

# The Last Star War

Paul R. Potts

29 Dec 2019

## Sunday

Folks, I'm tired this evening and it's already 11:15, so this one is going to be short and late.

Tonight I am remembering a line from a song by Blue Öyster Cult, *Veteran of the Psychic Wars*:

You're seeing now a veteran of a thousand psychic wars,  
I've been living on the edge so long, where the winds of Limbo roar  
And I'm young enough to look at  
And far too old to see  
All the scars are on the inside

I'm not sure if there's anything left of me

## *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019 film)

I slipped out while the kids were playing video games to go catch a showing of *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. I'm not going to write a full review tonight. I'm just going to say a few things. I found this long, over-stuffed movie to be alternately exhilarating and maddening. The first third or so proceeded fairly smoothly and enjoyably for me. The middle third is full of speed bumps, as the script rolls roughshod over the established continuity, and turns into a MacGuffin chase, with multiple MacGuffins. Things heat up in the third half, but the eye-rolling starts to come fast and furious as the movie introduces many new types of magic to drive the plot. And along the way, as many critics are reporting, the movie takes great pains to undo most of the most interesting choices that Rian Johnson made when he wrote the previous film's story.

A full list would involve a lot of spoilers, so right now I'm going to just mention one particularly offensive one: Kelly Marie Tran's Rose Tico, a major character in the previous film, and a great character at that, was in this new film, but completely sidelined, given only a couple of minutes of screen time, and given no important actions. She's a great actress and her character was a great character. As far as I can tell, the only rationale for this was to satisfy some of the more

vocal fans who objected to her character (who is not skinny, is stronger and braver than Finn, and saves him from a suicide mission).

I had several reasons to want to sneak out and see it alone. More than 42 years ago, my Uncle Ted took me and my brother Brian to a preview showing of the original *Star Wars* film, at the Millcreek Mall in Erie, Pennsylvania. It would have been appropriate to share this experience with my Uncle Ted and brother Brian, but that just wasn't going to be possible. So it felt appropriate to go by myself. Back then the original movie was just called *Star Wars*, without the "Episode IV: A New Hope" appendage. As the first film turned into a trilogy and the films became episodes IV, V, and VI, we learned of George Lucas' plan for a "triple trilogy." And, over 42 years later, the "triple trilogy" is finished. *Star Wars* has been a part of my life for a long time.

I was not a rabid fan of the films after the first one; in fact, I disliked the first prequel Episode I, so much that I did not even bother to see the next two in the theater, or even watch them on home video until very recently. And as it had been so long since the original trilogy, it was impossible for the films to just do what older fans like me really wanted, which was to continue the story from where Episode VI left off, with the same characters. Instead we got a "soft reboot," which I couldn't help but like to some extent, because the story of Episode IV is baked into my bones.

But this meant that one film of the nine was largely wasted with the rebooting, and so spent its runtime recapitulating the first film, rather than continuing the story where we left it at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. It wasn't until the next one that we got some interesting new storytelling. And as it turns out, an awful lot of the older fans are much more fixated on the traditional storytelling tropes of *Star Wars* — heroic men and damsels in distress — than I thought they were, and despised Episode VIII, claiming that Johnson had ruined the franchise. But at the same time they were saying this, episode VIII was the most profitable *Star Wars* film to date. So, some catastrophe, I guess.

And so we've come to this last film. Not the last *Star Wars* film — certainly not! Disney has already released a couple of films that are complementary to the main story arc. I haven't seen those. But the last one of the "triple trilogy" as originally conceived.

So, I wanted to be alone with the movie and with my thoughts. Going to the film, I felt emotionally vulnerable. I wasn't sure how I'd feel, watching this film. Would I be teary-eyed and sad? Or enraged because I had to watch what amounted to a catfight between directors, Abrams pissing on Johnson's work?

I also wanted to see it first without the kids so that I could think over whether I wanted to take the kids to see this one. I was happy to show them VIII, but I'm well aware of Abrams' misogyny and homophobia, having seen the *Star Trek* reboot, and wasn't sure if I wanted to expose them to more of it.

Having seen it, I'll probably only take a couple the kids to see it; maybe just

the oldest two (in part because it is very long). And it can't help but seem a little over-stuffed, given how many plot lines it had to wind up. I felt like they very well could have easily made the call to make the last film a two-parter, like they did with the seventh Harry Potter film. They could even have made it into three films (and then the last trilogy of a trilogy of trilogies would conclude with a trilogy — trilogy-ception!) But no; Disney wants to move on and make *Star Wars* films that will appeal to a younger and less critical audience, not cranky old members of Generation X like me.

I was moved by parts of the film but I'm also left feeling a bit heartsick. I've been put through an emotional wringer that didn't result in the hoped for catharsis, but in a headache. Overall, I don't think that's the experience fans hope for when going to see a *Star Wars* movie.

I guess the big picture is that I have to accept that this is the end of an era. I think the era actually ended after *Return of the Jedi*. Disney managed to manufacture some nostalgia that made it come, briefly, back to life in Episode VII, and Johnson managed to inject some fascinating new life into it in Episode VIII. But then they gave it back to Abrams, a director who is good at visual storytelling and generating emotions on-screen, but who is ultimately a hack with a very narrow, jaundiced view of storytelling possibilities.

But it doesn't really matter; I don't expect to ever go see another *Star Wars* movie in the theater. My kids probably will.

For me, it's probably best to remember that all this took place a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. The people having those adventures are dust and their spaceships rust and wreckage now, the light of those days just now reaching our eyes. It's time to walk out of the theater and look at *this* world.

## This Week

**Vacation Update** This over-stuffed movie comes at the end of an over-stuffed week. As I wrote last week, this vacation will be the longest one I've had in twenty years. I'm halfway through it. There is so much I hoped to do and still hope to do.

I've gotten a few things done. I have finished the project of replacing a whole lot of broken and damaged CD cases. I replaced a whole bunch of them with this case, purchased from Brodart, and called the "Allsop CD StrongBox." They are quite expensive; three dollars each. But these are the cases that passed the testing I described a while ago. I bought fifty of them. It wasn't quite enough to fix up everything that needs a new case, and there isn't a double CD version of this case, so there are a few more to fix later. But this covered most of the most damaged cases. We were also able to shuffle around unbroken pieces of broken cases to make a few more whole ones. So I have now mostly fixed up the damage that happened during the time that we had eleven young children in the house, several of whom took a particular interest in destroying CD cases,

every time they possibly could get their hands on them.

I finished a project to move all the networking gear into a bookcase with no dangling cords. I had not done that originally because doing it properly, getting all the cords away from the kids, required cutting holes in the bookcase. I knew that there was not going to be any way to cut pretty-looking holes through the cheap cardboard backing of the bookcase, so I finally just hacked ugly holes with a knife, ran the cords, and hid them with books. I've also started digging into some long overdue cleanup and organization of stuff in the basement, some of it never properly packed and organized back when we moved (because I was commuting back and forth between Saginaw and Ann Arbor, and did not have enough time at the Saginaw house to get everything done properly).

It seems like it happened two or three weeks ago, but we had our Christmas. It was a very nice, low-key Christmas. The kids got gift bags with candy, books, and DVDs to watch. We did some feasting. We had a huge Chinese food feast on Christmas Eve, and we've also been celebrating Hanukkah this year by lighting the candles each night; tonight was the eighth night, so we had chicken soup and latkes. Grace's father was Jewish, and while he was not all that observant, he did follow some Jewish ritual. And so we sometimes host very nice Passover dinners.

I am not entirely clear whether I have Jewish ancestry or not. I think my great-grandfather, my mother's father's father, may have been Jewish, but I have almost no documentation on him. If I felt that I could trust one of those DNA testing companies with my DNA, I would have myself tested, because I'm curious about how the ancestry I've been told about — Scottish and Danish — compares to what my DNA says. Although when I look in the mirror, I see someone who definitely looks a bit like a Viking.

I think this year we are lighting candles in part to declare that while there is real anti-Semitism happening, even in our own country, we are Jewish.

Anyway, I'd say that Grace and I got no Christmas gifts at all, and we like it that way, but it's not entirely true. We didn't buy each other gifts, but I did get a small gift or two from other people. And I got myself a few small gifts, including a couple of vintage calculators (cheap on eBay), a couple of movies, and a book. The book is volume 6 of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, in English. (I've read the first five, so I figure I should at least take a crack at the last one, although it is a much different, much longer, much more controversial book — and 1,200 pages long!)

One of the movies was a cheap DVD copy of the 2014 *Godzilla*, which I haven't seen yet.

And I found another film. I've actually been waiting for this one a long time — almost as long as I've been waiting to watch the end of the *Star Wars* triple trilogy.

***Until the End of the World* (1991 film, Criterion 2019 Blu-ray edition)**

In 1991 I went to see the Wim Wenders film *Until the End of the World* at the Michigan Theater. I was a Wim Wenders fan, having seen *Wings of Desire* back in college; it remains one of my favorite films. I recognized that this was a hacked-up film, at 158 minutes, but there was still much about it that intrigued me. There have been other versions released over the years, specifically foreign DVD releases. I have a bootleg version of a much longer cut and I've watched it, but the video quality isn't very good. There have been rumors over the years that there would be a full Director's Cut released someday. I was looking at the Barnes and Noble web site in the hopes that they would have Criterion Collection discs on sale again — Criterion Collection releases are very expensive, about twice the list prices of other films on DVD and Blu-ray, and Barnes and Noble generally sells most DVD and Blu-ray discs at list price, aside from their small member discount.

It turned out that they weren't on sale; that only happens in November. But I was pleasantly surprised to find that Criterion had released *Until the End of the World* on Blu-ray in a 287-minute Director's Cut.

Yes, the film is really 4 hours and 47 minutes long. And I'm thrilled to have a chance to watch every minute of it.

I'm not sure I can really explain why I love this film. The plot is tissue-thin. It has very little dramatic tension, and the climax of the story feels overwrought and unconvincing, while by comparison the rest of the story is breezy and fun. But it is a road movie, or rather, the *ultimate* road movie. We follow the characters on a whirlwind tour of Paris, Moscow, Berlin, Tokyo, and the Australian outback. As a person who doesn't really love travel, and hasn't done very much of it, this is all an amazing feast for my eyes. And because it moves at a leisurely pace, we as the audience really have time to look around. I think this is particularly poignant in the scenes set in Australia, a country that will never be the same as it was when this film was shot there.

Some of my very favorite works of art are *about* the process of making art. My favorite play by Shakespeare is *The Tempest*, which is all about the magic of storytelling. *Until the End of the World* is really a film about the process of making a film — at least, one kind of film, where the story is something cooked up on the fly, and the real joy in this road movie is the road itself, and the exuberance of images, and the *process* of editing and viewing them. So yes, it's very self-referential, and “crawls up its own ass” at times. But it's also sprawling and beautiful and fun, about the joy of travel and of meeting people again and again in new and exciting places and altered circumstances. And so it remains one of my favorite films, while at the same time, I also understand that it certainly won't appeal to everyone. But sometimes I just really love to have a chance to look around at this world.

I'll probably have a screening next week; maybe I'll bring the 43” monitor

upstairs for the occasion.

### **Or Until Next Week, Whichever Comes First**

The stress of the run-up to the end of the work year and Christmas has passed and is gradually leaving me, and I'm having some time to catch my breath and look around. I bought two more pairs of pants with 36-inch waists, but after only a week of vacation, a reduced stress level, a chance to catch up on a little bit of sleep, and a couple of days of intermittent fasting, they are now feeling loose. So I think it is possible that I might be able to wear some of my older pants again by the time I return to work on the 6th.

***The Matrix Revolutions* (2003 film)** I showed the kids *The Matrix Revolutions*. Well, sort of; I censored it, and skipped through some scenes. I knew this one wasn't as good as the first one, since I saw it on video years ago, but I couldn't really convince the kids that it wasn't as good, so finally decided to show them. Joshua actually got up to leave about halfway through it, saying that he had some other things he wanted to do. I explained to him that if the movie had been as good as *The Matrix*, he wouldn't have had that sensation, because despite the amazing fight scenes, including a ground-breaking freeway chase scene, this sequel feels *tedious*, and I think he understood what I was getting at. We probably won't watch the third one. I remember almost nothing about the third one, although I know I've seen it; that's also a sign that it wasn't that good. But we might get a copy of *The Animatrix*, which I've never seen.

I forgot to bring home the pastrami I was keeping in the refrigerator at the office. Oops.

Happy New Year!

## **About This Newsletter**

This newsletter by Paul R. Potts is available for your use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. If you'd like to help feed my coffee habit, you can leave me a tip via PayPal. Thanks!