

**Mako Mori and the Gender Politics of *Pacific Rim* (2013)**

Nathanael Hood

Carefully balancing on the top of an escape pod somewhere in the South China Sea, pilots Raleigh Becket (Charlie Hunnam) and Mako Mori (Rinko Kikuchi) embrace after successfully saving the world from an invasion of giant, extra-dimensional monsters known as “kaiju.” This ending from Guillermo del Toro’s *Pacific Rim* (2013) seems to cohere to traditional narrative tropes within the Western action genre wherein the hero triumphantly kisses his love interest after a great struggle, battle, or fight. And yet, a close inspection of this scene reveals a shocking subversion of this reliable concluding scenario: Becket and Mori do not kiss. They draw close, touch foreheads, and even lean in for a hug as the screen cuts to the credits. But again, they do not consummate their victory with a kiss.

The absence of a kiss wasn’t an oversight on del Toro’s part. In fact, it was a conscious creative choice, recounting in an interview that he had filmed three different versions of the scene including one where they did kiss. Del Toro said: “We did one version where they kiss and it almost felt weird. They’re good friends, they’re pals, good colleagues” (qtd. Faraci). The idea that two (supposedly) heterosexual heroes would not fall in love during the course of a film and instead become good friends seems oddly counter-intuitive. For western audiences, the development of romantic feelings concluding with a kiss between the protagonist and their love interest is quintessential for creating a sense of narrative closure (Doane 196). We see this trope repeated over and over again in the popular American cinema: Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) and Adrian Pennino (Talia Shire) confessing their love after the fight with Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) in *Rocky* (1976), Westley (Cary Elwes) and Buttercup (Robin Wright) confirming their storybook romance after escaping from Prince Humperdinck (Chris Sarandon) in *The Princess Bride* (1987), Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet) re-uniting in the afterlife in *Titanic* (1997). Even in films where the couple is doomed

to break apart in the end the audiences are frequently treated to a physical love scene or at the very least a kiss near the climax: Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) kisses the transformed Judy Barton (Kim Novak) before confronting her true past at the Mission San Juan Bautista in *Vertigo* (1958), Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher) kiss before he is frozen in carbonite in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) and Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn) conceive the future savior of the human race in *The Terminator* (1984).

So why is this lack of a kiss so important? The answer is that it is merely the last in a long line of stereotype and story archetype subversions in *Pacific Rim*. It also directly involves perhaps the most progressive feature of the film: the character of Mako Mori. In both the ways her gender and nationality are presented, del Toro has blessed audiences with one of the most progressive female action protagonists since Ellen Ripley. Through this article I hope to prove this by examining Mako Mori as an action heroine, as a woman of Japanese descent, and as an object that subverts Hollywood norms concerning the cinematic “look” as defined by Laura Mulvey (711-22).

While *Pacific Rim* received only modest returns at the American box office, Mori has become a cult favorite among very vocal fan communities both on- and offline. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the social media site *Tumblr* where fans have created a new standard through which to evaluate the strength of female characters in the film. Known as the Mako Mori Test, it was derived as an alternative to the Bechdel Test, a system created by Allison Bechdel that asks three simple questions: does [a film] have at least two women in it; who [at some point] talk to each other; about something besides a man (Power 39). The Mako Mori test requires that a film has: at least one female character, who gets her own narrative arc that is not about supporting a man’s story (Romano). So how is Mori such a progressive character that she would inspire such critical consideration? To answer this, we must begin by summarizing her character within the diegetic world of *Pacific Rim*.

Mako Mori was born on 1 January 2005. She grew up in Tanegashima, one of the Ōsumi Islands in the South of Japan, and had a happy childhood until her family was killed during a kaiju attack on 15 May 2016. However, her life was saved by the intervention of a Jaeger, a giant two-pilot mecha

specifically designed to combat kaiju, piloted in part by Stacker Pentecost (Idris Elba). Pentecost then adopted Mori and put her through school. Once she graduated, she trained to be a Jaeger pilot to avenge her family (Irvine 163). In doing so, Mori underwent a transformation from passive bystander (orphaned child) to proactive warrior (combat pilot). What is most interesting about Mori's transformation is that she avoids becoming "musculinized" – in other words, assuming attributes more commonly associated with male strength and power. (Tasker, *Spectacular* 149) Maria DeRose explains that "musculinity" might actually be detrimental to the evolution of equal gender roles in action cinema since it suggests that femininity is incompatible with action cinema heroism. She writes:

[Musculinized women] may be tough, they may be powerful, but they may or may not "be women" for, as some people might think, if "woman" - feminine and the definition of feminine is the opposite of tough and powerful, how can tough women be women in our culture's limiting, dichotomous understanding? These tough women are often theorized as being symbolically male, especially if [...] their bodies are also muscular and if other gender signifiers (such as how they dress, how they act, how they talk, how they wear their hair) suggest that they are masculine (DeRose 2).

"Musculinity" creates a difficult binary for action heroines wherein they can either remain female/passive or become male/active (Tasker, "Kathryn" 423). But Mori challenges this binary opposition by being neither passive nor active; she is not portrayed as "butch" or overly muscled. At no point is her femininity taken for granted or ignored. Only once is Mori's gender addressed: after a disastrous trail Jaeger run with Becket, Mori is called a "bitch" by Australian pilot Chuck Hansen (Robert Kazinsky). The shocked response among bystanders is palpable. Becket attacks Chuck and demands that he apologize. While this scene could be interpreted as a reduction of Mori's character into a clichéd "threatened object," it is important to note that Becket's assault isn't intended as a means by which he can reclaim superiority as an alpha male or to confirm ownership over his co-pilot. (Tasker, *Spectacular* 17) Instead it is retribution for sexual disrespect.

Herein lies one of the keys to appreciating gender roles in *Pacific Rim*: sexual equality is so institutionalized that it is taken for granted. In an environment where humankind's existence is threatened, old prejudices (both racial and sexual) have to be abandoned so humanity has a fighting chance for survival. There are two female Jaeger pilots who appear onscreen in *Pacific Rim*: Mori and Russian pilot Lt. Sasha Kaidonovsky (Heather Doerksen). Both are valued within the Jaeger program solely for their skill and aptitude as pilots. This status quo wasn't incidental but deliberately created by del Toro. When speaking about the inception of Mori's character, del Toro explained: "I was very careful how I built the movie. One of the other things I decided was that I wanted a female lead [...] who has the equal force as the male leads. She's not going to be a sex kitten, she's not going to come out in cutoff shorts and a tank top, and it's going to be a real earnestly drawn character" (Howell).

If the "musculinized" heroines of the Nineties and early Noughties mark the beginning of a deliberate effort on Hollywood's part to produce strong female characters, then their next development can be found in films that utilized a technique known as "splitting." "Splitting" was defined by Carol M. Dole as "[The distribution] among multiple personalities or characters the modes of power that would otherwise be concentrated in a single female hero, [reducing] the threat of each individual protagonist" (89). Dole goes on to identify various examples of "splitting" in American cinema. For instance, Jon Amiel's *Copycat* (1995) sees two women, a tough-as-nails cop named Detective M. J. Monahan (Holly Hunter) and a mentally damaged intellectual unable to leave her apartment named Dr. Helen Hudson (Sigourney Weaver) join forces to stop a serial killer. It is only after these women work together, thereby bypassing each other's flaws, and simultaneously confront the serial killer that they are able to emerge victorious (Dole 90-1). Parallels can be immediately drawn to the "drifting" dynamic within *Pacific Rim* which required two pilots to work together to pilot a single Jaeger. But Mori and Becket avoid the "split" relationship suggested by Monahan/Hudson because the expectation within the world of *Pacific Rim* is that one pilot is incapable of controlling a Jaeger by themselves. Monahan's alliance with Hudson is presented as atypical in *Copycat*. There is the implication within the film that a trained detective like Monahan should not have needed Hudson's aid to stop the serial killer outside of standard technical expertise.

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If we accept the narrative that the evolution of action heroines charted both “musculinity” and “splitting,” then Mori emerges as a character at the apex of this continuing mode of development. But in spite of being consciously designed to break action heroine stereotypes with both a rejection of “musculinity” and overt sexualization, Mori is still subject to the gazes of both the audience and del Toro’s camera. But a close reading of *Pacific Rim* reveals that del Toro actively rejected the male gaze, instead employing one that regularly identified with female viewers and characters. The physical camera never eroticizes Mori. We never see her in a state of undress or engaged in any kind of sexually explicit activity. Throughout the film, we see adult Mori in three primary costumes: a black raincoat over black trousers, a martial arts uniform comprised of a black shirt and black pants, and the Jaeger suit (Mori does have one other outfit in the film, a blue coat, but it is worn by her child counterpart during flashbacks). The raincoat ensemble is worn during her introductory scenes where she first meets Becket. The skirted hem is the only physical indication of her gender until we see her face and hear her voice. As a result, the audience is denied a visual sexual spectacle, forcing them to judge Mori as a character and not simply as a woman.

The martial arts uniform is worn during what can be interpreted as the film’s most erotic scene: when Mori and Becket measure their compatibility as pilots by sparring. While her shirt is the only outfit she wears in the film that features cleavage, it is important to note that the shirt allows her considerable freedom of movement. Becket wears a similar white shirt that shows off his pectorals and sculpted arms. The result is that both actors display approximately the same amount of skin. The duel itself is filmed with a variety of long shots, medium close-ups, and close-ups of the actors’ faces. The camera never intrudes by awkwardly framing either fighter’s bodies so that their erogenous zones are put on display. Del Toro’s cinematography here is sexually neutral, thereby stripping the scene of much of its potential eroticism.

Finally, the female Jaeger suits stand in stark contrast to the suits commonly worn in anime and manga which eroticize the female pilots. While it is worth mentioning that the mecha genre of Japanese entertainment (one of the primary influences on *Pacific Rim*)<sup>1</sup> has been identified as

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1 A science fiction genre that centers on robots or machines controlled by people.

markedly progressive in terms of the equality of the sexes by featuring active, competent female protagonists by such scholars as Annalee Newitz, who wrote that within the genre female characters were actually better suited to be heroes than males, the genre is soaked in eroticized images (9). While the featured mecha themselves are usually constructed as gender-neutral (or at the very least reminiscent of the heavily muscled male body, regardless of pilot gender), the jumpsuits that the heroines wear inside the machines are incredibly sexualized. (Newitz 8) The Jaeger suits from *Pacific Rim* are constructed like metallic battle armor, fitting their wearer's bodies but only to provide a maximum amount of protection. Both Sasha and Mori's jumpsuits are dark, visually understated, and androgynous with the obvious exception of the breastplate.

By never clothing Mori in provocative costumes or showing her naked (either partially or fully), del Toro prevents her from being subject to the male gaze. Although Becket is featured as both primary protagonist and audience surrogate, del Toro repeatedly abandons his gaze in favor of Mori's. There are two specific occasions where this happens: the first is soon after Mori and Becket meet for the first time. When she takes him to his new room, she stands by and watches as Becket begins to undress. Del Toro then switches to a point-of-view shot of a shirtless Becket in medium close-up. When Becket notices Mori, she snaps out of her daze with a start and retreats into her room (conveniently located right across from his). As Becket moves to close his door, del Toro cuts to another point-of-view shot of Mori looking through the peephole on her door at him. This doorway peeping is repeated again approximately ten minutes later when Becket tries to confront Mori in her room after their martial arts fight. Mori watches as he walks up to her door, hesitates, and slouches away. Like the other two point-of-view shots, not only are these representative of the female gaze, but they demonstrate a feminine sexual desire projected on the male body.

Laura Mulvey points out that typically in film when a woman is established as a love interest her presence becomes disrupting to the narrative: "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (715). But the obvious sexual tension between Mori and Becket doesn't physically materialize even in the finale. And while

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there certainly is erotic contemplation in *Pacific Rim*, it is directed from Mori towards Becket. Mori is, simply, a non-eroticized sexual character.

But there is one other crucial element of her identity that must be acknowledged: her Japanese ethnicity. The image of the devoted, submissive Japanese woman continued to permeate Hollywood films even to the present day, perhaps most notably in Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). In fact, this very behavior has led to these characters being labeled "Geisha Girls." But if the submissive "Geisha Girl" was coded as an object to be desired in Hollywood films, the dominant Japanese woman was coded as a monster. If they were sexually proactive, they were seen as scheming "Dragon Ladies" who were ruthless and incapable of empathy. If they were skilled fighters, they would be characterized as a "Martial Arts Mistress," who could defend herself from physical assault, while being emotionally absent and sexless (until, that is, a male hero comes along and helps her "re-discover" what she has lost. (Prasso 87) This last stereotype is particularly potent, being seen in mainstream Hollywood films such as *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003). O-Ren (Lucy Liu) one of the women who betrayed the Bride (Uma Thurman) and set her on her course for vengeance, is a vicious assassin who serves as the head of the Tokyo Yakuza. Much like Mori, she lost her parents at a very young age and trained as a fighter to avenge them. But O-Ren's training leaves her an emotionless husk of a human being. She doesn't hesitate for a moment to brutally kill those who offend or impede her. Mori, on the other hand, ends up triumphant in her quest to avenge her family without having to sacrifice her humanity. In this way, Mori transcends the "Martial Arts Mistress" trope.

Of course, one of the biggest criticisms of *Pacific Rim* concerns Mori's perceived timidity, particularly in how she doesn't stand up to Pentecost when he orders her not to pilot a Jaeger. But such assumptions reveal a predominantly western-oriented perspective on feminism and heroism. After Pentecost refuses to assign her as Becket's co-pilot, we witness a vital conversation between Mori and Becket that clarifies her character:

BECKET: "You felt it, right? We are drift-compatible!"

MORI: "Thank you for standing up for me. But there's nothing to talk about."

**Becket:** “I mean, c’mon, I thought you wanted to be a pilot. Mako, this is worth fighting for. We don’t have to just obey him.”

**Mori:** “It’s not obedience, Mr. Becket. It’s respect.”<sup>2</sup>

Mistaking Mori’s obedience for weakness is not only inappropriate, but demonstrative of serious ignorance on the part of the interpreter.

In a career dominated with mythical monsters, strange beasts, and giant robots, the character of Mako Mori might be Guillermo del Toro’s greatest creation. For he has given audiences something nearly unprecedented in popular Hollywood cinema: a Japanese action heroine who proves that a female character can balance romantic feelings while striving for completely unrelated goals. A popular *Pacific Rim* production story told by del Toro in interviews and at conventions involved the “Conn-pod” sets where, in the film, the pilots would control their Jaegers. Seeking authenticity in the special effects, the actors were strapped into 20-ton hydraulic machines for hours at a time. According to del Toro, every actor who was filmed in a Conn-pod suffered an on-set breakdown. All, of course, except for Rinko Kikuchi. Consider that for a moment: it wasn’t the giant, physically buff male actors, but the petite Japanese actress who escaped unscathed. When asked about how she could withstand the grueling working conditions without collapsing, she replied that she simply thought happy thoughts (Sacks). I believe that this speaks to how many people reacted to Mori. On the outside, they think they see a physically minuscule, emotionally devastated woman who is too scared to stand up to her commander. But that meager exterior conceals a strength, power, and courage unparalleled among her peers. She is Mako Mori: Woman. Japanese. Hero.

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