

AN EXHAUSTIVE PERSPECTIVE ON AND ANALYSIS OF
STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI

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Key

TPM – *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999)

AOTC – *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* (2002)

TCW – *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2007–2020)

ROTS – *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* (2005)

ESB – *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)

ROTJ – *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1983)

TFA – *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015)

TLJ – *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017)

TROS – *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019)

**Star Wars* (1977), the original film, will be referred to by its original title, in italics; it has since been renamed *Star Wars: A New Hope*

I have never been in a film debate more complicated and nuanced as I have about *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. It has caused a great division amongst fans of the Star Wars films and universe. For some, it's one of the best Star Wars films in the entire saga, but for others, it's a giant scar within the Star Wars canon. I have seen the film a number of times and have spent a lot of time thinking and debating about it with fellow Star Wars fans. I have concluded that, although it possesses some great qualities and has good intentions, the film fails in its endeavor, and its legacy in the Star Wars story is that it played a major role in the shortcomings of the Sequel Trilogy. In the following essay, I aim to explain my perspective of the film through an analysis of the history of Star Wars, the filmmakers involved, the merits and failures of *The Last Jedi*, and *TLJ*'s impact on the final film of the trilogy.

My Experience with Star Wars

I have been a Star Wars fan for as long as I can remember. I grew up watching the Original Trilogy on VHS, dueling with toy lightsabers, and reenacting battles with Star Wars action figures. I have watched the entire saga countless times, watched *TCW* and *Star Wars: Rebels*, and read George Lucas: A Life by Brian Jay Jones in order to learn more about man behind it all. I don't just love Star Wars because it's entertaining, I love it because it's filled with great stories, told through incredibly well-crafted films (especially the Original Trilogy).

I was very excited when Lucasfilm began to develop a Sequel Trilogy, and I made sure to see all three films at Thursday night previews. I ended up seeing *TFA* at least five times in theaters, partly because of the thrill of seeing Star Wars in theaters again, but mostly because I thoroughly enjoyed the film and it excited me about the rest of the story to come. But after seeing *TLJ* for the first time, I was reluctant to see it again. I had left the theater with such an awkward feeling that first time; I had hoped to feel the same thrill I had after *TFA*, eager to see how the story would end, but instead, I left disappointed. My second viewing didn't happen until after the film arrived on Netflix, shortly after its home release. This time, I had the benefit of watching the film with subtitles, to help me gain a better understanding from the film's writing. But what I remember most about that viewing, was having to pause the film multiple times in order to air out my frustrations to whom I was watching it with. I have seen the film a few times since, trying my best to look at it with a new perspective and appreciate the good qualities, and while I have in some ways, my overall impression of the film remains.

Providing Context: A Brief History of Star Wars

In order to understand my perspective on *TLJ*, it's important to have a thorough understanding of Star Wars and its creator, George Lucas, as well his sale of Lucasfilm and the subsequent decisions made by the company. As a kid, Lucas loved to read comic books and watch Saturday-morning serials on TV. When he entered college, Lucas had a deep interest in Anthropology, the study of human beings, but ultimately decided to study film after becoming acquainted with cinematographer Haskell Wexler. Wexler help Lucas get admitted to the USC School of Cinematic Arts in the late 1960's, where he began to make waves with his avant-garde and experimental films. Lucas, like many film students of his generation, hoped to graduate and make films outside the bureaucracy and commercialization of the Hollywood system, but soon realized that he needed the financial support that only the studios could provide. Lucas' first feature, *THX 1138* (1970), was an experimental, science-fiction film that didn't receive much support from Warner Bros., and failed at the box office. His second feature, *American Graffiti* (1973), was quite the success, but the experience was frustrating for Lucas, as he was forced to fight Universal's pressure and oversight during filming and post-production.

For his next film, Lucas decided to write a space opera, inspired by the serials and comics he loved as a kid and built around the mythological framework of the "Hero's Journey," outlined by famed mythologist, Joseph Campbell. Lucas found support from 20th Century Fox executive, Alan Ladd Jr., who decided to take the risk in financing the science-fiction movie, which would rely, heavily, on special effects. Lucas wrote and directed the picture, and had Gary Kurtz produce, who had worked on *American Graffiti* and was known for his ability to push back on Lucas when necessary. They filmed on location in Tunisia, and at Elstree Studios in England in order to avoid studio oversight, while Ladd advocated for the film to the Fox studio board in Los Angeles. *Star Wars* was released on May 25, 1977, and quickly became one of the most successful film ever. The film's success allowed Lucas to independently produce two sequels (*ESB* and *ROTJ*), which Fox had rights to distribute; Lucas decided to step down from the director's chair for these films and acted as Story Writer and Executive Producer. The sequels were a tremendous success, and the trilogy that destroyed an empire, built one in real life.

As the world entered the digital age and computer technology led to incredible innovations in visual effects, Lucas decided to return to the Star Wars universe and produce a "Prequel Trilogy" to the original films (*TPM*, *AOTC*, *ROTS*). These films would chronicle the journey of Anakin Skywalker, from his

discovery as a child to his transformation into the evil Sith Lord, Darth Vader, all set during the rise of the Galactic Empire from the ashes of the High Republic. In his effort to maintain complete creative control, Lucas chose to write and direct each film and hired his lawyer, Rick McCallum, to produce. The films were successful at the box office, but often received criticism for the heavy use of Computer-generated Imagery (CGI), an over-focus on political themes, cheesy writing, bad acting, and poor direction. Many people claim that Lucas' full control, relative to the more-collaborative Original Trilogy, was to blame for the quality of these films, but I think Lucas doesn't receive enough credit for the strong narratives and challenging, mature themes presented in them.

Lucas accomplished so much through the Star Wars saga; his work helped pioneer digital filmmaking, visual effects through Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), sound design through Skywalker Sound, and the way we experience films through THX sound systems. After the Prequel Trilogy, Lucas considered making a "Sequel Trilogy" to the original films, even going as far as developing story outlines, but when Walt Disney Company CEO, Bob Iger, expressed his interest in acquiring Lucasfilm and its properties, Lucas decided it was finally time to let go.

In the deal that followed, Iger agreed to Lucas' request to install producer Kathleen Kennedy as President, but Iger made sure that the acquisition wasn't contingent on using Lucas' story outlines to develop their films. After the sale, Disney and Lucasfilm decided to move forward with their own plans: a trilogy of films, with an installment released every other year, as well as two stand-alone films released in the years between. In order to avoid the criticism of the prequels, and follow the tradition of the originals, Kennedy intended on hiring three different directors for each film.

The Force Awakens

For the first film in the new trilogy, Kennedy hired director JJ Abrams, noted for his work in TV and feature films, such as *Star Trek* (2009) and *Super 8* (2011). Abrams, a big fan of Star Wars, wanted to approach the project with humility and reverence, so he brought on Lawrence Kasdan, writer of *ESB* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), to co-write the script. The goal of the film was to appeal to fans of the original films, while staying relevant to a modern audience. The plot would share many similarities to the original *Star Wars* and the production tried to use real locations and practical effects whenever possible, but the film would center around a new generation of heroes and villains, while featuring some of the beloved characters from the Original Trilogy.

TFA was an incredible success at the worldwide box office, receiving acclaim from Star Wars fans and critics alike. There were, however, criticisms toward the lack of originality in plot and the quality of the antagonists, who many considered disappointing. But the film introduced interesting and relatable characters, and left many questions unanswered, setting a great foundation for the next films to build upon.

Enter Rian Johnson

For the second chapter of the new trilogy, Kennedy hired writer-director Rian Johnson, a graduate of USC (Lucas' Alma Mater) and an emerging talent noted for his work on *Breaking Bad*, *Brick* (2005), and *Looper* (2012). In the work I've seen from Johnson, it is apparent that one of his main goals, as a filmmaker, is to subvert the audience's expectations. A good example of this is seen in his latest film, *Knives Out* (2019). Presented as a classic "whodunnit," Johnson flips the narrative by revealing the circumstances of the victim's death early in the film; the story then follows the protagonist on her journey to cover her tracks, while a private detective tries to learn the truth. Johnson also uses the film as a sort of satire, writing the characters in a way that comments on wealth, privilege, and prejudice. Johnson's mission to experiment and make statements with his films fits well with the character and vision of George Lucas, making him a good fit to work within the Star Wars universe.

Johnson's goals as a filmmaker gave him a particular mindset when approaching his installment of the Sequel Trilogy: he was going to make the film that he wanted to make, and subvert the audience's expectations in the process. This has been affirmed by a story Mark Hamill shared at a panel discussing *TLJ*. Hamill had a difficult time making the movie, because he didn't agree with Johnson's creative choices for the character of Luke, and tried to argue that they should be considerate of what the fans want to see. But Johnson responded that they shouldn't make what the audience expects to see, but make the film that they want. This makes me believe that Rian Johnson wanted to use his Star Wars film as a platform to share his ideas about certain themes and characters, rather than continuing the story in a way that would please fans.

I would argue that Johnson's goals and mindset gave him a particular attitude while writing and directing *TLJ*, which is evident in his creative choices and response to criticism. As I mentioned earlier, *TFA* left many questions unanswered and characters undeveloped, leading fans to hope they would be addressed in *TLJ*. Johnson took the opportunity to address practically all of these in the film, but chose to do so in a

way that aligned with his goal of subversion; they were either executed in a way that was unexpected, or completely discarded as unimportant (I will go into detail later). I think Johnson's intentions can be clearly expressed through one of Kylo Ren's lines in the film: "Let the past die. Kill it if you have to." In trying to understand the reasoning behind Johnson's creative choices, I have come to think that his hope was to move the story forward into new territory, but his decisions often received major backlash from many Star Wars fans. Johnson's response was that, "[He] wouldn't change a thing."

The Merits of *The Last Jedi*

TLJ is one of the most visually stunning films in the Star Wars saga, captured through the great work done by cinematographer Steve Yedlin, the visual effects artists at ILM, and production designer Rick Heinrichs. Their work is amplified by very cinematic moments, such as the throne room duel, the light speed crash, and the Battle of Crait. Film is first and foremost a visual medium, so it is understandable why many people translate this specific aspect to describe the overall quality of the film.

Another quality to Johnson's script, is that it took the film down an unexpected and thought-provoking path by challenging traditional thought surrounding the Force and the Jedi through the journey of Rey and Luke. At the end of *TFA*, Rey discovers her ability to use the Force and finds Luke, hoping he will train her to become a Jedi. But at the start of *TLJ*, Luke adamantly refuses to train her, arguing that it's time for the Jedi to end. Eventually, Luke agrees to teach her about the Force, but only to reveal its true nature in hopes of persuading her against becoming a Jedi. This was an unexpected turn from the Luke we knew at the end of *ROTJ*, but this allowed the opportunity to take a look at the Force and the Jedi from a new perspective. Luke's argument centers around the hubris of the Jedi, which, he argues, gives them an undeserved sense of entitlement to the Force, as well as their legacy of failure, which he affirms through their history and his own failure to restore them. Though quite interesting, Johnson's choice to use Luke to address these ideas was very controversial (I will explain with my perspective later).

Another interesting idea Johnson presented in *TLJ* was an exploration of heroism and true leadership through the story of Poe, Leia, and Vice Admiral Holdo. Johnson's intentions for this story arc were great, but I think that he completely failed in his execution of this part of the story (I will go into detail later).

Another good theme presented in the film is a confrontation of the ethics of the wealthy, with an added emphasis on military industrialists, told through Finn and Rose's journey to Canto Bight. On their journey, they discover the wealthy are living a life of luxury and pleasure, paying little mind to the woes of the galaxy caused by the war; they abuse animals for purposes of entertainment, use orphaned children as labor, and make their profits selling weapons to both sides of the fight. This socio-economic commentary fits well within the themes often presented in Star Wars, particularly *TCW*, but there are many problems with the attempt made in *TLJ* (which I will address later).

But the best part of the film, in my opinion, is Kylo Ren's character arc, and how Rey is involved in it. When *TFA* was released, many fans were disappointed by Kylo Ren, seeing him as a "wannabe" Darth Vader, whose weaknesses make him less of a threat. But to me, Kylo was one of the most complex and well-developed characters introduced in *TFA*, and I think Johnson did an incredible job building on that in *TLJ*. Throughout *TFA*, we see that Kylo is failing to live up to the expectations of his master, Snoke, and feels conflicted about his alignment in the Force. At the end of *TFA*, he expresses this to Han Solo, saying, "I'm being torn apart. I want to be rid of this pain. I know what I must do, but I don't know if I have the strength to do it." The thing he "must do" is kill his father, Han Solo, in order to fully embrace the dark side. But when he does, we can see from the expression on his face that it didn't work; he still feels pain and conflict.

In the beginning of *TLJ*, Kylo faces Snoke, who openly expresses his disappointment in Kylo. Kylo responds, "I've given everything to you, to the dark side." To which, Snoke replies that it split his soul, confirming that the act of sacrificing his father only deepened Kylo's struggle. This is further illustrated later, when Kylo has an opportunity to kill his mother Leia, but chooses not to. But his journey in the film takes a turn when a Force connection is established between him and Rey, allowing them to communicate without resorting to violence. Through this, they both try to convince the other to join their side, and they begin to develop a deeper connection as they choose to be vulnerable with each other; Rey shares her deep attachment to knowing the identity of her parents, while Kylo shares that he turned to join Snoke after Luke tried to kill him (we later learn Luke's perspective: he wanted to destroy the darkness in a moment of instinct, but Kylo reacted before he had a chance to make things right). Later, Rey decides to trust Kylo enough to join him in facing Snoke.

On their way to face him, Rey and Kylo both claim to have had a vision when they touched hands; Rey saw that Kylo would turn, but Kylo says that he saw who Rey's parents are, and

because of this, he knows she will turn. This uncertainty creates tension in the coming moment when they arrive at the throne room. Rey tries to seize the moment by confronting Snoke, but he is too powerful for her. Snoke then urges Kylo to kill her, to finally prove himself worthy, but Kylo turns and kills Snoke instead. Kylo and Rey must then join forces to defeat Snoke's guards. After the fight, Rey urges Kylo on, thinking he has returned to the light, but it soon becomes clear that his real intentions are to give in to his desire for power, taking Snoke's place as Supreme Leader. Kylo asks Rey to join him, but she refuses. He then tries to manipulate her, using the knowledge of her parents that he claims to have; he reveals that her parents were nobody special, so she has no place in this story, unless she joins him. Rey refuses to give in, fueling Kylo's rage as he then turns his focus to destroying the Resistance.

At the end of the film, Kylo is forced to confront what he thinks is his uncle and former master, Luke, an embodiment of his past. Kylo lets his anger and hatred further fuel him, as he tries to kill Luke. But it isn't really Luke, it's a Force projection of him. Kylo fails in his effort to kill the past, his pain and conflict remain, and his distraction allows the Resistance to escape and survive.

Good Intentions, Poor Execution

Though the mindset and inner conflict of Luke Skywalker in *TLJ* was unexpected, I think it makes sense, following the background presented in *TFA*: he tried to rebuild the Jedi Order, but a student turned against him and destroyed it, so he went into exile. I think this Luke began to question himself and his abilities after this great failure, and perhaps part of his coping involved ridding himself of guilt by pushing blame onto the Jedi way itself. But in my opinion, I don't think Luke's justification for why the Jedi must end is a very compelling argument, and I don't think it aligns with his character and experience. As I mentioned earlier, his argument centers on the hubris of the Jedi. In his first lesson with Rey, Luke teaches her that the Force is about balance, and it does not belong to the Jedi. This makes sense, and the existence of the dark side proves that the Jedi aren't the only ones able to use the Force. But later, Luke further denounces the Jedi, arguing that their legacy is failure, and that a Jedi Master was responsible for the training and creation of Darth Vader. I found it very strange that this was the basis for Luke's reasoning. Luke knows firsthand the story of Darth Vader, his father, and his ultimate redemption, so I found it strange and weak that he used him to justify his position (even Rey points this out). Also, Luke is

referring to Obi-Wan Kenobi, his first Jedi Master, with an inaccurate picture of what really happened; Obi-Wan wasn't responsible for Anakin's choice, it was motivated by his attachment to Padme and fear of losing her, seen in *ROTS*.

By the end of the *TLJ*, we realize that the whole point of Luke's journey wasn't about ending the Jedi at all, it's about him learning that it's okay to fail, because failure is the best teacher; this is shown in the scene where Master Yoda returns to visit Luke as a Force ghost. This scene becomes the turning point in Luke's story, because it motivates him to use Force projection in order to speak to Leia once more, and redeem himself by facing Kylo Ren and saving the Resistance. I think this completed arc is good, but I don't think the scene with Yoda does a great job showing Luke's transformation from his position at the start of the film. In the scene, Luke states, "So it *is* time for the Jedi to end." But Yoda doesn't affirm this statement; Yoda's focus is on Rey and her journey forward. While this creates positive momentum toward the future, I don't think this scene does a good job clarifying that the Jedi will continue through Rey (who, as we see later, has taken the sacred Jedi texts; Yoda has no trouble destroying the tree, because the books aren't inside; Yoda doesn't share this information with Luke, because that's not the point of his visit).

Another failure in *TLJ* I need to expand on, is the execution of Poe Dameron's development and story with Leia. The point of Poe's journey is that he realizes some heroic actions can have major consequences, and he learns to become a better leader because of that. Poe is a great character and I think this is a great story arc for him. It was smart of Johnson to connect this story with Leia, because he shares a lot of traits with Han Solo, so their interaction would provide good conflict (at least while Leia was conscious). But the plot details and story progression of this arc don't make sense and fail to capture its purpose.

TLJ opens with the Resistance leaving their base. The First Order arrives with a deadly ship, and Poe prepares to execute his plan for disabling it, so the Resistance fleet can escape. Before he begins the first phase of his plan, Leia reminds him that she doesn't support it, but she gives no command to stop it. Poe proceeds with the daring task of eliminating all surface canons on the enemy ship, and succeeds with style. This is enough for Leia, so she tries to call Poe off from the second phase of his plan. But Poe turns off his communicator and proceeds anyway, eager to put another enemy ship out of commission. Bombers begin their approach, but the First Order deploys dozens of TIE Fighters, which destroy all of the bombers and their crews. Only one ship succeeds in releasing its bombs and destroying the enemy ship, before being destroyed itself.

Poe's plan succeeds, but at a tremendous cost to the Resistance. When Poe returns, Leia slaps him, berates him for the reckless action, then demotes him. As compelling of a start this plot point makes in beginning of Poe's journey, one detail doesn't make sense to me, and makes Leia look like a bad leader: she outranks Poe. Yes, Poe shut off his communicator, but I think it's safe to assume that Leia would still have the ability to communicate with the bombers herself. If she really wanted to call the mission off, she could order the bombers to fall back, and they would have to obey the command despite Poe's protestation, because her command would supersede his. Leia's silence makes her just as responsible for what happened, so putting the blame completely on Poe is an example of bad leadership, and a weak foundation for illustrating for Poe what good leadership is.

Later in the film, Leia is almost killed and ends up in a coma; while unconscious, command falls on a new character, Vice Admiral Holdo. Immediately, Poe tries to communicate with Holdo to figure out a plan for their escape. But instead of communicating a plan with him, Holdo chooses to attack him out of spite for his reckless heroics that have cost the Resistance many lives. When the Resistance learns that they can be tracked through hyperspace, Holdo commands for them to put up their rear shields and travel just out of range the First Order ships tailing them; besides this, no other plan is communicated and it seems like Holdo isn't looking for any alternatives. This is when Poe, Finn, and Rose contact Maz Kanata, who points them toward a codebreaker that can disable the First Order's tracking system, which would allow them to escape through hyperspace. Finn and Rose make the journey to find the codebreaker, while Poe stays behind. Instead of communicating with Holdo, Poe organizes a mutiny with a few other high-ranking fighters to seize command (I think it's important to note that the fact Poe was able to recruit help show that Holdo hasn't been communicating with them either). The mutiny is broken up when Leia regains consciousness, and reveals that she and Holdo had a plan the whole time to head for a base on the planet Crait. To me, Holdo's complete lack of communication is just another example of bad leadership, especially considering their dire circumstance. One could argue that her silence was to maintain secrecy, but the fact that it led to mutiny shows a fundamental lack of trust in her leadership. To add insult to injury, in order to give the Resistance an opportunity to make a break for the base, Holdo decides to sacrifice herself by driving through the enemy's command ship at light speed. This heroic action makes Holdo a hypocrite, especially since the context of her action is similar to Poe's opening mission; she berates Poe's "hero" attitude, then flips to play the hero herself.

Another problem with this story arc is the plan to take refuge at the Crait base itself. The reveal of the base's existence is treated like a miracle, but in reality, the base put them in no better position than they already were in, as the First Order is able to follow them and trap them inside. This makes Leia and Holdo's decision for secrecy practically pointless, and it makes them look like bad leaders, since they didn't look for other options; the fact that Poe was looking for solutions, and willing to take risks in their dire situation, shows that Poe was actually a better leader than his arc implies.

As I mentioned above, Finn and Rose journey to Canto Bight in order to find Maz's codebreaker contact. They find him, but miss an opportunity to talk to him when security arrests them and puts them in a holding cell. In the holding cell, they meet DJ, a strange character that claims to be a skilled codebreaker. Finn and Rose don't give him any mind, but they're suddenly impressed when he's able to open the cell door. Finn and Rose escape security, making their way down into the fathier stables, where they help the animals escape, destroying the casino in the process. As they return to their ship, they see it has been found by patrols, leaving them with no transport. Suddenly, DJ appears with a ship and offers them a lift back toward the Resistance fleet. On the way, Finn and Rose become convinced that DJ can do the job for them.

Johnson's choices for Finn and Rose make the characters look extremely dumb. When freed from the cell, they make no attempt to find the codebreaker again. Instead, they give up and leave, then decide to put their trust in a complete stranger, who openly shares the fact that he has no loyalty in the war. When DJ betrays them, they seem surprised, making them look like fools. Looking back on the various steps of their journey, it doesn't become a failure, just a complete waste of time.

Why Johnson's Subversion Hurts More Than Helps

Johnson's goal to subvert the audience's expectations in *TLJ* isn't inherently bad, but I think the way in which these choices happen lowers the quality of the film, especially since they tend to be very "on-the-nose."

This subversion is very apparent in the film's portrayal of Luke, seen from moment he is introduced. The film picks up right where *TFA* ends (unlike any other Star Wars film), where Rey is offering Luke his father's old lightsaber. Luke lost the saber, along with his hand, in his duel with Vader in *ESB*. Rey puts the lightsaber in his hands, and he carelessly tosses it behind him. In considering Luke's journey in the Original Trilogy, this action seems uncharacteristic and inappropriate, which is why it

angered many fans. One could argue that it is, indeed, characteristic of the Luke that's presented in the film: disillusioned, isolated, and quirky; but it is the first instance of many where Luke is portrayed as comical, rather than the serious person he has been shown to be in the originals (my guess is to make him more like Master Yoda in *ESB*, but even Yoda became serious once his identity was revealed). Other instances include his drinking of a thala-siren's milk and tickling Rey with a plant when she literally reaches out to feel the Force. This behavior makes it difficult to take Luke seriously throughout the film, making his point-of-view less compelling, and his transition at the end less dramatic.

Another subversive element that, I think, falls flat is Johnson's choice to dismiss certain characters, particularly Captain Phasma and Supreme Leader Snoke. Neither *TFA* nor *TLJ* give any detail into the background of these characters, and both are killed off in *TLJ*. Many fans were interested by these characters, particularly Snoke, and wanted to learn more about how they got into their positions of power after the fall of the Empire. In killing them off, Johnson is saying that it doesn't matter, and they don't matter. Some argue in favor of this choice, claiming that the Original Trilogy never explained Palpatine's origin, so Snoke's doesn't need an explanation. But the circumstances of the Sequel Trilogy are completely different. The Original Trilogy was about good vs. evil, light vs. dark, and Palpatine was just the simple embodiment of evil. The Prequel Trilogy then defined Palpatine's origin, thereby setting the precedent for films to come. Since the sequels take place after the fall of the Empire, I think it is valid for people to question where Snoke came from, especially since he is powerful in the dark side and had influence in transforming Ben Solo into Kylo Ren.

But one of the most disappointing subversions is Johnson's dismissal of Rey's background. Throughout *TFA*, there are quite a few instances highlighting questions about Rey's identity, without revealing much about it. When they meet Maz, she asks Han, "Who's the girl?" And later, when Rey discovers Anakin's lightsaber, she has a vision in which the voice of Obi-Wan Kenobi calls her by name and says, "These are the first steps." Maz then points to the fact that the saber belonged to Anakin and Luke, then states, with emphasis, "And now, it calls to you?" By the end of the film, we don't get any answers, but we learn that Rey can use the Force and is very powerful.

Throughout *TLJ*, the questions surrounding Rey's identity are simplified into one central question: who are Rey's parents? Rey spends the entire film trying to find the answer to this question, even looking to the dark side, but finds no answer. As I mentioned above, Kylo later reveals that her parents were

nobodies. I think the point Johnson was trying to make by doing this, was that her identity doesn't matter, because anyone can be the hero in the story; I don't think there's a problem with that. But the fact that her identity was foreshadowed as something important in *TFA*, and a central focus up until that point in *TLJ*, makes that reveal very disappointing; it means that all the time spent on that development was pointless. I think Johnson was trying to say, through her journey, that it's not the past that matters, but the future. But in discarding her past, Johnson eliminated this element from Rey's character, simplifying her into a character with no unique, personal struggle to drive her story forward. I should note, however, that Johnson's choice for Kylo to reveal this information makes the truth of it ambiguous; it could be true, or Kylo could have lied in order to manipulate Rey into joining him (this note will come into play later).

The Bad Stuff

Although I'm aware *TLJ* is a character-driven film, evident from the focus on their separate journeys, the overall plot is incredibly simple and quite boring. The entire film is the Resistance trying to escape the First Order through space, then taking a last stand on the planet Crait, only to escape again; with the exception of Rey's story on Ahch-To, and Finn and Rose's journey to Canto Bight, that's the extent of the story in the film. I find it interesting that I've heard a lot of criticism about *TFA* being the same plot as *Star Wars*, and almost none about *TLJ* being the same plot as *ESB*, only less interesting. At the end of *ESB*, the stakes are raised: they lose Han to a bounty hunter, and Luke learns that Vader is his father, adding another complex layer to his struggle between the light and dark sides of the Force. But at the end of *TLJ*, the Resistance and all the heroes survive; all that's really lost is Luke, who was practically gone already.

Another thing I find bothersome in *TLJ*, is how unnatural and cheesy certain moments feel, particularly the ones trying to be funny. As I alluded to earlier, Johnson usually handles his subversive moments in this pointed, unnatural way, but the film is also filled with very forced and unnecessary gags that add little very little to its entertainment quality. An example of this, is when Poe communicates with General Hux while stalling at the beginning of the film; Poe calls him "General Hugs" and makes a wise crack about Hux's mother. Another example is after Rose catches Finn trying to get away in one of the Resistance escape pods; she gives him an electric shock, then puts the tool away in an overly dramatic fashion, literally posing for the camera. Another moment, as I mentioned above, is when Rey

reaches out and Luke tickles her with a leaf; in a sarcastic tone, he says, "You feel that? That's the Force!" And Rey gives an excited response. Another example is after Finn and Rose stampede through Canto Bight on the fathiers; Finn gives a quick speech about how good it felt to tear up the town and make the rich people hurt. I realize that a lot of dialogue and moments throughout the Star Wars saga are cheesy due to the films' style, but these moments in *TLJ* felt over-the-top.

Another bad element in *TLJ*, is Finn's character arc. For this analysis, I have to credit the YouTube channel, *Lessons from the Screenplay*. In *TFA*, Finn is introduced as a First Order stormtrooper that doesn't want to kill. He becomes a deserter and crash lands on the planet Jakku, where he meets Rey. Later in the story, Finn ends up with the Resistance and agrees to help them access Starkiller Base, but we learn his motivation is to rescue Rey, who was taken captive. At the end, Finn tries to battle Kylo Ren and is severely wounded. At the beginning of *TLJ*, it is unclear where Finn stands in terms of his loyalty; that's because the scene that does this was cut from the final film. So, we are left guessing his position, until we see him trying to escape. But after he's caught, Finn flip-flops and decides to go on a risky mission for the Resistance. On this mission, Finn rarely expresses his point-of-view; instead, his inner conflict is supposedly demonstrated through Rose and DJ's monologues, sharing their conflicting views. Later, when DJ betrays them, Finn finally sides with the Resistance, but the moment falls flat. He cements his position later, during the battle of Crait, when he becomes willing to sacrifice himself for the Resistance, completing his arc. But Rose intervenes and he survives.

Rose is a bad character; that is no statement toward Kelly Marie Tran, who played Rose, but to Rian Johnson, who wrote the character. Rose is low-level worker in the Resistance who is grieving the death of her sister, a bombing crew member, who gave her life in Poe's opening mission. Rose first meets Finn when he tries to escape, and joins him on the mission to Canto Bight. In her time on screen, Rose is portrayed as a two-dimensional character: she's idealistic about right and wrong, and she's in pain from the loss of her sister. She doesn't really develop beyond that in the film, until the battle of Crait, when she suddenly stops Finn from sacrificing himself in order to destroy the enemy's weapon. Finn questions why she did this, and Rose responds with one of the worst moments in the film: "I saved you, dummy. That's how we're gonna win: not fighting what we hate... but saving what we love." She then kisses him as the First Order canon, still operational, blasts the door of the Resistance base behind them. This third dimension to her character, her feelings for Finn, is suddenly dropped in, with

no prior indication. But more importantly, her justification makes absolutely no sense. First, there's no way they can win by not defending themselves against their enemy, who is the clear aggressor. Second, her "saving what [she] love[s]," resulted in the aggressors having the ability to take further action in killing the remaining fighters of the cause she loves. I find the fact that she says this right before the canon blasts the door incredibly ironic, but also, it makes Rose look incredibly dumb (which, as an earlier argument points out, might just be the case).

When criticism of *TLJ* began, producer JJ Abrams made a statement that critics of the film have a problem with seeing powerful women on screen. From the different story lines and the decisions made in them, one can see that that overall plot is mostly driven by the female characters, which explains why Abrams made this claim. But I would argue that *TLJ* was, actually, counterproductive in its goal of showcasing powerful women. I think this is clear in my analysis of Leia and Holdo, where I argued that these women, who hold positions of authority, are constantly showcasing bad leadership and decision-making. Another example is in my analysis of Rey's character arc; though Rey is a strong decision-maker and a powerful warrior, her story in *TLJ* eliminates much of the complexity in her development and growth as a character moving forward. Yet another example is seen in my analysis of Rose above, whose actions are downright dumb and motivated by emotion, without care for the consequences. But a less-obvious example, that really disappoints me, is the fact that Captain Phasma is killed off. In marketing *TFA*, Phasma was hyped up, but had very little screen time in the film, leaving something to be desired in *TLJ*. Although we got to see her in action in her fight against Finn, it is implied that she was killed after Holdo destroyed the First Order's ship, and with her, dies the only leading, female antagonist introduced in the trilogy. I do not think these decisions were intended to misrepresent and mishandle the female characters, but I think it's important to realize that they do.

How *The Last Jedi* Impacted the Final Film

The divided and passionate response to *TLJ* put Lucasfilm and Kathleen Kennedy in an awkward position, facing a potential loss of interest for the final film. From early on, they had hired Colin Trevorrow, known for *Jurassic World* (2015), to write and direct the final installment. But just before the release of *TLJ*, it was announced that Trevorrow would leave the project based on creative differences. Not long after, they announced that JJ Abrams, director of *TFA*, would replace him, eliminating

their plan to use different directors; since TFA was a big success, I think their decision was made in hopes of appeasing fans disappointed by *TLJ*. With this change of hands, the release date for the final film was pushed back from May to December 2019, to give Abrams enough time to produce it, while staying within their two-year release window.

The Rise of Skywalker: Trying to Fix What's Broken

JJ Abrams decided to divert from Trevorrow's script entirely, and chose to co-write a new version with Chris Terrio, the award-winning writer of *Argo* (2012). Their goal was to try to create a satisfying ending to the saga as a whole, while appeasing fans that were disappointed with *TLJ*. But with the amount of time and pressure they had to accomplish this, I believe they took the easy path.

TLJ left Abrams and Terrio with little to work with moving the story forward. One of the problems they faced, was the issue of Rey; they needed to find a dramatic situation for her in order to give her a compelling story. But rather than trying to come up with something new, I think Abrams defaulted on what he intended to be developed from his work in *TFA*: Rey's family background. The fact that Kylo's reveal in *TLJ* could be taken as ambiguous, made it easy to change. I would argue that *TFA* was foreshadowing a potential link between Rey and Obi-Wan Kenobi, but I think the final decision was influenced by Snoke's demise. They thought another villain was needed, large enough to challenge Kylo's claim to power, but this villain also needed to explain Rey's struggle with the dark side presented in *TLJ*, and somehow connect to the Star Wars saga as a whole. I think that's why they chose to bring back Emperor Palpatine: it made sense to them. But the problem they didn't fix, was the fact that Finn's character arc had ended and he was still alive. Instead of trying to come up with a new, developed arc for him, they sidelined Finn as just a part of the action, trying to keep him interesting by giving him a secret he needs to share with Rey (which he never does, but it's implied that he's Force sensitive). They also faced the challenge of continuing Leia's story after the passing of Carrie Fisher, but they were able to fix this by writing her scenes around unused dialogue from *TFA*.

The Rise of Skywalker was released on time. The first time I watched it, I was very entertained and left the theater satisfied. But after some thought and additional viewings, I began to realize that it wasn't as good as I initially thought, and it failed to bring a new and satisfying end to the Star Wars saga.

Final Thoughts

In trying to understand what went wrong with the Sequel Trilogy, I have concluded that everything was rushed. Disney had made a major investment in Lucasfilm, and was eager to capitalize on it. Lucasfilm was too ambitious in creating a two-year release window for each film in the trilogy, when both the originals and prequels had three whole years between each release; Kennedy's focus was also split between them and the stand-alone films they decided to produce in between. Another mistake was separating responsibility for each film, without having an overall plan. It's a shame that the Sequel Trilogy did not live up to its potential, but I believe Lucasfilm has learned its lessons, and we can expect quality work moving forward (I think *The Mandalorian* is a testament to that).

The more I watch *TLJ*, the more I begin to appreciate it for what it is and what it tried to do for the Sequel Trilogy. In writing this essay and putting more thought into the film and its different story lines, I began to see that the major theme presented in it, is failure: Poe fails his mission, Leia fails to protect the Resistance, Finn and Rose fail to break the code, Rey fails to turn Kylo, Kylo fails to destroy the past, and Luke has failed to rebuild the Jedi Order. As Yoda says, "The best teacher, failure is." Though I love this message, I find it a bit ironic that the film itself fails, in so many ways, of accomplishing what it's trying to do. But hopefully, Rian Johnson's failures taught him lessons that will make him a better filmmaker in the future, as long as he chooses to learn from the past, rather than letting it die.