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## Remembering and Restoring the Republic: *Star Wars* and Rome\*

MICHAEL B. CHARLES

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that one of modern Western culture's most-watched film series, the *Star Wars* double trilogy, derives much of its meaning by tapping into the age-old discourse of political freedom versus dictatorial oppression, which is at the core of early imperial reimaginings of the Roman Republic. Yet George Lucas's films reveal that the longed-for era of freedom was hardly that at all, just as the era of *libertas* longed for in the Roman Principate was similarly illusory, particularly for lower echelons of Roman society.

Many of the truths we cling to depend on our point of view.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, *Return Of The Jedi* (1983)

George Lucas's epic cycle of six *Star Wars* movies<sup>1</sup> is widely recognized as an amalgam of various mythic and historical motifs. At one level, Telotte states that it embodies a Baudrillardian aesthetic of pure surface,<sup>2</sup> or, as

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<sup>1</sup> The following forms of the *Star Wars* film titles are used: *Episode I = Phantom Menace* (1999); *Episode II = Attack of the Clones* (2002); *Episode III = Revenge of the Sith* (2005); *Episode IV = A New Hope* (1977); *Episode V = Empire Strikes Back* (1980); *Episode VI = Return of the Jedi* (1983). All translations of ancient authors are from the following: Cassius Dio = E. Cary, tr., *Dio Cassius. Roman History* vol. 6, Loeb Classical Library 85 (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1917); *Res Gestae* = P. A. Brunt and J. M. Moore, eds., *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: The Achievements of the Divine Augustus* (London 1973); Sallust = J. C. Rolfe, tr., *Sallust*, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library 116 (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1931); Tacitus = C. H. Moore, tr., *Tacitus* vol. 3, Loeb Classical Library 249 (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1931).

<sup>2</sup> J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge 2001) 138.

Queenan puts it, “a dizzying collage of everybody else’s ideas.”<sup>5</sup> But this underplays the importance of the visual and verbal motifs linking the viewer to other texts that provide ideological orientation. The films convey meaning because they tap into a vast corpus of mythohistorical material, in other words, that “dizzying collage.” Stripped of their science-fiction trappings, the films emerge as the quintessence of much of the mythohistorical material that most Westerners have absorbed since childhood. As Rubino suggests, they “tap into a deep reserve of themes that have preoccupied humans for millennia.”<sup>4</sup> These elements of pseudo-historicity, woven thickly into the saga, form mental bridges between one appropriation of reality and the innumerable other appropriations that we denominate “history.” It is in this sense that Brooker can justify labeling the saga as a “postmodern pastiche,”<sup>5</sup> with influences as diverse as Westerns, Samurai films, World War II movies, and even Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).<sup>6</sup> Nods to *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* are also evident, in addition to J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, while Lucas has acknowledged his debt to Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy*, which dealt with the demise of a galactic empire, and was influenced by Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.<sup>7</sup>

The evocation of the Old Senate, which embodied freedom and enlightened government, and its replacement by a totalitarian Galactic Empire, seems to tap into an ideological discourse as old as organized society itself, that of the “eternal struggle of goodness and light against disorder and darkness.”<sup>8</sup> Some have seen the rise of Palpatine from Senator to Supreme Chancellor to Emperor as mirroring the rise of Adolf

<sup>5</sup> This phrase was used by J. Queenan, *The Guardian Guide*, 15–21 July (1995) to describe *Judge Dredd* (1995); see J. Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in M. Poster, ed., *Selected Writings* (Oxford 1988) 170.

<sup>4</sup> C. Rubino, “Long Ago, But Not So Far Away: Another Look at *Star Wars* and the Ancient World,” *CO* 89 (2011) 1.

<sup>5</sup> W. Brooker, “New Hope: The Postmodern Project of *Star Wars*,” in S. Redmond, ed., *Liquid Metal* (London and New York 2004) 299; L. Geraghty, “Creating and Comparing Myth in Twentieth-Century Science Fiction,” *LFQ* 33.3 (2005) 197.

<sup>6</sup> See M. M. Winkler, “*Star Wars* and the Roman Empire,” in M. M. Winkler, ed., *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford 2001) 272.

<sup>7</sup> A. Gordon, “*Star Wars*: A Myth of Our Time,” *LFQ* 6 (1978) 317; T. Edwards, *The Unauthorized Star Wars Compendium: The Complete Guide to the Movies, Comic Books, Novels, and More* (London 1999) 17; Rubino (above, n.4) 2.

<sup>8</sup> Rubino (above, n.4) 1.

Hitler at a time of turmoil in Germany, the more so since both leaders had “stormtroopers.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, others have viewed it as a critique of neoconservative American politics beginning with Richard Nixon and ending with George W. Bush, a president whom some have suspected of having engineered the threat of terrorism to strengthen the state’s hold on society—just as soon-to-be emperor Supreme Chancellor Palpatine would do. Lucas himself has said that Palpatine was based on Nixon and that he was indeed originally described as “President of the Republic.”<sup>10</sup> Yet the most appropriate mirror in which to view *Star Wars* may be the Roman Empire, rather than Hitler’s rise to power or recent American politics. As several scholars have recently argued, one should devote more attention to ancient Rome, and particularly the transition from Republic to Empire at the hands of the first emperor, Augustus, and the subsequent mythohistorical material surrounding the old order’s demise and the advent of the new.<sup>11</sup>

Nazi Germany, with its warlike eagles, military symbolism, grandiose public works, and genocidal bent, represents one reimagining of the Roman Empire, while the United States, with its Senate, classicized images of the Founding Fathers, and canonization of the gentleman farmer,<sup>12</sup> is a reimagining of the Roman Republic. Malamud has previously made this comparison. In particular, she focuses on the theme of filial piety (*pietas*), which characterizes the original *Star Wars* trilogy, together with Roman literature that lauds traditional Republican values—values allegedly lost in the Empire.<sup>13</sup> But Republican and Imperial Rome, even as they appear in scholarly works, are more a series of juxtaposed and overlapping constructions, based on various appropriations of reality made by various people at various points in time, than the products of “scientific” scholarship.<sup>14</sup> Our “Rome” is therefore a constructed reality

<sup>9</sup> M. Henderson, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth* (New York 1997) 146.

<sup>10</sup> G. Lucas, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, in *Star Wars Omnibus* (London 1995) 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Winkler (above, n.6) 273; A. Lancashire, “*The Phantom Menace*: Repetition, Variation, Integration,” *Film Criticism* 24.5 (2000) 27–28; M. Malamud, “Patriarchy and *Pietas* in the *Star Wars* Trilogy,” *Amphora* 3.1 (2004) 1–2, 16; Rubino (above, n.4); C. Rubino, “It Was Their Destiny: Roman Power and Imperial Self-Esteem,” *Amphora* 5.2 (2006) 10–11, 19.

<sup>12</sup> C. J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge 1994) 158; see also ch. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Malamud (above, n.11) 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> A. M. Gowing, *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (Cambridge 2005).

that, in many of its manifestations—such as history, literature, plastic art, theatrical performance or film—probably bears little resemblance to what Rome was really like. Both the popular reception of Rome and its reception in the works of modern scholars can therefore be plagued with inaccuracies of different types. Bondanella even speaks of “the myth of Rome.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Tacitus’ *Annals* and *Histories* and Suetonius’ *Caesars*, which have colored many modern perceptions of ancient Rome, including those of historians who have placed too much faith in their content, may well be regarded as texts embodying tales and traditions, some apocryphal, some not so apocryphal, that eventually lead to the construction of mythohistorical reality.

The purpose here is not to provide a detailed comparison between *Star Wars* and ancient Rome. Of course, the suppression of the Jedi resembles the proscriptions during which Cicero was murdered. The soldiers of Octavian, soon to be Augustus, were loyal to him rather than to the Senate, in the same way that the clone troops turned on their Jedi commanders on Palpatine’s order. Palpatine himself rose to power with a promise to restore peace, just as Augustus did. Like Augustus’ successor Tiberius, Palpatine became an increasingly secluded figure, while the traditional aristocracy became yet more servile, much as Roman senators and equestrians became in Tiberius’ reign, at least according to Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.7.1).<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Smith notes that, when Palpatine accepts special powers in *Attack of the Clones*, he addresses the Senate in tones that make us think of the kind of promises that Octavian would have made on receiving extraordinary powers designed to safeguard the Republic:<sup>17</sup> “It is with great reluctance that I have agreed to this calling. I love democracy. I love the Republic. This power you give me I will lay down when this crisis has abated.”

To build on this comparison serves no real purpose, since elements of the saga reflect other historical periods as well, while the claim that the story of *Star Wars* was based on that of ancient Rome places undue emphasis on authorship. This would negate the notion,

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<sup>15</sup> P. Bondanella, *The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., and London 1987).

<sup>16</sup> The similarity to Tiberius is also observed by Bondanella (above, n.15) 234; Rubino (above, n.11) 10. On servility at Rome, see C. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge, 1968) 164.

<sup>17</sup> J. Smith, *George Lucas* (London 2003) 285.

advanced previously by Malamud, that Lucas was not consciously basing his work on anything in particular but was tapping into an already established, yet constantly evolving, discourse on the nature of “Republic,” with its connotations of freedom and democracy, and those of “Empire,” with its inverse connotations of oppression and lack of political representation.<sup>18</sup>

## I. Freedom’s Pleasant Fiction

The first three *Star Wars* films emphasize that the Empire brought about the end of freedom. For example, *A New Hope*’s opening crawl concludes: “Pursued by the Empire’s sinister agents, Princess Leia races home aboard her starship, custodian of the stolen plans that can save her people and restore freedom to the galaxy.” Likewise, *Return of the Jedi*’s opening crawl describes “a small band of rebels struggling to restore freedom to the galaxy.” Freedom’s restoration is, effectively, the restoration of the Republic and the destruction of the Galactic Empire. Deposing the Emperor therefore reflects a desire to return to a governmental form that is more inclusive and genuinely representative. The Galactic Republic was an idyllic age in which reason prevailed and freedom was assured. But the films themselves contradict this idealistic view, or rather appropriation of a “past future.”<sup>19</sup>

That the Senate ruled the Republic is made clear in *A New Hope*. The Grand Moff Tarkin, a powerful provincial governor, informs his lieutenants, “The Imperial Senate will no longer be of any concern to us. I have just received word that the Emperor has dissolved the council permanently. The last remnants of the Old Republic have been swept away.” Rome’s story is almost entirely the narrative of the elite. *Star Wars* follows a similar path. The Rebellion is led by members of the now-dissolved oligarchy.<sup>20</sup> Its most influential members are aristocrats, most visibly Princess Leia Organa, daughter of the ruler of Alderaan. Though not named in *Return of the Jedi*, the film’s accompanying novelization reveals the Rebellion’s leader as Mon Mothma, previously a

<sup>18</sup> Malamud (above, n.11) 1–2.

<sup>19</sup> R. G. Collins, “*Star Wars*: The Pastiche of Myth and the Yearning for a Past Future,” *JPC* 11.1 (1977) 1.

<sup>20</sup> See R. Kaveney, *From Alien to the Matrix: Reading Science Fiction Film* (London and New York 2005) 114.

senior senator.<sup>21</sup> Luke Skywalker, though raised in obscurity, is a de facto aristocrat by virtue of his provenance (“son of an elite warrior”<sup>22</sup>). That Luke and his twin sister Leia, whose mother, Padmé Naberrie, was part of her world’s nobility, were separated at birth recalls ancient myths involving displaced royalty; think of Romulus and Remus and of Oedipus.<sup>23</sup> The former outlaws Han Solo and Lando Calrissian, generals of the Rebellion by *Return of the Jedi*, are aristocrats of their own creation. Han has elevated himself because of his courage and resourcefulness, while Lando, formerly Baron Administrator of the Cloud City of Bespin, has risen on account of his leadership abilities.

Admission to the Galactic Senate depended on financial status. In *Attack of the Clones*, substantial amounts of money are needed. Obi-Wan asserts that “Senators focus only on those who fund their campaigns. And they’re by no means scared of forgetting the niceties of democracy in order to get those funds.” This recalls what we know of Roman senatorial politics—Julius Caesar, despite his patrician heritage, rose to preeminence through the largesse of his creditors. A Roman senator in the Republic also had to be elected by the people, something that could be facilitated by bribery. As in the *Star Wars* galaxy, the Roman Senate was comprised of members of the landed aristocracy. Indeed, even the poorest Roman senator possessed a wealth that peasants, laborers, and shopkeepers could scarcely imagine.

Roman senators clearly practiced a very selective freedom, with slave ownership the norm. The Republican Roman senate *did* represent freedom, but mainly for the elite, and it was from this group that those who directly administered Rome and its provinces were drawn. Every senator could theoretically rise to become one of two consuls, who acted as virtual kings for a year before laying down their power. When the Senate eventually became to all intents and purposes subordinate to the Emperor, some of its members undoubtedly felt that they had lost the freedom (*libertas*) once viewed as a birthright.<sup>24</sup> Yet the common Roman citizen would have noted little difference.<sup>25</sup> For these

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<sup>21</sup> S. A. Galipeau, *The Journey of Luke Skywalker. An Analysis of Modern Myth and Symbol* (Chicago and La Salle, Ill. 2001) 242.

<sup>22</sup> K. Kuiper, “*Star Wars*: An Imperial Myth,” *IPC* 21.4 (1988) 78.

<sup>23</sup> On this, see A. F. Segal, “The Ten Commandments,” in M. C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (London 1996) 37; Rubino (above, n.4) 2.

<sup>24</sup> On *libertas*, see Wirszubski (above, n.16) 10 and ch. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Wirszubski (above, n.16) 122–23.

citizens, it was a matter of exchanging a large number of rulers for one prince. Likewise, a critique of *Star Wars* reveals that the freedom of the aristocracy has an essentially selfish connotation.

The disaffected aristocrats who engineered the Rebellion were eager to restore their former preeminence. In short, the Rebellion constituted an attempt to restore the “freedom” wrested from them by the Emperor and his minions. Yet freedom probably meant something rather different to others. To Palpatine, freedom meant directing the galaxy as he saw fit, while to Anakin Skywalker freedom meant not having to live by rules imposed by the less gifted. As Anakin—now styled Darth Vader—says to his former mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi, “I have brought peace, freedom, justice, and security to *my* new Empire.” In Anakin’s mind, turning to the Dark Side and participating in the destruction of the Jedi Order, which he had come to believe represented a form of tyranny, meant a return to sound governance.

## II. Justifying the Totalitarian State

So, members of the hereditary elite led the Rebellion, just as conspiratorial movements in the Roman Empire were generally led by senators. In *Star Wars*, however, the lowly were served well neither by the Galactic Republic nor by the Empire. The Republic’s stance towards common folk is demonstrated in *Phantom Menace* by Qui-Gon Jinn, an unorthodox Jedi Knight. While he eventually secures the emancipation of Anakin Skywalker, who lives on Tatooine, he shows little interest in freeing Shmi, his mother, and also a slave: “I didn’t actually come here to free slaves.” Padmé states that the Republic does not support slavery (there are “anti-slavery laws”), but Tatooine lies beyond its control. Still, this hardly seems an acceptable excuse, and Qui-Gon’s indifference reminds the viewer of the Republic’s moral decay. That such moral weakness is displayed by a Jedi—a guardian of the Republic—suggests the Republic does not promote freedom for the many but maintains the freedom of the few.<sup>26</sup> It is not so different from the Roman Republic, which, like the Empire, protected Roman citizens from slavery but did not extend this protection to others.

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<sup>26</sup> See J. Queenan, “Anakin, Get Your Gun,” in G. Kenny, ed., *A Galaxy Not So Far Away. Writers and Artists on Twenty-five Years of Star Wars* (New York 2002) 119.



In *Attack of the Clones*, the new Queen of Naboo warns in vain, “The day we stop believing in democracy is the day we lose it.” Yet it seems abundantly clear that, by the end of the Clone Wars, not only did people stop believing in democracy, but also they did not want it. “Democracy,” by then, meant factional conflict and internecine strife. “Empire,” however, would have represented a new beginning. Palpatine justifies the destruction of the Jedi to Anakin by stating, “The Jedi are relentless. If they are not all destroyed it will be civil war without end.” This carried out, “Once more the Sith will rule the galaxy and we shall have peace.” One can almost imagine Augustus, adoptive son of Julius Caesar, descended from Venus through her mortal son Aeneas, whose descendants were Rome’s legendary founders, saying something along the lines of “Once more the Julian family will rule Rome and we shall have peace.”

Next, Palpatine, as the Emperor, outlines his mission to the assembled Senate. The vast majority appears to support him. For those familiar with the historians of Rome, his speech is pregnant with meaning: “In order to ensure security and continuing stability, the Republic will be organized into the First Galactic Empire for a safe and secure society.” After the Emperor’s soliloquy, the Senate erupts with applause. This prompts Padmé to utter arguably the most poignant line in the entire saga: “So this is how liberty dies . . . to thunderous applause.” This sequence is the quintessence of much of what is found in ancient treatments of Augustus’ rise. Though Augustus maintained the fiction that he was merely the “First Citizen” or *princeps*, Palpatine avoids such niceties and elucidates instead the new imperial reality with frightening conviction.

Like Palpatine, Augustus also promised that his stewardship would promote security and stability. In his *Res Gestae*, an autobiographical statement of his deeds, Augustus emphasizes his rule’s peace-bringing nature:

It was the will of our ancestors that the gateway of Janus Quirinus should be shut when victories had secured peace . . . throughout the whole empire . . . from the foundation of the city down to my birth, tradition records that it was shut only twice, but while I was the leading citizen (*princeps*), the senate resolved that it should be shut on three occasions (*RG* 13).

Augustus also states that he “made the sea peaceful and freed it of pirates” (*RG* 24), “brought peace to the Gallic and Spanish provinces as well as to Germany,” and “secured the pacification of the Alps” (*RG* 26.2–3). He also claims that it was the people who “demanded me as

the leader in the war in which I was victorious at Actium" (*RG* 25.2), a conflict waged against the "separatist" Mark Antony and his wife Cleopatra. He even tells us that he enjoyed "universal consent" (*RG* 34.1).<sup>27</sup> Palpatine would have claimed likewise.

### III. From Roman Writers to a Galaxy Far, Far Away

During the Roman Empire, it is clear that many senators, though they publicly described the incumbent emperor as a paragon of virtue, looked upon the Republic with nostalgic eyes. Writing under the "good" emperor Trajan, the senator Tacitus is nevertheless highly sympathetic to the notion of "the Republic." His views are stated clearly in the introduction to his *Annals*, which covers the period from Augustus' death to Nero's suicide in 68 CE. After a bald statement that Rome was first ruled by kings, Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.1.1) writes, "freedom (*libertas*) and the consulship (*consulatum*) were established by Lucius Brutus." Tacitus clearly associates freedom with the "Republic." Yet "when the world was wearied by civil strife, [Augustus] subjected it to empire (*imperium*) under the title of "Prince" (*princeps*)" (*Ann.* 1.1.1). Though some freedom of speech could be practiced under Augustus, "growing sycophancy" under his successors meant that the historical record was perverted, first by those who praised the emperors while alive, and then by those who condemned them after their deaths (*Ann.* 1.1.2). Similar claims are made in the *Histories* (1.1.2–3), where it is supposed that fear (or rather servility) and hatred colored the narratives of those who had written about the emperors.

In a passage recalling Lucas's prose introduction to the *Star Wars* saga, Tacitus recounts how Augustus came to power:

Augustus won over the soldiers with gifts . . . all men with the sweets of repose, and so grew greater by degrees, while he concentrated in himself the functions of the Senate, the magistrates, and the laws. He was wholly unopposed, for the boldest spirits had fallen in battle, or in the proscription, while the remaining nobles, the readier they were to be slaves, were raised the higher by wealth and promotion, so that . . . they preferred the safety of the present to the dangerous past. (*Ann.* 1.2.1)

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<sup>27</sup> On a general desire for peace after decades of civil strife, see Wirszubski (above, n.16) 120.

One can draw parallels with Lucas's depiction of the fall of the Galactic Republic. Palpatine had created a clone army and, with the Jedi's destruction, it becomes clear that they are loyal to him, and not to the Senate. Palpatine concentrated in himself the functions of the state. In *Revenge of the Sith*, the audience is told that Palpatine "has control of the Senate and the Courts." By *A New Hope*, he had seen fit to dispense with the Senate entirely, something foreshadowed by his Louis XIV-like statement, while still Chancellor, in *Revenge of the Sith*: "I am the Senate!" Tacitus' "boldest spirits" could well be applied to galactic leaders such as Count Dooku, leader of the Separatists, or even the virtuous senator Padmé Amidala. Similarly, the "proscription" could be associated with the wholesale murder of the Jedi Knights on Palpatine's orders and Darth Vader's hunting down of the survivors. The "remaining nobles," that is the senators, were indeed willing to submit to what Tacitus would describe as slavery, while "the provinces" (read "the various systems"), distrustful of the Republic's administration, were tired of factional warring.

Cassius Dio, a Roman senator writing long after Augustus' accession, also depicts the Principate's beginning. He notes that the new political system was effected "in the interest of greater security; for it was no doubt quite impossible for the people to be saved under a republic" (53.19.1). What is more, "the power of both people and senate passed entirely into the hands of Augustus, and from his time there was, strictly speaking, a monarchy" (53.17.1). It becomes obvious that *Star Wars*, as a text, speaks to the literature of ancient Rome, which is not surprising given that Lucas apparently composed the plot details of *Phantom Menace* with a copy of Caesar's *Civil Wars* close at hand.<sup>28</sup>

In the early Roman Empire, the Republic was looked on with nostalgic eyes. But what was its true nature? The *Star Wars* prequels allude to the internal corruption that undermined the Galactic Republic. They show that, instead of being taken over by external forces, "[the Republic] . . . rots from the *inside*."<sup>29</sup> Like ancient Rome, this corruption, from a literary perspective, leads to what seems inevitable, with the prequels drawing on established notions of the internal corruption of stagnant political systems. While sections of the elite living under the Galactic Empire viewed the Republic as a time of freedom, even the most cursory viewing of the prequels contradicts this. One might say the same about the Roman Republic, especially when those living in its terminal years reveal a system

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<sup>28</sup> Smith (above, n.17) 224.

<sup>29</sup> Smith (above, n.17) 241.

that is quite rotten. For the senator Cicero (*Rep.* 5.1.2), the Republic of the first century CE, tainted by civil strife, was little more than a badly faded representation of a painting that had once been glorious.

Sallust, also a senator writing during the Republic's final years, mourned the loss of integrity on the part of Roman politicians. Of course, it is irrelevant whether the glorious Republic ever really existed. To describe the Republic of yore as a system utterly at variance with the present demonstrates that Sallust needed a literary control against which he could expose the decadence of more recent history. His main purpose was to show that decline is gradual and initiated from within—just as the Galactic Republic would be undermined by forces linked to its core. In his *Catilinarian Conspiracy* (2.5), Sallust describes the process by which a leader turns from virtue to vice: “When idleness replaces industry, when self-restraint and justice gives place to lust and arrogance, the moral degeneration brings loss of station in its train.” Sallust also outlines the inherent corruption that he experienced as a junior senator. Indeed, he even succumbed to the “Dark Side,” the more seductive and easier path to power, before removing himself from political life. One is reminded of Anakin Skywalker's path. At first, Anakin is repelled by the corruption around him. Later, “led astray by ambition” and “a young man's weakness,” as Sallust writes about himself (*Cat.* 3.3–4.1), Anakin wonders if he cannot use intrigue for his own ends. Anakin Skywalker sacrificed his integrity for power. Sallust did so for profit. But Sallust was able to extricate himself from the grip of corruption. It was only in the final minutes of Anakin's life that he was able to break free.

Those familiar with the Imperial trilogy were undoubtedly shocked to discover that the virtue-filled Old Republic of memory is, in the prequels, a rather different beast. Yet Lucas had conceived this very difference while making the first three films. The novelizations of *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, which draw extensively on the screenplay of the two movies and cohere with Lucas's vision, suggest that all was not well:

Corruption had set in. A few greedy senators had started the chain reaction of malaise, some said: but who could know? A few perverted bureaucrats, arrogant, self-serving—and suddenly a fever was in the stars. Governor turned on governor; values eroded, trusts were broken—fear had spread like an epidemic in those early years, rapidly and without visible cause, and no one knew what was happening or why.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> J. Kahn, *Star Wars. Return of the Jedi*. Screenplay by L. Kasdan and G. Lucas. Story by George Lucas, in *Star Wars Omnibus* (London 1995) 410.

While there are some incongruities with what made it to screen in the prequels (there is no mention of “governors” in *Episodes I, II* or *III*), the general picture is that of a political system so corrupt that Sallust would have had no difficulty in recognizing it. Trade had grown in importance, and those governing vast enterprises were immensely powerful. The tentacles of the Trade Federation, as seen in *Phantom Menace*, extended to all quarters. Palpatine knew this better than most: “Enter the bureaucrats, the true rulers of the Republic, and on the payroll of the Trade Federation I might add.”

#### IV. Restoring the Republic

While Republican-minded Roman senators themselves never managed to realize their dream of a return to the Republic, modern filmmakers have not hesitated to turn that dream into a reality. The Imperial Trilogy, inasmuch as it depicts a group of ex-imperial senators and their allies desirous of restoring a Republic, also taps into the Roman Republican dream, as espoused by Tacitus, of *res publica restituta*: “the Republic restored.” In essence, it undertakes the resolve whispered in Roman texts from the Empire, and perpetuated, as Winkler points out,<sup>51</sup> by Gibbon: “Such princes [i.e., the ‘good’ emperors Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius] deserved the honour of restoring the republic had the Romans of their days been capable of enjoying a rational freedom.”<sup>52</sup> Winkler also observes that the film *Gladiator* (2000), which plays out the theme of restoring the Roman Republic, revives “the anachronistic concept [of *res publica restituta*] and makes it an integral part of its plot.”<sup>53</sup>

In *Gladiator*, the dying Marcus Aurelius intends to take the Empire with him and restore the Republic. As he says to Commodus, his immoral son, “My powers will pass to Maximus, to be held in trust, until the Senate is ready to rule once more. Rome is to be a Republic again.” Commodus promptly strangles his father, proclaims himself heir, and attempts to do away with Maximus. And thus the stage is set for the

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<sup>51</sup> M. M. Winkler, “*Gladiator* and the Colosseum: Ambiguities of Spectacle,” in M. M. Winkler, ed., *Gladiator: Film and History* (Malden, Mass., Oxford, and Carlton, Vic., 2004) 109.

<sup>52</sup> E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. I (Harmondsworth 1994; repr. of 1776 ed.) 90.

<sup>53</sup> Winkler (above, n.51) 109.

struggle that will eventually result in Maximus' triumph, while mortally wounded, over Commodus in the gladiatorial ring. The audience understands that the Republic will be restored. Maximus, near death, is heard to utter: "There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realized." A new day then dawns over the capital, thereby suggesting renewal. Despite this, one does not expect the new Republic to last. In an earlier scene in which Commodus, now emperor, discusses political matters with his sister Lucilla, we hear, "If father had had his way, the Empire would have been torn apart." The Republic's restoration implies civil war.

Likewise, *Return of the Jedi* posits that the dark days of the Empire are at an end with Palpatine's death. The audience expects the Rebel Alliance to restore the Republic. But, as Wetmore suggests, "The danger of rebellions is that those who carry them out tend to replace the empires they overthrow."<sup>54</sup> That is, another fascist state, but one with a more palatable veneer:<sup>55</sup> "While the Jedi may be rebels, they're also *conservative* underdogs; they aren't fighting to bring about a new order, but to restore an old one."<sup>56</sup> Lev suggests that *Star Wars* presents an "ideologically conservative future,"<sup>57</sup> the welcoming of which poses myriad questions. The scenes of people cheering throughout the galaxy suggest that tyranny's oppressive weight has been lifted. Perhaps the hiatus between the Old Republic and its probable return is much briefer than that which existed between the Roman Republic's demise and its cinematic restitution after Commodus' death in *Gladiator*. Yet the Old Republic of *Star Wars* had not existed in its original "pure" form, if such form it ever had, for a long time—it was already

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<sup>54</sup> K. J. Wetmore, Jr., *The Empire Triumphant: Race, Religion and Rebellion in the Star Wars Films* (Jefferson, N.C. and London 2005) 187; see also R. Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . And Beyond*, rev. edn. (New York 2003) 152.

<sup>55</sup> Many have commented on the curious visual quotation, at the conclusion of *A New Hope*, of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*; see A. Lancashire, "Complex Design in *The Empire Strikes Back*," *Film Criticism* 5.3 (1981) 48; A. Lancashire, "*Return of the Jedi*: Once More With Feeling," *Film Criticism* 8.2 (1984) 56; D. Rubey, "*Star Wars*: Not So Far Away," *Jump Cut* 18 (1978) 11.

<sup>56</sup> T. Carson, "Jedi uber [*sic*] Alles," in G. Kenny, ed. (above, n.26) 170. Some contend that the Rebellion speaks to Reaganism; see P. Lev, "Whose Future?: *Star Wars*, *Alien* and *Blade Runner*," *LFQ* 26.1 (1998) 31; Malamud (above, n.11) 16. Yet Wood (above, n.34) 150–52 interprets the films as evidence of America's fear of fascism rising from within; see C. Baldwin, "Darth Vader and G. W. Bush: A Common Vision of Empire", *Humanist* 65.4 (2005) 4–5; Eric W. Robinson, "American Empire? Ancient Reflections on Modern American Power," *CW* 99.1 (2005) 35–50.

<sup>57</sup> Lev (above, n.36) 30.

moribund in *Phantom Menace*. Despite the celebrations, one doubts that all will proceed smoothly. Will the various Imperial governors, presumably in control of substantial military forces, submit to the Alliance? Surely one or more of them will seek the ultimate prize, just as Vitellius and Vespasian, powerful provincial governors of Nero, did in the aftermath of the emperor's suicide in 68 CE.

The end of *Return of the Jedi* is therefore poignant, not only because of the possibility of freedom but also because of the uncertainty that it raises. The same could be said of *Gladiator*. Cyrino comments that *Gladiator*, which arguably identifies the Roman Empire with the present-day United States, does not deal with whether the United States will survive, but which "vision," like that of Rome, will prevail.<sup>38</sup>

## V. A Linguistic Paradigm

The close link between *Star Wars* and Roman film is made further apparent by the "stylized" dialogue,<sup>39</sup> whose archaic nature recalls historical epic. But this "classicizing" device has even deeper symbolic significance. As Wood observes, Roman aristocrats in Anglophone film typically speak in the kind of patrician voice honed in Shakespearian theatre.<sup>40</sup> British actors, especially those with a theatrical background, have often appeared as villainous, tyrannical, or effete Roman aristocrats. This is part of the "linguistic paradigm," whereby British actors, or those capable of mimicking such accents, are cast as "wicked Roman oppressors, like emperors, generals, or power-mad aristocrats, while American actors take the roles of their righteous adversaries, whether Jewish, Christian, or 'good' Romans on the cusp of conversion."<sup>41</sup> This paradigm would also remind American audiences of their ancestors' struggle to throw off the yoke of British oppression in the War of Independence.<sup>42</sup>

Lawrence Olivier makes for a splendidly aristocratic, aloof, and vindictive Crassus in *Spartacus* (1960). Irish-born Stephen Boyd, as the

<sup>38</sup> M. S. Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome* (Malden, Mass., Oxford, and Carlton, Vic., 2005) 240.

<sup>39</sup> A. Lancashire, "Attack of the Clones and the Politics of *Star Wars*," *DR* 82.2 (2002) 236.

<sup>40</sup> M. Wood, *America in the Movies* (London 1975) 183–84.

<sup>41</sup> Cyrino (above, n.38) 28; with W. Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie," in S. R. Joshel, M. Malamud, and D. T. McGuire, eds., *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore and London 2001) 25.

<sup>42</sup> Cyrino (above, n.38) 28; Rubino (above, n.4) 2.



vengeful tribune Messala of *Ben-Hur* (1959), evokes a British officer of the Raj. Peter Ustinov is the depraved tyrant Nero in *Quo Vadis* (1951). Even New York-born actor Jay Robinson, in *The Robe* (1953), affects a hammy, aristocratic stage accent to portray the fiendish Caligula, a role which he reprised in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954). In *Gladiator* (2000), the American actor Joaquin Phoenix adopts the sort of “elegant” diction found in the children’s stories of the British writer Enid Blyton, e.g., “It vexes me . . . I’m *terribly vexed*” and “Royal ladies . . . do very *odd* things in the name of love.” Such speech, when delivered with a lisp, reinforces our perception of Commodus as a spoilt aristocratic man-child suddenly forced to play an adult’s role on the stage of empire.

The virtuous protagonists in such films, which often deal with the conflict between “evil paganism” and Christianity, generally speak with an American accent.<sup>43</sup> Robert Taylor, who speaks with “Midwestern cadences,” is the good Roman general and soon-to-be-Christian Marcus Vinicius in *Quo Vadis* (1941).<sup>44</sup> In *The Robe* (1953) and *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), Kentucky-born Victor Mature plays the Christian slave Demetrius. More emblematic is Charlton Heston’s eponymous character in *Ben-Hur* (1959), a man fighting for justice in an empire that crushes those defying its universalizing mission. In *Spartacus* (1962), Kirk Douglas’s freedom-fighting hero juxtaposes his American accent with the polished tones of his “British” oppressors Crassus (Lawrence Olivier), Lentulus Batiatus (Peter Ustinov), and Sempronius Gracchus (Charles Laughton). Even the Australian-raised Russell Crowe, as the general-turned-gladiator Maximus, speaks with a neutral accent. Crowe himself meant his voice to sound like “Royal Shakespeare Company two pints after lunch.”<sup>45</sup> While *Gladiator* moves beyond the American versus British conflict, it still has recourse to the association of British aristocracy with tyranny. Furthermore, the “Republican” virtue of Maximus, with its emphasis on good old-fashioned bravery, concern for the nuclear family and commitment to pastoralism, clearly speaks in broad Midwestern tones.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> M. M. Winkler, “Cinema and the Fall of Rome,” *TAPA* 125 (1995) 140. Some “good” Romans, however, are played by British actors, including Ben Hur’s adoptive father Quintus Arrius (Jack Hawkins, *Ben-Hur*), and Marcus Aurelius (Alec Guinness, *Fall of the Roman Empire*).

<sup>44</sup> Cyrino (above, n.38) 22, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Cyrino (above, n.38) 23.

<sup>46</sup> See M. S. Cyrino, “*Gladiator* and Contemporary American Society,” in Winkler (above, n.31) 127–29; J. Solomon, *The Ancient World and the Cinema*, rev. edn. (New Haven, Conn. and London 2001) 94.



The *Star Wars* saga is far more complex in its narrative than any of the films discussed, but, as Rubino has pointed out, traces of the British–American conflict remain.<sup>47</sup> *A New Hope* represents the best example. The protagonists are clearly American in both accent and persona. Han Solo (Harrison Ford) is a gun-slinging figure of the American West.<sup>48</sup> We meet him in a canteen on dusty Tatooine. Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) is a strong and independent American woman, though raised on Alderaan, while Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) is a golly-gosh all-American boy exuding naïveté, innocence, and homespun values.<sup>49</sup> Yet the Grand Moff Tarkin, commander of the Death Star, is the stereotypical fascist commander. Cool and precise, Tarkin is played by Peter Cushing, who speaks with the most crisp and quietly terrifying British accent imaginable. The arch-villain Darth Vader represents a problem. Voiced by the American James Earl Jones, an actor with Shakespearian training, his voice is deep, booming, and mechanical, yet is arguably more neutral than overtly American, and his dialogue’s palpable theatricality provides an aristocratic veneer.<sup>50</sup>

But it is the figure of the Emperor Palpatine himself—the very embodiment of unfeeling fascist tyranny and dark excess, or *licentia* as the Romans would have known it—that is most revealing.<sup>51</sup> He briefly appears as a hologram in *Empire Strikes Back* but does not really figure until *Return of the Jedi*. Palpatine is played here by the Scottish actor Ian McDiarmid, made up to appear much older than his age. McDiarmid delivers his lines with a British accent, and one tinged with the sort of quality associated with archetypal filmic tyrants. Some twenty years older, McDiarmid reappears in the three prequels. The attuned viewer will not fail to notice the British theatricality of McDiarmid’s Palpatine. One may even detect some elements of Sir Humphrey Appleby, British public servant extraordinaire, an ostensibly urbane, witty, and charming but otherwise scheming and duplicitous character made famous by the BBC comedy series *Yes Minister*

<sup>47</sup> Rubino (above, n.4) 2–3.

<sup>48</sup> J. M. Curtis, “From *American Graffiti* to *Star Wars*,” *J PQ* 13.4 (1980) 596.

<sup>49</sup> D. S. Meyer (“*Star Wars*, *Star Wars*, and American Political Culture,” *J PQ* 26.2 [1992] 106) observes that the “droid” C3-P0 has “the only middle-Atlantic accent in the alliance.”

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Rubino (above, n.4) 2–3. The notion of the older Jedi using British accents is not borne out by the prequels, where Mace Windu (Samuel L. Jackson) uses an obviously American accent.

<sup>51</sup> Wirszubski (above, n.16) 7 contrasts *licentia* with *libertas*.

(1980–1984). The American–British dichotomy is further enhanced with the addition of Count Dooku/Darth Tyrannus in *Attack of the Clones*. Palpatine’s apprentice, who leads the Separatist movement engineered by the Sith, is played by British actor Christopher Lee.

As Wood points out, the American accents employed by the younger generation of heroes in *Star Wars* emphasize the potential for a bright new future.<sup>52</sup> This recalls some of the Roman themes introduced previously. Thus, with respect to the “linguistic paradigm,” the *Star Wars* trilogy coheres with the viewer’s expectations. British accents provide an aural cue to the fascist tyranny of the Empire, while the more down-to-earth American tones of the heroes, especially in the Imperial trilogy, alert the viewer to the struggle for freedom that the films will portray. Once again, the surface elements, which provide clear points of reference and help to minimize psychic distance, align the viewer with Lucas’s narrative project.

## VI. Monumentalized and Mythical “History”

In sum, classical antiquity maintains “a continuing presence” in the modern popular culture of the Western world.<sup>53</sup> Yet *Star Wars* moves beyond its superficial aesthetic of merely seeming to be an iteration of tropes and appropriated signifiers. The Rebellion in *Star Wars* represents a rejection of slavery, in much the same way as *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus*, and *Gladiator*. It ostensibly embodies the struggle of different life forms and belief systems against a system of intolerance and mechanical soullessness. Moreover, the Republic represents, at face value, vibrant eclecticism and individual choice in the face of rigid uniformity and unquestioning conformance.

Yet one recall’s Nietzsche’s warning about the danger of eulogizing a “monumental past,” especially since this is the standard to which the Rebellion so doggedly clings:

As long as the past has to be described as worthy of imitation, as imitable and possible for a second time, it of course incurs the danger of becoming somewhat distorted, beautified and coming close to free poetic

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<sup>52</sup> Wood (above, n.34) 151.

<sup>53</sup> M. M. Winkler, “The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945,” in Joshel (above, n.41) 51.

invention; there have been ages, indeed, which were quite incapable of distinguishing between a monumentalized past and a mythical fiction.<sup>54</sup>

Those senators writing in the Roman Empire looked upon what we call the Republic as an ideal age, idealized above and beyond historicity, to an extent that it did indeed become a “mythical fiction.” While that fiction might well have been imitated, as it was by the Founding Fathers of the United States, who espoused a “usable” *romanitas*,<sup>55</sup> the Roman Republic, with all its faults, factionalism, and bloody conflict, was no utopia. This Republic harbored values and norms that, in the present day, seem racist, sexist, and inhumane, and thus decidedly unworthy of emulation. But, as Nietzsche warns us, these characteristics are “imitable and possible for a second time.”<sup>56</sup>

*Star Wars* takes this concept one step further. The Imperial trilogy decries the coldness and sterility of technology-driven empire, while the prequels warn us that the world that we might desire to revisit is the root of our present disillusionment. The *Star Wars* films reiterate that liberty is a relative concept, with as many meanings as there are individuals, groups, and nations, and posit that one person’s “liberty” is another’s yoke. By juxtaposing an analysis of Roman historical ideology, as conceived in the Early Empire, with that witnessed in the *Star Wars* films, one perceives that there is much danger in blindly accepting the ostensible superiority of past worlds, or even comparatively more recent eras, especially when mythical or reimagined history is used to serve political ends.

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<sup>54</sup> F. Nietzsche, “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in J. O. Stern, ed., R. J. Hollingdale, tr., *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge, Mass. 1991) 70.

<sup>55</sup> M. Wyke, “Projecting Ancient Rome,” in M. Landy, ed., *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick, N.J. 2001) 126.

<sup>56</sup> On “nostalgia empires,” see T. J. Barfield, “The Shadow Empires: Imperial State Formation Along the Chinese-Nomad Frontier,” in S. E. Alcock et al., eds., *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (Cambridge 2001) 7.