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History and happy endings: Hollywood's treatment of the American Civil War and Reconstruction

Adam Fairclough

In 1965 a young boy sat in a darkened cinema – wreathed in curls of cigarette smoke – and watched, entranced, as a thin line of grey-clad soldiers braced itself for an assault by a longer line of soldiers dressed in blue. The men in the Confederate line were unkempt, unshaven, dirty and hungry. Those in the Union line wore clean, new uniforms and looked well-fed and confident. Vastly outnumbered, the ragged Confederates knew they were facing almost certain defeat, and, indeed, the Union attack quickly shattered their line, driving them from the battlefield in pell-mell flight. When one fleeing rebel stumbled and fell, he looked up to see a soldier in blue standing over him, about to finish him off with a bayonet stab. The two soldiers, one white, the other black, looked like boys rather than men. The white boy had been forced into the Confederate army against his will. The black boy had volunteered for the Union army in order to escape slavery. Before he could deliver the coup de grace, however, the black soldier recognized the fallen Confederate. The two teenagers had been childhood friends. Putting down his rifle when their eyes meet, the boy soldier in blue embraced the boy soldier in grey.

Although the young boy in that cinema did not know it, the film he was watching, *Shenandoah* (Andrew McLaglen, 1965), represented a turning-point in how Hollywood depicted the American Civil War. In his Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), director D. W. Griffith – the son of a Confederate soldier – had depicted blacks as savage brutes who lusted after white women and he insisted on using white actors in blackface in the sexually-charged scenes of rape and abduction. *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) did away with whites in blackface, and cast black actress Hattie McDaniel in a Oscar-winning role, but it still portrayed blacks as either comic figures (the loyal house servants) or, in the case of those who quit the plantation after the war, as naïve and easily manipulated. Without the kind, guiding hand of their former masters, blacks were a threat. With the possible exception of singer Paul Robeson – whose acting career ended when he refused to recant his sympathy for the Soviet Union – black actors, when given roles at all, seldom played dignified or intelligent characters. A classic study of blacks in Hollywood summed up these stereotyped and

demeaning roles in the words of its title: *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*¹.



Scarlett O'Hara enlists the aid of Hattie McDaniel as she prepares to meet Rhett Butler.
DAVID O. SELZNICK'S production of MARGARET MITCHELL'S **"GONE WITH THE WIND"** In TECHNICOLOR Re-Released by METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER

Ill. 1: Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) and Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) in *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939).

With America's Civil Rights Movement then at its zenith – Martin Luther King had just won the Nobel Prize for Peace – the black soldier in *Shenandoah* symbolized Hollywood's attempt to move with the times. The film showed a young black man who was neither comic nor irresponsible. Dangerous he certainly was, but as a disciplined Union soldier, not a rapist on the loose. Young, but not naïve, he had made a considered decision to join the Union army in order to free his family. By including the character of the young black soldier, albeit a minor role, *Shenandoah* was the first film to portray blacks as active participants in a war to end slavery. It marked the appearance of what historian Gary W. Gallagher calls the 'emancipationist'

¹ D. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: an interpretive history of Blacks in American films* (New York 1973).

theme in Civil War films.² Over the following decades, this theme became increasingly prominent as the Civil Rights Movement worked its long-term effects on American society. Eventually entire films revolved around the theme of blacks fighting for their own emancipation. In *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989), the black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry took center stage. Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) depicted a mutiny by black Africans on board an America-bound slave ship and the mutineers' subsequent fight for freedom in an American court.

For the youngster sitting in the cinema, however, what mattered most in *Shenandoah* were the thrilling battle scenes. Yes, the Civil War may have been the first modern war – with trenches, trains, telegraphs, and conscription – as well as the first war to be thoroughly photographed on both sides. But the American Civil War was also the last Napoleonic War. Soldiers faced each other in the open, flags flying and bands playing. Cavalrymen charged with sabres drawn, and generals led their troops on horseback. The American Civil War was, too, the last war to be fought with a degree of chivalry. Despite the horror stories told by white southerners about the cruelties inflicted by Union forces – especially during the march of General William T. Sherman's army through Georgia in 1864 – the military of both sides observed the distinction between soldiers and civilians. Civilian property might be destroyed, but civilian lives were spared.

For many Civil War 'buffs' – amateur historians who make the war their hobby – there was the added romance of the 'Lost Cause'. Although humiliated by defeat, white southerners had stubbornly refused to admit guilt or regret: rather than acknowledge the Confederacy as a disastrous error, they celebrated it. Trumpeting the battlefield deeds of the Confederate armies, they elevated Robert E. Lee, their most successful general, to a god-like status. Insisting that they had fought heroically for an honourable cause – states' rights, not slavery – former Confederates explained that they had been overwhelmed by the superior numbers of the North. This idealization of the Confederate soldier – and of Civil War combat in general – wrapped the Civil War in a romantic haze.³ By focusing on the outnumbered Confederates who fought with such panache, it was easy to forget the war's political context – slavery – and to view the conflict

² G. W. Gallagher, *Causes won, lost, and forgotten: how Hollywood and popular art shape what we know about the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC 2008) 51-54.

³ G. W. Gallagher and A. T. Nolan ed., *The myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War history* (Bloomington, IN 2000).

as a David-and-Goliath struggle in which sheer brute force triumphed over courage and skill. 'They never whipped us', the saying went. 'We wore ourselves out whipping them.'⁴

For most Civil War devotees the Confederate side has always seemed more attractive. The weekend re-enactors who fight mock Civil War battles are far more likely to dress up in Confederate grey than in Union blue.⁵ The young cinemagoer was no different. He not only named his dog after Confederate general Stonewall Jackson, but also won a school prize for an excruciatingly bad poem entitled 'Stonewall Jackson's last battle' (it was doubtless the only entry that year).

Influence of historical film

The power of films to excite the imagination and emotions of the viewer is undisputed. Less certain, because impossible to measure, is the power of films to influence the way people think. If films offer political or moral 'messages', why should these messages, especially if they are incidental to the action, have any more influence than those emanating from churches, schools, families and peers? Is there any reason why 'historical' films should exert more influence than films in other genres? True, *Shenandoah* excited in this particular young boy a fascination with the American Civil War that evolved into a career as a professional historian. But for the average viewer, it can be argued, a historical film is no less a piece of escapist entertainment than a western, a thriller, or an action movie.

Yet perhaps historical films are a special case. Viewers can treat *Harry Potter* (2001-) as fantasy, *Mission Impossible* (1996) as escapism and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) as post-modern irony. When they watch films about love, friendship, or work, they have some point of reference – their own lives – to act as a 'reality check'. When films portray historical events, however, the audience is more likely to accept what it sees as real because it has lowered its defences. Fiction requires, in T. S. Eliot's famous phrase, the 'suspension of disbelief'. Films purporting to portray the past make no such demand.

⁴ G. M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (New York 1987) 4.

⁵ T. Horwitz, *Confederates in the attic: dispatches from the unfinished Civil War* (New York 1999).

On the contrary, they invite the viewer to believe. Moreover, the viewer is in no position to contest the authenticity of the past that films portray. As a subject in schools, history is of minor and diminishing importance. In America, history often fails to appear at all as a school subject, being subsumed under 'social studies'. How then can a lay person judge how accurately *Gladiator* (2000) portrays the Roman Empire, *La Reine Margot* (1994) the French wars of religion, and *Zwartboek* (2006) the Dutch resistance in the Second World War? Such a task is beyond even professional historians, whose expertise is based upon narrow specialization.

Hence – and it galls historians to admit this – most people get their knowledge (or image) of history from films and television, not from books. A single film, *Gone With The Wind*, first released in 1939, has had more influence in shaping popular perceptions of the Civil War than all the books written by academic historians put together.⁶ It is for this reason that the study of films is a worthwhile project for the historian. Feature films are useless for studying historical events themselves. They are invaluable for understanding how subsequent generations view those events. In this way films are a barometer of changing social attitudes.⁷

Of course, it is not that simple: the metaphor of film as a barometer is misleading. True, Hollywood could not survive unless audiences found its products enjoyable and acceptable. But this does not mean that films accurately reflect what the public thinks and believes. After all, films are the product of a creative process which, however compromised by commercial demands, incorporates the artistic vision of producers, writers, cameramen, and directors.

Censorship and racism

Films are also products of censorship. The Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, which applied to American films produced between 1934 and 1967, placed large swathes of real life off-limits as subject matter. The Hays Code banned nudity and bedroom scenes (unless the couple were fully clothed and in contact with the floor). Homosexuality and other forms of 'impure love' (rape, incest) were forbidden. Priests and ministers must

⁶ Gallagher, *Causes won, lost, and forgotten*, 45.

⁷ R. B. Toplin, *History by Hollywood: the use and abuse of the American past* (Urbana, IL 1996).

never be cast as comic characters or villains. Criminal acts, as well as 'immoral' acts such as adultery, should never be portrayed in a positive light. Films must not depict, or even mention, illegal drugs.⁸ And then there were informal conventions such as the 'happy ending' that made films deviate still further from reality.

Before the Hays Code, however, there was *The Birth of a Nation*. D. W. Griffith's film about the Civil War and Reconstruction remains one of the most influential, and controversial, films ever made. It was a landmark in the development of American cinema: the first Hollywood blockbuster (it was over three hours long) and a film that took the technical possibilities of the camera to a higher level. Its fast-paced editing, spectacular battle scenes and exciting chase scenes kept audiences on the edges of their seats. After watching a screening in the White House, President Woodrow Wilson gushed, 'It is like writing history with lightning.'⁹

The Birth of a Nation was also openly and viciously racist. It was based on a novel, *The Clansman*¹⁰, that glorified the role of the Ku Klux Klan in overthrowing the rule of the Republican party, which received the votes of the former slaves, in the conquered South. The film's first half presented a romanticized view of the antebellum South – a place where kindly masters treated their slaves as much-loved children – and showed the Civil War as a heroic but tragic conflict that divided families, friends and sweethearts. The film's second half portrayed Reconstruction as a nightmare of oppression, when the defeated southerners were subjected to the rule of bestial blacks. Manipulated by vindictive northern politicians, the former slaves, now endowed with political power, run riot. In one scene, a white girl jumps from a cliff rather than face certain rape at the hands of a black soldier (in the book the girl commits suicide after being raped). Another scene depicts a black politician proposing marriage to a white woman, promising that she can rule by his side as the queen of a 'black empire'. In a thrilling climax, the white men of the Ku Klux Klan rescue their womenfolk and disarm the blacks. The Klan then makes sure that blacks no longer vote in the next election. Thus the natural order of things – the supremacy of the white race

⁸ Motion Picture Production Code. Full text of the code can be found at <http://productioncode.dhwritings.com>. Date accessed: 15 September 2009.

⁹ M. Rogin, 'The sword became a flashing vision: D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*', *Representations* 9 (1985) 150-195: 151.

¹⁰ Th. Dixon, *The Clansman: an historical romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York 1905).

– is restored. America is reunited and reborn when the North acknowledges that racial equality is a myth and that whites must rule over blacks.



Ill. 2: Movie poster for *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915)

The Birth of a Nation presents an interesting example of the chicken-or-the-egg question: Did the film promote racism, or did it merely reflect the racism of its time? The best answer is that it did both. It reflected a period when blacks had lost the right to vote, attended segregated schools and suffered systematic discrimination. However, if we accept that there is no monolithic entity called ‘public opinion’ – views range across an ever-changing spectrum – then we can understand how *The Birth of a Nation* reinforced racism. The film offered an interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction that matched the views of southern whites. Even by the standards of the time, however, its racism was extreme. At a time when a growing number of Americans criticized the lynching of blacks, *The Birth of a Nation* endorsed lynching as a means of preventing black men from raping white women. At a time when white southerners were embarrassed by the Ku Klux Klan, Griffith’s film glorified what was, in fact, a terrorist organization. Indeed, such was the film’s impact that the Ku Klux Klan, which had not existed since the 1870s, underwent a spectacular revival,

recruiting millions of members in the decade after 1915.¹¹ In short, *The Birth of a Nation* helped to make extreme racism mainstream. In the North, the NAACP (an important civil rights organization, founded in 1910) organized demonstrations against the film and tried to have it banned, or at least censored.¹²

The naiveté of cinema audiences magnified *The Birth of a Nation's* influence. Griffith claimed that his version of the past was historically accurate. To boost that claim he included quotations from historians (including Woodrow Wilson) and mixed the fictional scenes with historical 'tableaux' that depicted real events.¹³ Because cinema was such a new medium, and because *The Birth of a Nation* was visually overwhelming, the viewing public was less sceptical about Griffith's truth-claims than a modern audience would be. (Although even today, it should be noted, viewers find it hard to separate fact from fiction. Think of the millions, for example, who were taken in by the absurd conspiracy story of Oliver Stone's *JFK*.)

Yet *The Birth of a Nation* also, ironically, helped to ensure that Hollywood made no more films that were so viciously racist. It demonstrated that politically controversial films both attracted and repelled. Those offended by the film were a minority, to be sure, but they represented a significant market share. In the 1920s, moreover, as civil rights organizations like the NAACP became increasingly influential, lynching rapidly declined. By the 1930s any depiction of blacks as sexual predators was seen as a defence of the indefensible. The Hays Code explicitly banned films portraying 'miscegenation' (sexual relationships between whites and blacks), which until 1967 was a criminal offense in every southern state. This represented progress of a kind in that it put an end to inflammatory black-on-white rape scenes. But it also had the unfortunate result of making it virtually impossible for films to treat race as a subject, let alone a political or social issue. Consequently race virtually disappeared from films until the 1960s.

The producer of *Gone With the Wind*, Daryl F. Zanuck, was well aware that race was an explosive topic and he took care to tone down the explicit

¹¹ Membership peaked at three million in 1924-25. D. M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: the history of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, NC 1987) 23-30, 291.

¹² M. Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: a history of the most controversial motion picture of all time* (New York 2008).

¹³ Rogin, 'The sword became a flashing vision', 184.

racism of Margaret Mitchell's novel of the same name. Under pressure from the NAACP, for example, he decided not to have any character utter the word 'nigger'. Although the film depicts the Ku Klux Klan, that organization is never mentioned by name and never shown in action.¹⁴ Because its racism is less explicit and also because the film tells a terrific story with strong actors playing complex characters – especially the awful but compelling Scarlett O'Hara – *Gone With the Wind* is perhaps the most enduring film that Hollywood has ever made. It is regularly screened on television and a copy can be bought in virtually any DVD shop. A stage adaptation is currently running in a London theatre.

Although in some respects *Gone With the Wind* debunks the romantic legend of the 'Lost Cause' – Scarlett O'Hara is a thoroughly selfish character who cares nothing for the Confederacy – it echoes some of the themes of *The Birth of a Nation*. Like *The Birth of a Nation*, it has two parts, the first dealing with the Civil War, the second portraying life in the South during Reconstruction.¹⁵ The first half shows the antebellum South as a pastoral idyll: a society of generous masters and faithful slaves, of southern belles and their chivalrous beau's. The second half presents Reconstruction as a terrible ordeal for the southern whites, and included the same stereotypes of rascally politicians and out-of-control former slaves. As in *The Birth of a Nation*, an attack on a white woman (in this case by a criminal band that includes both blacks and whites) prompts decent white men to join the Ku Klux Klan in order to punish the lawbreakers.

The long shelf-life of *Gone With the Wind* suggests that its racism is so subdued as to be hardly noticeable. Yet this points to a paradox about the influence of film. Works of obvious propaganda, or films in which the 'message' is presented too clumsily, are less persuasive than films in which political assumptions are subordinate to plot and characterization

For example, when Ashley Wilkes tells Scarlett O'Hara that he had always intended to free his slaves, regardless of the Civil War, the audience is inclined to believe him. The film has already established Wilkes as a thoroughly honest man. In addition, his statement is historically defensible because some slaveholders did free their slaves voluntarily. Moreover, these

¹⁴ L. J. Leff, 'Gone With the Wind and Hollywood's racial politics', *Atlantic Monthly* 284 (1999) 106-114.

¹⁵ E. Fox-Genovese, 'Scarlett O'Hara: The southern lady as new woman', *American Quarterly* 33 (1990) 7-34.

few words are incidental to a complicated love story and appear apolitical. However, in presenting Wilkes as the personification of the gentleman-slaveholder, *Gone With the Wind* is thoroughly misleading. If men like Ashley Wilkes were not fighting to defend the institution of slavery, then the audience can only suppose that they were motivated by some nobler cause, such as the rights of states to manage their own affairs. Yet the unanimous verdict of historians – as well as the evidence of what slaveholders said at the time – is that the Confederacy existed, first and foremost, to protect slavery.

Violence

To the frustration of Civil War enthusiasts, set-piece battle scenes form only a small part of the action in most films about the conflict. In *The Birth of a Nation* the battle scenes are brilliantly rendered, but in *Gone With the Wind* they play no role at all: the battles take place off-screen, and all we see – in a brilliantly executed panoramic camera shot – is the aftermath of battle, when thousands of wounded soldiers throng an Atlanta railroad yard after the battles around that city in 1864.

As if to satisfy the cravings of Civil War devotees, along came Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, who bankrolled the four-hour-long *Gettysburg* (Ronald Maxwell, 1993) and its much inferior sequel, *Gods and Generals* (Ronald Maxwell, 2003). Unencumbered by love stories – or, indeed, by female characters – *Gettysburg* filled the ranks of their blue and grey armies with weekend hobbyists or ‘re-enactors’, making the term ‘with a cast of thousands’ literally true. The film’s sweeping battle scenes, especially the depiction of ‘Pickett’s charge’¹⁶, successfully convey the scale of Civil War battles. Yet both *Gettysburg* and *Gods and Generals* present a romanticized view of the Civil War that make *Gone With the Wind* seem realistic by comparison. Although there is no overt racism in these two films, they sit squarely within the ‘Lost Cause’ tradition of idealizing the Confederate army and divorcing the Confederate cause from the defence of slavery. The Confederate soldiers are depicted as noble, gallant warriors who are fighting

¹⁶ A dramatic infantry assault during the Battle of Gettysburg (1963) by 12,500 Confederates against the center of the Union line. The charge was repulsed by Union rifle and artillery fire, at great losses to the Confederate army after which it retreated back to Virginia.

for their states, their wives, their families and their sweethearts. And although these films are realistic when it comes to things like uniforms and battlefield drill, their vision of warfare is entirely unrealistic. They depict grandeur, not slaughter. The soldiers all die cleanly, their bodies intact, to the accompaniment of a romantic score notable for its swelling violins. Curiously old-fashioned, these films have virtually nothing interesting or intelligent to say about the Civil War.



Ill. 3: Re-enactors acting as the 2nd Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, Company 'A' during the 145th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 2008. Photo: <http://www.2ndminnesota.org>.

In contrast to what one critic described as the 'absence of horror' in *Gettysburg*, the larger trend in all war films is toward the graphic depiction of violence.¹⁷ Beginning with the slow-motion shoot-outs in the films of Sam Peckinpah, violence in films has become increasingly explicit, often gruesomely so. The end of the Hays Code (1967) pushed back the boundaries of what was permissible on screen. After years of losing viewers to television, Hollywood discovered that gruesome violence pulled people back into the cinema. On a less cynical level, directors such as Oliver Stone

¹⁷ P. D. Beidler, 'Ted Turner et al. at Gettysburg; or, re-enactors in the attic', *Virginia Quarterly Review* 75.3 (1999) 488-503.

(*Platoon*, 1986) and Brian de Palma (*Casualties of War*, 1989) interpreted the Vietnam War as nasty, brutish, and anything but glorious. These films featured scenes – clearly modelled on the My Lai incident of 1968 – depicting American soldiers massacring civilians. Soon audiences were being treated to images of soldiers being decapitated by cannon balls (*Glory*, Edward Zwick, 1989), cut in half by tank shells (*Stalingrad*, Joseph Vilsmaier, 1993, a German film), and disembowelled by bullets (*Saving Private Ryan*, Steven Spielberg, 1998). We have come a long way from the war films of the 1950s. The Japanese-run prisoner-of-war camp depicted in *Bridge Over the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957) is a Center Parc compared with the one shown in *To End All Wars* (David Cunningham, 2001).

Violence hardly constitutes a theme, however. A more interesting feature of Civil War films of recent vintage is their portrayal of conflict behind the lines: the impact of the war on civilians and the guerrilla warfare that took place in some parts of the South.

The depredations of looters and deserters had already been portrayed in *Gone With the Wind* (Scarlett O'Hara shoots and kills a Union soldier bent on theft and rape) and *Shenandoah* (a Confederate deserter slays a farmer and his wife with his sabre). In *Ride With the Devil* (Ang Lee, 1999) and *Cold Mountain* (Anthony Minghella, 2003) the ugly side of Civil War is central to the action. *Ride With the Devil* shows how the Civil War divided the loyalties of civilians in Missouri, leading to a vicious guerrilla conflict in which prisoners were shot out of hand and civilians deliberately massacred. In one scene – based upon a real event – Confederate guerrillas raid the town of Lawrence, Kansas, and slaughter all the men and boys. *Cold Mountain* depicts the lot of a Confederate soldier who, wounded at the Battle of Petersburg in 1864, wants out of the war and starts to journey home. Back in North Carolina, however he is hunted down and slain by the 'home guard', a band of ruthless Confederates who enrich themselves by capturing and killing deserters. The message of both films is clear: far from being a gentleman's war, this conflict empowered psychopaths and murderers. The Civil War scenes in Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002) are equally brutal. Enraged by the new conscription law, which allows the rich to buy their way out of military service, rampaging white rioters terrorize the city and lynch blacks.

Conclusion

Interest in the Civil War shows no sign of abating. The war's centenary (1961-1965) may have been overshadowed by the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, but it nonetheless swelled the ranks of Civil War buffs. Moreover, the Civil Rights Movement itself, by ending racial segregation, made it easier for many southerners to celebrate their Confederate forbears. Although the Confederate flag remains a political hot potato, it is no longer the symbol of racism that it was in the 1950s and 1960s. However, nothing did more to stimulate popular interest in the Civil War than the nine-part television documentary directed by Ken Burns, *The Civil War*, which attracted 40 million viewers when first broadcast in 1990.

The Civil War remains a popular Hollywood vehicle because it can offer something for everyone. Although their ancestors were defeated, southern whites can see Confederate soldiers portrayed as brave and honourable men. Northern whites can identify with the triumph of the Union cause, which laid the foundation for America's national greatness. Blacks can identify with the war as a struggle for emancipation, and see black soldiers display courage on the battlefield. Women can identify with strong female characters, and adults of both sexes can enjoy the love stories. Above all, Civil War films can employ the tried-and-tested Hollywood formula of the happy ending. Just like the classic western, Civil War films end with the restoration of a broken community. In *The Birth of a Nation* former Union soldiers and former Confederates are reconciled. In *Gone With the Wind* Scarlett O'Hara loses Rhett Butler, but retains ownership of Tara, the family plantation, and confidently proclaims that 'Tomorrow is another day!' Although the Confederate deserter-hero of *Cold Mountain* is killed, Ada, his sweetheart, bears his child and succeeds, against all odds, in becoming a prosperous farmer. A final scene depicts Ada presiding over a happy community that lives in rural bliss. *Shenandoah* ends when the youngest son of the family, who had been given up for dead, comes home.

Reconstruction, however, presents a much more difficult problem for Hollywood, because there was no happy ending. The southern whites re-established their supremacy over blacks, but they did so by resorting to terrorism and the South paid a heavy price for its racism over the next hundred years. The whites of the North preserved the Union, but they abandoned the ideal of equal citizenship and betrayed the South's black population. Blacks themselves lost in every respect, their dream of freedom

and land ('forty acres and a mule') turning into the nightmare of lynching and the poverty of sharecropping. The kind of happy ending celebrated in *The Birth of a Nation* – white supremacy – is hardly acceptable in this 'post-racial' era. No wonder Hollywood avoids the subject.

Sommersby (Jon Amiel, 1993), one of the very few recent films to be set during Reconstruction, can only achieve a happy ending by turning history upside down. Returning from the Civil War a former Confederate soldier, John Sommersby (Richard Gere), sells his land to newly-emancipated slaves and helps them to defend their property against the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, eventually sacrificing his own life in order to safeguard their legal titles to the land. *Sommersby* even includes a trial scene presided over by a black judge! Evidently, the historical reality of Reconstruction – the triumph of terrorism over democracy and equality--is simply too depressing for Hollywood. This is a pity, for Reconstruction was one of the most dramatic, exciting and violent episodes in American history. Still, if a happy ending is the price to pay for a semblance of historical accuracy – think of the Holocaust film *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1994) – there may be hope. Perhaps Spike Lee, who performed the unlikely feat of making the ranting black nationalist Malcolm X the subject of a box office hit (*Malcolm X*, 1992) can rise to the challenge. I have the perfect Reconstruction story for him ...