

Gone with *Gone with the Wind*: How Cinematic History Lessons Reframe Slavery and the Civil War

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Class of 2019

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April 26, 2019

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Glynn Family Honors Program

Part One: Introduction

History is told through stories. Narratives of the past dominate historical discussions. Who did what? Where did this happen? What was the cause of some event? Our understanding of the past is shaped by our engagement with historical narratives. Simon Schama considers this inseparable relationship between historical narratives and our understanding of the past in his book *Dead Certainties*. In his opening chapter, he reconstructs the narrative of British hero General Wolfe at the battle of Quebec through a first-hand account of one of Wolfe's soldiers—or, so it seems. At the end of the book, Schama reveals that while the battle of Quebec factually took place, the eyewitness personal narrative that opens the book is entirely fictional: the soldier, the details of the battle, and the very story is invented. Schama's literary sleight of hand isn't pulled just for fun. Rather, it tells us something about historical narratives—that they are always constructions. As Schama notes in his afterword, “to have an inquiry, whether into the construction of a legend, or the execution of a crime, is surely to require the telling of stories. And so the asking of questions and the relating of narratives need not, I think, be mutually exclusive forms of historical representation.” (325) That is to say, narratives are legitimate forms of historical engagement that demand careful reflection. If, then, we necessarily access history through narratives, how do we navigate the interplay between historical truth—the event itself—and artistic choices—the deviations from facts made by the narrator of the story? Through careful examination of this relationship, we may realize our own biases and misunderstandings of history and grow to become better—and more informed—students of history. At the very least, we must be aware of the inherent prejudices present in all historical narratives. In this thesis I intend to uncover some biases by examining the relationship between fact and fiction in the cinematic history lesson.

Cinema has a long tradition of retelling history: the historical film has been a staple since the silent era. In fact, one could argue that D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a historical film about the American Civil War, did more than just tell a story about Reconstruction—it legitimized film as a form of popular entertainment for middle-class audiences. President Woodrow Wilson reportedly said that the film was like “writing history with lightning.” Whether or not the president actually said these words, this thought has persisted in the American imagination. Film could bring history to life like no medium before. Nevertheless, film is still subject to the prejudices of the cinematic storyteller. Schama acknowledges this: he says that historical knowledge must always be circumscribed by the prejudices of the narrator (322). My thesis will therefore examine how film writes history with lightning—how the formal elements of a film impact and transform the historical narrative—but also how film is also constantly circumscribed by circumstances and prejudices.

A central question of my thesis is how different films use varying strategies to reframe the past and construct historical objects. This question is answered best by breaking it down into a set of smaller, interconnected questions. How is history written and rewritten by a specific author, and what does that author intend by narrativizing the past? How does a historical film position itself in relationship with the factual narrative? How does such a film define and use evidence? What is the impact of the author on the narrative? I will use these questions as the basis for my comparative analysis of four popular historical films that offer fundamentally different cinematic history lessons.

I will consider historical films about the American Civil War and American slavery: Edward Zwick's *Glory* (1989); Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012); Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013); and Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012). Each film is very away of the

implications of race during the Civil War period. *Glory* describes the creation of the first African American regiment to fight in the war, *Lincoln* shows the concurrent struggle in Washington over the passage of the 12th amendment which abolished slavery. *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained* are both pseudo-slave narrative, the former based on a memoir, the latter a more mythologized narrative. Yet all four films frame this period in wholly unique ways. *Glory* shows the personal, gritty, and bloody struggle of African Americans fighting for both emancipation and equality; *Lincoln* shows a mostly-sanitized political struggle between competing ideologies in an incredibly different venue. *12 Years* depicts a free man subjugated into bondage by brutal White overlords; *Django* shows the inverse narrative by empowering a former slave to fight against his oppressors. While each film, then, tells a similar story of Americans fighting for liberation and abolition, each constructs history on its own terms.

I will conduct my close readings of each film with some critical points of comparison in mind. I will consider how evidence is presented through the film, paying attention to how a film uses letters, epigraphs, and narrations to legitimize its historical authority. I will compare films based on their narrative structure. Who is the hero of the story? Whose point-of-view is important? Whose story is being told? How is agency given to the film's characters? I will further examine directorial style and intention. Once again, any historical narrative demands an examination of the character of its narrator (Schama 322). How does a director transform the narrative being told? What does a director want from the past or from their film? Finally, I will examine each film's moments of pleasure. At what moments are we meant to be happy, or thrilled, or entertained, or satisfied? I will consider each film as a unit of entertainment, and I will look for where the historical narrative is adapted to fit a traditional film narrative arc. Finding who wins and who loses in moments throughout the film will help reveal who we as

viewer are meant to be empathize with and therefore whose point of view matters most. To do this effectively, I will first establish a persistent problem in cinematic history lessons—that is, the influence of what for decades was considered the definitive Civil War film, *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

Part Two: Setting the (Historical) Stage with BlacKkKlansman and Gone with the Wind

Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) opens with a shot from David Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939). This choice seems contradictory: *BlacKkKlansman* is a pro-civil rights film about an African American police officer who infiltrates the Klu Klux Klan while *Gone with the Wind* is widely regarded as a racist film that glorifies and embellishes the antebellum American South. The shot Lee chooses is especially emblematic of *Gone with the Wind*'s—and, by extension, Classic Hollywood Cinema's—glorification of the Southern side of the Civil War. The camera sweeps back from a distraught Scarlett O'Hara and over a railyard filled with wounded Confederate soldiers, finally stopping at a tattered Confederate flag in full frame. The shot idealizes the "lost cause" attitude: the men dying below are meant to be seen as heroic soldiers; the flag above is meant to be seen as the holy cause to which they gave everything. Of course, the Confederate cause included the preservation of slavery and continuation of White domination over Black people—a cause *Gone with the Wind* adheres to by barely representing Black characters on screen. Why, then, would a film about civil rights and equality between race begin with a shot emblematic of an attitude so opposed to human dignity?

Lee uses this shot to emphasize that much of what American consumers of media know about history—specifically, African American history—comes from Hollywood films that have represented the antebellum South in overly-either benevolent terms, as *Gone with the Wind* does,

or outright racist terms, as a film such as D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* does. As Schama argues, it is impossible to write about history without identifying the author's specific prejudice. The prejudices written in these cinematic history lessons could not be more explicit. Lee foregrounds Schama's claim by immediately cutting from *Gone with the Wind* to a racist soliloquy directly addressed into the camera. Through juxtaposition, Lee implies that *Gone with the Wind* inspires and promotes the outright racist attitudes present during the time period of *BlacKkKlansman*. Films like *Gone with the Wind* or *Birth of a Nation*, then, are history lessons defined by their racist prejudice.

Lee recognizes that the history of cinematic misrepresentations of slavery and the Civil War must be confronted. His *BlacKkKlansman* addresses the damage of harmful representation. The film establishes through references that *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation* are films that continue to have hideous ramifications for African Americans. Lee visualizes these ramifications by comparing *Birth of a Nation* to the lynching of an innocent Black man in two intercut scenes. Through parallel editing, we see the Colorado Springs chapter of the Klu Klux Klan cheer for Griffith's glorified magnanimous KKK; a cut, and we see a Black student union recoil at actual pictures of a mutilated man's body. Lee implies that this mutilation is the direct result of attitudes inherent in and promoted by *Birth of a Nation*. Furthermore, Lee ends *BlacKkKlansman* with footage from the Charlottesville riots of 2017. His intention is clear: racist attitudes fostered by *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation* continue to cause damage in America and must be challenged in order to fix the damage by creating better cinematic history lessons.

Thus, Lee makes clear to his viewer that *BlacKkKlansman* reacts against cinematic misrepresentations of American history. Furthermore, Lee defines what is at stake when a

misrepresentation becomes popular. Attitudes and prejudices suggested by films can inspire real suffering. To address and repair such damage, Lee's film puts a Black man into a position of power formerly exclusively occupied by White Americans. By defying traditional conventions and reacting against popular but problematic films, *BlacKkKlansman* also serves as a model for alternate history lessons. In his film, Lee recognizes a misrepresentation, confronts the source, and suggests an alternate story that is more dignified and less racist. An appropriate film about the Civil War must confront two shames: the shame of American slavery and racism, and the shame of racist cinematic history lessons that glorify the so-called chivalrous past of the antebellum American South.

The films that I will discuss in this thesis present alternative history lessons that fit the model epitomized by *BlacKkKlansman*. These films confront the problems of racism and slavery and challenge traditional Hollywood conventions about Civil War narratives. In doing so, these films reject the legacy of *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*—as *BlacKkKlansman* does—and put forward alternative history lessons by re-framing the relationship between African Americans and the Civil War in divergent ways.

Part Three: Glory

Edward Zwick's *Glory* came out in 1989. Based on the letters of the real Union Colonel Robert Gould Shaw (Matthew Broderick) and on Peter Burchard's *One Gallant Rush*, it tells the story of the formation of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first African American regiment organized during the Civil War.

Glory, on the whole, appears to be a typical Hollywood production. Zwick's cast is star-

studded: Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, Cary Elwes, and Morgan Freeman help fill the ranks of the 54th. The narrative is straightforward: Colonel Shaw takes command of a motley crew of disorganized but willing African American wannabe soldiers and, through heroic effort, transforms the band into a disciplined and undeniably patriotic fighting force. The story is historically factual in many points. Shaw did in fact lead the 54th regiment; he did reject pay until Black soldiers made as much as White soldiers; he was killed at the Second Battle of Fort Wagner. This narrative form is familiar to a typical consumer of Hollywood films. Plenty of films have been made in which the underdogs come together against all odds and win the day. *Glory* could be *The Mighty Ducks* or *The Karate Kid* or *The Dirty Dozen*. Zwick reapplies a standard Hollywood narrative form but in the context of the Civil War. However, *Glory* isn't about a sports team—rather, the film means to show that African Americans during the Civil war had just as much value and even more at stake than the frequently-portrayed White soldier. In doing so, Zwick means to change our perceptions of the typical Union soldier.

Glory is certainly well-intentioned in its portrayal of African Americans, but certain problems arise when examining the narrative structure. *Glory's* main character is Colonel Shaw—a White man. Indeed, the highest-ranking characters in the film are consistently White: Shaw, his second-in-command Major Forbes, and General Charles Harker are all prominent and White figures. Most of the film's agency is assigned to men. Indeed, the most pivotal moments of the film depend on Shaw's willpower. Shaw fights a sullen commissary officer for new boots for the regiment; Shaw tears his paycheck in half when the regiment's pay is cut; Shaw leads the fatal charge on Fort Wagner. Shaw seems to be more a White savior than a sympathetic officer in these triumphant moments. *Glory* is very cognizant of Shaw's superior rank, at least. Shaw berates Searles, his childhood friend, for poor training results; Shaw beats Tripp when he runs

away. However, the film does take steps to lessen Shaw's superiority. Before the assault on Fort Wagner, the final battle of the film, Shaw dismounts his horse to walk with the 54th. This is certainly a moment of brotherhood and mutual respect. White officers, always riding horses while their men march, quite literally tower over the Black ensigned. While the scene is triumphant in tone, it is slightly troubling that Shaw must lower himself to enter into the Black community before the charge. *Glory* nevertheless establishes a real and apparent rift between its White and Black characters.

Glory's racial politics is further complicated when considering the supporting characters who are African American. Four speaking roles are given to Black actors: Corporal Thomas Searles, an educated but bullied New Englander; Sergeant Major John Rawlins, a dignified ex-grave digger promoted to rank; Private Jupiter Sharts, a taciturn sharpshooter; and Private Silas Tripp, a rebellious ex-slave. The Black characters have limited communication with the White characters through the film. Instead, most conversations between these Black characters are restricted to a near-exclusive Black space of their shared tent. The film establishes a dichotomy between White spaces and Black spaces—certain zones exist in *Glory* in which very little racial integration occurs. The Black soldiers sing and dance and talk in the Black space of the enlisted camp. The White officers, on the other hand, strategize and sleep together in an all-White officers' quarters. This racial boundary is rarely crossed in the film. In one moment, Shaw walks through the enlisted camp on Christmas. He is clearly uncomfortable and out of place, and the scene's apparent tension does not resolve until Shaw is welcomed into the Black space by Searles. While White characters may enter Black spaces through invitation, African Americans never enter the White spaces of command. Thus, *Glory* isolates Black characters from positions of agency and maintains a White-over-Black power structure.

African American roles in *Glory* are clearly supporting and subjugated to White characters. Searles accepts this. In a pivotal moment in his character arc, he admits to his own inadequacy as a soldier but resolves to push on. In fact, he resolves to be treated as an inferior to Shaw, though the two grew up together and came from similar social classes. Rawlins crosses the White/Black divide of power when he becomes a commissioned officer, assuming and asserting this new role in the same way the White officers do—by commanding Black soldiers. Tripp is the most interesting. He does not immediately accept White command. Himself an ex-slave, Tripp's rebelliousness makes sense narratively, and Tripp's fears are realized when the 54th is used not to fight battles but rather to labor on roads. Tripp's insolence is not a point of pride but rather a defect that must be stamped out of him. Shaw does just that—he orders Tripp flogged like a slave when Tripp runs away from camp.

Each African American soldier surrenders their individuality at the unit is brought together as a cohesive fighting force led by Shaw. *Glory* therefore rejects African Americans depicted as individuals. Though each of the four Black soldiers appear at first to be unique, the narrative transforms each into standard, unified US soldiers fighting for the same cause in the same way. On the other hand, *Glory* encourages its White characters to be assert command and maintain their individuality. While the African American of *Glory* is ultimately confined to a soldier role, the White character changes in a radically different way. Shaw becomes more assertive, professional, and courageous, thereby becoming a uniquely privileged character. In the opening scene, we see Shaw escape capture in battle by playing dead. By the end of *Glory*, Shaw literally leads the charge on a Confederate fort. Black characters, then, must become less individualized and more subservient to become fit for their role while White characters can become more confident and heroic as they assume their commanding roles.

A closer look at Tripp reveals much about *Glory's* racial politics. Tripp is an ex-slave, run away from Tennessee to live freely in the North. He enlists in the 54th but is surly, wise-cracking, and aggressive towards the other Black soldiers and White officers. Tripp's relationship with Shaw is especially fascinating. Tripp deserts camp midway through the film, is caught, and is brought before Shaw for punishment. Shaw orders Tripp whipped. The scene is brutal: the whole regiment is brought forward to witness the punishment, and insert shots on Forbes, Searles, and others emphasize their shock and horror. Shaw takes on the role of a slave-owner by commanding this punishment—Shaw's whipping adds to the dozens of lashes and scars already on Tripp's back. Of course, this whipping only enforces the already strong White-centric power dynamic. Furthermore, Tripp's rebelliousness is recontextualized as the rebelliousness of an unruly slave, and he is whipped because of it. Though Tripp does henceforth become more placid, the master/slave tension created between Tripp and Shaw is never addressed or satisfactorily resolved. Later in the film, Shaw offers the honor of color-bearing to Tripp. Tripp refuses on principle—he's worried about how ex-slaves will be treated after the Civil War and doesn't want to become emblematic of the nation that enslaved him. Yet when Shaw is killed during the final battle, Tripp picks up the Union flag and is himself killed. While Tripp's action certainly shows a change-of-heart, his overall narrative arc is troubling. Summarily, Tripp is first portrayed as the archetypal unruly Black man who becomes subjugated—and more like his White commanders—through a literal whipping. Eventually, Tripp has a change-of-heart and becomes an emblem of his oppressive nation by bearing its flag. His rebelliousness and individuality is entirely stripped away from him. By the end of the film, Tripp becomes just another dead Union soldier. *Glory* does not allow individuality to African Americans and prefers to subjugate when necessary to create African Americans that America

can accept.

Zwick's directorial style is understated. *Glory* uses the conventions of a traditional Hollywood war movie—there are short and fast-paced moments of violence in the opening and closing sequences; there are close, personal moments of brotherly bonding inside the soldier's tent and in Shaw's quarters; there are moments of triumph and moments of failure as the 54th is united. The film's score fits well with this standard style of war filmmaking. Conventional orchestral music vaguely guides the movie along and instills a sense of honor and higher cause. *Glory* looks and sounds like a typical Hollywood war-themed blockbuster. The film uses violence liberally to emphasize the weight and stakes of the narrative. Battle sequences at both ends of the film serve as powerful bookends to remind the viewer what the stakes ultimately are—the lives of the soldiers. Zwick uses flashbacks and intercuts to give Shaw a backstory and a psychological depth that other characters don't have. One particular flashback jarringly interrupts Shaw while he is at a party hosted by wealthy Northern elite, giving the viewer access to Shaw's psychological state. However, besides rare expositional dialogue, Zwick reveals nothing about the internal state of any Black character. Yet while Zwick provides no psychological moments of intimacy with African Americans in *Glory*, he does show a moment of intimacy in a group of Black characters in a scene just before the final battle. In the scene, dozens of Black soldiers surround a fire and pray for safety in the upcoming battle, singing and clapping while they pray. One might say that Zwick is taking voyeuristic pleasure by showing the African American soldiers in such an intimate state, perhaps even classifying the soldiers as an ethnic other. The scene is notably different from any other scene in the film: it is dark, shot primarily from a single angle, and very long. Like Tripp, Zwick's camera stays outside the prayer circle because it is initially so unfamiliar. Slowly, Tripp grows in confidence, and enters

the circle when asked to by Rawlins. The viewer is likewise meant to join in to this prayer circle: the scene is shot tightly, the dim lighting provided by the bonfire draws attention to the soldiers' faces in the inky black night. It's very important that African American soldiers are shown in moments like these; it's important that African American characters are given the chance to speak; it's important that many African Americans are named throughout the film. *Glory* gives special access to the 54th Regiment's historical narrative, and therefore Zwick gives those soldiers dignity and respect by telling their largely unknown story. Zwick's greatest success is in creating such an intimate, personal, and humanized narrative. He uses intimacy throughout the film to invite the viewer to reimagine the Union soldier as African American. This African American soldier prays, worries, trains, cries, and overcomes obstacles like any other oft-portrayed White soldier of the Civil War. Though admittedly given little agency, the Black soldiers of *Glory* are in fact granted the majority of the screen-time—and the frame itself. Rather than tell *Glory* through a wide-angle lens, Zwick stays tight and therefore personal throughout the film with a dedication that extends even to the battle sequences. Rarely does Zwick show the wide, sweeping battle shots that blockbuster directors are so fond of. Instead, he chooses to shoot much of the battle sequences via shots held tight on either Shaw's face or on his soldiers. Zwick therefore readjusts the Civil War narrative to a smaller and more personal narrative of trial and success. *Glory* transforms the overarching and overwhelming narrative of the Civil War into a personal account of the unimagined Union soldier: the African American.

Part Four: Lincoln

Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) shows the political tact and struggle of President Abraham Lincoln to pass the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery. The film was

adapted from Doris Kearns Goodwin's Lincoln biography *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, itself meant to reveal Lincoln to be a savvy political mover, not simply a folksy and ethereal figure from American myth. Though concurrent with the ending phases of the Civil War, *Lincoln* is no ordinary war film. Rather, Spielberg combines moments of martial violence with political strong-arming to realize the relationship between racial tension and military conflict as it was politicized during this period. *Lincoln* was well-received, winning two Academy awards—including best actor for leading man Daniel Day Lewis.

It is easy to recognize *Lincoln* as a cinematic masterpiece. Cinematographer Janusz Kaminski made interiors dark and moody, and rooms are often only penetrated by a single shaft of light, making many frames look like Renaissance paintings. This choice serves to elevate a figure so lofty and storied as Abraham Lincoln into a position of historical and cultural significance—in many ways, this is the cinematic equivalent of creating a painting of Caesar, or Christ. *Lincoln* employs other strategies that suggest understanding Lincoln as a mythical and legendary figure. Daniel Day-Lewis, who portrays Lincoln, is well-regarded as a prestigious or premium actor, and his legendary method acting was covered extensively in the press surrounding *Lincoln*'s release. In a feature printed in the *New York Times*, Charles McGrath wrote that Day-Lewis “half-convinced” himself that he was Lincoln. As Day-Lewis himself said, he “looked at [photographs of Lincoln] the way you sometimes look at your own reflection in a mirror” (McGrath). Or, as Spielberg himself said: “I just came to see [Day-Lewis] as the character” (McGrath). Day-Lewis' dedication to characterizing and inhabiting the role of Lincoln lends respect and prestige to Spielberg's production. Day-Lewis' presence as among the finest actors of his generation further elevates *Lincoln* into a realm of Academy Award-worthy films in a way only such a prestigious lead actor could bestow. While undoubtably possessing cultural

prestige, *Lincoln* could appear too lofty and Lincoln himself too mythic to facilitate modern retrospection. Spielberg, perhaps anticipating this, counters such loftiness with gritty reality in the form of short battle scenes. These sequences are dirty and intimate—shots are often medium and mostly handheld, immersing the viewer into a mud-covered battlefield by a method similar to Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). *Lincoln*'s Congress gallery is not quiet and poised as a painting might make it out to be—rather, the floor is noisy, and Congressmen quarrel, shout, and verbally spar with each other as onlookers watch. *Lincoln* creates a certain kind of authenticity through this strategy. Spielberg enforces the film's realism when Congressmen argue and soldiers fight just as people argue and fight in more contemporary films.

Spielberg's dedication to authenticity extends to every aspect of *Lincoln*'s mise-en-scène. For example, Lincoln's desk was reportedly reconstructed and filled with period-accurate documents—some of which are never seen by the camera. Spielberg's production team even recorded the sound of a door latch from one of Lincoln's actual carriages for the film (Fosmoe). Spielberg obsesses over accuracy in physical details, often choosing to reconstruct or photograph the very items Lincoln would have come into contact with. This is strange behavior—the audience might not ever know the difference between a perfectly reconstructed desk and a casually-built prop without prior knowledge of Spielberg's obsessive recreations. By such exacting interaction with historical objects, Spielberg quite literally puts new life into old things and brings the historical object into the frame by photographing such impressive recreations. In fact, *Lincoln* as a whole means to reinvigorate the tired and too-familiar narrative of Lincoln's life.

The narrative of *Lincoln* focuses on the politics surrounding the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Unlike other Civil War films written about in this thesis, *Lincoln* rarely depicts

combat violence. Quick and short scenes from Civil War battlefields are jarring, gritty, and dirty—but few and far between. In another instance of a different kind of violence, Lincoln and his son Robert Todd enter a soldier's hospital. Spielberg shows gruesome and mangled bodies and body parts, but the scene perhaps functions more to show Robert Todd's unrealistic idealization of war break under the stark reality of actual combat rather than to shock the viewer. Most strikingly, *Lincoln* does not show Lincoln's assassination, though the event happens during the film. Instead, a stagehand announces the assassination to a theater where Lincoln's son Tad is watching a play. Of course, Spielberg might make such a decision to preserve Lincoln's dignity by not depicting so gruesome an event—though the hospital sequence certainly proves Spielberg is not afraid to show gore. Spielberg might instead wish to emphasize the alternative nature of the story he tells through *Lincoln*. After all, few films or books about Lincoln show Tad's perspective during Lincoln's death. Nevertheless, Spielberg drastically minimizes violent imagery and instead shifts focus away from marital combat and to political combat.

Lincoln revolves around the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. While we rarely see the battlefield, much, if not most, of the film takes place in the United States Capitol. The Congressmen we encounter are either for or against the amendment and therefore depicted by the film as either heroic or villainous. Thaddeus Stevens, a representative from Pennsylvania, is a center of good and justice, while Fernando Wood, a representative from New York, is played despicably. Rather than fight by gunfire or hand-to-hand combat, *Lincoln*'s politicians verbally spar and debate ethics as they battle over the morality of slavery. Key to all this fighting is Lincoln himself. Spielberg sullies the immaculate image of Honest Abe by showing a Lincoln willing to offer federal jobs to bribe unwilling Congressmen to vote for passage. *Lincoln* in these moments feels more like *House of Cards* or any other political thriller: we recognize certain

figures that fit tropes, like the conniving lobbyist William Bilbo or the immoral and unscrupulous politician Fernando Wood. Indeed, *Lincoln*'s triumphant climax is not found in a sweeping victory on a battlefield by the Union Army, but rather when church bells ring across Washington D.C. to announce the passage of the amendment. Again, Spielberg shows restraint and subtlety where other directors might not: Lincoln is not in the chamber when the vote is passed but rather hears bells across the city while alone in a dark room. In fact, by juxtaposing the victory bells with Lincoln, Spielberg suggests that Lincoln was absolutely vital for the passage of the amendment. The scene is stirring and triumphant.

Lincoln, then, is without a doubt the hero of *Lincoln*. He is constantly shown to be the driving force behind the political actions taken throughout the film, and he is at the center of nearly every scene. However, for a film about the abolition of slavery, *Lincoln* does not show many African American characters. Indeed, the only prominent African American role in the film is Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave who acts as a personal servant to Mary Todd Lincoln. Rarely does Spielberg show Keckley outside of the domestic sphere. The role of the African American in *Lincoln*, then, is tied to domesticity—exactly like African American characters in *Gone with the Wind*. What Spielberg fails to show, however, is that Keckley was not just Mary Todd Lincoln's maid—she was actually a prominent abolitionist and leader of African American abolitionist groups with fellow White House servant William Slade (Masur). Though Spielberg does not hesitate to show any politician, whip, or lobbyist even remotely involved with the political fight for emancipation, African American abolitionists have no presence in the film, although Lincoln was documented to have interacted with several in his tenure in office. As Sinha writes, *Lincoln* lacks all historical context concerning African American roles in the abolitionist movement. Lincoln even met with famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass in March

1865, a surely consequential interaction that was not even mentioned in the film. Spielberg's obsessive attention to detail does not extend to African Americans in Lincoln's social sphere as it does to minor objects like Lincoln's carriage latch or desk papers. Elizabeth Keckley is merely a faithful servant, and Spielberg totally obscures the achievements and efforts of Black social reformers (Masur). Nor does *Lincoln* show any instances of slavery on screen—or, more accurately, *Lincoln* does not *recreate* any instance of slavery. We do see images of slaves when Tad Lincoln looks at small prints of enslaved African Americans. The narrative perspective therefore remains focused and tight on the Lincoln family, and Spielberg thus dutifully shows the viewer strictly only what Lincoln may have seen. Perhaps Spielberg means to be sensitive by not recreating images of slavery that would be troubling to the contemporary viewer. For Spielberg, that image alone is sufficient—and literal images of slaves are the only evidence of slavery presented to the viewer. Tad's relationship with slavery is similar to a 21st century American's relationship with slavery: Tad can only gaze at an image—perhaps voyeuristically—and gasp. Lincoln scolds Tad after Tad has seen these images, and Lincoln's scorn might be translated to the modern viewer who encounters slavery as a spectacle in a similar way. On the other hand, one might argue that Spielberg erases a vital piece of the 13th Amendment's narrative by minimizing contact with those the 13th Amendment most affected.

Questions about slavery aside, *Lincoln* does raise questions about the agency of African Americans. As Lincoln is at the center of every conflict and resolution of the film—and *Lincoln* does indeed imply that Lincoln was the main driver behind the Thirteenth Amendment—then Abraham Lincoln as a White male might be accused of being a White savior. After all, soon after the amendment is passed, Spielberg cuts to shots of a largely Black viewing public celebrating in the stands far above where White men debated and signed the amendment into law. Indeed, the

whole narrative is moved forward by White men talking to each other, and little agency is given to Black figures. While Lincoln himself never says anything overtly controversial or prejudiced, Thaddeus Stevens makes clear that the argument over the Thirteenth Amendment must revolve around equality before the law, not actual, professed equality between races—thus, Lincoln and the rest of his party are not concerned with the morality behind slavery but instead just the technicalities. Once again, such a problematic statement might be explained away by remembering Spielberg's obsession with period authenticity. However, *Lincoln*, in its search to find and display true authenticity, might in fact promote problematic power structures. As Masur asserts, *Lincoln* reinforces the “outdated assumption that White men are the primary movers of history and the main source of social progress.” *Lincoln*'s Lincoln is a god-like force, and Lincoln alone—himself a mythologized White male—can incite the emancipation of slavery and prevail in the battle over racial equality. Just as two historically-significant African Americans are made in *Lincoln* to be simply servants, so too are African Americans in general made subservient under Lincoln's authority. Spielberg directly or indirectly implies that Lincoln alone is responsible for the passage of the amendment, and African Americans are thus indebted to him for their deliverance. Again, though Spielberg's overwhelming accuracy may fill a desk with trinkets that no viewer will ever see, Elizabeth Keckley cannot fight for her own freedom but instead can only thank Lincoln, her master, for his dedication to equality—legal, not actual, equality, that is. *Lincoln* is not truly a cinematic history lesson devoid of prejudice. Instead, *Lincoln* minimizes African American agency and historical impact and instead imparts God-like authority to Lincoln alone.

Such problems are realized fully in a single scene—in fact, *Lincoln* as a whole can be concisely summarized in its opening sequence. The scene starts with an extended sequence in an

unnamed and unmarked battlefield. Soldiers grapple and punch and stab each other in rain and mud. The frame rate seems high—there’s almost no motion blur, making each the image sharp and precise, like a wartime photograph. The camera is handheld and eye-level with the soldiers, directly placed in the center of the battle. The sequence is intimate, violent, jarring, and personal—perhaps very nearly replicating the experience of being in a Civil War battle just as Spielberg did in *Saving Private Ryan*. Spielberg then cuts directly to a group of some soldiers addressing Lincoln directly. In fact, there’s four soldiers in all: two Black, two White. The Black soldiers tell Lincoln about where they’ve fought, and Lincoln reminisces about the battles. The scene depicts Lincoln as personable—like a painting come to life, Lincoln isn’t dark and musty but rather bright and lively, speaking plainly with the soldiers as if he’s known them his whole life. Another Black soldier asks Lincoln when African Americans will be allowed to be commissioned officers in the Army. The soldier references the struggle for uniforms and equal pay for Black soldiers—a driving conflict in *Glory*—and the scene reminds the viewer of the motivating conflict behind *Lincoln* as a whole—the struggle for equality. Later, the two White soldiers remark that Lincoln inspired them to enlist with his famous Gettysburg Address and, to Lincoln’s chagrin, begin to recite the speech. The two soldiers must muster before they finish the speech, and Lincoln is left alone before the Black soldier who argued for officer commissions for African Americans. Spielberg lights Lincoln’s back—quite literally enlightening him—while he leaves the African American soldier in relative darkness. Furthermore, Lincoln is positioned physically higher than the soldier, and when Spielberg cuts to the soldier, the camera is angled down from above Lincoln’s shoulder—thus, Lincoln literally looks down on the soldier. Without missing a beat, the soldier finishes the Gettysburg Address as he walks away: “that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain...” This speech is the answer to the

battle sequence just before: through parallel editing, *Lincoln* assures that the fighting of the Civil War—whether on the battlefield as before or in Congress after—is for equality among races and a new birth in freedom. *Lincoln*, then, reframes the goal of the Civil War in a divergent way than *Gone with the Wind*: rather than a fight to preserve or destroy the Southern way of life as *Gone with the Wind* suggests, the Civil War as depicted in *Lincoln* is a struggle over equality and freedom. The scene thus shows the motivation both for Lincoln and *Lincoln*. However, it should be noted that this African American soldier—though he has concisely summarized the larger goal of the Civil War—makes his point by directly quoting Lincoln’s own words. The soldier has no voice of his own, but rather must adopt the position of the empowered White man to even speak about the change that should occur. After hearing these words, Lincoln leans back in his chair. From his positioning to the atmospheric lighting around him, Lincoln appears remarkably similar to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. Spielberg literally memorializes Lincoln in this moment—and, in doing so, contextualizes the Memorial itself. In other words, Lincoln has ensured his place on the National Mall through his role in the struggle over equality.

Spielberg uses a variety of strategies to imbue *Lincoln* with authenticity and to shed light and liveliness on a dim past. *Lincoln* shows the political climate around the Civil War and the Abolition of slavery but makes it explicitly known that this struggle is a fight for equality and liberty. Spielberg thus reimagines Lincoln as savvy, clever, and caring. Nevertheless, Spielberg cannot help but maintain pervading beliefs that White men alone created and contributed to the abolition movement. Therefore, he minimizes prominent African American abolitionists into subservient household roles. However, this chapter does not serve to reject *Lincoln* as a failed cinematic history lesson. Rather, I mean to show a danger of adhering to historical and therefore marginalizing accuracy at the expense of representing the historically marginalize that were most

affected. While Spielberg is right to show that Lincoln held more political power than a figure such as Elizabeth Keckley, he ought to have allowed her and other prominent and influential Black figures a larger role in the film. *Lincoln* is not free from prejudice, though it does successfully reimagine the negotiation between conflict over race and political power in the Civil War era.

Part Five: 12 Years a Slave

Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2012) is based on a slave narrative of the same name written by Solomon Northup and published in 1853. The film follows the fictionalized Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) as he is taken from his family and status as a free man in New York and sold into slavery under the pseudonym Platt on Louisiana plantations. *12 Years a Slave* was a commercial and critical success, earning well above its budget at the box office and winning three Academy Awards: Best Supporting Actress for Lupita Nyong'o, Best Adapted Screenplay for John Ridley, and the Best Picture award. Northup's story—though certainly related to slavery and racism in the antebellum United States—takes place around a decade or more before the start of the Civil War, but the narrative undeniably has great implications on how one reads the causes and conflict surrounding the war.

Though on its surface level the film is strictly adherent to historical reality in its narrative structure, *12 Years a Slave* creates a psychological reality to develop and reveal the traumatized state of Northup when he is in slavery. McQueen begins his film with a scene of extreme intimacy: a woman makes sexual contact with Northup in the dark of a slaves' quarter. The shot is tightly framed and underexposed, showing Northup's face prominently. In a later scene, slaves

are made to dance for the cruel slave master Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender), and the camera is placed in the midst of the forced celebration. McQueen emphasizes intense intimacy in both scenes—an intimacy so intrusive that it allows the viewer to gain a privileged access to Northup's inner thoughts. McQueen establishes this psychological intimacy between the viewer and Northup by employing flashbacks. The first two scenes of *12 Years a Slave*—of Northup in a field and of Northup in a slaves' quarters—take place long after the scenes immediately following of the free Northup living in New York. The entire front half of the film, then, might be read as an extended flashback sequence: Northup, hard at work in the fields or discouraged in his cabin, might be thinking back to better times during these trying moments. Additionally, cutting directly between Northup in freedom and Northup/Platt in slavery draws a violent contrast between two wholly different worlds—that of the freed man and that of the slave. *12 Years a Slave* is able to cross such a wide gap in experience in such little time, making the world of the enslaved all the more oppressive, violent, and horrific. All the while, McQueen foregrounds Northup at the center as the main character of the film. Direct intimacy and clear cross-cutting between slavery and freedom invites the viewer to imagine themselves in Northup's situation. McQueen inserts his viewer directly into this slave narrative to demand a violent discovery of the horrors of slavery and effect deep empathy.

McQueen has no problem with showing intense images of violence and brutality in his film. Much of *12 Years a Slave*'s shocking impact is made through depictions of horrific violence. McQueen shows slaves labor in a field and get beaten later in the day for not bringing in enough cotton. McQueen doesn't only use juxtaposition to emphasize the horrors of slavery—in fact, many scenes, especially scenes of brutality, are covered in long and uncut shots. One particularly jarring scene finds Northup strung up on a tree to be hung by a band of rowdy and

viscous overseers. Though the men do not successfully hang Northup—they are scared off before they can finish their evil job—Northup is left barely suspended on his toes while other plantation workers pass by without giving him a second glance for what feels like hours. McQueen does not cut away, and the shot lingers for a very long minute. In another instance, Epps commands Northup to whip fellow slave Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o). Though Northup is rightfully reluctant at first, Epps threatens him at gunpoint, and Northup commences. From the start of the scene to its finish—nearly five minutes—McQueen does not cut, instead moving the camera handheld to Epps, then Northup with a whip, then Patsey tied to a post, and back again, so the moment plays out in real time. No detail is missed by the camera: we see the rage and fury in Epps' face; we see Northup bend over in disgust at what he has been made to do; we see sprays of blood and flesh rent in seams as Patsey is whipped. McQueen purposefully uses the long take to ensure that his viewer sees every last bit of these violent and horrific images—thus, he demands a full, uncut confrontation with the horrors of slavery. Rather than minimize slavery to small on-screen images as Spielberg does in *Lincoln*, McQueen shows the absolute worst of the twisted system recreated in full, bloody detail on the screen. At the end of the whipping scene, McQueen wants his viewer should bend over like Northup does in shock at what he or she has just seen.

12 Years a Slave is not a film that shows solely horrors. McQueen does allow minimal and heavily-caveated moments of pleasure to counter the violence and inhumanity of much of the film. In one instance, Northup suggests to the benevolent William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch) that logs could be transported faster through a swamp and is mocked by the aggressive overseer John Tibbeats (Paul Dano). Ford gives Northup the go-ahead, and Northup successfully navigates the swamp on a raft. Upon his return, Northup is greeted with joy and congratulated by both Ford and the other slaves. The moment feels joyful: the men clap and

cheer when Northup docks his raft, and Northup himself smiles with pride. However, a closer look at the frame itself tells another story: Ford wears decadent and clean clothes, while Northup and the slaves are clad in dirty and ragged garments. Northup clearly is triumphant in this scene, but McQueen is careful not to imply that Northup is treated as an equal by his seemingly-benevolent master. Truly, the only authentic and untroubled moment of pleasure in the entire film is Northup's reunion with his family after twelve long years. The scene is not overly-joyous, nor over-done. Northup stands in front of his house before entering for several long beats in dead silence, and the viewer realizes how scared and scarred he must be. Nevertheless, the payoff is worth the wait: Northup reunites with his family and meets his grandson, named after himself. McQueen covers the scene almost entirely in close-ups—we clearly see Northup cry profusely as he says “I have had a difficult time these past several years.” McQueen reserves a scene so emotional and touching for a Northup only after he has been freed. In other words, Northup can only experience unproblematic pleasure after he's escaped the terrible confines of slavery—pleasure indeed well-earned after the trials Northup has suffered throughout the film.

Unlike *Glory* or *Lincoln*, an African American is undoubtedly the main character of *12 Years a Slave*. While the world of the antebellum South clearly bestows all power upon White men and women landowners—a fact which McQueen is certainly aware of—the film nevertheless devotes the majority of its screen time to African American characters. While Northup is belittled, whipped, dominated, and even renamed by his White overlords, he still exerts some amount of agency. He suggests a new delivery route for Ford, he earns and plays a violin for parties, and he creates ink and writes a letter home against threat of death. Interestingly, all of Northup's acts of defiance are indeed historically plausible. These acts are not large action pieces or impassioned manifestos—rather, they are small moments of resilience

and independence. *12 Years a Slave* even includes a scene in which Northup physically assaults Tibeats. McQueen is not romantic about the attack, and Northup suffers great consequences for his actions—his attempted hanging occurs immediately after. However, Northup is certainly not just a subservient plot device but rather a fully-developed character with wants and means to gain his wants. The film at times seems less like a Civil War narrative and more a movie about survival, reminiscent, perhaps, of *127 Hours* or *Cast Away*. Northup faces immense physical and psychological challenges and overcomes such challenges through sheer willpower alone. His enfoldment into the system of slavery is not ultimately a personal defeat—rather, Northup’s continued survival through the evils of slavery is a continuous triumph of will.

Northup’s ultimate deliverance from slavery, however, is not solely the result of his own agency. After being inspired by a Canadian abolitionist named Samuel Bass, played by Hollywood superstar Brad Pitt, Northup writes and sends a letter via Bass back to New York. The letter is received, and a sheriff and friend of Northup’s come to Louisiana to bring Northup home. Importantly, the impetus of these actions are Northup’s writing of the letter—Northup alone begins his own emancipation process. Unlike *Lincoln*, in which only White men are endowed with the ability to speak, write, and grant freedom, Northup is able to write and argue for his own liberty. However, the moment is slightly more complex than this simple reading might allow. Northup tries to write for his freedom earlier in the film and is foiled by a treacherous courier who reveals the scheme to Ebbs before the letter is sent. Northup later entrusts his letter to Samuel Bass, the cool-talking abolitionist who caught Northup’s eye by arguing with Ebbs about the morality of slavery. Though Northup begins his own emancipation process, it is Bass who ultimately allows the emancipation to occur. Of course, McQueen plays the moment true to history: it’s hard to realistically imagine a scenario in which an enslaved

Black man could successfully argue for his freedom in the antebellum South without any outside help. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that Brad Pitt, both a well-known and well-loved star who is also credited as a producer of the film, is the good White man who allows the deliverance of Northup. McQueen's film cannot be accused of creating and using a White savior as the key mover in the emancipation process as *Lincoln* or *Glory* might be. However, *12 Years a Slave* is not totally immune to the White savior complex. Though McQueen remains diligent throughout the film in depicting Northup and African Americans with dignity and preference, Brad Pitt's star persona is enough to overpower McQueen's intentions. Bass, then, is as a near White savior in a film that almost always gives preference to Black characters.

Ultimately, *12 Years a Slave* recreates a slave narrative that focuses greatly on and allows agency to Northup, though it confers part of the emancipation process to its weighty White co-star Brad Pitt. Nevertheless, McQueen demands that his viewer confront the evils and violence of slavery directly, and he pulls no punches in depicting terrible images and vile characters associated with the antebellum South. Northup is resilient in his personal struggle against slavery, and his survival through twelve years is a triumph of the will that is rewarded at long last by a final shot of Northup clutching his grandson surrounded by his family. *12 Years a Slave* provide the African American slave's perspective sorely lacking in *Gone with the Wind*—where *Gone with the Wind* has few African American voices, *12 Years a Slave* is filled with them.

Part Six: Django Unchained

Quinten Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) is unconventional from the start, telling the story of the ex-slave Django (Jamie Foxx) and his partner and dentist-turned-bounty hunter

Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) as they travel across the antebellum South to rescue and emancipate Django's wife Broomhilda (Kerry Washington). Tarantino himself said that *Django* is a genre film, clearly combining elements of Spaghetti Westerns and Blaxploitation cinema to form a bizarre cross-genre hybrid. *Django Unchained* was a commercial and critical success: it grossed nearly \$500 million and won two Academy Awards (Best Original Screenplay for Tarantino and Best Supporting Actor for Waltz).

Unlike the other three films of this thesis, *Django Unchained* makes no claims to any sort of authenticity—rather, the film is outright counter-factual, much like Tarantino's earlier *Inglorious Basterds* (2009). *Django* is not based on any memoir. Tarantino does not overlay epigraphs or historical citations, and some aspects of the film are downright fantastical. *Inglorious Basterds* functions similarly: the film begins with a title screen proclaiming: "Once upon a time... in Nazi-occupied France." Tarantino juxtaposes fantasy with the historical—on the one hand, he provides an exact date and location for *Basterds*; on the other hand, he introduces the film with the most traditional and clichéd opening line to a fairy tale. Tarantino, then, explicitly reminds his viewer that he does not mean to tell a factual narrative. Rather, *Basterds* will be a fantasy story set in a historical context. Sure enough, *Basterds* tells the story of an American special forces unit composed of Jewish Americans sent to France to assassinate Hitler—and they do. Though such a narrative clearly did not happen historically, *Basterds* nevertheless fulfills an important function. Tarantino allows Jewish people, horrifically oppressed by the Third Reich, to get full revenge on the perpetrators—albeit fictionally. Through *Basterds*, Tarantino tells a wish-fulfillment fairy tale of what should have happened in World War II. Similarly, *Django* counterfactually describes a narrative in which a Black slave is empowered and triumphs over his ex-masters and other vicious and malicious Southern White

racists. *Django*, then, is a fairy tale positioned historically in the antebellum South meant, perhaps, to repair the damage of a disappointing reality—that is, that slaves never had a real chance to seek reparations from the perpetrators of the evils of slavery. Though it similarly features an ex-slave as a main character, *Django Unchained* is diametrically opposed to *12 Years a Slave*. While *12 Years* thrives on accuracy and historicity, *Django* rejects typical historical film standards and uses genre to tell a counter-narrative about slavery and the antebellum South.

Tarantino appropriates aspects of Spaghetti Westerns as he uses certain genre conventions in *Django Unchained*. The film takes its name from *Django* (1966), an Italian film directed by Sergio Corbucci starring Franco Nero. Incidentally, *Django*—the 1966 version—tells the story of a former Union soldier who battles revolutionaries and racists gangs of Southerners resembling the Klu Klux Klan. Tarantino ensures the connection between his *Django Unchained* and the original *Django* by using the same theme music over opening titles printed in the same font as the original *Django*'s credits. Tarantino uses a rapid zoom throughout *Django Unchained*, just as Corbucci does in *Django*. Django's (the Tarantino character) style of gun-slinging—shooting at the hip while rapidly re-cocking his revolver with his other hand—mirrors exactly how Django (the Corbucci character) shoots bandits in *Django*'s first scene. Franco Nero even makes a cameo in a *Django Unchained* bar scene, and his name is displayed prominently at the end of *Django Unchained*'s credit sequence. *Django Unchained* leans heavily into other Spaghetti Western conventions. Django practices his fast draw on a can embedded in a snow-man; Schultz dubs Django the “fastest gun in the South”; Schultz and Django gallop out of dusty frontier towns side-by-side as the sun sets. This clear adhesion to genre rules allows *Django Unchained* to firmly establish itself into the mythical cannon of the American West popularized by Hollywood and Spaghetti Westerns in the 1950s and 1960s. The traditional Western is

already a modernized American fairy tale, so Tarantino appropriates Western formal elements to grant *Django Unchained* an American mythic status.

Django Unchained also incorporates narrative motifs from German epic poems of the middle ages—specifically, the stories of the *Nibelungenlied*. The *Nibelungenlied*, an oral poem about knights and chivalric quests, is somewhat akin to the English legend of King Arthur, interested not so much in historical accuracy but rather in defining heroism. While Schultz and Django sit at dusk eating, Django remarks that his wife is named Broomhilda; Schultz tells Django that Broomhilda must be named after a character in the *Nibelungenlied*. Django crosses the fire and sits child-like directly in front of Schultz and asks that Schultz tell him the story. Schultz does: the mythic Broomhilda is removed from her beloved Siegfried and placed on top of a mountain, and Siegfried must journey up the mountain and defeat a dragon to rescue her. The scene is lit by a campfire's glow, and Tarantino does not cut away while Schultz tells the legend. Tarantino evokes the ancient tradition of orally telling stories. In ancient times, elders told legends to children around campfires—just so, Schultz, positioned physically above a cross-legged Django, tells a similar story around a campfire. Tarantino therefore maps the archetypal heroic narrative of Siegfried onto Django's liberation narrative and subsequent pursuit of his wife. As Schultz himself says, he'd never miss the opportunity to help out a "real-life Siegfried." Incidentally, *Django* is far from verisimilar to historical accounts—nevertheless, Tarantino brings to life and represents the *Nibelungenlied* through *Django*. Moreover, *Django* hybridizes pulp fiction and high culture through the combination of Spaghetti Westerns and German archetypal mythical tropes. Though these two storytelling traditions may seem opposed, Tarantino nevertheless imposes both onto his counterfactual slave narrative. By tying a Spaghetti Western narrative to an epic myth through the campfire scene, Tarantino transforms Django's

story into an legend about American slavery. Indeed, Schultz fits the epic tradition quite well: he gives Django lessons in heroism and provides Django with weapons, thereby becoming the mythical provider of arms. In the tradition of epic storytelling, Tarantino intends his *Django* to have cultural impact and to be likewise handed down over generations; by applying aspect of the Western, Tarantino means to establish *Django* directly in the American pop cultural cannon.

Django is not simply a myth about American slavery—the film also acts as a counter-narrative to *Gone with the Wind*. *Django* explicitly calls *Gone with the Wind* into question through a very clear reference. As Django and Schultz cross into Mississippi, a title rolls across the screen: “And after a very cold and very profitable winter, Django and Dr. Schultz came down from the mountains and headed for MISSISSIPPI.” The title is formatted precisely as various title rolls throughout *Gone with the Wind*. Tarantino superimposes the word “Mississippi” over an overhead image of slaves marching into auction. Tarantino therefore explicitly inserts slavery into *Gone with the Wind*—in a single frame, he directly combines a brutal image of slavery and an ornate image of antebellum opulence. Tarantino does not allow his viewer to think of Mississippi without thinking of slavery. In a single shot, *Django* contradicts the sanitized and airtight pro-Southern narrative from *Gone with the Wind*. Indeed, if *Gone with the Wind* hides all images of slavery in the antebellum South, *Django* shows all forms of slavery. While *Gone with the Wind* devotes almost no screen-time to African American figures, *Django*’s frames represent African Americans constantly, and Tarantino visualizes every horrific aspect of slavery on screen. Tarantino shows slaves whipped mercilessly, mandingos fighting to the death, and a man ripped apart by dogs for attempting escape—images directly opposed to *Gone with the Wind*’s posh, luxurious, and sanitized South. *Gone with the Wind* praises so-called heroic characters who raid the African American part of town in KKK-esque fashion; Django and Schultz kill a local

band of white-bag-wearing marauders. *Django* is not sympathetic towards Southern society: every interaction between Django and some White landowning Southerner reveals the cruelty and inhumanity of the antebellum Southern way of life. Calvin Candy (Leonardo DiCaprio), owner of Broomhilda and Candyland, the fourth-largest plantation in Mississippi, wears clean suits and speaks French in a posh and ornate living room; all the while, he commands his slave to beat another man to death in a mandingo fight. Through such rough juxtaposition, Tarantino reveals two sides to antebellum society, while *Gone with the Wind* firmly shows only one. *Django*, then, is a film to correct the gross misrepresentation of Southern society that *Gone with the Wind* promulgates. Furthermore, *Django* puts forth an alternative counter-narrative of an ex-slave's experience in the antebellum South.

Django Unchained, then, is a strange German myth/Spaghetti Western hybrid meant to counter a pro-Southern attitude established by *Gone with the Wind* and instead reveal the horrors of slavery while empowering a Black hero. Why does Tarantino use such a strange combination of genre for so serious a task? Of course, following Western conventions certainly makes *Django* enjoyable to watch: Django and Schultz gun down outlaws in fast and furious raids, and Tarantino takes great pleasure dropping frames and going into slow motion when Django dives across a room shooting two guns at once. However, the form does more than just entertain. By evoking the epic tradition, Django assures its viewer that the hero will prevail over all evil by the end, as nearly all heroes in fairy tales eventually do. Django does just that: though beset by Candy and company and even sold into slavery—just as Northrup was in *12 Years*—Django escapes within a day using his wits and his gun, blows up the plantation, and gallops away with his wife. Though Tarantino does not explicitly say that Django and Broomhilda lived happily ever after, we certainly assume so when Django grins to the camera and rides off into the night

with Broomhilda in tow. Such a narrative is clearly a distortion of history. *12 Years* provides a far more so-called accurate depiction of an enslaved African American fighting for his emancipation. While Northup can only write for his freedom, Django makes his own emancipation by killing his enslavers in grand spectacle. *Django* ends with the big house on the plantation exploding—Django literally destroys the physical establishment of Southern White slaveowners. Such a story, as remarked earlier, bears little to no historical reference. However, this lack of historicity does not delegitimize Django. As Schama writes, all history is subject to specific prejudice (322). Django acknowledges its own prejudice clearly: the film derives its conventions from recombined genres and is unabashed about its use of pulp and graphic violence. Nevertheless, *Django* still effectively and importantly acts as a counter-narrative to *Gone with the Wind*.

Django Unchained does not only draw from the genre conventions of German legends and Spaghetti Westerns. Tarantino also takes great influence from American Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Django himself is clearly modelled after a blaxploitation hero: he wears flashy clothes, a swaggering hat, and cool sunglasses while effortlessly slinging guns. When Django blows up Candyland with dynamite, he turns to the camera in a close-up with cigarette in a holder in his mouth and wearing his trademark sunglasses, and he grins. Through the film Django learns to shoot straight and swagger, like John Shaft or Youngblood Priest or any other Blaxploitation hero. Django ultimately becomes a Black superhero: when he shoots, he never misses; when he brawls, he never loses. The Blaxploitation genre fits the *Django Unchained* model very well: Blaxploitation heroes often struggle against a racist White society and always triumph at the end. Django, too, fights racists and ultimately triumphs.

Django Unchained does not exclusively feature African American characters, and

Tarantino constructs complex and nuanced relationships between Black and White characters on a spectrum ranging from animosity (the relationship between Django and Candy, the main villain) and empathy (the relationship between Django and Schultz, the sympathetic and partner-in-bounty-hunting German). In his essay on race and culture, Richard Dyer notes that media presents radically different representations of White characters. Effectively, Dyer argues for a more complex notion of whiteness as depicted in media. Rather than defining whiteness in relationship with non-White characters, Dyer moves to develop notions of whiteness in conjunction with relationships between White characters themselves. Therefore, Tarantino's definition of whiteness is exposed not by comparing White characters to non-White characters, but rather by comparing White characters to other White characters—that is to say, by comparing Schultz versus Candy. Candy is undeniably villainous: he forces his slaves to fight to the death, he allows a runaway to be mauled by dogs, and he violently splits an African American skull during a brutal discussion about racist pseudoscience. Schultz is quite the opposite. In the opening scene, he wounds and kills two slavers and leaves keys and a gun for the remaining slaves. He gives Django a horse, then, in a bar a few scenes later, a beer, and he happily teaches Django lessons in chivalry—whether archetypal lessons, about heroism in the legend of Siegfried, or practical lessons, about how to wield a gun. It is tempting to draw similarities between Schultz and *Glory*'s Colonel Shaw. True enough, both allow for the arming and subsequent empowering of Black men. Schultz does not actually *liberate* Django from the two slavers in the film's opening scene—rather, he purchases Django, later explaining that although he disapproves of slavery, he'd like the system to work to his advantage while tracking down the Brittle brothers. When Django agrees to join Schultz as a bounty hunter, Schultz does not offer Django half the reward, but rather a mere 30 percent. Like Shaw, Schultz seems to be

willing to help Black men so long as he still maintains power over them, whether as an owner or as a commanding officer. Nevertheless, to call Schultz a White savior—like Colonel Shaw—is not accurate. While Schultz does give Django his gun—thus fulfilling the mythic role of the provider of arms—Django himself takes full responsibility for his own training. In a sequence, Django practices his shot on a snowman by himself. Schultz only approves admiringly at a distance. Though it is initially Schultz's job to kill the Brittle brothers, Django kills two of the three on his own. As Django had a personal history of mistreatment at the hands of these brothers, Schultz allows Django to exact personal justice on them. When Django and Schultz enter Candyland undercover and when they visit a plantation in Tennessee, Schultz is very careful to remark that Django is a freeman. When a woman asks if that means she should treat Django as if he were a White man, Schultz nods yes. Schultz, then, both counters the White savior Shaw by allowing Django great agency and dignity and also is as a foil to Candy by constantly acting with sympathy and empathy whenever possible. Whereas Candy argues that White men are scientifically superior—even of a different species—to Black men, Schultz firmly believes in racial equality. In fact, Schultz's compassion is almost to a fault: when Django and Schultz ride in convey with Candy to Candyland, the company encounters a slave surrounded by dogs. Candy declares that the slave should be mauled, so Schultz immediately stands and offers to buy the slave, thereby putting his and Django's covers as mandingo enthusiasts at risk. Django himself must insist that Schultz steps down and that the slave is mauled to maintain their cover. Thus, Schultz places his conviction in empathy over even his own safety.

Schultz, then, is placed in opposition to Candy. Schultz's total admission of racial equality—and the complete dichotomy between Schultz and Candy—is revealed in full in a specific scene. Late in the film, Django and Schultz are discovered to be after Hildi rather than

mandingos by Candy and his head of household Stephen. Candy gives the two an ultimatum: either they buy Hildi for \$12,000, or he'll kill him. Schultz must agree and pays Candy furiously. Just as Django, Schultz, and Hildi start leave Candyland, Candy stops them—he won't make the sale official unless Schultz shakes his hand. Schultz refuses; Candy insists and commands his deputy to kill Hildi if she leaves before Schultz shakes Candy's hand. Schultz glances at Django, then shrugs and approaches Candy's outstretched hand. Of course, if Schultz were to actually shake Candy's hand, he would legitimize the sale and thus in a way the institution of slavery as well as admit Candy the victorious party in the deal. Rather than do that, Schultz shoots Candy. Blood drips through a white carnation on Candy's chest: Schultz has effectively disrupted the gaudy and sanitized world of the antebellum slaveowner through violence. As Candy falls backwards, Schultz turns to Django with a smile and says "I couldn't resist." At once, Schultz is gunned down by Candy's waiting deputy. Schultz fully understands the implications of killing Candy in his own house—to Schultz, the price of his life is worth rejecting Candy and the system of slavery. Schultz becomes, in a way, a martyr, giving his life rather than giving a handshake to an evil man. Moreover, since the original deal has fallen apart, Schultz's death allows Django to rescue Hildi unaided. Thus, Schultz dies so that Django can finish his epic quest on his own. By sacrificing his life, Schultz ensures that he is not a White savior—instead, Schultz ensures that Django can self-determine his own success.

Django is without a doubt the hero and main character of the film. Django bookends the film: he is in one of the very first shots; in the last shot, Django rides with Hildi away from a burning Candyland. Django undergoes much change through the film: Django becomes emancipated from slavery, then an accomplished bounty hunter, and finally a triumphant and unstoppable hero, using his wits and his gun to save his wife and kill the bad guys. Most

importantly, Django becomes increasingly able to effect his own goals—that is, Django gains agency through the film until ultimately he can effectively do whatever he wants, whenever he wants. It is no accident that Candy is interested in mandingo fighting. Besides clearly referencing the blaxploitation film *Mandingo* (1975), mandingo fighting reveals a truly disturbing side of slavery—slave masters were so sadistic that they made Black men fight to the death for sport. Rather than be forced to fight by a White man, Django learns to fight for himself and he uses his unstoppable agency to ultimately overpower the sick perpetrators of mandingo fights. *Django Unchained* is an unconventional iteration of the traditional slave narrative. While most slave narratives feature a move out of slavery and the South and detail the process by which the formerly enslaved learns to read, Django stays in the South and learns how to shoot rather than read (although Django does read aloud a handbill with Schultz’s encouragement, and we can assume that Schultz had been teaching Django how to read). Django moves from a position of submission into a position of power—more importantly, he makes this move on his own.

Tarantino, combining weighty themes while simultaneously grounding his film in typically Hollywood action film tropes, shows large amounts of violence in *Django Unchained*—however, this violence is starkly different from the verisimilar violence of *Lincoln*, *Glory*, or *12 Years a Slave*. *Django* is highly violent and highly stylized: blood spurts in ten-foot-tall geysers, bloodstains are bright crimson red, and bullets whizz through the air with the high-pitch whine of a bomb dropped from an airplane. Tarantino takes glee in his action sequences: shootouts are long and well-covered. Tarantino uses highly-stylized techniques, like slow-motion, fast zooms, and dropped frames, thus emphasizing the pulpy action-movie element of *Django*. The film has a flair for the dramatic. Django does not just kill all of Candy’s men, he also blows up Candyland in a fiery explosion. Tarantino seems to be drawing attention to the

form itself: *Django Unchained* is a product of Hollywood filmmaking, influenced by dozens of pulp action films of the past. While *Lincoln* or *12 Years* demand their viewers watch them with extreme seriousness, *Django* encourages viewers to experience all the pleasures of a pulp action film—but this is a pulp action film framed by conventions of the Spaghetti Western, German epics, and Blaxploitation flicks. *Django*, then, does not miss a moment to find pleasure. It's greatly satisfying to see Django and Schultz blow up a hoard of racist rioters, or to see Django gun down in quick succession the three men transporting him to the mining company after tricking them into giving him a gun, or to see Django kill the Brittle brothers. That last scene is particularly important and should be explored in greater detail. Django and Schultz track the three Brittle brothers to a plantation in Tennessee. While Schultz is away in the big house, Django finds two brothers about to whip an enslaved woman. Django calls out to John Brittle and shoots him where he stands—an incredible moment, and it's the first time the viewer sees Django shoot his gun. Django wears all blue, a suit he picked for himself, and he stands out clearly against the less spectacularly-clad others on the plantation. When Django first spots one Brittle brother, Tarantino cross-cuts to a flashback in which Big John Brittle and Little Raj Brittle whip Hildi. In the flashback, Django drops to his knees and pleads that they stop the whipping, and Big John says, "I like the way you beg, boy." Tarantino thus establishes a clear motive for Django: Django doesn't just kill the Brittles for the money, he also kills them for revenge for the personal harm they have caused him. Perfectly, Django may get revenge on the Brittles and still remain within the law—they are outlaws, after all. Just before Django shoots Big John, the camera tracks towards him standing firmly while a trumpet fanfare plays: a picture-perfect hero shot with Django at the center of the frame. By killing the Brittles, Django is one step closer towards achieving his goal of saving Hildi and, additionally, one step closer towards

becoming a fully self-actualized and emancipated man. Django even whips Little Raj before killing him, and when he shoots Big John, he remarks “I like the way you die, boy.” We literally see slaveowners get a taste of their own medicine. Django’s statement to Big John is a manifesto of sorts—it’s repeated later in the film during a rap song. By repurposing this quote, Django effectively reallocates the violence caused by slavery onto the perpetrators of injustice. Big John is shot, Little Raj is whipped, and Candy is killed.

Django Unchained exalts in moments such as these. The film takes great pleasure in showing a Black ex-slave kill racist slaveowners—and, indeed, it’s both somehow comforting and cathartic to see slaveowners get a taste of their own medicine. *Django Unchained* allows slaves to pursue justice against their inhumane masters. Therefore, *Django* functions not only as a western/epic/blaxploitation hybrid, but also a revenge narrative. Tarantino is no stranger to the genre: his films *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, and *Inglorious Basterds* all can be considered revenge films. Such films are characterized by a basic plot structure: some protagonist is wronged by an evildoer, the evildoer is tracked down, and the protagonist triumphs over the evildoer, usually through violence. Typically, the evil act is committed between two men, and the arena of damage is usually immensely personal—a man must hunt down another man for kidnapping his wife and daughter, for example. When a typical revenge drama reaches its climax, nothing beyond personal satisfaction is granted: the villain is killed and the man reunites with his wife and daughter, for example. *Inglorious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*, however, are both revenge films taken to an extreme. Rather than seek revenge for just a personal wrong, the protagonists of these two films are confronted with two of the greatest evils in human history, the Nazi party and slavery. The individual and the individual’s plight—in *Django Unchained*, this is Django and his quest to rescue his wife from slavery—becomes representative of an entire

race, and the individual is thus tasked with getting revenge on a grand scale. Django burns down a plantation and thus symbolically burns down the antebellum South to enact his revenge; therefore, *Django Unchained* is a counter-narrative on a national scale that allows a Black man the chance to have revenge on the oppressive slave-owning society of the South. The narrative itself becomes the site in which revenge is served: while no ex-slave presumably had the chance to enact revenge in the historical United States, Django is given this opportunity in *Django Unchained*. Tarantino is quite intentional with the title of the film: Django is literally unchained while in a sense he undoes some of the woes of slavery through his revenge plot. Ultimately, *Django Unchained* presents its audience with a vision of unenacted justice, thereby fulfilling some fundamental national wish to see African Americans counteract the evils of slavery. Tarantino therefore violently rejects both traditional representations of the antebellum South established by *Gone with the Wind* as well as the antebellum South itself. Tarantino hybridizes the Spaghetti Western, the German epic, and Blaxploitation cinema to imagine a new form of cinema in which unsatisfied victims of historical evils may finally find an arena to enact justice against their unpunished persecutors, fictional though they may be. *Django Unchained* does not seek hyper-authenticity like the other films considered in this thesis—rather, the film suggests a strategy by which dissatisfactory historical narratives might be readjusted and remixed to empower the downtrodden. *Django Unchained* is a highly entertaining, deeply moving, and, surprisingly cathartic film that seeks to heal some part of the damages of slavery and misrepresentation in Hollywood not just by representing things as they were, but rather by re-imagining things as they ought to be.

Part Seven: The Conclusion

Django Unchained is a remarkably different film than the three others studied in this

thesis. While the former three—*Glory*, *Lincoln*, and *12 Years a Slave*—strive for authenticity and include many markers of historical verisimilitude, *Django Unchained* rejects historicity defined as a pursuit of ‘accuracy’ and instead combines pulp film genres and ancient storytelling traditions to effectively tell an origin story of a Black superhero. Indeed, *Django* is unabashedly spectacular. The film celebrates pop culture and hyper-masculinity as its eponymous ex-slave hero slings guns and dodges bullets—quite unlike any slave or Civil War narrative thus far discussed. Surely *Django* could not be considered problematic, for the film clearly classifies slave-owning Southerners as villains of mythic proportions and gives a slave a gun to right the wrongs of slavery—an easy “fix” for a centuries of wrongdoings between White overlords and oppressed African Americans. Yet Spike Lee, director of *BlacKkKlansman*, was not so enamored with Tarantino’s clear-cut vision of a narrative that can rectify misrepresentation and oppression.

Before *Django Unchained* was released, Spike Lee publicly stated that American slavery should not be treated as content for a “Sergio Leone Western,” but was rather a “Holocaust” and should be treated as such (Child). Lee’s criticism is fair, in certain regards: Tarantino is not African American and cannot claim to have the same investment as Lee in this part of American history. Indeed, Tarantino has been criticized on numerous accounts for his use of racial slurs, and calling *Django Unchained* some form of cultural appropriation is not entirely baseless. Of course, Lee never saw *Django Unchained*, and his opinion might have changed if he had. Nevertheless, as a leading African American filmmaker, Lee certainly has more at stake in a discussion of American slavery than the White Tarantino.

Lee’s most pertinent criticism can be reduced to a question: does Tarantino take so many liberties with the history of the Civil War period in *Django Unchained* that the film is detrimental to our understanding of slavery? Or, is creating a radical counter-narrative to slavery

that depends on revenge motifs drawn from pulp genre films a responsible act of filmmaking? Let's compare *Django Unchained* to *12 Years a Slave*, an emancipation film greatly concerned with historical accuracy directed by Steve McQueen, a Black (albeit British) man. While *Django* devotes much of its running time to showing gunfights, training montages, and explosions like an action flick, *12 Years* is subdued, preferring to show aspects of a much more historical slave experience. Though the hero of a hybrid emancipation narrative, Django is depicted as a slave in only the opening scene—he walks with a chain around his leg in the Texas woods, and then is bought and unshackled by Schultz soon after. *12 Years'* Northrup, on the other hand, is a slave for nearly the entire film. *12 Years* is based on a true story and highly attentive to historical accuracy; Django throws historicity to the wind and appropriates pulp genres onto a heroic origin story. The resulting films, then, are strikingly different. While Django can ride and gun across the Southern and Western United States, free to pursue his own goals, Northrup must labor and live under the yoke of slavery. While Tarantino seemingly shies from the brutal reality of slavery, McQueen embraces it. Yet Tarantino does not entirely omit the harshness of slavery—he depicts mandingo fighting, whippings, and plenty other horrors. Tarantino supplements horrific reality with cathartic unreality—Django whips the master that beats him and shoots the White man who attempts to castrate him, plot points that presumably rarely happened throughout the history of slavery. *12 Years*, on the other hand, remains realistic at a cost: Northrup never really gets revenge on his captors and the narrative seems unsatisfactorily unresolved. Compare *12 Year's* hanging scene to *Django's* mandingo fight. McQueen shows the somber reality of a lynching in a brutally long one-take shot. Northrup's agony is heightened as slaves and plantation workers pass him by as they go about their daily work. Surely a scene such as this happened in the antebellum South, and Northrup's on-screen suffering evokes bitter remorse for the past. The

mandingo fight, on the other hand, is fast and violent: Tarantino cuts quickly between cheering slave-owners and fighting slaves covered in graphic, bright-red blood. The scene undoubtedly evokes immense pathos, but Tarantino's trademark action-oriented style makes the moment seem hyper-real or overexaggerated, especially when compared to the McQueen's somber and chilling lynch scene. Lee's objection to *Django* reconsidered in this context, then, is that in creating his counter-narrative, Tarantino seems to ignore vital details of historical accuracy and instead creates a Spaghetti Western out of a Holocaust narrative. The question then shifts: is it better to be accurate in depicting slavery and thus necessarily end films as unsatisfactorily as the historical narrative actually played out? Or can one adjust the historical narrative to give closure and transform suffering into exaltation without complications? Is there even a place for a film that provides wish fulfilment as historical resolution as *Django* so confidently does?

Each film I have discussed in this thesis represents an alternative to the *Gone with the Wind* depiction of the Civil War and slavery. Each film balances narrative strategies and historical accuracy—and, in doing so, presents alternate ways to discuss a similar story. *Lincoln*, ostensibly obsessed with specific accuracy, creates a political emancipation narrative in which slavery is conceived of as a national shame but all power of emancipation is ascribed to White politicians and, specifically, Lincoln himself. African Americans are thereby relegated to extremely minor and marginalized roles. *Glory* presents a narrative based on historical records in which a White commander trains and thus empowers a Black regiment from former slaves to free soldiers. However, this narrative similarly enforces a White-above-Black hierarchy, and *Glory*'s African American regiment can only become unified and empowered with the help of a heroic White man. *12 Years a Slave* reverses the format: rather than describe a journey from slavery to emancipation, it follows a freed man into slavery, thereby revealing an unfiltered and

unedited perspective into the slave experience. Thus, its narrative insists upon its historical accuracy and is bleak and violently depressing. *Django Unchained* rejects traditional slave and emancipation narratives as it rejects historicity, choosing instead to combine genres and retrofit a revenge plot to allow a slave a chance at exacting justice over slave owners and the antebellum South. Though the narrative strategies clearly vary, each film manages to define what is at stake throughout—that is, the empowerment, emancipation, and agency of Black characters. *Lincoln* and *Glory* flounder in this respect: though both films understand that the Civil War national narrative must be adjusted to include the African American emancipation story, each film cannot escape a preference for White empowerment over Black empowerment, and each film relies heavily on the superior agency of White agents over Black ones. *12 Years*, on the other hand, focuses intensely on Northrup, its central Black hero, who negotiates his way through the slavery system and critically writes for his freedom, just like a traditional slave narrative. *Django* empowers Django, allowing him the ability to emancipate both himself and his wife—undoubtedly, Django is granted near-unlimited agency as he assumes a superhero-like persona. Ultimately, though these films vary greatly in terms of how they approach accuracy and ascribe agency, they all succeed in one regard: they each present counter-narratives to the pervading national narrative of the antebellum South and the Civil War described by *Gone with the Wind* by reframing the relationship between slavery and the Civil War and by representing African American figures in conjunction with the Civil War narrative.

In the end, these four films vary most importantly in how they ascribe agency to African Americans at the cost of historical accuracy. Some films choose to be more historical and therefore reinforce archaic power relationships between White and Black characters; other films choose to eschew accuracy in order to empower Black characters at any cost. If historical

accuracy is the only goal a film about the Civil War must achieve, look no further than *Lincoln*, for it certainly succeeds in that regard. However, if historical accuracy as an end in itself may be downplayed—and, indeed, it ought to be, for Schama notes that we cannot circumscribe the prejudice of the author that taints every historical narrative—then it is better for a film to grant agency to the oppressed and give an arena to right the wrongs of history. *Django*, then, succeeds: it breaks away from historicity to tell a slave narrative that *should* have happened. This is far more vital today than a historically-obsessed set piece, for—as we have learned in *BlacKkKlansman*—narratives impact the world.

Of course, each film ultimately serves one simple goal: the presentation of a counter-narrative to offset countless misrepresentations of African Americans in media as well as the history of the Civil War. Each film succeeds, then—through each film, the relationship between slave narratives and the Civil War is framed in new and unconventional ways, and Black characters are granted some amount of visibility and agency formerly denied to them.

The most famous shot from *Gone with the Wind* is graphically quoted throughout American cinematic history and well-recognized in American pop culture. A tattered flag waves heroically over a rail-yard filled with Confederate soldiers wounded or killed in pursuit of the so-called noble cause—the secession of the South from the United States and, therefore, the continuation of American slavery. *Gone with the Wind* does not comment on how ramifications of slavery persist in today's society, so Black figures hardly seem to matter in the pursuit of restoring the South to its antebellum magnificence. Indeed, this single shot epitomizes an attitude still present in America today: Black figures are invisible, worthless, and expendable, and the antebellum South is an ideal society that ought to be fought for. Such an attitude was inspired by films such as *Gone with the Wind* or *Birth of a Nation*, and such an attitude was promoted with

little resistance throughout American media over the last one hundred years. The four films I have written about in this thesis directly respond to this shot and this attitude. Rather than reinforce the damaging ideology behind films such as *Gone with the Wind*, these four films reject the traditions therein established and instead offer four counter-narratives meant to heal some part of the damage caused by *Gone with the Wind* by reframing the relationship between African Americans and the Civil War—a relationship that now reveals the antebellum South to be a malicious inhumane society and African Americans to be empowered and emancipated individuals. Perhaps the most potent effect of these four films is that anyone who has viewed them cannot look at the tattered flag shot from *Gone with the Wind* in quite the same way ever again. These films successfully challenge the damaging effects of *Gone with the Wind*'s vision of the Civil War by offering their own cinematic history lessons. That, alone, is enough.

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