

Seeing in the Dark: Film and the Slave Past

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Curiously, earnestly, anxiously we peer into the dark, and wish even for the blinding flash, or the light of northern skies to reveal him. But alas! he is still enveloped in darkness, and we return from the pursuit like a wearied and disheartened mother, (after a tedious and unsuccessful search for a lost child,) who returns weighed down with disappointment and sorrow. Speaking of marks, traces, possibles, and probabilities, we come before our readers.

—Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*¹

The incongruity of the grotesque...comes to a focus on the oxymoron: one hears silence, peoples loneliness, feels distance, and sees in the dark.

—Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Towards History*²

Django's Mirror

About halfway through *Django Unchained* we get one of *those* Quentin Tarantino scenes, and yet it is a trick reminiscent of Velásquez: Jamie Foxx's Django, dressed in a shiny blue Lord Fauntleroy outfit, kills a pair of white overseers, one of whom has a shirt festooned with tacked-on bible pages, just as they prepare to bull-whip a terrified female slave for breaking eggs.³ In this sequence, Tarantino creates a strange visual triangle. We see the scene from

Django's perspective: the surprised black woman and shocked white man look directly at him; just to the right of the tree to which the woman is tied, an old, cloudy mirror leans against a pile of bricks; it points directly at Django, reversing his gaze. Yet the mirror reflects Django's image only partially: we see his body, his cartoonish costume, but his face is strangely obscured. We cannot quite see his face in the mirror. It is a deeply unsettling shot that seems to take apart the very act of looking—there must be *something* in that mirror. What are we looking at? Who is doing the seeing and who is being seen?



Figure 1: Django's mirror. *Django Unchained*, Weinstein Company, Columbia Pictures/Sony Pictures, 2012.

Perhaps the confusion here has something to do with the shock these ante-bellum characters feel at this sudden intervention into their generic scene. It is as if they see through the impossible Django, to the camera and the film crew as well, or even to the cinema audience itself, as if Tarantino is reminding us, live, that this is a fantasy of historical revenge, that film has here intruded on history. In the actual past, there was no Django, no stopping it; indeed, there was no camera, no record even, only that hazy blankness. But when Tarantino mirrors this absence back on to us, with the naturalizing perspective of the camera revealing only a blind spot at the precise location of historical subjectivity, the scene comes to visualize our own blankness, our own strange absence: it is also *our* face that is missing in Django's mirror. How, the shot makes us ask, can we be retrospectively absent from our own past? The narrative satisfactions of Django's impossible presence (and vengeance) are undercut by a literally forced reflection on our own impossible absence. Film itself has been troubled in some fundamental way by the subject of historical slavery, and vice versa.

Django was one of three major studio films about slavery released in 2012 and 2013; the others were Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*⁴ and Steve McQueen's *12 Years A Slave*.⁵ These films, however, do not all pursue the same strategy. *Lincoln*, yet another entry in a long line of white savior films aimed at the consciences of contemporary liberals—a reboot of *Amistad*⁶ with fewer black characters—is an unconsciously retrograde film, and an exemplar of what I want

to call the neo-abolitionist film genre, in which black humanity and white virtue are ritually and problematically re-established under the auspices of slavery. This pattern is familiar in recent Hollywood treatments of both slavery and, by analogy, Jim Crow, and also includes films such as *The Help*, *Cloud Atlas*, *The Free State of Jones*, and *Green Book*.⁷ All of these films feature historical white characters who heroically insist that black people are people. Yet, in a pervasive irony, these pseudo-woke fantasias return us to the very historical moments they claim to move us past, and their bizarre ‘re-humanization’ of historical blacks is suffused—implicitly (through erasure) or explicitly (through spectacularized violence)—with the very brutality they allegedly expose, but also re-create, in a kind of ritual. The result is a form of racial catharsis, a cleansed whiteness for the moral present, in which anti-racism looks towards, and is contained by, the past.

Tarantino and McQueen’s films, in contrast, pursue less facile tasks than congratulating contemporary viewers for their retrospective opposition to slavery; indeed, they try to unsettle the ritual of neo-abolitionism from within. In doing so, however, they open up a panoply of questions about responsibility. Is *Django*’s postmodern humor disrespectful, or on the contrary the only way to take on such a tortured topic? Is Tarantino’s signature fascination with (or fetishization of) blackness problematic, or even racist? Is *12 Years*’ gorgeous naturalism somehow inappropriate, like a beautiful canvas depicting a slaughter? Do the generic requirements of Hollywood film necessarily undercut the reckoning with slavery we so desperately need? Is there something pornographic about these films? Is the depiction of black people as slaves the form of black subjectivity (or abjection) with which Hollywood films and audiences are, disturbingly, most comfortable?

Not surprisingly given this minefield of aesthetic politics, many critics have seen these films as deeply problematic. The cultural critic David J. Leonard argues that *Django* is more about its white director than its black subjects; it represents a “testament to the power of whiteness” whose “focus . . . [is] ultimately on revering a divided white self.”⁸ Political theorist Adolph Reed Jr. cheekily compares *Django* to the racist film *The Help*, arguing that Tarantino, in classic neoliberal fashion, obscures the material relations of slavery by working through an essentially meaningless symbolic narrative order. *Django* sanitizes slavery by “dehistoricizing” it, creating instead “cartoons” which “take the place of the actual relations of exploitation which anchored the regime it depicts.” “*Django*’s quest is entirely individualist,” says Reed Jr. “[H]e never intends to challenge slavery and never does.”⁹ Ishmael Reed also compares *Django* to *The Help*, adding that “Tarantino . . . apparently believes that progress for blacks has been guided by an elite, which doesn’t explain the hundreds of revolts throughout this hemisphere which weren’t guided by German bounty hunters nor Abraham Lincoln nor a Talented Tenth Negro.”¹⁰ In such accounts, *Django*’s postmodern façade belies a conservative, or even reactionary, politics.

12 Years, though a less outwardly controversial film, has nevertheless elicited similar criticisms. The African-Americanist Robert J. Patterson argues that “the movie’s representation of black inequality privileges behavioral explanations

over structural ones,” and wonders if it can be any basis for black politics in the present.¹¹ Frank B. Wilderson III, in an Afro-Pessimist critique, argues that *12 Years* tries, and fails, to accommodate slavery into a fundamentally liberal narrative structure bent on “equilibrium,” because black “social death ruptures the assumptive logic of narrative writ large.” From this perspective, film narrative cannot move past an anti-blackness which is in fact constitutive of it; it is suffused with black social death in a way that cannot be resolved by any story.¹² Taking a different tack, the film critic Stephanie Zacharek argues that *12 Years* “comes off as weirdly antiseptic, history made safe through art,” an exercise in aestheticism more than political critique, with its focus on authenticity and composition an incongruous strategy for a film about such an important topic.¹³

These critics highlight how these films put almost unbearable political pressure on the filmic vehicle itself. A slave film must account for the racial politics of Hollywood, the material conditions of historical slavery and racism, the implications for contemporary black politics, the ontological problems of black social death, and the challenges slavery poses for both narrative and aesthetics. Any film about slavery, it seems, will always be both too much and not enough.¹⁴ In contrast to this pattern of critical frustration, I want to take a step back and to ask different questions about artistic responsibility. The film scholar Michael Boyce Gillespie has argued that we should move past evaluating black film in the unfulfillable terms of “an extradiegetic responsibility . . . to embody the black lifeworld or to provide answers in the sense of social problem solving.” “Black film,” contends Gillespie, “must be understood as art, not prescription.” What would happen if we read these films in Gillespie’s terms, considering “what a film does rather than what a film must do”?¹⁵ That is: what if these films are actually *about* the problems their critics have raised? What if they are, as political artworks, about the problems of justice in historical representation, about framing a silence we must be made to see? What if the point of these films is to make us look at how we look at the past?

In what follows, I argue that *Django* and *12 Years* develop in response to the problem of aesthetic responsibility to historical violence formal techniques that are complementary in their shared self-defeating purpose: they work, as films about slavery, by not working, as films. The contradictions these films foster between history, narrative, and filmic naturalism prove in the end so irresolvable that they rupture the illusory totality that film seems to bring to our past. They force us to confront the violence inherent not only in history, but in how we continue to look at it—and in the story those looks tell. In *Django*, this means most of all forms of tension: meeting horror with humor and play; gorgeous, allusive cinematography and wantonly inappropriate comic narrative; relentless performativity and self-defeating dénouement. *12 Years* complex depiction of slavery, in parallel, involves provoking a tension between historicism and naturalism, between the painfully hollow echoes of black voices and the lush simulacrum of the past that comes to frame them. At stake in these films, I contend, is the rejection or even explosion of particular American rituals of

separation from the past, and of the way cinema can wrap-up historical violence in narrative enclosure. The slave past is transformed from a moral parable for the present into an ongoing crisis.

Violence and Temporal Form

The tendency to focus on issues of responsibility when we look at films that look at the slave past speaks to a persistent fantasy about historical violence in American culture, *writ large*: that it is exceptional; that it is a shocking foreground to be cast into relief against a presumably nonviolent background; that it should be staged as a spectacle that makes clear its unusual character—its divergence from the putatively humane norms in which we, in the moral present, live. In narratives about the antebellum South, slavery's supposed peculiarity is continually re-established in how we look back at it. This pattern connects slavery to a very old cultural tradition, much older than film, which requires us to *stage* violence as a kind of spectacular ritual, as something which is, we must remind ourselves, past: the story we always tell about violence is that it is over. If, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues in *Time and Narrative*, all narrative takes place in an implicitly completed past,¹⁶ narratives about violence are suffused with a particular temporal character: a central purpose of the spectacle is the resolution of the scandalous eruption of violence figured as finished, so that the satisfactions of plot resolution become imbricated with the re-establishment of a peaceful equilibrium in human affairs. Not only is the violence *over*, but we, in the present, are excepted from it; indeed, we are retrospectively shocked. This is the plot we impose on the nearly endless carnage of our past, in which historical violence is quarantined so that we might measure our distance from it.

Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's work on ancient Assyrian art might seem a strange place to go to explore this point, but I follow them so far afield because they are in search of a fundamental alternative to the way we tell stories about violence in Western culture—one which, I contend, parallels the approach of Tarantino and McQueen's films, and their radical revision of the depiction of the slave past. In "The Forms of Violence," Bersani and Dutoit re-imagine palace reliefs from the ninth-century BC as the unlikely impetus for a reconsideration of the relationship between aesthetics and violence.¹⁷ Assyrian art, according to them, is usually seen as shockingly "repellent."¹⁸ It depicts the "defeat, humiliation and slaughter of Assyria's enemies" with an "obvious relish" that is "profusely gory" that confirms suspicions of Assyrians as "intensely nationalist, imperialistic and violent people."¹⁹ It is not just the violence which repels the contemporary viewer, but the casualness of its depiction, the way it fails to foreground violence as the focal point of a scene. Instead, the scenes depicted are multiform, anti-climactic, and indeed, anti-narrative, "devaluing the content of any one scene of violence."²⁰ Violence, though shockingly commonplace, is afforded no particular pride of place—it is just one theme among many. Bersani and Dutoit describe this tendency as an apparently incongruous "ele-

ment of play”—the way that these scenes of Assyrian bloodshed are enmeshed in a confusing network of horizontal and vertical distraction, with some other scenes also casually violent, some not. Our eyes are meant to *move* through this smorgasbord, this riot, and not to linger on centralized spectacles.²¹ Violence, in this artistic tradition, strikingly lacks the spectacular dimension it is so often afforded in Western art.

Indeed, Assyrian art seems almost hostile:

Nothing could be more antagonistic to the narrativizing of violence which has characterized Western humanist culture. Narrativity sustains the glamour of historical violence. It creates violence as an isolated, identifiable topic or subject. A liberal humanist tradition has trained us to locate violence historically—that is, as a certain type of eruption against a background of generally nonviolent human experience. In this view, violence can be accounted for through historical accounts of the circumstances in which it occurs. Violence is thus reduced to the level of a plot; it can be isolated, understood, perhaps mastered and eliminated.²²

Such a *de rigueur* narrativization of violence is inherent to the ethic of aesthetic responsibility among Tarantino and McQueen’s critics. Indeed, cultural critics tend to be most reproving when narratives do not go out of their way, in something like a ritual, to condemn violence as exceptional, because the result is the possibility that violence could go unresolved. “Few things are censored more harshly by the humanistic ethic,” argue Bersani and Dutoit, than an ‘aesthetic complacency’ in the images and language of violence.”²³ It is as if we require all visualizations of violence to be narrativized; as if we recognize at some level the potential threat of contagion violence represents; as if filmed violence, if not carefully quarantined, could show us shapes in the mirror we do not want to see.

Moreover, Bersani and Dutoit insist that, in a powerful irony, violence quarantined through narrative becomes violent at the level of form: “the artist’s privileging of the subject of violence encourages a mimetic excitement focused on the very scene of violence.”²⁴ The paradox of narrativized violence is that by staging it as an outrageous spectacle—by turning violence into a historical stage on which we can act out our contemporary condemnation—we threaten to turn violence into a strange form of political virtue. Lurking inside this familiar pattern is the story violence itself always tells: that this is a special case, that soon this will be over, that this is a purging, a catharsis, a purification necessary for a virtuous future. Looking backwards from such a virtuous future, the white filmgoer cries at the slave film or the Civil Rights costume drama, secretly content at the depth of her retrospective outrage, an outrage that is in fact a political pleasure, or at least a relief. Pushed to its limits, the problem of the temporality of narrativized violence prompts a harsh question: what if a filmed lynching unwittingly reiter-

ates the relationship with violence inherent in actual lynching—black suffering for the purpose of civic cleansing? What if, by sequestering violence in the past, we end up, in this paradoxical way, reproducing it for the present?

Perhaps no director in Hollywood history has been more castigated for aesthetic complacency with violence than Quentin Tarantino. However, I would contend that *Django*, along with McQueen's *12 Years*, in fact pursues a radical re-aestheticization of violence along the lines of Bersani and Dutoit's readings of Assyrian art. To repurpose the latter's words, although Tarantino and McQueen, like the Assyrians, "appear to accumulate scenes of horror with a singular complacency," the "violent *spectacle* never maintains a privileged position" in their films.²⁵ I recognize that this may seem an incredible claim: both directors, after all, have littered their films with scenes of seemingly spectacular violence: for example, *12 Years*' awful rape scene, or *Django*'s multiple lynchings. Yet if violence is usually rendered into a plot, these films go to extreme lengths to trouble that tendency—because there is so much violence, filmed in such disruptive ways, that narrative resolution becomes essentially impossible. McQueen and Tarantino's films unframe violence, or even unplot it; they make violence erupt from its narrative shell, and in so doing, refuse to spare us its implications for the present. The stakes of this eruption are, again following Bersani and Dutoit, nothing less than "our moral relation to history," because "only a radically aesthetic perspective on violence will allow us both to recognize and to redefine our constant implication in violence."²⁶

Django: The Cruel Festival

How *should* we look at slavery? A crucial problem looms here: because slavery was always already about looking; that is, as a system of domination, it required not only forced labor but constant negotiations with the visual, with the observation of observation. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman shows how spectacles were central to how slavery functioned as a system.²⁷ She argues that the archetypal atrocities of abolitionist literature—for example, the whipping episodes in Solomon Northrup's original *12 Years a Slave*²⁸ or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*²⁹—which sought to mobilize contemporary Northern audiences against slavery, can nevertheless blur into the very "scenes of subjection" through which slavery was perpetuated. The auction block, the coffle, the whipping post, the lustful nighttime visit to the slave quarters were not, according to Hartman, part of a shocking order which, once revealed, must necessarily provoke sympathy in any reasonable (Northern, white, modern) person. Instead, they were all part of "the spectacular nature of black suffering" which abolitionist texts (and, by extension, neo-abolitionist films) tend to reproduce even as they seek liberal redress against slavery.³⁰ Hartman, crucially, does not stop there: she connects such generic moments of horror with the allegedly positive scenes from slave life that are so often seen as a tenuous outside to subjection: for example,

the levity of the shuck-time dance, the domestic sovereignty of the slave cabin, or the patient defiance of slave Christianity. On her account, even these free moments were performances, meant to be acted; and they were *scenes*, meant to be seen, and thus formed an essential part of the architecture of racial subjection. From this perspective, it is hard not to think of *12 Years* and the midnight dances Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbinder) forces on his slaves, or the overseer John Tibbeats' (Paul Dano) disquieting rendition of the song "Run, Nigger, Run": moments of supposed respite transformed into grotesque performances of respite, thus asserting the master's control over the totality of slave life.

Hartman's critique marks a controversial contrast with the work of historians who have emphasized what Eugene Genovese calls "the world the slaves made"³¹—the self-fashioned outside to bondage that has been so crucial to scholars of slavery since the 1970s.³² For Hartman, scenes from the supposedly organic, resistant world of blacks under slavery were in fact an essential component of slavery itself, because, far from asserting a black humanity outside of the system, they functioned to contain humanity within that system. Black humanity was not the outside to slavery, but the very core of what the slaveowners had to own. Moreover, it is this subsuming of the totality of black life that links the spectacles of slavery to later modes of subjection: for Hartman, this aspect of slavery strangely endures in post-emancipation popular cultural forms such as Tom Shows and minstrelsy—the spectacular dimension of slavery has proven disturbingly durable, extending even to contemporary popular culture.

How can this spell be broken? If you film slavery, the visual fabrics of film, its forms of created sight, always threaten to resemble the acts of seeing and being seen on which slavery sustained itself as a system. It is this perverse Reconstruction that a film about slavery must confront. And so what is required is a particular filmic form that tries simultaneously to show slavery and show the problems with showing it, at the same time. As we will see in *Django*, the only way to film slavery is to unfilm film itself.

Set in the late 1850s in Texas and Mississippi, *Django* is the story of a slave, the titular Django (Jamie Foxx), freed by a bounty hunter, King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) who eventually trains Django in his profession. After the two men become friends, they hatch a plan to free Django's wife Boomhilda Von Shaft (Kerry Washington), owned by the planter Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio), by posing as prospective buyers of mandingo fighters—enslaved men forced to engage in what are essentially human cockfights. The plan goes awry when Candie discovers Django and Boomhilda's relationship, and after Schultz shoots Candie, Django is captured and nearly lynched. But he escapes and returns to rescue Boomhilda, in the process murdering Candie and his family and burning down his house.

The issues of propriety with Tarantino's film—its humor, its sense of post-modern play, its arch staginess, its casual reproduction of minstrelsy, Tarantino's characteristic reliance on exaggerated violence as a plot release—can seem at best incongruous with its subject matter, and at worst hideously insensitive.

However, as the cartoonish melodrama of the plot suggests, *Django* is acutely aware of slavery's grotesque intimacy with spectacle, performance, and even humor—what Hartman describes as slavery's tendency to “wed cruelty and festivity.” Long before Tarantino did, slavery already involved “the pleasure of terror and the terror of pleasure.”³³ Indeed, in Hartman's work, these seeming discrepancies actually speak to the core of slavery itself, and Tarantino here carnivalizes a slave society that was itself already carnivalesque. The film's relentless focus on watching, performance, melodrama, costumery, acting—indeed, on something like “sceneing”—exists in an operative tension with the buried skein of violence which is always threatening to erupt and, when it finally does, comes as a relief, or at least a release. But it is also important to note that what is realistic here is in fact the cruel festival of slavery itself. What is *not* realistic, however, is what the cinema audience expects, demands, and what Hollywood cinema, almost by its very nature, must provide: the *ersatz* resolution of the gunfight Jubilee Tarantino stages (with extreme irony, twice) in the film's self-sabotaging *denouement*. In short, *Django*'s overwrought depiction of slavery, its paradoxically satisfying *and* uncomfortable portrayal of one of history's greatest crimes as a playful postmodern romp, is in fact a recasting of the performativity of historical slavery against the form of Hollywood film. Tarantino is grotesquing a grotesque. It is this second level of cruel festivity, this double-performativity, through which the film breaks itself, in the process shattering the narrativized spectacle of slavery on film.

Django falls apart at a precise moment: when the word “MISSISSIPPI” crawls across the screen about half way through. When Schulz and Django come to the South in order to rescue Django's wife Broomhilda, the film becomes a riot of performance, a festival of overacting. “When we visit these plantations, we will be putting on an act. You will be playing a character,” Schultz says to Django, describing a relationship that often verges on that of director and actor. We see this dynamic especially in the numerous scenes (we might call them acting scenes) in which performance becomes exponential, heaping attention onto itself. For example, take two of the film's most unnerving sequences: in the first, Django, posing as a black slaver and trainer of mandingo fighters, is forced to watch, seemingly unperturbed, as two slaves fight to the death in an Egyptian-themed brothel. In the second, Django, having travelled to Candie's Candieland plantation, allegedly in order to purchase a particular fighter, is forced to watch, again unmoved, as slave patrollers sick dogs on a runaway. These scenes make a certain amount of nominal sense: Candie is testing the suspicious pair of Schultz and Django to find out if they really are who they say they are. But these casual murders are undercut by a monstrous staginess. Each scene is as much staged by Candie himself as it is by Tarantino, and we get a multilayered look at the scenics of subjugation: Jamie Foxx plays a freed slave-turned bounty-hunter posing as a black slaver, but as part of the act, he is forced to witness (and act nonplussed about) slaves being brutally tortured and killed, scenes which are put on for him by Candie precisely to vet him. As the visit to Candieland gradually descends

from ruse to farce, complete with Stephen's (Samuel L. Jackson) winking Uncle Tom act and Candie's outrageous dinner table lecture on the phrenological implications of black skulls, the overlapping levels of performance create an almost unbearable tension. We look on at the spectacle of Django watching a spectacle that he must pretend is not a spectacle, thus calling attention to the brutal stageness of slavery itself. The familiar ritual of retrospective outrage is suffused with layers of performance and observation, in what becomes a violent burlesque.

What begins to come into focus here is Tarantino's alternative aestheticization of slavery, one which wallows in melodrama in order to reveal the violence of melodrama and the melodrama of violence: the way we use sensationalized narratives to process violence, to launder it, to render it palatable. By insisting on a hysterical specularly in the destruction of black bodies, a winking form of black humor designed specifically to offend the modern liberal audience through its outrageous glibness, Tarantino forces us to confront a central fact of historical violence against blacks: from colonial Virginia to Emmett Till to contemporary videos of police executions, it is so often staged as a show. Sometimes this show is a brutal demonstration of racial discipline; sometimes it is a neo-abolitionist morality play, but it is the show itself that he wants us to see. This is another connection between on-screen lynchings and actual ones, and Tarantino's massively inappropriate archness functions to make us see the violence inherent in the spectacle itself.

In short, in *Django*, the whole thing is a show, and everyone seems to know it. The film, paradoxically realistic in its outsize melodrama, reaches for how slavery worked as a system of power, how it functioned. Slavery in *Django* is a kind of social illusionism, a set of enforced appearances that claim the status of natural but are in reality obviously constructed, and which depend at least as much on the performance of belief as they do on actual belief. This is why a crucial trope in many slave narratives, from Northrup's memoir to Octavia Butler's neo-slave narrative *Kindred* one-hundred and twenty-six years later³⁴, is the breaking down of the free black until he or she is reduced to the (violently) enforced performance of something like 'slaveness': a crucial element of the system's brutality is to reveal not just that everyone is acting, but that everyone knows it. Slavery is sustained not only through raw power and its accompanying racist ideology, but through a much more sinister lived make-believe, a power that flows not through claims on the actual but instead through the as-if—the enforced performance that comes from realizing that race is like a camera that is always on. Tarantino, in turn, forces us into an uncomfortable place: we must learn what we must suspect every slave had to learn the hard way: the true horror that revelation does not matter, that the exposure of slavery's evil or the establishment of the humanity of the slaves are false antidotes, pale backwards cries of "all lives matter."

Such cries remain disturbingly familiar in recent Hollywood treatments of slavery, including neo-abolitionist films which fixate on black suffering and white redemption. Even relatively nuanced films from this genre, such as *Free State*

of *Jones*, ultimately function, like so many of Hartman's scenes of subjection, to return us to a case for black humanity made under the auspices of slavery, suffusing narratives with an abjection that outruns any humanist or liberal resolution.³⁵ This pattern of 'dehumanizing' the slaves is of course not limited to Hollywood; discussing how it appears in the work of American historians, Walter Johnson has argued that such narratives "implicitly and unwittingly suggest that the case for enslaved humanity is in need of being proven again and again." Indeed, for Johnson, "A belief in the 'dehumanization' of enslaved people is locked in an inextricable embrace with the very history of racial abjection it ostensibly confronts. All this while implicitly asserting the unimpeachable rectitude and 'humanity' of latter-day observers."³⁶ The recurring retrospective fascination with the slave past, in this context, is transformed from an ostensible object lesson in confronting oppression or establishing liberal personhood into something like the obsessive repetition of the visual and narrative technologies of bondage itself. In a bitter paradox, slavery is reproduced through a kind of visual circularity: the way we look at it is descended in part from the way it worked.

The function of neo-abolitionist film, then, is not to make us remember, but in fact to make us forget. Paradoxically, such narratives, ostensibly about reconnecting us with our roots, actually function to separate us from their implications. We are reassured that, since we now know, looking backwards, that black people are people, slavery was a scandalous exception to the march of human progress. What we forget is the most salient fact about slavery: the slaveowners already knew their slaves were people. The central historical problem of slavery is not the dehumanization of the slaves, but the dehumanization of the slaveowners—the fantasy of temporal segregation in which we imagine what they did to be outside of the purview of a humanity always figured in terms of a moral present. Instead of examining the possibility of a disturbing coterminousness in our constructions of slavery and humanity, we launder the suffering of people from the past into a form of contemporary virtue. Certain things become invisible through the virtuous tears of the liberal viewer of the slave film: how the world we live in is "the world the slaveowners made"³⁷; how, indeed, there are more slaves alive right now than at any time in human history. This is the neo-abolitionist ritual that I contend Tarantino explodes in *Django*.

The Gunfight Jubilee

D.W. Griffiths once admitted that he initially just flipped through Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*³⁸, which Griffiths would eventually adapt into *The Birth of a Nation*³⁹, until a particular scene caught his attention:

I could just see these Klansman in a movie with their robes flying . . . We had all sorts of runs-to-the rescue in pictures and horse operas . . . Now I could see a chance to do this ride-to-the-rescue on a grand scale. Instead of saving one little Nell of the Plains, this ride would be to save a nation.⁴⁰

By “horse opera” Griffiths means one of early film’s most important genres, what we now call the Western, and this generically vital “rescue” is a crucial element of the narrative form Griffiths did so much to create: the Hollywood feature film. Griffith’s description reveals the extent to which his narrative innovations, visual imagination, and politics are of a piece: as the political theorist Michael Rogin describes *Birth*, “American movies were born . . . in a racist epic.”⁴¹ And yet the ride to the rescue is precisely what *Django*, ninety-seven years after *Birth*, must still contain, and cannot. If the Western is in a certain sense always about the birth of a nation, it should come as no coincidence that a Western is precisely what *Django* fails to be—it is, in fact, a film about its own impossibility.

Westerns end in gunfights, the most American of catharses. But a Western about slavery presents intractable generic problems. If the purpose of a film, as with *Birth*, is the celebration of the foundation of modern America as a white polity, then the Klan can ride in to save the day: “here comes the cavalry,” as the cliché goes. Yet *Django* cannot end effectively because there is no plausible way to depict the saving of the day—indeed, it can only stage its own allusive klan-cum-cavalry ride in the middle of the film, playing it for incongruous laughs. The key moment in the film’s abortive third act comes, instead, when Schultz kills Candie rather than shaking his hand. Shultz’s murder-suicide essentially betrays the entire purpose of the journey depicted in the film, the rescue of Broomhilda. Diegetically, it is a moment of fatal stupidity. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist,” says Schultz to Django, almost certainly a kind of metafictional apology from Tarantino himself—not a director known for his restraint. The requirements of Hollywood narrative are central here: given the immense depravity of (even this darkly comical) plantation order—Schultz flashes back to the murder of the slave D’Artagnan (Ato Essandoh) just before shooting Candie—it is not as if the film, heretofore a Western, can simply have Django and Broomhilda, purchased one more time, walk off into the sunset. There must be a climax of some sort.

The climax that follows—*Django*’s ludicrous gunfight Jubilee—is cinema archly staging the ride to the rescue that never happened—a brutal send-up of the neo-abolitionist fantasy of filmic redemption. It is not a catharsis but an aporia, a hollow place that in some sense intentionally ruins the film. (It is tempting to call Django a “Southern,” but a Southern is just a Western that does not end well.) The cartoonishness of the immense bloodbath that ensues is played for laughs: an endless number of inept white gunmen shoot each other so many times that the dead become little more than spurting bags of voluminous costume blood. Three set pieces follow, each more absurd than the last: an aborted lynching in which Django’s assailants speak at length directly to his penis; a slapstick interlude where the imprisoned Django convinces three boobs (including the egregious Tarantino himself) to release him, and then immediately kills them; and, finally, the *second* shootout and subsequent Technicolor dynamiting of Candieland, over which the credits roll. The absurdity here—the way the film essentially flags its own grasping at narrative closure—frames the central absence it is actually trying to depict, the final reckoning that never happened. This is an ironic melodrama, a

movie that keeps trying to be a Western until it breaks the Western. It dashes the ultimate American cinematic genre on the rocks of its own inadequacy to account for a central aspect of American history. The film disrupts generic catharsis by making it outwardly ridiculous on its own terms, as of course it is, historically speaking. Like the final scene in *Inglorious Basterds*⁴², in which cinema itself destroys the assembled leadership of the Third Reich, *Django* troubles our need for just endings by overdoing, even luxuriating in, the preposterous narrative closures film can imagine and indeed, naturalize. Tarantino, then, re-opens the civil war always latent inside of film—and race as well—between performativity and naturalizing form. *Django* thus becomes a mirror to its own impossibility, a realistically unrealistic film about the impossibility of filming slavery. It is as if the DNA of Hollywood film, originally created in part to retroactively justify slavery, must, by some chemical law, unravel if ever returned to that key juncture again.

Lincoln's Door, Solomon's Letter: the Camera as Amanuensis

Ben Burt, the Sound Designer for *Lincoln*, was unsatisfied with merely simulating the sound of Lincoln's carriage door, so he went to the Smithsonian Institution and recorded the sound made by Lincoln's actual carriage door. He also recorded the tick-tock of Lincoln's pocket watch and the groaning floorboards of Lincoln's favored Washington church.⁴³ Such exactitude is in some sense a limit case for historical realism: the reuse of actual objects from the past. Here is film as "authentic" historical recreation, film as re-enactment. And yet this painstaking attention to the accuracy of sonic minutiae takes place in a film about slavery without significant black characters. The scrupulous verisimilitude *Lincoln* lavishes on period detail must stand in some relation to its expurgation of black subjectivity. That is, such ultra-realism is paradoxically a part of the film's own complicity in historical misrepresentation; it is realism papering over its own historical aporia. The extent of this aporia is breathtaking: in a film about white abolitionists pursuing the end of the erasure of black humanity, that erasure is itself preserved, so that the slave past remains enslaved. The sound of Lincoln's door is a fanatical displacement, an absurd focus on the perfect recreation of trivia in light of the impossibility of reproducing what most matters. Beneath the exactitude of filmic recreation lies an unaccountable grotesque; behind the tiny squeak of Lincoln's carriage door lies the massive silence of millions of people.

The silence of those millions looms very large in both the original memoir of Solomon Northrup and in McQueen's film version, as it must in all slave narratives. The status of black speech in such texts is a historiographical minefield. The historian Ulrich B. Phillips infamously declared that all slave narratives are unreliable as historical sources: "ex-slave narratives in general . . . were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful."⁴⁴ That such a dismissal was a little too convenient for Phillips' sympathetic representation of slavery seems obvious today, but historians followed his prescription for

much of the 20th century. In the 1970s and 1980s, African-Americanists such as John Blassingame, Charles T. Davis, and Henry Luis Gates finally overturned Phillips' prohibition, working closely with slave narratives as historical sources. At stake, of course, was not just accuracy, but self-determination: for Davis and Gates, slave narratives represent "textual evidence of the self-consciousness of the ex-slave and...the formal basis upon which an entire [black] narrative tradition has been constructed"; they "represent the attempts of blacks to *write themselves into being*," and so give us invaluable windows into the emergence of African-American literature, historicity, and political personhood.⁴⁵

However, other scholars have put real pressure on this picture of recovery. The problem with slave narratives is that they are highly conventional in terms of both plot and language. This fact *does* have to do with white abolitionists; as the literary critic James Olney says of the original *12 Years a Slave*, "[w]e may think it pretty fine writing and awfully literary, but the fine writer is clearly David Wilson rather than Solomon Northup."⁴⁶ David Wilson was Northup's amanuensis, a white abolitionist who recorded and edited the former slave's testimony into the text of the memoir. Highlighting how "the white amanuensis/sentimental novelist [lays] his mannered style over the faithful history as received from Northup's lips," Olney quotes a passage that must be said to be at least novelistic: "They seat themselves at the rustic table—the males on one side, the females on the other. The two between whom there may have been an exchange of tenderness, invariably manage to sit opposite; for the omnipresent Cupid disdains not to hurl his arrows into the simple hearts of slaves."⁴⁷ Is this a patina of generic language applied to an authentic historical voice, or a painted silence? The literary scholar John Sekora goes as far as to say of slave narratives that the "genre as a whole is defined by the suppression of the slave voice." In an extraordinary irony, "[s]ilence, the suppression of selfhood, is a necessary condition of being in the slave narrative"—these texts suppress the very black subjectivity around which they are organized.⁴⁸ Whether or not we accept the harshness of Sekora's judgment, the problem remains: what we most need to recover in these texts is what they most threaten to occlude.⁴⁹

Phillips, then, is unfortunately at least partly right. There is a false equivalence to the idea that since slaveowners' records count, so should those of slaves, because slaveowners were never a group systematically denied literacy, historicity, and humanity. If we want to hear the voice of a slaveowner, we can consult thousands of texts from colonial times to the late nineteenth century. If we want to hear the voice of a slave, we have about a hundred antebellum narratives, and the WPA Slave Narrative Project records from the 1930s—both of which present considerable methodological problems, mostly due to the ambiguous position of white editors, ghostwriters, publicists, and interviewers. The documents with which historians like Phillips traditionally worked—the diaries, letters, and ledgers of the slaveowners—must have a different status for historians simply because they can be corroborated by thousands of similar documents. The surviving narratives of slaves, on the other hand, stand out because of their relatively

small number, and so the few narratives we do have must speak for a whole lost world. To corroborate what Frederick Douglass thought about slavery, we must look to the abolitionists who curated and edited people like Solomon Northrup, or, alternatively, gain the ability to commune with the dead.

These issues of speech and writing and their vexed historical status are foregrounded from the very first shots of the film version of *12 Years*, shots which establish its central concern: the abiding and irresolvable tension between pseudo-historical voices of Northrup's characters and the immense and terrible visual naturalism of McQueen's camera. The film begins *in medias res*, with a shot of the free black-turned-slave protagonist Solomon's (Chiwetel Ejiofor) hands running through cane, followed by a cut to his failed efforts to use berry-juice as ink to write a letter to friends in New York in order to ask for rescue. Yet the juice does not work as ink, and he fails to write, in some sense, the account which we are currently watching. McQueen then cuts to the title card, in handwritten script on antique white paper, and so the film becomes the letter that would have freed Northrup, the letter that he was never able to write, the letter which we can never read. In the original text, of course, when Northrup writes about not being able to write, he is not himself writing: we have only the words of his white amanuensis, David Wilson. The letter Northrup might have written with the berry juice is the impossible historical real here, and the film is in some sense about the impossibility of actually being what it looks like: the past.

12 Years follows Northrup's memoir fairly faithfully, tracking the hellish journey in which he was stolen from life as a free black in New York into an increasingly perilous existence as a slave in Louisiana. Following a generic allegorical progression meant to illustrate the evils of slavery—a pattern familiar to readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—Northrup, given the slave name Platt, is first owned by the relatively kind master William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), but is later 'sold down the river' to the cruel and rapacious Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender), in whose employ he befriends the unfortunate slave woman Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), whom he will later be forced to leave behind. Following years of hard labor, Northrup is only delivered from Epps' tyranny when he is finally rescued by a white friend from New York.

As we have seen with Solomon's letter, *12 Years* is suffused from the start with historical loss; the film's time travel continually undercuts itself. We go back in time only to discover that there is something deeply missing in this past we can see so clearly. This absence speaks to the inherent problem of filming slavery: the more naturalistic the film becomes, the more scrupulously attentive to the cadences of antique speech, the peculiarities of period costume, and the possibilities of razor-sharp location shooting, the perfectly re-created anterior world we seek is depopulated of the people we most need to see. When *12 Years'* characters reproduce the already mediated words of Solomon Northrup's memoir, the result is thus not to extend the pseudo-documentary accuracy of Lincoln's door but to undercut it. *12 Years* is, in fact, *about* the crisis of historical representation slavery must always provoke: to attempt to be faithful to the

antebellum world becomes to highlight the harrowing mediation through which we approach that world. It is as if, like Tarantino, McQueen must occasionally intrude into his own film to remind us of its impossibility. Only in *12 Years*, the tenor of the intervention is inverted; whereas Tarantino disrupts his own narrative by highlighting the intrusion of film into historical problems, McQueen highlights the intrusion of historical problems into film. What appears as real is always simultaneously undercut at its very moment of presentation by the evocation of historical absence, of distance. It is a realism so real that it scratches against the camera lens.

12 Years a Slave is dominated by the tension between its reproduction of the allegedly historical sensationalist text and the naturalism of Hollywood cinema. The film's faithfulness to Solomon Northrup's memoir means that it contains a core of tropes, characters, and dialogue taken directly from abolitionist literature. Northrup, like Frederick Douglass or Harriet Beecher Stowe, was a political writer engaged in an international political movement, and such texts reflect a clear attempt to harness the generic structures of sensational fiction to the liberation struggle. Sensational novels also, however, often involve a didacticism so extreme that, to modern ears, they stretch the bounds of verisimilitude, turning dialogue into exposition and character into type. And so the film adaptation teeters on the precipice between the ultra-realism of reenactment and the wooden floridity of the textual precedent: the scrupulous employment of the primary document becomes a sensible representation of the historical record's incomplete ability to speak for the past.

12 Years' dialogue, which is often taken directly or adapted from the language of Northrup's memoir, is disruptively baroque. "It occurs to me that the cost of transportation would be materially diminished if we used the waterway," Platt tells Ford while describing an engineering project. Tibeats, in an almost meta-fictional moment, can hardly believe it: "are you an engineer or a nigger?" he asks. Awkwardly elevated diction is endemic in the film: when Eliza accuses Platt of kissing up to Ford ("You luxuriate in his favor!") he replies "I survive. I will not fall into despair. I will keep myself hardy until freedom is opportune!" At one point, Patsey screams at the rapist Epps "you, blind with your own covetousness!" And when Patsey later asks Platt to kill her, he responds as Stowe herself might have: "Why would you consign me to damnation with such an ungodly request?" he declares, and we should note the palpable tension here between the revelation of the depth of Patsey's plight and the canned Protestant moralism of Northrup's reply. Such discrepancies are how the film calls attention to its own tortured artificiality: in a movie filled with perfect recreations of the anterior world, the spoken dialogue sticks out as ponderous, incommensurate, even performed. It is as if the film seeks to remind us, live, that its characters are characters. They sound like people reading the lines out of a book, because they are.

The film's dialogue exists in a state of open warfare with the supple naturalism of its visualized past. McQueen's camera lingers on the small moments of the recreated antebellum world: Solomon's hands running through sugarcane;

a weevil at work in a cotton boll; berry-juice running down a pewter plate; the dying embers of Solomon's failed letter after it is consigned to the fire; the extraordinary shots in which McQueen employs a 'cotton-eye view' of the slaves in the field, as if we are seeing slavery from the languid perspective of the earth itself. Such naturalism can be seen in the film's editing, too, especially in relation to time. The camera often lingers on the frame for a few extra seconds, or arrives a few seconds too early. Sometimes it as if the camera has been looking somewhere else and turned to face a sound heard from somewhere in the frame. In such moments, the film suggestively mimics the human acts of looking and staring and lingering, yet it also undercuts them by disjoining them from the action on screen, suggesting that the camera's acts of sight involve some deeper order—prior, after, outside of the gazes of the characters, or even our own. This uncoupled gaze involves us in an ambivalence unusual in cinema. We begin to wonder who is doing the looking. It does not seem to be us.

The gaze is, of course, an important trope in film theory and its disruption is discomfiting.⁵⁰ In what is surely the film's most memorable lingering shot, Tibbeats and his accomplices string Solomon up to a tree, but are prevented from lynching him by Ford's overseer Chapin (JD Evermore). In a bitterly ironic backwards reiteration of American iconography, the long shot of their straining to string up the black man recalls Joe Rosenthal's famous photograph of the Marines raising the US flag on Iwo Jima.⁵¹ Then, in an extraordinary long take, Solomon remains there, semi-lynched, an objective correlative in some way for a country fundamentally caught up in a moment that you feel will never end, on screen or off. The shot lasts eighty-six seconds before there is a cut. It is, true to Hartman's work, staged as a spectacle for both Mistress Ford (Liza J. Bennet) and the other slaves, who must not even stop their work. However, here, in the background, just to the left of Northrup's struggling, dangling form, several slave children play in a field. It is the most strikingly violent scene in the film because of its eerie calm: somehow a man strung up seems as natural as the dappled sunlight or the chirp of the cicadas. Somehow, this slow lynching is not unusual; as the agonizing seconds tick by, it ceases to stand out. The spectacle, leaking out from its narrative enclosure before us on screen, loses even the familiar comfort of outrage, of shame. It outwaits us. What are we supposed to feel next? And then we see it, finally, again: we glimpse the world of these people, the world in which slavery would never end.

And yet, despite the power of these shots, McQueen never allows us to settle in to the fantasy that the time of the camera is the past; he has spoken of a desire to have "real time" punctuate the cinematic time of the film.⁵² We see this disruption most clearly in another long take, just before the end of the film, where Solomon, in a close-up, gazes off-screen for an uncomfortable eighty-one seconds, even looking through the screen for a time, breaking the fourth wall and provoking a certain representational confusion. Solomon looks right at us, but his gaze is marked by a distinct ambiguity. His eyes seem to travel from one imperceptible emotion to another: is it recognition? Confusion? Anger? We cannot



Chapin (JD Evermore) looks at Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor). *12 Years a Slave*, Fox Searchlight Pictures/The Walt Disney Studios, 2013.

know. When real time erupts from within the film's time, we suddenly lose our privileged access to interiority: Solomon, suddenly inscrutable, scrutinizes *us*. It is as if the camera has been turned around. The question, as with *Django's* mirror, is what is Solomon looking at? Is it the camera? Is it *us*? Whence this sudden ambiguity at the heart of the historical gaze? This is the exact kind of encounter we always seek with the past, our collective fantasy of contact, of presence, and yet here it strikes us as enormously disruptive— an unremoved outtake, a filmic version of the dream in which we cannot speak, or a tear in the fabric of form itself. When McQueen stops film time, he stops our time travel as well.

Following such disruptions, narrative resolution becomes not only impossible in *12 Years*, but ironized. If *Lincoln* is a liberal fantasia about the end of slavery (and if *Django* is a postmodern explosion of such fantasias), *12 Years* includes in the character of Samuel Bass (Brad Pitt) an ironic nod to the neo-abolitionist fantasy of retrospective virtue. Bass, of course, fulfills a vital role in Northrup's original text: he personifies the white abolitionist from the North and provides a model for contemporary readers' own possible political interventions. In a heroic argument with Epps (staged dramatically, if absurdly, in front of Solomon) Bass declares "there is no justice nor righteousness in slavery." When Epps points out that slavery is legal, Bass responds that "laws change . . . Universal truths are constant." Bass' abolitionist piety gels well with the Hollywood code of universal truth and justice-in-the-end. And of course it is Bass who indirectly provides Solomon with his own day of reckoning, by writing and mailing the letter that will set him free—the letter Solomon himself was never able to write. But in the film the striking thing about this *Brad Pitt ex machina* is its grating implausibility: why has a loquacious Canadian abolitionist suddenly appeared in rural Louisiana to give the evil slavedriver a lecture on eternal justice? His intervention is not only absurd at the level of plot but painfully impossible at the level of history: this is, quite specifically, what did not happen for two hundred years.

Just in case the irony of this third-act anti-resolution is not clear, McQueen interrupts it with the whipping of Patsey, therein depicting a fundamental violence that escapes any and all resolution—the flesh of history erupting from within its failed representation. The conflict between the progressive needs of the film (in both narrative and political terms) and the transcendent pain it has made us *see* is so stark that it essentially requires us to think about commensurateness. Bass speaks about universal laws in the language of liberal and providential justice, foreshadowing Solomon’s eventual deliverance, and yet Patsey’s hiding erupts from within this happy ending, juxtaposing live the pieties of Hollywood retrospect with the nearly unwatchable explosion of her body, the opening up of her interior—a brutal literalization of the kind of access to historical black interiority films about slavery so often imagine. And so film itself is opened up here as well; film ruptures itself. By the end, the narrative and linguistic requirements of sensational fiction, in tenuous alliance with Hollywood three-act storytelling, are in open conflict with the naturalistic violence we have been forced to witness. We see the civil war within representation; we see the past’s violent silence. There was no third act in the history of slavery.

Representation and Historical Loss

Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.

—Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction.”⁵³

Pliny the Elder records a particular anecdote about Greek painting, which was much revered in antiquity for its realism, but which is almost completely lost and survives only in descriptions and a few mosaic copies. (Representation always dances with loss.) The famous painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius stage a



Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) looks back at Patsey (Lupita Nyong’o). *12 Years a Slave*, Fox Searchlight Pictures/The Walt Disney Studios, 2013.

competition to determine who is the better artist. Zeuxis reveals his canvas first: it depicts a bushel of grapes so realistically that birds fly up and peck at the mimetic fruit. Parrhasius then asks Zeuxis to unveil his entry, hitherto covered by a draped cloth. Zeuxis, to his astonishment, discovers that the painting *is* the cloth—Parrhasius has painted a drape. “When he realized his mistake,” reports Pliny, Zeuxis “conceded the prize, saying that whereas he had deceived birds, Parrhasius had deceived him.”⁵⁴ Parrhasius’ move is from an art that looks the way looking looks to an art that looks at looking itself. Which painting, then, is more realistic?

Yet there is a further aspect to looking here, and it has to do with time. There is a false temporality at the heart of all representation, whose manifold strategies are essentially a shell game meant to occlude its irreducible past tense. Representation, considered temporally, is an illusionism: it records a gone world yet pretends presence. I have asserted here that *Django* and *12 Years* demonstrate how slavery functions as a limit case for this temporal aspect of representation. They envision how the historical silence of the slaves strains the mimetic errand past its breaking point. They also ask not only what should art do with the violence of the past, but also what it should do with the violence *in* the past, in our very construction of it. The topic of slavery therefore comes to provoke a necessary reckoning with the potential violence of art itself, with the way that the same historical violence that demands exposure in the first place always threatens to reconstitute itself within representation. There is then this bitter irony: we cannot allow the slaves their freedom, even now. We cannot let them go. We line them up, like the dancers in Epps’ parlor, in the various Hades of our present needs: we make them perform victimhood, resistance, or redemption for us, as if their lives belong to us now or ever did. Historical representation is a captivity narrative, yet we are the captors; it is a slave narrative, yet we are the slavers.

The most powerful moment in the films discussed here comes near the end of *12 Years*. In yet another shot that reverses the cinematic gaze, it shows Patsey and the other inhabitants of the Epps plantation looking on as Solomon rides away in a wagon. The camera is mounted on the wagon and so the scene bumps and shakes with the antebellum road (even now McQueen wants us to think about perspective—is it Solomon’s, ours, history’s?). Frozen still within the camera’s movement, and framed by the plantation scene, Patsey recedes into the familiar unfamiliarity of a grainy old photograph, back into the past as we are used to knowing it, as a static tableau, the *mise-en-scène* of history. This shot is the inverse of *Django*’s mirror, the moment at which historical looking is closed up again to resume its normal sense of comfortably unfathomable distance. And yet we can no longer see Patsey as just another photographic ghost; we now feel we know she was there, somehow. She is held in that look, in the story it tells, and these are the irreducible terms of her bondage: she cannot speak, and she will never escape. We have always left her there again, in that painted hell we call the past.

Notes

1. Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave: A Cultural and Critical Edition*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2015), 4-5.
2. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Towards History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 (1937)), 58.
3. *Django Unchained*, directed by Quentin Tarantino (2012; Los Angeles: Weinstein Company and Columbia Pictures, 2013), DVD.
4. *Lincoln*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (2012; Los Angeles, CA: Dreamworks and Twentieth-Century Fox, 2012), DVD.
5. *12 Years a Slave*, directed by Steve McQueen (2013; Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2013), DVD.
6. *Amistad*, directed by Steven Spielberg (1997; Los Angeles, CA: DreamWorks, 1997), DVD.
7. *The Help*, directed by Tate Taylor (2011; Los Angeles, CA: Touchstone Pictures, 2011), DVD; *Cloud Atlas*, directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski (2012; Los Angeles, CA: Warner Brothers, 2013), DVD; *Free State of Jones*, directed by Gary Ross (2016; Los Angeles, CA: Bluegrass Films, 2016), DVD; *Green Book*, directed by Peter Farrelly (2018; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Pictures, 2019), DVD.
8. Leonard, David J., "Django Blues: Whiteness and Hollywood's Continued Failures" *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: the Continuation of Metacinema*, Edited by Oliver C. Speck, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 269, 277.
9. Adolph Reed Jr., "Django Unchained, or, The Help: How "Cultural Politics" Is Worse Than No Politics at All, and Why," *nonsite.org*, February 13, 2013, <http://nonsite.org/feature/django-unchained-or-the-help-how-cultural-politics-is-worse-than-no-politics-at-all-and-why>.
10. Ishmael Reed, "Black Audiences, White Stars, and 'Django Unchained,'" *Wall Street Journal*, (New York) December 28, 2012, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/12/28/black-audiences-white-stars-and-django-unchained/>
11. Robert J. Patterson, "12 Years a What? Slavery, Representation, and Black Cultural Politics in *12 Years a Slave*," in *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, ed. Soyica Diggs, Patterson, Robert J., 18.
12. Frank B. Wilderson III, "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*," *Black Camera* 7, no. 1, Fall 2015, 135-138.
13. Stephanie Zacharek, "12 Years a Slave Prizes Radiance Over Life," *Village Voice* (New York), Oct. 16, 2013.
14. Several critics have defended *Django* and *12 Years* from many of the early attacks they faced in popular media. See Yaramir Bonilla, "History Unchained," *Transition*, 112 (2013), 68-77, who argues that "*Django* speaks to us about the contemporary era of black power" (73), and reads the film through the historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot's idea that historical representation should preference authenticity over accuracy. Also relevant is the Forum on *12 Years a Slave* in *American Literary History* 26, no. 2 (2014), 317-384, and in particular Valerie Smith, who argues that "the film resonates...because of what it has to say about the fragility of black freedom" (365).
15. Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2; 158.
16. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1:146.
17. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, "The Forms of Violence", *October* 8 (Spring 1979), 17-29.
18. *Ibid.*, 19.
19. *Ibid.*, 17.
20. *Ibid.*, 21.
21. *Ibid.*, 19.
22. *Ibid.*, 21.
23. *Ibid.*, 21.
24. *Ibid.*, 21.
25. *Ibid.*, 22.
26. *Ibid.*, 21-22.
27. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 19, 22.
28. Northrup, Solomon, *12 Years a Slave* (New York: Greymalkin, 2014).
29. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or: Life Among the Lowly* (New York, Penguin, 1986).
30. Hartman, 19; 22.
31. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976).
32. It was not until the 1970s that historians such as Genovese, Herbert Gutman, (*The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976)) and John Blassingame (*The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979)) fully

explored black life under (and resistance to) slavery. The work of Hartman, as well as that of Fred Moten (*The Case of Blackness*," *Criticism* 50 no. 2 (2008): 177-218), Frank Wilderson III, (*Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), and Stephen Best, ("On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012): 453-474) complicates such notions of recovery and resistance.

33. Hartman, 27, 29.

34. Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon, 2003).

35. cf. Wilderson III, "Social Death" (2015).

36. Walter Johnson, "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice," *Boston Review*, Winter 2017, <http://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world>.

37. Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation*, (Hannover: Wesleyan UP, 1969).

38. Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1970).

39. *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by David Wark Griffith (1915; New York, NY: Kino Lorber, 2013), DVD.

40. Quoted in Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," *Representations* 9, (Winter 1985): 150.

41. Rogin, 150.

42. *Inglorious Basterds*, DVD, directed by Quentin Tarantino (2009; Los Angeles: Weinstein Company, 2009).

43. DeNeen Brown, "Historical Sound Effects Captured in Spielberg's *Lincoln*," *Washington Post*, (Nov. 13, 2012).

44. Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, (Columbia: South Carolina UP, 2007 (1929)), 219.

45. Charles T. Davis and Henry Luis Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), xxxiv, xxiii.

46. James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *The Slave's Narrative*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 162.

47. *Ibid.*, 162;163.

48. John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo*, no. 32 (1987): 482-515, 510.

49. For an exploration of these issues in the historiography of slavery, see Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Misher, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney, eds., *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (2015), "The Question of Recovery: Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive." Saidiya Hartman's work reflects an extended, and often poetic, meditation on the problems and possibilities of the archive, memory, and redress in relation to slavery. See: "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008), 1-14; "The Time of Slavery," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 757-777; and "Dead Book Revisited," *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016), 208-215. Also relevant is Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, eds., *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016, which posits "the history of slavery as the primary political and epistemological feature of cross-disciplinary African American Studies" and understands "engaging with the ghosts of history as part of an ongoing abolitionist project" (2).

50. Explorations of the gaze include Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Dziga Vertov *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Christian Quendler, *The Camera-Eye Metaphor in Cinema*, (New York: Routledge, 2017).

51. Joe Rosenthal, *Raising the Flag Over Iwo Jima*. February 23, 1945. In Hal Buell, ed., *Uncommon Valor, Common Virtue: Iwo Jima and the Photograph that Captured America*. (New York: Berkley, 2006).

52. Goodsell, Luke. "Interview: Steve McQueen and Chiwetel Ejiofor Talk About 12 Years A Slave." *Rotten Tomatoes*, Oct. 17, 2013. <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/interview-steve-mcqueen-and-chiwetel-ejiofor-talk-12-years-a-slave/>

53. Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. (New York: Noonday, 1994), 40.

54. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, Trans. John F. Healy, (New York: Penguin, 2004 (1991)), 330.