

Media Review

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The American Civil War is one of the most widely discussed and significant events in the history of the United States. As one of the integral parts of teaching American history, it has become a source for multiple types of media both educational and for entertainment. In viewing the Civil War themed film *Gone with The Wind*, and YouTube channel Crash Course's videos, one consumes both historical fiction, and nonfiction media based around the Civil War period. By comparing and analyzing these forms of media, one can see the historical accuracies and errors, and how the creators of these sources viewed the events of the Civil War.

The film *Gone with the Wind*, released in January of 1940, was based on the novel authored by Margaret Mitchell. As the United States' highest-grossing movie of all time, and highly regarded by critics, it is one of the most famous and recognizable films today. Chronicling the life of a quintessential southern belle, Scarlett O'Hara, through the Civil War and Reconstruction era, it has shaped how people envisioned this period, especially Georgia, for years. However, as time progressed concern has grown for the inaccuracies and troubling features within the film. Most notable and disturbing is the film's complete omission of the horrors and injustices of slavery on Southern plantations. The housemaids of the fictional Tara Plantation, Mammy and Prissy, are portrayed as being content with their condition as slaves. They are also shown as having a personal relationship with O'Hara, and serve her even after the end of the Civil War. In one scene black soldiers showed fighting with the Confederates even assured Scarlett that the South would pull through and win the war. Both depictions of African Americans during this period are completely problematic and inaccurate. The "Southern image of a contented, loyal slave was an imaginative creation."¹ Slaves in Georgia "resented the inhumanity of individual masters and of the impersonal institution which bound them."² The house slaves Mammy and Prissy would not have been treated somewhat familial, be outspoken

with whites in the household, or follow them back after the close of the war to reestablish the Tara plantation, as shown in the film. Slaves that aided the Confederates helped build structures amongst other tasks were forced and bought to do so, not volunteers.³ Secondly, they “were not fighting as armed men for the Confederacy” as the movie portrays.⁴ While there were some moments in the movie that showed more accurate depictions of owner and slave relations, such as General O’Hara calling them inferiors and Scarlett slapping Prissy, the overall portray is of a grossly false, harmonious relationship between slave and master.

However, there are elements of *Gone with the Wind* that is historically accurate. One is the roles of Southern women during the Civil War. The film shows Scarlett’s mother performing her duties as the mistress of the plantation, which was being “proxy for master’s temporal authority” to “maintain the schedule.”⁵ During the war, many Confederate women “took to the hospitals to care for the wounded” which is demonstrated in the film when Scarlett became a volunteer nurse in Atlanta.⁶ The costumes, set designs, and artillery used in the film were also historically accurate. This was assured by hired historian Wilbur Kurtz and technical assistant Susan Myrick. Overall, the film *Gone with the Wind* with its historical merits and faults continues to be one of the most famous and recognizable stories based around the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The YouTube channel Crash Course’s Civil War videos serve a very different purpose than that of a feature film. Presented by John Green, these short educational videos discuss basic information and the overall cultural and political themes from the war. It discusses how slavery was the root of the conflict, the many disadvantages of the South against the North regarding resources, and important figures from the period. All the information provided is historically accurate, save for a few opinionated statements. One claim given in the video was that recent

research estimates that Civil War casualties are greater than the previous long-accepted number of around 620,000. This claim is supported by multiple sources, stating that the actual number could be more than 750,000.⁷ Based around the research of J. David Hacker, his findings through census data showed many “deaths from disease or war-related injuries that were never officially counted.”⁸ The videos also focuses on significant components not specifically related to battles or combat. For example, it discusses how the Civil War was the first war to ever be documented thoroughly through photography. Matthew Brady and his staff took over 10,000 photographs during the war.⁹ However, some of these images, along with fellow photographer Alexander Gardner’s famous *Rebel in a Sharpshooter’s Den*, were later found to be staged.¹⁰ The conclusion of the Civil War solidifying the unification of the United States was another theme discussed in the video. Overall, these short educational videos give an overview of important events and expand on ideas of cultural and political significance.

Both *Gone with the Wind* and Crash Course’s Civil War videos are based around the same period. They mention many similar events including the Battle of Gettysburg, Sherman’s March to the Sea, and Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. However, their intended purpose and portrayal of certain elements differ. The Hollywood film was a fictional story created for entertainment only based around history, while Crash Course was educational, featuring real people and events. In comparing these two media sources, viewers can see the major reason for notable differences, which is the time they were produced in. The recent Crash Course video gives detailed explanations on slavery being the main cause for the Civil War, and how events like the Emancipation Proclamation and Reconstruction affected the later history of blacks. By looking back at over one hundred years of American history long term impacts can be determined. Released in 1940 *Gone with the Wind* was reflective of the views held by many

Americans at the time, namely in its romanticism of the Old South and its misleading depictions of the realities of slavery. Other aspects concerning the movie show this as well. At the first screening of the film, actresses Butterfly McQueen and Hattie McDaniel, who won the Oscar for best-supporting actress for the film, were denied admittance because of segregation laws. While the film's negative look on slavery is seen through its absence, the movie serves as a glance into how the creators of the time viewed the history of African American slavery and the concept of the idealistic antebellum South.

To conclude, the popular film *Gone with the Wind* and Crash Course's Civil War videos are both based on the history of the American Civil War. In comparing the two, one can discover how the media's intended purpose and time of creation affect the historical accuracy of the content.

Endnotes

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4. "Talking Civil War History: A Conversation with Eric Foner and James McPherson." *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 30, no. 2 (2011): 1–32. <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.library.ualr.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=31h&AN=71876313&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
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10. James Curtis. "Making Sense of Documentary Photography James Curtis." History Matters, n.d. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/modern.html>.

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