

Passing the Mako Mori Test:
Female Agency in Men's Science Fiction and Fantasy Cinema

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When *Pacific Rim* (2013) premiered, critics praised its approach to multiculturalism in a futuristic setting, *The Daily Beast's* Marlow Stern lauding it as a “refreshing” departure from the Eurocentric norm of most big-budget franchises. Even though the primary protagonist is white, he resides in a pluralistic culture where ethnic and racial groups maintain their identities unfettered by the myth of a post-racial future that often becomes a pseudonym for a one culture’s dominance. But amidst this utopian future, very few women fill important positions in the military program charged with global defense against skyscraper-sized aliens. *Vulture's* Kyle Buchanan criticized the film for this, noting that of the fifty-six credited actors, only three women receive speaking parts.

While *Pacific Rim* succeeds in one respect, it flounders in another, also failing the Bechdel test, developed from a feminist comic strip creator, which asks for bare minimum female representation built into three simple criteria: “One, [the film] has to have at least two women in it, who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man” (Bechdel 22). However, in a post on Tumblr, user spider-xan chastised “white women” for boycotting the film because it failed the Bechdel test. As an Asian woman, she had a different perspective on a key character in the film, Mako Mori:

someone like Mako – a well-written Japanese woman who is informed by her culture without being solely defined by it, without being a racial stereotype, and gets to carry the film and have character development – almost NEVER comes along in mainstream Western media. And honestly – someone like her will probably not appear again for a very long time.

In response, fellow Tumblr user chaila proposed another tool to compliment the Bechdel test, the Mako Mori test, which requires a film include “a) at least one female character; b) who gets her own narrative arc; c) that is not about supporting a man’s story” (Romano). The test has since been added to *Geek Feminism's* digital archive and one user on social media site Letterboxd continues to compile a list of films that pass the test, finding just over 470 pass, dating back to 1928’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Brittany). And since *Pacific Rim* premiered in July 2013, more than 150 films have passed.¹

While the Mako Mori test applies to female-lead films, the goal here is to examine instances where heroes are surrounded by heroines in science fiction and fantasy films (SFF), mimicking the premise of *Pacific Rim*, a film with a male lead *and* a fully realized female character. This analysis tests Jeffrey A. Brown’s claim that a heroine’s presence on “a predominantly male team or partnered with a male” can result in “a possibility for strong female characters,” subsequently bringing “the topic of gender roles and sexuality to the forefront” (*Beyond Bombshells* 55). In particular, SFF cinema can rupture gender expectations in ways unavailable to other genres; SFF can “imagine empowering social and political roles for marginalized people” (Allen 20). At its greatest heights, SFF cinema provides women a unique platform as stories “boldly go where no one has gone before,” borrowing *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* gender-inclusive tagline.

Of the less than two hundred films since *Pacific Rim* premiered, if the Letterboxd list is partially accurate, only fifteen SFF films with male leads – normally named after male titular characters – pass, or come close to passing:

¹ The user-made list on Letterboxd is not all-inclusive, and some films analyzed here do not appear on the list. Still, it remains important to note the cultural impact of the Mako Mori test.

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| 1. <i>The Wolverine</i> (July, 2013) | 8. <i>Doctor Strange</i> (November, 2016) |
| 2. <i>Ex Machina</i> (April, 2014) | 9. <i>Logan</i> (March, 2017) |
| 3. <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> (May, 2015) | 10. <i>Spider-Man: Homecoming</i> (July, 2017) |
| 4. <i>The Martian</i> (September, 2015) | 11. <i>Thor: Ragnarok</i> (November, 2017) |
| 5. <i>Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice</i>
(March, 2016) | 12. <i>Black Panther</i> (February, 2018) |
| 6. <i>The Huntsman: Winter's War</i> (April, 2016) | 13. <i>Pacific Rim: Uprising</i> (March, 2018) |
| 7. <i>Captain America: Civil War</i> (May, 2016) | 14. <i>Deadpool 2</i> (May, 2018) |
| | 15. <i>Solo: A Star Wars Story</i> (May, 2018) |

In these films, three depictions of female characters occur to varying degrees. First, female characters move beyond romantic interests, from overt subversion (*Ex Machina*, *Fury Road*) to more positive displays of romantic entanglement (*Black Panther*). Second, even as supporting characters, or sidekicks, in men's stories, they are still afforded more agency on screen, especially in superhero films (*Batman v Superman*, *Ragnarok*). And when this occurs, fandom tends to favor these performances over the male leads. Third, female characters move from margin to center as powerful characters, no longer damsels in distress or objects of desire (*Doctor Strange*, *Winter's War*). This is not an exhaustive list but an overview of popular feature films often with budgets north of \$100 million, in which producers are less likely to take risks (and women in prominent positions carry that label, especially in foreign markets resistant to egalitarian messages on screen), making the presence of Mako Mori characters noteworthy, even if they are not entirely successful.

Passing the Test

Pacific Rim clearly focuses on a white male protagonist, Raleigh Becket, but the partner most suited for him to “drift,” the pseudo-science explanation for “sharing the neural load” required to operate a skyscraper-high jaeger machine, is Mako Mori, played by Rinko Kikuchi. The two remain close, but their relationship is never romantic. Further, when they drift for the first time, an overwhelming experience for rookie Mako, she loses focus and *drifts* into a traumatic memory. As she relives the moment she lost her family, Raleigh cannot help. He tries to snap her out of the memory, entering it to do so, but her trauma is too great. Only deactivating the jaeger shakes her free. Mako does not improve with aid from a male character; she confronts her trauma alone. Finally, when she must drift for combat, she defeats a skyscraper-high kaiju following her declaration in Japanese, “For my family!” Surrounded by men, her thoughts are not of them but loved ones she seeks to avenge.

The Mako Mori test refers to any female character who moves her own story forward unrestrained by, or in this case alongside, male narratives. Like the Bechdel test, this is not meant to be the only measure of a film's use of female representation, but it does fill in gaps. For example, *Gravity* (2013) fails the Bechdel test because the film's female astronaut stranded in space never speaks to another woman. As a high-profile film featuring a female lead, *Gravity* is worth consideration beyond the confines of one barometer, and the Mako Mori test fills in such a gap. That said, films primarily about men create a challenge. What qualifies as “not about supporting a man's story,” as the test requires?

While more than fifteen SFF films might pass the Mako Mori test, they do so in minimal ways, and including them here both muddies this analysis and confuses what the test seeks to accomplish: highlighting women's noteworthy character arcs, something that does not occur in these films. So Elle in *Godzilla* (2014) earns points for staying in San Francisco to provide

medical aid when Godzilla and two other monsters approach, but, subverting this independence, her choice occurs to keep her nearby, making the reunion with her husband, the film's primary hero, more satisfactory. Similarly, Mason Weaver in *Kong: Skull Island* (2017) goes through part of an arc, transitioning from jaded war photographer to Kong sympathizer, but all these realizations occur alongside a male character and then in service of the Kong himself as a damsel to be saved. Finally, *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) includes a very notable female character in elite soldier Rita, but since the film revolves around a day resetting with each death of William Cage, only he can receive a complete story arc by narrative design.

In a more detailed example, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) passes the Bechdel test, is considered as a problematic Mako Mori recruit. The film includes several female characters, but their arcs only minimally branch into Mako Mori territory. As *The Mary Sue* claims, the film mostly "fails" its female characters (Baugher). This occurs by marking them more as romantic interests (Gamora, Scarlet Witch), placing them in the background (Mantis, Black Widow), displaying their suffering more than others (Nebula), or in one case, through the act of "fridging," defined in fannish parlance as killing a female character to move a male character's story forward (Griffin 126). Gamora comes closest to fulfilling the Mako Mori criteria, but when she is fridged, her arc's conclusion serves as a defining moment for Thanos, her killer, and vengeful motivation for her lover, Star Lord. In minimal ways, however, *Infinity War* does pass. Nebula, a "daughter" of Thanos, exerts independence from her aggressor's patriarchal upbringing (beginning in 2014's *Guardians of the Galaxy*) by gradually planning his demise. Her plan fails, but she remains one of the only characters in the entire film to traverse a galactic landscape on her own, joining the fight against Thanos in the final act of her own volition. Though her revenge is directed towards a male character, this motivation aligns with Mako's own desire to defeat the monsters who killed her family. Further, Wakandan scientist Shuri, sister of the Black Panther, is the only tech genius with a clear mission who performs her task without direct help from men. On the battlefield, Scarlet Witch, prompted to join the fight despite boyfriend Vision's vulnerable state in Shuri's care, teams up with Black Widow and Okoye to take on villain Proxima Midnight, three women fighting a fourth. This moment is brief, however, in a 149-minute film, serving as one of the few breaks from men's stories as the central male characters deal with their inner and interpersonal conflicts while battling the male supervillain. The result is a film with many powerful women, but few notable Mako Mori candidates.

Subverted Desire

Popular cinema often features an active male protagonist and passive female characters, a common dilemma Laura Mulvey, the predominant writer on the sexist gaze, claims characterizes most, if not all, Hollywood films (20). The female romantic interest normally falls prey to this depiction as a direct object of desire in *Homecoming*, *Doctor Strange*, *Civil War*, *Batman v Superman*, and *Deadpool 2*, the latter even fridges that love interest throughout most of the film. Across these films, if a female character functions as a romantic interest, her story likely is intertwined with the male protagonist, meaning her chances of passing the Mako Mori test greatly dwindle. Still, passing is possible. Amidst all the films analyzed here, three feature agentive women whom are love interests: *Hunstman*, *Black Panther*, and *Solo*, while two others confront male-female relations in a different way.

Fury Road and *Ex Machina* confront love's perverse forms. In *Fury Road*, the Five Wives seek to escape their patriarchal arrangement with Immortan Joe, who sends all his War Boys after them. The visual of hundreds of men chasing after the Five Wives in muscle cars addresses patriarchy head on, while *Ex Machina* transforms men into "victims" thanks to a reliance on "heterosexual stereotyping" (Mackinnon 606). Here, two men often discuss romance and gender dynamics directly, one falling in love with robot Ava, programmed to mimic a heterosexual woman. By the film's end, Caleb, the primary protagonist, plans to liberate Ava and run away with her, but he is a patsy, used and discarded. Ava desires to be free of the glass cage she inhabits, but her identity is not rooted in male intimacy promised upon her freedom; she resides beyond "the male circuit of power/knowledge" (Jelača 396). The male characters read gender into her character, one seeing her as a damsel in distress and the other as a literal object. Ultimately, however, Ava is a "femme fatale" who violently resists "masculinity's imagined superiority" (615). Ava and the women of *Fury Road* confront (toxic) masculinity, ultimately killing or banishing those who both oppress and/or underestimate them. But this is not the only depiction of heterosexual coupling in Mako Mori films; both *Black Panther* and *Solo* present very different perspectives.

As Délice Williams notes, *Black Panther*, as a film that imagines an African utopia untouched by colonialism, is not about the Black experience as understood through the African diaspora: characters like Nakia "want to help suffering people, but not necessarily because they believe that those people are like them" (27). The citizens of the fictional nation of Wakanda remain in isolation, attempting to preserve their way of life, hiding their progress from outsiders. T'Challa/Black Panther might care about the surrounding world, but he remains more involved in state and family affairs as the newly minted king. In contrast, his ex, Nakia, aware of her privileged position, is first introduced passing as a victim of a mass kidnapping in a neighboring region. She is a heroic figure independent of her relationship with T'Challa, actually ending their courtship to continue her work. She still cares for him but resists becoming a queen, continually identifying more as a "spy," trying to open Wakanda's borders. While her story is integrated into T'Challa's, she does not become subservient. Only when he changes, accepts Wakanda's responsibility to the world, as Nakia champions, working beside her instead of insisting on her retirement, does she decide to stay by his side.

Okoye serves as another example of a love interest without subservience baggage. To start, fan criticism occurred surrounding the alleged removal of an implicate lesbian moment between Okoye and another member of the all-female warrior guard the Dora Milaje (Robinson). Instead, Okoye is married to a man, W'Kabi, though her story does not merely complement his. She functions as a general, navigating loyalties to her country. As T'Challa's bodyguard, her story is partially bound to his, but she remains a powerful character, making her own choices and taking pride in her heritage, a point that taps into the Tumblr user's original intent for the Mako Mori test when she praises a character for being "informed by her culture but without being solely defined by it." This is obvious when Okoye fights in a South Korean nightclub, donning a wig as a disguise which she excitedly removes during combat, resisting "the idea of trying to fit into the outside world's normative, Eurocentric beauty ideals" (Allen 21). While she is informed by her own cultural identity, in a later scene, she also proves she is not "solely" controlled by it when she finally turns on villain Killmonger, who has won her sworn loyalty by taking the

throne from T'Challa in ritual combat. Her husband leads an attack in support of Killmonger, while Okoye breaks with tradition to fight a leader she believes does not deserve the throne. She even comically disarms her husband when his charging rhinoceros breaks its attack to lick her in greeting. In this moment, their relationship becomes a weapon she can use to win the day as much as her fighting prowess.

The most problematic example of a love interest occurs in *Solo*, which passes the Mako Mori test with a disclaimer. Qi'ra is clearly Han Solo's love interest, but she rejects him to follow her own path in her final scene. Throughout the film, she is the object of Han's gaze, and she seems to reciprocate until the enemy is defeated and she abandons plans to run away with Han. Instead, she contacts the head of the criminal underworld to which she reports, directly communicating with the once Sith Lord, Darth Maul. While this scene can be interpreted as a choice to leave one man for another, the novelization of the film provides more context. In it, "Qi'ra had no idea who was on the end of that call when she made it" (Whitbrook). Her choice is not one man over another but ambition to run a criminal empire over a relationship with Han. Her story may end in tragedy, but in this moment she chooses not to be a damsel swooped away.

Beyond Sidekicks

Contemporary superhero films pepper their plots and subplots with women, finally doing so with less female undressing and damsel scenarios (though they are still common place). In *Ragnarok*, for example, Valkyrie is a fully realized, fully clothed character. Introduced as a once great warrior now drowning her regrets in alcohol, she is unmoved by Thor's many pleas to help him escape captivity on the planet Sakaar and aid in his battle against a foe she once failed to defeat. Only time and the right circumstances change her mind, not any one piece of dialogue exchanged between hero and heroine. Following her decision to finally help Thor, the two discuss her change of heart, Thor commenting on her excessive drinking, which is not her actual problem:

Valkyrie: I've spent years in a haze trying to forget my past. Sakaar seemed like the best place to drink, and to forget, and to die, one day.

Thor: Well, I was thinking that you drink too much, and it was probably gonna kill you.

Valkyrie: I don't plan to stop drinking. But I don't wanna forget. I can't turn away anymore. So, if I'm gonna die, well, it might as well be driving my sword through the heart of that murderous hag.

The Mary Sue's Kaila Hale-Stern notes the film fails the Bechdel test, but she cannot entirely condemn the film, in part, because of Valkyrie, described as "a fully fleshed-out, fully nuanced woman warrior, unsympathetic when you meet her, totally uncompromising, brash and flawed and resilient." She even claims the film passes "the Kaila test," but her praise for both Valkyrie and the film's female villain, Hela, align well with the Mako Mori test.

While Valkyrie moves the story forward on her own, her prominent role serves a greater purpose in the Marvel Cinematic Universe; she will be back in some capacity, big or small. A cinematic universe obliges individual films to expand their scope, construct stories that both survive independently and keep an eye on the next entry. Wonder Woman's presence in *Batman v Superman* meets this criteria much like Black Widow's introduction in *Iron Man 2* (2010). In the film, though her presence distracts from the central conflict between Batman and Superman and adds more to a bloated story, critics considered her the film's standout. Starting in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, audiences often meet new characters in other superheroes' films. To consider Wonder Women – from her introduction at Lex Luthor's mansion in search of hidden

documents to her decision to stay and fight – a Mako Mori victory – is only part of the full story as the photo she seeks teases the plot of *Wonder Woman* and her team-up prepares for her character arc in *Justice League* (2017). Of course, the idea that she needed an introduction prior to her film also reveals concern about a cold introduction in *Wonder Woman* (2017), unnecessary anxieties considering the film’s popularity as well as worldwide box office gross of \$821,847,012, more than any other superhero origin film at the time.

The role of women evolves across two Wolverine films, *The Wolverine* and *Logan*. In *The Wolverine*, Wolverine/Logan engages in a relationship with one woman, Mariko, while he copes with the ghost of a woman he both loved and had to kill in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), Jean Grey. However, his relationship with Yukio (Rila Fukushima), a sword-wielding mutant with the ability to see people’s deaths, is different. While she enters his life out of obligation to a male employer, she remains in it once the events of the film conclude, a sign of Logan’s evolution “from a narcissistic masculinity to a more ‘dialogic masculinity’” (Miczo 143). While this alone does not make Yukio a fully realized character (that occurs through her independent investigation throughout the film), it does set the stage for Wolvey’s final journey in *Logan* when he encounters Laura, a mutant clone created from his DNA.

For *Vulture*’s Emily Yoshida, Laura is primarily defined by “the silent, deadly little girl” trope, including characters like *Firefly*’s River Tam, *Stranger Things*’ Eleven, and Hit-Girl from *Kick-Ass* (2010), though she serves a foul-mouthed revision of this type. Yoshida goes so far as to say, “Laura and her ilk aren’t characters,” despite praise from others that Laura has been described as “kick-ass” and “a little badass.” While debate continues regarding the function of this convention, particularly when male writers employ it, Laura, or X-23, enjoys her own arc throughout the film. Though she is introduced as a child Logan must protect, she is, in fact, “bad ass,” with dual claws similar to her (clone) father’s. At one point, she leaves Logan, seeking safety with a group of young mutants on the run from seedy mercenaries. And when Logan dies, the final moments of the film belong to her as she embarks on a new life, not merely bidding farewell to her a father figure but reflecting on the X-Men’s legacy, in a scene when she tilts a cross on his buried body sideways to resemble an X instead. As *The Washington Post*’s Alyssa Rosenberg says:

though Logan is able to tell Laura “Don’t be what they made you” before his own death, it’s not remotely clear that his affection for her and the brief protection he provided her will be enough to make up for the circumstances of her birth and upbringing, or the lingering psychological effects of violence she inflicted on others as she fought for her freedom.

As a sidekick, Laura does help Logan learn a final lesson about the importance of family, but the film ends like *Ex Machina* with her story left unresolved, and with rumors of her own spinoff perhaps to come (Couch). This is a clear passing of the torch from aging male to assertive female, mirroring a similar transition in the comics.

Other superhero films provide minor examples of female character arcs that barely break Mako Mori territory. Black Widow decides for herself whether to support Iron Man and later Captain American in the superhero standoff in *Civil War*. While the both sides of the argument – superheroes regulated by governments versus superheroes dictating their own actions – are embodied in male characters, she turns the tide of their major battle by switching sides and eventually goes into hiding when she must deal with the consequences of her choice. In *Deadpool 2*, which fridges an important female character from the first film, Domino (a mostly

white superheroine with black spots in the comics but here played by Black actress Zazie Beetz), teams up with the titular character because her mutant power, luck, guides her to the “merc with a mouth,” as he is called. She later encounters the facility where she was raised and liberates the children in it, leaving the other male characters involved in a separate fight. Further, *Homecoming*’s most notable female character, Michelle (Zendaya), rarely interacts with Spider-Man/Peter Parker, spending most of the film on her own. She eventually opens up to classmates, revealing her nickname M.J. – the same nickname of Spidey’s love interest Mary Jane in the comics – but no clear romantic attraction is established. These examples remain minor victories that barely pass the test, but they are often praised for providing unique and refreshing elements to otherwise entirely masculine narratives.

The Power

Mako Mori films approach power in unique ways. Even when Thor uncovers the god of thunder within, fighting without his beloved hammer, he still cannot defeat his much more powerful sister Hela; only a joint attack with Valkyrie can stall Hela long enough until brother Loki summons an ancient foe to finally defeat her. Elsewhere in *Solo*, the titular character’s combat abilities pale compared to Qi’ra’s, as she saves him from the highly trained crime lord, Dryden Vos. In many cases, power is shared, easily seen in *The Huntsman* as titular huntsmen Eric and Sara fight together, equal in ability and egalitarian in their relationship. In more than half these films, power is no longer understood as masculine but something equally distributed or, in some instances, female dominant.

When casting was announced for *Doctor Strange*, media outlets chastised Marvel Studio’s omission of a central Asian character, a move familiar to films like *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), “criticized for centering EuroAmerican agency through whitewashing, yellowface, and plots that valorize the white savior complex” (Ho 591). In *Doctor Strange*, the Ancient One, a centuries-old Tibetan man in the comics, would be played by Tilda Swinton, a white woman, a move that “[suggests] a strategic whitewashing of Hollywood films, one that avoids casting Chinese people as unlikable villains or drawing attention to hot-button political issues like Tibet” all in favor of the global box office (Kokas 35). For the film’s director, Scott Derrickson, this was an attempt to avoid stereotyping. “We weren’t going to have the Ancient One as the Fu Manchu magical Asian on the hill being the mentor to the white hero,” Derrickson told *The Daily Beast*, later adding that an Asian female character would result in “a straight-up Dragon Lady” (Yamato).

While *Beast* reporter Jen Yamato concludes such attempts to remain “one kind of woke” result in something “most unfortunately unwoke,” she does praise Swinton’s interpretation of the character, who “has far more to do, and more on her mind, than just help Strange realize his super-powered potential—although yes, she also does that. She battles, she leads, she ponders the mystery of life and beyond with a complexity that belies the sparse details of her background.” *Doctor Strange* functions in a unique way alongside the Mako Mori test. As Yamato points out, the Ancient One is the most powerful sorcerer on Earth, she teaches a man the mystic arts, and her story does not merely accent protagonist Stephen Strange’s. Even when she dies, an inciting incident borrowed from the comics, her final moments revolve around her current circumstance, not his. “Death is what gives life meaning, to know your days are numbered, your time is short,” she says. “You’d think after all this time, I’d be ready. But look at me, stretching one moment out

into a thousand just so that I can watch the snow.”

Fury Road creates equal power between Max and Furiosa, who is actually the “heroic agent” of the film (Yates 360). Their first encounter is a fair fight, and when they work together, they share the burden of protecting the Five Wives equally in their firearms proficiency (though Furiosa is a better shot with a sniper rifle). Certain feminist critics argued Furiosa’s plan to reach the Green Place, what she believes is the last fertile refuge still run by women, invokes “the long-standing association between women and nature” which trends to “depict women as docile, unintellectual and ruled by their physicality” (Yates 354). Still, *Fury Road*’s “Edenic” hero is not male but female; Furiosa is the one who puts all the film’s events into motion and personally defeats Immortan Joe, an act that allows her to become the new leader of Joe’s kingdom (360). Further, as the women in the film “ascend to agency,” Max is not “reduced,” but he “still represents hegemonic white masculinity,” hence the film concludes with his decision to leave, allowing Furiosa to lead divorced from patriarchy (Yates 360-361).

The assumed thesis of this analysis is that most Mako Mori films present more positive depictions of women on screen. If that is generally the case, *Winter’s War* is the exception. For a film with three high-profile and powerful women – one a skilled warrior and two endowed with supernatural abilities – their stories remain troublesome. To start, *Winter’s War* has been declared a victory for women’s pay in Hollywood following the 2014 Sony hack. *Winter’s War* star Chris Hemsworth was originally paid substantially more than Charlize Theron, even though both reprised roles in the sequel to *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012). Because of the hack’s forced transparency, Theron negotiated “a deal worth more than \$10 million, the same as Hemsworth” (Smith).

However, her star-power does not transfer as effectively into the film itself. As *Bustle* notes, what should be “a game-changer for feminism in fairytales” is “a frustrating step back for women on-screen” (Funk). To start, Queen Fraya hardens her heart following the death of her baby girl at the hands of her lover and becomes a rigid ruler who requires her huntsmen to remain chaste. Along with Fraya, *Bustle*’s Allie Funk says, the other female characters suffer a similar problem. “Although the women *appear* to act of their own will and volition,” she writes, “their decisions are actually reactions to situations involving relationships with male characters, all of whom are in positions of power.” Within the context of the film, the women technically “act of their own will and volition,” passing both the Bechdel and Mako Mori tests, which do “not necessarily say anything about gender depiction” (Maureira and Rombout 546).

Other Mako Mori films include similar baggage. For example, *Fury Road* provides a violent resistance to patriarchy, but it does feature predominately white women, and the three non-white actors “are light-skinned,” which “masks the way that capitalist patriarchy has disproportionately exploited women of colour’s sexuality and reproduction” (Yates 368). Such criticisms remain important, but, as the Mako Mori test rhetorically stresses, complete dismissal ignores the glimmers of hope possibly at work in an imperfect film industry. Therefore, even though *Black Panther* revises a lesbian character’s backstory, it still succeeds in other ways: a majority Black cast, including strong and agentive female characters, in a film directed by a Black man entrusted with a budget of more than \$200 million. *The Martian*’s portrayal of a female Navy commander leading a Mars mission celebrates a lack of STEM representation. And even though young mutant Laura begins *Logan* as a silent, violent killer, she is also a strong

Latinx character, who even defeats the Wolverine clone, X-24, that Logan could not.

R.I.P. Mako

Strengthening Mako Mori's place in the *Pacific Rim* universe, Cait Coker says Mako's presence in "a few panels" of 2013's *Pacific Rim: Tales from Year Zero* prequel comic establishes her presence within the broader *Pacific Rim* canon as something that "cannot be erased" (214). That might be true, but she can die. Almost five years after *Pacific Rim*'s premiere, *Uprising* brought the franchise back to the big screen, with more supporting female characters, who talk to each other about topics unrelated to men; two women are even attached as screenwriters. While the film passes the Mako Mori test, to a degree, it fails Mako Mori's character, killing her off in the first act to advance a male character's story. While a new slate of younger characters narratively move freely, Kikuchi's character, played by an actor in her mid-thirties, lost her relevancy when Charlie Hunnam, the actor who played Raleigh Becket, decided not to reprise his role in the sequel. Without Hunnam's Raleigh, Mako is not a character worth exploring, according to *Uprising*.

The Mako Mori test is beneficial for analyzing female characters in a changing cinematic landscape, but it also reveals how fragile representation agentive female characters are, especially in films with male leads. Just as *Uprising* fails Mako, the *Furiosa* prequel comic by Vertigo fails the Five Wives, according to *The May Sue*: "this was a chance to show a narrative that discussed rape on women's terms, in women's voices, rather than just splaying their legs all over the page as if a woman truly is the object that her rapist would reduce her to" (Mardoll). Beyond further entries that undo important Mako Mori moments, some films analyzed here barely pass the test (*Homecoming*, *The Martian*, *Civil War*), while others only pass with explanation (*Solo*). This is not the original intent of the test.

Even more troubling, of all fifteen films analyzed, all directors are male and only two non-white, while *Uprising* features the only female writing credits. Still, while the Mako Mori test does not require a female character to be non-white, the origin of the test based on *Pacific Rim*, started as a criticism to viewers far too willing to condemn a film for one reason without noting other positive contributions. Similarly, condemnation of *Deadpool 2*'s fridging could omit the positive inclusion of Domino, a comics character "traditionally portrayed with ice-white skin," which even prompted actor Zazie Beetz to fear "backlash" from fans (Armitage). Non-white characters are often whitewashed, so any inverted examples are important.

The Mako Mori test, like the Bechdel test, is not a perfect formula, but it provides a unique perspective for an evolving film industry that owes much to Laura Mulvey's concerns regarding the male gaze but also faces new challenges as well. Amidst the many positive and troubling examples noted here, one truth remains clear, in large part thanks to the Mako Mori test. The 1990s are riddled with examples of "action [heroines] . . . enacting masculinity rather than providing legitimate examples of female heroism" (Brown, "Gender, Sexuality" 47-48). In contrast, when a more modern character like Valkyrie gets drunk or fights – previously male coded behavior – she does so as a fully realized female, not a masculine substitute. Instead, many of the female characters depicted here, to paraphrase spider-xan, are *informed by gender without being solely defined by it*. Science fiction and fantasy films remain a promising discursive space for emerging female representation, but like the great unknown in the stars, that remains only a partially explored frontier.

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