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No Questions Asked

by

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Curator's Note

“I told you that was a bad idea,” The Mandalorian says in episode six, unscrewing a little metal ball and handing it to Baby Yoda (The Child). They are an island of calm in the midst of their passage through hyperspace. His laconic insulation against the blur constitutes a professional’s experience of culture; I want to try to bring some of it into focus here.

A repressive professionalism lies at the heart of the Code of the Bounty Hunters Guild, and Mando’s violations of that code are the source of our pleasure in his mix of professional skill and humane improvisation. The bounty droid IG–11 threatens to keep to the Code and kill The Child; Mando kills the droid instead. When Mando asks his client what he plans to do with “the kid,” he is upbraided in high Herzogian fashion: “How uncharacteristic of one of your reputation. You have taken both commission and payment. Is it not the Code of the Guild that these events are now forgotten?” It is. Mando is not about forgetting.

In March, as the pandemic broke across Los Angeles, USC went remote and furloughed dining hall workers. Disney’s California parks closed, and those workers were furloughed, too. Both groups were members of UNITE HERE Local 11, and law students at UCLA organized an effort to help them sign up for unemployment.[1] I volunteered some time; I would talk to the applicant on the phone while I entered their information in the state website.

In April, while Disney’s vast promotional machine was securing industry recognition for The Mandalorian’s technical achievements, Industrial Light and Magic was laying off workers. “It is a massacre,” a popular reddit thread began. “Do not blame Covid 19. Blame outsourcing.”[2] Members of no guild or union, these VFX artists began posting their reels and hustling for whatever work-from-home gigs they could find.

In the clip above, Mando rejects Greef Karga's suggestion that he get wasted on spice to forget his betrayal of The Child. In another moment, the bounty hunter will attempt to bury himself in his work only to be told there isn't enough to go around. "Why so slow?" Mando asks, and Karga answers: "It's not slow at all. Actually very busy. They just don't want to pay guild rates. They don't mind if things get sloppy." At an individual level, The Mandalorian violates the code for moral reasons. At a social level, the code is under relentless economic pressure. The laconic; the blur; a contrast that suggests a universe of professionalism-under-pressure. Things will get sloppy.

It would take an hour per person if things went well, a series of very personal questions, a portrait of a worklife that was almost always cobbled together across a series of gigs: waitstaff here, counter help there, some off-the-books music lessons at home; hours upon hours. At the end of every session I was supposed to flush whatever records I could. That didn't work. My phone knew who I called; the blanks on the online application were always ready to repopulate with someone else's address; the stories lingered. And weeks later when union members were denied benefits for some opaque reason, they would often call me back.

At USC we knew our own budget cuts were coming, and we scrambled for summer students who would never come to campus. What could be done remotely? What was attractive? I suggested Disney After Walt; this seemed like a good idea. I thought the park might reopen before the term ended.

"I didn't ask. It's against the Guild Code." Season 1 of *The Mandalorian* investigates the limits of a philosophy of "no questions asked," and it proposes three morally ranked tiers of *uninquisitiveness*. The lowest is the smuggler Ran's version (E6) where "no questions asked" is an alibi for betrayal. In the middle lies the Guild Code, with its uses—confidentiality and confidence; tidiness and reliability, rituals of induction—and its brutalities: "People don't have bounties; only acquisitions have bounties."^[3] Once acquired, The Child can be eaten, mounted on a wall, or tortured as the client chooses. At the highest tier is allegiance to the Mandalorian creed, with its quaint habits (not removing the helmet) and its ascetic obligations. "This is the way."

May is a blur of internal and external marketing, the unique fusion being at USC affords, where students are as likely to be attracted by coverage in The Hollywood Reporter as an advising email. I do a series of media hits. On the 21st the provost tells the faculty the deficit is likely over \$400 million and our retirement contributions will be suspended. If we hustle maybe we can avoid

furloughs. My summer teaching hustle can patch the small hole in my retirement; it certainly can't cover the four-seasons-worth-of-The-Mandalorian-sized hole in the budget. Like ILM workers, I am not in a union; unlike anyone at Disney, I have tenure. I stop doing unemployment help and start delivering food on weekends.

In July, Disney reopens its Florida parks to much controversy but to the delight of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.[4] On the 27th, Alan Horn, the head of Disney Studios, graciously visits my class on zoom. More USC privilege crossed with the strange advantages of remote learning. The next day The Mandalorian picks up 15 Emmy nominations, including VFX, production design, sound design, costume design, and score.[5]

In the second scene in this clip, Mando is reminded of his faith's allegiance to the foundlings over the Guild Code by his sensory-motor relation to his ship. The switches and lights and clicks and beeps and slides are the essence of Star Wars' beat-up, lived-in science fiction and the centrality of production and sound design to its success. The absence of the simple threaded knob interrupts the ballet of take-off and calls him back to a higher duty, a fight he knows is a bad idea.

September is another month of ironies: The Mandalorian wins its Emmy for VFX on the backs of the laid-off ILM workers. The next day California Governor Gavin Newsom announces a two-week pause in new unemployment filings in an effort to clear the enormous backlog and do something about the disastrous filing system. Disney's California parks remain closed by state order, and the company breaks with the governor, lambasting him in public and proceeding to lay off 28,000 furloughed workers. "Team," Josh D'Amaro begins his letter to people who no longer are.[6] News coverage emphasizes that two-thirds of them are part-time as though the jobs were inessential to them (the laconic) and not that the conversion of employment to part-time work weren't a foundational characteristic of the contemporary economy (the blur).

That little metal ball with the threaded hole and the equatorial groove is the scalar opposite of the Death Star. But the consonance of their forms suggests the intense attention devoted to aligning *The Mandalorian* with the Star Wars universe. I can consume that alignment by purchasing a Baby Yoda figure that comes with a control knob or by diving into the Disney+ making-of series—a series which runs a hefty 228 minutes.[7] But even that scale only hints at the enormous quantity of labor deployed to suit my—our—desires. I like to think that

my consumption adheres to a code of remembrance and respect. Yet I am no rogue professional asking dangerous questions and disrupting the system. Try as I might, I'm just a client.

[1] Unitehere11.org.

[2] https://www.reddit.com/r/vfx/comments/gb05nz/laying_off_workers_at_indus...

[3] https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Bounty_Hunters%27_Creed

[4] Disney's "Welcome Home" video inspired numerous parodies, many collected here: <https://slate.com/culture/2020/07/walt-disney-world-reopens-florida-coronavirus-welcome-home-video-inspires-parodies.html>. DeSantis's praise can be found in <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/coronavirus/os-ne-desantis-press-conference-july-6-coronavirus-20200706-tyh7tewbvjglf3y7ux35244uu-story.html>.

[5] <https://www.starwars.com/news/the-mandalorian-emmys-2020>.

[6] <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/29/disney-to-layoff-28000-employees-as-coronavirus-slams-theme-park-business.html>.

[7] <https://www.gamestop.com/toys-collectibles/funko/pop/products/pop-star-wars-the-mandalorian-the-child-with-control-knob-only-at-gamestop/11099357.html>.