

Star Wars: The Last Jedi—The further business of the Disney franchise

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Written and directed by Rian Johnson

December 15 saw the release of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, the eighth entry in the episodic film saga and the third to be released since its production company Lucasfilm was purchased by Disney in 2012.

The new film opened in 4,232 theaters in the US and took in \$220 million on its opening weekend. According to Box Office Mojo, the movie “delivered on expectations, debuting with the second largest opening weekend of all-time and propelling the box office to the third largest weekend ever based on estimates. ... *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* delivered the second largest opening weekend ever behind only *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, which debuted with \$247.9 million back in 2015.” It is “only the second film to ever gross over \$100 million on opening day.”

This is the only thing anyone at Disney or in Hollywood cares about. The statement by Disney president of theatrical distribution Dave Hollis to the effect that the makers of *The Last Jedi* “have delivered an experience that is totally *Star Wars* yet at the same time fresh, unexpected and new,” which “has got people talking [and] puzzling over its mysteries,” is so much hot air. Hollis, in any event, can’t help but let the financial cat of the bag when he goes on to suggest that the qualities of the latest *Star Wars* entry “should help set the film up for great word-of-mouth and repeat viewing as we enter the lucrative holiday period.”

Disney and its marketing partners spent nearly \$60 million in television advertisements to make certain that a portion of the American population would feel obliged to see *The Last Jedi*. The studio spent \$12 million on television marketing in the two weeks prior to the December 15 opening, much of it during sports programming, especially NFL football. According to iSpot.tv, the largest co-marketing sponsorship, \$11.7 million, came from Nissan for its intelligent mobility

technology.

As pymnts.com notes, the release of *The Last Jedi* “has once again unleashed a tidal wave of *Star Wars* products: Socks, home décor, kitchenware and linens, ice cream, nail polish, watches, cufflinks and even *Star Wars*-styled clothing designed not for cosplay—which is when fans dress up as their favorite characters in the most true-to-movie fashion possible—but for everyday wear.”

Bloomberg comments that *Star Wars* fans with “\$10,000 to burn” can purchase an “\$8,999 *Star Wars* pinball machine,” a “\$6,499 Millennium Falcon coffee table,” the “\$9,999 Han Solo carbonite desk,” or the “\$10,250 Darth Vader crystal” from Swarovski.

The economic stakes are considerable and tend to ensure, as the *Hollywood Reporter* points out, that a “bona fide ‘shake up’—philosophical, ethical, or otherwise—of the *Star Wars* universe would be a sort of pop-culture earthquake. ... Disney has not and almost certainly will not take the risks that would be involved in such a move when they spent over \$4 billion acquiring the franchise.”

This is the necessary prelude to and framework for any discussion of the film’s “artistic” or dramatic merits.

The Last Jedi picks up where 2015’s *The Force Awakens* left off, for those keeping track, with heroine Rey (Daisy Ridley) confronting Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), and the First Order ready to retaliate after the loss of its Starkiller super weapon.

The Resistance base is under attack. The rebels barely escape, but General Leia Organa (the late Carrie Fisher) is badly injured and left unconscious for much of the film. Command transfers to Admiral Holdo (Laura Dern) who has conflicts with Captain Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac) about which course to take.

Dameron helps Finn (John Boyega) and newcomer Rose (Kelly Marie Tran) escape on a small transport to the planet Canto Bight to find a codebreaker who can help

them slice into the First Order's flagship and disable important systems. A mysterious individual (Benicio Del Toro) says he can help them accomplish the feat, and the three return to the remnants of the fleeing Resistance fleet.

Meanwhile, Skywalker refuses to return with Rey to the Resistance or train her as a Jedi. He has decided that the Jedi were a failure and that what he has learned must not be passed on. Rey decides to remain on the island where Skywalker has been hiding and finds herself repeatedly connected through the Force to villain Kylo Ren (Adam Driver).

The First Order's Supreme Leader Snoke (Andy Serkis) berates Ren for failing to find Skywalker. Ren leads the initial attack on the fleeing Resistance fleet, but fails to pull the trigger when he has the command ship of his mother, Leia Organa, in his sights. Rey reaches out to Ren and believes she can turn him back to the light side of the Force. Further formulaic adventures lie in store.

Writer-director Rian Johnson has included certain unexpected elements. More prominent characters see their end than one would expect, and it is difficult to predict how certain situations will play out. However, there are also a barrage of irritating gimmicks and gags obviously included to lighten the mood, but which often simply remove the viewer from whatever the central experience is intended to be.

The film also stretches the imagination far too much in terms of physics. The *Star Wars* franchise has never pretended to be scientifically accurate, but the creators reach new depths in *The Last Jedi*, particularly in terms of what is possible through the Force.

However, what really sets *The Last Jedi* apart from the last two Disney offerings is that there is so little to which one can relate in terms of anything historically or socially recognizable. *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* at least included militarist elements that recalled the roots of Nazism in the former case and terrorist organizations in the latter. *The Last Jedi* is almost entirely focused on the "spiritual side" with some military bombast and ill-placed jokes thrown in.

One might hope the second chapter in a trilogy would place more emphasis on character development and put the protagonists in positions where they might undergo life-altering experiences as well as lose more of their innocence. There is some such loss in *The Last Jedi*, but it is dealt with so trivially that none of the new, young protagonists seems to have gone through any significant changes by the end.

This film is another example of how much talent can be wasted on cinema that does not have anything of substance to say. Perhaps more than in any other *Star Wars* film, the technical effects and cinematography are at times breathtaking and beautiful. Many of the actors are talented and have shown an interest in being taken more seriously (Daisy Ridley in particular has said in interviews that she does not want to appear in any more *Star Wars* films after her contract expires).

Many people may be drawn to *The Last Jedi* because it includes the last screen performance by Carrie Fisher, who sadly passed away last December. Unfortunately, as in *The Force Awakens*, her dialogue and place in the story are weak. Dern's Admiral Holdo is far more believable as a Resistance leader. Whatever spark Fisher's performance added to the original trilogy has been lost in these latest films.

As noted above, *Star Wars* has become a big profit machine for Disney.

For *The Last Jedi*, Disney enforced new agreements with movie theaters, allowing it to keep as much as 70 percent of box office revenues and to stipulate how long the film appears on the biggest screens in each location. When this was announced in November, many theater owners complained it would hurt business.

Due to the profitability of the franchise, *Star Wars* films will not stop appearing any time soon. Currently, another standalone film—*Solo*, directed by Ron Howard—is set to be released in May 2018, and J.J. Abrams (writer and director of *The Force Awakens*) has been hired to complete the current episodic trilogy with Episode IX, to be released in December 2019.

Last month, Lucasfilm announced that Johnson had been hired to make a brand-new trilogy set in a different corner of the *Star Wars* universe that has not been explored. This first chapter of this new trilogy will likely appear in theaters in 2020 or 2021. Whether this is an item for a business columnist or a film reviewer remains a question.



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