

Nobody Should Watch Star Wars Alone

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I have never gone to the movies alone. It is the equivalent of trick-or-treating by yourself. Going to the movies is best when it's a team sport. Movies have always been communal in my life, and it started right at home.

In 1980 my father purchased a new home movie projector. He was recording every minutia of his children's childhood. To this day the top shelves of my parents' basement coat closet are occupied by perfectly placed rows of stacked eight-millimeter home movie reels, all in chronological order, dated neatly.

Each month my father would have several of the three-minute home movie reels he had filmed on his Minolta XL-440 camera developed. The camera came with a ten-foot extension cord microphone, but we had never heard anything recorded. On the last Saturday night of each month my mother would make popcorn, Dad would set up a portable white screen and situate his home projector. For most of my early childhood we watched home movies as silent images, even after Dad had purchased a sound camera. The new projector was a Bell & Howell Filmosonic Dual eight-millimeter and super eight-millimeter combination. As Dad said on the night of its inauguration, "It came with a freebee bonus, something special."

Nobody operated the home projector except Dad. The same rule was in place for the back porch barbeque. But occasionally, Dad would teach me and my brothers to load the reels. I lament that children today may *feel* something when they see movies, but few of them know what celluloid feels like in your hands; how your father instructs you to always hold it by the edges as to not smudge the image with the grease of your fingertips, to always be careful to load the film straight to avoid a miss-feed and cause a jam, and to most importantly always rewind the reel to its original casing.

As I sat in 1980 on our living room's shag-green carpet between my two older brothers—all of us wearing matching Darth Vader pajamas while sipping juice and munching buttered popcorn—we watched with sound for the first time reels of birthday parties, bar

mitzvahs and national holidays Dad had filmed. We laughed at our recorded voices as Dad occasionally humored us by increasing the speed of the projector so that we came across as the Alvin and the Chipmunks of suburban Portland, Oregon. My mother balanced our baby brother in her lap on one of the imitation yellow velvet swivel chairs by the draped window (you don't watch movies in a lighted theater, of course). We did not yet know that by the time *The Return of the Jedi* was released this same baby brother would flush our *Star Wars* action figures down the toilet, saying "Bye-bye, man," forcing our dentist father to embrace makeshift plumbing to retrieve them.

Finally, Dad said we were through all of the newly developed reels but he had a treat for us; that freebee bonus he got with the purchase of the projector—that something special. When Dad's new projector whirled again, the escape scene from the Death Star from the original *Star Wars* was transported right into our living room. My two older brothers and I literally began to fall over each other, screaming at the top of our lungs. We lunged towards the portable white screen as Han Solo and Luke Skywalker battled pursuing TIE fighters from the gunnery ports of the Millennium Falcon. "Don't touch the screen or I'll turn it off!" Dad yelled.

But we were mesmerized.

For any child born after the mid-1980s, seeing a five-minute scene from *Star Wars* projected in your living room would be nothing spectacular, but for us it was downright unbelievable. Cinemas were houses of worship to us, and our living room had just become one. In fact, we were so ecstatic that Dad had to play the reel a second time just so we could eventually hear it. And of course, we insisted he play it again and again, until our mother said, "Okay, one more time, then all of you brush your teeth." After the last run-through, a rare moment of compliance with our mother's wishes occurred, and I followed my two older brothers to the bathroom where we squirted Crest to our *Star Wars* toothbrushes (having a dentist father on Halloween is not ideal, but our house was the most popular in the neighborhood that October when, instead of miniature Snickers, Dad handed out promotional Oral-B toothbrushes with images of R2D2 and C3PO he had acquired from one of his product distributors).

That evening epitomizes what I have always felt about *Star*

Wars. It is best when it's communal. It's not a movie to watch alone. In fact, the entire franchise should never be a solitary experience. It's about community, whether it be sitting in a packed theater with hundreds of strangers, or sitting on shag-green carpet with your family in 1980. *Star Wars* is about togetherness; it's about being with others and simultaneously feeling for the first time, *I've never seen anything like that*, or for the umpteenth time feeling, *This never gets old*. Like all great movie-going experiences, *Star Wars* has never been about *I saw it* but instead will always be about you and everyone around you feeling exactly as I felt with my brothers on that night in 1980, which is of course, *I want to see it again!*

From that evening on, whenever we watched family home movies, the evening concluded with Dad projecting that five-minute eight-millimeter reel of the escape scene from the Death Star. Eventually, Dad was the first father in the neighborhood to purchase a VCR (a Panasonic with imitation wood paneling and enormous operating knobs that must have weighed more than our sheltie). Dad would occasionally bring home bootlegged copies of movies shot by cinema patrons with eight-millimeter cameras inside theaters and then transferred to VHS. He recently told me that he acquired these films from the brother of a friend (he will still not divulge his source). Over time there was no need for bootlegged copies or ones recorded from television broadcasts. Movies had leapt out of cinema churches and had entered every home in America. But I don't think I will ever feel the same as that evening when Dad showed the Death Star escape in our living room.

Dad always loved *Star Wars*. After *The Empire Strikes Back* was released he painted his face green, put on rubber ears and dressed as Yoda every Halloween to hand out more *Star Wars* toothbrushes. If you walked into his dental office you had a good chance of hearing one of John Williams' scores from the films. He always put our *Star Wars* Hanukkah toys together himself so *he* could play with them. Like me and my brothers, who were transfixed and transported to another world in a communal experience that night in 1980, I always like to think that *Star Wars* allowed Dad to have a second childhood. To not just *be* a kid again; to be *one* of the kids again.

When the first of the restored versions of the original films was theatrically released in the 1990s, I was the only one of my father's sons living in Portland. My mother was out of town visiting

relatives and I drove to Beaverton to pick Dad up. But like the barbeque and the home movie projector from my youth, he insisted on driving (rules are rules, after all, even for adult children). We got burgers and Cokes at the McDonald's near the Beaverton Mall he had always taken me and my brothers to as a treat when we were young and then sat in the Westgate Theater—the same place we had waited in line for hours to see the original movies. Only this time there was no wait. How could there be when the movies had left the cinema churches? In fact, the theater wasn't even filled. But what I remember most about seeing the restored version of *Star Wars* was waiting for the escape from the Death Star scene. It came and I turned to Dad, but he was simply smiling, watching the scene, probably not thinking at all about the freebee five-minute reel he had gotten with his purchase of his new Bell & Howell projector over twenty years before.

After the movie Dad said he had some steaks in his refrigerator and asked me to stay for dinner that evening to barbeque them since Mom was out of town. When we came home I decided to surprise him by getting out his home projector and portable white screen to play that five-minute reel we used to watch. I went to the basement coat closet and there was the projector, safely secured in its travel case. Among the countless organized three-minute reels in stacks was the slightly larger one simply labeled, "Death Star." I knew the white screen was in the upstairs closet by the front door where Dad kept his hats—where it had always been.

When I came upstairs I found Dad sleeping on the couch in the living room. The room now had hardwood floors and there were no longer little boys in Darth Vader pajamas strewn across shag-green carpet. Dad was older, now had grandchildren, was hopefully living a third childhood. He had earned it. But he was tired and I decided not to disturb him. He deserved a nap in a quiet house without the worry of little boys secretly taking his ladder from the backyard shed to climb to the roof with broken broom handles attempting to recreate the duel between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*. I set the projection case down but kept the Death Star reel in my hands and went to the kitchen.

I sat at the island wearing faded Levis and scuffed hiking boots instead of Darth Vader pajamas. I sipped a Henry Weinhard's beer instead of juice. And I opened the reel. Just as Dad had always

instructed, I carefully unwrapped the celluloid and held it at the edges as to not smear the images. It felt exactly as I remembered it as a child; thin, delicate, something to take great care with and respect because I wasn't the only one it was there to please. It was for everyone— together.

Slowly, I held the reel to the light of the kitchen's ceiling lamp. But I wasn't with anyone. And *Star Wars* just wasn't the same by myself.

