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Jade Weimer

Book Review

Ken Derry / John C. Lyden (eds.), *The Myth Awakens* Canon, Conservatism, and Fan Reception of *STAR WARS*

Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018, xxi + 173 pages,
ISBN: 978-1-5326-1973-1

When asked to review this book, I was a little hesitant to do so, because my familiarity with the *STAR WARS* franchise is limited at best. Yet I would now argue that extensive knowledge of the *STAR WARS* mythology is not a prerequisite for engaging with this text in a meaningful way, as issues raised by the contributors provide key insights into the discipline of religious studies as well as the intersection of religion and media which are useful in a broader context, including questions of canonization, collective memory, legitimacy, race, and gender. And perhaps one of the most exciting questions addressed in the book (for me!) is the role of music in myth-making.

Ken Derry's preface offers an introduction to the volume and he emphasizes the need for fun in scholarship. He contends that we as scholars ought to take ourselves less seriously in certain ways. The "enduring appeal" (11) of *STAR WARS* is linked to the fun one derives from creating meaning through engagement with the films, music, and characters. Derry's concurrent use of theory and humour in the opening section is both fun to read and theoretically rigorous.

The first chapter, by John C. Lyden, argues that both the Original Trilogy and the newer films demonstrate moral and political ambiguity as the lines between villain and hero are blurred. Lyden challenges previous arguments that *STAR WARS* has a singular political message. The main point of the chapter is that the political meaning of the franchise will be variously interpreted by the

viewer and by extension is innately subjective. Lyden concludes that the mythic structure of STAR WARS can be understood “as an important site of cultural self-reflection or as a reflection of who we are, and who we might become” (31). The ambiguity in the hero/villain dichotomy is further explored in chapter two, where Lindsay Macumber employs a Jungian model of the shadow archetype to follow Darth Vader’s transition from ambiguity (as Anakin) to embracing and becoming part of the dark side. Episodes IV–VI exemplify Darth Vader as the shadow archetype who is dichotomously contrasted with the hero Luke Skywalker, but the Prequel films provide a window onto that (internal) transformation of the character. Interestingly, Macumber also argues that Darth Vader acts as shadow for Luke throughout his own journey to hero in the Original Trilogy, where Vader is an external shadow. Macumber then contrasts her understanding of Darth Vader as shadow archetype with the character Kylo Ren in EPISODE VII: THE FORCE AWAKENS (J.J. ABRAMS, US 2015). In this case, she concludes that Kylo Ren is either a disappointing shadow or perhaps not the shadow at all, because his struggle is internal, which may provide an equivocation for that hero/villain dichotomy. Macumber uses this analysis to conclude that comics are now generally characterized by this type of ambiguity, which has resulted in “the loss of identifiable shadows and heroes” (44).

Chris Klassen challenges previous uses of Joseph Campbell’s concept of the hero’s journey through her analysis of Leia and Rey in chapter three. Klassen argues that Rey’s journey is predicated on an internal transformation to find power within (similar to the traditional masculine hero journey), whereas Leia can be classified as a hero with political power who wants to free her community from oppression. Neither role is gendered, according to Klassen, but both characters “speak to a culture that has struggled with gender division and discrimination and make possible what was once unthinkable” (49). A strong case is made that both Rey and Leia qualify as heroes and one key point is Klassen’s use of the term “hero” and her dispensing with the less significant “heroine”. This nomenclature immediately changes the reader’s perception of the inherent masculinity associated with the term “hero” and places both Rey and Leia in a category typically reserved for the male (super)-hero.

In one of the most interesting sections for me, in chapter four Kutter Callaway explores the role of music in the creation and perpetuation of a mythological narrative. He also examines the way in which music influences or dictates the nature of the fan reception of the STAR WARS films. Callaway makes important claims here about the functionality of music and proposes that John Williams’s score is not just a typical leitmotif deployed for semiot-

ic reasons but rather a leitmotif that initiates mythic recapitulations in the viewer. He argues that the melody played during the scene where Leia and Rey hug in *THE FORCE AWAKENS* prompts the viewer to make certain interpretative conclusions about Rey's possible status as Leia's daughter and identifies both characters as the real heroes of the story. However, Callaway concludes that the use of the same melodic motif actually subverts this potentiality for a female hero by taking the viewer/listener back to something they have already experienced (where Luke is the hero). The main point he makes is that the music subverts the audience's gendered expectations. This is a fascinating argument that deals with the often-neglected topic of music in myth-making. However, I would have liked to see a more detailed analysis of the leitmotif in that scene in order that the point might be more clearly (and strongly) argued. For example, what type of emotional response is this melody meant to elicit? How does that response shape the viewer's interpretation of the scene more generally? Further discussion on the musical aspects of the melody (i.e. mode, rhythm, etc.) would be useful here.

In chapter five, Daniel White Hodge and Joseph Boston explore the issue of racist fan responses to the casting of John Boyega in *THE FORCE AWAKENS*. In light of the legacy of racism and stereotyping in Hollywood films, they argue that the casting of non-white characters in *ROGUE ONE: A STAR WARS STORY* (Gareth Edwards, US 2016) and *THE FORCE AWAKENS* challenged the white hegemony of the *STAR WARS* franchise and therefore met resistance from some fans. Yet despite the attempt at diversifying the franchise, all of the Black characters are in roles that reinforce whiteness as superior: "Lando is a traitor, Finn is a coward, and Lupita Nyong'o is buried under latex" (86). The authors aim to provoke further discussion on issues of race and racial representation in film, and they conclude that while *STAR WARS* still reflects long-embedded tropes of whiteness and patriarchy, a positive mythical component is also present. Chapter six continues the issue of race as Joshua Call argues that the films have not sufficiently recognized or embraced the "generative and rhetorical power of myth-making that has so captured the *STAR WARS* fandom" (93). The Black characters are often tokenizing, which is problematic considering that myth-making is successful only when a person can recognize themselves within the narrative or story. Call contends that other iterations of the franchise such as video games are actually more successful at achieving diversity by allowing players to create their own avatar, which reflects other ethnicities besides the "white hero" figure so prominently featured in the franchise.

In chapter eight, Syed Adnan Hussain discusses the importance of collective memory in establishing continuity or a “heritage of belief” (138) as it applies to STAR WARS canonicity. Hussain problematizes the idea of canon here by highlighting George Lucas’s attempts to alter the Original Trilogy through the re-releases, which were strongly resisted by some fans. Hussain argues: “The fundamental schism caused by de-canonization and revision in the STAR WARS universe should be conceived as a crisis of collective memory or as a break in the chain of tradition” (143). He concludes that the sale to Disney changed the trajectory of the franchise but reiterated the role of fans in shaping future films.

Chapters seven and nine both problematize the notion of canonicity. In chapter seven, Justin Mullis examines the nature of the relationship between George Lucas and his fans and concludes that it can be likened to the relationship between a hierophant and their devotees. He contends that Lucas’s diversion from the “canon” of the original trilogy (particular with regard to the “Han shot first” controversy) in re-released editions challenged core aspects of the mythology, resulting in the fans’ rejection of Lucas as “leader” or director. Mullis references the “established canon” of STAR WARS in his discussion of how the Prequel films (Episodes I–III) altered the Original Trilogy (Episodes IV–VI), but it would be useful to address in further detail the process of canonization itself. The process is complex and deserves somewhat fuller theoretical consideration here. When and how does the Original Trilogy come to be characterized as canonical? And what role do ritual and repetition play in that process? Here drawing from scholars of ritual such as Catherine Bell or Ronald Grimes might be useful for explaining how ritualization occurs (and in this case leads to the formulation of a canonical mythology). Chapter nine contains what might be expanded in chapter seven: a clear theoretical outline of canonization. Kenneth MacKendrick employs J. Z. Smith’s framework on canon and religious authority to argue that canon refers “to the creation and authorization of a shared imaginary world” (147). MacKendrick describes the process of canonization, the mechanism for moving from an open to a closed canon, and the role of authority in determining “canon”. The discussion of fan reactions to the Disney takeover is analogous (in some ways) to new discoveries of non-canonical religious texts such as the Nag Hammadi scriptures (which are labeled as Gnostic but have clear references to Christian theology). MacKendrick considers how “truth” is determined to be present in some parts of the mythology but not others. He argues, “Once canonized, the arbitrary assemblage of items takes on a totalizing function. The canon and its authorities establish an im-

aginary world as a world that can be understood [...] as a virtual world” (157). And these imaginary worlds have to be maintained and authorized in order to exist, which means they are subject to continual interpretation.

Overall, this volume offers an interesting and novel approach to STAR WARS through a religious studies lens. The emphasis on fandom reflects a common line of inquiry in religious studies that focuses on the reception history of texts or mythologies. In fact, this approach is one of the greatest strengths of the book, because it goes beyond mythological hermeneutics and presents a more nuanced analysis which accounts for the significance of this franchise in popular culture. The relationship based on mutual influence between the mythology, the creator George Lucas, and the fan base provides insights for other aspects of religious studies that examine the role of “adherents” in legitimizing mythologies and perpetuating those mythologies in varying forms. The distinct emphasis on the newest films, such as *THE FORCE AWAKENS*, highlights both the comparative approach taken by several contributors who distinguish between “parts of the canon” and the attempt to trace the impact of the changes to the “original mythology”. The book proved both accessible and valuable to a scholar who previously had very little knowledge of the STAR WARS franchise. It would be a terrific addition to any course (graduate or undergraduate) on religion, media, and film, but it also has broader appeal and utility to the non-academic fans of STAR WARS, who are often the focus of the volume.

Filmography

The Original Trilogy

STAR WARS EPISODE IV: A NEW HOPE (George Lucas, US 1977).

STAR WARS EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (Irvin Kershner, US 1980).

STAR WARS EPISODE VI: RETURN OF THE JEDI (Richard Marquand, US 1983).

Prequel Trilogy

EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE (George Lucas, US 1999).

EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES (George Lucas, US 2002).

EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH (George Lucas, US 2005).

Sequel Trilogy

EPISODE VII: THE FORCE AWAKENS (J.J. Abrams, US 2015).

EPISODE VIII: THE LAST JEDI (Rian Johnson, US 2017).

EPISODE IX: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER (J.J. Abrams, US 2019).

ROGUE ONE: A STAR WARS STORY (Gareth Edwards, US 2016).