

THE FORCE AWAKENS

Directed by J.J. Abrams
Produced by Kathleen Kennedy, J.J. Abrams, and Brian Burk
Distributed by Walt Disney Pictures
Released in 2015

Shortly after *The Force Awakens* premiered, Star Wars creator George Lucas expressed his displeasure with the film. Specifically, he was disappointed to see that much of the equipment and costumes of the original trilogy carried over in *The Force Awakens* despite the fact that 30 years have passed. Lucas took pains to invest the prequel trilogy with unique worlds and aliens. However, Lucas, from his earliest planning in the mid-'70s for the original film, wanted a strong female protagonist. He originally conceived the Luke character as a girl. Even when Lucas had all the time and control he could muster, in the prequel trilogy Padme Amidala was reduced to window dressing by the time of *Revenge of the Sith*.

And yet, despite a reputation for being derivative rather than inventive, in *The Force Awakens* director J.J. Abrams manages to create a strong female protagonist. Rey is Force-sensitive, grew up in horrendous circumstances, doesn't unrealistically match up blow-for-blow against men, and defeats a wounded Sith at the climax (the splitting earth providing a brilliant *deus ex machina*). Best of all, she is not fetishized and turned into just another modern-cinema warrior-slut. (As a bonus, John Williams's theme for Rey matches the brilliance of his Star Wars motives for Yoda and Vader. His ability to top himself, *in his 80s*, astounds.)

The excellent characterizations continue: Finn is a reluctant warrior. He knows the power of the First Order first hand and just wants to get away (much like Han Solo in the original film). And yet, despite his hunger to survive, when Rey is captured, he stops at nothing to save her (not realizing, of course, that she doesn't really need saving anyway!). He risks his life challenging Kylo Ren in a lightsaber duel. He is willing to go into the Starkiller base with no plan, feigning first-hand knowledge of its weaponry so that he'll be permitted to join the ground attack. (In the process, the exposition of the command meeting is exposed as not exposition at all [because information conveyed there is not true]; it is pure entertainment, turning a standard movie convention on its head.)

Kylo Ren is a little underwhelming for much of the film. True, Ben's boiling temper recalls Anakin's outbursts in the prequels, and remind us that he, too, is an alienated youth. But the filmmakers take a great risk in showing him without his mask. In the end, any doubts about his suitability as the main antagonist are vanquished when he commits patricide, killing the most-beloved character in the franchise in cold blood. This was a drastic step, but necessary to make him both a complex villain and hateable.

This might be the funniest Star Wars film since the original. Finn's insistence on holding Rey's hand during their flight from Jakku, Chewbacca's fishing for compliments after his injury, the reveal of the Millennium Falcon, Finn's interrogation of Captain Phasma, and Solo's con-man double-talk with the rival gangs are all brilliantly executed.

New revelations of the Force keep coming in. Now we know that it can be channeled with relics. It's like the Khyber Crystal idea from George Lucas's early *Star Wars* drafts. This

follows, in order of release, these revelations: Force-choking and telepathy (*IV*), levitation and visions (*V*), seeing the far future (*V*), Force mind-reading (*VI*), seeing the near-future (*I*), midichlorians (*I*), and communion with the dead (*III*) (but both sides have to be in the club).

The resolution of the struggle over Anakin's saber is the greatest moment in all the movies (better than the green-saber reveal in *VI* [a powerful moment before the green-saber-rife prequels came along]). All sound drops out but the burning-homestead cue from *Star Wars*. This continues a fascinating trend by composer John Williams of using portions of previous scores in effective ways: The Qui-Gon and Amidala funerals feature identical themes, the Emperor's theme from *VI* becomes major-mode celebratory in *I*, the "Binary Sunset" rendition of the Force Theme of *IV* is employed in the concluding moments of *III* and *VII*, "Anakin's Theme" in the closing credits of *I* morphs into a *largo* rendition of "The Imperial March," and part of the Luke/Vader duel music from *V* is used in the fight between Obi-Wan and Anakin in *III* (coupled with a quotation from *Episode I*'s hard-charging "Duel of the Fates").

BB8 is original and endearing. His head seems to hold on to his body by means of magnetic forces. He is not an R2 clone and he feels like a real person, particularly in the scene where Rey has to decide whether she'll trade him for a month's-worth of food, and when he gives Finn a thumbs-up with his blowtorch.

The only lousy part of *The Force Awakens* is the First Order (Third Reich) speech preceding the destruction of five planets. It's vacuously bombastic, provides no exposition, nor does it yield any information about General Hux, the most underwritten of the major characters. His speech is just a sleet storm of blind rage, the low point of a screenplay that never gives us any ability to understand the political views of these disaffected loyalists.

The Starkiller is derivative, but it was Lucas's original name for Luke Skywalker. While it is a Death Star clone, Starkiller Base has a believable power source, and its operation functions on a dramatic level—as the sun's light fades, we know that destruction is nigh; it's an expressionistic device.

After all, the Death Star *is* a great idea. It makes sense that the Empire and its successor would keep returning to the idea. What doesn't make sense is that it can always be blown up. Maybe the Death Star is the ultimate McGuffin of the Star Wars saga.

Trying to figure out what happened in the aftermath of the second Death Star's destruction is difficult. The opening crawl (rarely as necessary to the franchise's films as it is here) could have been a little more specific about how the Rebellion failed to vanquish the Empire totally. Or it could have detailed that this is (another) civil war, and both camps control large portions of the galaxy. Of course, this is not the first time that the Star Wars audience has been cheated. The crawl for the original movie said that the plans to the Death Star, if used properly, could restore freedom to the galaxy. Also, Grand Moff Tarkin says later in that film that the Death Star, in conjunction with the regional governors, will take the place of the Imperial Senate in maintaining control over the various systems. So the Death Star is blown up, everybody celebrates, and we find in *The Empire Strikes Back* that, surprise surprise, it just wasn't good enough and the Rebels are on the run...again. You would think that at least the Empire would be on the run. If fear of the battle station is supposed to keep the systems in line, what replaces the Death Star as the means of control?

There have been other sleights. We never are told in *Revenge of the Sith* who Sifo-Dias is, nor who ordered the clone army. And George Lucas admits that the idea of "The Other" voiced by Yoda in his last line in *The Empire Strikes Back* was a ruse to make audiences think that Luke was expendable. When plans for sequels to *Return of the Jedi* were abandoned in pre-production of that film, any inkling that there could be a mystery Jedi out there was jettisoned, Leia was deemed kin, the love triangle was resolved by default, and all was made right. In fact, Lucas was so hasty in wrapping up his cinematic adventures, he dispensed with his best characters! J.J. Abrams apparently felt obliged to replace them with approximations. Thousand-year-old Maz Kanata replaces Yoda, grotesque Snoke replaces the Emperor, black-masked Ren replaces Vader. It wouldn't be a surprise if in the next film we discover that Boba Fett has left behind a clone of himself, just like his 'father,' Jango Fett, did. Instead of Nutter Fett, let's see something original in *Episode VIII*.

As our movie progresses, all we're told is that Luke's self-exile after Ben's betrayal led to a wave of unchecked evil as Empire-sympathizers exploited the ensuing power vacuum and challenged the Republic. Even if Leia had merely said something to Han like, "How did we ever let things get so bad?," there could at least be an acknowledgment to the audience that this isn't quite what we expected, given the finality of *Return of the Jedi's* ending.

Thankfully, any information we need on the origins of the First Order (and Rey!) can be conveyed by Luke in the next film. And as he exposit, we can experience first-hand the broken spirit of Star Wars's ultimate hero. After a career of being an undeserved also-ran, Mark Hamill is ready to do some serious acting.

The Force Awakens is more than an endearing pastiche. In addition to some jaw-dropping, tear-welling moments, it has the best ending of any Star Wars movie. We get tension and resolution (it just beats the concluding moments of *Attack of the Clones*). Skywalker is found. We know why he hid, but we don't know why he provided an obscure map to his location through the auspices of R2-D2.

The film finishes with three minutes *sans* dialogue (the last line is Leia's "May the Force be with you") as we travel through hyperspace with Rey and Chewbacca, reveling in some of the greatest combinations of visuals and music in all seven films (which is saying a lot, indeed). Then we join Rey in climbing the Jedi Steps. Luke doesn't seem happy with this interloper, but he is certainly intrigued by the lightsaber she bears like a talisman. The very fact that she has it justifies her intrusion. He senses that she seeks his instruction. We can see in his face that he already fears he will fail, as he failed with young Ben. Just as Yoda had reservations about training Luke, now Luke is in the same position. It is better for a Force-sensitive individual to remain ignorant than to turn to the Dark Side with unimaginable power at his disposal. Luke's brief appearance (while being talked about by practically everyone in the galaxy for the entire movie) finally gives him his due, and justifies suited-Vader's similarly brief appearance in *Revenge of the Sith* as more than a cameo designed to sell cereal. The camera, spinning around the characters, makes it seem like they're caught in a vortex or a whirlpool. Indeed, the fate of the galaxy depends on their choices...as we blast into the credits.

It's wonderful having Rey take Han's place as captain of the Millennium Falcon. She can fly, she can repair, she can fight, and Chewbacca accepts her, which speaks volumes. Recall the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Lando was flying the Falcon, but we thought Han could return (Harrison Ford hadn't signed a contract for the next film). Now we know that Solo will not be back. And Lucas's decision to keep Han alive at the end of *Return of the Jedi* (over the objections of Harrison Ford) has proved very wise.

In fact, Harrison Ford may be the last of the great movie stars. He is on par with Humphrey Bogart and Jimmy Stewart. His performance in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* was certainly not the problem with that installment, and here he is in top-notch form again. He anchors the film and his character is finally redeemed from the post-hibernation stupor of *Return of the Jedi*; he has plenty to do, and he can finally be the rogue again, not the benign actioneer. His acting may be better when he has no lines (note the raid scene in *Patriot Games*). His best scene in *The Force Awakens* is his last—afraid of his own son, he hesitates before confronting him at the abyss; though it's never said, he knows he might be killed. Honoring Leia's request to rescue their son is his death sentence.

Despite the exaltation many Star Wars fans have experienced at this reinvention of a beloved fictional world, the sad thing is that, with Disney's purchase of the franchise, Star Wars will never end. It will ramble on, like the James Bond series, indefinitely. At least the Bond series (which helped set the stage for *Star Wars* with its refreshing potpourri of optimistic action-adventure), for the great majority of its fifty-plus years, has been a series of self-contained stories. Star Wars, by contrast, is episodic, and one adventure leads to another. Now, to ensure theme-park profitability, there can never be a Happily Ever After. But for the dedicated fans who were not only disappointed with the prequels, but also *Return of the Jedi* over 30 years ago, perhaps this third trilogy is an unprecedented opportunity for lightning to strike thrice. It's too bad that Lucas isn't happy. But even before he sold it to Disney, Star Wars belonged to all of us.