey to assume the role of her teacher instead of killing her. Ren’s libido is apparently working there while the “teacher” might also be explained regarding a sexual initiator towards his “Phallic Girl” and Rey’s ability to cool down Ren’s dysfunctional representation of a phallus. (his non-proper construction of the lightsaber).

Kylo Ren is not the one-dimensional character at all, but he seems to be rather a very complex villain. Despite his numerous problems, he is “just” the young man eager to “belong somewhere” – which might lead to his downfall, becoming the leader of Knights of Ren and the apprentice of Snoke. At least some problems of wayward children might be caused by dysfunctional marriages - such as the case of Han Solo and Leia, but also very realistic mirror image of rising number of this phenomena in the real world. Perhaps, it is the time to realise that our beloved heroes/family members/friends are not perfect at all. The stars of the origi-
nal trilogy lost their powerful god-like image in the same manner like our parents lost theirs, when we realised that they are only human beings.

Another interesting phenomenon is undoubtedly ageing and how it is projected both within the movie, but also within the connection to the real world. It is even more interesting because older characters are played by the same actors that played roles of Luke, Leia, Han Solo, Chewbacca, R2-D2, and C3-PO. Obviously, the issue of ageing is avoided in case of robots, and this makes sense, but it is quite suspicious that even Chewbacca did not truly get any older both mentally and physically. Despite the fact that he is now 30 years older, he apparently did not undergo any further Erikson's developmental stages. I do not think that it can be justified with the fact that he is the non-human character since gorillas, for instance, are ageing as well. On the other hand the best example to demonstrate the ageing as a cultural myth would be the issue of Leia Organa-Solo played by Carrie Fisher. Many fans remember her as tomboyish princess Leia, but at the same time her character was sexualised in many ways in the original trilogy from the 1970s. There is no doubt that both Leia and Carrie Fisher reached a certain level of sex symbol status at least among the fans and subculture of geeks. Lea played by young Carrie Fisher became the object of various sexual phantasies, and she would certainly fit into the role of Phallic Girl. Many spectators had to face the severe problem while they were watching the latest movie – The object of their desires was transformed into the object representing the archetype of the Great Mother. The fantasy is suddenly disrupted and after the latest SW movie, the scene of Leia in chainmail bikini from The Return of the Jedi would never be the same experience. Some older fans even attacked Carrie Fisher via social media with statements such as – “you didn't age well.” The object of desire was stolen from them, but at the same time, it clearly illustrates how our society is obsessed with the cult/myth of youth. In 2016, the issue of the male gaze in films is still a big problem, and male spectators evidently demand that female characters should primarily serve as objects of pleasure.

One cannot expect to see an explicit portrayal of a sexual relationship in SW movies and The Force Awakens is no exception to this tradition. However, the film provides both male and female spectators with lots of symbolism. Phallic objects are represented by the shape of lightsabers, spaceships, Rey’s pilgrim-like walking cane and sand speeder - all of them traditionally objects connected with males and masculinity. Apparently, yoni symbols are represented much less and if so, they are usually connected with evil “vagina dentata” concept such as Rathar’s attack aboard Han Solo’s spaceship, devouring male members of gangs and
finally clinging- sucking a phallic-shaped cockpit of Millennium Falcon. Another case of Yoni symbolism can be seen in a scene, where Millennium Falcon with Rey and Finn co-operating aboard fly through a yoni-shaped engine of wrecked star destroyer to escape enemy Tie-Fighters - this scene can be explained as a variation of classic Freudian’s locomotive “penetrating” railway tunnel. The only one exception might be the case of the cute droid BB-8 and the shape of its oval/circular parts and time spent on the screen with female lead character Rey. JJ Abrams as a director and de facto architect of these scenes might be more or less responsible for this psychosexual symbolism. His infamous desire to ask actress Daisy Ridley (Rey) to repeat the torture scene with Kylo Ren during auditions and later on the set leaves us with the memory of legendary Alfred Hitchcock and his relationships with actresses. Nevertheless, Abrams swap male and female roles in many classic functions and mythological motifs and particularly dialogs between female characters revolving around different topics than men show a certain progress towards female spectators. The same could be said about the final duel between Kylo Ren and Rey, which is experienced in both points of views. Furthermore, Rey’s role is very modern-feminine, independent and her initial refusal to hold Finn hand while escaping (stereotype) or her ability to resist Kylo Ren’s torture form altogether a positive image for young women. Rey’s ability to recover the lightsaber from the snow instead of Kylo Ren demonstrates that Excalibur-like scene from Arthurian legend is retold with a rather feminist underpinning. On the other hand, it also highlights the shortage of positive male role models. There is no character like young Luke Skywalker or Han Solo and Finn with Poe are rather useful, but not heroic in the classical sense. At the same time, one can hardly admire The New Order and characters like Hux, Snoke or Kylo Ren. Fortunately, the real world does not have to face the rise of another Nazi-like threat presented in SW as the New Order.

The New Order and their violent politics embracing Thanatos (death-drive) and stirring up the conflict between the Good VS the Evil again. Theory of Thanatos developed by Freud in his works and his explanation that Thanatos will eventually become dominant over Eros seems to be a core point in a repetition (very similar to Plato’s circle of deviations in term of politics). As we can see, Lucas and his “Return of the Democracy” will not last forever… We can clearly see the circle of destruction in a time – Mandalorian Wars, Sith VS Old Republic, Republic VS Separatist (Clone Wars), Empire VS Rebels, The New Order VS Rebels… At the same time, the New Order appears to be something different – they are in fact a fascist organisation led by General Hux (the leader character is very similar to extremist rulers –
Hitler, Mussolini, Chavez or Kim Chong-Il for example). The interesting fact is that Hux is not the merely useless officer like those in the original trilogy being there only for the purpose of being choked by Darth Vader. Hux is, in fact, the rival of Kylo Ren; Hux represents the progress, the modern, the pragmatic, the “industrial revolution” and Kylo Ren rather represents the tradition, the old, the religion, the emotionally driven character. Both villains serve as competing cousins or brothers over the legacy presented by the Supreme Leader Snoke - the embodiment of the pure and primal evil. Perhaps the division between the Good and the Evil is also seen in a typical portrayal of both realms. The movie emphasises the role environmentalism and destruction of the environment in the real world. The New Order relies on technology or exploitation of nature and the Force (Force torpedoes, Ren’s unstable crystals in his lightsaber). The Starkiller Base is not an updated version of infamous Death Star from *A New Hope*, but this deadly super weapon represents something far worse. Death Star was a man-made space station, whereas the Starkiller Base is established as an integrated part of the living planet to drain the power of a nearby Sun and use the heart of the planet to transform this energy into a beam capable of mass destruction. The life-giving planet is exploited, “raped” and its environment is steadily destroyed by the super weapon negative side-effects. Destruction of Hosnian System strikes us with the very intense apocalyptic image seen both from the distance in Ren’s POV, Han Solo’s POV and from the viewpoint of poor inhabitants of destroyed planets a few seconds before the apocalypse. On the other hand, planets like D’Qar, Takadonia or “Skellig Michael” are associated with good characters like Leia, Maz Kanata or Luke Skywalker are portrayed very much like green areas with azure lakes, lush forests and plenty of water as opposed to both the Starkiller Base or a desert planet Jakku. Rey’s home on Jakku reminds us about a “junkyard”, shortage of food and possible green-vegan like solution as a response to the harsh life similar to real-life Darfur.

The entire exaggerated division between damaged and preserved environments reminds us that we should also try to repair our wounded relationship with the nature, since the Force in the SW universe represents the nature and being strong with the Force is very important because the Force can be found everywhere - it surrounds us, it is in the stone there or the tree here… so much like environment in our real world. To end this analysis with a style worth the newest SW movie paraphrasing one particular line which has already gained a legendary status: “If the reader gets any other interesting ideas about *The Force Awakens* - Tell that to Kanji-Club!”