

Bombers, Bullets and Black History

White critics miss the point of *Red Tails*

John Wayne, Audie Murphy, Tom Berenger, Sylvester Stallone — these were the “war heroes” in the movies I grew up watching. All of them portrayed brazen, fearless, patriotic characters in over-the-top flicks that defined the psyches of many American fighting men in service today, as well as Americans who’ve never seen war but love to watch war movies.

These actors were white and I am not, but as a boy I wanted to be like them. They were fearless in the face of danger and willing to confront forces of evil that threatened the common good. They were Americans and so was I. That was all that mattered. Sometimes.

Americans love action movies, always have and always will. The country has even (so it seems) evolved a tolerance for action movies where a strong black man can play the lead role. Will Smith’s career might be the best example of this. But when was the last time you saw a war movie with all black heroes? You could mention *Glory*, the 1989 flick about an all-black unit in the Civil War. You could also mention the 1995 Golden Globe-nominated, HBO-produced *Tuskegee Army* film, starring Laurence Fishburn, Allen Payne and Cuba Gooding Jr.

Both were exceptional films. But they had the same thing in common. They were films focused almost exclusively on the struggles of black men in the armed forces. The point of these movies was to highlight the injustices survived by the black military man, and in doing this, they transcended the category of war movie and became dramas that happened to be set against the backdrop of war. To be clear: *The Deer Hunter* is a dramatic film; *Braddock: Missing in Action III* is a war movie.

George Lucas’s new film, *Red Tails*, about the Tuskegee Army of WWII, has unearthed an ugly reality within the socio-political sphere of Hollywood. This veiled racism, wielded by many notable critics, is now out in the open and can only be the product of gross misunderstanding. *Red Tails* isn’t about the struggle of blacks in the military and it isn’t supposed to be. It’s a war movie, for black people.

The \$58-million movie that Lucas financed on his own after major Hollywood studios refused to touch it (on account of what was said to be the box-office limitations of an almost all-black cast) has been the target of many critics who simply missed the point. *Red Tails* has been called “flat,” “generic” and a film that “fails even as a basic history lesson.”

Roger Ebert said the movie could have done more by “firmly establishing the atmosphere of the Jim Crow



South.” He even went so far as to criticize the characters for not being more fearful of combat.

In what bravado-soaked war movie of America’s very white past have the heroes ever been scared?

Apparently Lucas’s *Red Tails* flew right over the heads of these otherwise conscientious critics, but I have a more likely theory, better conveyed in the words of Tim Wise. Hey guys: “Your whiteness is showing.”

I’ll be honest, the whole double-consciousness thing gets to be pretty tiring on a daily basis — I’m sure other young, educated black men would say the same. You build compartments. You grow thick skin. You perceive and misperceive on account of your situation. You learn to accept racism (both blatant and passive) as a part of your everyday American life, while at the same time hoping it will one day change.

And a lot of things have changed — hey, my dad can vote now, which wasn’t always the case. He even got to vote for a black president, whose image with regard to new generations of young black Americans is as fundamentally important as establishing a classic U.S. war hero prototype for the Afro-American male. And George Lucas has achieved exactly this with *Red Tails*.

It’s really nice to see a movie where a group of Afro-American warriors do battle with a common enemy instead of fending off their own countrymen (there is some of that in there, too). It’s great to cheer for heroes who look like me as they bark predictable one-liners and blow shit up. It’s pretty wonderful to watch these uber-determined

overboard characters shoot it out with flying Nazis, while all of Hollywood’s special effects illuminate the dazzling dogfights.

I don’t need to be reminded of the lynchings, the separate drinking fountains, the water hoses or the back of the bus. I have those stories within my own family; I will pass them to my children and it will be a somber sort of affair. And if I really want to revisit those stories via film, there is no shortage of cinema devoted to the Civil Rights struggle, for which I am grateful.

You don’t go to see *Red Tails* to be educated on black history. That wasn’t Lucas’s intention in making the movie, nor was it director Anthony Hemingway’s goal. If you happen to become more aware of black pilots’ sacrifices in WWII, that’s great, but also not the film’s purpose. This is action-packed, guns-blazing, bomb-dropping, aerial-combat porn — and by the way, no one really complained about “clunky dialogue” when *Top Gun* was released.

Red Tails exists as a fascinating attempt to create a vintage war movie such as those made in the late ’40s, (eg. *The Flying Leathernecks*) with the addition of a primarily black cast. It is meant to be enjoyed by young black viewers and those of us old enough to feel liberated by the movie’s existence.

Here’s the truth of it: We have a right to our cheesy combat war movies, too. Grab your popcorn and enjoy the gunfire.

“Just saw *Red Tails*. Tonight my inner child will dream of heroes who look like me. Thank you George Lucas.”
— LeVar Burton ew

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