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Film Review

12 Years a Slave directed by Steve McQueen

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BASED UPON SOLOMON NORTHRUP'S MEMOIR PUBLISHED IN 1853, and the screenplay by John Ridley, Steve McQueen's film is characteristically steadfast in its depiction of the violence of slavery. Northrup, a free man in New York, was duped, kidnapped and sold into slavery. The film follows this period of Northrup's life until his release and restoration to his family in 1853.

There is much more to McQueen's film—and it is very much his film—than violence. However, this review, in accordance with themes of this issue, explores slavery as a form of violence. If compared with the other recent treatments of slavery, *Manderlay* (2005) and *Django Unchained* (2012), *12 Years a Slave* has a clear agenda and is undivided in its focus, achieved by narratively and aesthetically attending to one thing: a freeman's story of enslavement. While Lars von Trier's *Manderlay* features slavery, the film is ultimately about von Trier's (on-going) critique of American society, politics and consumerism, and the second in a series of films utilising Brechtian decontextualization. Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, although in part about the liberation of a slave, inhabits the Western genre and is typically preoccupied with high tempo action. With *12 Years a Slave*'s singular focus in mind, different manifestations of the violence of slavery and their formal elements are addressed.

Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) awakens in a thin pool of light, in an otherwise dark room; as he moves, the chinking sound of chains signal his alarm and new-found confinement. On protesting to his jailers about his identity as a freeman, he is beaten with a wooden paddle and then a whip. Such is the ferocity of this outburst—the blows bearing down on Northrup are accentuated by the low camera angle—viewers are induced to flinch with each

strike as he is abused for asserting himself. As becomes clear throughout, the marks borne on slaves' bodies, are not just indices of their affliction and their oppressors' brutality experienced at the moment of infliction, but the embodiment of the burden of their suffering and subjugation they endure. It seems fitting, then, that viewers kinaesthetically respond (wincing, sharp intakes of breath, turns of the head, recoiling as they sit) as an embodied acknowledgement of McQueen's visceral representations of brutalisation.



Tibeats the carpenter watches over his charges. Fox Searchlight, '12 Years a Slave Featurette:

"The Cast", published 5th Nov. 2013, [00:02:38]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_pMRuEjwQE&list=PL9aTpcXXIf48bI2irph8hIwKsluk9fpB5> [accessed 11 May 2014].

The composition of the above shot provides an example of how a pervasive atmosphere of threat and menace is suggested, which envelops Northrup and his fellow slaves. The saw, with its prominent teeth, comes between master (this time, Chief Carpenter, John Tibeats [Paul Dano]) and slave. This shot complements earlier sequences showing the relentless plunging rotation of the red paddles of the steamer as Northrup and the other slaves are inexorably transported to their fate. Such sequences, shot compositions and sound—connoting portent—combined with an unhurried, lingering camera are reflected in McQueen's other feature films: *Hunger* (2007)—a depiction of resistance and hunger strike, particularly of Bobby Sands, in the Maze prison near Belfast; and *Shame* (2011)—the study of a sex addict in New York. However, there is a shift in tone from the exacting impassive examinations carried out in those prior features, to a somewhat more intimate tone in *12 Years a Slave* to facilitate an appropriately affective re-telling of Northrup's account and treatment of American slavery.

Notably, the violence of slavery obliterates identity. Little by little McQueen flags the erosion of Northrup's former life and status. After his initial beating by his kidnappers, Northrup is provided with a new labourer's shirt in preparation for his transportation and sale. His old shirt, bloodied and torn, belonged to the freeman Solomon Northrup, but he now puts on a slave's garb. Once transported to market, he receives a new name, Platt, when the roll is called. Still unwilling to embrace his new identity, Northrup asserts himself, suggesting improvements in working methods to his new owner, Master Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), making no secret of his former life and experience hitherto. Solomon's behaviour earns him favour with Ford, but Tibeats feels threatened by a slave of such ability and is bent on beating him into submission if necessary. Northrup's resistance to Tibeats results in near death for him and a change in owner to the ruthless and anger-riddled Epps, whose wife warns

Northrup that he is 'here to work', not assert his former, educated self. The threat against doing 'any more' is 'a hundred lashes'. This exhortation follows his answer to her question about where he is from; he answers with a story about a past and former master in Washington, rewriting his own history in order to survive.

Flogging, commonplace on Epps' cotton plantation, comes to a head in the most excruciating scene. Northrup is forced to whip fellow slave Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), the object of Epps' affection, following her trip to a neighbouring plantation to get some soap. Consumed with envy and rage, Epps orders Patsey be strung up and flogged but Epps bids Northrup administer the lashes. Left with no choice, to lash or be lashed (or worse), Northrup whips Patsey—he is compelled to appease Epps who holds a cocked pistol. Northrup's ethical dilemma notwithstanding, this represents a process whereby any semblance of his former identity is blotted out with each strike he makes upon Patsey's back.

Epps' infatuation with Patsey is evident from the outset as he eulogises her ability as cotton picker at one of the daily weigh-ins—where, if a labourer's yield weighs less than the day before, she is taken out and whipped—ominously moving behind her and placing his hands on her shoulders. Later, Epps announces proudly that 'A man does how he pleases with his property'. This is the violence of slavery that manifests itself in the horror of human beings treated as less-than-human, as expendable possessions. And he is true to his word. Besides liberally administering and ordering lashes for his slaves, Epps rouses them from their precious sleep to have them dance for him—as a young boy might play with marionettes—as he looks on. Epps' wife is no better. In a fit of jealousy at her husband's affection for Patsey, she interrupts the dancing on one occasion and throws a glass decanter in Patsey's face. However, the most disturbing but inevitable episode occurs as a consequence of Epps' reckless assertion of his ownership. Fetching her by night in a fit of inebriated passion, he leads Patsey into the thin moonlight and rapes and chokes her (without killing her). The monstrous reality is that Epps is true to his word, doing as he pleases. The only hope for Patsey it seems, is death, as Epps, having embraced his lecherousness, can walk away.

The violence of slavery is also manifested in enforced separation. At the slave auction, Eliza, the mother of Emily and Randell, is with Solomon and others. Her fears of separation are realised when her son is purchased, apart from her and Emily. Ford then buys her along with Solomon. Wailing with grief, she is removed from the auction quickly, her outburst disrupting the 'dignified' atmosphere of the salesrooms. Inconsolable, her melancholia continues once on Ford's plantation. Mistress Ford comments to her maid during Sunday worship that she cannot abide such grief in their midst. Northrup, housed adjacently to Eliza, even complains of her incessant wailing. The prominence given to her cries in the sound design emphasises the very same to viewers. Eliza is ominously removed, presumably to be sold, and does not feature again. The violence of forcible separation from her children begets her visceral (violent) grief (which eventually kills her).¹

In the end, there is also an inverse kind of separation which is also a deliverance, as Northrup manages to contact those who can provide assistance and proof of his freedom. As Solomon is driven away by his liberators in spite of Epps' incredulity, Patsey shouts after Solomon in distress as he leaves, the bond between them being broken. Northrup is pictured in close-up to the right of the frame, the background dissolving into soft focus as the depth of field narrows. The time of his slavery becomes a blur of memory. However, Patsey can still be

made out and she collapses, as if falling under the cumulative weight of her now heavier burden. She is now separated from Solomon, the one who helped her bear that yoke.

These manifestations of the violence of slavery were shot on location on former plantations in Louisiana. The state's landscape is acclaimed in the actors' interviews and by critics alike as of 'great natural beauty'. There are shots where the environment is conveyed in a striking painterly manner with a vibrant palette: the fresh greens of sugar cane and meadow; burning orange skies are reflected in still creeks with tree silhouettes clawing the sky; and willow trees sway in the breeze. All the while, these shots serve to heighten the violence in that the environment, however affective to 'free' viewers (and masters and mistresses), remains utterly impervious to the slaves' predicament. Just as these slaves are trapped in a legally sanctioned system of commodification, existing in subjugation to their owners, so the environment in which they are confined, however exquisite, cannot and does not aid them.

This juxtaposition of human violence and other-than-human equanimity occurs elsewhere in McQueen's corpus when, for example, a snowflake lands on the grazed knuckle of a prison guard in *Hunger*. There are no less striking images in *12 Years a Slave*, such as the extreme close-ups of the violin accompanied by the noise of the string being tightened very near the beginning of the film, spilling out of the frame, which introduces the violin as a recurring motif throughout, the eventual destruction of which emblematises Solomon's despair and fading hope. This waning hope is further undermined when an itinerant white labourer betrays him. Northrup asked the labourer, in confidence, to post a letter on his behalf, but once he is betrayed he must destroy it. As he burns the letter the final shot depicts the dying embers, glowing amber—the only thing viewers can see—against the black of the night.

The second shot of the film, in which the camera creeps through green undergrowth, is also indicative of McQueen's visual style, in-keeping with these notable kinds of shots. However, the position of this shot is interesting given what precedes and follows it. Beforehand, the opening shot (approximately ten seconds in duration) of the film is a tableau vivant of the film's subjects, including Northrup, who is positioned in the centre of the frame. They appear as a line of somewhat bemused and fatigued expressions, staring off to the left of the frame, as if alive and yet frozen all at once. The subjects are introduced before the start of the play, as it were, because in the subsequent sequence, the camera slithers through the undergrowth then breaks through into a clearing revealing those same subjects at work in a sugar cane field. The transition from undergrowth to clearing, then, is like the curtain going up at the theatre, where the preceding tableau vivant serves as a rudimentary programme note of the actors and their roles.

The very first shot, however, also functions as one of at least two other points in the film where a gesture is made directly to viewers. If the tableau vivant connotes the idea of the introduction of a cast, another gesture is made, this time in a close-up of Solomon as he reflects on his predicament, on what he was and what is to come. He looks to the left of the frame, and from there, his gaze edges towards the centre of the frame, at which point his eyes address the camera directly. This is followed later, where Northrup and others enter the body of a dead slave, by a shot in which the earth thrown from the shovel into the grave flies directly towards the camera as if to cover it. These points make viewers aware that they are observing these events as a viewer and draw attention to the filmic apparatus itself. The effect is to remind viewers that the film, as Northrup did in his book, bears witness, as they do, to these events, to

the violence of slavery. In turn, the question of complicity and of responsibility is posed of Northrup and to viewers in bearing witness.

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Notes

- ¹ See Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Company, 1853), p. 160 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html>> [accessed 11 May 2014].