

The “Lost Cause Myth” and Its Representation in Cinema

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the films “Lincoln” and “Gone with the Wind”. “Lincoln” is a 2012 historical drama that focuses upon Abraham Lincoln and his mission to pass the thirteenth amendment and effectively end the Civil War. “Gone with the Wind” is a 1940 historical romance that involves the story of Scarlett O’Hara and her journey amidst the American Civil War. The Lost Cause mythology is a prominent narrative that attempts to downplay the centrality of slavery in the context of the underlying factors for the American Civil War and insert a positive outlook upon the antebellum South. This specific topic was chosen in order to shed light upon this comprehensive myth that has an extensive history and indeed has contemporary impacts and relevance. Examples of such include the support of various Confederate figures, a fundamental belief in the interconnectedness between the Confederacy and heritage, and persistent discussions regarding the variables that elicited the Civil War. This paper argues that “Lincoln” repudiates this mythology, while “Gone with the Wind” adheres to it. Through examination of formal elements including dialogue, cinematography, and commentary within the films, this deduction is reached. The essay is partitioned into four sections: “Intro”, “Lincoln”, “Gone with the Wind”, and “Conclusion”. The middle sections discuss the respective film demonstrated in the subtitle of that particular section.

Keywords

Lost, Cause, Myth, “Lincoln”, “Gone with the Wind”, Formal, Elements, Civil, War, Adheres, Repudiates, Cinema, Film

1. Intro

The American Civil War was marked by intense violence, ideological confrontation, and a catalyst for an influential, extensive myth that has permeated Ameri-

can political discourse and historiographical interpretation, dubbed the Lost Cause Myth. The war wrought 680,000 deaths and countless civilian casualties. The bloodshed was a product of long-winded, multifaceted ideological tensions that brewed in early 19th-century America for decades. To put it simplistically, inherent disagreements with respect to slavery, the rights of states, and cardinal differences regarding the agrarian and industrial way of life bred the deadliest American conflict in military history. Furthermore, this particular myth was thus founded as a byproduct of the war, and it attempts to shed a positive light on the South and its role in the Civil War. It does this through a multitude of methods, including the prevailing notion that outlines the importance of “state’s rights” as a contingent factor of the war, the sanitization of the institution of slavery and its impact, and a conception of the Confederacy as consisting of brave, heroic heroes that were not defeated but overwhelmed. This method of thought has even evolved into the modern day. The memorialization of heroes such as Robert E. Lee and Zebulon Baird Vance through statues is an example of this in present-day politics and society.

Moreover, this myth has had a large influence on cinema. Numerous films have incorporated this mythology into their overall narrative structure and recurring themes in one methodology or another. Some of which include, but are not restricted to, “*Gods and Generals*”, “*Ride with the Devil*”, and “*The Free State of Jones*”. In particular, the films “*Lincoln*” and “*Gone with the Wind*” are fundamental examples of this mythology’s role in film. The film “*Lincoln*” repudiates the Lost Cause Mythology by having various elements that refute the myth’s cardinal tenets. These include but aren’t limited to, a conception that slavery was an inherently un-American, unjust institution that was the primary cause of war and a rebuttal of the notion that African Americans were feeble-minded, inferior, and submissive individuals with limited influence on the conflict. In juxtaposition, “*Gone With the Wind*” adheres more closely to the mythology by obtaining facets of the movie that align with the ideas of the Lost Cause myth. It attempted to paint a positive light and romanticize the South, downplay and mangle the accurate historical reality of the cruelty of slavery and its role as a factor for war, and peddle the notion of the Confederacy being overwhelmed by the power of the Union, rather than defeated.

2. Lincoln

The film: “*Lincoln*” tells the story of Abraham Lincoln, the president of the United States during the Civil War (1861-65). It is a historical drama that expands upon his last months in office and focuses on his lengthened, comprehensive efforts to establish the Thirteenth Amendment. When analyzing the film through the lens of whether it adheres to or refutes the Lost Cause Myth, there appears to be only one answer: The Lost Cause myth is mostly repudiated, whether intentionally or unintentionally, when evaluating the different themes and plot points that comprise the movie. For example, a key aspect of the film is

about dismantling the unethical institution of slavery and emphasizing its role as the sole causality of the Civil War. It depicts slavery as incredibly oppressive, harmful, and disadvantageous to the African-American lifestyle. The argument that African-Americans were suitable for slavery given their “inferior, submissive characteristics” is pushed back on. It views abolition as essential and a cause to fight for, as it is immoral and fundamentally against the Constitution. Although many refer to the argument relating to states’ autonomy when evaluating the most significant factors of the war, the film argues that ridding American society of slavery was truly the moral imperative fought for.

To further develop this important distinction, David Blight’s work, *For Something Beyond the Battlefield, Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War* also aligns with this contention of moral imperative by integrating a quote from Frederick Douglass: “The war for the Union came only to execute the moral and humane judgment of the nation” (Blight, 1989: p. 8). He further explains how Douglass abhorred the non ideological interpretation of the war and urged that ethical imperatives of the abolitionist cause were undeniably the most prominent. This coincides with the film’s arguments which maintain that slavery was both inhumane, as well as a central factor for war, and deviates from the Lost Cause narrative. The mythology, in contrast, often downplays the brutality of slavery and contends that it was a more suitable alternative for African Americans and, in some cases, beneficial to their livelihood. It deems, most importantly, not the issue of slavery to be the root cause of war, but rather the focus on the Southern priority of states’ rights and autonomy to be the central imperative.

In addition, vital elements of “*Lincoln*” are unequivocally the moral issues of enslavement and refutation of the Social Darwinist notion of the Lost Cause that suggests African-Americans are inferior and incapable of managing themselves. This notion asserts that as per natural selection, African-Americans are rendered as innately worse-off. This particular rebuttal is shown immediately within the film. The opening scene encapsulates the crucial efforts of African Americans as part of the Union’s military. The scene portrays dozens of Black soldiers fighting valiantly and courageously against the Confederacy in what is a violent and lethal battle. This serves to repudiate Southern slaveholders’ ideology that Black individuals were inherently submissive, sub-human people. Instead, African Americans were a capable, robust community that played a fundamental role in both the underlying cause of the war and in fighting for said cause. One dialogue that substantiates this is an interaction between Lincoln and a Black soldier. Lincoln asks: “How long have you been a soldier?” to which the soldier responds: “Two years, sir.” This, along with multiple scenes throughout the film portraying Black soldiers, provides a more nuanced, accurate characterization of history that the Lost Cause mythology overlooks or simply ignores. African Americans did indeed have a notable influence on the war and the film proves Lost Cause stereotypes about their community to be false through military representation.

Moreover, the film emphasizes the hypocrisy of America through Lincoln's belief that a nation founded upon Enlightenment values is at war elicited by an ideological clash between one government that subscribes to said values and another that rebels from these cardinal ideals that have constructed American civilization. Lincoln contends that slavery as a practice is immoral and is fundamentally at odds with constitutional values of liberty, equality, and fairness. One method that the movie engages in to purvey this theme is, once again, through dialogue. Two soldiers discuss Lincoln's Gettysburg address. Lincoln asks: "Did you hear what I said" and the soldier responds: "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth from this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war."

This interaction establishes Lincoln's beliefs regarding the survival of cardinal constitutional values and how he will act upon said beliefs to pass the Thirteenth Amendment through what are often questionable legislative endeavors and commendable, though borderline tyrannical efforts. This evaluation is further aided by "*Film Review: Lincoln (2012)*" which states: "He is portrayed as a man who was unafraid to use dishonest, underhanded politics to suit his purpose, nor afraid to assume power, even when it meant challenging his restrictions under the Constitution." (*Members of the CSUSB History Club, 2013: p. 4*). This illustrates that Lincoln thoroughly supports American ideals and that this particular war puts them at risk. At the heart of this war was the issue of slavery and its inherent unconstitutional nature as an oppressive, tyrannical system. As claimed in the film by Mrs. Jolly: "I want an end to the war. Once we do away with slavery, the rebels will quit fighting. Since that is what the war is about" Given this, Lincoln viewed slavery's demise as paramount to not only achieving moral peace but also wartime peace and fulfilling twenty democratic votes for the 13th Amendment's passing as crucial for the nation. This contrasts with the Lost Cause narrative which regurgitates the more simplistic belief that it is a war for state's rights and protection from "autocratic," "industrialized" influence on their agrarian culture. It posits that slavery was a rather minuscule factor in the war and a charitable institution (in a sense) for African Americans, according to the Lost Cause Mythology.

Lastly, the film also depicts slavery in a methodology that portrays the immorality and cruelty of the institution that the Lost Cause sanitizes. This portrayal is first seen in the statement by Thaddeus Stevens responding to another member stating: "Slavery is the only insult to natural law you, fatuous nincompoop!" He goes on to elucidate that supporting slavery is an insult to God. This refutes the Social-Darwinist contention that enslaved individuals are sub-human and unworthy of equality, and suggests that slavery as an institution is the true practice that ignores natural law. It reaffirms the reality that all individuals are equal under the eyes of God and proponents of slavery fundamentally disagree with this.

This conception of slavery as immoral and most importantly, brutal, is seen in another piece of dialogue. Tad Lincoln asks Elizabeth Keckley if she was beaten as a slave to which Elizabeth responds: “I was beaten with a fire shovel when I was younger than you.” This statement is notable as it highlights the cruelty and violence that slavery encompasses, even from a young age. It demonstrates the vicious actions that Southern slaveholders engaged in with a lack of regard for even one’s age or bodily damage. The prevailing narrative that the Lost Cause formulates of slavery as beneficial and a flourishing lifestyle for African Americans is thus disavowed. Slavery as an institution often included consistent punishment, physical violence, and grueling conditions as made glaringly apparent by Elizabeth.

3. Gone with the Wind

To transition to “*Gone With the Wind*,” this film is a 1939 historical romance film that is set in the South during the American Civil War and the Reconstruction era. It is an extensive film that explores Scarlett O’Hara’s perspective as the Civil War unfolds and significantly impacts her overall way of life. Within the narrative of the film, there are a multitude of themes that coincide with the Lost Cause mythology. One notable theme, for example, is the conception of the South as benevolent, beautiful, and a fundamentally idyllic society with its culture under threat by the Civil War. The film consistently depicts the Southern way of life as ideal, and the impending war threatens this lifestyle. The movie argues that if the Union triumphs, its Southern agrarian lifestyle, beauty, and overall culture will be overtaken by the industrialized, tyrannical North. Not only this, but it also regurgitates the concept that the South was overwhelmed, not defeated. This, coupled with the downplayed portrayal of slavery, contributes to the argument that slavery wasn’t the imperative for war but rather the protection of the beautiful, romanticized Southern lifestyle (this contrasts directly with “*Lincoln*”).

This particular standpoint is substantiated by the article “*The Lost Cause*” by the Encyclopedia of Virginia, which emphasizes: “Until the middle of the twentieth century, and even longer in Virginia, textbooks presented a picture of the Civil War and race relations that owed much to *Gone with the Wind*. Only during and after the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s did some textbooks begin to state that slavery was the war’s most important cause.” (Janney, 2020) This indicates the film’s role as a work that has influenced the perpetual notion that the preservation of culture was indeed the Southern imperative for war, rather than the institution of slavery. These plot points are closely associated with the Lost Cause. As explained previously, the mythology maintains a very similar point of view. It renders not slavery the issue at hand but the state’s rights and Southern culture.

Instead, the institution of slavery was realistically a benevolent, charitable institution that served as a preferable alternative for African Americans to freedom. The film views enslaved individuals as submissive and content with the

system they are under. They are depicted almost as an essential part of the family and one character in particular, the female house slave: Mammy, was almost like a mother figure to Scarlett. Often giving advice and showing concern over her behavior and choices. This point is further elucidated in "*Gone with the Wind and the Lost Cause*:" "The slaves never complain and never speak of freedom, and after they are freed, they are "childlike in mentality, easily led, and from a long habit accustomed to taking orders" (611). The Lost Cause mentality is evident." (Hall, 2019: p. 17). The topic of enslavement, within the context of the film, is not treated as a cause for the war, but rather an important element of a beautiful, prosperous, and content culture.

Moreover, a crucial element of the film, as described, includes the romanticization of the antebellum South at large. The audience first observes this in "*Gone With the Wind*" through the opening scenes of the movie that display visually stunning, beautiful cinematography. The camera shows gorgeous, visually pleasing views that show the scenic views of the farmland and Southern agrarian culture. Not only this, but these shots also go hand-in-hand with the musical score within these scenes. The track is slow-paced, mellow, and harmonious. These formal film art elements are fundamental to not only enhancing emotional and visual style but also reinforcing a prevailing notion of the film. It reinforces the outlook of the South as a beautiful, idyllic, and untainted society. It has not been invaded by the impending threat of industrialization and hence is a pleasant, prosperous society. The scenic depiction signifies a broader conceptualization of the South and, as explained, portrays it in a positive light overall. This aligns with the Lost Cause Mythology, as a key tenet of this narrative is the idealization and fixation upon the so-called "beauty" of the antebellum South. Therefore, the music and cinematography are the key foundations for what this film argues throughout.

This particularly benevolent portrait that is painted of the South becomes a persistent theme throughout the film. Not only does the audience observe this outlook through cinematography and music, but also text shown to the audience in the movie and the Union's portrayal. For example, one text read: "There was a land of cavaliers and cotton fields called the Old South... Here in this pretty world, gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever sighting of knights and their ladies, master, and slave... Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. Civilization has gone with the wind." This specific quote is another instance within the film that demonstrates the delicacy and grace of the South. "Pretty world" and "Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered" reaffirm the Lost Cause notion that the beauty and exquisiteness of what was once the South was extracted by the North.

By describing the South as a dream, the text encapsulates the mythological conception, which posits that the South was an ideal, gorgeous society that benefited everyone. This society, however, as a product of the actions of "Yankees," was thus "gone with the wind." The text contends that the North (referred to by the harsh term "Yankees" to signify them as the "bad guys" to imply that they are the "good" folks) had eradicated what was a beautiful civilization. This dero-

gatory labeling of Northern soldiers enables a negative conception of the North at large. In doing this, it implies that the situation of the Civil War rests between the efforts of “good” versus “evil.” The “evil” at hand, according to Southerners, is the North. This is key to the Lost Cause narrative and foundational to what the mythology supposes that the South fought for: the sanctity of Southern culture.

Furthermore, the depiction of slavery and its role in the context of the Civil War within the film was often inaccurate and very sanitized in comparison to the true nature of what the institution truly was. The movie would portray various slaves as content, friendly, and comfortable with their position. The field slaves at the start of the movie, for example, were shown to engage in a sense of humor by yelling, “It’s quittin’ time,” and another responding, “No, I say when it is quittin’ time.” This particular piece of dialogue may seem innocuous; however, its significance cannot be understated. The portrayal of slaves appearing content, lively, and bridled with humor is intrinsically at odds with historical reality. Slaves were often worked tirelessly and beaten brutally if a labor quota was missed or misbehavior was detected. Severe punishment, including whipping, starvation, and sometimes death, would ensue. The average slave was neither content nor happy with their position. Many slave rebellions were evidence of this, including but not limited to the Stono Rebellion (1739), Nat Turner’s Rebellion (1831), and the Samba Rebellion (1731).

The film continued to downplay the brutality of the institution through not only this but also through the words of Gerald O’Hara. He claimed: “I have been talking to Prissy and Mami, and I do not like the way you are treating them. You must be firm with inferiors, but you must be gentle with them, especially darkeys. Yes, Pa, I know. I am not asking them to do anything I would not do myself.” This further reinforces the attempt of the film to understate the cruelty of enslavement. The methodology of thinking that entails a so-called “gentle approach” towards slaves was, of course, wildly historically inaccurate as slaveholders often treated their “inferior” with scorn and apathy rather than “gentleness.” This illustration of slavery is a cardinal aspect of the Lost Cause as the sanitization of it helps encourage other arguments, such as the need for the state’s rights and preservation of culture, to overshadow it when examining the contingent factors for the Civil War. The downplaying of slavery within the film is not only done to promote the idealization of the South but also to contribute to the mythology encompassing the sole cause of the war, which undermines or even negates slavery’s role.

The preservation of Southern culture and the agricultural way of life was an integral aspect of the film. It perpetually represented the South as beautiful, prosperous, and protectable, setting a compelling underlying imperative worth engaging in warfare for. This argument from the film was represented in Gerald O’Hara’s conversation with Scarlett O’Hara when he proclaimed: “Do you mean to tell me that land doesn’t mean anything to you? Why? Because the land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, and worth dying for because it’s the only thing that lasts. The land they live on is like their child.”

As mentioned before, this argument coincides appropriately with the lackadaisical portrayal of slavery as an institution. The film completely disregards the issue of slavery as a result, and when discussions regarding the war and the sole obligations to fight are addressed, the topic is nullified.

The narrative of the film, instead, implies that the beautiful Southern way of life and its protection were essential to the relentless Southern urge to enlist. This notion is reaffirmed by Ashley when he states, "Yes. There is something to fight for. Something you love better than me, though you may not know it, Tara." The farmland (Tara) is, to Southerners, everything. The Southern agrarian way of life was something beyond a mere way to amass profit through agricultural methods, but rather a rudimentary element of their culture that deserved protection and love. Ashley adheres to the Lost Cause arguments by outlining the importance of fighting for Southern culture and tradition.

Finally, the film also aligns with the Lost Cause in that it consistently promotes the belief that the South was overwhelmed rather than defeated. This belief was first mentioned by Rhett Butler, who claimed, "The Yankees are better equipped than we are. They've got factories, shipyards, coal mines, and a fleet to bottle up our harbors and starve us to death. All we've got is cotton, slaves, and arrogance." This was also, of course, the first negative depiction of the South that was purveyed.

Nevertheless, it adheres to the mythology in that it states that Confederate manpower and resources paled in comparison to the Union. The abundant quantity, resources, and everlasting population of military men would ultimately lead the South to not a defeat but simply a suffocation. Although the South encompassed many states and a vast population, its might could not rival the noteworthy attrition of the North. This method of thought was displayed many times throughout the film as a way to cope with the Confederate loss. The audience also saw this belief by Ashley: "The end of the war. The end of our world, Scarlett. I see the Yankees coming, always more and more." He emphasized that the abundance of men was ineluctably the downfall of the battle. His quote encapsulates the narrative that rather than military tactics, outmaneuvers, or commendable efforts from the Union being the cause of their triumph, it was merely their vast quantity of men. This serves as a way to downplay the Union's victory and justify the Confederate loss.

4. Conclusion

The era of the Civil War was a bloody phase in American history that gave rise to a historical myth that influenced American historical discourse and interpretation. The Lost Cause was an attempt by the South to essentially justify the actions, efforts, and loss of the Confederacy to the Union. It did so through consistent portrayals of the antebellum South as idyllic, the downplaying slavery as an institution and its impact on the war in comparison to ideals such as "state's rights", and continuous pushing of the conception that they were simply overwhelmed rather than defeated. This particular myth has evolved to have such a

bearing on American society that it has even influenced cinematic works. The films “*Lincoln*” and “*Gone with the Wind*” are examples of films that interact with this mythology. “*Lincoln*,” specifically, refutes the Lost Cause mythology by, most importantly, emphasizing the key issue of slavery and its impact on the war. In contrast, “*Gone With the Wind*” aligns more closely with the ideology by effectively romanticizing the South and highlighting Southerners’ imperative to protect its agrarian way of life. These cinematic works were crucial to fostering discourse regarding the history, interpretation, and accuracy of the Lost Cause narrative. They help refine the understanding of truth for individuals who evaluate the Lost Cause and what exactly the narrative entails. This helps individuals grasp history more effectively and thus pave the way for the future by recognizing past faults and seeking compromise and peaceful resolution.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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