

# On -Pairing Canon-

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## Abstract

This paper considers the relationship between originality and canon-pairing in relation to Rian Johnson's *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi* (dir. 2017) and Dave McCary's *Brigsby Bear* (dir. 2017). It also considers how a new experience can emerge, or re-emerge, from -pairing canon- as a new and original form of analysis through synthesis, or anti-synthesis. With the advent of digital technology fan-edited material is already exploring the ways in which montage and the moving image can be utilised as a means of research.

Keywords: Analysis, Synthesis, canon-pairing

In 2012, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, buoyant after breaking a number of box office records following the release of Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (dir. 2012), The Walt Disney Company quietly but not so quietly acquired Lucasfilm for \$USD4.01 billion—twice as much as *The Avengers* had already grossed worldwide, but half a billion dollars less than what Disney had previously acquired Marvel Entertainment for back in 2009 (“Box Office Mojo”). There was a sudden sense of imminent relief if not cautious optimism, following “a one and a half year pursuit of the Lucas empire,” according to “Disney CEO Robert Iger” (Krantz et al.). Indeed, “Many investors were caught off guard by the announcement, but there [had] been questions about what Disney would do with its mounting pile of cash [for a while].” (Krantz et al.). On the one hand, then “68-year-old [George] Lucas [would] serve [only] as a creative consultant [with] plans to retire”, but on the other hand, “Disney expect[ed] to more aggressively expand the *Star Wars* film schedule, Iger said in a statement”, where “our long term plan is to release a new *Star Wars* feature film every two to three years” (Krantz et al.). In 2014, however, and seemingly without much fuss or fanfare, Disney under the new guise of “Lucasfilm... announced that all of the books and comics that [had] filled the empty space in the Skywalker story after [*Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi*] [Marquand dir. 1983], hundreds of titles collectively known as the Expanded Universe, [would] no longer play any part in official [*Star Wars*] canon – and [that] they [would no longer] stand as precursors to the upcoming movies.” (Taylor). It is this notion of canon, and *Star Wars* canon in particular, that forms the basis for this paper, and the legacy of the Lucas empire itself as a Cinematic Universe, what has spawned but since deviated from this Expanded Universe “In order to give maximum creative freedom to [future] filmmakers and also [to] preserve an element of surprise and discovery for the audience, [in] *Star Wars* Episodes VII-IX” (qtd. in Taylor). Yet, “what... Iger [had] touted as the strength of [*Star Wars*] when it bought the franchise was the fact that it contain[ed] more than 17,000 characters” (Taylor), a whole universe of potential, ripe for innovation, reminiscent of what had nourished and nurtured the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

In 2015, despite being generally well received, J. J. Abrams' *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* (dir. 2015) delivered on these plans on schedule. “The storyline, although very similar to [*Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*],” according to Deen Hussein, “took me back to the franchise that I both kn[ew] and love[d]... refreshing the old storylines as opposed to having to focus on a completely new storyline.” (Lucas dir. 1977). The approach was not unlike Abrams' *Star Trek Into Darkness* (dir. 2013) in substance and style—a rehashing of Nicholas Meyer's *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (dir. 1982) by any other name but half as sweet. There was no Ricardo Montalban, there was no *Moby Dick*, but the storyline was uncanny, if not, in parts, completely the same. There but for the death of *Spock* go I. “After all,” Tim Grierson wrote, “it just need[ed] to be better than the [*Star Wars*] prequels [*in order*] to restore people's faith in the franchise”, and what Lucas had otherwise apostatised. It just needed to be better than *Jar Jar Binks* in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (dir. Lucas 1999), but not so coarse and rough like *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (Lucas dir. 2002), or so melodramatic like *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas dir. 2005). This was a bench without a mark, and with it the opportunity to aggressively expand what *Star Wars* could be as a Cinematic Universe without the legacy of the Lucas empire somehow holding it back as an Expanded Universe. There was also a dangerous precedent afoot. If *Star Wars: Episode VII – A New Hope: Redux* was the maximum effort of creative freedom, and if Gareth Edwards' *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (dir. 2016) was anything to go by, the strength of *Star Wars* was definitely in its past, especially when the future of its narrative remained uncertain as a renovation rather than an innovation. It put into question, “something confronting about this [new] trilogy of films which, in the presence of” creative freedom, rather than “time travel, ultimately fears the future”, but “still somehow manages to recycle the past in the future of the present.” (D'Aloia 2017 p. 1). Indeed, many films and franchises besides *Star Wars* rely on the past of their own story rather than the future through the creation and recreation of their own canon as an Expanding Universe.

This canon does not represent the past per se any more than it represents the future, even if creative freedom still somehow manages to recycle the past in the future of the present. There is a continuity to canon, that is, which cohabits the boundaries between what is past, what is present, and what is future, that can expand in any direction. It is similar in some respects to how Martin Heidegger conceives of *Da-sein*, “which includes [its own] inquiry among the possibilities of its being” (Heidegger p. 6). This being “is its own past not only in such a way that its past, as it were, pushes itself along ‘behind’ it, and that it possesses what is past as a property that is still objectively present and at times has an effect on it”, according to Heidegger, “*Da-sein* ‘is’ its past in the manner of *its* being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion ‘occurs’ out of its [own] future.” (Heidegger p. 17). It is how the audience is able to entertain the notion of a prequel, for example, that is technically a sequel to its own past, which ‘occurs’ out of its own future through the continuity of canon. The nature of this continuity is also being experimented with in much more playful ways through montage, splicing and intersplicing shots from prequels with shots from sequels, or what has already been popularly referred to as ‘canon-pairing’. It is not uncommon to find several different versions of *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, for example, reminiscing about “the dark times” in *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (Lucas dir. 1977 min. 00:32:00–00:34:00) spliced together with sequences from *Episodes I* through *III*. If continuity represents an Expanding Universe, however, then the strength of a good -pairing depends on its faithfulness to the lore of its -canon, and what only canon-pairing can reveal, through comparison, as a form of analysis through synthesis, or anti-synthesis—the splicing, and intersplicing, of intertextual

references. This lore is as synonymous as it is homonymous with the law, establishing the boundaries between what is past, what is present, and what is future, and how storylines can emerge, and re-emerge, from one another. It is also what gives an Expanding Universe its momentum, what pushes itself along ‘behind’ a prequel as a sequel, and what it is that constitutes the history of a canon without necessarily being historical.

There can be a number of problems with an Expanding Universe given that it is in no way bound by the continuity or lore of its own canon. Unlike the gravitational constant of our own universe there is no constant here, only what you take with you. It is the direct manifestation of potential and creative freedom, and it can be easily manipulated because it is a fiction. The more that it expands, the more problems that it can encounter—and *Star Wars* canon is no exception to this rule. The continuity of canon can be strained, for example, by certain storylines, just like it is in *Rogue One* with the digital recreation of the late Peter Cushing reprising the role of the infamous *Grand Moff Tarkin*, as well as the late Carrie Fisher with *Princess Leia*. All of a sudden *Star Wars* must grapple with the uncanny valley in new and unfamiliar ways that question the suspension of disbelief itself (Althoff). It could also be argued that why something like *The Force Awakens* can restore people’s faith in a franchise when something like *Star Trek* leaves it in *Darkness* depends on whether or not its storyline can take us back to the history that we already know and love in refreshing yet familiar ways that do not question our suspension of disbelief as opposed to having to focus on a completely new storyline that could, through its very own potential, strain this continuity further. These storylines can also break the lore, as it were, of their own canon through the strain and build-up of inconsistencies in continuity and overfamiliarity, not unlike a plot hole, or a canon hole, but where a plot hole is typically restricted to the lore of its own storyline, a canon hole has momentum, and with it the potential to ricochet throughout multiple storylines within an Expanding Universe much more like a cannonball. It can destroy a canon, and, in 2017, with one swift stroke, you can actually pinpoint the moment Rian Johnson’s *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* did so irrevocably. “We had all the momentum,” to paraphrase Hunter S. Thompson, “we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful [franchise]... [But] now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in [Hollywood] and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high water mark — that place where the wave finally broke, and rolled back” (p. 68). The point where *Admiral Holdo* made the jump to hyperspace. The day that *Star Wars* died.

The gravity of this mistake within the bounds of *Star Wars* canon arguably constitutes the first personification of a cannonball ball onscreen. The jump to hyperspace, and subsequently the ramming of the *Supremacy* with the *Raddus*, “threatens to totally destabilize the way [that] *Star Wars* space combat works” according to Ben Lindbergh. If a ship can just ram another ship this way, through hyperspace, and with such devastating consequences, it puts into question why *Admiral Ackbar* for less tempting reasons than political correctness, did not simply ram the *Death Star II* with *Home One* in *Return of the Jedi*. “[T]he impact is extremely powerful and impossible to prevent” as Lindbergh puts it, “Any sufficiently large craft could easily destroy any ship or ships of its choice. This would be a battle-ending—hell, a war-ending—weapon. And now we know that it’s fully operational.” It breaks *Star Wars* canon, because “in *Star Wars* lore, hyperspace travel has existed for millennia. [And] we [the audience] are supposed to believe that this idea didn’t occur to anyone else [during] those ages” (Lindbergh) until *The Last Jedi*. The suspension of disbelief is strained to such an extent that “[Johnson] flies in the face of decades of *Star Wars* (and sci-fi) tradition,” by

breaking continuity, “disabling the failsafe that his predecessors presumably preserved for a reason” (Lindbergh), so much so, it split the *Star Wars* fan base (Bianco; VanDerWerff; Loofbourow; Mendelson). Yet, it would not be the first time that *Star Wars* risked its own canon for the sake of its own storyline, given the development of *Princess Leia* into *Leia Skywalker*. This idea presents a unique opportunity, however, that instead of disabling a failsafe actually enables and emboldens the splicing and intersplicing of canon- itself through the -pairing of one canon- with that of another as a form of anti-synthesis. In the absence of continuity there is lorelessness, and fan theory, and hope—what it is that constitutes true creative freedom, or the potential to “pave over the [canon] hole that [*Admiral*] Holdo’s death left.” (Lindbergh). If the rules can be broken, that is, they can be rewritten in new and original ways that not only contradict one another, but support different interpretations. The power of fiction, in other words, remains theoretical.

This power depends on the break between continuity and lore in order to give maximum creative freedom to the associations that a canon- can make through -pairing. If a canon represents the associations that any given Universe can make as a relationship then a cannonball effectively breaks the relationship between these associations, and the way in which the structure of this relationship can function in the future of the present. It is not unlike how a “costext” (D’Aloia 2020a) functions in that the structure of this relationship depends on whether or not the audience is familiar with any given Universe they encounter, and that it possesses what is past as an association that is still objectively present and at times still has an effect on it. This structure, however, thrives off of the relationship between these associations, and the ways in which a new experience can emerge and re-emerge from a past experience by heightening these associations, rather than by breaking them. It could also be argued that examples of a proto-anti-synthesis can function within an unsuccessful meme by heightening unfamiliar associations, or when the structure of this relationship attempts to make new associations altogether that the audience is unfamiliar with. The function of these new and unfamiliar associations are similar in some respects to how Ian Bogost characterises a “hyperobject: a massive, tangled chain of objects lampooning one another through [a] weird relation[ship], mistaking their own essences for that of the alien objects [that] they encounter” (p. 79). This lampooning “uncovers the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity”, which “involves the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind” about those relationships, what Bogost calls “*ontography*” (Bogost p. 38). The problem with the structure of these relationships is the very lack of clarification or description that enables *ontography* to “demonstrate their overlap and [to] imply [an] interaction through [their] collocation” (Bogost p. 38) in such a way that it can gesture at non-anthropocentric phenomenologies. The interaction between the audience and the moving image, however, remains anthropocentric in origin and design, and thus anti-synthesis embraces that which a hyperobject recedes from.

The nature of anti-synthesis is itself a form of anti-synthesis, that is, a combination of memesis and *ontography* which enables the splicing and intersplicing of objects without necessarily being canonical. It considers the repleteness of associations in order to demonstrate where they overlap and how their collocation as an interaction can function through -pairing, and thus what it is that can be -synthesised from this -pairing—what it is that can be learned from something like *Star Trek*, for example, that cannot necessarily be learned from something like *Star Wars* about *Star Wars* (Stowe). Enter one *Luke Skywalker*, the eponymous story after *Return of the Jedi*, and what it is that really binds this Universe

together, “a group of items loosely joined not by logic or power or use [anymore] but by the gentle knot of” (Bogost p. 38) one Mark Hamill. In 2017, almost five months before the release of *The Last Jedi*, Hamill also starred in Dave McCary’s *Brigsby Bear* (2017), his only other live action role in a feature film that year. If it were not for the coincidental casting of Hamill in both these films then there would be nothing to imply an interaction through his collocation; and likewise, if it were not for the storylines of both these films in particular then there would be nothing to -synthesise from this -pairing as a form of analysis or anti-synthesis. On the one hand, *The Last Jedi* is ultimately a storyline about defying expectations, and anything which could be interpreted as encouraging those expectations, including but not limited to nostalgia—something which *The Force Awakens* has already been criticised for weaponising (Golding). Hamill, reprising the role of *Luke Skywalker*, has not only closed himself off from the Force, he has turned his back on that which he has aspired to be, but has already become, and cannot reconcile the two; whereupon *Rey* must convince him otherwise (D’Aloia 2020b). On the other hand, *Brigsby Bear* is a quaint storyline about coming to terms with nostalgia itself, encouraging these expectations by confronting those expectations head-on while fulfilling some of them as a form of closure. Hamill, as *Ted Mitchum*, the deranged father née kidnapper of *James Pope* has been keeping *James* inside a bunker for nearly twenty years since he was a child, entertaining him with *Mitchum’s* own homemade television programme, the eponymous *Brigsby Bear* itself; hundreds of episodes of which *James* is utterly obsessed with.

When the police raid *Mitchum’s* bunker, *James* is forced to reintegrate back into society and his biological family at the age of eighteen. The only other world he has ever known is *Brigsby Bear*, however, the creator of which has just been indicted, and the episodes of which have also been confiscated for evidence. Nobody else has ever watched *Brigsby Bear* besides *James*, and so he cannot relate to society any more than society can relate to the nostalgia he has for this other world of his, twisted though it may seem—especially when *Brigsby Bear* has been left in limbo, and with a lot of unanswered questions, much like *The Force Awakens*. *James* eventually comes up with the idea to create a movie, a *Brigsby Bear* finale of sorts, in order to answer these questions himself, by himself, as an unrealised form of closure, even daring to go so far as to get *Mitchum*, now behind bars, to voice the lines for some of its recurring characters. *James* must confront the past in the future of the present, and in some ways, -synthesise the past with the future in the present by fulfilling nostalgia for closure’s sake. It is Hamill’s relationship with this nostalgia as an association that overlaps with *The Last Jedi* and *Brigsby Bear*, and thus what it is that can be -synthesised from this -pairing—what it is that can be learned from *Brigsby Bear* that cannot be learned from *The Last Jedi* about *The Last Jedi*—is a form of closure. The storylines of *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*, however, invoke nostalgia without fulfilling that nostalgia, by defying expectations in order to preserve an element of surprise and discovery for the audience. There are three unanswered questions posed by *The Force Awakens*; what it is that constitutes the logic of who *Rey’s* parents are; what it is that constitutes the power of who *Supreme Leader Snoke* is, and what he represents; and what it is that constitutes the use of *Jedi Master Luke Skywalker* as a means of somehow answering this logic while defeating this power. There were also a handful of well-reasoned fan theories speculating how these questions could be answered, all of which *The Last Jedi* answered rather unexpectedly, and rather unremarkably. *Rey’s* parents are nobody, *Supreme Leader Snoke* is nobody special, and *Jedi Master Luke Skywalker* just up and vanishes. There but for the ghost of *Yoda* go I.

In fact, there is absolutely nothing left for *The Rise of Skywalker* to answer, because *The Last Jedi* sacrifices its own canon for the sake of its own storyline; which ultimately results in a glorified exposition of sorts. It can no longer possess what is past as a property that is still objectively present and at times has an effect on it since what is past as a property now pushes itself along ‘behind’ it as a mistake, the gravity of which it could exacerbate by orders of magnitude with a storyline that could, through its very own potential, strain this continuity further. This mistake also suggests that *The Rise of Skywalker* must go back into the past in order to restore people’s faith in the franchise, such that it defeats the purpose of creative freedom in the first place at the expense of this creative freedom—a wasted opportunity, given that the strength of *Star Wars* is still stuck in its past, with something like Ron Howard’s *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (dir. 2018), which many fans snubbed in response to *The Last Jedi*. Indeed, “‘Solo: A Star Wars Story’ – a stand-alone film that wasn’t part of the [Skywalker] saga – was the lowest-grossing film in the four-decade history of the franchise”, and in 2019 on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April, despite that “Iger said he’s not at all concerned that consumers may be overexposed to the [Star Wars] brand... the film franchise will go on ‘hiatus’ after” (Palmeri and Chang) *The Rise of Skywalker*. This ‘hiatus’ is an all too familiar tactic, however, not unlike the one that gave rise to *The Phantom Menace*, as well as *The Force Awakens*, without coming to terms with its own nostalgia, encouraging these expectations by confronting those expectations while fulfilling some of them as a form of closure. The future of *Star Wars* canon remains uncertain as a renovation rather than an innovation. What it is that can be learned from anti-synthesis is that the collocation of Mark Hamill can also be substituted for Rian Johnson, and thus what it is that can be -synthesised from this -pairing—what it is that can be learned from something like Rian Johnson’s *Looper* (dir. 2012), for example, that cannot be learned from *The Last Jedi*—simply recontextualises this analysis. It can be transposed in new and exciting ways that broaden the methodological horizons of analysis with interdisciplinary traits that it would otherwise lack from a unilateral perspective such as *Star Wars* canon.

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