Film Review

Art as an Ally to Public History: *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained*

12 Years a Slave. Brad Pitt, Dede Gardner, Jeremy Kleiner, Bill Pohlad, Steve Mcqueen, Arnon Milchan, and Anthony Katagas, Producers; Tessa Ross and John Ridley, Executive Producers; Steve Mcqueen, Director; John Ridley, Screenwriter, from the book by Solomon Northup. A Fox Searchlight release of a Regency Enterprises, River Road Entertainment presentation of a River Road, Plan B, New Regency production in association with Film 4, 2013. [134 minutes].

Django Unchained. Reginald Hudlin, Pilar Savone, Stacey Sher, Producers; Shannon Mcintosh, Michael Shamberg, James W. Skotchdopole, Bob Weinstein and Harvey Weinstein, Executive Producers. Written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. 2013 [136 minutes].

Visitors seek out public history sites because they want to confront the past on an intimate level. This occurs, for instance, whenever visitors contemplate the unrecorded interactions, private moments, and feelings that historic spaces both fostered and figuratively absorbed. At plantations and other sites directly associated with slavery in the United States, setting the stage for these moments of emotional engagement with the past has proven to be quite difficult. As the historian Edward T. Linenthal notes, when audiences that remain "mostly white" tour plantations, "Their imagining is not of coming in the back door, of emptying chamber pots, of working in the kitchen making someone else's meals, of looking at the Big House from slave quarters, or of living every minute with the wrenching vulnerability of one's body or one's family."[1] If

1. Edward T. Linenthal, "Epilogue: Reflections," in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 215.

Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup in *12 Years as Slave*. (Courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures.)

visitors are forced to grapple with the mindsets of slaves at all, they often do so in a manner that conforms to the preexisting notions they brought with them, inherited from works of popular culture with specific racial agendas and no inclination to base their analysis of slavery on the documented experiences and observations of those who were actually enslaved. Cultural texts such as *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* have perpetuated historical inaccuracies. Equally problematic, however, is the way that works such as these make art into an opponent of public history grounded in evidence.

Directed by the black British director Steve McQueen, with a screenplay by John Ridley, the film *12 Years a Slave* is an ally to public historians because its examination of slavery's intimate world is both evocatively resourceful as an interpretation, yet also securely tethered to realities that Solomon Northrup so meticulously documented in his first person account published in 1853. In 1841, Northrup was a thirty-three year-old freeborn black man employed as a fiddler in Saratoga Springs, New York. Tricked by two white men posing as circus entertainers into joining their troupe and traveling with them to Washington, D.C., there Northrup was drugged and sold to the slave trader James Burch, who—like many in this massive business—was not overly concerned with the provenance or legality of the "goods" he handled. (Unsuccessfully, Northrup would later initiate legal proceedings against Burch and his two kidnappers, for their roles in his abduction. Although Northrup appears somewhat gullible in the film for being duped, in his firsthand account he describes going to the Custom House in Manhattan with the two men in order to obtain "free papers" proving his status, a necessity for free black persons traveling through slave states. After using this trip to demonstrate

concern, the papers were subsequently stolen from him as part of the con.) Renamed "Platt" after a severe whipping, Northrup was forced to accept his new identity as a runaway from Georgia.

Sent to New Orleans, Northrup was resold by Theophilus Freeman and spent his next twelve years laboring on cotton and sugar plantations in the Red River region of Louisiana. In the 1840s, this area was a frontier of capitalist development. With the emergence of cotton as the preeminent cash crop export, more than a million slaves were relocated to the old Southwest from older plantations in the north and east, making this a forced migration comparable to that of the Middle Passage, and a critical moment in the expansion of the United States that Northrup found himself uniquely swept up in. With the assistance of a Canadian carpenter named Bass, who clandestinely mailed a letter from Marksville, Louisiana, to white acquaintances of Northrup's in New York, he was returned to freedom after his legal status as a free man was sufficiently proven. Though the film does not address it, this was a process that involved the Whig Governor of New York, Washington Hunt, who by an 1840 state law was required to investigate instances where free citizens of the state were alleged to have been kidnapped into slavery, and Pierre Soulé, a Democratic senator from Louisiana, both of whom worked behind the scenes in order to prevent Northrup's kidnapping from becoming a fractious sectional issue. Shortly after his return, Northrup dictated his narrative to David Wilson, a white lawyer and state legislator, who edited and published *Twelve Years a Slave* in 1853, which quickly became a bestseller. Wilson, who was not identified with the abolitionist movement, anticipated that detractors would accuse him of perpetuating falsehoods about slavery. In the preface, after noting that the details Northrup provided had been verified for accuracy, Wilson averred that he was free of "any prepossessions or prejudices" and that his "only object . . . [was] to give a faithful history of Solomon Northup's life, as he received it from his lips."[2]

In adapting the text for film, Ridley stated that his obligation was to portray slavery with "emotional honesty" and an "emotional velocity," a process that required him and McQueen, in his unrelenting attention to atmosphere, both to be faithful to the account while also moving beyond the literal.[3] With its detailed focus on the political economy of slavery, naturalist impressions of southern flora and fauna, and observations of local cultural practices,

2. A digital copy of Northrup's text is available for free through the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill's "Documenting the American South Project" (http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html). Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853), xvi. For an overview of the debates surrounding the authenticity and accuracy of Northrup's account, see David Fiske, "Authenticity and Authorship: Solomon Northup's Twelve Years a Slave," *The New York History Blog: Historical News and Views from the Empire State*, http://newyorkhistoryblog.org/2013/11/13/authenticity-and-authorship-of-solomon-northups-12-years-a-slave.

3. John Ridley, Interview, "'12 Years a Slave' restores historic firsthand account to cultural consciousness," *PBS Newshour*, November 18, 2013.

Upon arriving in New Orleans, Ejiofor (far left) as Northrop, attempting to convince Paul Giamatti as Freeman, a slave trader, in *12 Years a Slave*. (Courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures.)

Northrup's original account can at times read more like a travel diary than the shocking narrative of a man whose liberty was viciously and illegally taken away. Northrup's dedication to understanding slavery as a complex economic and social system—despite denouncing it unconditionally as a violation of humans' natural rights—carries over to the film, which avoids simplistic judgments and instead pursues an unflinching examination of these dynamics that in the end is far more damning. In the film, for instance, after his arrival in New Orleans, Northrup finds himself in a fashionable home that doubles as a slave market, where prospective white customers mill about enjoying snacks, beverages, and music (that he provides), all the while scrutinizing the naked and semi-naked black bodies before them, and negotiating their value. The film is most powerful in moments such as this, where humans—perhaps to contemporary audiences own knowing and discomforting familiarity with the practice—coerce other humans into serving any number of purposes, primarily as labor, but also as forms of social capital, deployed in sex, entertainment, acts of humiliation, and even religious instruction.

Where the film version departs from the first person account entirely it does so to confront what Northrup refused to relate in a narrative intended for respectable audiences. The opening scene of the film, for instance, imagines a sexual encounter in the bunkhouse that serves as the slaves' quarters, where an unnamed slave woman sleeping next to Northrup seizes his hand and uses it to masturbate, before she rolls away, back turned to him, sobbing. McQueen, in a forum hosted by the *New York Times*, explained that he wanted to provide the unnamed woman whom Northrup assists with

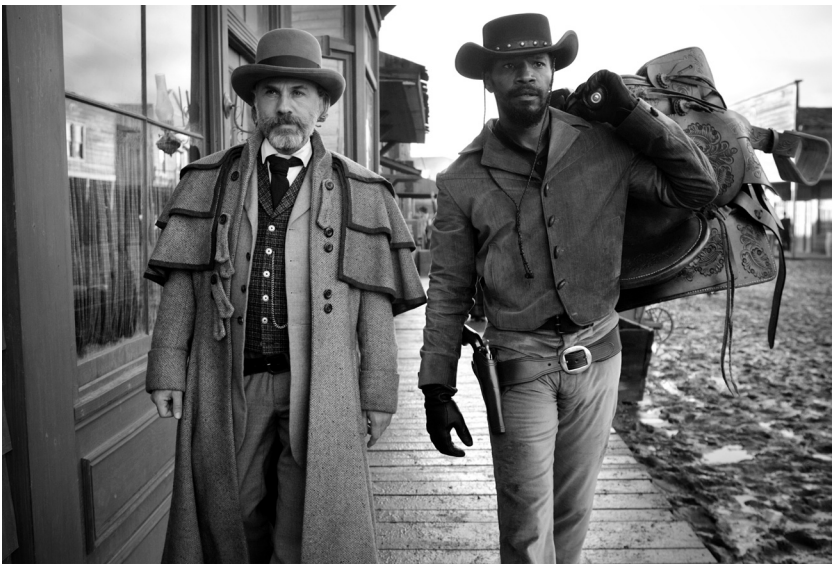
a moment of "tenderness," where she "takes control of her own body," a statement that possesses irony, since for Northrup (played with absolute brilliance by the British actor of Nigerian descent, Chiwetel Ejiofor), it is another moment—albeit one he does not overtly resist—where he seems to lose autonomy over his own body. The film frequently lingers over how slavery's rule extended over the bodies and hearts of all subjects joined, willingly or unwillingly, to the interdependencies it forged. Describing his depiction of the drunken and menacing planter Edwin Epps's rape of his slave Patsey, which results in her additional torture at the hands of Epps's wife, McQueen may be too forgiving in concluding that: "You can't choose love. Love chooses you."[4] McQueen is not suggesting that Epps and Patsey's relationship is based on a consensual and mutual exchange of affection, in line with our present definition of the sentiment (although a form of this may have existed in some master and slave relationships). Instead, he seems to be arguing that any interpretation that denies Epps's humanity excuses his behavior by way of ignoring it as representative of the species. Calling something evil does not carry much analytical weight.

The film set in the antebellum South that most immediately preceded *12 Years a Slave*—and which provides an important point of comparison—is Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. Set in 1858, in Texas then Mississippi, *Django* is a Blaxploitation film done in the style of the Spaghetti Western from which the name of its title character is lifted. Django is the archetypical hero comprised of pure agency, a gunslinger whose honor and determination enables him to overcome any obstacle. In the film, this is signified by the mountains of bodies he leaves behind—catharsis for both the film's protagonist and its audience—in his quest to rescue his wife from bondage on the plantation of the evil Calvin Candie.

As the social historian of slavery Walter Johnson argues, "'agency,' like 'power,' is historically conditioned; it takes specific forms at specific times and places; it is thick with the material givenness of a moment in time."[5] If Tarantino presented *Django* as counterfactual and outlandish history designed to force people to come to terms with their own revenge fantasies, which so often exist in sharp contrast to what Johnson calls the actual "material givenness" in which historical actors operated, than this work might be welcomed by historians as a provocative piece of art. (A similar point could be made about Tarantino's other recent work of historical fiction, *Inglourious Basterds*. How many viewers of that film, for example, are aware that the initial reaction of the United States to news of the Holocaust was to continue to bar European Jews and other refugees from entering the country as immigrants, since they exceeded allotted quotas? It was not to send an elite

4. Nelson George, "An Essentially American Narrative: A Discussion of Steve McQueen's Film '12 Years a Slave,'" *New York Times*, October 11, 2013; Dan P. Lee, "Where It Hurts: Steve McQueen on Why *12 Years a Slave* Isn't Just About Slavery," *Vulture*, December 8, 2013.

5. Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 9.



Christoph Waltz as Schultz and Jamie Foxx as Django in *Django Unchained*. (Courtesy of The Weinstein Company.)

corps of "Nazi killers" overseas.) The historian Jelani Cobb points out that the problem with *Django* is not its depiction of the courage of slaves and their desire to win their freedom. Slaves' involvement in the Union Army proves this, as do the countless small acts of resistance that they performed on a daily basis. "The alternate history is found not in the story of [a] vengeful ex-slave," Cobb argues, "but in the idea that he could be the only one."[6] In this reading, *Django's* greatest flaw is perhaps assuming that the history of slavery is well-known enough to allow for (at times bloody and satisfying) flights from historical reality altogether.

12 Years a Slave does not make this mistake, with its insistence on immersion. Optimistically, it will spur public historians—including those involved with sites where slavery is not even the primary focus—to think about what was felt and thought by bodies and spirits procured as commodities, and consumed for their labor power. If visitors come armed with an appreciation for the material realities and nuances of historic experiences that a work of art such as McQueen's film can so powerfully imagine and offer, and can then embark on their own acts of interpretation, we are all the better for it.

Andrew Urban

Rutgers University, New Brunswick

6. Jelani Cobb, "Tarantino Unchained," *New Yorker*, January 2, 2013.