

Making Things Right: *Star Wars: Episode VII: The Force Awakens*

J.D. Connor

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THE FIRST WORDS spoken in *Star Wars: Episode VII: The Force Awakens* come from Max von Sydow's Lor San Tekka: "This will begin to make things right." He's talking about the thumb drive he's handing off that includes a map to gone-monking Luke Skywalker, but he might as well be talking about how this installment will help clear the franchise of the accumulated muck of the prequel trilogy (and, perhaps, the digitally juiced "Special Editions" of the initial films).

That sort of meta-availability is inevitable in contemporary blockbuster moviemaking, where lines in the story are just as readily PR lines for the trailer or, in this case, for fan service. At the same time, these movies are properly classically constructed, and so such moments have multiple payoffs within the movie as well. The final image of *The Force Awakens* will be of another handoff, this time young heroine Rey (Daisy Ridley) offers long-lost Luke his long-lost lightsaber. Assuming he accepts — something bound to have happened between this episode and Episode VIII, due in 2017 — she will have lured him back into teaching and will have fulfilled, ironically, the dictum of his rogue pupil Kylo Ren, "You need a teacher."

Such immanent balance exists throughout. Tool of the First Order and Dark Side wannabe, Kylo (Adam Driver) delivers his line in the midst of a clenched lightsaber standoff in Act III and follows it with "I can teach you the ways of the Force." He doesn't need to; simply reminding Rey that there is such a thing as the Force is enough: she Zens out, the movie's underlying Force-tone shifts, and the music swells. The whole scene inverts an Act I exchange between newly nonconformist Stormtrooper Finn (John Boyega) and resistance fighter Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac). Finn is helping Poe escape, and Poe is momentarily baffled:

POE: Why are you doing this?

FINN: Because it's the right thing to do.

POE: You need a pilot.

FINN: I need a pilot.

Moments later, Poe will swagger, "I can fly anything" before speed-teaching Finn how to man a TIE fighter's guns.

Poe and Finn steal the TIE fighter but crash it; Poe disappears; Finn hooks up with Rey and they steal the Millennium Falcon. The second theft sets up the handoff from the Poe-Finn pair to what will eventually be the Kylo-Rey pair with some rapid cross-cutting between Finn figuring out the Falcon's guns and Rey figuring out how to pilot it. "I can do this," they exhort themselves, each unaware the other is saying precisely the same thing.

Piloting, shooting, and self-teaching are the interactions through which the social network of the story operates. And just as the movie spins off bits of itself for marketing, it also takes fairly seriously the question of exchanges within the network of its young stars. When Kylo captures Poe, the pilot smart-mouths him: "Do I talk first or you talk first? I talk first?" (Good guys ask; bad guys insist: they are the First Order.) Slick interactions are the movie's strong suit. In one bravura shot during the Battle on

Takodana, the camera executes a complex left-to-right track and pan, shifting its attention from Finn on the ground to Poe in his X-wing back to Finn back to Poe. Finn punctuates the moment by proclaiming “That’s one hell of a pilot!” He is, or isn’t, talking about the cinematographer.

In short, *The Force Awakens* is tighter than it has been given credit for. The problem — the problem that most reviewers have had with it, the problem that its defenders have had to shunt aside — is that the resonances with earlier versions are far too strong. These are not nifty callbacks for dedicated fans or the marks of a well-told tale. This movie is, in more ways than it should be, assembled out of the pieces and parts of the earlier ones, especially the first one, the one now called *Episode IV: A New Hope*.

Critics have blamed J.J. Abrams, or George Lucas, or Disney (as Lucas and Michael Hitzlik have) for the film’s lack of novelty, but whomever they’ve singled out, the range of causes has been far too narrow, locating responsibility *within* the production narrative of *The Force Awakens*. That’s typical. For decades *Star Wars* has inspired a strangely blinkered sort of criticism that leans on the franchise’s unique success and Lucas’s unique authority to justify treating it as somehow apart from Hollywood as a whole. It has been seen as responsible for the end of The ’70s, but somehow not the product of that ending.[1] Worse, Lucas’s own cod-Jungian narrative theory has governed the understanding of the films’ stories to the exclusion of changes in Hollywood storytelling over the same period.

As a result, criticisms — or defenses — of *Star Wars*’s narrative retreading are misguided, not because the film is narratively innovative, but because critics continue to regard it as far more immune to the broad tendencies in big-budget Hollywood filmmaking than it is now or ever was.

The first film was undeniably the project of an auteur, a director who got what he wanted formally, while simultaneously launching a new era of merchandise by out-negotiating 20th Century Fox. Lucas was a 1970s figure with aspirations of the same order as his mentor, Francis Ford Coppola, but unlike Coppola, Lucas actually managed to turn himself into a new-era studio. At the heart of that new studio were sound (Sprocket Systems, now Skywalker Sound) and large-scale special effects (Industrial Light & Magic).[2] Let’s start with sound.

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It might be unfair to note that the first words in the series — the first words we hear — are “Did you hear that?” C-3PO is speaking to R2-D2, but before we can wonder what we might have heard, he follows up with “They’ve shut down the main reactor.” It is an odd thing, for sure, since we don’t know what the main reactor is, what it sounds like, or what its absence entails. Furthermore, the sounds we might recall at this point are the low rumble of the Imperial star destroyer and the laser cannons.

R2-D2 responds with a series of bleeps and bloops, which C-3PO understands and which we quickly gather. There is no language to the gliding mailbox’s sounds — this is not *Star Trek* or *Lord of the Rings*. But this relationship — between a character who speaks English and a character who does not but whose noises are understandable through a combination of redundant dialogue and emotional tone — clearly fascinated Lucas, so much so that there are two versions of it at the heart of that first film: one, between C-3PO (or various humans) and R2-D2; the other, between Han Solo and Chewbacca.

The smooth translatability between the hairy wookiee, the human, and the droid is the initial trilogy's utopia, the social equivalent of its handwaving around the problem of faster-than-light travel. Jabba the Hutt will get subtitles, because he is a negotiator/gangster, and gambits require syntax. But R2-D2 and Chewy are there to spark indignation, and that does not. "I am fluent in over six million forms of communication," C-3PO says, but the payoff of that ability is not properly linguistic. Rather, what we get from it is the chance to listen to sound designer Ben Burtt construct cinema's biggest sonic sandbox.

Lucas's strategy of relying on quasi-languages for comedy ran aground in the second trilogy, when he passed out ethnic accents to the butts of his jokes. Watto the trader has a Times-Square-Lebanese greasiness; members of the trade council are saddled with off-the-rack World War II-era Japanese accents; and, most notoriously, the Gungans epitomized by Jar Jar Binks display the full range of racist midcentury black dialects. When Lucas went back and reedited the opening installments so they would line up with the universe as it had evolved, *Return of the Jedi* now included a nameless Gungan yipping for joy, "We-sa free!"

When Lucas went back through the older films to create the Special Editions, he claimed it was because his vision had always been hampered by the limits of filmmaking technology at the time. That might have been true, but the films were almost always better for it. Worse, the digital effects that seemed state-of-the-art when he dropped them in now look dated — the edges of the composited elements stand out, and the behaviors of the digital surfaces, especially stone and fur, seem unnatural. That he couldn't foresee or didn't care that the baseline look of digital cinema would continue to evolve is one more sign that Lucas had lost it.

The decision to set the initial Star Wars films in a grungy, lived-in universe remains brilliant. However digital that world had become, there was still a necessary materiality to the place, and it was still spitting out garbage. R2-D2 is always jacking into various computer ports — there is Force but no wi-fi here. That analog insistence extends to the films themselves. They were technical marvels but they were basically analog marvels overseen by a man who had more of a sense of what digital cinema might promise than anyone else.

Eventually digitization would transform editing, particularly by allowing all sorts of alternative versions, and CGI would make it possible to generate images that never existed in front of a camera. But in the late 1970s, only a few aspects of filmmaking had begun to take the digital turn. Computer controls allowed cameras to precisely duplicate complex moves, which made special effects compositing more consistent and more dynamic even when the cameras were still shooting models. The plans for the Death Star appear onscreen in some of the earliest wireframe CGI in mainstream film. Yet sound went digital even before cinematography, editing, special effects, and animation. And unlike the much-heralded End of Film, there was roughly zero public handwringing about it.[3]

In *Return of the Jedi*, C-3PO is telling "the story so far" to the Ewoks, mixing together another faux-language with enough proper nouns that we can follow along. What makes the scene particularly nifty is that alongside the proper names we hear key sound effects — the lightsaber's *gzhzhzh*, Vader's breathing, the Death Star's explosion — and we hear them in the slightly muffled way that we hear an old tape playing back.

C-3PO cannot give his audience a perfect digital copy, but that isn't the point. The point is that the storytelling here draws on a uniquely recognizable sound library via an instant, nonlinear retrieval system. The translator's utopia has as its complement a utopia of storage and recall. That utopia, not unimaginative nostalgia, underpins *The Force Awakens*.

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Alongside sound, what made the first *Star Wars* compelling was a mastery of on-screen scale, a particular parallax of human-sized motions against things geological, or galactic. That's the other half of why the opening shot of the star destroyer worked, and it's why the very long shot of Luke's speeder zipping left to right is so memorable. *Star Wars* shared this facility with Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, where scale shows up as a joke Richard Dreyfuss tells as he tries to take a picture of the shark and an unintended joke that Roy Scheider tells twice (the one about needing a bigger boat). Abrams understood that commitment and put it to exceptionally good use in his Spielbergian *Super 8*.

Abrams repeats those scalar effects in *The Force Awakens*, combining them into the lovely shot of Rey speeding across the sand, wrecked destroyer in the background, wrecked X-wing foreground. She is our scalar emissary, dropping into the destroyer's vast abandoned hulk, fishing for tradable spare parts, more completely alone than Luke was (of course she is orphaned). When she later wanders through her *WALL•E*-like dwelling, we see the same mechanic background, now humanized by an abandoned yarn doll, now domesticated by the presence of some bachelorette-pad hotplate cookery. As she plops down on the sand to eat her jiffy-pop bread and gruel, a crane shot gives us a view of her leaning against the foot of a dead AT-AT walker, and we realize that both her work and her home are set against the remnants of the Empire. Here, scale and character are baked into Rick Carter and Darren Gilford's production design.[4]

Scalar replication brings us back to the initial problem: that *The Force Awakens* is, for its detractors, a 1:1 scale model of *A New Hope*. It seems to clone Episode IV, with a (self-consciously) cruddy climactic space battle and a limited number of quasi-mathematical transformations operating to cross up the gender and ethnic makeup of the major characters. (Forty years on, the franchise has begun to catch up with Samuel Delany's criticism.)

The worst defense of this sort of repetition is the invocation of myth; the second worst is Lucas's own invocation of poetry. Within the film, the emissary of that way of thinking is, surprisingly, Han Solo. In *The Force Awakens*, his favorite word is always: "Same thing I always do: talk my way out of it." "Women always figure out the truth. Always." "How do we blow it up? There's always a way to do that." (Leia is his partner in continuity: "As much as we fought, I always hated it when you left." "That's why I did it.")

But despite decades of follow-on Joseph Campbell-derived screenwriting, the initial installments didn't work because they were driven by some eternal masterplot. At the level of plot, *Star Wars* was acceptable not because it made sense but because its components were fungible. Like the 1930s serial space operas it emulated, *Star Wars* delivered, regularly, and then moved on.

The narration of the first film was a space opera pastiche from its opening crawl and retro wipes between scenes to its gee-whiz dialogue and hyperlegible bad guys. At the same time, though, its insta-library of self-justifying sounds and images depended

upon human performance, not nostalgia, for their success. A video of Burtt wielding a shotgun mic like a lightsaber in order to conjure the attack and decay of a particular stroke affects the presence of some high-Method Foley artistry. [VIDEO CLIP]

Forty years later, though, the appeal of the 1930s is negligible. *The Force Awakens* only weakly gestures toward the first film's wipes. And it has not been obvious what compensating novelty might redeem its wink-wink-nudge-nudge retro appeal from being a withered pastiche of a pastiche.

Why, in the 1970s, were Lucas and so many of his contemporaries interested in an ersatz 1930s? Fredric Jameson argued that it was because the 1930s looked like the last possible opening for revolution. Add to that the not-entirely-compatible fascination with the glory days of the studio system and the emergence of technolibertarianism, and you have enough tension to get the project up and running.

But whatever drove nostalgia for the 1930s, where is a storyteller of the 2010s supposed to look for inspiration? Perhaps to the 1970s themselves, but decades as frameworks work against the scalar effects that Abrams and his designers want to achieve. Decades are occupiable and occupied: for example, the 1950s by *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the 1960s by *Mad Men*, the 1980s by *The Americans*, the 1990s by *Dope*, a whole stew by *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Instead of simulating a temporal zone of action, many of today's biggest movies draw from a reservoir of narrative components, fascinated by the very possibilities of arrangement, exchange, and interaction. By self-consciously foregrounding storytelling elements — scenes, characters, lines, props, images, sounds, etc. — these movies prove sufficiently reassuring to funders and fans to get a greenlight while still cultivating sufficient after-action discussion to retain enough audience mindshare to bridge the gap between installments. From the 1970s to now, the systematicity at work at the industry's highest levels has morphed, placing at its center, or very near its center, a morphology no longer Proppian but componential. Innovation in this context consists not in the elements themselves, wherever they are cadged from, but in the combination of unexpected occurrence and surprising competence. Only afterward we will see just how the pieces were rearranged.

The summer of 2015 was dominated by just such a *nachträglich* movie, *Jurassic World*, a franchise installment 14 years delayed from its predecessor, *Jurassic Park III*. In *Jurassic World*, in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, in 2012's *Prometheus*, in 2011's *The Thing*, we have a new industrial solution to the question of whether a movie is a sequel or a reboot — whether it exists *within* the narrative continuity established by the earlier films or whether it is in the process of purging that story-world of undesirable elements. *Jurassic World*'s story is assembled through a process of replication and mutation out of the fundamental base-pairs of by-the-numbers Hollywood screenwriting. Take the bug out of the amber, sequence the DNA of its prey, supplement that with some cuttlefish genes, and you have a designer dino, *Indominus Rex*. Take the plot out of *Jurassic Park*, scramble its elements, update its product placements, and you're off, having made the most successful movie ever directed by someone other than James Cameron.

Whether confident or cowed, the deferred-action movie depends on the structural preeminence of sound and production design to make sense of its place in the franchise. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is as conscious of its own posteriority as *Jurassic World*, but it is far more confident in its ability to transcend that franchise obligation through sheer

experience. Like these movies, *The Force Awakens* took apart the earlier models and scattered the blocks on the table. Unlike them, when the moviemakers went to put the thing back together, they not only reused most of the pieces, they even reassembled them in very nearly the same order. It can seem like the same story, more or less — and it feels better or worse, depending. But at every switchpoint the alternatives have been considered and these elements have been chosen.

Those elements build worlds, and world-building, done right, has enormous downstream consequences. Tactile and sonic objects make movies “toyetic,” as anyone who has visited the toy section of a big-box retailer this holiday could tell you. (I took a loop around a mid-market mall between my opening day screenings, and 12 stores had Classic *Star Wars* or *Force Awakens* merch in the front window.) Compelling, open-ended design spaces can be readily ported into theme park rides or entire lands (*Star Wars* is getting its own version of The Wizarding World of Harry Potter). Narratives with scalar capacity can spin-off alternate plots, accumulating an entire universe.

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Today, Disney is the single most important overseer of narrative universes. Most prominent is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which Disney bought and augmented earlier this century. But it also has homegrown universes — one centered on Mickey, the other on Princesses. The Mickey-centric universe is a topologically odd thing, intercalated with the others either through the conceit of a coherent “backstage” where all Disney characters can interact when they are not performing in their own, properly fictional universes (*House of Mouse*) or through the “Toy Box” mode of the Disney Infinity videogame. The Princess universe — which is emerging from the biggest licensed brand franchise in the world (roughly \$5 billion a year) — was initially simply a unified approach to a “play pattern” among young girls but is slowly becoming a narrative in which the princesses interact. Like *Star Wars*, it has a dark side, featuring the progeny of various Disney villains. More, doubtless, is to come.

Neither the Princesses nor the Mickey universe has particularly difficult continuity problems to solve. Marvel does, and it keeps temporarily solving them and then undoing its solutions with comic series like Ultimate Marvel. Still, there is friction between the comic continuities and the cinematic continuity.[5]

Star Wars’s continuity problems were similarly thorny. The commitment to the canon was legendary, and the accumulated stories in novels, comics, television, and on and on had elevated the keeper of the universe bible, Leland Chee, to something like the mock-high-priest of the place. Such complex canons can turn off casual fans. In the wake of its purchase of Lucasfilm, Disney held off on deciding what to do about the mountain of prior *Star Wars* materials until this past summer when the entire “Expanded Universe” — everything outside the movies — was declared non-canon. The Wookieepedia — the online repository of *Star Wars* lore — now featured two tabs for most important entries, “Canon” and “Legend,” where all the Expanded Universe stories were stored, waiting to be recalled, rebooted, retold into the canon. As at Marvel, a Lucasfilm Story Group will now attempt to bring order to the narrative universe.

If that sounds like Disney has First Order aspirations, it surely does. But just as surely, it knows that unless the movies are fun, they are not going to become the gargantuan hits in Asia they need to be going forward. There is work to do. At the same time *The Force Awakens* was torching box office records in the United States and

Europe, it only opened in second in Japan and third in India. (It hasn't opened in China as of this writing, but Disney has pulled out all the stops in this new market for the franchise.)

Back in 2002, Jonathan Last, writing in the *Weekly Standard*, got some traction arguing that the Empire were the good guys (Alderaan deserved it, etc.). Lost in the morass of neocon bullshit was his summary dismissal of the expanded universe. "It's always been my view that the comic books and novels largely serve to clean up Lucas's narrative and philosophical messes." That isn't wrong, but making messes and cleaning them up is one of the particular charms of this universe.

At the narrative level, messes look like continuity problems, and there are ways of dealing with those. Comics readers are as used to the practice of "retconning" — retroactively justifying a narrative innovation or inconsistency — as moviegoers are to rebooting. The Expanded Universe purge amounts to something like disconning — breaking the hold of the continuity altogether. The next *Star Wars* movie (*Rogue One*), due later in 2016, will be something of a prequel, but it may be an example of slipconning — as when one *Bourne* film takes place inside or alongside another. Figuring out what is worth keeping and what requires purging is part of the fun.

Fans have been cleaning up and remaking *Star Wars* almost from the get-go, and one of the reasons that the excision of the Expanded Universe was felt so strongly was that it came awfully close to discounting fans' extensions of franchise. *The Force Awakens* is a salve to those fans not because it restores the Expanded Universe, but because it plays to the sort of maker culture that inspired fan-versions of the earlier films. That tinker's fascination unites Anakin, Luke, and Lucas; it carries over into the new movie in Rey's scavenging — she gets yelled at for slacking off when she's brushing up her gleanings — and Finn's prior job in the sanitation department on Starkiller Base. The former pays off in a joke about the Millennium Falcon being garbage, but, as it's their only escape option, "Garbage will do." The latter pays off in a joke about Finn throwing Captain Phasma, his former Stormtrooper boss, into a garbage chute.

Should we toss the whole thing? Nearly all the criticism of *The Force Awakens*, smart and otherwise, notes the overwhelming parallels with the first film. I've tried to explain that without explaining it away. But only the best criticism that I've seen takes up a second problem: the need to avoid watching (or listening) closely. Here's Lili Loofbourow: "*Star Wars* is shallow and silly and campy and fun, and a dozen other synonyms that suggest we shouldn't think about it too hard." Here's Aaron Bady: "Everything that puts you in the moment, when you're watching it, falls apart as soon as you turn your brain back on." And, finally, here is Abigail Nussbaum: "The original *Star Wars* films are fractally awful. The closer you examine them, the more apparently fatal flaws you notice." Each of them will go on to note exactly what is morally or narratively or otherwise insupportable in the movies, and, by extension, in the *Star Wars* universe as a whole. And each of them will also find something to hold on to, but something that reads as much like an admission of critical weakness as a recognition of aesthetic success.

I hope it's obvious by now that isn't my approach. Instead of noting the fatal flaws and cordoning off their import, I would rather ask whether the movie, at its best, can bear our attention.

The best thing about *The Force Awakens* should be the moment when Kylo Ren is

using the Force to summon Luke and Anakin's snowbound lightsaber. When it finally dislodges and hurtles past his face to Rey's outstretched hand, the scene wants to be a display of unexpected power. But nothing has led us to expect that the lightsaber is actually heading for Kylo here — he's already been bested by Rey in a straight-up Force contest, and we know the weapon has a thing for her — so it seems less a shocking turn of events than another joke at Kylo's expense. As an assemblage of prefab parts, the movie aspires to that same unexpected display but most of the time Abrams resorts to jokes (solid, to be sure) to excuse everyone's feelings of familiarity.

No, the best thing about *The Force Awakens* is BB-8. The droid sounds metallically hollow and yet inside its smooth surface are untold mysteries. These emerge unexpectedly from panels that slide or pop or hinge open in a process we might call facetization. There is a lighter that does double duty as a thumb's up; there's an electric prod that shocks Finn; there are guy-wires that can stop the poor thing from rolling endlessly about the Falcon as the ship pirouettes through the sky; and there is the drawer in which that thumb drive can be stored. Somehow, though, that drawer also allows BB-8 to read the data on the drive to project it holographically. It thus mediates the analog and the digital, real enough to promise an actual world, digital enough to escape our real world's constraints. To watch BB-8 leave a smoothed track in the sand or gingerly doink its way down a set of stairs is to feel the pull of a very particular materiality, one that everywhere suggests an almost endless chain of concepts.

[BB-8 gif]

As a soccer ball, BB-8 is an emblem of the beautiful game's globalized universality and hence of an ideal *Star Wars* universe. As a dog, it is an emblem of fidelity and obligation for Poe, Rey, Finn, and R2-D2, and hence of an ideal relationship with fans. As a sphere, it is the analogue of the wireframe animation of the Death Star and the hologram of Starkiller Base. Compared with the real Death Star it is infinitesimal, but compared with the projection, the droid appears to be a nearly 1:1 materialization. That inversion extends to its hemispheric head, which echoes and inverts the satellite dish indentation behind the Death Star's superlaser. It is small but large enough to be awkward when Finn lowers it below the deck of the Falcon; it is small but not the smallest of the movie's spheres. Aboard the Falcon, Finn finds and tosses aside Luke's old Training Remote, that ball that would zap him as he practiced with his lightsaber. It is the droid they are looking for, hence the object of both nostalgia and suspense.

If we aren't paying close attention to *The Force Awakens*, BB-8 will be cute. Paying attention, we realize that it is the material emblem of the revitalized *Star Wars* universe, the ways that universe, like a bubble, must balance internal and external pressures, the ways it tucks innumerable aspects of earlier films into itself and rolls onward in the service of Disney's long-term profitability. BB-8 is an example of making things right — not in the sense of restoring order to the Force or apologizing for past Special Editions — but in the sense of making a movie that knows what it's about.

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[1] For an exception, see Benjamin Hufbauer's piece in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/politics-behind-original-star-wars>

[2] For audience reactions, and more, see Chris Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe* (New York: Basic), 2014; for the digital turns see Michael Rubin, *DroidMaker: George Lucas and the Digital Revolution*, (Gainesville, FL: Triad),

2005.

[3] See William Whittington, *Sound Design and Science Fiction* (Austin, TX: U Texas P) 2007.

[4] Lev Grossman's preview in *Time* ("A New Hope: How J.J. Abrams Brought Back *Star Wars* Using Puppets, Greebles and Yak Hair," [12/14/15, 56ff] is particularly sensitive to the role of production design in *Star Wars*'s success.

[5] It hasn't been published yet, but for a nuanced account of the Marvel phenomenon, see Martin Flanagan, Mike McKenny, and Andy Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury), 2016.