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Glory: The Importance of Story Truth in Commemoration of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment

The 1989 Civil War film titled *Glory* directed by Edward Zwick has been described succinctly by many viewers including bloggers and professional movie critics. Casual film blogger Michael Henley gave the film an “A-“, praising its “development of its distinct black characters” while admitting that “There is little in historical accounts that suggests the 54th was made up of such a broad variety of men.”¹ Critic Roger Ebert called it a “strong and valuable film”, balancing his critique of the film’s biased white perspective with praise for how the film presents the “changed white perceptions of black soldiers.”² *Glory* recounts the story of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first African American military unit in US history, from the perspective of its white commander Colonel Robert G. Shaw. This film takes place during the midst of the US Civil War beginning with the formation of the 54th and concluding with the regiment’s costliest battle at Fort Wagner, South Carolina. But just how did the film balance the production of drama for audiences with its reliance upon source texts and historical documents? This film was produced from several source texts, the most important of which was a series of letters written by Colonel Shaw himself. Many of these letters are compiled into the volume titled *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw* edited by Russell Duncan. The deviations of the film *Glory* from *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert G. Shaw* along with historical research from Civil War historians

¹ <https://ttcritic.wordpress.com/2011/08/27/glory-1989/>

² <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/glory-1989>

create story truth, a term coined by writer Tim O'Brien who defined story truth as "the lie that helps us understand the truth."³ (O'Brien) The creation of story truth in the film arguably leads to two consequences in the public memory of the Civil War: the de-emphasis of racial tensions between soldiers of the 54th and its commander Shaw, and more importantly the portrayal of the 54th as an emblematic force of African Americans who served in the Civil War. Historical inaccuracies of the film create a compelling drama to satiate the hunger of viewers while illuminating the importance of black soldiers in the Civil War.

From the time of its release through the present day, the consensus among critics and casual reviewers has indicated that the film is racially controversial due to its white perspective, but also that this perceived controversy does not detract from the overall illumination of Colonel Shaw and his black regiment. For instance, reviewer M. Aldrich wrote in his 1989 magazine article titled "*Guts and Glory: A Forgotten Civil War Story Comes to Film*" that "Everyone-Black and white- involved in the film wanted to avoid the *Mississippi Burning* syndrome: taking a Black story and making white people the heroes." (Aldrich) Clearly the film, solely on the basis of its historical focus on black soldiers, needed to pinpoint the fine line between white narration and black illumination. When *Glory* was first released in late 1989, the film was subjected to criticism of its perspective, including a review by renowned film critic Roger Ebert who reviewed this film a shortly after its North American release. In his official review of the film, Ebert commented "I didn't understand why it had to be told so often from the point of view of the 54th's white commanding officer. Why did we see the black troops through his eyes- instead of seeing him through theirs? [...] I ask, not to be perverse but because I consider this primarily a story about black experience." (Ebert) Ebert uses his criticism of the film's white perspective as a vehicle to express his opinion that this film is overall "about black experience."

³ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2330.Tim_O_Brien

It appears that from Ebert's perspective, the portrayal of the 54th in the film is indeed intended to serve as an emblem for the more generalized African American experience during the war. Yet Ebert's review also points out a characteristic of the film that seems to contradict Director Edward Zwick's intention to "explore a time in which blacks and whites found some commonality of purpose."⁴ This criticism was addressed by the self-proclaimed "Time-Traveling Film Critic" Michael Henley, who noted in his 2011 blog-style review that "[Shaw's] letters provide the screenplay and help provide the emotional spine of the story, as they must, for Shaw's are the only emotions on record (the men under [Shaw's] command left few if any accounts, as most of them could not read or write to begin with.)" (Henley) Henley addresses this criticism of the film's perspective by noting that the very nature of the film as a historical drama based upon source material lends to its favored perspective of the white commander, since the white perspective is the only recorded perspective. Ultimately, Henley's stance on the racial position of the film is quite pragmatic. Based on his comments, the film's predominantly white perspective was purely a matter of practicality from the production standpoint. This provides evidence that to a viewer like Henley, any perceived racial tensions between Colonel Shaw and his men in the film were neutralized by production reasons. Reviewer M. Aldrich confirmed this in an informal interview with Zwick writing "[Zwick] agrees and notes that the presence of Broderick as Shaw is historically accurate, 'not a Hollywood trumping-up of a role in order to have a part for a white actor.'" (Aldrich) Thus the film's white perspective is a consequence of what was historically documented rather than intentional racial bias. Blogger Henley later admits in his review that the interplay between Colonel Shaw's perspective and the development of the black characters "gives the story more interest, making the film a clash of personal ideals against a backdrop of fighting the Confederacy", and even Ebert admits that *Glory* "is a strong and

⁴ <http://tech.mit.edu/V109/N60/zwick.60a.html>

valuable film no matter whose eyes it is seen through.” Evidently the controversy over *Glory*’s perspective confounded some reviewers but the conclusion is simple: *Glory* serves to illuminate the black experience in the Civil War through the mediating voice of its white commander.

Before beginning deep reading of film scenes, the source material itself provides the foundation for comparison, and the primary source text is *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw* edited by Russell Duncan. This compilation consists of volumes of letters written by Colonel Shaw himself, and the volumes were collected from various scholarly sources including the Houghton Library of Harvard University as well as numerous historical societies and public libraries in New England. The letters are organized chronologically, spanning from April of 1861 through July of 1863. By comparison, the film begins chronologically with the battle of Antietam in September of 1862 and runs through July of 1863. These letters were written to various associates of Shaw, including his immediate family and friends. It is important to note, however, that this volume does not contain *every* letter that Shaw wrote in between April 1861 and July of 1863, therefore the extracted content cannot be considered comprehensive. Nonetheless, the extensive collection of letters that *were* compiled provides a vivid account of the historical figure of Robert Gould Shaw. This work served as one of the primary source texts for the production and screenplay of the film *Glory*.

The first film scene in focus takes place in Readeville camp as a mounted Colonel Shaw first meets his marching African American recruits (00:17:30-00:17:55). The film techniques of diegetic sound and a crane shot are present to develop Shaw’s character as sympathetic towards the African Americans in sharp comparison to his racist white officers. The first film technique, diegetic sound, is defined as “any voice, musical passage, or sound effect presented as

originating from the world of the film”⁵. In this scene, Colonel Shaw is silent as he rides on horseback alongside the marching African American recruits, the camera following his face in a



Figure 1: Colonel Shaw played by Matthew Broderick at top left, other white officers at right and soldiers of the 54th in the foreground.

crane shot parallel to his movement (Figure 1). The relative silence is broken by other white officers in the background, who cut in with lines reading “I’d rather have a hog than a nigger” and “Come on, show us a little dance, will you boys?” (00:17:35-00:17:48). The sharp contrast between the use of pejorative terms by Shaw’s colleagues and the relative silence exhibited by

Shaw himself appear to present Shaw as a character who is more sympathetic with the African Americans. Even though this film takes place in a time where social conventions liberally applied racial slurs toward African Americans, Shaw shows restraint amidst a scene of contempt. Juxtaposed upon these racial slurs in the background is the presence of a musical military march featuring wind instruments and a constant percussion line. This musical piece on its own is reminiscent of patriotic compositions, but in the presence of Shaw and his colleagues, the piece introduces irony to the scene. On the one hand, the piece appears to be harmonious with Shaw’s restraint and moderated treatment of the black recruits. Yet the use of racial slurs in the background lay in direct opposition to the patriotism instilled by the marching piece. Hence the musical march serves to illuminate the difference between Shaw and his colleagues, where Shaw appears to be a saint by comparison.

Shaw’s moderated and restrained portrayal in this scene stands in stark contrast with his language in the letters he wrote to family and friends, which paint him as a “man of his time”. In

⁵ <http://ww2.odu.edu/~kwinters/Courses/Film%20Appreciation/film-terms.html>

words short, the actual Robert G. Shaw did not refrain from using racial slurs such as “nigger” in his everyday language. American Civil War historian Joseph Glatthaar commented in his analysis of the film that “The movie viewer also gets no sense that Shaw carried racial baggage. In the letters to Charley Morse we see Shaw as a *white man of his times*. There he refers to the debate over the use of black troops as “the nigger question” and plays up racial stereotypes. [...] This is a very different Shaw than we see in his letters to his parents and in the film.” (Glatthaar 477) Glatthaar not only points out that the character of Shaw differs in language from the historical figure Shaw, but he also implies that this inaccuracy has an effect on the viewer. This effect, or story truth, may be the viewer sympathizing with rather than antagonizing the character of Shaw. Glatthaar’s commentary is reinforced by excerpts from some of the letters Shaw wrote to his family, documented in *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert G. Shaw* edited by Duncan. In one letter dated February 25, 1863, Shaw discusses his new recruits in the 54th to his father, writing “They are not the best class of nigs- and if it weren’t for the want of state aid we should be able to get a much better set from the other states” (Duncan 300). In another letter dated March 6, 1863, Shaw wrote to his close friend Charley Morse that “It has been a subject of wonder to me that the nigger concern meets with so little opposition here” (304), where the “concern” Shaw references is the conscription of black soldiers. Evidenced by the language in these letters, it appears that (at least in the beginning of his tenure with the 54th) Shaw thought of his black recruits as inferior and expendable. Additionally, Shaw expresses his thoughts in a matter-of-fact manner, evidenced by his comfort level with using the racial slur. Glatthaar’s analysis and the letters written by Shaw provide evidence that Shaw was initially a man of his times while serving as an officer of the 54th. He appeared to be an individual who did not hesitate to treat blacks as inferiors.

The effect of the film's censorship of Shaw's more profane thoughts is that viewers are more emotionally attached to the character of Robert Shaw. This in turn allows the audience to be drawn into the drama and relationship between Shaw and his men in the 54th. It turns out that there are numerous cases where the actions of Shaw in the film are tailored from the "happening truth", defined as "the actual events that happened"⁶, in order to win over the hearts of viewers. Some of these instances also catered to viewing the 54th as an embodiment of all black soldiers that served in the Civil War.

One of these film scenes involves a key turning point in the relations between Shaw and the men of the 54th. In this scene, one of the more rebellious soldiers in the 54th nicknamed "Trip" incites a rebellion upon discovering that black soldiers are to receive \$10 a month



Figure 2: The character "Trip" played by Denzel Washington at left, encouraging black soldiers around him to protest pay rates.

compared to the white wage of \$13 per month.

Trip tears his pay stub in protest, and Shaw follows suit (00:53:30-00:56:00). This scene utilizes tracking shots and reverse shots to depict the 54th as emblematic of African American soldiers, and to dramatize the relationship between Shaw and his men. It begins with Trip, who incites a rebellion due to pay disparities among races. A

tracking shot, defined as "a mobile framing that travels through space forward, backward, or laterally"⁷, follows the face of Trip as he walks up and down the aisles of black soldiers, slowly encouraging others to stand up against their "slave" wage (Figure 2). The tracking shot is utilized such that the soldiers who turn over to Trip's side appear then disappear one by one within the

⁶ <http://www.studymode.com/essays/Story-Truth-And-Happening-Truth-In-720500.html>

⁷ <http://ww2.odu.edu/~kwinters/Courses/Film%20Appreciation/film-terms.html#tras>

frame of view, creating a “domino effect” of protest to viewers. This serves to portray the 54th (even the sole character of Trip) as the root of African American spirit in the Civil War, considering that Trip appealed to black soldiers of all types during his rant. The tracking shot passes by ex-slaves and even a gentlemanly African American recruit by the name of Thomas, and the sheer diversity of these men appear to represent the African American recruits as a whole. The 54th in history was in fact a unit composed of black soldiers from around the nation. Jeffrey D. Wert, a journalist of *The Civil War Times*, wrote in his article titled *Rewriting History With the 54th* that “Unlike most Civil War units, the 54th Massachusetts Regiment recruited nationally and had its share of members who [...] were from other states.” (Wert) The juxtaposition of the sheer diversity of black soldiers presented in this scene of the film with the fact that the 54th recruited nationally suggests that this scene intended to present the 54th as an emblem of African American soldiers in the Civil War.

Meanwhile the reverse shot, defined as “two or more shots edited together that alternate characters, typically in a conversation situation”⁸, is used to depict Shaw as a charismatic officer who ultimately empathizes with the protesting soldiers. The reverse shot alternates between the concerned, then resolute face of Shaw and the enraged face of the character Trip repeatedly shouting “Tear it up!”⁹, referring to his own pay stub (00:55:20-00:55:38). The reverse shot emphasizes the personal connection and silent conversation between Shaw’s character and that of Trip. Each time the camera reverts back to Shaw’s face, his facial expression becomes more resolute, as Shaw appears to have decided that he will support the troops in protest of their pay. Through Shaw’s resolution the viewer may be inclined to further sympathize with his character,

⁸<http://ww2.odu.edu/~kwinters/Courses/Film%20Appreciation/film-terms.html#tras>

⁹http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/g/glory-script-transcript-denzel-washington.html

once again breaking down racial barriers between Shaw and his men which may have been present in historical documents (as established in his letters) but absent from the film.

The film portrayal of this insurrection scene is historically inaccurate because it is actually Shaw and not one of the soldiers of the 54th (the character “Trip” in the film) who instigates the rebellion against pay disparities. The two consequential public memories imprinted into viewers’ minds is that the black soldiers of the 54th have once again come to represent an emblem of African Americans, and also that Shaw’s character is more easily sympathized with. Within this scene, Shaw is depicted as the officer to stand in a united front *after* the character Trip instigates the rebellion. This is shown by the cause-effect relation of the line that Trip reads, “I mean, a colored soldier stop a bullet just as good as a white one!” (00:54:55-00:54:58) followed shortly by Shaw’s line reading “If you men will take no pay, then none of us will.”¹⁰ (00:55:50-00:55:57) Shaw proceeds to tear apart his pay stub, and the onlooking soldiers cheer on Shaw’s actions (00:55:58-00:56:10). Compare Shaw’s relatively passive stance in the film to an excerpt of a letter (in the volumes edited by Duncan) written on July 1, 1863, reading

You may have perhaps heard that the coloured troops are to receive \$10 instead [of] \$13 per [month]. It is not yet decided that this [regiment] comes under the order. If it does I shall refuse to allow them to be paid until I hear from Gov. Andrew. This [regiment] ought, in that case, to be mustered out of service, as they were enlisted on the understanding that they were to be on the same footing as other [Massachusetts Volunteers]. (366)

Shaw, in the context of “happening truth”, clearly took the initiative over pay protests. Not any of the soldiers. Shaw’s tone of absolute refusal unless his demands are met conveys this sense of initiative. Historian Joseph Glatthaar also directly noted in his same article that “[The film

¹⁰ http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/g/glory-script-transcript-denzel-washington.html

directors] depict Trip as the leader in the rejection of unequal pay, when Shaw was actually the one who declared unacceptable \$7 per month, plus \$3 for a clothing allowance, while white privates earned \$13 per month and \$3 for clothing.” (479) Ultimately, the portrayal of a black soldier as opposed to Shaw leading the insurrection illuminates the importance of the black soldier in the Civil War for public audiences. More specifically, this scene illuminates the importance of the 54th in *representing* the importance of black soldiers. After all, the 54th was not the only regiment that experienced protests against wage disparities. Civil War historian Christian G. Samito wrote in his book titled *The Intersection between Military Justice and Equal Rights: Mutinies, Courts-Martial, and Black Civil War Soldiers* that “The pay disparity undermined discipline but also energized black soldiers’ demands for equal treatment. In February 1864, Col. Alfred Hartwell received an anonymous letter declaring that his 55th Massachusetts would stack arms if they did not soon receive pay.” (Samito 171) The events of the film take place in 1862, nearly two years prior to the insurrection of the 55th, thus the directors only appear to further emphasize the pioneering nature of the 54th. Meanwhile presenting Shaw as the follower rather than the leader in this protest allows viewers to sympathize with his character, which in turn funnels viewers into the emotional drama connecting Shaw to his men later in the film. This film scene establishes the 54th as a model regiment for future black regiments in the Civil War as well as the saintly character of Shaw, creating drama and story truth for audiences to feast on at the expense of historical accuracy.

The final scene of analysis focuses on the character of Trip, who recites a fragmented and emotional prayer in front of his fellow soldiers on the eve of the Second Battle of Fort Wagner where many soldiers would soon perish (01:34:00-01:35:35). This scene utilizes the film techniques of shallow focus, diegetic sound, and dialogue to create drama and pathos

surrounding Trip's character, illuminating his character as an embodiment of African American soldiers' experiences. The film technique of shallow focus is defined as "A restricted depth of field, which keeps only those planes close to the camera in sharp focus"¹¹. In this scene, the plane in focus is Trip's face, and only Trip's face. Shallow focus forces the audience to pay



Figure 3: The character Trip (top) in shallow focus while making an emotional speech in front of his fellow soldiers (bottom).

attention only to the actions of Trip, or in this case Trip's speech (Figure 3). Meanwhile, diegetic sound contributes to the mood surrounding Trip's speech. During this excerpt of the film, the only sounds produced from the world of the film itself are the intermittent chirps of crickets in the surrounding forest. The remainder of background noise has been silenced or omitted, such that Trip's voice pierces the silence. Shallow focus and diegetic sound provide the foundation for Trip's emotional speech, evidenced in his dialogue during this excerpt. The

script for Trip in this section includes lines reading "I ain't never had no family and... killed off my mama" (01:34:05-01:34:15) followed by "[The 54th's] the onliest family I got" (01:34:46) and "Ain't much matter what happens tomorrow, 'cause we men, ain't we?"¹² (01:35:10-01:35:15). Trip recites these lines while holding back tears and evidently taken aback by his camaraderie with the 54th Regiment. Trip's dialogue is reinforced by his emotional state, appealing to the audience in the form of pathos, defined as the act of "persuading by appealing to

¹¹ <http://ww2.odu.edu/~kwinters/Courses/Film%20Appreciation/film-terms.html#tras>

¹² http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/g/glory-script-transcript-denzel-washington.html

the [viewer's] emotions.”¹³ The use of pathos conveys Trip's struggles to the audience as he confronts his past as an ex-slave while absorbing his present as Union soldier. This is evidenced by Trip's lines referencing his mother and the absence of the family unit. Trip's situation serves as an emblem of the experience of many African American soldiers, including most of the soldiers who are sitting beside him as he makes the speech. Glatthaar noted in his article that “Of the 178,000 black males who actually served in the Union Army, 144,000 came from slave states” (479). Evidently, the experiences of Trip are relatable and emblematic among many of the African Americans who served for the north during the Civil War.

The “story truth” of this speech is that there is no recorded evidence that any of the named black soldiers in the film actually existed. In other words, the character of Trip is likely a fictionalized character. In this respect, the creation of story truth solidifies the evidence that the significant black characters in the film (Trip, Thomas the gentleman, etc) are not meant to represent themselves as individuals, but rather a more abstract embodiment of African American character and spirit during the Civil War. For audiences, the effect of Trip's presentation in the film is emotional attachment to Trip, which factors well into the final scenes of the film where Trip valiantly dies while bearing the regimental colors during the attack on Fort Wagner. Glatthaar bluntly states in his article that “Unlike Shaw, the four black soldiers are not based on any individuals in the 54th Massachusetts” (478), referring to the characters of Trip, Thomas, and two others. Additionally, within the letters of Shaw that were available in the volumes edited by Duncan, there is no mention of specific soldiers or their names. The specific letter linked to this scene is dated July 3, 1863, and an excerpt reads

After tea we went to what the negroes call a praise-meeting, which was very interesting.

The praying was done by an old blind fellow, who made believe, all the time, that he was

¹³ <http://courses.durhamtech.edu/perkins/aris.html>

reading out of a book. He was also the leader in the singing, and seemed to throw his whole soul into it. [...] Their singing, when there are a great many voices, is fine, but otherwise I don't like it at all. (372)

Trip's prayer takes place just after a series of musical chants lead by some of the other black lead soldiers in the film, and Shaw refers to these chants in this excerpt. As seen in his language, Shaw never refers to any individual in the chant or prayer, but generalizes with terms such as "fellow" and third person pronouns. No names, no sense of the individual like in the film. Hence the purpose of having a fictionalized character recite such an emotional prayer for audiences is to create pathos, and from pathos, drama. Drama created by Trip in the pay protest scene is also re-illuminated. The emblem of Trip in the insurrection scene only further supports the argument that the actions of members of the 54th in the film serve to represent the wider efforts of African Americans. The film director's decision to fictionalize Trip creates story truth, illuminating the individual character as an emblem of the general experiences of African Americans in the Civil War. Of course, the drama created in this scene also leads to a more lucrative film for producers to sell.

Glory's release in 1989 was a pivotal film release in American history. Now regarded as the first major film dedicated to the story of African American soldiers, the film was bound both to its duties of entertaining viewers while adhering to its source texts and historical documents. While critics debated over the feasibility of a white voice mediating the African American story, there was no doubt that the story of the African American soldier was illuminated. As seen in several of the analyzed film scenes, there were several important instances where the film deviated from source material and "happening truth" in order to create "story truth", which in turn creates drama for eyes to feast on. The story truth produced by this film serves two purposes

for audiences. First, viewers may be led to believe that racial tensions between the commanding officer Robert Shaw and his men were virtually non-existent, contrary to evidence provided in Shaw's letters. Viewers are led to sympathize with the character of Shaw at all costs, in order to create drama and emotional bonds between Shaw and his men. More importantly however, the audience may be inclined to recall the true importance of black soldiers in the American Civil War. Through analysis of various scenes of the film and comparison to relevant source material and secondary research, the 54th Regiment and individual characters of the 54th depicted in the film such as Trip serve as an emblem of the wider experiences of African American soldiers in the Civil War. Fleshing out characters like Trip also creates drama to draw in viewers, helping to sell the film to public eyes while compromising historical accuracy. Beyond the inaccuracies and the drama, however, lies a simple and key message of the film: never forget the valiant African American soldiers who fought in the name of freedom and social justice.

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