

Star Wars: The Force Awakens: No real awakening

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Directed by J. J. Abrams; screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan, J. J. Abrams, and Michael Arndt

December 18 saw the release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (*TFA*), the sequel to *Return of the Jedi* (1983), the last film in the original trilogy of popular science fiction movies. The first came out in 1977. The release of *The Force Awakens* has been surrounded by a large-scale public relations campaign and vast media hoopla. The public has been informed, more or less, of its civic duty to turn out and see the film.

The new film—directed by J.J. Abrams (*Star Trek*, 2009; *Star Trek Into Darkness*, 2013)—comes 10 years after what was supposed to be the “final” *Star Wars* installment, *Revenge of the Sith*, the concluding film in a trilogy of “prequel” movies that dramatized how Anakin Skywalker became Darth Vader and how the “democratic” Galactic Republic became the first Galactic Empire. This new offering serves as the first part of a “sequel” trilogy that tells the story of the next generation and how they deal with the unsettled ghosts of their predecessors.

The story takes place 30 years after the events depicted in *Return of the Jedi*. The “rebel” alliance has fulfilled its mission and established a “New Republic.” However, a remnant of the former Galactic Empire, known as the First Order, has started to exert power. Fighters led by General Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher) oppose the rise of the First Order and call themselves the “Resistance.”

Both the First Order and the Resistance are searching for Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), “the last Jedi,” who has gone into seclusion. The leader of the First Order, Snoke (Andy Serkis), a sinister figure who appears as a giant hologram, dispatches one of his underlings, Kylo Ren (Adam Driver), to discover Skywalker’s location.

Ren’s search brings him to the planet Jakku, where a Resistance pilot, Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac), has obtained a map indicating Skywalker’s location. Before being captured, Dameron inserts the data into a small droid named BB-8. Meanwhile, one of the Stormtroopers in Ren’s party, FN-2187 (John Boyega), later Finn, fails to comply when Ren gives the order to execute a group of villagers, and abandons the First Order. He helps Dameron escape from Ren’s forces, but their small ship is shot down above Jakku.

Finding himself alone on the desert planet, Finn soon crosses

paths with a young scavenger named Rey (Daisy Ridley), who has befriended BB-8. Finn escapes further attacks by leaving the planet with Rey and BB-8 aboard the Millennium Falcon, the ship belonging to Han Solo (Harrison Ford) that was stolen years ago. Rey and Finn decide to help BB-8 return to the Resistance with the map, and eventually succeed with the assistance of Solo and Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew), who have been searching for their former vessel.

The First Order has developed a superweapon that consumes stars and focuses their energy into beams that can disintegrate entire planets, similar to the Death Stars in the original trilogy. The First Order leaders prepare an attack on the planet where the Resistance is located, precipitating a desperate attempt by its leaders, as well as Rey and Finn, to destroy the terrifying weapon....

One has to report that, all in all, *The Force Awakens* is a mediocre action picture. It is not insufferable like the recent “prequels,” directed by George Lucas, but it is still mediocre, even as a piece of light entertainment.

If *TFA* is intended as a kind of coming-of-age story, like the previous films, it falls short because it does not offer much plausible insight into that process, or any other. The characters here are largely one-dimensional. Rey is invariably “feisty” and “spirited,” Poe is “gung-ho” and “heroic,” Finn has “a good heart” and, once committed, “loyal to the end.” On the other hand, there are the villains, who sneer and storm about a great deal. In this “far, far away” galaxy, psychological complexity is apparently unknown.

All the *Star Wars* films are based on this simplistic dichotomy between “good” and “evil.” Ludicrously, the “fate of the galaxy” depends on the ability of a handful of individuals in each category to control their troubled, in part inherited, in part mystically generated, emotional and mental states.

The original 1977 film was something of a spoof, or seemed like one—only the diehards took it to heart. Carrie Fisher, in fact, has made mockery of her performances in the first three films something of a staple of her one-woman shows in recent years. Yet, here she is, appearing to treat the material terribly seriously. Money and celebrity still have their allure. The scenes between Ford and Fisher are rather awkward, and one feels bad for both of them.

The appearance of this film is being treated as a major cultural and social event. Without idealizing America's or its film industry's past one bit, there was a time when "the much-talked-about film" was an effort to say something, perhaps hamfistedly, perhaps melodramatically, perhaps shallowly, about the world. Fifty years ago, movies such as *Elmer Gantry*, *West Side Story*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate* were making a splash. Again, all of them were flawed, some very seriously flawed, but nonetheless they were films about something. Superhero adventure stories and the like were treated as camp or made up Saturday morning fare for children.

Certainly, *The Force Awakens* bears witness to the times in which it was produced. How could it not, how could any work not? The past 15 or 20 years, especially since September 11, 2001, of non-stop war and militarist belligerence have had an impact. This film is quite violent, and the opening scene where Ren and his Stormtroopers burn a village to the ground and execute all of its occupants in a fashion similar to *Einsatzgruppen* death squads does have a certain resonance.

But, then, James Cameron's *Avatar* also obviously made reference to the brutality of neo-colonial invasions, yet that was hardly a blow against imperialist war. It would be a mistake to confuse the almost inevitable "seepage" into *The Force Awakens* of harsh objective realities with a conscious or consistent statement against war. Much of the film is a paean to pain-free, blood-free killing and mayhem, as long as it is in a good cause. The social or political criticisms, such as they are, are too amorphous and tepid to make a serious impact. The First Order is presented as a fascist regime reminiscent of the Nazis, but at the root of this organization are "evil" leaders who are inexplicably devoted to a "dark side" set of spiritual beliefs.

The *Star Wars* franchise is the most popular in history. From the day tickets for *The Force Awakens* first went on sale until the night before its release, online ticket merchant Fandango reported that it broke the company's record for most tickets sold by any movie during its entire theatrical run. It has been estimated that pre-sales for *TFA* had reached \$100 million by the end of Thursday night. By the end of Sunday night, it had reached \$517 million, making it the second highest-grossing film in just one weekend. The film has yet to be released in China, which is the world's second largest movie market.

As noted, Abrams's film is essentially being imposed on the population by a gigantic marketing bombardment. Both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton mentioned it in public appearances.

For example, *Variety* reported, "The White House said that *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* will be screened on Friday for members of Gold Star families, an organization of family members who lost relatives in military combat.... The president also indicated that he would attend the screening, telling the media at the end of a press conference, 'OK everybody, I have

to get to *Star Wars*.'"

In her closing remarks at Saturday night's Democratic Party debate, Clinton concluded by saying, "Thank you, good night, and may the Force be with you."

Many of those involved in the new film's production have stated in interviews that the reason people are still attracted to *Star Wars* after 40 years is that the series has a positive message and gives people "hope." The problem is that this "hope" is not founded on any real answers to, or even explorations of, real problems. The fixation on "good" and "evil" personalities does not go far beyond the tabloid-soap opera approach to social reality—or the rubbish of American political campaigns where voters are encouraged to choose a man or woman based on images generated by the media, entirely apart from their social position and program ("he has an honest face," "she has leadership capabilities").

There is also the obvious element, at a time of unprecedented instability and volatility, with the American ruling elite apparently determined to provoke a third world war, of a popular desire to escape the generally distressing state of things.

The mediocrity of *The Force Awakens* is not the fault of the audience, but people need to demand more. This is simply not serious or challenging filmmaking, even in the action genre. It gets tedious, repetitive. Ridley's and Boyega's performances make for appealing characters, and the film is not malevolent or cynical, but it ultimately serves as little more than a time-killer.

Disney and Lucasfilm plan to release *Star Wars* Episodes VIII and IX in 2017 and 2019, respectively, and they will also be releasing films outside the episodic series. In December 2016, *Rogue One* will be released, showing how the rebels obtained the Death Star plans immediately before *Episode IV: A New Hope*. It has been described as being more "gray" when it comes to morality and less focused on the Force or on "good" and "evil."



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