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## Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Film: What Does It Mean to Be a Black Film in Twenty-First Century America?

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### I.

*We can agree that the notion of a unitary black man is as imaginary (and as real) as Wallace Stevens's blackbirds are; and yet to be a black man in twentieth-century America is to be heir to a set of anxieties: beginning with what it means to be a black man. All of the protagonists of this book confront the "burden of representation," the homely notion that you represent your race, thus that your actions can betray your race or honor it.... Each, in his own way, rages against the dread requirement to represent; against the demands of "authenticity."<sup>1</sup>*

—HENRY LOUIS GATES, Jr, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (1997)

*Django Unchained* was heir to a particular set of racial anxieties from its inception, carrying a “burden of representation” on its shoulders that no single film could possibly bear. In contrast to the black men who populate Gates’ book, however, *Django*’s burden was taken on knowingly and willingly. The people who made *Django* knew they were making a risky film. They also knew that “dangers are not places you run away from but places that you go towards.”<sup>2</sup> Making a film about chattel slavery in the United States is an inherently dangerous undertaking that is guaranteed to upset a lot of people. *Django* isn’t an important film, however, simply because it pushes people’s buttons: it is an important film because it tells a story about race and racism that desperately needs to be told.

## II.

*Django* is a black film. More than that, it is an exemplary black film. We would even go so far as to say that it is one of the most important black films of the century... which is where some of you will interrupt us to point out that Quentin Tarantino, the film’s director and screenwriter, is white, making it impossible for *Django* to be a black film.

So we begin again, in order to clear up some misconceptions about “black film” that stand in the way of the argument we want to make about *Django*. Typically, the term is used to refer to films that are made by (actual) black people, offer depictions of (authentic) black experience, and/or are primarily intended for (real) black audiences. Taken at face value, *Django* falls short on at least two of those counts—but taking things at “face value” is precisely the sort of uncritical interpretive stance that we want to avoid. Embedded in the claim that white directors cannot make black films are two problematic assumptions: one about essentialism, and the other about auteurism.

The essentialist assumption is that there is a direct relationship between people’s racial identities (on the one hand) and the aesthetic, cultural, and/or political characteristics of whatever art they make (on the other). Only black people, the argument goes, have enough firsthand knowledge of “the black experience” to represent that

experience properly in art. Because white people lack such knowledge, their efforts to tell black stories and/or work within black aesthetics are inevitably inferior and/or politically problematic (e.g. *Mississippi Burning*, Alan Parker, 1988).

Meanwhile, the auteurist assumption is the widespread belief that we can reasonably attribute cinematic authorship to lone individuals. Typically, this distinction is reserved for directors, though occasionally producers may be granted such honors. So Alfred Hitchcock (rather than screenwriter Ernest Lehman) is widely understood as the main creative force behind *North by Northwest* (1959), Stanley Kubrick (rather than Stephen King) gets credit for *The Shining* (1980), Orson Welles (rather than Herman Mankiewicz) is celebrated for *Citizen Kane* (1941), and so on.

In the case at hand, auteurism tells us that Tarantino—and only Tarantino—deserves credit (or blame) for *Django*. Meanwhile, essentialism tells us that Tarantino's whiteness prevents him from understanding black culture well enough to capture its essence on film. Taken together, these philosophies tell us that *Django* can't possibly be a black film, because only directors matter when it comes to cinematic authorship, and because white directors cannot make black films. Neither of these seemingly straightforward claims, however, manages to reflect the realities of authorship or identity very well.

If auteurist visions of the singular genius artist work at all, it is only for the small number of aesthetic practices that are feasible as solo efforts: for example, novel writing, poetry, painting. Most art forms, however, simply do not function this way. As the most collaborative of all major art forms, however, film is especially ill-suited to this particular understanding of authorship. Even the most low-budget feature film requires creative input from hundreds of different people. To be sure, a film's cast and crew are not an egalitarian commune in which artistic decisions are made through a democratic process, and directors exert far more creative control over "their" films than, for example, key grips or lighting technicians. But directors never make films alone. Whatever creative genius Tarantino brought to the making of *Django* (and there was certainly plenty of this), it would not be such an aesthetically rich, politically savvy film without significant creative labor from its principal actors (Jamie Foxx, Samuel L.

Jackson, Christoph Waltz, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Kerry Washington), its cinematographer (Robert Richardson), its editor (Fred Raskin), and its production designer (J. Michael Riva).

Moreover, even if one believes that Tarantino really is the principal creative force behind "his" films, his most striking auteurish contributions come from his liberal borrowing of shots, scenes, costuming, and characters from Blaxploitation films, martial arts films, Spaghetti Westerns, and the like. Significantly, most of those genres depend heavily on non-Western, non-white, and/or hybrid aesthetic styles. To be sure, Tarantino blends these genres in ways that give "his" films a recognizable feel of their own, but the resulting style is much closer to a remix or mash-up aesthetic than it is to traditional notions of a unique auteurish vision.<sup>3</sup>

Essentialism is no more helpful than auteurism when it comes to understanding the relationship between artists and their creations. The apparent clarity of a categorical label (such as "black") hides a messy, thorny tangle (dare we call it a briar patch?) of context-dependent significations: enough so that, when one examines it closely, the essentialist equation—for example, that only "real" black people have access to "authentic" black experience—implodes.

The identity side of the equation depends on the notion that "race" is a natural phenomenon that can be used to accurately place the peoples of the world into discrete, nonoverlapping categories. In actual practice, however, such categories vary significantly over time and across space—which makes them cultural and historical fictions, rather than universal, scientific facts. Moreover, as the growing population of self-identified multiracial people<sup>4</sup> should remind us, those categories overlap a great deal. Racial identity is more of a finely granulated spectrum than a simple binary choice, which, in turn, makes it impossible to anchor the identity end of the essentialism equation with any precision.

Meanwhile, at the other end of that equation, the abstract quality that is "blackness" is even harder to pin down. Debates over the politics of putatively black cultural texts routinely flounder over the question of what counts as "authentic" blackness in the first place. *The Cosby Show*, for example, was *both* celebrated for its realistic portrayal of "mainstream" (i.e. bourgeois) black life *and* critiqued for its failure to represent the struggles (cultural, social, economic,

political) that “real” black people face in their everyday lives—with much of the debate hinging on the question of whether upper-middle-class blacks or working-class blacks count as the “true” face of black America.<sup>5</sup> What such divergent analyses reveal is that “blackness” is far too variable to be understood as a homogeneous phenomenon. There is no singular “black experience,” and no individual black person has access to the full range (or even the majority) of different “black experiences” that one might name.

### III.

In spite of all their unavoidable messiness, racial labels perform significant (albeit not always positive) work in the world. The imprecision of such terms doesn’t render them meaningless or useless, but it suggests that we need to think about them in more nuanced ways than essentialism allows. With respect to “black film,” we want to suggest two related possibilities: one descriptive, the other prescriptive.

On the descriptive side of things, we would argue that “black film” doesn’t refer to a set of natural, essentialist truths as much as it does a range of culturally specific *articulations*.<sup>6</sup> Writing about this issue as it relates to rap, Gil Rodman has argued that,

insofar as they help to shape the musical terrain in significant fashion, these racialized ways of categorizing music are very real—and very powerful—but they are not simply natural facts. Rather, they are culturally constructed articulations: processes by which otherwise unrelated cultural phenomena—practices, beliefs, texts, social groups, and so on—come to be linked together in a meaningful and *seemingly* natural way.<sup>7</sup>

We can—and should—understand “black film” in a similar capacity, especially insofar as many films that fit the category quite “naturally” (e.g. Blaxploitation classics such as *Coffy* by Jack Hill, 1973, and *Foxy Brown* by Jack Hill, 1974) were actually made by white directors and thus fail the essentialism/auterism test. By the same token, this

understanding of the term frees us from having to squeeze *all* films made by black people into the category by default.<sup>8</sup>

More prescriptively, we want to suggest that the modifier “black” should be understood as a marker of progressive, anti-racist politics, rather than as a “simple” statement about a filmmaker’s racial identity. Addressing a much broader version of the essentialism question (i.e. “Black Like Who?”), *Village Voice* columnist Joe Wood makes the following argument:

We need a clearly articulated theory of coalition—political, economic, and cultural coalition across biological, and class, and cultural lines—towards the liberation of African and other marginal peoples. Such a theory would be a new “black” objectivism, a grand theory that would include an expansive and progressive definition of “blackness;” one to describe African folk who choose “blackness;” as well as any fellow travelers . . . . Next go-round we’ll drop Clarence Thomas quickly, and with theoretical confidence. And we won’t confuse questions about Michael Jackson’s African authenticity with the nuts and bolts concerns—his political loyalty, his “blackness.” . . . If “black” the term is to be of any use, it ought to mean something, and not any old African thing.<sup>9</sup>

To understand “black film” in *this* context is to insist that any film worthy of the label do significant work toward identifying, condemning, and dismantling systemic and institutional racism. It also necessarily opens the door for “fellow travelers”—political allies who are not black—to make “black film.”

This is not to advance some sort of simple “colorblind” claim in which racial identity is wholly irrelevant to someone’s capacity for making black film. Undoubtedly, it is much harder for white filmmakers (be they directors or not) to make “black film” than it is for black filmmakers to do so, since most white people have never had to face the harsh realities of systemic racism in the way that people of color (filmmakers or not) are forced to every day. Because the meaningful relationship here, however, is about articulation, rather than identity, it is still possible (even if it is rare) for white people to make black films. We would not claim that all (or even most) of Tarantino’s directorial efforts meet the criteria we describe here—but *Django* most certainly does.

#### IV.

One of the most troubling aspects of the auteurist bias in the public discourse around *Django* is the way that commentators have routinely overlooked the agency of the film's black actors. For example, a *Moviemaniacs* roundtable interview with Tarantino and the film's major cast members begins with a question for Tarantino about his "sense of responsibility... in terms of making a movie that brings slavery out front and center like this," but the actors are not addressed as if they, too, had made important creative contributions to the film. Instead, they are asked for their thoughts on Tarantino's artistic vision: for example, "When you read the script, what were your first impressions?"<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in an ABC News *Nightline* interview with Tarantino, Foxx, and DiCaprio, Cynthia McFadden spends several minutes focusing on the risks that Tarantino took by using "the n-word" so liberally, and the risks that DiCaprio took by choosing to play a character of "pure evil" in a supporting role—but she has nothing to say that recognizes the choices (risky or otherwise) that Foxx made with respect to *Django*. Even Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (who really should know better) spends the majority of a three-part interview with Tarantino about the film<sup>11</sup> asking questions that frame the film as the exclusive by-product of Tarantino's creative vision.

Perhaps the most ironic version of this erasure of black agency, however, comes from Dexter Gabriel. In an otherwise convincing essay about the history of Hollywood's (largely abysmal) efforts to depict slavery, he derides *Django* as nothing more than a white fantasy about black acquiescence:

While Django (Jamie Foxx) takes his cues from Blaxploitation, his fellow slaves seem throwbacks to the old plantation epics. Dazed and voiceless, they stand around as backdrops to Django's heroics. The one standout role, the sinister Stephen (Samuel Jackson), recycles "Lost Cause" caricatures of the faithful Tom stitched together with contemporary African-American folklore on so-called house versus field slaves. In this post-racial revision of American history, mythical Uncle Toms and sadistic whites collude to maintain slavery—a clever moral escape-hatch to negate white guilt and guarantee crossover appeal.<sup>12</sup>

Gabriel may have a point about the silent docility of most of the slaves in *Django* (though, even here, he ignores the fact that film extras are *supposed* to be voiceless backdrops), but his larger argument only works if the film's black actors are too "dazed and voiceless" to contest (what he takes to be) Tarantino's racist fantasies—or, worse, if those actors are modern-day Uncle Toms who are all too eager to do a white man's bidding. Either way, Gabriel winds up transforming Foxx, Jackson, and company into the very same caricatures that he dismisses as "mythical."

## V.

Time and time again, *Django's* black actors have to interrupt their interviewers and/or reframe the questions being asked of them in order to be seen as anything more than Tarantino's hired help. Significantly, when those actors get to talk about what *they* find important about *Django*, they consistently demonstrate a deep concern for the representational burden the film carries, and offer nuanced thoughts on the film's anti-racist politics. For instance, Foxx has to forcibly insert himself into the *Nightline* conversation mentioned earlier in order to establish that he, too, had significant choices to make with respect to the making of *Django*. Eventually, he manages to tell a story about filming the scene in which Broomhilda is whipped:

Everybody, people on trucks, people in catering, stood still ... I asked for a certain piece of music, Fred Hammond, "No Weapons." So as Kerry's being strapped up, we played that song.... I looked over and saw a girl who had never been on a set before and she was one of the extras and her hands went up like this, she started testifying. And as everybody had tears in their eyes, you felt the ancestors, you felt the significance of why we're doing this film and showing it this way.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Foxx doesn't just push back against critiques of the film's "disrespectful" representation of slavery (specifically Spike Lee's claim that the film is an insult to his ancestors): he makes a powerful



argument about the historical and political significance of the project to the black cast (stars and extras alike) who worked on it.

Similarly, during the *Moviemaniacs* roundtable, Washington explicitly points out that the film is about “the *institution* of slavery” (emphasis added), and claims that she chose to make this film precisely because it offers an exceptionally positive vision of black empowerment:

So many of the narratives that we’ve told in film and television about slavery are about powerlessness, and this is not a film about that . . . . I was very moved by the love story, particularly in a time in our American history when black people were not allowed to fall in love and get married because that kind of connection got in the way of the selling of human beings . . . . I said to Quentin in our first meeting, I feel like I want to do this movie for my father because my father grew up in a world where there were no black superheroes, and that’s what this movie is.<sup>14</sup>

In that same roundtable, Jackson has to remind the interviewer that he (Jackson) isn’t just a voiceless body (“You don’t want to know how I felt about all this? . . . I have intelligent things to say about this shit.”). When the interviewer presses on, trying to get Jackson to discuss the “psychology” of Stephen and the “small power” he has in the story, Jackson responds, “Small power? I’m the power behind the throne. What are you talking about? I’m like the spook Cheney of Candyland. I’m all up in that.”<sup>15</sup>

Jackson’s point about Stephen’s backstage power also describes the roles that he, Foxx, and Washington played in shaping the film. They are the power behind Tarantino’s throne. They not only have intelligent things to say about *Django*: they had intelligent things to contribute to making it the articulate condemnation of structural racism that it is.

## VI.

Without a doubt, the most controversial character in *Django* is Stephen: the cunningly cruel “head house nigger” of Candyland.

Why, some critics have wondered, did Tarantino make the nastiest villain in the film an over-the-top Uncle Tom? Where is the racial justice in a narrative that asks audiences to see Stephen, rather than Calvin Candie, as Django's ultimate nemesis? Why does a film that invites audiences to cheer for a black man who gets paid for killing white men (and who openly enjoys that aspect of his job) end with us rooting for that black man to kill another black man?<sup>16</sup>

Implicit in such questions is a problematic desire for a simplistic morality play, in which heroes and villains obey a predictable set of color-coded rules. In classic Hollywood westerns, the heroes wore white and the villains wore black. For some of *Django's* more skeptical viewers, this code apparently should have been flipped and then applied to skin tone, so that all the heroes were black and all the villains were white. Stephen clearly violates this typology, and he does so without a single sympathetic on-screen moment that might allow viewers to understand him as an erstwhile hero who has simply lost his way.

Of course, the absolute purity of Stephen's villainy makes him an easy character for audiences to hate—and, in many ways, this is precisely what makes so many critics uncomfortable with him. The idea that audiences—especially white audiences—might openly yearn for the violent death of a fictional black man is, after all, awfully close to the very real disdain that so many white Americans have for real black people. We can't entirely blame some critics for finding Stephen to be distasteful. Yet we can't quite share this reading of his character. Partially, this is because a weak, ineffectual Stephen would have been just as problematic in terms of representational politics. It's hard to imagine any of the critics who disliked Stephen as a villainous race traitor being any happier with him as a shuffling, ignorant pawn for Candie to push around. Partially, this is because we see a great deal of political value in a film that places *two* exceptionally strong black characters at the center of the action—even if they happen to be on opposite sides of the narrative struggle—especially since it's still rare for a mainstream Hollywood film to give audiences even one such character. And partially, this is because, in the context of the film's action, it's almost impossible to actively root for Stephen's righteous comeuppance without simultaneously

rooting for Django to deliver the *coup de grâce*. If *Django's* white viewers are going to cheer for the death of a black villain, they also have to cheer for the triumph of a black hero.

Mostly, though, we have a difficult time condemning Stephen as a character because, short of making the entire movie about him (and probably not even then), there is no feasible way to portray the "head house nigger" of one of the largest and most notorious plantations in the South as a sympathetic or politically progressive character. The problem with Stephen, after all, isn't in how Tarantino scripted the character: it's that he exists at all. Critics who want something else from Stephen seem to believe that there's some politically acceptable way to depict a black slave whose primary role in life is to keep his wealthy white owner's household running smoothly: a role which, in turn, requires him to actively participate in maintaining the brutal hierarchy of racial oppression that lies at the core of the plantation system.

## VII.

*Django's* real villain is not Stephen or Candie. It's not even a person at all. It is racism. And not racism as a scattered problem produced by isolated, individual bigots, but racism as a pervasive, unrelenting *structural* phenomenon—and this is a large part of what makes *Django* such an unusual and important film. There is nothing romantic about *Django's* depiction of life in the antebellum South. From top to bottom, this is a world built out of brutal oppression and cruel racial hierarchy. If there's a physical embodiment of racism in the world of *Django*, it's Candyland: the notorious "big house" that every slave knows about (and fears being sold to), and that—significantly—*Django* blows to smithereens at the end of the film.

There is, of course, a very long history of "big houses"—from English manors to Dixieland plantations—in mainstream film and television: glorious mansions, populated by chivalrous gentlemen and virtuous ladies who, in turn, are waited on hand and foot by a sizable retinue of happy, loyal, docile servants/slaves. What makes Candyland so different from a century of fictional big houses before

it, though, isn't the treachery of Stephen. If anything, Stephen's role is no different than that of any semi-privileged house slave in classic Hollywood depictions of antebellum plantations. To the degree that such characters were ever presented to viewers as more than just silent props, they showed fawning, unswerving devotion to their masters and mistresses: they were always already race traitors.<sup>17</sup> The difference here is that *Django* doesn't take the house's side. Stephen can only be a villainous character in the context of a film that gives us "the big house" as the fundamental structural evil that needs to be destroyed.

Within the world of the film, there was no need for Django to do anything about the "big house" at all. Except for Stephen, he had killed everyone who stood between him and freedom for himself and Broomhilda—and Stephen was no longer a threat. Django could have killed Stephen—or even just walked away from him—without touching the house at all. Django doesn't blow up Candyland because *he* needs to do so: he blows it up because *we* need him to do so. By this point in the story, *Django* has spent nearly three hours painting a picture of a society permeated, top to bottom, by a deep and abiding racism. If Django is going to triumph against *that* villain, he can't just kill off Candie and Stephen and then ride off into the night with Hildy: he needs to kill "the big house" too. Stephen's final speech underscores this point emphatically:

You ain't gonna get away wit' this, Django. They gonna catch yo' black ass. You gonna be on the wanted posters now, nigger. Them bounty hunters gonna be lookin' for you. You can run, nigger, but they gonna find yo' ass. And when they do, oh I love what they gonna do to yo' ass. They ain't gonna just kill you, nigger. You done fucked up. This Candyland, nigger! You can't destroy Candyland! We been here—they's always gonna be a Candyland! ... Can't no nigger gunfighter kill all the white folks in the world! They gonna find yo' black ass!

Stephen knows—and the inclusion of this speech in the film is an attempt to make sure that *we* know—that Django's destruction of Candyland is supposed to symbolize something bigger than just the end of a quest for personal revenge. But Stephen also knows that

Django's victory is only a symbolic one: that you can't kill systemic racism with nothing but bullets and dynamite. It will survive this setback. And it will come after Django with a furious vengeance.

## VIII.

Discussing *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and the debates that it sparked in Britain in the 1980s about the politics of racial representation, Stuart Hall writes,

Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily "right-on" by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essentialist white subject, the new essentially good black subject.<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, the major U.S. filmmaker whose work embodies this philosophy most fully is Spike Lee. Part of what makes Lee's films powerful and refreshing is that they routinely portray blackness as a variable, multifaceted, heterogeneous phenomenon. *Do the Right Thing*, *Bamboozled*, *School Daze*, *Jungle Fever* (etc.) all contain an incredibly broad range of black characters. Some are sweet, some are mean; some are good, some are evil; some are smart, some are dumb; some are kind, some are cruel. We are invited to root for some of them to succeed and for others to get a truly righteous comeuppance. There is no singular blackness in Lee's cinematic worlds: an extraordinarily rare thing in Hollywood's depictions of black America.

Nonetheless, Lee has done a curious two-step around *Django*. On the one hand, he wants to avoid talking about it publicly. On the other hand, he's made very public statements claiming that film is

"disrespectful to [his] ancestors."<sup>19</sup> It's likely that part of Lee's disdain for *Django* is tied up with his long-running public feud with Tarantino over the latter's heavy use of the word "nigger" in "his" films.<sup>20</sup> We can respect Lee's point that "nigger" signifies in *much* different ways when it's used by white people than when it is by black people. White artists, after all, have a long, ugly history of "blackening" up in ways that read more as theft than as love.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, we respect Tarantino's artistic right to create characters who say and do all sorts of "bad" things. And given the physical brutality that Tarantino's characters routinely inflict on one another, it's hardly surprising that they speak to each other using coarse, impolitic language. Moreover, a film that focuses on slavery in the antebellum South is almost obligated to use "nigger" on a regular basis. In this sense, *Django* is a lot like *Huck Finn*: if you are going to tell this story with anything that pretends to have a semblance of historical accuracy, then you *have* to use the word—and use it a lot.

More problematically, Lee has said that he has no intention of seeing *Django*. And it's disheartening to see him so thoroughly condemn a film he hasn't seen—not the least because Lee has been subject to plenty of that sort of blind, reactionary condemnation himself. Lee has also wandered into some exceptionally murky waters with respect to ugly representations of black people on the big screen. For example, *Bamboozled*, while a brilliant piece of work, produced its own fair share of audience discomfort with its depictions of contemporary blackface minstrelsy. Perhaps more than any other working director, Lee should be aware that smart, politically progressive films about racism will necessarily take their audiences places where they will be uncomfortable. Discomfort for discomfort's sake, of course, is not desirable in and of itself—but Lee should at least see the film before he declares that its representational politics are unacceptable.

## IX.

As filmmakers, Lee and Tarantino are actually very much alike: they are both opinionated, cantankerous, provocative directors and screenwriters, each of whom has risked alienating the established

powers in Hollywood by pursuing controversial projects that suit their respective artistic and/or political visions. One of the main places where their careers have differed, however, is that Lee has had to struggle far harder than Tarantino in order to get his films financed and completed—Exhibit A: *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1993); Exhibit B: Lee crowdfunding his most recent film, *Oldboy* (Spike Lee, 2013). That Tarantino could get “green-lighted” to make a film like *Django*—a violent revenge fantasy in which a black man rides roughshod over antebellum white America—must be a bitter pill for Lee to swallow.

In this light, though, the proper target for Lee’s righteous anger isn’t *Django*, or even Tarantino. It’s the larger set of institutional forces related to how Hollywood makes films about black culture, history, and politics. To this end, we would pose the following questions:

- Why have Hollywood films featuring black action heroes enacting revenge fantasies largely, if not entirely, been confined to the “campy,” marginalized genre of Blaxploitation? Where is the black version of *Rambo*? Or *Die Hard*?
- Why is it that the few Hollywood films that focus on slavery and the antebellum South inevitably do so from the perspective of white characters? Why hasn’t there been a major motion picture made about Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, or Frederick Douglass?
- Why is it that black directors and producers trying to make politically charged films about contemporary versions of “the black experience” can only seem to find major financial backing to do so if they focus on ghettos, gangsta rap, and/or modern-day minstrelsy?
- Why is it that major “message” films about U.S. racism are either historical narratives (*The Butler*, *The Help*) that allow viewers to believe that racism is entirely a thing of the past, or they’re “sensitive,” “balanced” stories (*Crash*) that pretend that racism is nothing more than individual bigotry (and to be “fair,” remind us that people of color can be bigots too)?

Ultimately, though, the amount of attention given to the ongoing Lee–Tarantino “feud” arguably does more to reproduce Hollywood’s racism than it does to address that problem. What truly matters here, after all, isn’t the public sniping between two “bad boy” film directors—even if that may provide gossip blogs with useful material—since that “story” merely reduces the issue to a clash of individual personalities, and it directs our attention away from the broader structural problems that help to fuel that feud in the first place.

## X.

Apparently, the film about slavery that America *really* wanted in 2012 wasn’t *Django*: it was *Lincoln*. Directed by Steven Spielberg, with a masterful performance by Daniel Day Lewis in the title role, the film tells the story of Lincoln’s embattled month surrounding the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Both films were written and directed by white men, but—tellingly—all seven of the principal actors in *Lincoln* are white, while three of *Django*’s five principal actors are black. *Lincoln* also somehow manages to erase Frederick Douglass from the historical debates that led to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, opting instead to focus on white abolitionist and congressman Thaddeus Stevens. The only black characters in *Lincoln* come to us as nameless soldiers, slaves, or—most troublingly—Stevens’ lover, whose only appearance in the film comes after the Thirteenth Amendment’s passage. She’s so grateful that she falls right into bed with Stevens.<sup>22</sup>

The sharp differences in the ways that *Django* and *Lincoln* were (or were not) celebrated also tell us something significant about the sad state of contemporary U.S. racial politics. Perhaps the most obvious example of this differential treatment comes from Oprah Winfrey. In her latest television series, *Oprah’s Next Chapter*, Winfrey dedicated an entire episode to *Lincoln*, which she prefaces by telling her audience:

If you haven’t seen *Lincoln* yet, I encourage you to do so. There really is nothing like it.... The entire film will reach into the



marrow of your soul . . . I can't remember when I've experienced anything like it . . . [It] is a masterpiece.<sup>23</sup>

Two weeks later, Winfrey aired a two-part episode on Jamie Foxx, in which *Django* went unmentioned until the second hour of conversation. Tellingly, when Winfrey finally broaches the subject, she does so in clearly disapproving tones: "Everybody had read the script, a lot of people felt that this movie shouldn't have been made . . . How are you going to react when people say 'what'd you do that for?'" Foxx responds with conviction: "I don't feel that I'm dumb . . . and I don't feel that Samuel Jackson is dumb, and I don't feel Quentin Tarantino or Kerry Washington—we're not dumb guys in this business . . . I didn't worry one iota of is it gonna be ridiculed" (Oprah Winfrey Network, 2013). Even after this eloquent defense of the film, however, Winfrey still seems unwilling to take the film anywhere near as seriously as she does *Lincoln*. All she can manage is the vague and awkward statement: "You can't imagine the conversations we're having today after seeing it."

Meanwhile, *Lincoln* was widely praised, not just as a major cinematic achievement, but as a significant political intervention. *New York Magazine* published a lengthy list of laudatory comments on the film from a bipartisan range of politicians (Rich, 2013). *Washington Post* columnist Ruth Marcus seemed to think that *Lincoln* could somehow fix everything that is broken about the U.S. government:

President Obama hosted a screening of Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* at the White House the other day. He should do it again—and again and again. For the subsequent showings, though, the president ought to invite every member of Congress. *Lincoln* is exquisitely crafted and even more exquisitely timed . . . It presents useful lessons in the subtle arts of presidential leadership and the practice of politics, at once grimy and sublime.<sup>24</sup>

In this "Oprahfication" of *Lincoln*, the racial significance of the historical events that (supposedly) lie at the core of the narrative—the end of chattel slavery—is pushed to the side, in favor of a less threatening set of lessons: how powerful white men can protect the nation (and their own power) while keeping the culture's major racial

hierarchies firmly in place. By contrast, *Django's* far more pointed lessons about the horrors of institutional racism have largely been ignored, and the film itself pushed to the margins of the "national conversation" on race (the one that we never *quite* seem to have) because the film is (allegedly) too controversial to take seriously—as art or as politics.

## XI.

*Django* begins with an astonishingly huge historical gaffe: a factual error so blatant, obvious, and easy to correct that it almost *has* to be deliberate. After the opening credits finish, a title appears indicating that the year is 1858—"Two years before the Civil War." And, of course, the Civil War didn't begin until April 1861. It is possible that somehow *no one* connected with the film's production knew their U.S. history well enough to have caught this basic mistake. Or, perhaps, that no one cared enough to fix it.

More plausible, however, is the notion that Tarantino knew that the opening title was historically inaccurate in ways that millions of filmgoers would spot, and that he *chose* to keep the mistake in place deliberately. From the very start, he is signaling that he's more interested in telling a good story than he is in showing rigid fealty to historical facts. There is historical precision to be found here, but it revolves more around Tarantino demonstrating how thoroughly he knows cinematic history than it does around capturing the realities of mid-nineteenth century Southern life.

In part, *Django* demonstrates the depth of Tarantino's knowledge of, and love for, the B-movie genres from which he borrows so heavily. But the film is also a lesson about the problematic history of mainstream cinematic representations of blacks, slavery, and the (antebellum) South.<sup>25</sup> What *Django* underscores—brutally so, at times—is the degree to which Hollywood has spent the past century producing outrageously dishonest visions of Dixie. *Django* doesn't do this, however, by presenting us with a painstakingly researched quasi-documentary account of what southern life in the 1850s was really like. Instead, it takes those old stereotypes, places them on

the screen before us, and systematically shows us the social and political horrors that hide beneath their surfaces. Glamorous scenes of happy slaves enjoying the pastoral beauty of the land are merely Django's feverish fantasies of being reunited with his wife. A lush shot of a sumptuous cotton field is sullied by a violent splattering of blood from off-screen. The perfectly mannered, aristocratic southern gentleman first appears in a private club where he is watching two slaves try to beat each other to death with their bare hands. The genteel southern belle turns out to be little more than a glorified sex trafficker. And so on.

Very few mainstream Hollywood films have attempted this sort of frontal assault on Hollywood's history of racially problematic representations. Probably the best known (and, more sadly, probably the most recent) of such efforts is the 1974 comedic send-up of Hollywood westerns, *Blazing Saddles*. Most of the film's humor revolves around the appointment of a black man as the new sheriff of the all-white town of Rock Ridge: a setup that allows for ninety-five minutes of nonstop satirical jabs at bigotry and racial stereotypes. The film fared so well upon its initial release that it was re-released six months later to help boost a sluggish summer at the box office for Warner Brothers. In 2006, the Library of Congress deemed it worthy enough to preserve in the National Film Registry. Tellingly, though, *Saddles* was almost never released, because Warner Brothers' executives were scared that the film's racial politics were too controversial, and that the film's use of "the n-word" would make it box office poison. As director Mel Brooks tells the story, what ultimately saved the film was a wildly successful in-house screening of a rough cut for studio underlings, and the fact that Brooks' contract gave him control over the film's final cut.<sup>26</sup>

Arguably, part of what allowed *Saddles* to succeed—and still be heralded decades later as a classic—is that it used comedy as its primary weapon against "racism." Also, it framed the problem as one rooted in individual bigotry, rather than as a structural, institutional force that shapes the entire culture. We don't want to downplay the degree to which *Saddles*, like *Django*, was a politically dangerous film to make. But if a film that skewers racism as *gently* as *Saddles* does was almost too risky to release, then it's not surprising—though it *is* disappointing—that it took nearly forty years

before another mainstream Hollywood film would dare to tackle the subject so directly again.

## XII.

Many observers have criticized *Django* for what it *doesn't* do in terms of portraying racial solidarity between blacks, or in terms of gesturing, even minimally, toward collective rebellion. And there's some truth to be found in such critiques. Django is not a selfless martyr, choosing certain death over personal freedom because he cannot bear to leave his brothers and sisters behind in chains. Nor is he a remade Nat Turner, leading armies of slaves into open rebellion against white supremacy. His mission is purely personal (though not entirely selfish), and he is never distracted from it by even a moment of sympathetic solidarity for the obvious suffering of other black folk around him.

And that's okay by us. At least for now. *Django* gives us a vision of racism as a cancer that permeates the entirety of U.S. society, top to bottom—and that is an extraordinarily rare thing for Hollywood. We can live with Django, the fictional man, getting to live out his personal revenge fantasy and ride off into the night with his one true love, because *Django*, the movie, doesn't let audiences pretend that slavery was really just some sort of pleasant *Gone-With-the-Wind*-style costume drama after all.

More importantly, there's a cruel, racialized double standard to the complaints that *Django* "fails" to present a sufficiently revolutionary narrative of black liberation. Hollywood hasn't exactly demonstrated much desire, after all, to make feature films that portray *anyone's* collective rebellion against systematic, institutional oppression. Sergei Eisenstein might have been able to make that sort of thing work in the heyday of Soviet silent film (*Battleship Potemkin*, *Strike*, *October*), but Hollywood invariably transforms collective political struggles into purely personal battles between individuals. Class struggle gets reduced to the heroic efforts of lone individuals to win a symbolic fight against a singularly evil boss (*Norma Rae*). Feminism gets reduced to the heroic efforts of lone individuals to win a symbolic fight against a singularly evil man (*9 to 5*). Anti-racism gets

reduced to the heroic efforts of lone individuals to win a symbolic fight against a singularly evil bigot (*Driving Miss Daisy*). So why is it that people of color—both in real life and in fiction—are routinely expected to sacrifice their personal desires and ambitions for the sake of the collective? White people who work hard and overcome obstacles to rise out of poverty are never expected to “give back” to the impoverished communities they left behind—much less be publicly excoriated for “failing” to do such a thing in the ways that people of color are.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, one of Hollywood’s oldest and most popular tropes is the man (or, occasionally, a woman) who sacrifices *everything*—family, friends, career, home, etc.—for the sake of his one true love, because “love conquers all” ... though, significantly, this trope only really gets applied to white love. Hollywood, after all, rarely gives us love stories about people of color at all, and it certainly doesn’t give us any such tales where the love in question is *celebrated* for being selfish and all-consuming in the way that white love routinely is. How many Hollywood films are there about white men who have somehow lost their one true loves, and where the driving force behind those narratives is a purely personal quest to rescue/reclaim those lost women, rather than a political mission to repair/destroy the broken criminal justice system, military-industrial complex, capitalist economy, or whatever systemic inequity it is that has separated the happy couple? Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? *Casablanca* may be the last major Hollywood movie where a white hero willingly sacrifices his chance to be reunited with his one true love for the sake of a larger, more noble cause—and that is arguably because, for all its charms, the film functions more as a form of historical war propaganda than as a love story.

This begs the question: if Django were a *white* action hero, would we be having this debate at all? When Hollywood starts routinely giving us mainstream films dedicated to collective political agendas, then—and only then—can we start worrying about why more black heroes aren’t positioned as the leaders of such efforts. In the meantime, however, expecting Django to (deep breath here) rise up out of slavery, learn to shoot better than anyone else in the South, scour the countryside for his lost wife, free her from bondage, organize and lead a massive slave revolt, destroy the plantation

system, and bring about an end to white supremacy across the land (you can exhale now) is an unfair burden to place on any hero—or any film.

### XIII.

We recognize that this advice flies in the face of what is usually regarded as sound, practical sense . . . . The conventional wisdom teaches that the way to achieve social change is to strive to express the desires of an existing constituency. That is perhaps why most social reform is so useless. We are calling for the opposite: a minority willing to undertake outrageous acts of provocation, aware that they will incur the opposition of many who might agree with them if they adopted a more moderate approach. How many will it take? No one can say for sure. It is a bit like the problem of currency: how much counterfeit money has to circulate in order to destroy the value of the official currency? The answer is, nowhere near a majority—just enough to undermine public confidence in the official stuff.<sup>28</sup>

There are people (e.g. Kaplan, 2012) who want to open up a long overdue conversation about slavery in the United States, but who insist that the proper way to do so is with sober, serious ruminations on the historical realities of slavery and its aftermath: not with foul-mouthed, blood-soaked bits of commercial entertainment. We've got nothing against sober, serious debates about racial politics—the nation could stand to have more of those—but we cannot fully accept this particular line of argument.

For starters, we reject the assumption that popular culture is an inappropriate ground on which to wage serious political struggles. "The popular," after all, is one of the major sites where such battles have been waged for decades: far too long now to pretend that it doesn't matter in this regard.<sup>29</sup> It's true that "the popular" isn't the only place where such debates need to occur, and that many (though by no means all) of the necessary solutions to the problem of systemic racism need to be implemented in other spheres. But if anti-racist critics refuse to fight on this turf, then they—we—are

effectively ceding it to the other side, which, in turn, almost certainly means that we will lose those struggles. “The popular,” after all, is often the site where people’s hearts (rather than their minds) are won or lost. And we will not win the fight against racism simply by appealing to people’s intellects.

We also reject the assumption that this conversation can only take place in polite, bourgeois language and contexts.<sup>30</sup> We’re not interested in chaotic free-for-alls, where everyone shouts as loudly as they can, nobody listens, and nothing is ever resolved. But the topic at hand is ugly, brutal, and painful. It *demand*s a sense of outrage and anger—especially if we’re still struggling with the topic 150 years after the formal end of slavery—and to pretend otherwise is to diminish the scope and the importance of the problem.

*Django* is not a perfect film, nor is it a perfect representation of either the horrors of U.S. slavery or the realities of black resistance. But then again, no such perfect representation exists. Or could. For all of its faults, *Django* puts a much stronger, much more forceful condemnation of institutional and structural racism in the public eye than anything that, say, Barack Obama has managed to accomplish from the White House. We don’t believe that *Django* can fully resolve the political problems at stake here—that’s an impossible burden to place on any single film—but we do believe that it pushes the conversation along in valuable and productive ways.

## Notes

- 1 Gates, 1997: xvii.
- 2 Hall, 1992: 285.
- 3 See Lessig (2008). We have nothing against either remix or mash-up aesthetics, nor are we claiming that they are somehow less creative than more traditional forms of art. We draw this distinction simply to note that Tarantino’s “signature style” of filmmaking doesn’t fit traditional models of auteurism well in the first place.
- 4 To be clear, there’s nothing new about people with multiracial heritages. There is, however, a growing tendency for multiracial people to self-identify as such, rather than to claim single, normative racial identities for themselves.

- 5 See here Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 78–87; Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 79–84; Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992).
- 6 Stuart Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, 2 (1986), 45–60.
- 7 Gilbert B. Rodman, “Race ... and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity,” *Popular Communication*, 4, 2 (2006), 107.
- 8 For example, despite the presence of John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*, *Rosewood*, *Shaft*) in the director’s chair, we are not convinced that *2 Fast 2 Furious* (sequel to the Vin Diesel vehicle, *The Fast and the Furious*) counts as a “black film.”
- 9 Joe Wood, “Niggers, Negroes, Blacks, Niggaz, and Africans,” *Village Voice* (September 17, 1991), 39. See Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System*, ed. Anthony King (London: Macmillan, 1991), 41–68, for a discussion of a comparable rearticulation of blackness, used to help forge anti-racist political alliances in Britain in the 1970s.
- 10 Moviemaniacs. “Django Unchained: Meet the Press” (2013), <http://youtu.be/-1QpScB-HJg> (accessed September 6, 2013).
- 11 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Tarantino ‘Unchained,’ part 1: ‘Django’ Trilogy?,” *The Root* (2012), <http://www.theroot.com/views/tarantino-unchained-part-1-django-trilogy> (accessed August 29, 2013); “Tarantino ‘Unchained,’ part 2: On the n-word,” *The Root* (2012), <http://www.theroot.com/views/tarantino-unchained-part-2-n-word> (accessed August 29, 2013); “Tarantino ‘Unchained,’ part 3: White Saviors,” *The Root* (2012), <http://www.theroot.com/views/tarantino-unchained-part-3-white-saviors> (accessed August 29, 2013).
- 12 Dexter Gabriel, “Hollywood’s Slavery Films Tell Us More about the Present than the Past,” *Colorlines* (2013), [http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/01/slavery\\_in\\_film.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/01/slavery_in_film.html) (accessed August 29, 2013).
- 13 ABC News, “‘Django Unchained’: Tarantino, DiCaprio, Foxx Answer Critics,” (2013) <http://youtu.be/JMUhaCXPyg8> (accessed September 6, 2013).
- 14 Moviemaniacs.
- 15 Moviemaniacs.



- 16 See Jelani Cobb, "Tarantino Unchained," *The New Yorker* (2013), <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2013/01/how-accurate-is-quentin-tarantino-portrayal-of-slavery-in-django-unchained.html> (accessed August 30, 2013); Gabriel Charles Reece, "Snowball's Chance in Hell: *Django Unchained*," *The Hooded Utilitarian* (2013), <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/01/snowballs-chance-in-hell-django-unchained/> (accessed August 30, 2013); Ishmael Reed, "Black Audiences, White Stars, and 'Django Unchained,'" *The Wall Street Journal* (2012), <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/12/28/black-audiences-white-stars-and-django-unchained/> (accessed August 30, 2013); Armond White, "Still Not a Brother." *CityArts: New York's Review of Culture* (2012) <http://cityarts.info/2012/12/28/still-not-a-brother/> (accessed August 30, 2013).
- 17 Gates, "Were There Slaves Like Stephen in 'Django'?" *The Root* (2013) <http://www.theroot.com/views/were-there-slaves-stephen-django> (accessed August 30, 2013), offers a helpful discussion of the historical facts and myths connected to the "house slave vs. field slave" debate.
- 18 Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 443–444.
- 19 VibeTV, "Spike Lee Talks 'Django Unchained,'" (2012) [http://youtu.be/LJTIWe\\_71mw](http://youtu.be/LJTIWe_71mw) (accessed September 6, 2013).
- 20 The feud itself dates back to 1997, when *Jackie Brown* was released, though Tarantino certainly wasn't shy about using the "n-word" in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) or *Pulp Fiction* (1994).
- 21 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 22 For more on the dicey representational politics of black women whose only function in a film is to serve as mistresses to white men, see Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); and bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992).
- 23 Oprah Winfrey Network, "Oprah, Spielberg, Daniel Day-Lewis talk about 'Lincoln,'" *The Huffington Post* (2012), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/29/oprah-spielberg-daniel-day-lewis-lincoln\\_n\\_2207277.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/29/oprah-spielberg-daniel-day-lewis-lincoln_n_2207277.html) (accessed September 6, 2013).
- 24 Ruth Marcus, "A Cliffhanger in the White House," *The Washington Post* (2012), <http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-11-20/>

opinions/35510873\_1\_fiscal-cliff-mary-lincoln-13th-amendment (accessed September 2, 2013).

- 25** Amanda Marcotte, "Django Unchained: A Movie about Other Movies about the 19th Century," *Raw Story* (2013), <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2013/01/03/django-unchained-a-movie-about-other-movies-about-the-19th-century/> (accessed September 2, 2013).
- 26** Cindy Davis, "Mindhole Blowers: 20 Facts about *Blazing Saddles* that Might Leave Your Mind Aglow with Whirling, Transient Nodes of Thought Careening through a Cosmic Vapor of Invention," *Pajiba* (2012), [http://www.pajiba.com/seriously\\_random\\_lists/mindhole-blowers-20-facts-about-blazing-saddles-that-might-leave-your-mind-aglow-with-whirling-transient-nodes-of-thought-careening-through-a-cosmic-vapor-of-invention-.php](http://www.pajiba.com/seriously_random_lists/mindhole-blowers-20-facts-about-blazing-saddles-that-might-leave-your-mind-aglow-with-whirling-transient-nodes-of-thought-careening-through-a-cosmic-vapor-of-invention-.php) (accessed September 2, 2013).
- 27** Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Gates, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*.
- 28** Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds. *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 36–37.
- 29** See Lauren Berlant, "The Face of America and the State of Emergency," in *Disciplinary and Dissent in Cultural Studies*, ed. Cary Nelson and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (New York: Routledge, 1996), 397–439; Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227–240; Laura Kipnis, "(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, Linda Baughman, and J. Macgregor Wise (New York: Routledge, 1992), 373–391; Constance Penley, *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America* (New York: Verso, 1997); Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Gilbert B. Rodman, *Elvis after Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 30** For more on the merits of "impolite" political interventions, see Michael Awkward, *Burying Don Imus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.*; bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Kipnis, "(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust;" and Rodman, "Race."

Quentin  
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