**NONFICTION REVIEWS**


**Benjamin J. Robertson**


In *Star Wars after Lucas*, Dan Golding implicitly and explicitly grapples with challenging questions scholars of that galaxy far, far away must consider when they attempt to make definitive statements about the franchise. How does one deal with more than forty years of *Star Wars*? How does a single person, in a single text (even a book-length one) identify and address an adequate sample of films, television shows, novels, comics, toys, video games, theme park attractions, and so on? How does one make sense of the relationship and interplay among the various groupings of narrative texts that make up the universe: the original trilogy, the prequel trilogy, the Disney trilogy, the films labeled as *Star Wars* stories, the de-canonized texts that make up *Star Wars* Legends, the new non-filmic texts that have replaced the Legends as canon, and so on? How does one account for the myriad historical moments in which they were produced and the various models that shaped their production, distribution, and reception? Perhaps most importantly, how does one say something about *Star Wars* now, in the present, when the inevitable progress of the franchise machine will make whatever one says about it obsolete in the very near future, perhaps even before one's claims find their way to readers?

*Star Wars After Lucas* comprises an introduction and nine chapters, the bulk of which, as Golding's title suggests, focus on the Disney era of the franchise, especially *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015). The introduction lays out the foundations for Golding's subsequent discussion of the complex nostalgia *Star Wars* produces in its fans, a nostalgia that has become perhaps the franchise's main thematic concern and narrative guide since at least 2015. Chapter one examines the politics of the original trilogy, the malleability thereof, and the consequences of this malleability with regard to the ongoingness of franchise. Chapter two turns to the Disney era, specifically to fan reaction to the announcement of new *Star Wars* films after the prequels—whose legacy has been, at best, problematic for the franchise—and the prospect of revitalizing *Star Wars* in such complex circumstances. Chapter three offers a strong reading of *The Force Awakens* by way
of Golding’s conceptualization of the legacy film, whose goal is “to extend the life of a film series and renew it for a new era” by: bringing back actors/characters from earlier films, introducing new actors/characters, repeating and revising narrative strands and thematic concerns from earlier films, documenting a handoff from one franchise generation to the next, and using this handoff to shift the narrative focus from the older generation to the younger one (71). Chapter four stays with The Force Awakens to investigate the film’s politics, which shift away from the original trilogy’s concerns with colonialism and war in the aftermath of Vietnam and towards questions of diversity and representation appropriate to a decade when Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and similar identitarian movements focused on marginalized voices have taken center stage in political debates. Chapter five, perhaps the most interesting in the book along with chapter three, also focuses on The Force Awakens and how the film’s score, by John L. Williams, plays a clear and important role in Disney’s nostalgic enterprise. In chapter six, Golding compares the nostalgia deployed by The Force Awakens to that deployed by the second film of the Disney era (and the first film to not be part of the episodic structure of the entire film franchise to that point), Rogue One (2016). Chapter seven then compares how Rogue One and the animated Star Wars Rebels television program take on fascism in their respective ways. Chapter eight turns away from engagements with specific films in order to think about how actors and the characters they play (specifically Carrie Fisher/Leia and Harrison Ford/Han Solo), by way of their mortality in the real world and their narrative weight in the storyworld, affect franchise production and reception. Finally, in chapter nine, Golding turns to Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi (2017) and how it responds to The Force Awakens and Rogue One “by questioning some of the fundamental questions about Star Wars that these films took for granted” (205). Such questioning, undoubtedly, will remain at the heart of the franchise for the foreseeable future.

As this summary suggests, Golding accomplishes a great deal in Star Wars after Lucas even as he continually faces the specific challenges Star Wars presents to critics, as discussed above. In some cases, he answers a challenge by doing what so many scholars of the franchise have already done. For example, he defines his object mainly in terms of the films, and privileges discussions of them over Star Wars in other media—a sensible move given the volume of material in other media and given the fact that the films will likely always remain canonical, and therefore central, for the Star Wars universe. While this choice might appear merely standard, it allows Golding the opportunity for a very clear and focused discussion of the consequences of Disney’s 2012 acquisition of Lucasfilm for the recent rebirth and success of the Star Wars franchise through The Force Awakens and subsequent films. As Golding makes clear, this success derives from a complex relation the new material establishes with the older material, a complexity that the idea of the legacy film clarifies and makes available to further scholarship. For Golding, as for many other fans and critics, while The Force Awakens and subsequent films clearly recall beloved moments from the original trilogy, they also distance themselves from the prequel trilogy.
However, Golding takes a further, and much needed, step by making clear that we must not only consider how the Disney-era films relate themselves to the past, positively or negatively. We must also account for how these films do something new within the franchise itself: “For all that has been made about these new films’ ability to deliver something quintessentially ‘Star Wars-y,’ their atonement for past sins, and their renewal of the franchise, there are discontinuities here, too. […] Disney’s strategy in reviving Star Wars can tell us much about not just how American, global media functions today but also the power of the contemporary audience’s thirst for revisiting the past, and culture that deals with questions of legacy and myth” (3-4). In other words, Star Wars will always refer to its own past, but such reference goes beyond the valorization of what we like and denigration of what we don’t. It requires that Disney balance the weight of franchise history with the need for new narrative and thematic possibilities which can leverage the galaxy for further profit.

Here, however, we find a challenge that no critic of Star Wars will likely ever completely overcome. Just as Anakin Skywalker could not bring any final balance to the Force, no critic can ever make a final claim about how the franchise works. Because the franchise always carries on, and because this particular franchise (more than most, I think) so clearly concerns itself with a constant revision of its own history, future films (and television shows such as The Mandalorian [2019]) will not only provide new grist for the critical mill in and of themselves, they will also constantly affect how we understand all that has come before. With this point in mind, we can understand how any scholarly investigation into Star Wars will not only offer potential insights into what the franchise means (or has meant to date) and how it works (or has worked to date), but such statements will also provide a snapshot of Star Wars and its reception prior to some new revelation that might moot such statements. It is, of course, far too early to tell how, for example, Star Wars Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker (2019) might undermine Golding’s arguments.

Nonetheless, the fact that Golding could not have known the title of this film—revealed in April 2019; Golding refers to the film as “Episode IX”—hints at the franchise’s potential for such undermining. Along similar lines, Golding says very little about Solo: A Star Wars Story (2018) or the claims that its relatively poor performance at the box office caused Disney to cancel or delay previously announced Star Wars projects, including trilogies by The Last Jedi director Rian Johnson and Game of Thrones showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss (both of which Golding mentions in his introduction as evidence of the robust future Disney imagines for the franchise). Finally, although Golding spends a whole chapter on The Last Jedi, his reading of the film does not seem to have much impact on his discussions of earlier films, perhaps because he could not wait for it to be released and integrate his reading of it into the rest of the book given academic publishing timelines.
I do not mean to suggest that Golding’s inability to see the future is a problem for this book so much as that every scholar’s inability to do so presents a problem for critical engagement with twenty-first century cultural production generally and the most prominent form of such production specifically. Insofar as Golding’s book both succeeds as an investigation of *Star Wars* in the Disney era and performs the limitations such investigations necessarily entail, it provides a useful and necessary account of contemporary, popular entertainment. It shows us that, as critics, we must make claims about what we know even when part of what we know involves the fact that knowledge, and therefore claims, will always remain radically provisional under contemporary capitalism and the forms it produces.

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