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Tainted Glory: Truth and Fiction in Contemporary Hollywood

by
Patricia A. Turner

In the earliest days of cinema, the image of the African American on screen matched the off-screen image. When a 12-minute version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) was filmed, "Tom" shows were the most popular stage shows, the Stowe novel was still a top-seller, and the notion that white southerners were the real victims of the peculiar institution was gaining increasing acceptance in academic circles. When D.W. Griffith's epic and revolutionary *Birth of a Nation* (1915) depicted a set of stock African-American movie characters—the subservient overweight domestic servant; the indifferent, coquettish mulatto; the savage, sexually driven buck; and the marauding bands of black men with weapons—these images were being promoted in other arenas as well. Woodrow Wilson had refused to integrate the federal work places, and Jim Crow segregation was prevalent throughout the South.

Time and space don't permit me to review the entire history of African Americans on screen. As distorted as we know these images to be, we cannot truly indict Hollywood unless we also condemn society at large. In relying on caricatures of African Americans, filmmakers were merely echoing the prevailing sentiments and attitudes about race.

While many of us are dissatisfied with the progress (or lack thereof) made by African Americans as of 1990, few of us would deny that some significant gains have been made in the past 25 years. In my mind, and I am showing my biases as an educator here, one of the most important accomplishments we have made is to seize control of our history. In 1918, U.B. Philips' monumental apology for slavery, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, became the standard text on southern history virtually without protest. By 1954, when Stanley Elkins used stock labels such as Nat, Tom, and Sambo to describe African-American slave personalities, there were more voices of protest raised and they were raised louder. And by the 1960s, following the publication of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engermann's analysis of slavery and William Styron's fictionalization of the life and death of Nat Turner, scholars turned out en masse to reject these distortions of African-American history. Well-trained scholars, African American as



well as white, have set themselves to the task of identifying and chronicling the primary sources of African-American history. While it is obvious that there is more work to be done, there are now a multitude of texts available from which the stories of African Americans can be told.

There are those who would say that similar advances have been made in the way in which African Americans are portrayed on film. There are those who would say that in translating the stories of the African-American experience onto the screen Hollywood has kept pace with the historians. Certainly

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Hollywood would say that. Although the film was a disappointment at the box office, Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* was nominated for the Academy Award's "best picture." Last year's much celebrated *Mississippi Burning* was also a contender for that award. And this year the release of *Glory* generated speculation that it too would be nominated. Hollywood may be boasting about its track record in bringing real life African-American drama to the screen, but close examination reveals that it is still very much trapped in an outdated white-supremacist model and that it has not kept up with the work of historians.

As my title suggests, the bulk of my comments today are going to be directed at the 1990 release *Glory*.

However, in order to understand what went wrong (and what went right) with this film, I think it is important to put it in context with the other two films I mentioned, *Cry Freedom* and, more significantly, *Mississippi Burning*. All three films are dramatized versions of “true stories.” (In another context it would be interesting to incorporate a discussion of the fact that in the past few years the bulk of roles offered to serious African-American performers are

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those based on true stories. Fictional films with African Americans in prominent serious roles have been few and far between.) The basic storyline of each of the three films discussed here goes something like this: a group of people of color are being oppressed (in *Cry Freedom* it is South African blacks, in *Mississippi Burning* it is African-American Mississippians, and in *Glory* it is both the soldiers in the 54th Regiment and the slaves they are fighting to free.) In all three films the liberation of these people of color is won by a hero or group of heroes who bravely take up the fight, though usually with some reluctance. The manner in which these heroes embrace their task is an important theme. In two out of the three films African Americans assume a kind of heroic status—three out of four of the primary characters in *Glory* perform heroically and prior to his death Stephen Biko in *Cry Freedom* is depicted as a hero. The makers of *Mississippi Burning* deviate from this pattern by focusing solely on the two white heroes. (See related article in this issue of the *Trotter Review*.) All three of the films foreground white characters who, because of their involvement in and/or commitment to alleviating the circumstances oppressing the black masses in the background, in some measure improve or at least bring attention to the plight of those masses. In *Cry Freedom* the journalistic efforts of Donald Woods bring the world’s attention to apartheid and bring sympathy to Biko. In *Mississippi Burning* the good white guys pull out all of the stops to bring the bad white guys to a kind of justice. In *Glory* Robert Gould Shaw leads the 54th Regiment into a battle that will improve the reputation of black soldiers in the Civil War. In all three films these white characters gather the audience’s sympathy because they are sensitive enough and brave enough to risk their well-being in the name of a liberating cause. Perhaps the most important common denominator in these three films is that any African American granted heroic stature on screen is not allowed to survive. As mentioned before, there are no black heroes in *Mississippi Burning*; in *Cry Freedom* Biko dies; and at

the end of *Glory* we see the mass grave that includes the corpse of the African-American Trip. The audience learns that the assault on Fort Wagner devastated the ranks of the 54th and is given no reason to believe that any of the other blacks identified by name in the film have survived.

This core story line featuring white heroes engaged in the liberation of black masses is, it seems to me, one of the latest incarnations of what African-American film scholar Clyde Taylor has so brilliantly identified and labeled as the master narrative.¹ Taylor has noted that in film after film in which African-American characters have any stature at all the circumstances of the plots always subordinate the role of the blacks in order to feature and applaud the white characters who are noble enough to engage themselves in racial matters. If you consider successful commercial films, it is nearly impossible to think of one in which a black hero is allowed to successfully be the agent of change in any aspect of the oppression of his people.

These three films are all based on real life incidents and people. But the real life circumstances do not fit the story lines. This is particularly true of *Mississippi Burning* and *Glory*. The inaccuracies of the former film have been quite well-documented, so I will only briefly review them. In real life, no FBI agents were as dedicated as those in the film to protecting civil rights activists and bringing the murderers of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner to justice. The film shows African Americans to be frightened victims; it pays no attention to the heroic efforts made by civil rights activists during the investigation. The film also presents a white female heroine, whose well-being is at risk when she is no longer able to cover for her policeman/husband’s KKK activities. Of course in real life the break in the case came when an informant accepted a large cash bribe in exchange for the information that the FBI needed to make its case.

According to at least one account, the makers of *Glory* had not planned any special openings of the film in Boston. When it was pointed out to them that the film was, after all, ostensibly about the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, they agreed to sponsor some fanfare for the local release of the film. After seeing it in the company of authorities on this chapter of local history, we could all understand why they were not anxious for us to see it. The film’s central character is the young white colonel, Robert Gould Shaw, whose heroic actions and role in the 54th should not be underemphasized. The point of view of the film is for the most part his—the audience sees the events played out through his eyes, from his perspective. One marvelous exception to this pattern is in an early sequence following the Battle of Antietam when the camera shifts from the point of view of Shaw, wounded in battle, to the view of Rawlins, the black gravedigger (played splendidly by Morgan

Freeman) as he peers down on the wounded white character, little more than a boy.

The Antietam battle scene is meticulously filmed, as are all of the battle scenes along with the chilling hospital scene in which Shaw (played by Matthew Broderick) is bandaged. The details of Shaw's life are, for the most part, meticulously recorded as well. However, this attention to detail is severely lacking in the scenes that focus on the African-American characters. Early in the film Shaw is introduced to a pensive Frederick Douglass. The make-up and hair style of Douglass inaccurately suggest that he was an old man during the war. A photo in the documentary *Black and Blue in Color: Blacks in the Civil War* reflects what Douglass looked like during the war years. His role in the film is rather limited, but his role in the actual events that precipitated the formation of the 54th was quite extensive. He and many African-American religious leaders were quite involved with the recruitment of northern freemen for the company. His sons also functioned as drill sergeants.

In order to tell the story of the men in the 54th the filmmakers employed a time-honored cinematic device of highlighting the experiences of a core group of individuals whose experiences are meant to be representative of the whole. As critic Pauline Kael points out in her *New Yorker* review, "the principal characters are fictional, and you know it instantly, because they're the usual representative group of recruits who bicker and quarrel before they shape up and become fine soldiers."² The four tent mates are: Rawlins, the southern gravedigger; Trip (played superbly by Denzel Washington), a runaway from Tennessee; Sharts, a conspicuously southern ex-slave; and the sole northern African American, Searles, ostensibly a boyhood friend of Shaw's and Forbes' whose "white" education has ill-prepared him for the demands of army life. With his tasteful suit, his glasses, and his transcendentalist essays, Searles is seen as having more in common with the white officers than with his fellow soldiers. None of these

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characters is based on actual soldiers who made up the 54th, even though the details of their lives are quite accessible. The filmmakers offered the standard justification for using composite characters — they argue that in these four characters the breadth of the communal personality of the 54th can be better portrayed than by sticking to four genuine accounts. The major flaw in that line of reasoning can be seen in the decision to make three of these charac-

ters recent slaves and the fourth an inept northerner. The rank and file members of the 54th do not match that profile. Many of them were the sons or grandsons of ex-slaves who had spent their whole lives in the North. They were not all illiterate; we have letters and diaries that prove it. They were not as rough as the Trip, Rawlins, and Sharts characters suggest; nor were they polished to the point of ineffectiveness, as the Searles character was.

In a series of fictionalized incidents in the movie, Broderick's Colonel Shaw is depicted as the agent of positive change for all four of the black characters. First, when he demonstrates that the sharp-shooting techniques that Sharts has developed for hunting don't guarantee him success on the battlefield, the fugitive slave learns how to pack his musket, aim, and shoot under fire. The validity of such an encounter is particularly weak when we consider that few slaves would have been permitted the kind of access to guns that would have allowed a real-life Sharts, had there been one, to develop skills as a marksman. Next, Shaw's supposed African-American boyhood companion, Searles, ostensibly one of the few northern born, matures through the colonel's consistent refusal to intervene as the highly literate black recruit struggles to adapt to the rigors of camp life. Since the audience is led to believe that Shaw, the other white officer Forbes, and the African-American Searles have had the same education, why then are the former two able to prove their military mettle in spite of their privileged backgrounds while the genteel Searles falters throughout his training? Of course, Shaw is only ignoring his friend "for his own good," and this indifference is seen as paying off when Searles performs admirably under fire and refuses to return home after he is injured. Next, during at least part of the film the dignified gravedigger Rawlins is permitted to play teacher to Shaw as the white colonel seeks advice on how best to understand the men of his black regiment. With great flourish Shaw recognizes Rawlins' quiet leadership abilities and rewards them by finding a loophole through which he can appoint him as a noncommissioned officer. This new rank increases Rawlins' already strong dedication. In actuality, noncommissioned officers, including Frederick Douglass's sons, were appointed much sooner in the chronology of events. Finally, Trip, the recruit with the roughest edges, has a series of confrontations with his young commanding officer. Each one, including a whipping, seems to bring the two closer to an understanding. (There are no references that I know of in the historical record in which an African-American recruit is whipped.) Before the battle at Fort Wagner, Shaw's guarded optimism about the war's outcome moves Trip away from his more pessimistic stance. Following Shaw's courageous but fatal charge into enemy fire at Fort Wagner, Trip and his comrades, knowing that they are outnumbered

and out maneuvered, bravely pursue the Confederate enemy who has killed their white leader.

These fictionalized encounters in which the white leader's gentle wisdom is seen as a positive force for all four African-American men are, of course, meant to convince the audience that this would have been the effect on the whole regiment. The white character is a patriarchal figure able to meet the diverse needs of his dependent black progeny.

To use the much quoted but very appropriate adage coined by Ralph Ellison, the real men of the 54th are *invisible* in this film. Probably the most well-known African American of the 54th was William H. Carney, incorrectly identified in the Tri-Star pictures *Glory* press kit as John Carney. The first black recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Carney was from the New Bedford area. To use his own words:

As the color-bearer became disabled, I threw away my gun and seized the colors, making my way to the head of the column; but before I reached there the line had descended the embankment into the ditch and was making its way upon Wagner itself. While going down the embankment one column was staunch and full. As we ascended the breastworks, the volleys of grapeshot which came from right and left, and of musketry in front, mowed the men down as a scythe would do. In less than twenty minutes I found myself alone, struggling upon the ramparts, while all around me were dead and wounded, lying one upon another. Here I said, "I cannot go into the fort alone," and so I halted and knelt down, holding the flag in my hand. While there, the musketballs and grapeshot were flying all around me, and as they struck, the sand would fly in my face. I knew my position was a critical one, and I began to watch to see if I would be left alone. Discovering that the forces had renewed their attack farther to the right, and the enemy's attention being drawn thither, I turned [and] discovered a battalion of men coming towards me on the ramparts of Wagner. They proceeded until they were in front of me, and I raised my flag and started to join them, when, from the light of the cannon discharged on the fort, I saw that they were [the] enemy. I wound the colors round the staff and made my way down the parapet into the ditch, which was without water when I crossed it before, but was not filled with water that came up to my waist. Out of the number that came up with me there was now no man moving erect, save myself, although they were not all dead, but wounded. In rising to see if I could determine my course to the rear, the bullet I now carry in my body came whizzing like a mosquito, and I was shot. Not

being prostrated by the shot, I continued my course, yet had not gone far before I was struck by a second shot. Soon after I saw a man coming towards me, and when within hailing distance I asked him who he was. He replied, "I belong to the 100th New York," and then inquired if I were wounded. Upon my replying in the affirmative, he came to my assistance and helped me to the rear. "Now then," said he, "let me take the colors and carry them for you." My reply was that I would not give them to any man unless he belonged to the 54th Regiment. So we pressed on, but did not go far before I was wounded in the head. We came at length within hailing distance of the rear guard, who caused us to halt, and upon asking who we were, and finding I was wounded, took us to the rear through the guard. An officer came, and after taking my name and regiment, put us in the charge of the hospital corps, telling them to find my regiment. When we finally reached the latter the men cheered me and the flag. My reply was "Boys, I only did my duty. The old flag never touched the ground."³

In the film it is the illiterate, angry Trip who picks up the flag. At the end of the battle the audience sees his body being dumped in the mass grave on top of Shaw's. The audience may not realize that Civil War custom dictates the return of officers' corpses to their side but, because the Confederates were so insulted by the concept of a white officer leading a black regiment, they mutilated Shaw's body (not shown in the film) before burying him with his men. To their credit his family responded to this news by claiming that he would have wanted to be buried with his men. Returning to the discussion of the Trip/Carney character, aside from the act of receiving the flag, the "composite" character Trip exhibits nothing of the real life Carney. The fact that Carney survived and Trip dies is, I think, telling. Recall the story line that connects these three "based on real life" films to each other and to many other films ostensibly based on the black experience: no African American is allowed to successfully participate in the liberation of his people.

It is worth noting that *Glory* opened in local theaters less than two weeks after we learned that Charles Stuart had perpetuated a hoax in claiming that he and his wife, Carol, had been attacked by an African-American assailant. Perhaps the readiness with which his original story was accepted was partially the result of the consistent misrepresentation of African Americans on screen. No one walking away from *Glory* learns that hard-working literate African-American men left their jobs and families behind to take up arms during the Civil War. Their stories are still untold.

The most puzzling aspect of these omissions

stems from the fact that these stories are no longer hidden. The makers of *Glory* and *Mississippi Burning* would have had no trouble finding accurate accounts upon which to base their scripts. But perhaps because of an unconscious alliance to what Clyde Taylor identifies as the master narrative, the filmmakers take from these five stories only those truths that fit within the core story line, altering or omitting those that do not.

The saddest aspect of this pattern stems from the popularity of commercial film and the longevity of such accounts in the form of easy-to-rent videos. Far more people will see *Mississippi Burning* than the documentaries on this episode in civil rights history, such as *Eyes on the Prize*. Far more people will see *Glory* than *Black and Blue in Color*. Few reviews have called attention to flaws and these, obviously enough, will not be quoted on the boxes that contain the videos.

Moviemakers have not kept pace with academicians and thinkers. In contemporary Hollywood

films, "truth" appears on screen only when it fits the preconceived plot that the producers feel compelled to retell. When reality deviates from that story line, fictionalized characters and events that do fit are substituted. Only when filmmakers of color who have not internalized the dominant master narrative infiltrate the commercial film industry will the real stories be told.

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