XIII

Star Wars and the Roman Empire

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A wide variety of sources influenced George Lucas in his *Star Wars* trilogy, which was released from 1977 to 1983, rereleased in a "Special Edition" in 1997, and followed in 1999 by *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*. Among Lucas's literary sources are archetypal hero myths as described by C. G. Jung, popularized by Joseph Campbell, and exemplified in the stories and novels of J. R. R. Tolkien, American pulp fiction, and comic strips; among his cinematic sources are science-fiction and war films, medieval epics, westerns, and film noir. Also markedly evident is the influence of individual films, such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), and Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* (1958). There is, however, one other aspect of popular culture, generally overlooked, that plays a major part in Lucas's imagination of the future.

The films' theme is the struggle of the forces of Good against absolute Evil. Their eternal opposition is a fundamental feature linking traditional hero myth, romance, and epic to modern fiction and films. In such tales the hero's actions are invariably deeds of valor and violence, committed for the purpose of restoring justice to the community and helping to bring about a better society. Literary and cinematic narratives of this kind tell thrilling stories full of exciting action. The fight of Good versus Evil frequently evolves on a large scale in clashes of battles and wars. Lucas has described the purpose he pursued with *Star Wars* in the following words:

> I wanted it to be a traditional moral study, to have some sort of palpable precepts in it that children could understand. There is always a lesson to be learned. Where do these lessons come from? Traditionally, we get them from church, the family, art, and in the modern world we get them from media—from movies.[1]

In Lucas's film world, Evil is represented by a galactic empire. While twentieth-century history and its transformations into filmic narratives, especially those involving World War II, provide the most obvious factual parallels to the films' plot, there is another, more distant, era of the past which is equally important. Lucas's evil empire parallels the Roman Empire and conforms to the negative view of imperial Rome generally present in popular culture. Moreover, the first three *Star Wars* films bear close resemblances to one specific historical film: *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), directed by Anthony Mann. I will describe, first, Lucas's galactic empire as an *imperium Romanum redivivum*, so to speak, and, second, the similarities between *Star Wars* and Mann's film.

1. Parallel Societies and Histories

In *The Eternal City*, Peter Bondanella has traced the modern survival of ancient Rome in the high and low culture of western Europe and the United States. He has shown conclusively the connections between Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Star Wars*, with Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy providing the direct link between the two.[2] Asimov himself acknowledged as much: "I modeled

1. Quoted from John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing—The Marketing of Culture* (New York: Knopf. 2000), 146, in a chapter entitled "The Empire Wins" (131–160), first published as "Why Is the Force Still with Us?" *The New Yorker* (January 6, 1997), 40–53.

2. Isaac Asimov, *Foundation* (1951), *Foundation and Empire* (1952), *Second Foundation* (1953), published mostly in magazines from 1942 to 1949. For a plot outline see Peter Bondanella, *The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 227–237 and 270 (notes). On Asimov and on the tradition of galactic empires in science fiction see Oliver Morton, "In Pursuit of Infinity," *The New Yorker* (May 17, 1999), 84–89. Asimov also published two books on Roman history for juvenile or popular audiences: *The Roman Republic* (1966) and *The Roman Empire* (1967). In the wake of the *Star Wars* trilogy he took up writing further installments of the Foundation saga in the 1980s, with other science-fiction authors taking over from him after his death in 1992. The latest addition to date is David Brin, *Foundation's Triumph* (1999). Further examples of Asimov's influence on modern science fiction appear among the stories collected in *Far Horizons: All New Tales from the Greatest Worlds of Science Fiction*, ed. Robert Silverberg (New York: Avon Eos, 1999). Silverberg is himself the author of stories about an alternative Roman empire that never fell. For a Greek parallel to ancient Rome in galactic-empire fiction see Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson, *Dune: House Atreides* (1999), a sequel—or rather, "prequel"—to the

my 'Galactic Empire' . . . quite consciously on the Roman Empire," and: "When I first wrote the Foundation trilogy, I did indeed have Gibbon in mind." On *Star Wars* Asimov noted:

> Galactic empires reached the cinema with this group of films, which here and there offered more than a whiff of the Foundation. (No, I don't mind. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and I certainly imitated Edward Gibbon, so I can scarcely object if someone imitates me).[3]

Asimov's trilogy seems to have provided Lucas with the chief source of his transposition of the historical past into the mythical future of science fiction. From this perspective, the well-known motto of *Star Wars*—"A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away"—receives a specific connotation which goes beyond its general nature as a variation of the traditional opening phrase of fairy tales: "Once upon a time . . ." The "long time ago" in the *Star Wars* films is, from the statement's point of view, a past that to the spectators is still in the future, but we may also regard it as a reference to an era in our own long-ago past, that of Rome's empire.[4]

The imperial tyranny in *Star Wars* parallels imperial Rome beyond the general theme of an evil power and its decline as described factually by Gibbon and imaginatively by Asimov. Lucas's galactic empire has overthrown an earlier republic and, as in Roman history, the new monarchy has preserved the original republican governing body, the senate. Early in the trilogy's first film the usurping emperor dissolves the senate. Except for this, the film's senate parallels the history of the imperial Roman

Dune novels by Frank Herbert. The noble house of Atreides are descendants of Homer's Agamemnon.

3. The quotations are from Bondanella, *The Eternal City*, 229, 270 note 11, and 233. Mary Henderson, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth* (New York: Bantam, 1997), 146, traces several mythical and historical parallels in the *Star Wars* trilogy but gives only the briefest reference to ancient Rome—and this one is to Julius Caesar rather than to the time of the empire. She does not mention Gibbon or Asimov. Morton, "In Pursuit of Infinity," 87, quotes Asimov's jingle: "you'll find that plotting is a breeze, / With a tiny bit of cribbin' from the works of Edward Gibbon and that Greek, Thucydides." Morton's observation that "Asimov had an Enlightenment love of reason above all things" (88) explains Asimov's affinity for Gibbon.

4. The ambitious scope of Lucas's mythmaking in the *Star Wars* saga with its multiple settings in time and space also parallels Tolkien's multigenerational myths of Middle Earth. In narrative terms the first three *Star Wars* films comprise the second of two trilogies (episodes IV–VI). *The Phantom Menace* is the initial installment of the first trilogy, whose other parts are scheduled to appear in 2002 and 2005. Lucas seems to have abandoned his original intention to continue the story with a third trilogy. On Lucas and myth see in general John Baxter, *Mythmaker: The Life and Work of George Lucas* (New York: Avon/Spike, 1999).

senate. Tacitus, the chief historian of early imperial Rome, emphasizes that after Augustus the Roman senate progressively lost its influence and prestige and most of its administrative functions to the increasing usurpation of power by successive emperors and that it rapidly declined into a claque of imperial flatterers. In particular, his stark statement about the beginning of Tiberius' rule provides a concise summary of this phenomenon: *At Romae ruere in servitium consules patres eques*—"Meanwhile at Rome consuls, senate, knights, precipitately became servile."[5] While the historical Roman senate continued to exist as an administrative figurehead, the imperial senate's dismissal in the film is the logical next step to be taken by any tyrant who need not preserve even a façade of legitimate government. So Governor Tarkin announces: "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." The speaker's name echoes that of the Tarquins, the last dynasty of Roman kings, which had become synonymous with tyrannical monarchy and, according to the Romans' own perspective on their early history, had directly led to the abolishment of monarchy in the late sixth century B.C. From this perspective the situation in *Star Wars* is a reversal of Roman history.

The popular American view of the Roman Empire, especially in its reincarnation in the cinema, has almost invariably been that of a degenerate totalitarian society characterized by militarism, slavery, religious persecution, bloody games, sexual debauchery, and spiritual emptiness.[6] It is doomed to be overthrown, and Christianity provides the only path still open to Romans toward moral regeneration. (Much of this stereotypical view is historically inaccurate.) The American founding fathers had therefore modeled their own government on the Roman republic, not on the empire.[7]

The dichotomy of good republic and evil empire fits Lucas's futuristic society seamlessly. Obi-Wan Kenobi, the wise teacher and spiritual leader of the resistance to the empire, tells Luke Skywalker, the young hero-to-be: "The Jedi Knights were the guardians of peace and justice in the old republic, before the dark times, before the empire." Even the visual and

5. Tacitus, *Annals* 1.7.1; quoted from *Tacitus: The Annals of Imperial Rome*, tr. Michael Grant (rev. ed.; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977; rpt. 1996), 35.

6. Cf. my "The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945," *The Classical Journal*, 93 (1998), 167–196, with further references. For a general overview of Rome in cinema see Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–33.

7. See, for instance, the recent detailed examination by Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

verbal references in *Star Wars* to the most evil of all modern empires, Nazi Germany, are consistent with the standard portrayal in American films made after World War II, in which Rome appeared as a totalitarian system modeled on Hitler's Germany.[8] From this point of view the historical continuity from the Roman Empire to the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation, the empire of 1871–1918, and on to the third empire in German history, Hitler's Third Reich, may be extended to the galactic empire in *Star Wars*. The films' references to imperial army units as both legions and storm troopers are anything but surprising.

In ancient Rome, an absolute monarchy replaced the free republic, what Romans called the *libera res publica*. The same occurs in Lucas's galactic world. His emperor, as did his historical precursors, uses a particularly powerful henchman to carry out his will. In Rome, this was the prefect of the Praetorians, the emperor's elite guard. Such men walked in the innermost circles of power and often were the most influential advisers to the emperor. Little was possible without their consent. Men like Sejanus under Tiberius and Tigellinus under Nero are generally depicted as two of the most villainous creatures in Roman history, not only because of their own ruthlessness but also because of their close association with rulers considered to have been quintessential tyrants. The archvillain of the *Star Wars* trilogy fulfills a similar function in the new imperial power structure. The figure of Darth Vader presents a striking parallel to imperial Roman henchmen. He is swift and energetic in carrying out his master's plans, and consequently the emperor has no need himself to become active. (Except for a brief appearance in a holographic image in the second film, he remains off-screen until the trilogy's climax.) Tacitus' description of Sejanus and his character traits, the best-known historical source for this prefect's rise to power and for his eventual fall, applies to Darth Vader as well: "Of audacious character and untiring physique, secretive about himself and ever ready to incriminate others, a blend of arrogance and servility."[9] These last two aspects of Sejanus' character are clearly present in Darth Vader. We may compare his supercilious and cruel treatment of those below himself in rank and his obsequiousness toward the emperor, which is expressed in faux-archaic English: "What is thy bidding, my master?" Tacitus also refers to Sejanus' *industria ac vigilantia*, his energy and vigilance (*Annals* 4.1.3).

8. Details and additional references in my "Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945." For Nazi overtones in *Star Wars* see, for example, the final scene in the first film, which is modeled on *Triumph of the Will*. Cf. in general Dan Rubey, "*Star Wars*: Not So Far Away," *Jump Cut*, 18 (1978), 9–14, and Henderson, *Star Wars*, 144–147.

9. Tacitus, *Annals* 4.1.3; quoted from Grant, *Tacitus*, 157. For Tigellinus see Tacitus, *Histories* 1.72.

Even more than Sejanus, Nero's Tigellinus has been a regular example of a "bad guy" in Hollywood's Roman films. Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), which was reissued in a "modernized production" in 1944, presented an explicit analogy between Nero and Hitler; DeMille's Tigellinus was an ice-cold sadist.[10] In Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951), the first of Hollywood's post–World War II Roman films, the same analogy recurs, and Tigellinus is more than willing to obey his master blindly. While it is unlikely that Lucas intentionally modeled Darth Vader on Sejanus or Tigellinus, the similarities between these historical and cinematic villains indicate that all of them are equally diabolical and have become stereotypes. Even Darth Vader's turning against his emperor at the trilogy's end, when he overthrows his master both literally and figuratively, has historical parallels in the Praetorians' palace coups in which one emperor is replaced by another. The examples best known to Americans are those of the emperors Tiberius and Caligula, popularized as characters in Robert Graves's novels *I, Claudius* (1934) and *Claudius the God* (1935) and, even more so, in the 1976 BBC television series based on them.[11] But there were several other cases in Roman history. In the first to third centuries A.D., Praetorians were involved in the overthrow of Domitian, Commodus, Caracalla, Gordian III, Gallienus, and Numerianus. Tacitus reports that the Praetorian prefect Macro, Sejanus' successor, caused the murder of Tiberius, the man who had raised him to power (*Annals* 6.50.5). While Darth Vader kills his emperor for the sake of a last-minute plot reversal in which he finally acknowledges and saves his son Luke and also redeems himself in the audience's eyes, men like Sejanus and Tigellinus appear to have had no positive qualities.

The parallels between Darth Vader and the Praetorian prefects, especially in connection with Tiberius, point to the reason why the "shuttle," which Luke Skywalker and Han Solo seize from the enemy in order to infiltrate the new Death Star in *Return of the Jedi*, is called Tiberium. Not surprisingly, Ian McDiarmid, the actor who plays the galactic emperor, resembles George Relph, the Tiberius of William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), the most popular and best-known of all Roman Empire films. Both actors appear somewhat emaciated and possess rather hawklike facial features.[12] As with Caligula in Henry Koster's *The Robe* (1953) and Delmer Daves's

10. On Nero in American and Italian films see Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, 110–146. See my "Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945," 178–182, on Nero as Hitler in American cinema.

11. Bondanella, *The Eternal City*, 234, points to Praetorian parallels to Darth Vader but does not examine them in detail.

12. Bondanella, *The Eternal City*, 234, also adduces the modern incarnations of Tiberius in the BBC's *I, Claudius* and in Tinto Brass's film *Caligula* (1980).

Demetrius and the Gladiators (1954) and with Tiberius in *Ben-Hur*, the galactic emperor must be approached via a flight of steps, if a considerably less grandiose one. Both Tiberius and Lucas's emperor sit on a throne or thronelike seat from which they can overlook their domain, in one case Rome, in the other the galaxy.

The galactic emperor's body guard, which appears on-screen in the third film, is dressed in garb of blood-red cloaks and tight-fitting helmets.[13] While it looks medieval, it has, however, a close Roman or quasi-Roman parallel. The guards' outfit resembles that worn by Fredric March as prefect of the city of Rome in *The Sign of the Cross*. The Jedi Knights themselves are a case in point for Lucas's mixture of ancient and medieval cultures. While popular imagination primarily associates knights and swords with the Middle Ages, Roman society also had a class of knights throughout its history. Despite obvious differences between Roman and medieval social and class structures, the Roman *equites* ("horsemen") are the historical precursors of the medieval knights; they ranked immediately below the aristocratic senatorial class and well above the rest of the population.[14] The feudal hierarchy of the Middle Ages is a direct result of the rigid vertical organization of ancient Roman society. (Medieval Florence, for example, believed, or at least claimed, that the city and its nobility were a Roman foundation later refounded by Charlemagne.) Such a hierarchy reappears virtually unchanged in Lucas's trilogy.[15] The name of the usurping emperor, the former senator Palpatine, is a case in point: it carries echoes of both medieval and imperial Roman history and culture.[16]

The dialogue of Hollywood's historical films also links Roman, medieval, and futuristic societies. In such films, those of low social status generally use a simple modern idiom. Lucas's Han Solo is the best example of a thinly disguised all-American of the mid–twentieth century, as his standard exclamation makes evident: "I have a bad feeling about this!" On the other hand, the aristocrats in historical epics are assigned elevated

13. A convenient illustration in Henderson, *Star Wars*, 146.

14. See, for example, Frances Gies, *The Knight in History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984; rpt. 1987), 8 and 209 note 2 (references) on the origin and rise of medieval knighthood. Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), discusses the chivalry of the Romans in medieval context.

15. Cf. Rubey, "*Star Wars*," 10–11.

16. Medieval: "paladin"; Roman: *Palatinus* ("imperial"; as noun: "chamberlain"). Cf. also the name of presidential candidate Charles Palantine, who becomes the target of a political assassination attempt in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, a film released the year before the first *Star Wars* film. Palpatine's guard in *The Phantom Menace* wears ancient-looking helmets with two crests, which seem to be patterned after similar double- or triple-crested helmets on view in some European films set in Greek or Roman antiquity. An example from a later film is Achilles' helmet in Michael Cacoyannis's *Iphigenia* (1977).

diction, which is often rather flowery and sometimes bathetic. The most telling verbal connection between *Star Wars* and the past is a linguistic standby of historical American films set in antiquity or the Middle Ages. Deferential addresses to Darth Vader such as "My Lord" or "Lord Vader" directly echo the apostrophes both to medieval kings or heroes and the standard way in which Roman emperors are addressed in these films. We may compare the tautologous phrase "My Lord Cid" in Anthony Mann's *El Cid* (1961) and "My Lord Caesar" in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. All this is another bridge from the past to the future.

These parallels between the Roman Empire and its usual portrayal in American cinema on the one hand and the science-fiction empire in *Star Wars* on the other can hardly be overlooked. The fundamental historical similarity between Rome and America is as quintessentially American as it is Roman, that of expansionism and the concept of the frontier. Both Rome and the United States rose from humble beginnings to world power, and both periods of history, ancient and modern, are characterized by military campaigns and territorial annexation as far as geography would permit. The limits of the Roman Empire were set by the Atlantic Ocean in the northwest and west, by the impenetrable forests and swamps of central Europe in the north and northeast, and by the deserts of Arabia and Africa in the east and south. The American empire came to stretch from sea to shining sea, its military presence extending from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli and eventually throughout most parts of the globe. And it is on the borders of both empires that the battles for the continuing presence of Romans and Americans in territories originally belonging to other peoples were regularly carried out. The maintenance of imperial power is, almost by definition, a border problem. Just as Indians raided American border settlements or wagon trains, both in history and in the cinema, so Germanic and other barbaric tribes invaded the Roman frontiers, again both historically and on film. In modern American culture, space is the final frontier, and this concept applies to the *Star Wars* films in equal measure. The connections between the science-fiction film and the western are obvious.[17]

17. American science fiction films are, by and large, westerns transplanted to outer space, or to *Outland*, as Peter Hyams's 1981 sci-fi remake of Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) calls it. Lucas himself has acknowledged as much: "I became very fascinated with how we could replace this mythology that drifted out of fashion—the Western. One of the prime issues of mythology was that it was always on the frontier, over the hill. It was always in this mysterious place where anything could happen"; quoted from Henderson, *Star Wars*, 136. And: "That sort of stuff . . . is always big adventure out there somewhere. It came all the way down through the western"; quoted from Rubey, "*Star Wars*," 10. See further the quotation from Lucas at Henderson, 126. For an overview of archetypal

The American western has regularly carried overtones of medieval culture.[18] Arthurian romance has influenced American popular fiction since the nineteenth century, in particular through Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, the spiritual father of James Fenimore Cooper, Owen Wister, Zane Grey, Max Brand, and Louis L'Amour, to name only the most prominent.[19] Just like westerns, the *Star Wars* films are modern morality plays, although less sophisticated than their cinematic precursors. Important models for both are medieval mystery plays and chivalric epics. These in turn go back to Greek and Roman epic and drama based on myth.

2. *Star Wars* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

The Fall of the Roman Empire is a film with specific parallels to Lucas's futuristic cinema. Although Lucas has never acknowledged any direct or conscious influence, he was probably familiar with Anthony Mann's film.[20]

Generally, and since the earliest epic stories (*Gilgamesh, Iliad*), the fate of society hinges on the heroism of one man. Often he has learnt from a teacher or father figure that physical prowess must be based on an awareness of justice and responsibility. The hero's fatherly teacher in *Star Wars* is Obi-Wan Kenobi. He is first the living and then the spiritual embodiment of the Force, a quasi-religious philosophy of the distinction between

connections between ancient myth and the western, with additional reference to science-fiction cinema, see my "Classical Mythology and the Western Film," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 22 (1985), 514–540, especially 535.

18. Details are in my "Mythologische Motive im amerikanischen Western-Film," in *Mittelalter-Rezeption*, vol. 3: *Mittelalter, Massenmedien, Neue Mythen*, ed. Jürgen Kühnel et al. (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1988), 563–578. See also the examples in Frank McConnell, *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979; rpt. 1980), especially 83–137. For the reverse—western overtones in a medieval film—see my "Mythical and Cinematic Traditions in Anthony Mann's *El Cid*," *Mosaic*, 26 no. 3 (1993), 89–111, at 105–107.

19. See John Fraser, *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), especially 3–14, and Alan Lupack and Barbara Tepa Lupack, *King Arthur in America* (Rochester, N.Y.: Brewer, 1999).

20. Lucas's first feature-length film, *THX 1138* (1971), an expansion of an earlier short film made while he was a student in film school, deals with rebellion against an oppressive system and so reflects the theme of Mann's film and foreshadows his own *Star Wars* trilogy. I give detailed information about the plot of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, its use of historical sources, and Mann's approach to history in "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 125 (1995), 135–154.

right and wrong and of the meaning of life in the universe. That the Force is a secular substitute for traditional religion becomes evident, none too subtly, in the fact that it can move physical objects by sheer exercise of will resulting from faith, just as belief in Christianity is said to be able to move mountains.[21] As master teacher of the Force, Obi-Wan naturally functions as repository of wisdom, experience, and traditional values, those qualities that had made the galaxy great before renegade Jedi Knights were corrupted by Evil and went over to "the dark side of the Force." Obi-Wan personifies man's highest aspirations and represents everything good and noble in mankind.

Parallel to this kind of figure in Roman history is the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius, a major character in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The filmmakers' conception of Marcus Aurelius is closely based on his reputation as an ideal or perfect man, whom Matthew Arnold, for instance, called "perhaps the most beautiful figure in history" and "one of the best of men."[22] Several of Marcus Aurelius' words and speeches are, in their philosophical thrust, similar to Obi-Wan's teachings about the Force, while others fit Obi's character so well that no viewer would be surprised if they came from his mouth. Marcus' words in the film's opening scene, addressed to his friend and counselor, the fictitious Greek philosopher Timonides, point to his premonition both of the impending fall of the Roman world, no longer ruled by someone good like him, and of his own death, expressed in the image of darkness: "When I was a child, Timonides, I had a secret fear that night would come and would never end, that we would live out our lives in total darkness. It was a small fear then." Later he adds: "I have tried to convince myself that my fears for the empire are unreasonable. But my fears *are* reasonable." One of his main principles of government in the multinational and, to use a current term, multicultural Roman Empire—a world paralleled in the *Star Wars* films by the various races of humans and other creatures—is to promote mutual acceptance: "We must try to understand other people more." What he says to his daughter Lucilla presents, in a nutshell, what Obi-Wan teaches Luke Skywalker: "Learn to pity, learn to have compassion. The future will make great demands on you."

21. Matthew 17:20 and 21:21, Mark 11:23, 1 Corinthians 13:2.

22. Matthew Arnold, "Marcus Aurelius," *The Victoria Magazine*, 2 (1863), 1–19; quoted from *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3: *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 133–157; quotations at 140. On ancient and modern views of Marcus Aurelius and his age see my "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 139–140 note 17. The most recent tribute to Marcus is by Nobel Prize-winning author and poet Joseph Brodsky, "Homage to Marcus Aurelius," in *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (1995; rpt. New York: Noonday, 1997), 267–298.

Shortly before his death Marcus holds a memorable interior dialogue with himself, in which he wrestles with his painful sickness and imminent death. He summarizes his life's philosophy, his responsibility for the empire, and the sacrifice of his comfort for the sake of the world he governs in simple but effective terms: "I do not seek pleasures, or friendship, or love; I speak only of Rome, and when I say Rome, I mean the world, the future. For my part, I am prepared to live in pain." The same could be said about Obi-Wan. In view of the latter's self-sacrifice at the hands of Darth Vader, Marcus' belief—"Death is in the order of things" although it remains a "mystery of mysteries"—equally applies to Obi. When Marcus resigns himself to death ("come for me when you will"), we may remember that Obi-Wan voluntarily accepts death by putting down his light saber during his duel with Vader. And some of Marcus' last words could summarize Obi's lessons to Luke about the Force: "there is a great truth we have not yet divined." When he sacrifices himself to the cause of the Good in the first film, Obi wears a hooded cloak, a garment in which he is seen for much of the film. In Mann's opening scene, Marcus Aurelius wears a similar-looking cloak and also appears with his head veiled—in Roman terms, *capite velato*—at a sacrifice. Both Marcus' and Obi's garments look medieval, like the habit of a monk, but, more important, these cloaks as well as the beards the men wear in both films are meant to signify that they are simple but upstanding figures of moral authority. Each embodies the epitome of his civilization. Tellingly, both characters are played by the same actor. The casting of Alec Guinness as Obi-Wan creates a strong link to his portrayal of Marcus Aurelius, especially for anyone who in 1977 remembered seeing the earlier film.

The enduring philosophical legacy of the historical Marcus Aurelius resides in his famous *Meditations*, as they are usually called—rather loosely, for their original Greek title simply means "To Himself" and indicates that Marcus' observations, instructions, and aphorisms were originally intended only for his own eyes and mind. Marcus' interior dialogue, mentioned earlier, is a moving adaptation of the *Meditations* to a visual medium.[23] The parallels between Mann's Marcus Aurelius and Lucas's Obi-Wan make the *Meditations* the dramatic equivalent of the Force in that both are philosophical teachings rooted in practical applicability; they direct us toward spiritual enlightenment and the responsible exercise of power. As we have seen, the Force is a kind of secular religion; in antiquity, philosophy also provided a substitute for traditional religious

23. For examples of dialogue in individual meditations by the historical Marcus see *Meditations* 5.6, 8.40, and 12.36, the latter on death and pain. Death is a regular topic throughout, often in connection with pain; see especially *Meditations* 6.28 and 49, 7.21 and 32–33, 8.47, 9.3, 10.36, and 11.3.

beliefs. The connections from Marcus Aurelius to Obi-Wan become even more obvious if we remember that Stoicism was a strong influence on early Christianity, which in turn has provided most of the population of the United States with spiritual guidance since 1776.[24] With the rising popularity of Eastern philosophies and their impact on both popular culture and the counterculture of the 1960s and later, Christianity as redemptive force could be replaced by a new system of morals such as Lucas's Force, which is nondenominational and undogmatic in nature, fitting everybody.

This comparison of Marcus' Stoicism with Lucas's Force is not meant to imply that all the naive talk about the Force in the *Star Wars* films is as profound or moving as are the *Meditations*. But the thematic importance of the *Meditations* in Mann's film points the way to Lucas's use of an analogous, if simpler, presentation of the spiritual. Marcus' soliloquy before his death, when we hear both himself and his disembodied voice in dialogue, is comparable to the voice of Obi-Wan as Luke hears it on several occasions after Obi-Wan's death. But the parallel becomes clearest in the following words spoken by Lucilla when she deposits her father's writings in a Roman temple: "I ask that you guard these, the *Meditations* of my father Marcus Aurelius. Whatever else happens in the days to come, let not these be destroyed, for this is Rome." If we make a few changes, we could imagine Luke Skywalker describing the lasting validity of the Force: "I ask that you guard these, the teachings of my spiritual father Obi-Wan Kenobi. Whatever else happens in the days to come, let not these be destroyed, for this is the future."

The characters who learn most from their teachers are the principal heroes of their respective films, Livius and Luke. Livius is the chief commander of the Roman legions stationed on the Danube frontier, whom Marcus Aurelius has chosen for his successor. As is Luke to Obi-Wan, Livius is a surrogate son to Marcus. Both Livius and Luke have been adopted into positions of increasing responsibility and power; both are being groomed for leadership, and their journey toward heroism and victory over their enemies is necessary for the survival of their worlds. In the *Star Wars* films, this survival is eventually accomplished with the fall of the evil empire. In Mann's film historical fact prevents such a victory

24. The historical Marcus' disquisition on the gods at *Meditations* 6.44 are a case in point for the spiritual affinity between Stoicism and Christianity: "the gods" could easily be replaced with "God," and so on. The widely read translation of the *Meditations* by clergyman Maxwell Staniforth has an introduction that closes with a section entitled "Stoicism and Christianity": *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964; rpt. 1985), 23–27. This translation was published in the same year *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was released.

even in a partly fictitious plot and requires Livius, himself an invented character, to reject offers of the throne. But Livius is, as Timonides says, "the real heir of Marcus Aurelius," just as Luke is Obi-Wan Kenobi's. And both Livius and Luke undergo the processes of learning and the rites of passage which in traditional tales are obligatory for apprentice heroes before they can become full-fledged hero figures themselves.

The side of evil is represented in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* by Commodus, Marcus' successor and believed to be his son (as he was, historically), and in the *Star Wars* films by Darth Vader. The protagonists and antagonists in both film worlds are either related by blood or at least close friends; the family is the social unit through which the fate of the world is determined in either case.[25] The parallels between the heroines, Princess Lucilla, Marcus' daughter, and Princess Leia, Luke's sister, further reinforce this aspect of the films' plots. Both of them play prominent parts in the rebellions against an evil empire. (During most of her on-screen appearances Leia wears a white dress, which almost gives her the appearance of a Vestal Virgin.) The close family ties between the good and the bad reinforce the similarities in the films' portrayals of evil. The theme of true parentage is also crucial to both plots. In *Star Wars*, the hero learns that the villain is his father, a former Jedi knight corrupted by the dark side; in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, the revelation that the true father of Commodus is not Marcus Aurelius but only a gladiator explains Commodus' innate instability and evil.

A parallel to the dark side of the Force are Lucilla's words to the power-mad and irresponsible Commodus, now emperor: "You've had only one idea, to smash and destroy everything Father did." These words could equally well describe the evil emperor's and Darth Vader's intentions in regard to what Obi-Wan and the Jedi Knights had built. Commodus represents the dark side of Marcus and Livius; appropriately, Livius kills him in the film's climactic duel.[26] Anthony Mann points to the extent of tyranny in the empire as ruled by Commodus most clearly in a scene set in the Roman senate. One of Commodus' henchmen is as unscrupulous about the extermination of rebels against Commodus' tyranny as Darth Vader is about the Rebel Alliance against *his* emperor: "crucify their leaders, sell

25. While dramatic stories have presented and worked through large and complex issues in family units since the beginning of Western civilization, this has been the standard strategy in historical fiction and film to make a distant past more easily accessible. See the discussion by Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 54–61.

26. In a stylistic parallel between this combat and the final duel in *The Phantom Menace*, the evil Darth Maul wields his light saber the way Livius and Commodus handle their spears at certain moments in their fight to the death.

the rest as slaves. Teach them once and for all what it is to make war on Rome." Dramatic pause; then: "*That* is the Roman way."

In the same scene Timonides describes the traditional scorched-earth tactics in the Romans' treatment of other nations, which he and Livius want to overcome. His speech is not only a concise summary of the standard American view of Rome as an evil empire, with which cinema audiences have by this time become thoroughly familiar, but also a close parallel to the galactic empire of *Star Wars*:

> We have burned their villages, we have crucified their leaders, we have enslaved their young; the fires go out, the dead are buried, the slaves die, slowly, but the hatred that we leave behind us never dies. Hatred means wars. Wars mean tribute torn from our provinces, taxes, hunger, disease. How costly that is, how wasteful! And yet the answer is simple. We must have no war.

Timonides then calls for what would bring about the kind of society that Lucas shows us at the end of his trilogy:

> Let us share the greatest gift of all, let us give these men the right of Roman freedom, and they will spread the word that Rome has accepted them as equals. Then we will have our human frontiers: the Roman peace that Marcus Aurelius promised.

It is, however, too late for this to come about, and Timonides' thoroughly American vision of democratic equality and liberty must wait for a different future, one unconstrained by historical fact and one that can become real only in a modern filmmaker's wishful thinking. Clearly, as the *pax Romana* came to be lost in the second century A.D. and no lasting *pax Americana* was to be achieved in the twentieth century, universal peace—a *pax galactica*, as it might be called—can come about only in the imagination, by a creative artist's say-so. The people's misguided celebration at the end of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* takes on added poignancy if we compare it to that at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. The latter is a genuine expression of joy over freedom regained, while the former is an instance of the proverbial dance on the volcano, the people oblivious to their impending ruin.

In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* we see the change of a good empire into a bad and doomed one; the *Star Wars* trilogy presents the overthrow of an evil empire and the restoration of liberty. Thus the films contrast in the ultimate resolution of their plots. But in both cases we are shown what benevolent and civilized forms of society and centralized government can be like. Since antiquity, the time of Marcus Aurelius has been considered a golden age in the history of mankind, a return, as far as such was at all possible, to the principles of the free republic that had made Rome great.

The years 96–180 A.D., the period of a series of good emperors culminating in the rule of Marcus Aurelius, received their highest praise during the Enlightenment in the famous verdict of Edward Gibbon:

> In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilised portion of mankind. . . . If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus.[27]

Anthony Mann in his film laments the passing of such a society, as Gibbon had done before him; George Lucas resurrects a comparable one before our eyes. The old republic and the new society in *Star Wars* here come to correspond to the Roman Empire under Marcus, and the galactic empire to that under Commodus.

That both the Roman and the galactic empires are indeed comparable appears with particular clarity in the prologue of the novel version of *Star Wars*, which accompanied the first film's release and became a national bestseller, read by many who had seen the film. It provides a description of what the galactic world used to be like. With a few simple changes in the wording, we could hear a summary of Roman history:

> The Old Republic was the Republic of legend, greater than distance or time. . . . Once under the wise rule of the Senate and the protection of the Jedi Knights, the Republic throve and grew. But as often happens when wealth and power pass beyond the admirable and attain the awesome, then appear those evil ones who have greed to match.

The prologue further describes the fall of the galactic republic and the rise of tyranny in Roman terms: there were "restless, power-hungry individuals within the government," and: "Imperial governors and bureaucrats instituted a reign of terror. . . . Many used the imperial forces and the name of the increasingly isolated Emperor to further their own personal ambitions."[28] The novel version of the third film recapitulates this theme:

> Back in the days when he [the emperor] was merely senator Palpatine, the galaxy had been a Republic of stars, cared for and protected by the Jedi Knighthood that had watched over it for centuries. But inevitably it had grown too large—too massive a bureaucracy had been required, over too many years, in order to maintain the Republic. Corruption had set in.[29]

But we also find two specific parallels to Mann's film in the prologue to the first *Star Wars* novel, when we read on its opening page: "Like the greatest of trees, able to withstand any external attack, the Republic rotted from within, though the danger was not visible from outside." This echoes the narrator's last words in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, provided by historian Will Durant, which summarize Gibbon's perspective on Roman history: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."[30] The metaphor of the tree for the empire also appears in Mann's film. In its first grand set piece, Marcus Aurelius says to the assembled leaders of the empire: "like a mighty tree with green leaves and black roots, you are the unity which is Rome."

Another parallel between *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and the *Star Wars* films is not of a thematic or narrative nature, as are those discussed so far, but rather concerns the most popular aspect of historical epics and science-fiction films: their action sequences. In Mann's film a quarrel between Livius and Commodus turns into an unexpected chariot race—unexpected because viewers are surprised to see a race where none has ever taken place before, along a narrow mountain road and on into a forest. The placement of this race comparatively early in the film and the fact that it is a duel in natural surroundings rather than a large-scale race in the Circus Maximus or similar arena are conscious signals to the audience that with his film Mann intends something different from the standard Roman epic on the order of the famous *Ben-Hur*.[31] Both the loca-

27. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1993); quotations from vol. 1, 3 and 90. Gibbon's work was first published 1776–1788.

28. George Lucas, *Star Wars: From the Adventures of Luke Skywalker* (1976), quoted from *The Star Wars Trilogy* (1987; rpt. New York: Del Rey, 1993), 3. This is a collection of the novel versions that accompanied the films upon their first release. The other novels are Donald F. Glut, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and James Kahn, *Return of the Jedi* (1983). Lucas's novel was ghostwritten by Alan Dean Foster; see Baxter, *Mythmaker*, 225–226.

29. *Star Wars Trilogy*, 382. A little later the description of the emperor's usurpation of power "through subterfuge, bribery and terror" parallels the perspective of Tacitus on the rise of the first Roman emperors, and the galactic emperor's megalomania—"he *was* the Empire; he *was* the Universe" (383)—reminds us of the madness of Caligula, Nero, or Commodus. The same novel contains a detail which is not in the film but which reinforces the analogy between Darth Vader and Roman Praetorians, when an ambitious Vader intends to overthrow the emperor and rule in his place (372–373).

30. Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to A.D. 325* (1944; rpt. New York: MFJ Books, 1992), 665, minimally altered in the film.

31. On this see my "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," 142–143. The two races and their stunts were staged by the same second-unit director. On the creation and filming of the race in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* see Yakima Canutt and Oliver Drake, *Stunt Man: The Autobiography of Yakima Canutt* (1979; rpt. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 202–205.

tion and the hair-raising stunts of the race are likely to have left audiences gasping.

To anyone remembering *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, the speeder chase in *Return of the Jedi* will look very familiar indeed. The flight of some storm troopers and their pursuit by Luke and Princess Leia on "speeder bikes," a kind of futuristic motor scooter, also takes place in a forest. Advanced computer technology makes it possible for the speed of this chase to be several times faster than that attainable by horse-drawn chariots in the 1960s and to present some spectacular crashes exciting to audiences who have come to depend on ever more advanced special effects for their thrills. But the fundamental idea behind the newer sequence—that is, to present a thrilling chase in an impossible-looking locale—is identical to that in Mann's film. Even so, there is a telling difference. With the help of his second-unit director and two first-rate stuntmen, Mann shows us a real race. Lucas and his director, on the other hand, have to rely entirely on technical gadgetry and can only show us something that was put together in the lab or, rather, on the computer. We know it to be fake as we are watching it. Old-fashioned as it will appear to audiences accustomed to computerized special effects, Mann's chariot race, with its carefully prepared tricks and stunts, and the traditional expertise of an action director and his team contrast with the soulless machinery of modern filmmaking. Not least for this reason, Mann's is the more exciting action sequence of the two.

Lucas's most recent installment of his saga also contains a high-speed race in a desert "arena," as it were. Numerous critics and reviewers noted that the pod race in this film "has a gutsy, Roman-circus buzz to it" and specifically refer to the race in the 1959 *Ben-Hur*.[32] But the widespread disappointment that greeted *The Phantom Menace* upon its release is revealing. Effective storytelling depends on how much the teller cares for the characters in his tale. Lucas, however, concentrates almost exclusively on his technological expertise, and the result is that the spectacular digital effects dwarf his protagonists: "Lucas is so fatally gulled by the latest tricks of his trade that he abandons the actors to their fate."[33] As is not

32. The quotation is from Anthony Lane, "Star Bores," *The New Yorker* (May 24, 1999), 80–84, at 82. The "bad guy" in the pod race fights unfairly and bumps other pods, just as the evil Roman Messala does to other chariots in *Ben-Hur*. As happens to chariots in *Ben-Hur*, two pods get entangled, and one of them crashes. Before the race starts, Jabba the Hutt enters with a pomp similar to that of Pontius Pilate in *Ben-Hur* (or Nero's in the arena sequence of *Quo Vadis*).

33. Lane, "Star Bores," 82. In his capsule review of the film, which appeared in subsequent issues of *The New Yorker*, Lane is even more blunt: "With this film, Lucas demonstrates two facts: one, that he has kept abreast of the recent leaps in special effects, and two, that he hasn't a clue what to do with all the nondigital figures, otherwise known as 'people'." The logical next step is that the two remaining films will be made completely on the computer; Lucas has already said that he intends to do so. As one critic has pointed out about the earliest film in the series: "*Star Wars* helped make the dawning digital age seem fun. But it also helped make fun merely digital." The quotation is from Louis Menand, "Billion-Dollar Baby," *The New York Review of Books* (June 24, 1999), 8–11, at 11.

the case in the earlier films, the numerous overtones of Roman history and of Hollywood's Roman cinema in *The Phantom Menace* do not enhance its narrative quality or cohesion.[34] We may contrast Anthony Mann's approach to his film, which for its time was a comparably large-scale undertaking, with immense logistical problems regarding its set constructions and its huge battle sequences:

> one must be careful not to let the concept of the spectacular run away with you. . . . the spectacle [in my film] is done entirely differently to what you would expect. . . . the characters bring you into the spectacle rather than it being imposed on you without dramatic reason.[35]

In spite of its often strange appearance, Lucas's galactic world is not all that different from an actual and specific era of history—or, more accurately, from the presentation of that history in the cinema. In the popular media of today, both the recreations of the past and the imaginative creations of the future necessarily reveal the moment of their making. But as practically all science-fiction films show, visions of the future quickly look dated. This is true even for Lucas's trilogy, which less than fourteen years after the release of its last installment was technically enhanced for a special edition. By contrast, and despite the liberties it takes with historical fact for the sake of a coherent plot, Mann's Roman world looks as good and convincing today as it did over thirty-five years ago.

34. The most obvious Roman aspects in *The Phantom Menace*, besides those noted already, are the following: Baroque architecture and statuary and immense barrel-vaulted halls with columns and polychrome marble, reminiscent of the palace architecture in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*; a huge statue of a man in a toga (the *togatus* was a popular type of Roman statuary); the triumphal scene, recalling the triumph sequences in *Quo Vadis* and *Ben-Hur*; trumpeters blowing fanfares as they do in *Quo Vadis* and other Roman films; the square formations in the land battle at the end, patterned after those of the Roman army in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960); the rolling balls that explode on impact, a parallel to the rolling fire logs with which the slave army in *Spartacus* beats back the Roman advance; enslavement versus freedom, the same theme as in *Spartacus*. The peace scene at the conclusion imitates the final scene of *Demetrius and the Gladiators*. Chancellor Valorum bears a fake Latin name, and much of the music score echoes Carl Orff's popular *Carmina Burana* (1937).

35. Anthony Mann, "Empire Demolition," in *Hollywood Directors 1941–1976*, ed. Richard Koszarski (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 332–338; quotations at 332 and 335. Mann's article was originally published in *Films and Filming* (March 1964).

This is because a highly accomplished vision of the past such as his better preserves its fascination. It becomes even more appealing when we realize that it also provided a thematic parallel to, perhaps even a model for, a popular imperial saga set in the future. The historical Marcus Aurelius as much as predicted all this, even if he was referring only to historical fact and not to works of the imagination, when he observed: "Look back over the past, with its changing empires that rose and fell, and you can foresee the future too. Its pattern will be the same."[36]

36. *Meditations* 7.49, quoted from Staniforth, *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations*, 113. Cf. Mann, "Empire Demolition," 332, on past and future.

XIV

Teaching Classical Myth and Confronting Contemporary Myths

Peter W. Rose

The most striking development since the first appearance of this essay has been the dramatic escalation and general success of the right-wing assault on education and culture. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, assessing the Reagan-Bush era, note the following developments:

> During these years, the meaning and purpose of schooling at all levels of education were refashioned around the principles of the marketplace and the logic of rampant individualism. Ideologically, this meant abstracting schools from the language of democracy and equity while simultaneously organizing educational reform around the discourse of choice, reprivatization, and individual competition.[1]

The Republican control of Congress, combined with President Clinton's apparent determination to steal Republican issues, has meant that the Clinton era has seen a vast escalation of rhetoric about improving education, but only token gestures have actually been enacted. Meanwhile the rhetoric of "choice in education" by means of school vouchers has already turned into reality.[2] William Bennett is still preaching a simplistic "moral literacy."[3] A host of right-wing culture warriors, usually

1. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, *Education Still under Siege*, 2nd ed. (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1993), 1. My thanks to Steven A. Nimis for comments and suggestions on the first version of this essay; also thanks to many perceptive students who have helped enlighten me over the years.

2. "Few Clear Lessons From Nation's First School-Choice Program," *The New York Times* (March 27, 1999), A10.

3. See *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, ed. William J. Bennett (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

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