

Christmas Eve Eve

Paul R. Potts

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Tuesday

So, I'm trying an experimental diet. The experiment is just this: I'm trying to avoid some carbs, especially simple carbs, and I'm writing down what I eat. I'm not counting calories, and I'm not trying all that hard to reduce overall calories. So far I've noticed that this is helping me avoid moments where I just shove holiday goodies in my mouth because they are there and I'm there. I don't want to have to write them down. For one thing, I'm lazy, so I will generally choose to avoid making paperwork for myself. But for another, I don't want to have to look at the documentation of my gluttony.

During holiday season at Thorlabs, we get all kinds of gift baskets and other treats from various clients and suppliers. They wind up on the central table in the upstairs office. For example, today we got a big box of Zingerman's brownies. We've gotten a couple of boxes of very delicious chocolates. I'm trying not to eat any of this, except a few select things that I think are actually good for me. In one of the gift baskets was a tin of fancy Spanish tuna in olive oil. It has sat there for a week or so uneaten, so today I ate it on some small slices of 100% rye bread from Mother Loaf, topped with a little Chipotle Tabasco sauce.

I tried to buy a second pair of 36" pants at Costco last Friday and after pawing through an entire table full of piled-up folded pairs of pants, I realized that there was not a single pair in my size. So I guess I'm not the only one who has to buy the pants with the 36" waist. But I would have liked at least one more pair.

Over my upcoming vacation, I will get back into a routine on the treadmill, and also try some experiments with an "eating window" as a form of intermittent fasting that isn't too onerous.

I have a few miscellaneous notes about things I've mentioned previously:

Brief Cases by Jim Butcher

I finished this last week and forgot to mention it. It's a pretty good collection, although some of the stories seem a bit ridiculous. I'm also questioning, a bit, whether all of it was appropriate for Sam; most of the stories feature quite positive moral lessons, but there are moments that are disturbing. But I am

pretty firmly committed to the principle of not censoring the kids' reading in the same way that we *do* censor what videos they watch. I'm not sure I can fully justify this position, except that in my view, text, as a "cool" medium (to use McLuhan's terminology), and requires more mental participation and judgement in the consumer, and it is also easier to self-censor or question, while video imprints images more directly and firmly on the brain (there are joke about "eye bleach" to wipe the mind of *images*, but not so much to wipe the mind of things that one has read, because in reading we make our own images).

I've wondered myself whether Butcher's other works, the Codex Alera series or the Cinder Spires series, are worth reading. I guess there's only one way to find out.*

**Actually I have discovered another way to find out — I will give the first book to Sam, and see if he likes it. It's not guaranteed that I will like it if he likes it, but I trust him more than I trust, say, most magazine book reviews.*

***Return of the Jedi* (NPR Radio Drama, 1996)**

Last week I mentioned that this radio drama was much shorter than the first two in the series, and was years late, and not even broadcast. I got my information from Wikipedia; it doesn't say that it *wasn't* broadcast, but describes the radio drama's difficult history, and doesn't mention a broadcast date, while the descriptions of the previous two series mention a broadcast date. But according to Wookieepedia, it *was* broadcast. I don't know which source is right. You can decide if you want to believe the Wookiee or the Wiki.

Listening to this series, which was produced by HighBridge Audio rather than NPR itself, I notice that although this is a shorter adaptation, it is in many ways a better radio drama. There is much more extensive use of foley; we hear what sounds like the characters manipulating objects and interacting with their environment, while in the previous series there isn't a lot of that sort of thing. In *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* we hear a lot of sound effects that were used in the original film, and they sometimes seem out of place — for example, the exact same low-frequency throb of machinery we hear as Kenobi deactivates the Death Star's tractor beam is also heard in Cloud City, which is a little disconcerting, because I associate that sound so strongly with the original scene.

In this later adaptation, we also get better use of reverb on voices, and more ambient background sounds, including background voices in scenes that have other people in them, which also serves to make it sound just a little more convincing than the previous series. HighBridge seems like they just had a bit more skill at producing radio drama. It helps make up for the fact that even fewer of the characters are played by the original actors.

I did not expect to have this opinion, given that the third series was so delayed, but I must say it: this radio drama adaptation of *Return of the Jedi* is simply

better than the other two: more immersive, faster-moving, and overall a more exciting and enjoyable piece of storytelling.

Copies of these CDs on eBay have become scarce and expensive. It doesn't seem to be available from HighBridge at all. And copies of the original poster? You can find them, but sellers want over a thousand dollars for them!

Sunday

Well. It's Christmas Eve Eve Eve already and the rest of the week has gone by in a bit of a blur. So I'll try to reconstruct what happened. We just finished up a quick meal — rotisserie chicken and sushi from Busch's grocery store, and a fruit salad. For those that were feeling brave, I tossed some of the fruit with a few spoonfuls of mint chutney and key lime juice to make a spicy/minty fruit salad. Grace and I liked it although most of the kids ate their fruit plain.

We had been out doing some Christmas shopping, such as it was. We don't get a lot of big gifts for the kids. Usually we give them stockings stuffed with candy, small toys, socks, and underwear, and maybe a few gifts like books. This year it seems like everyone is mostly well-stocked with socks and underwear so Grace and I went to Nicola's Books to look for a book for everyone, and a few small toys for the younger ones. Then we proceeded to Target and picked up some candy for stuffing stockings. After that we went to Lucky's Market, which is a sort of upscale grocery that took over the old Kroger.*

**This is actually a sort of ruse — an “new” grocery store to “replace” Kroger, to cater to the fancier tastes of Ann Arborians, but it's actually owned, at least partly, by Kroger; we were clued into this when we noticed that they stock some products with the Kroger “Private Selection” label.*

Dr. Bronner's Sugar Soaps

I was excited to find a couple of different varieties of Dr. Bronner's Sugar Soaps at Lucky's Market. This is a relatively new product and I only tried our first bottle earlier this year. I got a bottle of the lavender soap to try washing my hair with it. That didn't really work out well for my particular thin hair and oily skin; it gets it clean, but it doesn't emulsify any of the oil, so it leaves it clean but looking like I just rubbed my head down with lard. It might work well for folks with different kinds of hair.*

**I have since discovered that this is not because of the oils; it actually does remove the oils very well. It is because it raises the cuticle on my hair, leaving it with a rough texture and very prone to tangling with itself. Rinsing it with a diluted cider vinegar solution makes the hair feel smooth again and I can then easily brush through it without snagging, so it doesn't look like a crazy bird's nest.*

And so I started experimenting with using it to wash my face. It works *great* for that. It gets dirt out of my pores really well, without leaving my face raw and irritated and dried-out like the various scrubs and medicated cleansers I've

tried. We also discovered that Elanor really loves the lavender scent. But there is one downside for me — the scent is just a bit too strong and tends to set off my allergies. So I picked up three more versions — the unscented, to use for washing faces, and the lemongrass and peppermint for washing kids. This stuff is kind of expensive but it lasts a very long time, because it is highly concentrated. One squirt on a wet washcloth is more than enough to wash my face, and three squirts into the bathtub is more than enough to wash a dirty six-year-old.

The Doctor and I Go Way Back I go back to the eighties with Dr. Bronner’s soap and the entertaining, prophetic rambling on its labels; I used to shower with the peppermint castille liquid soap (that’ll wake you up!) We use Sal-Suds, diluted, as our regular dish soap, and I use their unscented castille bar soap as my regular bath soap (it’s a bit pricey, but it lasts a long time if you keep it dry between baths, and you can sometimes find it marked down). I don’t generally write endorsements of consumer products, but if I did, I’d endorse the Dr. Bronner’s Sugar Soaps, particularly for washing your face.

When we got home we put the bags in the bedroom with the lights off and the door closed while we ate dinner, planning to put things away properly afterwards. Naturally *one* Potts child who shall remain nameless went in and turned on the lights and rummaged around to see what we got. I will let that child remain anonymous in their shame, as much as it pains me to use the singular “their” as a gender-neutral pronoun.

Sunday Morning

This morning I took the three older boys to Mass. After Mass they had the volunteers decorate the church. I was surprised that all three boys wanted to stay and help. Every once in a while, I get a hint that maybe, just maybe, we aren’t doing a horrible job raising them after all. So we stayed another hour and did various tasks to help get the Nativity scene and Christmas trees ready. Somehow Joshua wound up on a ladder putting the star on top of the life-sized manger!

Saturday Evening

The Solstice Bonfire On Saturday, we hosted a small party at our house to celebrate the Winter Solstice. We had a lot of brush left over from Joy’s work trimming back various trees and bushes, so that all went into a big pile next to the brick fire pit in the front yard. As the sun started to go down, I started a bonfire. Our guests began to arrive at about 5:00, bringing wine, mead, and firewood, and by the time it was very dark we had an enormous bonfire going and a group standing around or sitting in folding chairs enjoying the fire. It was about 45 degrees — unusually warm for this week of the year — and the air was very still, and the sky was clear. It was just about the nicest weather one could hope for, on the last day of Fall. Since I was moving around a lot, piling brush

on the fire, I didn't bother with a coat, and didn't miss it at all, especially once the fire got going.

Joy baked a tray of pulled pork and another tray of scalloped potatoes, and put together a big salad, and also roasted some cauliflower with an Indian cooking sauce — that last item was particularly delicious! And so when we had burned up most of the brush and firewood and it was starting to get cold, we put a fire in the fireplace and came inside and had a buffet-style meal. It was altogether a wonderful evening. We drank wine and several kinds of mead, sweet and dry. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the conversation going into the longest night of the year, and no one seemed in a hurry to leave, but we did need to clean up and get the kids to bed, so we wound things up about 9 p.m. Of course, on these very short days, it felt much later than that.

Friday

The Thorlabs Holiday Lunch On Friday at work, we had our annual holiday lunch. The Thorlabs staff has grown considerably since last year and so we filled several large tables at Weber's hotel. The staff is now mostly segregated by floor, with the production staff mostly working downstairs assembling and testing the products and the engineering staff mostly working upstairs designing and testing the products. This past year I've mostly had my head down looking at code, so there are people that work downstairs now that I've barely met. This was a good chance to chat, and we took full advantage of it.

Weber's puts on quite a good meal. They specialize in prime rib, but I wound up eating whitefish, fried shrimp, and a wedge salad. I'm continuing to try to restrict my calories a bit, which is kind of a demoralizing thing to do this time of year, but I stuck to it pretty well; when they were bringing around giant slabs of carrot cake and crunchy lakes of delicious crème brûlée*, I stuck with my black coffee, but did ask for a small cup of whipped cream to stir into it.

**I write this newsletter using Markdown, and to make the three different accent marks appear correctly in "crème brûlée," I have to type "crÈgrave;me brËucirc;lÉe."*

Planning Time Off There had been some doubt about whether my boss would approve my requested vacation time. I asked to take the whole week of Christmas and the whole week of New Year's off, giving me a total of sixteen days out of the office. But ultimately I got enough done to satisfy him that I wasn't going to be able to magically finish my projects by the end of the year, especially since most of the people I need to interact with will also be taking time off. But he did ask me to hang an albatross around my neck; I brought home my work laptop, and I'm supposed to watch for any urgent e-mail.

I think this will actually be the longest vacation I've had since the end of 1999, twenty years ago, when I went to South Carolina for three weeks to celebrate Y2K and what we thought might be a pretty crazy time for our infrastructure,

which relied heavily on computer systems that we weren't sure would handle things correctly when two digits would no longer properly handle the year.

This Week's Cool Things

I got a copy of Men at work's second CD, *Cargo*, again an original (not remastered version) from an eBay seller.

Cargo by Men at Work (1983 album)

Last week I wrote:

Men at Work did not last, as a band; they released *Cargo*, which contains their single best song, and one more album, which did not do well at all, and never released another record.

I wasn't quite right about that. In fact they did release a third record, called *Two Hearts*, but it did not do all that well, and I don't remember ever hearing it. The whole thing is on YouTube, so I'll give it a listen, but I don't expect to find a lost gem. Meanwhile, back to *Cargo*.

Cargo is quite a mixed bag of songs. It doesn't sound quite as coherent an album as *Business as Usual*; there is more variation in style and song length, and, unfortunately, song quality.

“Dr. Heckyll and Mr. Jive” The first song, “Dr. Heckyll and Mr. Jive,” was the “lead single,” the first single released from the album. It was never that great a song, and hasn't held up all that well. Its chief sin is its length. At 4 minutes 38 seconds, it's a full minute too long. Pop songs can be longer than 3 minutes and 30 seconds, but that only works if there is something truly interesting in the song to justify the extra length. A really good song should make you long to hear the next verse and look forward to the next chorus. But the choruses in this song repeat so many times that the whole experience of listening to this song becomes painfully boring. When I listen to the album now, I skip past the whole song.

“Overkill” “Overkill” is the single best Men at Work song and one of the best songs of the eighties. It is 3 minutes 44 seconds long, and not a second is wasted. I have heard this song dozens of times over the years and I still look forward to hearing it again. It's a master class in crafting an effective pop song. The lyrics are some of the few Men at Work lyrics that don't rely on an ironic, detached, sardonic, or sarcastic tone. They seem to convey genuine melancholy and feel much more adult:

Alone between the sheets
Only brings exasperation
It's time to walk the streets
Smell the desperation

The lyrics are actually a bit scanty on paper. Just how it is structured depends on whether you think of the above verse as one verse, or two; I'll call it two. There are two quick verses, a brief chorus, two more quick verses, another brief chorus, and then a guitar solo — a lovely, simple solo — and then, two more quick verses. But the fifth and sixth verses are really just the first and second, sung an octave higher. This seems like it wouldn't work well, but it works beautifully; this song has some of Colin Hay's best vocal work. Those rhymes seem a little basic, but that's OK:

I can't get to sleep
I think about the implications
Of diving in too deep
And possibly the complications

And then we're into another chorus, with a repeat and fade-out, but only two repeats. We don't have time to get bored. The choruses feature some very sensitive and restrained soprano saxophone work by Greg Ham, again structured in a call-and-response form, and the soprano saxophone accents the accompaniment beautifully.

“Settle Down My Boy” This song, with a lead vocal by Greg Ham, sounds like it belongs on a completely different album. It's not a bad song, but it sounds more like something by Crosby, Stills, and Nash than something by Men at Work.

“Upstairs in My House” This one is more interesting. It's really an instrumental jam, and a fun one, with a vocal line added more for the sound of the notes than to convey the lyrics. Hay's voice is heavily processed on this song. I'm not sure exactly *how* it was processed, but right from the first word we can hear some quavering effect that lets me know it was recorded using variable tape speed. I'm not sure exactly what other effects existed in 1982 or so. Auto-tune as we know it today didn't exist. But however it was done, the net result is that the vocal part is absolutely pyrotechnic; he sustains and holds notes in ways that seem almost impossible. His voice sounds just like one of Ham's horns, and the horns sound just like his voice. They blend together in places so well that it's difficult to figure out which is which.

“No Sign of Yesterday” This song is a big downer after the previous energetic song. It drags the whole album down. I think Hay was going for another low-key song like “Down By the Sea,” but this one just isn't as good, and so it feels like a school dance when a slow dance comes on too soon, and everyone leaves the dance floor to go get punch.

“It's a Mistake” Fortunately things pick up with this tune. It's a genuine anti-nuclear song. The dated ironic/sardonic lyrics are in their fullest flowering here:

Tell us commander, what do you think?
Cause we know that you love all that power
Is it on then, are we on the brink?
We wish you'd all throw in the towel

The world has changed, though; nuclear war is, actually, still a threat, but global heating seems like a bigger threat, and in either case it feels like things have changed; it's hard to find that place where one could stand and face the unthinkable with irony rather than rage.

“High Wire” Yawn.

“Blue for You” Yawn.

“I Like To” This is another song with the lead vocal sung by Ham instead of Hay. It's a Devo song. No, really, it sounds like it should be on an entirely different album. If I had been told it was a Devo B-side, I would have believed it. It's not a bad song, it just doesn't seem like it belongs here.

“No Restrictions” And speaking of songs that don't seem like they belong here, here's a lost tune by The Police, or so it seems; it's almost uncanny. The Police, though, were able to record an album, *Synchronicity*, that could contain a bewildering variety of tunes, that somehow seemed like they belonged together.

And that's the album. Not the best, but the album is worth owning for three songs, “Overkill,” “Upstairs in My House,” and “It's a Mistake.” The rest of it doesn't really rise to the occasion. It's too bad. But at least we have those songs!

The Buzz about *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019)

There's a new *Star Wars* movie out. I'm hearing very discouraging things about it, especially about how it seems like the hack director J. J. Abrams has deliberately overturned some of the storytelling choices that made the previous movie so interesting.

The Last Jedi got a lot of push-back from hard-core fans, especially older fans. From their rants and raves, about how Rian Johnson ruined *Star Wars* (and with it, their childhoods) forever, one would think that the movie was a failure. But it was actually the most profitable *Star Wars* film to date, and that's saying something. When I was younger I'd often view commercial success as a sign that a film wasn't very good — that it was a dumbed-down spectacle, or pandered to the audience. But as I've gotten older and so watched many more films, I've come to think that the movie-watching public in general is quite good at deciding which movies — of big-budget Hollywood releases, at least — are actually engaging, interesting, and fun to watch, and which aren't.

I don't think I'm going to see the new one in the theater, at least not this week or next week. Instead, I think I'm going to take a few of the kids to see a stream of the *Doctor Who* premiere. And before I see the new one, I thought it might be interesting to revisit the previous two *Star Wars* movies, so I'm appending the reviews I wrote after seeing those films.*

*I made a few more revisions in February 2022, while preparing to put these newsletters on my web site.

***Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) — My Review from 2016**

This review contains big, big spoilers.

I want to start out by saying that I really was expecting, even hoping, to dislike *The Force Awakens*.

Entering the theater a cynical, somewhat bitter middle-aged man, I fully expected to be able to take my distaste for the other work of J. J. Abrams (particularly, his atrocious 2009 *Star Trek* reboot), and Disney, and recycled nostalgia in general, and throw it directly at the screen.

I am a first-generation fan of *Star Wars*. I saw the 1977 film perhaps a dozen times in the theater — and I pretty much agree with the critical consensus about the prequels. Their utter failure led me to believe that the things I loved most about the 1977 *Star Wars* had, for the most part, little to do with big-budget filmmaking, but were the result of giving a bunch of really brilliant costume and set designers and cinematographers and editors and sound designers a lot of creative control and a relatively low budget — a situation unlikely to be replicated in a truly big film, an important *investment* where none of the investing parties would want to take any significant risks.

But I didn't actually dislike *The Force Awakens*, and I'm still somewhat troubled by that. Is *The Force Awakens* a good movie, or was I just primed by my age and the bad experience with the prequels to suck up something relatively bad and call it good, simply because it lacks the awfulness of the prequels, and smells a lot like the 1977 original? I don't think I can actually answer that question, at least not easily. Really taking that up requires me to think critically about the original 1977 *Star Wars*, something I find hard to do, given the way the film imprinted itself upon my nine-year-old brain. Is it really all that and a bag of chips? Or did it simply land at just the right time to be *the* formative movie of my childhood?

One of my sons is nine, by the way. He enjoyed the new movie, but I don't think it blew his mind the way the original *Star Wars* blew mine, simply because we have, ever since 1977, lived in a world that has *Star Wars* in it.

To be clear — it's not the case that there weren't big action movies back then, and big science fiction movies back then. We had movies like *2001: a Space*

Odyssey, which also formed my tastes. We had *Silent Running*. We had *Logan's Run*. But it would be impossible to overstate the shock wave that followed *Star Wars* — its innovative effects, editing, and yes, even marketing. We just can't go back to the world before *Star Wars*. My son has seen lots of things that are like *Star Wars*, and things that were *influenced by Star Wars*, while in 1977, I never had.

And make no mistake, the new *Star Wars* is, most definitely, *Star Wars-ish*, in the way that the prequels were not. The world of the prequels was too clean, too sterile, too political, and too comic. *Star Wars* may have been the single most successful blending of genres ever attempted; a recent article here — http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/cover_story/2015/12/star_wars_is_a_pastiche_how_george_lucas_combined_flash_gordon_westerns.single.html called it “postmodern,” and I think that is correct. The prequels might have been attempting that kind of post-modernism, too, but they seem to have a different set of influences, and just seem, in every respect, to have been assembled lazily, and without artfulness. For just one example, see how one of the prequel lightsaber battle scenes was actually filmed — <http://petapixel.com/2015/12/23/this-is-a-star-wars-action-scene-in-the-age-of-cgi/> — and tell me that Lucas isn't, or at least didn't turn into, the laziest man in show business.

The Force Awakens follows the 1977 formula so closely that it is perilously close a kind of remake or pastiche of the original. Some people have written it off as, essentially, a remake. In my view it is actually an homage. There are a lot of parallel details and actual “Easter eggs,” where iconic props make cameo appearances, and certain audio clips from the original movies are sprinkled into the new one. In one of my favorite moments, on Starkiller base we hear a clip from the first movie, “we think they may be splitting up.” Some reviewers have made their reviews catalogs of these moments, and consider this excessive, complaining about the “nostalgia overload.” But although it is noticeable, I think the producers knew just how much nostalgia would be appreciated, and how much would become annoying, and walked a line between the two amounts very skilfully. The film takes great pains to re-create the world where Han Solo and Leia Organa will not look out of place. And so when Harrison Ford and Carrie Fisher actually appear on screen, I suddenly feel the weight of those years, the nearly 40 years I've been waiting to re-enter the world of the 1977 *Star Wars*, and inhabit my excited, young, hopeful 1977 self again. It's a gut punch. I must have gotten something in my eye.

While Solo is an important character in this film, Leia has very few scenes, and the action centers largely on new characters. The casting is what you might call “modern.” There's more diversity in the cast. No one can claim that Rey is not a strong, compelling female character. Daisy Ridley's acting in this movie is very impressive. Without her strong performance, we'd be prone to spend time musing on the oddness of her almost-absent back-story. As it is, we aren't really given a lot of time to meditate on such things, because she is very busy kicking ass and taking names.

John Boyega as Finn is good too, although he doesn't seem, to me, to quite *inhabit* his character the way Ridley inhabits Rey. And so I find myself spending a little time wondering about the gaps and inconsistencies in his character's back-story. He describes himself as a sanitation worker. If that's true, why is he on the landing craft in the movie's opening scenes, part of the First Order interplanetary SWAT team sent to Jakku to retrieve the MacGuffin? He's supposedly a low-level worker on Starkiller base, but he knows how to disable the shields? He's a stormtrooper, trained since birth to kill, but unable to kill. Has he never been "blooded" before? We're unfortunately reminded that this doesn't actually make a lot of sense. Of course this is true of many elements of the original trilogy. The key to making that kind of thing not matter, for a *Star Wars* movie, is to keep everything happening so fast that the audience doesn't have time to worry about any of those gaps and inconsistencies.

The story moves along quickly and we meet one of the most interesting characters, Kylo Ren, played by Adam Driver. Driver plays an adolescent, and puts Hayden Christiansen's portrayal of Anakin to utter shame — although one senses that much of Christiansen's failure may have been due to Lucas' poor direction of the young actor. Driver is completely compelling on-screen, and his scenes with Ridley are just mesmerizing. I really can't say enough good things about them. I've seen two screenings now, and I would happily see it again, just to watch those two characters interact. It's really impressive.

That's really enough to hang a movie on — a few really great performances, a few good performances, some terrific scenes, and no scenes that are actually bad. (Howard Hawks famously said that to make a good movie, you needed three good scenes and no bad ones; *The Force Awakens* exceeds that requirement).

Of course, there are a lot of confusing, unconvincing, and unwieldy things about this film. For example, Rey is strong in the ways of the force, and a very powerful fighter, right off the bat. She's grown up on Jakku, apparently spending years alone, and entirely untrained, while in the original trilogy we watched Luke start off with some talent for using the Force, but not much skill, and get trained up like Rocky Balboa. How did it come to pass that the neophyte Rey is far stronger than the young Luke Skywalker was? Well, it's a mystery we just have to accept for now. Maybe she had a lot of karate classes as a very young child. Perhaps the force is manifesting — "awakening" — precisely because this world does not have armies of Jedi Knights to channel it. I maintain that when a movie likes this leaves things unexplained, the audience will do the work for the screenwriters and make it work — *if* the audience has decided to side with the movie and help it along. And if they haven't, no amount of rationalization will explain away the inevitable plot holes in a satisfying way. This movie has done such a good job at entertaining the audience, and introducing a compelling character early on, that we as the audience are pretty happy to go along, willing to make a few allowances, and give it the benefit of the doubt. Watching the prequels, we were bored immediately, and so it was only natural for us to start picking at the plot holes in order to figure out *why* we were bored.

There are a few flaws that I think are worth noting. The movie is just slightly too long. The reawakening of Artoo-Detoo, just *after* the destruction of the big bad Starkiller base, allowing the plot to continue with a literal *deus ex machina* — is just slightly too silly.

What is up with Kylo Ren’s helmet, and Captain Phasma’s helmet? One of the notable things about the Empire was the extreme precision and cleanliness of the costumes, including the stormtrooper helmets and Darth Vader’s helmets. But in the new movie, Ren’s helmet is dinged and dented, with chipped paint, and Phasma’s helmet is covered in fingerprints. It’s not accidental; even the action figures of Kylo Ren have molded-in dents, and there is no way that someone simply forgot to polish Phasma’s helmet; such an error would certainly be caught. They were made to look that way deliberately, in stark contrast to the other uniforms and suits of armor. Why is that?

There are some scenes with the Resistance, preparing X-wing fighters, that look like they were literally shot on the site of a freeway overpass; that reminded me of the way J. J. Abrams decided it was a good idea to use a brewery — <http://brookstonbeerbulletin.com/star-treks-engineering-deck-brewery/> — for the engine room of the Enterprise, an incredibly dumb, unconvincing, revisionist look for the Engineering set. The Imperial wreckage on Jakku — which includes both Imperial Star Destroyers *and* the walkers from the invasion of Hoth in *Empire* — is nostalgic, but bizarre.

There are some coincidences that feel just a little too coincidental. How did Luke’s lightsaber wind up in Maz’s basement, in an unlocked trunk, in an otherwise empty room?

Starkiller Base makes very little sense; the physics of it just don’t work, in any reasonable universe. The Resistance leaders explain that it sucks up “*the sun*” — not “the nearest star” — in a galaxy with billions of suns, in a film set on multiple planets, around multiple stars, the producers apparently don’t trust the audience to understand how stars and planets work; we wouldn’t want to confuse them! Frankly, it’s insulting.

But none of this is really a deal-breaker, because the movie moves so fast, and is so willing to break things. Which brings me to the biggest spoiler of all.

The movie kills Han Solo. Yes, they went there. It was at that moment that the film won me over completely. It was a brave move, and it needed to happen. The screenwriters, including Lawrence Kasdan, who worked on *Empire*, knew very well that if the audience was to take this movie seriously, it would need to show them that it was serious. That’s what the death of Han Solo means. Harrison Ford — who, by the way, is excellent in this film — has a terrific death. This is also the reason that, for the upcoming episode IX to work, the screenwriters will have to kill another major character — most likely, General Leia — in the first ten minutes. (There’s a prediction, and a “pre-spoiler,” if you will; in a few years, we’ll know if I’m right!)

Given the impressive start to this new trilogy, I believe they will do the right thing — and it will be glorious. And we'll regard the prequels as an unfortunate, non-canon interlude, a mere glitch, in the continuity of the *Star Wars* story — and Lucas will continue his slide into irrelevant, up-his-own-rear-end lunacy — <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/01/george-lucas-apologises-for-describing-disney-as-white-slavers>.

And meanwhile, as I approach fifty, I still have to wonder. What was the point of *Star Wars*? Was it ever anything resembling a genuine artistic statement, or was it always a coldly calculated money-grabbing machine, powered by myth — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Power_of_Myth — in which Lucas figured out how to monetize the scholarship of Joseph Campbell? Was *Star Wars* ever actually *about* anything? Was it ever “real” art? Was it an authentic manifestation of our culture, something more than a dizzying whirlwind of entertainment, built on genre tropes and with very little in it that was groundbreaking but the improved technology of movie-making?

Was I simply bamboozled, as a child, into imagining that I was seeing a piece of art, something meaningful? And if so, does it matter? Is that dizzying whirlwind of entertainment, blended with a calculated human story arc, really enough? Can real art ever be made out of genre fiction? How about Tolkien? What about smashed-together, postmodern genre fiction? Is it just screenwriting that somehow loses the status of “art?” If I enjoy both *Moby Dick* and *Star Wars*, is there something wrong with me?

And, if these distinctions don't matter, and the Disney corporation buys George Lucas' property for four *billion* dollars, knowing they will turn enormous profits on that investment for decades, and makes us a compelling *Star Wars* entirely cynically, built literally out of the formulaic building blocks of the original, but it works as well, as wonderfully — distractingly, entertainingly, wonderfully — as the original, does that matter? And what does it say about art, and about its audience?

Saginaw, Michigan
January 1, 2016

Preliminary Notes Towards a Review of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) — My Review from 2017

Note: I called this my “preliminary notes,” thinking I would write a longer review at some point. But looking back on what I wrote, years later, I don't feel the need to add anything.

Episode VII (*The Force Awakens*) had to do three things:

1. Reboot the story. After the disastrously bad prequel trilogy, it was not sufficient to just try to continue the story where it left off in *Return of the Jedi*. And for practical reasons like the age of the original cast, it wasn't even possible to just do this. And so episode VII told a story inspired

by the original 1977 movie, filled with fan-service moments, as a bridge between the original trilogy (not the prequel trilogy) and the new trilogy.

2. Pass the torch. No one wanted to see any of the characters from the prequel trilogy in the new trilogy — and this wasn't even an in-universe possibility, given the chronology. But given the ages of the original cast members, it wasn't going to be possible to just keep them on as the action heroes of the next three movies. So the film had to involve the older characters while also starting to phase them out of the story, by having them hand off their places in the story to younger actors who can actually be around for more movies.
3. Raise the stakes. So that the audience might actually feel dramatic tension, it was necessary to convince them that they were not watching a museum exhibit in which the venerable antiques were wrapped in cotton wool just so they could be objects of admiration and nostalgia. The film had to convince the audience that big things were actually at stake, and anything could happen. Dramatically, the death of Han Solo was entirely necessary and in context it felt perfectly right and fitting.

After Episode VII, it was not entirely clear to me what direction Episode VIII would take. Would it just remake *The Empire Strikes Back*, or would it do something bolder? It would have been a safe choice to follow the story arc of *Empire* closely, and a lot of fans probably would have enjoyed that, but to really open up the possibilities for future films, it needed to do something more. It actually really impressed me, and won me over emotionally in scene after scene. In fact I'd say it isn't just "good for a *Star Wars* movie," but actually a good movie even considered outside of the narrowed criteria of *Star Wars* fandom, or even science fiction fandom.

I can see how people who were very attached to the structure of the original trilogy found themselves offended. There are indeed some updated politics at play. But I wouldn't really call them radical. Basically, this film introduces 1990s-era "social justice" ideas into the script, including feminism, disdain for toxic masculinity, and tropes about success through collective action and mutual support rather than extremely high-risk, unlikely individual heroics.

People offended by the idea that *Star Wars* would have a political agenda forget that the original had a political agenda, not from the 1990s but from a hundred years earlier, including toxic militarism, and the idea that a person's importance in the galaxy depends primarily on who that person's parents are. I grew up marinated in these tropes, which were so commonplace as to seem invisible, and you probably did, too. But truly growing up requires coming to understand that they are, in fact, *political*.

People have gotten angry about the treatment of the male characters, and elevation of the female characters. Finn, who famously deserted the First Order, almost succeeds in deserting the Rebellion as well. Poe is demoted. But if anything the treatment, in the screenplay, that these characters receive for their

actions is far too soft. Is the Rebellion not a military operation? Did Poe not make the decision to impetuously disobey General Organa's orders, and did that decision not result in the loss of many ships and personnel? In a military operation, Poe would have been facing not a slap in the face, but a court martial, and perhaps even execution. Even with its new "social justice warrior" approach to the male characters, the movie is still a soft-hearted fantasy that handles its characters with kid gloves. So as this movie raises the stakes, it doesn't raise them to a realistic level when it comes to its main characters.

People are even angry about the jokes in the new movie. It seems to me that these people have forgotten what is actually *in* the original film. They have forgotten that some of the most iconic scenes in the original 1977 film involve sight gags and dumb jokes and bickering characters and stereotypes. Think of Chewbacca proudly grinning after his roar scares away a small boxy repair droid. Think of Leia yelling "will someone get this big walking carpet out of my way?" when she is stuck behind Chewbacca. Think of Han bellowing "one thing's for sure — we're all gonna be a lot thinner!" as the trash compactor threatens to crush the rescue party, or chasing panicked stormtroopers down a corridor in the Death Star, screaming his head off. And let's not forget that while the character was eventually given more to do, in the first film, C-3PO's entire persona was a nasty caricature, an effeminate, excessively fearful, prissy gay man, played for cheap laughs.

People are angry about how Finn does not behave "heroically" enough. But apparently they have forgotten that Han Solo planned to take his reward and get the hell out of danger, and that he shot Greedo proactively — as described in the original shooting script — although Lucas has since claimed otherwise, and revised that scene four times now.

Reading complaint after complaint about the new movie, it really seems like people forgot what *Star Wars* actually *is*: as I've mentioned before, it's a postmodern mash-up of tropes from old adventure serials, with a dash of self-conscious Campbellian "hero's journey" myth-making, thrown in a blender with newer science fiction elements.

Some of the complaints are specifically about the way The Force is portrayed in the new film. Folks are complaining that The Force doesn't work the way they expect it to. But they seem to have forgotten that The Force was never a very precisely-developed concept; it was originally a little bit of quasi-religious myth-making to add a sense of world-building, and also a convenient source of plot devices and opportunities for *deus ex machina* interventions. It allowed dead characters to intervene in the story. In *Star Wars*, there was never much science in the science fiction; it's more of a fantasy and a space opera. To me, it sounds like these critics are saying "but this *gleep-glop* space magic fantasy world can't have *glop-gleep* space magic! That would violate the laws of physics!"

This is a little different than the justifiable complaints about the disastrous retconning* that George Lucas did in the prequel trilogy. For example, he

essentially said that instead of gleep-glop space magic, the ability to feel and manipulate the Force comes from the midichlorians in your blood, effectively saying that sainthood requires specific parentage. That sounds like actual heresy to me. And let's not forget that Lucas *really* pissed off many religious people when Anakin Skywalker's mother claimed that Anakin had no father.

**“Retcon” is fan-speak for “retroactive continuity,” and “retconning” means “making retroactive changes to the existing continuity,” which means “forcing fans to accept changes that radically redefine their most beloved characters and stories, rather than working with the existing back-story.” For example, Lucas now thinks that Han Solo apparently can't be a hero if he kills someone in cold blood, hence, Greedo shot first and Solo was merely defending himself. But fans at the time were absolutely fine with the morally ambiguous smuggler character who spent much of the first film trying to save his own ass, and only was moved to help others at the last minute.*

I get that arguing about it is not going to fix the movie for anyone who went to see it and found themselves thrown out of the story by the iconoclasm of the new one. All I can say is that each time the director broke with the storytelling tradition, I felt myself puzzled at first, but at each point I felt like he used the breaking of the frame to tell a bigger story, and it worked for me.

The amazing battle sequence at the end of the movie takes place on a white plain of salt crystals with red underneath. When one of the ship's skis or even a person's foot touches the surface, the surface turns blood red. (This is not really a spoiler; it's in the trailer). In this sequence, the sacrifices of all those who died fighting the Empire (and the First Order) are literally inscribed on the landscape in blood. It's moving, and jaw-dropping.

I saw *Star Wars* before it was called Episode IV, in the initial release — actually in a sneak preview showing before the film officially opened. I saw it at least a dozen times over the next year. I imprinted like a duckling on the movie. But it's been 40 years. You can't keep telling the same story in the same way. I think this new movie really does a fantastic job of breaking out of the limitations of the original film, bringing *Star Wars* to another generation as a world that won't be constrained by the original cast or the original story. Anything can happen. And *Star Wars* is great again.

*Pittsfield Township, Michigan
December 26, 2017*

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