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Skywalkers don't trod new ground in familiar 'Last Jedi'

Dark side and light side still at it decades later as new incarnations fight old 'Wars'

At conferences discussing the uphill battles of women in law firms, one can't help but think, "didn't we fight this fight already?"

Here we are, decades later, having the same conversation, our enthusiasm imperceptibly eclipsed by weariness. "Star Wars: Episode VIII — The Last Jedi," evokes a similar feeling.

The First Order, Reich-successor to Darth Vader's Galactic Empire, is now trouncing the New Republic's Resistance, led by General Leia Organa (the late Carrie Fisher), nee Princess Leia, twin sister of Jedi Master Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill).

Didn't we travel this ground years ago?

True, Princess Leia of the classic, dueling-cinnamon bun coiffure has changed her iconic hairdo (why? why?), but otherwise, here we are 40 years later and not much has changed. The Jedi Resistance is still resisting. Will the good guys ever triumph?

The visual storyline of "The Last Jedi" follows the war that rages between the First Order and the Resistance, replete with reckless flyboys (Oscar Isaac as Poe Dameron), hesitant leadership (Laura Dern as Vice Admiral Holdo), and imperiled Resistance heroes Finn (John Boyega) and Rose (newcomer Kelly Marie Tran).

The movie's lavish computer-generated effects are graphically stunning, the most breathtaking of

which is a battle fought on a ruby-colored mining planet dusted white with salt crystals. When the salt layer is breached, the crimson terrain seeps through, creating a lovely effect, like red velvet cake. Later, when strafed in warfare,



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the scarlet soil splashes like fountains of blood.

The emotional storyline is more complicated. Leia and Han Solo (who does not appear in this movie) turned their young son, Kylo Ren (Adam Driver), over to Luke for Jedi training. The result was unexpectedly disastrous.

Ren fashions himself after his grandfather, Darth Vader; and, until he grows into his own identity, parades around in a breathy helmet and cape, like a Halloween trick-or-treater.

There are no satisfying resolutions in "The Last Jedi," only reversals and setbacks that keep us guessing ...

Presented as an unstable adolescent — longing for belonging, bestowed with powers he can't fully understand or control — Ren is a walking recipe for dark-side authoritarianism.

The First Order's Supreme

Leader Snoke (Andy Serkis in yet another CGI role) recognizes Ren's power as a Vader and tried to manipulate the younger man's insecurities.

But even an uncertain Kylo Ren cannot easily be controlled.

Rey (Daisy Ridley), the movie's heroine, is as strong in the Force as Kylo Ren. The ultimate journey of the film belongs to Rey — her search to discover her parentage and assume her power.

Rey tracks down Luke, grieving and guilt-ridden, who has cloistered himself among the perilous cliffs and flagstone hives of the Jedi monastery Ahch-To. She pleads with him to train her in the Force.

True to the trope of retired gunfighters since the beginning of cinema, Luke refuses. When he finally relents, advising her to reach out with her feelings, one can't help but wish that mastery of the Force required more Bruce Lee and less Dr. Phil.

There are no satisfying resolutions in "The Last Jedi," only reversals and setbacks that keep us guessing until the incessant switcheroos establish a pattern that, in turn, is incorporated into our expectations.

As episode eight of nine in the Star Wars series, "The Last Jedi" is the foundational conduit that precedes an ultimate segment in which the inevitable showdown between Ren and Rey must occur.

But a conduit is not a climax, and, while gathering pieces to the puzzle may feel like progress, it's actually a tease.

Until the final feature is released, the heirs of the Empire and their Resistance counterparts will battle on, as ever, in a perpetual galactic cycle.