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Movie Review: The Rise of Skywalker

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Movie Review: The Rise of Skywalker

Abstract

"If all you wanted was more Star Wars content, then this latest installment will not let you down."

Posting about the movie *The Rise of Skywalker* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/movie-review-the-rise-of-skywalker/>

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Comments

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in things

January 7, 2020

Movie Review: *The Rise of Skywalker*

Tom Clark

★★★

Title: *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*

Directed by: J.J. Abrams

Written by: Chris Terrio, J.J. Abrams, Derek Connolly, Colin Trevorrow

Starring: Carrie Fisher, Mark Hamill, Adam Driver, Daisy Ridley, John Boyega, Oscar Isaac

“Are you not entertained?” may be a popular meme, but the question frames my own divided feelings on *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. If all you wanted was more Star Wars content, then this latest installment will not let you down. Anyone among us who would not like this movie probably already saw it on opening weekend. If you haven’t seen it yet, you probably will enjoy it well enough.

The ragtag rebellion is on the run following the events of *The Last Jedi* with Leia leading them, though Rey, Finn, and Poe are clearly in control of the action. A new threat interrupts Rey’s Jedi training and the gang is dispatched to stop it. *The Rise of Skywalker* plays the similar, well-known beats of other Star Wars canon, bouncing from planet to planet, fixing up the Millennium Falcon, rescuing captured friends, and culminating with a macrocosm space battle surrounding a microcosm Jedi battle ala *Return of the Jedi*.

The plot is fine, though not new, as you would expect with Abrams at the helm. Abrams returns to a safe replaying of a known storyline, as he did with *The Force Awakens*. For better or worse, it bends away from the far more inventive, though controversial film *The Last Jedi*. The cinematography is excellent, and the gritty used-world of Star

Wars is back with fresh new characters. While the space scenes looked great and the CGI light saber work is finely crafted, the climactic space battle lacked the focus and direction present in *Return of the Jedi*.

One item that I think does deserve credit is the clever use of force tunneling to give Rey and Kylo Ren opportunities to interact and battle without being in the same location. This offers a way of giving these foes a way to fight without contriving ways to have be physically in the same location. This also pays off nicely in one of the more satisfying moments in the film.

All in all, if you're looking for entertainment, I think you won't be disappointed. However, this film should be viewed through other lenses as well. Let's explore *The Rise of Skywalker* more thematically, and as we do, it will be harder to be completely spoiler free—so proceed as you wish.

If our first lens was entertainment, the second is what I will term “Nostalgia Machine.” If you are looking for a palate on which to place a variety of musical and character cued moments that queue up fond memories from previous films, you will not be let down. At times, it feels not so much like a film but rather an experience with the intended effect of presenting one last time the greatest hits of Star Wars, visually and sonically. I was impressed by how much care they took to provide musical memories of familiar places, and as someone who grew up with Star Wars, it surprised me how emotionally powerful some moments were.

This movie brings us back to familiar locations offering one last chance to see many of the sights we grew up exploring. As much as *The Force Awakens* was a replay of *A New Hope*, this movie is *Return of the Jedi* all over again. It lives and breathes the collective Star Wars cultural subconscious. The sheer number of people it took to produce this movie is a testament that this is something that was *produced*, a literal quilt of film, which likely had to satisfy a ridiculous list of conditions.

Given the constraints, it is surprising that it actually holds together at all. I'm reminded of a line from *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, where the wife of the man writing a feature on Mr. Rogers says, “Don't ruin my childhood.” Indeed, how do you finish a story that means so many different things to so many different people without ruining it for someone? As he did with his *Star Trek* reboot, Abrams recycles old themes, plots, music, locations, and puts them together into a well-executed nostalgic experience. However, the consequence of this compilation is that the film says very little new.

Perhaps in contrast, *Avengers: End Game* had the task of culminating the disparate storylines and characters from a decade-long series of twenty-two films. Nevertheless,

that story remained fresh. It found a way to playfully revisit the history of the series while telling a new story. Paying dividends for devotees of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, while remaining coherent for casual watchers. Even a film cut from whole cloth like *First Reformed* is upon inspection found to be deeply referential to certain filmography including *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Winter Light*—yet tells a new story all the same. In contrast, *The Rise of Skywalker* does very little new—but as delineated above, it does deliver on the nostalgia, which for many may be enough.

Finally, let's look at *The Rise of Skywalker* as a funeral, and there will be spoilers here. The story ends where it where it all began with a twin-sunset on Tatooine. We watch as the last remains of the twin Skywalkers are buried together. Many of us have followed their star-crossed saga from stem to stern, grown up along with them as friends, and now, at the end, we say goodbye. This film, despite its flaws, reminds us that we cared deeply for these characters and gives us a chance to pay our tender respects to Luke and Leia, and definitively concludes that their hard service is complete. Perhaps T.S. Eliot was right all along:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.