



The Force Awakens: The Best Star Wars Film Yet

A long time ago, in a galaxy far far away, 
there was a Republic, a Galactic Empire, and
a rag-tag band of freedom fighters called
“the Rebellion.” There were Jedi Knights and
Sith Lords, strange worlds and stranger
characters. There was a myth and a legend.
More recently, and much, much more
closely, JJ Abrams made the best *Star Wars*
film ever.

There is a certain danger in writing a review of a film whose secrets are as closely guarded as those of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. Say too little, and it is barely a review; say too much and you spoil the film for people who haven’t seen it. I will attempt to tread the fine line between the two, since they are both clearly paths to The Dark Side.

I saw the original *Star Wars: A New Hope* at a drive-in in 1977. I watched with the wide-eyed wonder of a six-year-old boy as Luke, Leia, Han and the others battled for freedom against the overwhelming power of the Empire. I loved Han. I hated Darth Vader. I collected cards, hung posters, played with action figures (they were not *dolls*, thank you), and waited with bated breath for the next installment. I subsequently saw both *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* and *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. I quite literally grew up on *Star Wars*.

By 1999, I was a more discriminating movie-goer. In anticipation of the upcoming trilogy of prequels, I rented the re-released original trilogy. I was completely underwhelmed. The magic was still there, but only because of the story. I realized something I had not as a child; Lucas had created a great *story*, but he did a lousy job *telling* it. I watched each new installment with the same feeling. I have since watched all six films several times and my impression is unchanged. Great story, lousy telling. So, when Disney bought Lucasfilm and announced a new batch of *Star Wars* films were in the works with JJ Abrams writing and directing, I was both excited and anxious. There was no doubt I would watch them. Again and again. I imagined another trilogy of great stories poorly told, but I hoped that the company famous for great story-telling could take the worlds and characters Lucas had created and finally make truly great films about them. I was not disappointed.

I saw the film in 3D. It was — in a word — immersive. The sets are amazing, and the battle sequences are larger than life. If you plan to see *The Force Awakens*, see it in 3D if you can. It is quite an experience.

With everything Disney and Abrams put into *The Force Awakens* — from top notch writing, directing, and production, to good actors and smart marketing (including keeping a tight lid on the plot and ending) leading up to the release — it is no wonder the film shattered all box office records during its opening weekend. Estimates are that the film grossed \$238 million in North America alone and more than that much abroad. It may be a long time before another film makes more than half a billion dollars in three days.

From the opening scene, *The Force Awakens* delivers. Many of the characters from the previous films are there, joined by new characters. The combination of the old and the new helps the transition. It



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avoids the stark feeling of starting over that marked the first several episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. It is nice to see familiar faces and personalities while being introduced to those who will undoubtedly play a role in the films that are sure to follow.

The story is set some 30 years after Luke and his father, Anakin Skywalker / Darth Vader, conquer the Dark Side and bring balance to The Force by defeating Emperor Palpatine. Now, a new power threatens that balance and the Republic.

The new power, like the old, borrows elements from the tyranny of Nazi Germany with all of its evils and totalitarianism. The “Resistance” is fierce and unwavering. They are fighting for their lives and their way of life. It is the classic story of the battle of good against evil that made the first *Star Wars* films work even with Lucas’s bad story telling. This time, though, not only is the story good, so is the telling.

Daisy Ridley makes her debut as a young scavenger named Rey who lives on a desolate planet (much like Tatooine) that is essentially a junk-yard. Without warning, Rey finds herself drawn into the galactic battle between good and evil. She has a part to play that she does not know and could not possibly understand. Her character is reminiscent of Luke Skywalker in the original film (no, I won’t tell you whether or not Luke appears in the film, so stop asking). Others have parts that remind the viewer of previous characters, as well.

Rey is joined by Finn, played by John Boyega, as she learns that the “legends” she grew up hearing about The Force, the Rebellion, the Jedi, and the Sith are all real. Together, Rey and Finn — like Luke and Han before them — find themselves in one chance encounter after another as they are guided by what looks for all the galaxy like dumb luck. In fact, if it weren’t for the viewer’s prior knowledge of the way The Force works to guide events, all that “dumb luck” would appear just dumb. In any other film — with the exception of *The Lord of the Rings* — this would work against the film. As it is, it adds to the film and helps pull the viewer in.

Everything about *The Force Awakens* is well done. The acting is good and believable. The characters are well developed. The dialogue is deep, witty, sharp, and well delivered. As Professor [William Strunk, Jr.](#) would have it, every word tells. The sets (some familiar, some new) are complete and help sell the story. The directing and production have a sense of excellence that really make this a great film. *The Force Awakens* is full of the familiar and the new, the expected and surprises. The anticipation builds and is (mostly) resolved. The ending leaves the viewer waiting for the next installment.

There is no nudity. There are no suggestive scenes or scantily clad characters. The only thing that may keep parents from taking children to see *The Force Awakens* would be the violence. The battle sequences are intense and show death and some mild amount of blood. It may be too much for young viewers.

And there is, of course, the matter of The Force which bears a strong resemblance to both the Chinese and Japanese teaching of Qi and the Manichean heresy of the third through seventh centuries. The Force is loosely based on the idea of dualism — that the universe is made up of equal parts good and evil and that they are balanced in power. This is opposed to the Christian teaching that evil is not an actual force, but merely the absence of good. As Han Solo explains (yes, he is in the film, but if you’ve seen either the trailer or the poster, you already knew that), “I thought it was a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. A magical power holding together good and evil, the Dark Side and the Light. The crazy thing is, it’s true. The Force and the Jedi, all of it. It’s all true.” Lucas also borrowed from other religious and



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philosophical ideas in creating the *Star Wars* universe. He told *TIME* magazine's Bill Moyer that he "had to come up with a whole cosmology" for the story and borrowed elements from ancient Gnosticism, Buddhism, and certain elements of Christianity. He said, "I wanted to express it all."

While this may be a cause for some concern, it could also serve as an opportunity to discuss these ideas with your children. The concern is largely ameliorated by the fact that this story is a myth, a legend and helps share a larger truth about about selflessness, sacrifice, love, honor, and duty. Importantly, the concept of the force is not true to the dualism of either Qi or Manicheanism. *Star Wars* has always shown that there is a moral difference between good and evil. It has also always shown the choices people make that lead them to follow one or the other and the consequences they bear for the choices they make.

Patriotic Americans who are aware of (read: paying attention to) the growing State, will recognize the historical elements of a tyranny that never sleeps for long in the way the Dark Side of The Force continues to rear its ugly head. Every generation must choose and pay the price for freedom. As Thomas Jefferson said, "Eternal vigilance is the price we pay for liberty."

I recommend *The Force Awakens*. In fact, I give it five light sabers.

Please pay others the courtesy of keeping your comments below devoid of anything that isn't known by those who have not seen the it. You wouldn't want to go over to the Dark Side.



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