

Time to do a close reading of a Civil War film. Painstakingly select a small group (3-6 people).

## *Glory* (1989) – Should it be shown in class?

### Introduction:

I see it as my job as a teacher guiding a class through the study of the Civil War (and Reconstruction) to place you in the position of an historian, democratic citizen, and media critic, forcing you to keep a focus on how race, racism, and freedom are represented. In this assignment, we consider what we can and do learn about African Americans in U.S. history from viewing *Glory*, with a particular focus on the themes of race, racism, and freedom. Studies have shown that this film is the most widely used in the high school history classroom (especially in “white” suburban classrooms – by a 3 to 1 margin – see the data on the class website), and we are going to discuss the wisdom of that pedagogical choice made by so many teachers. Traditionally, representations of African Americans (among others) in U.S. history curriculum and textbooks are marginalized or underrepresented. The average high school history textbook is dominated by what many historians have sardonically called “dead white men.” Indeed, the study that is linked on the class website shows that of the teachers who use the film, 75% show most or all of the film, and 77% use it to simply convey subject matter. Thus, the viewing of *Glory* may constitute a major portion of what students, and especially the “white” suburban students, are learning about the role of African Americans in U.S. history. Clearly, there is a heavy burden placed on this film in particular and how they represent the role of marginalized groups in history and the theme of freedom. Consequently, there is a heavy burden on how teachers incorporate these films into their classroom. In other words, the stakes are higher! Issues of race are traditionally invisible or marginalized in most history and social studies curricula and textbooks. Therefore, representations generally follow a more nationalistic story (i.e. the “dead white men” history mentioned above) that includes marginalized groups as add-ons or underlings rather than as part of the central narrative. Shohat and Stam argue that a “burden of representation” exists, that is very demanding whenever a marginalized or underrepresented group is portrayed in film, and it has lasting impact on how we, the audience, view the world and the groups that are represented, even if we know that the film’s portrayal isn’t accurate (No...Abe did not hunt Vampires!). Historical accuracy aside, an audience’s impression of a group is still shaped by how characters from the group are portrayed. Depending on the population of students and context of the viewing, these films – such as *Glory* – could establish or reinforce racist notions of race, freedom, and citizenship. In the case of representing history in film, this burden requires that members of these underrepresented groups be portrayed in a way that allows the viewer to understand their points of view, history, and culture. As such, our essential question is: Does *Glory* meet this “burden of historical representation?”

- Adapted from “The Burden of Historical Representation: Race, Freedom, and ‘Educational’ Hollywood Film” by Jeremy D. Stoddard and Alan S. Marcus



### →PART I: Critical thinking

#### Lucid Instructions:

- ◆ *Big Picture:* For this project, you’ll read a film with your Reader Response group, discuss it on wiki, and present your findings to the class.
- ◆ Do a little background reading -- the necessary documents are located on the class website, and are a mix of movie reviews and scholarly essays. You need to read them before publishing anything in your name!
- ◆ As a group, read (i.e., view and do a close reading of) the film *Glory*
  - Hint, hint: view once for pleasure and to gain an understanding of the film, then view a second time so you can do a close reading
  - Be sure to decide who will be responsible for securing the film, when you will view it, and that you get it with plenty of time to spare. There is a chance that there will be a large group viewing outside of class. If that is the case, I will tell you.....right now!
- ◆ As you read/view the film, take notes on the following on **separate** paper. Provide **textual evidence** to support your responses. Some questions will be more demanding than others; there will be some overlap -- take notes accordingly (preferred method of completion is the Titan Pad). This is to be completed individually, but of course, you should discuss with group members during, and after, viewing the film. Brainstorm together...think out loud. Bounce ideas off of each other. But the final product is your own. Don’t forget...these are notes, not a “final draft” essay. (45 points)

1. How is the socioeconomic status of the characters made visible? Are all of the characters of the same class?
2. How do relationships work? Are there signs of paternalism? If so, is it challenged?
3. What does the film say about social, racial and class hierarchies? government? authority?
4. As an historian: does the film accurately reflect the era or the views or habits of certain groups in the era? evidence?
5. What stereotypes are reinforced or broken? (LOOK CLOSELY.....BE CAREFUL)
6. As a viewer: what did you like and dislike? does the film hold up, or is it dated? would you recommend it to a friend?
7. In what ways does the film seem to reflect its historical moment?
8. How is force used? Is it physical, verbal, based in one's social/class/racial standing?
9. How does authority exert itself in the film? Who has authority? In what situations? What subverts or challenges authority?
10. **What's the preferred reading of the film? What is the film's dominant message? How does the film use space, light, music, and filming and editing techniques to enhance its message? Is there an alternate reading? In other words, are there ways to negotiate a new meaning, or even to read this text oppositionally? What could that look like?**
11. **Does your reading of the film or your reading of any of the characters disagree with any of the critics?**
12. **What are the main perspectives and themes of the film, beyond the general topic? (This is a toughie!!)**
13. **It is assumed that Hollywood will alter aspects of the history for dramatic purposes, it is more important to assess *the effects these changes*—do they add or detract from the larger historical, social, and, in the case of this film, racial issues represented in the history?**
14. **Does this movie tell us anything about the way people thought about things like race and the Civil War in 1989 – the year the film was produced?**
15. **How well does the film fulfill the “burdens of historical representation?”**
  - a. **NOTE: *These notes should be your initial thoughts – you are by no means married to them. Think of this as “thinking out loud...um, on paper. Your thoughts will become more elaborate and wonderfully complicated as you progress with this assignment.***

## →PART II: Consolidate your understandings:

- ◆ After the film:
  - Continue your group discussion and brainstorm.
  - Continue to research the era to determine the film's usefulness as an historical document, remembering to focus on the essential question: Does the film pass the test for “burden of historical representation?” Should we use it in class? That's NOT an easy question.....scrutinize heavily.
  - Each member will then write an analysis and critique to be posted to the wiki. Superb use of textual evidence is critical. This will entail going back to the texts. (Ugh.)
    - PART A of your conversation starter should focus on questions *such as* those you took notes on, and the essential question. Be sure to look at the rubric.
    - PART B of your conversation starter: Two open-ended questions for further discussion. You are then to engage in conversation with at least 3 of your classmates. At least 2 should be outside your reader response group. A conversation is more than a simple response – be thoughtful...what you are expressing is real and valuable, and academic....if you want it to be (and want a good grade). Who woulda thunk it? (55 points)

## →PART III: Present you consolidated understandings:

- As a group: present your findings to the class in a 12-16 minute presentation. Include a representative clip(s) (~5-7 minutes in total) from the film. This can be done entirely verbally with the accompanying clips (know the times of the clips – I will provide the film), or you can embed them into a PowerPoint and/or arrive with your own clips if you are savvy with Microsoft Movie Maker or iMovie. If you need a digital copy of the film to excerpt, please see me.
  - If the group does not arrive at a consensus interpretation....GREAT....Present both interpretations and defend them!!! To be presented two interpretations of the same scene or scenes would be interesting. (100 points)