

Star Wars: The Force Awakens—It Will Be Watched



By Adrian Bonenberger

I wrote a long essay about Lindsay Graham's candidacy a few months ago, when Craig Whitlock broke the story about Graham's [sleazy and disingenuous military service](#) (I choose my words very carefully—no enlisted man or officer who's had to struggle for promotion can view Graham's career and retirement with anything other than disgust). I revised it about a month ago, updating it to reflect his ongoing unsuccessful candidacy, and his apparent lack of interest in taking responsibility for a matter any honorable man would have sought to resolve before it became an issue. My hope was to bring attention to the fact that Graham himself still draws pay as a retired Air Force Colonel, which is outrageous, and also as further evidence that neither the military nor Congress can be trusted to police themselves when it comes to the obvious conflict of interest inherent to having appointed

officers of the executive branch, legally beholden to the office of the President, serving as representatives of the citizen electorate.

Boring, boring shit. So boring I'm annoyed I had to summarize it in a paragraph. And I don't blame *you* for being annoyed with me at having made you read it. Long story short—dictatorship, venality, corruption, blah blah blah. Fuck it.

Instead of slamming you with 2,500 words about how our democracy is basically doomed, let's talk about the new *Star Wars* instead. I recently watched Episode VII—*The Force Awakens* and feel compelled to discuss it in candid terms, for your edification. There will be no spoilers in this discussion of the movie. I've listened to the experts discuss SWTFA, I've read the positive reviews. It's time to deliver a counterbalance to the predictable parade of pander coming out of the usual corners.

Background on me, and how I interact with this movie franchise: I'm a longtime fan of *Star Wars*, an easy get. I saw *Star Wars* when it first aired on network television, and *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* in theaters. I had a few of the toys growing up as a kid. Never read the books, nor did I read many comic books beyond the few that somehow ended up in Branford's public library. I have never worn a character costume for any reason. I'm aware of the role-playing game but never played it. My friends and I played the video games during the high school years, and then later in college.

I didn't hate *Attack of the Clones*. I like movies, and the *Star Wars* franchise is clearly capable of delivering great movies (*Star Wars*, *Empire Strikes Back*) as well as others that are... less great (*Return of the Jedi*), mediocre, or bad. Albert Burneko wrote about this phenomenon [more gracefully than I could have, as usual](#), for *Deadspin*.

Outside Star Wars, I like satire and noir and comedy. Hitchcock, and Herzog. I loved *The Thin Red Line* and *Dr. Strangelove* and *Paths of Glory*. *Starship Troopers* was a great satire of what it would be like to live in a fascist society. I'm not a goddamned hater! I'm not!

I didn't love *The Force Awakens*.

More context, since no matter what I say now, forever, people will point me out as the white man who stood up and said "it was a good mediocre movie." Not a prudent place, tactically, to be, in other words, in a movie with [a powerful female lead](#) and [strong minority supporting characters](#). On a scale of 1-10, 1 being bad and 10 being great, here's my take on all other Star Wars movies:

I Phantom Menace: 4/10

II Attack of the Clones: 4/10

III Revenge of the Sith: 5/10

IV Star Wars: 10/10

V Empire Strikes Back: 9/10 [many would invert the SW/ESB rating here]

VI Return of the Jedi: 8/10

Overall, I'd give *The Force Awakens* 6/10, putting it a lot closer to *Revenge of the Sith* than *Return of the Jedi*. It was entertaining, it gave me chills and brought tears to my eyes with the music, sound effects, and deft introduction of major plot points I'd seen in my childhood. The story wasn't bad! But it wasn't *great*, which is what I was hoping for. It could have been great, too. You can see it *trying* to be great, almost making it, and being dragged down by—I don't know what. Marketing? Disney? Interference? Politics?

Here are the three major problems I had with *The Force*

Awakens. Every intelligent human with whom I've spoken, Democrats and Republicans both (so I feel like I'm on solid footing), old fans and new, all agreed with me on the following basic points:

ONE

The world that was built so deftly, so economically in *Star Wars* and *Empire Strikes Back* (and so clumsily in the prequels) is confusing in *The Force Awakens*. Consider the first five minutes of *Star Wars* for a moment—a movie that is itself a master class in storytelling. The audience learns that (1) there's an Empire and a Rebellion—the political order of the world is comprehensible [side note—I learned what a “rebellion” was as a child from the movie, when my parents explained the dynamic to me]—and (2) who the good and bad guys are, what they look like, how they behave. When Darth Vader and Storm Troopers capture and storm a tiny ship, killing its soldiers and capturing its cargo, a princess, everything (sounds, visuals, music, action) balances harmoniously for the audience. Whether or not one is interested in the larger story, it is impossible to deny that the essential conflict has been established, definitively and authoritatively. Having established so much, so clearly, the filmmaker is able to efficiently build the world out further in a myriad of ways. Stormtroopers in Mos Eisley represent a threat, which Obi Wan, described as a wizard, neutralizes using some kind of magic called “The Force.” Han Solo, a mercenary, is seen as reliable in part because he doesn't care for the Empire. This basic world building moment in the beginning of *Star Wars* is obeyed, reinforced, and becomes a touchstone of sorts, to the point where even in a later movie, understanding where a character stands vis-a-vis the Empire says things about that character—like with Han's assessment that Lando Calrissian has “no love for the Empire,” which sets, Calrissian up as an essentially good character.

In *The Force Awakens*, there are (ulp) three groups. The

Resistance seems like the inheritor (both in terms of weaponry, ideology, and personnel) of The Rebellion, and good characters affiliate themselves with it. The First Order seems like the heir (both in terms of weaponry, ideology, and personnel types) to The Empire's legacy, and evil characters affiliate themselves with it, including the movie's primary antagonists. Now—though it's rarely seen and little explained, apparently the third part of the galactic order at this point is—The Republic! Not “The Old Republic,” which was the government of the prequels, but something that seems to be allied with The Resistance, rather than The First Order—neither powerful enough to keep The First Order in check, nor so weak that they can be easily defeated at the outset. In any case, The Republic plays a passive role in the film, is described rather than seen, for the most part, and its presence raises more questions than it answers.

So at the end of the first film, here's what I know: Resistance good, like Rebellion. First Order bad, like Empire. Republic—*no idea*. Don't know where they are, what they look like, what they do. And this brings up serious questions that interrupt one's easy enjoyment of the film. We know First Order doesn't like Republic, and Resistance seems to like Republic, but why is the Resistance not part of the Republic? Who are they *resisting*? What are the basic relationships like in the film? In episodes IV-VI, everything was clear: Rebellion versus Empire, Light side of the force versus Dark side, and people torn between those two ideologies. In episode VII, I really could not tell you what motivates people to make choices based on their “side.” Which leads up to the second great flaw with this movie:

TWO

Lack of character driven plot. A movie that gets this right succeeds, and those that have trouble establishing or

following character motivations fail. The character with the strongest and most clear motivation in *The Force Awakens* is Kylo Ren, one of the primary antagonists. If you don't think this is a problem, you should. Without giving anything away in the movie, I'm going to rate each of the primary characters in terms of character unity and plausibility of action, also on a scale of 1-10, 1 being laughably absurd, 10 being perfectly reasonable:

Han: 9/10. A great performance worthy of the character and its actor.

Leia: 7/10. Not as much for General Leia to do as one might have hoped. Despite feminism raves about the film, the old and diminished star of the first series proves that especially in Hollywood, nothing is as powerless, ultimately, as a woman ravaged by time.

Kylo Ren: 10/10. Some people disputed this characterization of the first movie's antagonist, but the character was logical and compelling, and acted in ways that one would not expect. Given the weight placed on the actor's role and the character's significance in the movie and series, it is impossible to imagine a better character here.

Captain Phasma: 4/10. An absurd character, totally unnecessary. There were opportunities for Phasma to kick ass in a couple scenes that would have increased the Stormtrooper Captain's menace—instead, Phasma was the punchline of pointless jokes. Wearer of the silver suit, deliverer of vacuous lines. Why?

Chewie: Was never really a fan of Chewie but he does his thing in this movie, only, as with other elements of this movie, in a slightly imperfect fashion

Finn: 5/10. Extremely mediocre, almost perfectly mediocre character. If I had to get rid of one character, it would be Finn. I tried to imagine the movie without Finn, and it

immediately improved. A big part of this is the character's inexplicably contradictory compulsions. Just a flat, superficial character whose decisions at every point are surprising, because he's never adequately fleshed out.

Rey: 9/10. Pretty much carries the movie. Only thing that prevents her from rising to full on 10/10 Luke Skywalker status is her lack of *effort*—at no point does one doubt that she will prevail, she cruises through her challenges, which makes for a somewhat boring and anticlimactic finish. Also, her motivations are obscure and aestheticized in a way that Ren's are not. I don't know why a whiney Luke trying to get off Tatooine in *Star Wars* works where confident, capable Rey does not—but it's just not the same. I suspect that an unwillingness to test the female character, to risk “demeaning” or “diminishing” her and her capabilities were to blame for the difference here.

Poe: 8/10. There was not enough Poe in this movie, and those places where Poe occurred, he wasn't used to full effect. I believe this is because Poe and Finn could or should have been the same character—Poe is just the part of Finn that can fly X-Wings well. Together they'd be a far more interesting character, although their being separate characters raises the possibility of something truly revolutionary: *Star Wars*' first openly gay protagonists.

Side note—the actors all did great work in the movie (or at least I thought so). Finn wasn't poorly *acted*—on the contrary you can see John Boyega working like crazy to give the character life—nevertheless, one can only do so much with a mediocre draw.

THREE

Rushed plot. There are four or five parts in the movie I remember where one scene jumps to another without any idea of why it's happening or how it's connected to the action—places

that, in *Star Wars* and *Empire Strikes Back* are explained by the characters behaving logically given what the audience knows about them, or according to plot points that have been seeded beforehand. A great example of this is how Obi Wan's ghost speaks to Luke throughout the end of *Star Wars*—"use the force, Luke!"—then (the precedent has been established) manifests himself to Luke at the beginning of *Empire Strikes Back* and instructs Luke to seek master Yoda in the Degobah system. Luke then says Degobah and Yoda five or six times before he actually *flies* there. When Luke departs and arrives, the audience isn't thinking "where's Luke headed off to, now?" or "Degobah—where'd *that* star system come from? And who's this weird alien?" At various points during *The Force Awakens*, I found myself thinking "why are we here now, rather than somewhere else? And what's up with *f***ing* Finn, what he's doing makes no sense, again." Those places where the plot flagged in the original trilogy was often carried by the characters' powerful motivations, or the overall context of the universe (the first two gripes)—in VII, those places the plot drags or becomes confused, there's not much to rescue it from itself. It's nowhere near as bad as in the interminable *Phantom Menace*, but neither is *The Force Awakens* as clean and tight as its predecessors.

A final issue this trilogy will face is less definite, and much harder to describe. Apart from the legacy of the previous films and the weight of expectations from the comic books, television shows, video game, card traders and literary worlds that sprang up to satisfy peoples' curiosity, these films have to contend with the powerfully positive nostalgic legacy of the original trilogy. Things are already shaping up to be interconnected and contextually subtle in ways that are suitable for contemporary society, but fundamentally disappointing as light entertainment. In the original series, a young man confronts his father, and is able to transcend the

bad choices his father made, while wrestling to adhere to a strict moral code. Audiences are both more sophisticated and *less rational* today than they were in the 1970s and early 80s (a consequence in part of decreasingly consistent cultural mores, for better and for worse, but in the context of this movie, for worse), and there have been a glut of ambitious movies that foundered on their own desire to create complicated and clever, knowingly self-referential stories that satisfy everyone.

This movie is most laudable in part precisely because it goes so far out of its way to create a new mythology for the current social climate. After all, the original trilogy is basically a story for white European men. Women have long bemoaned the lack of fully realized female characters who can respond to (rather than mindlessly fulfill) gender expectations, and have found a hero in Rey. Some have claimed that the original trilogy is explicitly racist in its handling of both [Lando Calrissian](#) and [Darth Vader](#), and African Americans will likely be pleased with the inclusion of a heroic black character who owns his black-ness (and, possibly, in future films, his homosexuality) (Finn). Hispanic fans may feel burned by the relative lack of Poe, who is, as mentioned earlier, a character with great potential, sadly underused. Others saw earlier movies' treatment of native societies like the Ewoks and Gungans as exploitative and condescending at best, and racist at worst—there is almost nothing to be seen of earlier episodes' willingness to rely on racist or prejudicial tropes to be seen in *The Force Awakens*. The only overt examples of discrimination in *The Force Awakens* were (1) the aforementioned reluctance to give old women consequential roles outside ceremonial leadership functions and (2) the usual terrified insistence on binary cisgender roles in sex—homosexuality is unseen (unless Finn and Poe end up shacking up in later movies, which would be a good step in the right direction—clearly the two have a powerful and inexplicable immediate intimacy, seen in their few scenes

together, and Finn's character is such a cipher in terms of motivations that it's not at all implausible to imagine him developing in that direction).

Overall, the movie did a much better job at living up to the promise of the original trilogy than the prequels. The prequels were so bad without [serious rationalization](#) or [bizarre if entertaining conspiracy theories](#) that it's a minor miracle the franchise survived, and that Hollywood was willing to gamble on further movies. I am hopeful about *Star Wars*' long term prospects, based on this first, long-awaited sequel to the original trilogy. I'm also hopeful that Disney is confident enough in both its brand and the power of the original trilogy to allow real challenge to the characters, and enable them to grow. The series is overdue for a big winner, and Rey certainly seems strong enough to carry a powerful storyline.