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REVIEW OF STAR WARS AFTER LUCAS: A CRITICAL GUIDE TO THE FUTURE OF THE GALAXY

Star Wars After Lucas: A Critical Guide to the Future of the Galaxy

by Dan Golding

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The shadow of George Lucas still reigns across the *Star Wars* galaxy, despite having sold off his studio (Lucasfilm) and, with it, ownership of the decade spanning space opera to the media giant Disney for just over \$4billion in 2012. During the decades in which Lucas controlled his company, the extent to which his influence over the end result that was shown on screen could be debated either way; be it siding with some form of visionary *auteur* approach or that it was one individual acting as a figurehead for the eponymous studio (for the good and the bad times).

By 2012, as far as the general public were concerned *Star Wars* was for the most part dormant, aside from a videogame (*Star Wars 1313*) in long term development hell (and was cancelled as soon as Disney took over) and the mildly successful *Clone Wars* animated television series. What was not widely known outside of Lucasfilm was that Lucas was already working on ideas for new *Star Wars* films that would take place after Episode VI (*Return of the Jedi*). Yet, realising the sheer amount of work that would be required to take on another trilogy of films, and the sting of negative feedback received from so-called *fans* after the Prequel Trilogy, Lucas eventually took Bob Iger (then and current CEO of Disney) on his offer to purchase the studio.

The initial assumption, at least as far as Lucas was concerned, was that the new *Star Wars* films made under Disney's ownership would take Lucas' script treatments as the basis for the overarching narrative of the new trilogy. This, however, was not the case, and the result has been a mix of films that took a form that Lucas would unlikely have made himself, whilst also at times resembling something he once had made.

It has been seven years after Lucas sold to Disney and already there have been four *Star Wars* films released (two "Saga" films and two "Anthology" films) with the final episode in the *Skywalker Saga* out at the end of 2019; meaning Disney has overseen almost as many *Star Wars* films as Lucas did over the span of around four decades. In this relatively short space of time then, how has a franchise that was known for pushing the film industry with its expertise in special effects recapture an audience that was supposedly lost during the misunderstood prequel era.

Dan Golding has taken it upon himself to examine the form that the *Star Wars* franchise has taken in the absence of Lucas' leadership in a focused break down of *The Force Awakens* (2015) and *Rogue One* (2016) and to a lesser extent *The Last Jedi* (2017) which neatly brings this aptly titled book to conclusion. Golding has been diligent in writing in a way that both keeps things as clear as possible for those new to the franchise whilst also avoiding being overly descriptive for those that are not; this also enables the book to concentrate on its other core focus, that being a *critical* guide to this new era of *Star Wars*. In addition, Golding seemingly is able to strike a balance between fan and academic. Certainly, those of us who fit into both categories will gain the most out of this, but for those researching the format of franchise films and/or elements such as nostalgia (the significance of will be mentioned shortly), there is a substantial field of supporting evidence here. The non-academic *Star Wars* fan will also find something of interest here, as there are plenty of interesting insights into the development of the franchise and the reactions from around the world. The style of writing is also beneficial to all as the ideas Golding argues are clear and supported well, making this a helpful text for those researching within this or related academic fields.

If there is one strand that ties most of this book together and exemplifies Golding's main focus it is nostalgia. It permeates almost everything when discussing *Star Wars* during the Disney era, and is seemingly core to the much of the approach in creating and marketing these newer films. Whilst Lucas himself has been critical of *The Force Awaken* as being a "retro film" due to its adherence to *A New Hope* as a key source of inspiration, Golding is apt at making it clear that Lucas himself is not immune from indulging his own nostalgia in the past; the difference though is the way in which nostalgia is utilised differently. Golding notes that it is very clear in Lucas' *Star Wars* films where Lucas has been inspired by the serials of his youth along with the Westerns and the Akira Kurosawa samurai films. The latter influence came to Lucas during his time at film school, but it is the serials that are of particular interest here. Serials such as *Flash Gordon* were already outdated by the time they aired on television during Lucas' childhood, and this type of filmic aesthetic was no longer prevalent amongst the current generation of children by the mid-1970s. In part, Lucas wanted to create something akin to what he enjoyed as a child for a new generation by reintroducing "fairy tales" to popular media and as Golding states, "rejecting the trend of cynical, 'social realist' filmmaking that was popular at the time". Lucas himself reaffirmed this saying "Once I got into *Star Wars*, it struck me that we had lost all that - a whole generation has grown up without fairy tales". Therefore Lucas provided what he thought this generation was missing, sowing the seeds for a time when this generation would be nostalgic for this type of film when in the decades that followed, no one else was quite satiating the absence of such tales; Lucas himself included as far as the generation that grew up with the Original Trilogy were concerned.

With this being the perceived understanding in response to Lucas' Prequel era (justified or not) a desire from the fans was a return of something that more closely resembled the Original Trilogy, the absence of the aesthetic found in those three films creating a sense of loss in older "fans". This desire was keenly noticed by Disney who largely ignored Lucas' ideas for a Sequel Trilogy and created and marketed its new *Star Wars* in a way that "carefully pitched nostalgia" to "give the sensation of returning to where we have never been" whilst also facilitating a sense of homecoming. Something which Golding

keenly points out with the very deliberate use in one of the early trailers for *The Force Awakens*. In which Han Solo and Chewbacca are seen for the first time back in the Millennium Falcon where Solo proclaims “Chewie, we’re home”, a not so subtle indication to older fans that this new film will provide them with a return to the very nostalgic experience of the version of *Star Wars* they grew up with.

Golding carefully examines the extent to which nostalgia seemingly provides the backbone to this new post-Lucas *Star Wars*. As mentioned, the focus of this book is predominantly on *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One*, two films that both rely heavily on nostalgia for their very existence; however, the way in which this is executed differs both in execution and how they were received. In short, *The Force Awakens* was criticised for being too nostalgic due to the similarity in its narrative structure seemingly staying too close to that of *A New Hope* (the first *Star Wars* film created) and its general aesthetic also being too similar to the Original Trilogy as a whole. The latter being ironic as this is exactly what “fans” said they wanted which Disney happily provided for them. The difference here is that, unlike the Lucas films in which he “looked everywhere for ideas for *Star Wars*” resulting in what Fredric Jameson referred to as the “nostalgia film” – due to reclaiming cultural experiences of the past into the present – *The Force Awakens* took its inspiration from past *Star Wars* films as reference points. Although it would be reductive to claim that it solely did so, the result was a very different kind of nostalgia film to the one Jameson described, one that is self-reflective.

Rogue One, on the other hand, navigates nostalgia in a different way, one that allowed it to escape the same level of criticism that befell *The Force Awakens*. *Rogue One* was not just a film for the “fans”, it could also be considered a fan film itself (albeit with a substantial budget) given the passion for the franchise possessed by the film’s director Gareth Edwards. Plus, due to the narrative proximity of *Rogue One* to *A New Hope* (the former leads directly into the latter) the design of the two films – which are created decades apart – would need to resemble one another. Yet, as Golding highlights, even though “nostalgia makes an appeal to the past being at least partly better than the present” *Rogue One* would fail as a nostalgic project if it were to faithfully recreate the sets and costumes of *A New Hope*, because of the desire to return to the past as it was remembered, not as it actually was. Therefore, “*Rogue One* didn’t just re-create the past: it improved on it”.

This action of bringing back the past and improving on it is not just isolated to *Star Wars*, present also in what has been referred to as the *Legacy Film*. Golding explores how this helps provide authority to films – not just *Star Wars* – that have transferred from one era to another. This provides multiple perceived benefits in that it avoids the “sharp break of a traditional reboot” and gives older audiences a chance to remember whilst also enabling newer audiences to claim some cultural capital of this version for themselves. These benefits of the legacy film are similar in practice to those that Ryan Lizardi (2017) attribute to the approach used by companies – such as Disney – of focusing on transgenerational appeal; the aim of which is to “create a predictable dual audience of nostalgics and youths”.

This dual audience is deemed to be crucial for *Star Wars* in the post-Lucas era, and also recognises that there is indeed a limit to nostalgia in terms of engaging an audience; even if it does help to provide a narrative (and as with *The Force Awakens* a structure) to build from, that there is a sizable audience that has not grown up with *Star Wars* and is unfamiliar with it. This is not just a consideration for the American/European/Japanese audience, as the Chinese film market continues to grow and will soon rival that of the United States; except the difference is, China does not have a nostalgia for the franchise. The Chinese audience is coming to the galaxy far far away as new visitors meaning that the films still need to stand on their own, or in the case of *Rogue One*

given a bit of additional support from high profile Chinese stars such as Donnie Yen and Jian Wen. Because of this unfamiliarity for *Star Wars* in such a lucrative market having *The Force Awakens* adopt a “requel” (Lizardi, 2017) approach – that being a sequel that can be seen to act as a soft reboot – helps to ease Chinese audiences into the franchise in readiness for later entries; as well as potentially encouraging them to watch previous entries as well. However, despite these approaches, *Star Wars* – whilst successful – has not been the cultural juggernaut in China as it continues to be in the West, much to Disney’s disappointment.

Golding has managed to provide a book that is clear in its intentions of examining the *Star Wars* franchise in the years since it made the transition to a giant media conglomerate. The significance of nostalgia is interwoven throughout and provides a detailed yet broad exploration into how it has both impacted and been implemented into the long-running franchise. If there is one complaint it is that perhaps this book came out too soon, with Golding not having enough time to explore *The Last Jedi* further – although it did act as a helpful conclusionary chapter – and the final part of the *Skywalker Saga* coming out at the end of 2019 likely providing additional insight worthy of exploration. This book will greatly benefit from a sequel (maybe even a prequel) or perhaps Golding will provide a befitting “special edition” that will round off the conclusion of the saga and truly examine the extent of nostalgia in a post-Lucas galaxy far far away.

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