

THE RISE OF SKYWALKER

Directed by J.J. Abrams
Produced by Kathleen Kennedy and J.J. Abrams
Distributed by Walt Disney Pictures
Released in 2019

Producer-director J.J. Abrams had his work cut out for him when he took control of *Episode IX* of the Star Wars saga. *Episode VIII* had seen its release date pushed back by six months due to production delays, and, while it still made a pile of money, writer-director Rian Johnson's more introspective amalgamation of pessimistic anti-capitalism, strident feminism, and warm equity-bathed humanism alienated some diehard fans. In the process many of the tropes established for the sequel trilogy in *The Force Awakens* were undermined, a schizoid (but ultimately intriguing) development best characterized by Luke tossing his old light saber over a cliff.

Then *Solo*, after Ron Howard replaced Phil Lord and Christopher Miller in the director's chair, was released in May of 2018, only making \$393.2 million internationally, a major disappointment for Disney that scuttled plans for other standalone films, including a Boba Fett adventure initially spearheaded by veteran writer-director Lawrence Kasdan.

Already it seemed that, with annual films and a surge in toy- and expanded-universe-book production, Star Wars had (once again) reached saturation point.

Moreover, this two-year gap between Skywalker saga films had proven to be severely ambitious. While it helped with continuity and costs when it came to locking in the actors' contracts (and good looks), it put tremendous strain on the production team, especially once it was decided to abandon George Lucas's outline (that, according to initial press accounts, helped secure the four-billion-dollar sale to Disney).

On top of all this, Carrie Fisher died. She was to have had a massive role in *Episode IX* leading the Resistance and confronting her wayward son, Kylo Ren, for Jedi-Sith supremacy. In her absence, Harrison Ford was coaxed back for a cameo to aid Ben Solo's turn, and the new core three—Fin, Rey, and Poe Dameron—*finally* function as a unit (just in time for the movies to wind down). Abrams manages to preserve some of Rian Johnson's innovations without contradicting the back-story established in *VII*; for example, he retcons Kylo Ren's reproving exposition from *Episode VIII* that Rey's parents were worthless drunks into a truth-as-far-as-he-understood-it, in that they posed as selfish reprobates to protect Rey from nasty Grandpa Palpy.

He also maintains the series's embrace of humanism accelerated by director Johnson. Here, despite some dark digressions, the tone is wildly optimistic, resulting in a bigger about-face than *Return of the Jedi* was in the wake of the bleak (but strangely energized) *The Empire Strikes Back*. The Resistance goes from some 25 personages on the Millennium Falcon at the end of *VIII* to total victory in *IX*! How?

When a dejected Poe asks Lando how his generation managed to keep fighting and win, Lando replied, "We had each other." Apparently it wasn't so much Lando's salesmanship in *IX* that wins over the galaxy (a plot development that causes justifiable angst for Leia fans who

were disgusted that no one came to the aid of the Princess-General in the concluding moments in *VIII*), but—per Poe's insight—that it was the difference between begging for help and leading fearlessly, confident that others will rally to the cause. (Of course, the fact that Palpatine took the shock-and-awe route of informing the entire galaxy that he was back would certainly persuade fence-sitters who are sick of war that sometimes the devil you know is *worse* than the devil you don't.) The Final Order, armed to the teeth with tricked-out Star Destroyers that can smash planets, is woefully understaffed. It knows the Resistance doesn't have a decent navy. What General Pryde didn't account for—and this is the key line in the movie—was "people." Every ship that shows up to fight at the end is manned by people who have had enough and are willing to make the necessary sacrifice to win the future.

This idea, that mankind can be expected to (eventually) do the right thing, that man is his own salvation, is at the core of humanism, and the key to understanding *The Rise of Skywalker*. For with this film, an idea from George Lucas's earliest 1970s drafts, that the Force is more accurately The Force of Others, finally is embraced. (In fact, when J.J. Abrams took over direction from Colin Trevorrow, he took the writers to meet with Lucas to discuss the nature of the Force.) We go from the Pantheistic concept (best expressed by Yoda in *Episode V*) that God is concomitant with nature and is (according to Obi-Wan in *Episode IV*) "an energy field created by all living things," to the idea (similar to Shinto and other animistic religions) that the dead continue to have a role to play in the world and should be feared/accommodated/revered and—perhaps—worshiped. This shift really begins with Kylo Ren making a shrine of Darth Vader's helmet and face mask, then speaking to his grandfather in a humble posture of meditation. (The Emperor later claims that he was behind every voice that Kylo Ren heard in his head, including that of his grandfather. Who knows?)

In *The Rise of Skywalker* this trend accelerates. What is Rey saying when we first see her in the film? She is meditating, intoning repeatedly, "Be with me." And, with her life ebbing away, it is only by the combined efforts of intervening dead Jedi that Rey is able to beat the Emperor by redirecting his Force lightning (did he learn nothing from his fight with Mace Windu in *Episode III*?; turn off the juice!). The Emperor says he is all the Sith, and she, with equal defiance, announces that she is all the Jedi. Lucky for her, the Jedi seem to ignore what Ben Kenobi said to Luke before he confronted Vader at the climax of *V*: "If you choose to face Vader, you will do it alone. I cannot interfere."

August Comte, nineteenth-century French philosopher, launched the discipline of sociology (incidentally, one of George Lucas's favorite subjects in college). He deified the human race, saying the Great Being was actually humanity in the collective—past, present, and future. The traits of sovereignty, complete rationality, and moral perfection that the humanists believed inherent to man were all that was necessary for man to save himself. Morality, or as the humanist might prefer, ethics, is autonomous and situational.

Thus, true humanism concerns moral standards defined by man. This can get a little thorny, particularly when different men refuse to adopt a unified standard. Much differentiation that occurs as men are judged (especially outside of courtrooms) involves that nebulous quality, intent. This cynical view of the Jedi first espoused by—of all people—Anakin in *Episode III* reaches its apex in *VIII* as Luke attempts to burn the original Jedi temple and Rey is

counseled by Kylo Ren to let the past die ("You're still...*holding on!* Let go!," a nice twist on the Buddhist-derived concept of the dukkha—the pain and futility of attachment, as [remember Shmi's encouraging words to her son in *I*, when he is reluctant to part from her] there is no way to stop change, any more than one can "stop the suns from setting.") Everything—Jedi, Sith, First Order, Resistance—should be junked and they alone should define what is and is not right in their galactic kingdom, as far as Kylo Ren is concerned.

Here comes that wayward philosopher Anakin Skywalker to the rescue again: "The Sith rely on their passion for their strength; they think inwards, only about themselves...the Jedi are selfless—they only care about others," and, therefore, though their efforts may be misguided and they may misapply their power, because they want to do good and not take control and not subjugate, their ways are right, and the Sith ways are wrong. So the films want things to have a certain ambiguity that is cleared up by the good feelings engendered in the audience by the heroes' exploits.

After finally (definitively) destroying the Emperor, Ben Solo returns the favor that saved his life, and bequeaths his life force to Rey, saving her from death. (This is the culmination of the wonderful force-dyad concepts developed by Johnson in *Episode VIII*, his greatest contribution to the franchise and the handmaiden of the most ostentatiously artistic, cinematic poetry since Anakin and Padme ruminated on their collective fate amidst slow-tracking shots of Coruscant in *Episode III*.) They kiss, he dies. His redemption/conversion is proved by his willingness to sacrifice himself.

Still, it's a shame. Kylo Ren is the most interesting character in all nine films. But just like his grandfather he's become the public face of an evil empire. He must die for his sins, or, pragmatically, die because no one will believe he's changed, and (stab-of-conscience time) Rey did (mostly) nothing but good.

If that isn't enough, there's one more twist of humanism. Since our identity is not found in God, let alone family or tribe or nation, we can redefine ourselves.

Never having a surname, Rey is challenged by the equivalent of a nosy neighbor at the film's conclusion. She could just call herself 'Rey Rey' and tell the old woman to mind her own business. Instead she says she's a Skywalker. After a tepid exploration of Fin's supposed Force-sensitivity, not only is this a final blow to Johnson's concept of a Force revival across the galaxy, seeing regular Joes like Broom Boy develop into Force users, it's also a (unintended?) slight against Ben and Han. Their last name was 'Solo.' The sequel trilogy sets Han up as being the father Rey never had. She loved Ben and would have married him. She could take the name 'Solo.' If she wants to honor Leia, this gets tricky, too. She was known as 'Organa,' not realizing she was of Skywalker blood until she was in her 20s. If Rey was really gutsy she'd call herself 'Palpatine' and set out to redeem the family name. After all, it's strongly implied that Palpatine could have—via the Force—seeded the virgin birth of Shmi Skywalker to begin the whole mess.

Why does Abrams feel the need to name her anything? Did Executive Producer Kathleen Kennedy hit upon 'The Rise of Skywalker' as a title (it matches up nicely with *Episode III*) and force him to bring the story in line? The film is really about Ben's redemption, more than Rey's perseverance (it's just not conceivable that they'll let Rey kill the Emperor and join Kylo Ren as his evil queen, or, even better, let Rey embrace her heritage and turn evil, only to be

destroyed at the last moment by the penitent Ben Solo). 'The Rise of Ren' might work, but something more generic like 'The Dawn of Freedom' would be preferable. After all, every time the Saga tries to tell a more universal story we're dragged back to the same Days of Our Lives travails of the same Force-sensitive dynasties again and again and again.

Regardless of the intent behind the move, Rey's parting declaration can be seen as the convoluted byproduct of thinking best exemplified in the U.S. Supreme Court's 1992 abortion-rights decision—*Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." That's humanism in a nutshell.

With the old light saber buried, and the construction of a new yellow-bladed model complete, is she launching a more benign, less bellicose Jedi order? It's obvious she's not shutting herself off from the Force entirely. The craziest thing about these movies is this constant harangue about bringing "balance" to the Force. It's not like everything's gone wrong at the beginning of *The Phantom Menace*. No, there's a stupid trade dispute and slavery lingers on a few outlying planets. That's it. So the Jedi aren't hoping for some kind of hero to push Evil back and ease the galaxy into a self-preserving detente. It seems to be something they aspire for even though Good has already triumphed!

Anakin fulfilled prophecy in *VI*. At the climax of *The Rise of Skywalker* he tells Rey, amidst the exhortations of his fellow dead Jedis, "Bring back the balance, Rey, as I did." But evil took no time in flourishing again. (Apparently only the Emperor is meant to be really bad. And now he's gone. The rest is left to our interpretation, which is perfectly in keeping with Ben's apologia from *Return of the Jedi*: "Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view.")

If there is real balance, Good would not win. Evil would not win. They would be locked in a perpetual stasis. And given the extremely vague morality of these films in every release since 1977 (fans are still arguing about Obi-Wan's *Episode III* declaration that "only a Sith deals in absolutes"), there is no telling what that would look like. But given George Lucas's self-professed religion of Buddhist-Methodist it's really no surprise that the Saga wants to have it both ways—universal Right and Wrong, and truth "from a certain point of view." That's why Chewbacca can't die on the transport; that's why C-3PO can't lose his memory; that's why the Millennium Falcon never gets blown up; that's why Luke decides he was wrong to finish the Jedi Order; that's why Han and Leia's storied romance goes bust; that's why Rey won't quit so she can't be turned; that's why Poe goes from fearless renegade in *VII* to plaintive general-by-consensus in *IX*; that's why the Emperor dies for no good reason; that's why Leia stops training to be a Jedi; that's why Kylo Ren wears the mask, then smashes it, then fixes it and wears it again; that's why Rose never gets Fin and Fin never gets Rey; that's why Han can—in effect—rise from the dead; and that's why the Death Star, and all its progeny, have to be destroyed in perpetuity. There's always another twist, a new uncertainty. There's no real beginning, middle, and end, because, without God, nothing—nothing—is for sure. Perhaps this muddled storytelling, this schizophrenic hodgepodge, is best explained as the result of humanistic thinking. That's why the most humanistic (i.e., European and Independent) films are open-ended, cynical, and meandering; they are strong on premise but weak on execution, and permit

a variety of interpretations simply because even the filmmaker is unsure of what the message is. For in our present day, looking to other societies, other belief systems, trying to synthesize and appropriate new ideas while, paradoxically, celebrating diversity, is the only way to be. All the while, being applauded if one can claim his views have "evolved" (and, by so doing, avoid being "on the wrong side of history") is of extreme importance. Religion, no matter how contrary to modern sensibilities, is fine, as long as it's not Christianity. We are convinced that, if we seek it fervently, we can find the truth, here on Earth, in the wisdom of man. And many, feeling totally out of step with the times, but not knowing what to think anymore, decide to simply go with the flow, to believe in everything and nothing all at once. *The Rise of Skywalker* is a product of its time.

In any event, not all of the sequel trilogy's missteps can be explained by tight schedules, shifting directors, and Fisher's death.

What was it that Rose said when she decided to not let Fin blow up the super-gun, and thus preserve the Resistance? "That's how we're gonna win; not fighting what we hate, [but] saving what we love." That is brilliant rhetoric. But unless the Resistance embarks on a strategy of passive non-resistance in the style of Gandhi and King, this flight of impassioned whimsy falls flat. And wishing it were true just makes this endless fight that much longer. Man is powerless to redeem war. It's ugly, wasteful, confusing, terrifying, and all too necessary. God, however, can make sense of the senseless, and He will redeem the world.

The Rise of Skywalker gets confused because it's the culminating episode in a series that increasingly finds its *raison d'être* in the fatuous self-delusions of humanism. In such a system, morality shifts from generation to generation, wrongs are now right, and—in our day—love is the only universal good. But the love that is embraced is love abstracted in word, intent, and feeling, not love demonstrated in fidelity, suffering, and honor. After all, we must, each of us, follow our heart, and be true to ourselves. That's what counts today. To be fair, many characters in the Star Wars saga behave selflessly, and don't live long enough to be applauded for their good deeds. But they all seem to base their decision making not on a universal standard, but, rather, a vague inner conviction that brooks no argument. And all the while "the will of the Force" is supposed to prevail.

But the Force is more like God as conceived by the Deists—an inscrutable power that just doesn't care, and would probably be happier left alone. That's why it always demands "balance." There's less messiness, less drama that way. And when we survey a story that takes place over the course of 60-plus years across nine films, with its constant false climaxes, constant allusions and knowing self-references, and inexplicable plot shifts, we might be inclined to think that there's nothing to be learned. Everything is a crapshoot, and history is bunk. All this tension between competing ideas—the difference between grandiose words and irresolute actions that reduces Good and Evil to mere different shades of gray—can make for good drama...until the thematic tropes begin repeating themselves in film after film, the characters slowly implode on themselves, and nothing seems to matter anymore.