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

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### 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.

## 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* (1985)

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

\* I would like to thank CW's anonymous referee and editorial team for valuable suggestions on how to improve this article.

<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* (1985). All translations of ancient authors are from the following: Cassius Dio = E. Cary, tr., *Dio Cassius, Roman History* vol. 6, Loeb Classical Library 83 (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 1975); 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.



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