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## Spielberg and Hanks' *Masters of the Air* (2024): A Critical Review

Spielberg, Steven and Tom Hanks, producers, *Masters of the Air*. Apple Studios, 2024

### Introduction

Based on the novel *Masters of the Air* (2007) by Donald L. Miller, the Apple TV+ mini-series *Masters of the Air* (2024) is created by John Shibban and John Orloff, whose executive producers are Gary Goetzman, Steven Spielberg, and Tom Hanks. The series marks the third installment of a long-term Spielberg-Hanks World War II series, following *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2010). Consisting of nine episodes, the mini war-drama series recounts the bombing missions of the 100<sup>th</sup> bomb group from their headquarters in East Anglia, UK during the World War II. The airmen are faced with the extremely hazardous duty of bombing critical targets in Nazi Germany in broad daylight. In nine parts, *Masters of the Air* takes a closer look into the quests of B-17 pilots Gale Clevon, John Egan, Robert Rosenthal, and navigator Harry Crosby.

Throughout the episodes, American soldiers exhibit heavy drinking habits and constant disciplinary breaches. They smoke in the presence of their commanding officers, engage in fights amongst themselves and even hold a bicycle race inside their headquarters. Drinks flow freely and apparently without limit in every episode, due to the high amount of deaths, with over 80% of the soldiers dying in the missions. As much of the action takes place in the air, on board the B-17s, the series makes extensive use of CGI effects. While these CGI effects are executed effectively, in some scenes their use is excessively exaggerated. This is the case in Part 7 (28:03-28:13) when the screen is cramped with planes as some of the smaller fighter jets even appear as flies buzzing through the sky. According to *IndieWire*, 3,447 visual effects were employed in total and completed at 5K (Hemphill). The deliberate emphasis on delivering action sequences to the audience is a defining feature common to both predecessors, *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*. Thus, these series aim to place the viewer "right on the battlefield," offering a glimpse into and a sense of what the experience of combatants might have been like, while avoiding mention of any reference to the diplomatic, economic, social, or domestic political stakes that were nonetheless significant during

World War II (Piketty 2). Within the framework of media studies, this critical review contends that *Masters of the Air* reaffirms themes of American exceptionalism and heroism while offering a superficial representation of women and African Americans.

### **American Exceptionalism and Heroism in *Masters of the Air***

*Masters of the Air* (2024) depicts a manifestation of American exceptionalism and heroism, observable from its first episode to the very last. The series portrays Americans as the sole heroes/saviors of the World War II despite the involvement of many other countries, mainly the Soviet Union and the UK. The Soviet troops do not appear until the last episode when Major Rosie is saved by Soviet troops and escorted back to US troops. Additionally, the British are depicted in a negative manner at the beginning of the series. In Part 2, while drinking in a pub, American pilots start arguing with RAF pilots which ends with a fistfight. The argument springs from the difference in bombing policies between the British and Americans, with the Americans bombing in broad daylight vs. the British preferring nighttime bombing. These scenes portray conflicts between US and British forces, which are often portrayed in terms of conflicting military strategies, objectives, and personalities, rather than broad condemnation of British soldiers as a whole. The antagonism directed towards British forces stems from strategic differences in bombing policies, frictions over authority, cultural and military tradition differences. The British are depicted as hesitant or dismissive of the high-risk American strategy, positioning the Americans as more willing to sacrifice for victory while the British are seen as more pragmatic and less willing to push the boundaries of warfare. These depictions are not primarily targeted at disdaining the British efforts but rather to highlight the perseverance, ingenuity, and unyielding spirit of the American soldiers to overcome external and internal challenges, thus complementing American exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism refers to the notion that “there is (a) something different about America or (b) something special about America” (Ceaser 6). According to Natsu Taylor Saito, American exceptionalism is an ideological instrument used to convey and establish a specific narrative about the United States which is based on the assumption that human history follows a linear progression, with Western civilization representing the pinnacle and the US representing the most advanced stage of this civilization and thus human history (229). Thus, American exceptionalism is mainly based on a constructed narrative, a rhetoric that is deeply rooted in American culture and history. Its origin can also be traced in other closely associated myths such as “manifest destiny,” “the free enterprise” and US acting as God’s “chosen nation” (Sirvent and Haiphong 29). Moreover, American exceptionalism is profoundly ingrained in the country’s economic, political, and cultural institutions. Even at universities, the belief in American exceptionalism is often taken for granted (25). America and its citizens are considered exceptional due to their perceived duty to rescue the world from itself, a responsibility that requires a constant and profound commitment to this purpose (Edwards and Weiss 1). The commitment to rescue the world is clearly observable in *Masters of the Air*. The pilots regard themselves as the chosen ones who will change the course of this bloody war. Since Woodrow Wilson, exceptionalists have declared that the US has a mission and a responsibility to spread its power and influence through its institutions and ideas, until it dominates the globe (Hodgson 10). In brief, American exceptionalism incorporates the various myths outlined above, and whether expressed as exceptionalism or heroism, it ultimately remains intrinsically linked to nationalism.

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In Part 9, as Stalag VII prison camp in Moosburg is being rescued by American troops, prisoners gain control of the camp and overpower the guards. Upon this, Major John Egan finds an American flag in a hurry and lowers the Nazi flag from the pole, raising the stars and stripes in a heroic style. This scene openly reflects American exceptionalism and heroism as there are also many other soldiers of different allied countries in the camp. Though many other flags appear in the following frames, it seems that the American flag is the one and only that truly deserves to be risen on the pole. The fact that a white American soldier rises the flag is an overt indication of the recognition of "white American exceptionalism". After all, despite the presence of many African Americans in the camp, it had to be a white soldier that elevated this patriotic moment. The raising of the American flag, as visible in many other mainstream productions, is not only a symbol of freedom and salvation but also another indication of American exceptionalism. The waving American flag on the pole marks the symbolic recognition of America as the dominant liberating power within the Allies.

The series also has some discussion-provoking scenes. In Part 5, the Bloody 100<sup>th</sup> is given the mission to bomb the city center of German city Münster on a Sunday, where a cathedral is located nearby. Upon the statement that they will be targeting civilians, John Egan responds with: "For Christ Sakes Crank, this is a war. We're here to drop bombs. [Other soldier] On women and kids? [Egan] This won't end till we hit 'em where it hurts" (Spielberg and Hanks 12:05-12:16). Major Egan offers a brief "justification" for the killings of civilians they are about to cause. The discussion created around this causes some of the airmen and the spectators to question the moral implications behind this mission. Another similar "justification" is observed in Part 9 with Major Rosie uttering the following words: "The things these people are capable of. No, they got it coming. Trust me. They got it coming" (41:59-42:07). This is a reference to the Holocaust and Rosie's interpretation of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. The emphasis on the Holocaust of the Jewish people is saved for the last episode when Rosie's plane is shot down as he opens his parachute to land in Berlin, lucky enough to be rescued by Soviet troops. The Russians escort him to a camp where he witnesses the horrors inflicted upon the Jewish people. Upon talking to a Holocaust survivor, Rosie says: "Go with God" and the man responds with: "If God exists, he has forgotten me. Not even the earth that covers our bones will remember us" (Part 9, 29:22-29:41).

Compared to other major war films and series, *Masters of the Air* largely conforms to the established conventions of American-centered war narratives. Like many mainstream productions, it employs themes of American exceptionalism and heroism to a considerable extent, without significantly diverging from similar portrayals. *Masters of the Air* amplifies themes of American exceptionalism and heroism, presenting the war predominantly from an American perspective and attributing a savior-like role to American forces while overlooking the significant accomplishments of the British and Soviets. Additionally, the series falls short to adequately depict the broader scale of wartime atrocities.

### **Portrayal of Women and "Romanticizing" the War**

Women are notably underrepresented in *Masters of the Air*. The series features three women characters throughout all episodes. They do not get substantial screen time in the series and their only function seems to be providing the soldiers comfort and (sexual) companionship. Sandra Westgate is a British intelligence officer who Harry Crosby falls in love with in Oxford (Part 7, 16:50-

17:10, 32:45-33:05). Marge is the lover of Gale Clevon, who patiently awaits him at home (Part 1, 00:40-04:40). In addition, Paulina is a Polish widow John Egan meets and has a short relationship with in London (Part 4, 23:40-28:52). Overall, women do not get substantial screen time in the series and their only function seems to be providing the soldiers romantic and sexual comfort. This superficial depiction of women undermines the hardships and suffering they experienced during the war. Moreover, women serve the classic purpose of “romanticizing the war” in the series, as commonly observed in mainstream Hollywood war-movies. They are predominantly mentioned in relation to romantic and/or sexual relationships they have with American soldiers. Other than this, they seem to have no other significance in the series. Sandra Westgate, despite being a British intelligence officer, is portrayed more as the lover of an American soldier (Crosby) than as the dedicated soldier she truly is. (Parts 6, 7 and 8). This tendency of romanticizing women in *Masters of the Air* is mediocre and serves no actual purpose in context of the storyline. In addition, the stereotypical depiction of women as lovers and sexual companions not only undermines the sense of realism but also falls short to deliver a detailed exploration of intriguing characters and the prominent roles women played during the war.

### **The Tuskegee Airmen: African Americans in World War II**

As a mainstream production, *Masters of the Air* centers on the bombing missions of the Bloody 100<sup>th</sup> airmen, the majority of whom are white-male Americans. With the exception of Sandra Westgate and Paulina, the series makes no mention of women or people of other ethnic/racial origin. However, in Part 8, the story suddenly shifts from its original setting in East-Anglia to a US base in Italy, which consists of an all-African-American group of pilots entitled “The Tuskegee Airmen.” Founded and trained in Tuskegee, Alabama, these airmen (mostly lieutenants and 2nd lieutenants) were given the strategic duty to fly P-51 Mustang fighter jets, which had a profound impact on the course of the war in Europe. In 1943, the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force faced mounting losses during deeper raids into Germany, as radar-guided German fighters destroyed bombers and crews faster than they could be replaced; however, the situation improved significantly in December with the introduction of long-range escorts like the P-51 Mustang, which ensured protection throughout missions and enhanced their success (Sion 47). The spectators are introduced to three pilots, Lt. Robert Daniels, 2nd Lt. Richard Macon and Lt. Alexander Jefferson but because of their late inclusion, they do not receive enough screen time to have their characters explored in-depth and this is a missed opportunity for the series. Moreover, their inclusion in the series comes too late and evokes an artificial impression. It gives spectators the impression that the producers decided to include them after reconsideration or a change in the script. The quest of the Tuskegee airmen intertwines with that of the 100<sup>th</sup> in a rather unnatural and unconvincing manner. However, the racial segregation these pilots faced is dealt with rather superficially. In Part 8, a Tuskegee colonel and captain engage in a dialogue at the bar. Upon the question, “What do you see?” The colonel responds with: “I see too many second-lieutenants, first-lieutenants. On this mission counts alone, they should already be captains, majors. And we both know why they’re not and we both know why they may never be” (Spielberg and Hanks 17:05-17:14). Thus, the colonel highlights the obstructive role of racial discrimination in the US Army. This discrimination reaches its peak in the same part after the Tuskegee airmen are captured by Nazis and transferred to the Luftwaffe prison camp, Stalag Luft III. Upon the entrance of the Tuskegee pilots to the camp filled with white American soldiers, African Americans, referred to as “red tails” by others, are subject to racist

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insults by their own men. Some of the men shout: "You gotta be kidding me, they're negroes, they all belong somewhere else" (31:52-32:20). Despite these racist remarks, they're also welcomed by others who appreciate them for fighting alongside their ranks. This demonstrates the divided nature of American society during the 1940s. Just before this scene, Tuskegee airmen Alexander Jefferson and Richard Macon are interrogated by a Luftwaffe officer in Dulag Luft prisoner transit camp in Frankfurt. During this interrogation, the Nazi officer asks Lt. Macon: "Why do you fight for a country that treats you like that?" (31:08) Macon responds: "Do you know any other country that does better? I know what my country's shortcomings are. And I know it's trying hard to become what it's supposed to be. And when I get back, I'm gonna help 'em do that a lot faster" (31:25-31:51). Macon's emphasis on the struggle for equal rights does not go unnoticed but is not elaborated beyond these short dialogues. The issue of racial discrimination is only superficially depicted in *Masters of the Air* and this is an example of the series' lack of social depth. Rather than appearing in the last two parts, African American airmen could have been introduced much earlier, and, thereby, their characters explored in a more detailed manner. This is by far the major missed opportunity in the production. In reality, the war created ample possibilities for African Americans as they achieved unparalleled advancements in economic and civic spheres, ultimately overthrowing barriers of racial segregation and discrimination in American society (Moye 14). African American characters appear in only two episodes (Parts 8 and 9) and this ascribes them an impression of serving as a sideshow rather than being in the spotlight. Thus, giving the Tuskegee Airmen more screen time and attention would have created substantially positive effects throughout the series. *Masters of the Air* acknowledges the presence of African American pilots, via the Tuskegee Airmen, yet does so without fully developing their narratives. While their participation is a step toward representation, the series mainly ignores them, providing limited examination of their experiences, challenges, and contributions. This superficial portrayal parallels a larger tendency in mainstream war media, in which marginalized people's roles are often referenced but rarely fully examined. Such narrative choices contribute to historical erasure or simplification by supporting a dominant worldview that glorifies conventional heroics while disregarding the complicated nature of racial interactions in wartime. According to *Collider*: "*Masters of the Air* skims over the experience of Black pilots, does not give their characters closure, and misses the opportunity to tell a full history of the war". *Collider* concludes that "The Tuskegee Airmen are important to the story of the war, and important characters deserve endings" (Molinari).

The inclusion of the Tuskegee Airmen in *Masters of the Air* reinforces American exceptionalism by highlighting their skill, discipline, and bravery, showcasing the idea that the nation's strength lies in its diverse talent. Their heroism aligns with the series' broader themes of sacrifice, resilience, and the fight for democracy. However, their presence also exposes the racial hypocrisy of a country that championed freedom abroad while discriminating against African American soldiers at home. By depicting both their combat successes and the systemic barriers they faced, the series acknowledges the contradictions within American ideals. In doing so, *Masters of the Air* celebrates American exceptionalism, depicting the Tuskegee Airmen as heroes while stressing the injustices they endured.

### A Comparison of Spielberg & Hanks' World War II Trilogy

According to Guillaume Piketty, all three series; *Masters of the Air* (2024), *The Pacific* (2010), and *Band of Brothers* (2001) are heirs of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) (13). *Band of Brothers* (2001) chronicles Easy Company of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division from D-Day to the end of the European war, focusing on friendship, fraternity, and traumatic ground combat experiences. In contrast, *The Pacific* (2010) follows three Marines' lives throughout the harsh island-hopping battles against Japan, capturing the intense and often degrading realities of Pacific fighting. *Band of Brothers* has received favorable reviews for its extremely compelling storyline, strong character development, and realistic representation of troop camaraderie. *The Pacific* offers a grittier and more realistic portrayal of the horrors of the Pacific theater, reflecting the psychological toll of combat. However, its non-linear storytelling and shifting character emphasis might make it feel less unified, and some viewers might find it challenging to relate emotionally with the characters. This is also the case for *Masters of the Air*, which does not explore characters in depth and does not provide a realistic depiction of the war. In terms of realistic depiction of the war and hardships, *Band of Brothers* takes the lead whereas *Masters of the Air* comes last. The following table presents a detailed comparison of the trilogy from various key aspects.

Key Aspect	<i>Band of Brothers</i> (2001)	<i>The Pacific</i> (2010)	<i>Masters of the Air</i> (2024)
Plot Summary	Focuses on Easy Company, 506 <sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101 <sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, from D-Day to the conclusion of World War II in Europe.	Traces the wartime journeys of three US Marines from diverse backgrounds through the Pacific setting.	Centers on the airmen of the 8 <sup>th</sup> Air Force's 100 <sup>th</sup> B-17 bomb group, highlighting their significant role in the European aerial campaigns of World War II.
Character Depth	Provides an in-depth examination of individual troops, emphasizing the dynamics of friendship and personal growth under combat conditions.	Emphasizes the psychological burden of warfare, with a particular focus on trauma, isolation, and the individual tolls of conflict.	Investigates the psychological impact of high-casualty aerial combat on bomber crews, delving into themes of courage, loss, and duty. Provides limited in-depth exploration of characters.
Veteran Testimonies	Includes compelling interviews with surviving members of Easy Company in every episode, introducing each episode with firsthand testimonies.	Incorporates personal memories and testimonials from Pacific veterans, grounding the series in historical authenticity.	Does not include veteran testimonies, only photos of actual veterans at the end of the final episode.



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Portrayal of American Heroism	Emphasizes the valor, endurance, and resilience of Easy Company with a particular focus on the camaraderie formed in combat.	Highlights Marine soldiers' perseverance and sacrifices, using a more somber tone to emphasize the harsh reality of the Pacific War.	Portrays the valor of bomber crews within the context of World War II air raids, while idealizing and prioritizing American heroism and exceptionalism.
Romanticizing Warfare	Avoids excessive idealization of battle, preferring a balanced representation that reflects the hardships and challenges of conflict.	Employs a controlled heroism, emphasizing the persistent harshness and psychological difficulties of the Pacific setting.	Adopts a heroic portrayal of air combat, presenting the stark realities of high-risk missions in a romanticized context.
CGI and Visual Effects	Primarily utilizes practical effects, complemented by limited CGI to enhance large-scale battle sequences.	Relies on extensive CGI to render naval and jungle warfare, balanced with practical effects for realism.	Excessive use of CGI for aerial combat and bombing sequences. Exaggerated in some scenes.
Depiction of Women	Women appear minimally, primarily in supportive or caregiving roles in civilian scenes.	Women are more visible, often in civilian interactions; some focus on relationships.	Portrays very limited depiction of women, mostly in their personal relationships with men.
Portrayal of Ethnic and Racial Diversities	Limited portrayal; primarily focuses on a white, male unit with little diversity shown.	Asian populations depicted due to the Pacific setting, but little focus on racial diversity within US troops.	Portrays African American pilots in its final two episodes, including depictions of the Tuskegee Airmen but does not explore their characters in depth.

Table 1. [Comparison of *Band of Brothers*, *The Pacific* and *Masters of the Air*]

Compared to the larger body of mainstream World War II films, it can be asserted that each of these films and series presents American exceptionalism and heroism in different ways, shaped by their tone, historical accuracy, and thematic focus. The following presents a comparison of *Masters of the Air* to a selection of mainstream World War II films, in particular: *Saving Private Ryan* (1998, Dir. Steven Spielberg), *Pearl Harbor* (2001, Dir. Michael Bay), *Fury* (2014, Dir. David Ayer) and *Midway* (2019, Dir. Roland Emmerich). All these mainstream productions engage with American exceptionalism and heroism, but in distinct ways. While *Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Fury*, and *Midway* all depict American heroism, *Masters of the Air* embraces American exceptionalism by highlighting the strategic importance and immense sacrifices of the US Air Force in World War II. While *Pearl Harbor* and *Midway* highlight American triumph via better tactics and pure courage, *Saving Private Ryan* balances patriotic devotion with realism, depicting both the cruelty of battle and the sacrifice of the American soldier. *Fury* adopts a grittier tone, portraying US forces as tough but morally superior fighters. *Masters of the Air*, however, merges these elements, portraying the airmen of the 100<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group as emblematic of American resilience, innovation,

and righteousness. Despite acknowledging the war's hardships, the series ultimately affirms the indispensable, exceptionalist role of American air power in securing victory and reinforcing the idea that the US was not just a participant but the ultimate force in defeating tyranny.

Both *Saving Private Ryan* and *Masters of the Air* apply differing interpretations to the American idea of exceptionalism and heroism. *Saving Private Ryan* endorses the idea of American exceptionalism by depicting the US war effort as morally correct and the soldiers as embodying sacrifice, duty and camaraderie. Heroism is defined as noble self-sacrifice implying that American lives and ideals have to be earned. Whereas heroism is celebrated in *Masters of the Air*: it considers the psychological toll of war, the brutal reality of the nature of aerial combat and internal disputes within the US military. That type of heroism is no longer concerned with clear-cut moral victories but with making it through-endurance and heavy burden of leadership.

### Conclusion

*Masters of the Air* forms another example of mainstream Hollywood war-series where American exceptionalism is praised and soldiers hailed for their heroism. The series embraces the classical rhetoric of American heroism that saved Europe and determined the course of the war. It falls short to properly represent and do justice to women, African Americans and to provide a realistic depiction of the war. While the production has visually satisfying action scenes coupled with CGI effects to illustrate the horrors taking place in the B-17s, it does not evoke the sense of realism that was prevalent in *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*. In my view, among the four protagonists, Harry Crosby, portrayed by Anthony Boyle, is the first-person narrator and the most thoroughly developed character in the series. In the final episode, he quotes from Nietzsche: "Whoever fights monsters should take care not to become monsters themselves" (Spielberg and Hanks 40:58-41:07) stressing the danger of becoming what one opposes. In overall, acting skills are satisfying but characters are not explored in-depth.

Furthermore, the series reaffirms its mainstream orientation by neglecting to offer a thorough examination of women and African Americans, reducing them to mere sideshows. The lack of a thorough examination of African American pilots in *Masters of the Air* is noteworthy as it displays the marginalization of African American contributions to World War II, promoting a selective historical narrative that emphasizes white heroism while neglecting the complex issues of race and segregation. By recognizing the Tuskegee Airmen without fully addressing their challenges, such as prejudice and the quest for recognition, the series contributes to a simplified version of history. The mainstream media plays an important part in crafting this narrative by frequently emphasizing white experiences and heroics, concealing the obstacles encountered by African Americans. This exclusion has an influence on the larger cultural narrative by promoting an incomplete representation of World War II, sustaining an idealized, unified perspective on the war that excludes African American experiences. In conclusion, while *Masters of the Air* reinforces prevailing themes of American exceptionalism and heroism, it concurrently highlights the underrepresentation and superficial depiction of women and African Americans. This critical analysis exposes that, despite its engagement with exceptionalism and heroism, the series does not adequately address or authentically portray the experiences of marginalized groups, thus providing a limited perspective on the complexities of heroism and identity within the broader narrative.



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