

History Unchained

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THE YEAR 2013 brought unprecedented attention to representations of slavery in American film. With two major motion pictures nominated for academy awards—Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* and Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln*—and seven additional movies scheduled for release, including *12 Years a Slave* produced by Brad Pitt, there appears to be a sudden groundswell of interest in slavery among U.S. filmmakers and moviegoers. This has been accompanied by an equal swell of public debate regarding not just the quality of these films, but also their propriety. Across the media landscape many wondered: Are certain filmic genres, such as comedy, inherently inadequate for capturing the experience of enslavement? Are certain filmmakers more qualified, or more authorized, to render the experience of African American people? And must representations of slavery strike a certain mood? Can they be “wrong” not just in their facts, but in their affect?

The debates over these representations echoed concerns that emerged a decade earlier around a different “infotainment” project regarding slavery. Controversy sparked in 1993 when the Disney Corporation revealed its plans to develop a new theme park, named “Disney’s America,” which would include several exhibits devoted to plantation slavery. The initiative was driven by the Disney Corporation’s desire to find a new market midway between their existing parks in Florida and California. They contemplated building the park in Virginia, in order to capitalize on the pre-existing tourist market for American history via D.C. monuments and museums, the heritage tourism of colonial Williamsburg, southern plantation tours, and civil war battlefields. Visitors to Disney’s America would enter the park through a re-created civil war era village, witness battle re-enactments, and eventually exit through a re-creation of the Underground Railroad. The project was met with great controversy for, among other things, claiming that it would accurately portray “the feeling” of being enslaved without romanticizing that history.

At the time, the popular novelist William Styron launched a public criticism of the initiative in the pages of the *New York Times*. Styron

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was himself the grandson of slave owners and had penned a novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, that sought to represent the lived experience of slavery. Styron argued that Disney's effort was doomed to fail in part because of the genre, for the "technical wizardry" of Disney could only serve to mock what he described as "the great transforming circumstance of American history." Unlike the Holocaust, he stated, slavery could not be represented through museum exhibits because its repercussions were murkier and far more expansive. He stressed that "the *unlimited* permutations of human emotions and relationships" surrounding slavery as well as "the *infinitely* subtle moral entanglements of the terrible war that brought slavery to an end" could not be rendered in a theme park.

In his essay, Styron narrated the history of his grandmother who, as a twelve-year-old child, was herself the owner of two slave girls of similar age with whom she had become so "lovingly close" that she regarded them as sisters. Shortly following the Emancipation Proclamation, those "sisters" were taken away by Yankee soldiers. The period that followed was marked by great grief over the loss of the girls as well as the great economic hardship of the era of reconstruction. Styron wondered

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whether the Disney exhibit could represent this complicated tale of how, in his words, the suffering of both masters and slaves were "intimately bound."

However, his main concern was not with his grandmother, for he stressed that her terror and trauma were "no great matter in the end" since she eventually managed to survive reconstruction, raise six children in relative comfort, and died at peace (except for her purported hatred of Yankees). What haunted him most was the ghost of the two slave girls, the fictive kin who were plucked from his family's personal history. Surely, he speculated, their lives must have been difficult, cast into the racist storm of the KKK, poverty, joblessness, lynchings, and "the suffocating night of Jim Crow." Thus, the problem, as he saw it, was not just how to portray the history of slavery, but how to wrestle with the incomplete project of freedom. As he argued, "this renewed bondage is the collective anguish from which white Americans have always averted their eyes."

Styron worried that the Disney exhibit would allow audiences to walk away with a false sense of detachment and closure: "The falseness of any Disneyesque rendition of slavery" he writes, "is in the assumption that by viewing the artifacts of cruelty and oppression . . . the cabins, the chains, the auction block . . . one will have succumbed . . . to the



catharsis of a completed tragedy.” The Disney park would allow visitors to experience “a shudder of horror before they turned away, smug and self-exculpatory, from a world that may be dead but has never been laid to rest.”

The Disney debacle, and Styron’s critique of it, were analyzed at length by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his book, *Silencing the Past*. Trouillot argued that the problem invoked by Styron was not one of historical accuracy, but of historical authenticity. Trouillot suggests that most professional historians are trained to focus on issues of accuracy, in terms of fidelity to the historical record, but they often fail to reflect on the authenticity of historical representations, that is, on the relationship that historical narratives craft between the events described and their moment of representation. He argues that “empirical exactitude” is not enough and that the value of a historical product cannot be debated without taking into account the context of its consumption. It is in this sense that, for Trouillot, the Disney park was doomed to fail. For, regardless of how empirically sound its exhibits might be, the idea of gum-chewing tourists lining up for the Underground Railroad trivializes the history that stretches between that past and this present. It silences the institutionalized racism, structures of inequality, and practices of denigration that bridge the history of slavery to the present day.

**Moon
children
everywhere.**
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I was reminded of these debates regarding Disney's authenticity problem when a similar storm of criticism arose over the Quentin Tarantino movie *Django Unchained*. Once again, there was an issue of genre: some suggested that using slavery as a backdrop for a spaghetti Western was inherently distasteful. And as with Disney's America, many condemned the endeavor on principle alone, with public figures like Spike Lee and Tavis Smiley asserting that they did not need to see the film to know that it was offensive. As with Disney's America, we got the sense once again that there was something about the retrospective significance of slavery—it's role in the present—that conditioned the possibilities of its memorialization. Tarantino might have been able to "play" with the history of the Nazis in *Inglourious Basterds*, but slavery was not open to the same kind of tampering. Along with these issues of genre, there was also significant public debate over the film's historical details: Did Mandingo fighting really exist? Did the KKK predate emancipation? And did slaves ride horses?

Around the same period that *Django* was released, the movie *Lincoln* also appeared in theaters but failed to spark anywhere near the same level of angst-ridden debate. By emerging in the right "genre"—that of a dramatic period piece—*Lincoln* took on a patina of accuracy that *Django* did not. *The New York Review of Books* praised the film for providing "authentic wonderment" and Daniel Day Lewis was celebrated for

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his striking resemblance to the president and his accurate portrayal of Abraham Lincoln's speech, gait, rhythm, and walk. University of Virginia Professor of History, Philip Zelikow, published a piece in *The New York Times* titled "Steven Spielberg, Historian" in which he praised the filmmaker for offering new insights into that period

in American history. While some may have criticized Spielberg for silencing the role of African Americans in the history of emancipation (suggesting in certain scenes that African Americans simply witnessed emancipation from the peanut gallery, or received it as a gift from their lovers), nobody questioned his right to represent Lincoln's life. For, while many debate whether white filmmakers can adequately represent the history of slavery, few question their monopoly on histories of freedom.

Yet, if we take Trouillot's arguments seriously, how can we move past the criticisms of genre, the identity politics of historical representations (i.e., the questionable lines drawn between black history and American history), and focus instead on the relationships these historical representations craft between the past and present? What do these films tell us about the retrospective significance of slavery today? What do they

tell us, not just about the events described, but about the context of their remembrance? Why have these representations emerged at this particular moment? Why, in the era of the first black president, is our gaze being turned towards the fear and fantasy of black revenge and the abstract promise of codified freedom?

In exploring these questions I find it useful to return to Trouillot's distinction between accuracy versus authenticity. As Trouillot argues, "Historical authenticity resides not in the fidelity to an alleged past but in an honesty vis-à-vis the present as it represents the past." In the case of *Django Unchained*, it is telling that Tarantino directly positions his film as an alternative to the famous and more realist miniseries *Roots* which he described as "inauthentic" because of its ending which denied the audience the experience of retribution. The relationship of authenticity rallied by Tarantino is, as Trouillot suggests, not about faithfulness to the historical record, but about the current moment of historical production and consumption. For if *Roots* says as much about the African American middle-class search for respectability as it does about slavery, then *Django* speaks to us about the contemporary era of black power—or, more precisely, the era of one exceptional black man in power, and the fear of retribution he inspires.

Tarantino admits that it is in fact our political present which sets the stage for the film and that the film speaks to the place of slavery in those debates. In his interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., he states: "the dynamics of the country are changing and people are talking about that. . . . This time in history is a part of that conversation." When questioned on his use of the "N-word" he defended his choices partly through claims to historical accuracy, but even more strongly through his relationship to present-day audiences, by stating that he uses racial slurs as a tool to trouble the public:

Well, you know, if you're going to make a movie about slavery and are taking a twenty-first-century viewer and putting them in that time period, you're going to hear some things that are going to be ugly [. . .] I don't want it to be easy to digest. I want it to be a big gigantic boulder, a jagged pill and you have no water.

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Tarantino's film attempts to be a self-conscious meditation on the links between the past and the present. His film is part of a larger debate not just about what happened then, but about what is happening now, what that past means today, what relationships it authorizes, what words can and cannot be used to describe it, what accrued meaning these words carry, and what injuries they perpetuate in the present.

Nevertheless, as Tarantino himself is quick to point out, his movie is not "History with a capital H." In fact, in many ways Tarantino is engaged in a conversation about cinematic history as much, if not more so than, American history. He is more concerned with questioning the genres, traditions, and thematic canons of cinematic practice than in debating the historical record of slavery. However, although Tarantino did not seek to accurately represent the history of slavery, through his representations of racism, degradation, and revenge, he managed to index contemporary fears and fantasies about that period and how they are rallied in the present.

The appeal of Tarantino's representation became evident when, as the movie was still being shown in theaters across the United States, a non-cinematic though highly mediatized version of "real life" black revenge took hold of the public imagination in the figure of Chris Dorner, a former police officer who was reported to have exacted vigilante justice on members of the LAPD. Some described Dorner as a "modern day Django," but in the real life version

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the characters cannot be as easily rendered in black and white—neither racially nor in terms of their roles as villains or victims. Further, Dorner does not eventually ride off into the sunset, but rather (if the police are to be believed) shoots himself in the head in order to avoid being burned alive. Here is where Tarantino fails to provide us with a useful history: his fantasy belies the true stakes of black revenge in the present.

This brings us back to *Lincoln*, which for many constituted a more accurate and appropriate representation of the past. Although it is also given to us by Hollywood, its realist tone and contemplative mood grant it a historical gravitas denied to *Django*. Further, its focus on historical accuracy, as opposed to authenticity, have led film critics and professional historians alike to celebrate it precisely as "History with a capital H." Yet, I would like to suggest that *Lincoln* is in many ways a more troublesome historical representation than *Django*. For, while Tarantino is honest about providing us with a fantasy, Spielberg tries to fool us with a fake.



Although it is relatively accurate in its facts—and supposedly provides new insights into the history of the represented events—it offers no bridge between that past and this present. The film seeks to create precisely the kind of “cathartic closure” that Styron feared Disney would generate (Perhaps it is no coincidence that *Lincoln* was distributed by Touchstone Pictures, whose parent company is Disney). However, its efforts are inevitably infelicitous. For, one must ask: if, as the movie suggests, when the emancipation proclamation was signed music soared, light shone through the windows, and blacks rejoiced with their brethren and bedfellows—why does the problem of freedom persist to this day? If Abraham Lincoln, as “the emancipator,” set the stage for us to elect a black president, how can we explain the lingering disparities and hierarchies of race that persist in America today?

Although the film attempts to represent slavery as a concluded history, it ultimately fails for when we turn our gaze towards the past we inevitably find its unfinished business in the present. For example, one moviegoer in Mississippi was so inspired by the film that he decided to

Mother of mothers.

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research the role of his own state in the events portrayed. However, he found that the state of Mississippi did not ratify the thirteenth amendment until 1995, due in large part to the great resentment that remains in the South over the social and economic legacies of reconstruction. Even after it was ratified the state neglected to notify the archivist.

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So, technically, the amendment was not ratified in Mississippi until the moviegoer himself brought it to the government's attention. It is precisely this complicated history, which threads the establishment of the thirteenth amendment to the contemporary landscape of un-ratified freedom today, that is silenced in the film.

The only scene in the movie that hints at the uncertainty that followed the emancipation proclamation comes near the end as President Lincoln is shown standing before Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave who bought her freedom, and that of her son, in 1852, long before Lincoln granted it. Her character encourages Lincoln to carry on, and assures him that he has divine approval for his mission. However, Lincoln himself seems rather unsure about what exactly his project will mean for her, and "her people." He asks, "Are you afraid of what lies ahead? For your people? If we succeed?" Keckley offers an observation in lieu of an answer: "White people don't want us here." To which Lincoln responds: "Many don't." This is the only clue the movie offers to the fact that Lincoln's project to free and unify the nation, did not necessarily include Keckley's people. In fact, the real Lincoln would later attempt to ship newly emancipated slaves to the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa. The scene ends with Keckley asserting:

What my people are to be, I can't say. Negroes have been fighting and dying for freedom since the first of us was a slave. I never heard any ask what freedom will bring. Freedom's first.

The film fails to tell us what Freedom—abstractly codified—actually brought to Keckley's or Lincoln's people. But, what is worse, it encourages us to turn away (as Styron had feared) shoulders shrugged, without questioning that deed. For, as the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has suggested, the film *Lincoln* is less about slavery than about the "nobility" of compromised and morally ambiguous politics. It

suggests that the empty promise of freedom is the best we can do, and we should be happy for it. “Freedom is first” and we should continue fighting, dying, and compromising in its name without questioning what it has brought.

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IT IS TOO soon to know the long term impact either *Django* or *Lincoln* will have on the landscape of cinema or on the popular imagination. However, one suspects that as with previous iconic representations, such as *Roots* or *Birth of a Nation*, future students of history will turn to them, not just for what they reveal about the past they seek to represent, but for what they index about their moment of production and consumption. Like all historical representations, their value and importance will be assessed not just in terms of their accuracy, but also in terms of how they speak to the stakes, consequences, and legacies of the past in the present. 🌐