Slavery in Hollywood: representation and reception

Randa Sellali

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Department of history

University of Essex

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of a selection of four case study feature films made between 1903-2013 that investigates how American slavery was represented on the big screen and the reception of these representations in the US at various points in the 20th and 21st centuries. The films are used as the primary source of knowledge of the time in which they were made and its prominent racial attitudes. Using film as a primary historical source to understand the development of American ideas about slavery and race relations, this research explores the complexities of the cinematic industry, its engagement with the social and cultural environment from which it emerged, the industry which created it, and the ways It was consumed. Relying on a diverse range of films featuring American slavery, this research submits that any film set in the past can be used to explore the values, assumptions, and ideological conflicts of the present in which it was made. Furthermore, it contends that analysis of historical films allows the exploration of the contemporary audience's engagement with the past the films present.

The methods and approach of this research provide evidence-based analysis of each film's production and reception and close readings of individual texts. The four case studies undertaken in this thesis include a selection of different representations of plantation slavery: nine silent *Uncle Tom's Cabin* films (1903-1927), based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel documenting the life of Uncle Tom; *Song of the South* (1946), a live-action/animated musical film based on the adaptation of Uncle Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris; *Mandingo* (1975), an adaptation of a 1957 novel on a slave breeding plantation by Kyle Onstott; *12 years a Slave* (2013), a period drama film based on the 1853 slave narrative memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup.

Contents

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my loving parents, who gave me everything they had so I can be where I am today. I hope I have made you proud. To my loving father, my rock, and my role model. Your words and advice have guided me through this journey and my whole life.

I also like to dedicate this thesis to my dear husband, whose love and support have enabled me to carry on this Ph.D journey. From the first day we sat on that bench discussing me getting a scholarship and moving abroad alone to do my PhD, to the day we celebrated me successfully passing my viva, not a single day passed by without me feeling your constant support and pride, despite the distance and the several obstacles we faced throughout the years. Thank you for being there every step of the way, thank you for the endless patience and care, and for believing in me when I didn't even believe in myself. I truly could not have done this without you. I love you.

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General Introduction

In a 2015 interview for the Marshall Project, discussing the problem of race in the US, criminal justice lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson declared, 'I don't believe slavery ended in 1865; I believe it just evolved.' What Stevenson was referring to in his statement was the enduring effects of slavery, segregation, and long years of Jim Crow on the African American community. He argued that such effects and the memory of slavery are widely ignored or avoided that 'few people in this country have any awareness of just how expansive and how debilitating and destructive America's history of slavery is.'[1] In the summer of 2020, following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the mass protest the incident ignited, both in the United States and worldwide, the expression 'slavery never ended, it just evolved' appeared again on several protestors' signs. [2]

The incident, which spurred global protests against systemic racism, led to the removal of nearly a hundred Confederate and Civil War monuments, the renaming of several U.S. universities and consumer packaged goods, and forced federal state, and local authorities to remove Confederate flags from their government grounds.[3] The protests and the strong return of the Black Lives Matter Movement to national headlines, with the biggest participation and influence since it first appeared in 2013, brought back debates and conversations on institutional racism and its origins. Slavery, its legacies, and its direct links to the problem of

[1] https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/06/24/bryan-stevenson-on-charleston-and-our-real-problem-with-race#.1u48s2em5.

[2] The year 2020 also marked the theatrical release of *Just Mercy,* a biographical legal drama based on Stevenson's 2014 memoir, of the same title, which explored Stevenson's career and journey in legally defending African American prisoners. The film starred Michael B. Jordan as Bryan Stevenson.

[3] Rachel Treisman, NRP, February 23, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/23/970610428/nearly-100-confederate-monuments-removed-in-2020-report-says-more-than-700-remain.

race in the United States once again became the central focus of all these conversations. The enduring effects of slavery and segregation and calls for reparations have been on the table of discussion in the American social and political scene since the end of the Civil Rights Movement and keep rising to prominence as important events occur.

Among the manifestations of the enduring effects of slavery and its continuous presence in American life is the recurrent representation of the institution in films. This representation has been a reflection of changing social and political circumstances and society's comfort levels with the topic. For example, *Gone with the Wind* 1939, which is still to this day one of the most popular and most successful representations of slavery on the silver screen, had to be removed from HBO Max, Warner Bros. streaming service, in 2020 following the killing of George Floyd due to its offensive racial content which 'glorifies the antebellum South' and 'when it is not ignoring the horrors of slavery, pauses only to perpetuate some of the most painful stereotypes of people of color,' as noted African American scriptwriter John Ridley, who campaigned for the film's removal.[4] These stereotypes are "a product of their time" that 'were wrong then and are wrong today' which is why the network felt obliged to remove the film declared an HBO Max spokesperson to *Variety*. Yet, the film will return with 'a discussion of its historical context and a denouncement of those very depictions but will be presented as it was originally created because to do otherwise would be the same as claiming these prejudices never existed. If we are to create a more just, equitable and inclusive future, we must first acknowledge and understand our history.'[5]

[4] John Ridley, *LA Times*, June 9, 2020. https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-06-08/hbo-max-racism-gone-with-the-wind-movie.

[5] Jordan Moreau, *Variety*, June 9, 2020. https://variety.com/2020/film/news/hbo-max-gone-with-the-wind-removed-1234629892/.

As films on slavery continue to be made, questions on 'why can't black people get over slavery?' and 'why are films about slavery still being made?' continue to be asked. [6] The most straightforward answer to those questions is because the vestiges of the peculiar institution run deep into American society. Almost a century and a half after its abolition, slavery is still remembered as one of the most crucial moments in American history, which continues to have its effects on modern race relations within American society. As Alexander Weheliye notes, race must continue to be placed in 'front and center in considerations of political violence,' focusing on its functions 'as a set of socio-political processes of differentiation and hierarchization.'[7]

The last two decades have witnessed an intense focus on the history of slavery from scholars as well as the public. As Ira Berlin argued in 2004, 'slavery has a greater presence in American life now than at any time since the Civil War ended.'[8] This presence was reflected through cinema and television, with several successful productions featuring slavery in the first two decades of the new millennium.[9] However, this presence on the big screen is not a new phenomenon; slavery and its history have been a recurrent theme in historical films since 1903, with the release of Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Slavery Days,* an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel of the same title. The film began 'more than a century of conflict over the representation of African Americans in American cinema.'[10] A century

[6] Orville Lloyd Douglas, *the Guardian*, 12 September 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/12/why-im-not-watching-the-butler-12-years-a-slave.

[7] Alexander G Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human.* (Duke University Press Books; Illustrated edition, 2014), p. 5.

[8] Ira Berlin, 'American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice', *The Journal of American History*, 90.4 (2004), 1251–68 (p. 1251).

[9] Ibid., p. 1251.

[10] Plath, "Mammy, Mandingo, Django, and Solomon: A century of American Slavery in cinema from Uncle Tom's Cabin to 12 Years a Slave" in *Histories on Screen: The Past and Present in Anglo- American Cinema and Television*, ed. by Michael Dolski, Sam Edwards, and Faye Sayer, Bloomsbury Research Skills for History, 3 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 119.

which main's problem was 'the problem of the color-line' as noted by Du Bois. [11] Therefore, the intense engagement over the issues 'of slavery signals-as it did in the 1830s and the 1960s, a crisis in American race relations.'[12] Representations of American slavery in film, their reception, and their relationship to American attitudes on racial relations in the present in which they are made are examined in this thesis across four key case studies.

Scholarly research into the use of film in historical research, cinematic representations of slavery, and Hollywood's handling of race, is wide-ranging and includes books that focus upon the conceptual and methodological approach to historical filmmaking, historical surveys, and anthologies on the black presence on the silver screen and the social and political advancements made by African Americans throughout time. By critically surveying these discourses, this introductory chapter will first set out the approach to the use of film in historical research utilised by this study. Second, the method of this thesis, which combines evidence-based investigation with close textual analysis, is explained in depth. Finally, with reference to recent scholarship on the cinematic representation of slavery, the aims and contribution of this research will be set out, followed by a description of each chapter.

Film in Historical Research

The unfamiliar nature of film created an obstacle to its introduction into historical research. In its early years, films, and cinema in general, were a mysterious world for academics. During the first half of the twentieth century, the popularity of cinema and film as art was not

[11] W. E. B. Du Bois and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[12] Berlin, 'American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice', p.125.

reflected in its possible cultural importance. This continued until the end of World War II when films became part of the cultural landscape in most of Europe and the United States, and academics and the general public started appreciating the merits of Hollywood and other world cinemas. However, historians remained reluctant and doubtful of any other possibility film can have other than being commercial entertainment. Unlike historical novels, paintings, and photographs, which are the creation of individuals, films are a result of a collective, long, and complex process of production. This latter made considering film analysis in historical studies a bigger challenge for historians. Although these fundamental difficulties in using movies as historical data were not entirely resolved, historians realised that film was too important of a medium that it was impossible to continue ignoring it.[13]

Over the decades, Hollywood's handling of history became a rich and compelling field of inquiry for historians. This interest was a result of the growing power of Hollywood in shaping, reinforcing, or subverting people's vision of the past. As Melvyn Strokes noted, 'Hollywood for a century now has been a major force in how Americans view the past.' With technological advancements and the development of the cinematic industry, film became a principal social institution for storing and interpreting the past as well as one of the most important cultural artifacts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Consequently, modern historians have turned to moving images as important tools that provide insights into the past.[14]

Film can provide an important source of historical knowledge. Historical films, in particular, can embody historical thinking and, by so doing contribute to the understanding of the past. Feature films 'reflect and respond to the marketplace and thus audience', noted Anthony

[13] Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey H. Richards, *Best of British: Cinema and Society from 1930 to the Present*, Cinema and Society Series, New ed (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), p. 6.
[14] Melvyn Stokes, *American History through Hollywood Film: From the Revolution to the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 3.

Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, which make them a suitable tool to discover and investigate societies.[15] Historian Gianluca Fantoni perfectly described the relationship between cinema and the world it emerges from stating that 'cinema, rather is like a piece of blotting paper, absorbing ideas, cultural influences and controversies emanating from the world in which it was produced.'[16] This latter makes film an instrument at the historian's disposal that enables them to yield valuable insights into cultural, social, and political history.

The use of cinematic texts as a source of historical investigation is a research thread that emerged in the 1960s and has continued to develop ever since. Scholarly research into the filmic representation of the past is very eclectic and focuses on different aspects of the moving images using a variety of approaches and methodologies. In the 1960s, historians were preoccupied with the value of film as a primary source for the study of contemporary history relying on newsreels and documentaries. The next few decades witnessed major theoretical and methodological advances as many historians became interested in the subject.[17]

Film history began as a sub-discipline of film studies and developed to become an independent discipline as a result of the growing interest in film studies at American universities between 1965-1975. The demand for film history books encouraged many scholars to make research and write on the subject.[18] The publication of *Film History: Theoryand Practice* by Robert C. Allen and Douglass Gomery was a key moment in the development of the discipline. The book mapped the terrain of interest of both film studies scholars and film historians. It began with defining film history as a study based on film and

[15] Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British,* p.7.
[16] *Film, History and Memory*, ed. by Jennie M. Carlsten and Fearghal McGarry (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 27.
[17] Jeffery Richard, 'Film and Television: the moving image' in *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. by Sarah Barber and C. M. Peniston-Bird, Routledge Guides to Using Historical Sources (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 73.
[18] Ibid.

involving 'studying film form from a particular perspective and with particular goals in mind- perspectives and goals that are historical.'[19] The book represented both theoretical approaches to studying film history (aesthetic, technological, economic, and social) as well as a number of case studies of early American cinema. Starting from 1985, film history became more and more influenced by social and political history and eventually managed to establish itself as an independent field of research with its own emphasis and approaches. The main difference between film studies and film history, as identified by Jeffery Richards, lies in the fact that 'film studies are centrally concerned with the text- with minute visual and structural analysis of various films … with the eliciting of meanings that neither the filmmaker nor contemporary audiences and critics would have recognised.' On the other hand, film history 'has placed its priority on context, on the locating of films securely in the setting of their maker's attitudes, constraints and preoccupations and audience reaction to contemporary understandings.'[20]

By the 1980s, many scholars had written quite extensively on issues related to historical films and dedicated several books and publications to defend the use of film in historical research. Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin were the founding fathers of the 'history as visions' school of thought which advocated for the consideration of film as a reflection of society. Ferro and Sorlin's analyses are less concerned with issues of accuracy or authenticity than they are with the ideological construction of film texts. Sorlin defined the historical film as 'a reconstruction of the social relationship which, using the pretext of the past, reorganises the present.'[21] He emphasised the ties between the past and present made in films by stating that 'history is a mere framework, serving as a basis or counterpoint for a political thesis, history

[19] Robert Clyde Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 4.
[20] Richard, 'Film and Television: the moving image', p.75.
[21] Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford, Eng: B. Blackwell, 1980), p. 80.

is no more than a useful device to speak to the present time.'[22] Ferro considered films a good source of historical research for the fact that they do not present reality but are rather an interpretation of it. He wrote, 'We need to study films and see it in relation to the world that produces it.[23] Ferro recommended the focus on both 'the visible and non-visible' in the analysis of films. [24] He highly encouraged historians to 'look for everything that can be spotted beyond the intentions of the authors of the cinematic text'.[25]

The contributions of these two historians to the growing field of film in historical research set the scene for another school of thought led by post-modernist historians such as Robert Rosenstone. The latter was a major advocate for the importance of historical film who argued that historical films should be evaluated seriously as "real history." [26] His contributions were theoretically oriented. He approached film as a secondary source and concentrated on how it presents history and constructs its own historical world. Unlike the film history school, which was influenced by social and political history as explained above, Rosenstone's approach was mainly influenced by film studies and focused on 'film as a discourse, whose meaning was explored through theory independent of the prevailing cultural, economic, political and social contexts.' [27]

This approach to film has been criticised for relying too much on theory and addressing films 'as if they existed in vacuum' without paying close attention to the historical context of production and reception.[28] A major constraint in considering film as a direct depiction of the past is the fact that films provide a version of history that can be sold to audiences. Using the

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[22] Ibid., p.208.
[23] Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*, Contemporary Film Studies (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 29.
[24] Ibid. p.30.
[25] Carlsten and McGarry, *Film, History and Memory*, p. 23.
[26] Robert A. Rosenstone, 'The Historical Film as Real History', 1995.
[27] Robert Rosenstone, "The Historian Meets Hollywood" in Peter Beck, *Presenting History: Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 193.
[28] Richards, 'Film and Television: the moving image', p. 73.

past as entertainment requires presenting it 'in its most attractive light.'[29] In other words, it is inevitable to have many elements of fiction woven into the narratives and characters of a film dealing with history. For that reason, 'the ways in which cinema presents past events are never direct or unmediated' and can hardly be considered as a faithful depiction of the past. [30]

On the other hand, *American History American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* edited by John E. O'Conner and Martin A. Jackson pioneered the study of historical films for their reflection of the past in which they are made.[31] The collection of essays relied on a contextual as well as a textual approach to film and applied it to fifteen individual films in an attempt to explain the way in which the films documented American social history as well as reveal the state of mind of the American people at the time each of the films was released. In the book's preface, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. contends that cinema 'is a notably ambiguous, even duplicitous art', and, as such, its relationship to contemporary society is far more complex and challenging. To unlock 'the rich potential . . . of film as historical artifacts', he wrote, requires 'analysing them in their broader cultural context, and paying close attention to historical content, production, background, and audience reception.' The volume established what became to be known as the school of "film history" where films are used as primary sources to evaluate how the film production is shaped by the social and political context in which it happens, and that films about the past also say much about their own present. [32]

[29] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*, Sixth edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 17.
[30] Jay Winter, 'Film and the Matrix of Memory', *The American Historical Review*, 2001, 857 (p. 863).
[31] The editors founded the academic study of film and history in the United States in 1970 when they established the Historians' Film Committee of the American Historical Association.

[32] The first edition appeared in 1979, and the second (expanded from fourteen essays to fifteen by the addition of a piece on Oliver Stone's newly released *Platoon*) in 1988. *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, ed. by John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, 2nd Revised edition (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 1989), p. xiv and xvii.

Using film as a primary source in historical research consists of analysing the historical and cultural context in which it was produced and consumed, as well as textual analysis of the film's content. Investigating the institutional and cultural contexts of the production of films provides 'a glimpse into the social and cultural underpinnings of a time and of place.'[33] As Sian Barber explains, 'films can reveal a myriad of attitudes, not simply of those who are in the film, but also those of directors, scriptwriters, producers, and financers.' She argued that films are also most useful to understand how past audiences respond to 'issues, characters, and ideals.'[34] The choices that filmgoers make, as well as the decisions of filmmakers in producing a specific film and not the other 'reveal a great deal about the nature of contemporary life, prevailing social concerns, preoccupations, morals, and manners.'[35]

Using film as a primary source is an approach that was further advanced in recent years by many film historians such as James Chapman, Sue Harper, Jeffery Richards, and others.[36] The significance of this approach for historians using feature film is that it enables them to unveil 'evidence of values and attitudes from the time the film was made, the explication in story from the contemporary ideas about the social and sexual roles of men and women, the concepts of work and leisure, class and race, peace and war.'[37] This approach came to existence as a result of scholars' frustration with 'the surveys and overviews, the tales of pioneers and adventures that for too long passed as film histories' as well as the availability and accessibility of archival materials at the disposal of historians studying films. [38]

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[33] Micheal R. Dolski "The Moving image as a primary source: Author, text, and context", in *Histories on Screen: The Past and Present in Anglo- American Cinema and Television*, ed. by Michael Dolski, Sam Edwards, and Faye Sayer, Bloomsbury Research Skills for History, 3 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).
[34] Sian Barber, *Using Film as a Source*, IHR Research Guides (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 1.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Robert A. Rosenstone, 'The Historian Meets Hollywood' in Beck, p. 193.
[37] Richards, 'Film and Television: the moving image', p. 61-62. These two terms will be used interchangeably.
[38] Thomas Elsaesser, 'The New Film History', *Sight and Sound*, 55.4 (1986), 246–51 (p. 246).

James Chapman's *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film,* is a manifestation of this approach. Chapman's argument that 'historical feature films will often have as much more to say about the present in which it was made as about the past in which it was set' is explored and proven through thirteen case studies of feature films spanning over sixty years of British cinema.[39] Chapman examined their production and reception histories as well as looking closely at the way the movies tackled themes including class, ethnicity, imperialism, monarchy, militarism, and gender to prove this thesis. The book focused on both textual and contextual analysis using a variety of secondary and primary sources, including filmmakers' private papers, censorship records, Mass Observation material, and trade press journals to show us precisely what drove individual producers, directors, and actors to get involved in these various projects and how the movies were interpreted by contemporary critics and ordinary filmgoers.

As with any other research approach, film history has its critics. Many scholars have commented on the fact that it is devoid of theory. However, it is in fact the main objective of this approach to dismiss once and for all the use of 'fashionable but short-lived theories' in analysis and the lightweight descriptive methods which are often assigned to film-as-history.[40] It is based on the principle of empirical investigation and inquiry that emphasizes the critical analysis of primary sources relating to the production and reception of feature films.

The New film history: Sources, Methods, Approaches 2009 is a volume that represents 'an expanding research agenda of film history since 1985.' The approach of the book is based on three distinguishing features: 'A great level of methodological sophistication, being source-

[39] James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film*, Cinema and Society Series (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 1.
[40] Richards, 'Film and Television: the moving image', p.75.

based, and an understanding that films are cultural artifacts with their own formal properties and aesthetics.' The main argument of the book is that what the historical film present is 'not 'real' history, but a constructed version of history that accords with the ideological values of its makers and the culture and tastes of its audiences.' Therefore, films are placed at 'the nexus of a complex and dynamic relationships between producers and consumers.' [41]

This approach 'moves beyond a narrow concern with historical authenticity and takes full on-board questions of representation, whilst at the same time paying full attention to the contexts of production and reception.' The book uses several case studies that help illustrate the implementation of the approach into the current research of its contributors. The book does not distinguish between "good" and "bad" films and relies on a very inclusive approach to what can be defined as a historical film.[42] Throughout its chapters, the book focuses on empirical investigation with the use of a variety of primary sources and materials relating to the films under analysis.

This research will adhere to the methodology used by Chapman, Glancy, and Harper in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, and their approach to historical films. The main aim of this research is to explore the evolution of American ideas about race, Black experience, and American slavery from 1903-2013 through textual and contextual analysis of four feature films case studies. To attain this aim, this project will focus on different aspects in its analysis. First, a textual analysis of each of the films by looking closely to the meaning and structures of the films as conveyed through their content as well as the intentions of their creators. The latter will be done through a close reading of the films' texts, materials relating to the filmmakers such as biographies and personal accounts, interviews and press statements,

[41] *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, ed. by James Chapman, H. Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 6–9.
[42] Ibid. p, 9

other works of the filmmakers, and finally the source materials on which the films are based, if they are adaptations. Second, an examination of the context that produced each film by looking into historical records. The latter includes both the film industry itself and the political and social environment, as well as examining other films made at the same time period. Third, how the films were received by critics and how the audiences reacted to them. This will be done through examining critics' reviews in specialised and major newspapers and magazines, both Black and white, observing box office revenues, and recreating audiences' contemporary reactions through what is available in the press, anecdotes, and online conversations for the later films.

My examination of the reception of these films will employ the historical materialist approach to media reception proposed by Janet Staiger in *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception.* This approach 'attempts to illuminate the cultural meanings of texts in specific times and social circumstances to specific viewers, and it attempts to contribute to discussions about the spectatorial effects of films by moving beyond text-centered analyses.' The films' reception is conceived as an event that is reconstructed through locating its historical traces. These traces can be, but aren't limited to, film reviews, news articles, letters to newspapers, advertisements, illustrations, and publicity which circulated in the major mass media.[43]

As argued by Chapman, film analysis 'should be grounded in contextual as well as textual analysis and that is what differentiates film historians from other commentators who focus only on the aesthetics or formal analysis of films.'[44] Films can serve as a cultural lens through which one can view contemporary society at the time and place of creation.[45] The direct

[43] Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York University Press, 2000), pp. 162–74.
[44] Chapman, *Past and present: national identity and the British historical film,* p. 11.
[45] Dolski, "The Moving image as a primary source: Author, text, and context", p. 23.

effect that context has on the representation of the past is shown in Chapman's chapter on the difference between Kenneth Branagh's 1989 adaptation of Shakespeare's Henry V and Laurence Olivier's 1944 glorified imagining, despite the fact that both films are based on the same text source and follow the same narrative with the same characters. Chapman noted that Olivier's version, being made and released at the height of the Second World War, took account that audiences would appreciate the wartime narrative but at the same time, the filmmakers limited the scenes of bloodshed. On the other hand, Branagh's adaptation is all 'dirty gritty and viciously bloody.'[46]

Cinema is a complex historical, sociological, legal and economic phenomenon, 'films are merely one manifestation of the working system as a whole', argued Thomas Elsaesser.[47] Therefore, in order to understand how a historical film is constructed, it is important to investigate its collaborative production process. This latter 'often demands the efforts of many participants, all of which can shape the final product.'[48] Anything from the Production studios, financers, scriptwriters, actors, directors, location, and any other detail relating to the production of the film can influence its content. Filmic representations are after all 'simply the traces left by the struggles for dominance during the production process- by the contest of creative control.'[49] When using films from different periods, which is the case of this research, it is important to acknowledge the status of the industry in the period and map it alongside audience numbers.

Contemporary reception and response to films can say a great deal about the 'preoccupations of audiences in the past decades.'[50] However, it is crucial to distinguish between critical

[46] Chapman, Past and present: national identity and the British historical film, pp. 113–42.
[47] Thomas Elsaesser, 'The New Film History', *Sight and Sound*, 55.4 (1986), 246–51 (p. 247).
[48] Dolski, "The Moving image as a primary source: Author, text, and context", p. 13.
[49] Sue Harper, *Women in British Cinema: Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*, Rethinking British Cinema (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 3.
[50] Barber, *Using Film as a Source,* p. 1.

reception and ordinary people's reaction to the film as the second can easily be influenced by the first (but not always). On the other hand, the popularity of a film among critics doesn't necessarily mean it would be a commercial success, a film can easily be despised by critics yet very popular among filmgoers and performs well at the box office and vice versa, which will be demonstrated in the following chapters. It is also important to stay cautious about generalisations and seeing audiences as one mass or having the same views and one has to keep in mind that 'an audience does not accept passively every message put across in a film.'[51]

The source on which the historical film is based is also an element that needs to be investigated to determine what might have inspired the making of the film. Films adapted from pre-existing material would require a 'further layer of authorship that needs to be acknowledged and explored.' Adapting any source into a film will eventually involve a certain degree of interpretation and influence by other sources.[52] Therefore, investigating and analysing any source that might have influenced the film will enable the identification of invention or inaccuracies as well as the intentions of the filmmakers. All these elements will be taken into consideration in this thesis and lay the structure of each chapter.

Slavery in Film

Running through the literature on the representation of slavery and African Americans in Hollywood is a thread that traces back to the early journalistic criticism of motion pictures. The first presence of African Americans on the big screen was during the period of silent

[51] Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British: cinema and society from 1930 to the present*, p. 3.
[52] Chapman, *Past and present: national identity and the British historical film*, pp. 113–42.

cinema (roughly 1895-1927). This latter intersected with the Jim Crow era and the widespread racial segregation. Consequently, this presence was an extension of the racial prejudice and racism Black Americans were facing on a daily basis. With the release of *UncleTom's Cabin* (1903), 'slavery filmography began with all of the ugly, stereotyped characterizations and storylines one would expect of the racial nadir of the early twentieth century,' noted historian Brenda Stevenson.[53] Consequently, this representation generated anger and frustration among Black Americans who found themselves being humiliated on the big screen. At the time, film criticism and analysis as an academic discipline was yet to be established. Therefore, African American response to these films was either through political activism or journalistic commentary. The newly formed agencies such as the National Negro Business League (NNBL) and the National Association for the Advancement of Black People (NAACP) condemned and protested these cinematic representations. This criticism was a result of defining moments in the history of the African American community. The most important were the era of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, the era of the Second World War, with the shift in racial ideology, and finally the age of the Civil Rights Movement.

Birth of a Nation (1915) by D.W. Griffith was one of the most controversial and protested films of all time. When the film was released, most African Americans found Griffith's film and the way he used racist fantasy shocking. Donald Bogle argued that the film introduced 'all the major screen types . . . Literal and imaginative as some types might now appear, offensive and cinematically untutored audiences of the early part of the century responded to the character types as if they were the real thing.'[54] The film's release and influence galvanized African American activists, writers, thinkers, and filmmakers and each reacted

[53] Brenda E. Stevenson, 'Filming Black Voices and Stories: Slavery on America's Screens', *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, 8.3 (2018), 488–520 (p. 488).
[54] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Updated and expanded 5th edition (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 17.

within their area of expertise. The NAACP conducted a nationwide campaign to suppress or censor the movie. Unsurprisingly, their appeal to the National Board of Censorship to stop the release of the film was unsuccessful. More individual efforts were made by some Black journalists in various cities who hoped to influence their local censorship boards to at least omit certain controversial scenes in the movie to prevent the racial violence that occurred in the theatres where the film was shown, yet only a few screenings were cancelled. From their part, filmmakers attempted to recuperate African-Americans' onscreen image and react against the offensive depictions of white filmmakers by financing and making their films to propagandize favourably the important role of Black Americans in society. Among these were the Lincoln Motion Picture Company (founded in 1916), and the most famous of all race film companies, the Micheaux Film Corporation, founded in 1918 by author and filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. [55] Protest and annoyance among Afro-Americans were not exclusive to *Birth*, most films made between the silent era and the 1940s relied relatively on the same racist depictions.

For over half a century of presence on the big screen, the criticism of the stereotypical representation of Blacks in films was mainly from political activists and intellectuals who defended the vision of cinema as a means of empowering social and racial harmony in the US. Black as well as white liberal journalists, objected to the popular culture stereotypes that were feeding racism in societies by criticising these films in their newspaper and magazine articles. In August 1929, *Close Up*, an international film journal produced in Switzerland by Kenneth Macpherson and Winifred Bryherthe, devoted a number to "The Aframerican Cinema". The journal highlighted the Black community's rage and disappointment and encouraged protest against Hollywood. It also emphasised the need to establish an

[55] Thomas R. Cripps, 'The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture Birth of a Nation', *The Historian*, 25.3 (1963), 344 (pp. 345–50).

independent Black cinema where Black filmmakers would best represent their communities.[56] *Close Up* was one of the first contributions to a developing critical canon as well as an important source material for the later academic literature. In the spring of 1939, Georg Nobe and William Harrison wrote two articles, "the Negro in Hollywood" and "The Negro and the Cinema" in the distinguished British journal *Sight and Sound*. Similar to previous criticism, the two articles listed the many obstacles and stereotypes that Blacks face in American cinema. Yet, the writers highlighted the significant talent among Black actors and performers and held strong hope that Black producers will be able to turn around the old stereotypes of film art, despite the financial and social barriers.[57]

The years of the Second World War saw a considerable acceleration in the pace of critical writing. This acceleration also came with a change in tone and focus. Unlike previous writings that favoured the establishment of an independent Black cinema and had very little hope that Hollywood would ameliorate its treatment of Black Americans in movies, the wartime and post-war critical canon, influenced by the shift of racial liberalism and driven by an integrationist ideology, advocated for a better representation of African Americans in Hollywood. It was finally time for 'Better Break's for Negroes in H'wood,' as read a headline on page one of *Variety*, on March 25, 1942, after a meeting between major studios' heads and NAACP leaders to discuss strategies to improve the image of Blacks in cinema.[58] This spirit of progression and inclusion was directly reflected in the literature which started to emerge in the mid of the 1940s with the work of Lawrence Reddick.

In academic circles, African American historian, civil rights activist, and the curator of the Schomburg Collection of Afro-American literature in the New York public library, Lawrence

[56] *Close Up*, August 1929.
[57] Georg Noble and William Harrison , *Sight and Sound*; London ,Vol. 8, Iss. 29, Spring 1939.
[58] *Variety*, March 25, 1942.

Reddick was the first critic to apply scholarly standards to the representation of Blacks in media. Reddick was an established academic specialising in Afro-American studies who held different teaching positions at several American universities. His research interests in Black life since the days of slavery, and African ancestry in general, led him to reflect on the image of African Americans portrayed in media, press, and textbooks to become an outspoken critic of the racial stereotypical images portrayed in media. His pamphlet, "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures, Radio, The Press, and Libraries" published in 1944 discussed the stereotypical and racist thinking of white Americans and how it was reflected in media. Although Reddick was neither specialised in media nor film studies, his involvement with collecting archival material and clippings for the Schomburg Collection enabled him to survey Black contributions to American popular culture almost on a daily basis. He examined a hundred films, made from the beginning of the silent era to the 1940s, out of which three quarters came as "anti-negro."[59] Reddick was a strong critic of the pre-war images of Blacks in film. He objected to the 'inaccurate and unfair' treatment of Blacks in Hollywood and argued that such representation was standing as an obstacle to their advancement and integration into the American society by functioning as a 'powerful instrument for maintaining the racial subordination of the Negro people,' as well as feeding racial prejudice and the stereotyped conceptions when it should be doing the opposite by working to change the minds of Americans.[60] His vision of new Black film images reflected the post-war integrationist ideology. Reddick's essay and most of the wartime and post-war writings focused on integrating African Americans in Hollywood and thus neglected the growth of an independent Black film industry. However, their efforts to create a new era in Black representation were considerable.

[59] L. D. Reddick, 'Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures Radio, The Press, and Libraries', *The Journal of Negro Education*, 13.3 (1944), 367–89.
[60] Ibid, p. 389.

Reddick's vision influenced a number of other critics in the next few years, who attempted to refine his sociology of film. Among these critics was British journalist Peter Noble. His book *The Negro in Films* (1947), examined the depiction of Blacks in films, mainly in the US, withsome chapters dedicated to Blacks in Europe, from the early 1900s up to the Second World War. The book attempted to highlight the improvement in Hollywood's attitude towards Blacks in the later years of the period under analysis. Noble declared that he was influenced by Reddick's study and decided to base his research on his observations and conclusions.

Noble's work was mostly concerned with the negative images of Blacks and how these images are rooted in the belief that Blacks are different from whites, both physically and culturally.[61] He argued that, overall, African Americans have been portrayed as either servants or savages in most films during the 1920s and 1930s, with very few exceptions where the filmmakers would portray a Black as a real character. But even when that would happen, it 'would inevitably be with one of the two alternatives: hatred or contempt.'[62] Noble's work developed a pattern that later scholars, interested in African American presence in cinema, mainly in the 1970s, followed by focusing on African American involvement in the filmmaking process, and identifying and condemning racial stereotypes.

V. J. Jerome's *The Negro in Hollywood* followed in 1950. The editor of *Political Affairs*, the leading journal of Marxist thought and opinion in the United States, and the chairman of the Communist Party's National Cultural Commission, published his booklet as an extension of a lecture he delivered the same year. The lecture, sponsored by the Marxist cultural magazine, *Masses & Mainstream*, gathered Black and white Americans to discuss racism through the film medium and the 'negro question.' The Marxist cultural essayist focused on the continuing post-war problem of Hollywood with racial themes and the failure of soft

[61] Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1948).
[62] Ibid., p. 47.

liberalism to put an end to the racism within the cinematic industry. Contrary to later scholars who praised the post-World War 2 race films and considered them as revisions of earlier presentations, Jerome provided a contemporary view on these films in his pamphlet and argued that they only introduced new stereotypes rather than reflecting racial progress. He wrote, 'they are films that attempt to inspire in the Negro people trust in their worst enemy-the white ruling class, by portraying that class as the Negro's benefactor and legal protector, while arousing in them mistrust, fear, and hatred against the white working people, who are depicted as the would-be lynchers, as the camp of the lynchers.'[63] Unlike Reddick and Noble who advocated for the inclusion of Black Americans in mainstream Hollywood, Jerome represented the establishment of an independent Black cinema as the fittest solution to racism in cinema. Although Jerome did not rely much on empirical data in his study, his strong analysis and focus on the social details made his contribution merit attention, as well as being an important contemporary source material for the films he discussed.

Then, it was not until the 1970s that larger initiatives were taken and the first significant wave of research addressing Black participation in the American film industry and the portrayal of slavery in films emerged. This latter was a result of various factors. First, it was the massive expansion in university-taught film courses in the late 1960s and early 1970s that sparked academic interest in film history. The maturation of film studies as an independent discipline and the rise of film history as a sub-discipline enabled historians to explore cinematic representations and critically evaluate historical films. Also, the revolutionary social movement at mid-century with the Civil Rights Movement and its effects on race relations as well as the profound revision in the historiography of slavery, beginning in the 1970s, influenced film historians to explore the history of its cinematic representation and progression over the years. As a result, by the mid-seventies, a series of seminal works

[63] V. J. Jerome, *The Negro in Hollywood Films* (Masses & mainstream, 1950), p. 49.

appeared laying the ground for much of the later scholarship. The pioneers of this field of research were Donald Bogle, Daniel Leab, and Thomas Cripps. Bogle was mainly interested in the images of Black in films. His work focused on the history of cinema and film, unlike Leab and Cripps whose works explored film history or history through film and how the presence of Blacks in Hollywood intersected with social and political history. These scholars found the representation of African Americans in film, from the beginning of cinema until the 1970s, stereotypical, non-progressive, and exploitative.[64]

The first work was *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (1973), with four later updated editions. The volume was a valuable contribution to cinematic history, American history, and Black studies. The African American writer began his career in journalism as a reporter and assistant editor for *Ebony* magazine before becoming a lecturer in several US universities. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* was his first book and the beginning of his long career in the history of Blacks in American cinema and television during which he completed several other literary works on the subject. Bogle identified five Black mythic characterisations introduced in the early silent period: 'the Tom' and the 'mammy' featuring the happy and loyal servants of benevolent white masters, and representing the social ideals of many white viewers; the 'coon', the fool who is usually the most entertaining of all the characterisations; the 'mulatto', the tragic figures with which the audience was sometimes encouraged to sympathise, but who were doomed because of their mixed racial inheritance, and the 'buck', the stereotype of the violent Black male which dominated the period of *Birth* and remained a strong residual influence ever since. Bogle considered these characterisations as 'merely filmic reproductions of Black stereotypes that existed since the days of slavery and were already popularized in American life and arts.' In

[64] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*; Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900- 1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

his analysis of the evolution of the representation of African Americans in the movie industry, Donald Bogle noted that African American actors were restricted exclusively to subservient positions in early films. Bogle has compellingly argued that the tradition of stereotyping, one that transcended the plantation chronotype and infiltrated various urban locales, became a direct expression of Hollywood racism. The book was indeed an important contribution and an easy read due to Bogle's simple journalistic style, yet it lacked more details and elaborations in some parts. [65]

Daniel Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade* followed in 1975. Leab extended the period under analysis in his book and covered major Hollywood films, as well as what he labelled 'black audience films,' from the 1900s to the 1970s. The book put forward questions on whether movies influence an audience or whether they mirror its ideas and considered both alternatives to be true. The cinematic industry was in one way or another, a reproduction of society's prejudices, but at the same time played a role in shaping and reinforcing them. Leab's conclusions on the relationship between cinema and society were quite original. He asserted that movies are 'entertainment, but they are also symbols, and behind every shadow on the big screen is a struggle to impose definitions upon what is and what should be. The Power of any single movie to influence a viewer permanently is limited, although repetition obviously has its effect. Constant repetition that emphasizes certain stereotypes […] is overpowering.' The book argued that representations of the Black experience in motion films changed to some extent in the 1960s and 1970s, if compared to earlier days, especially in some films which represented a dignified image of Black life like *Sounder* (1972) and *The Learning Tree* (1969). However, other than these exceptions it is only the stereotype that changed 'from Sambo to Superspade while the humanity of black people is still being denied

[65] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, p. 1.

in the movies.'[66] Most of the book is a condemnation of the cinematic industry's disgraceful and discriminatory treatment of Blacks, both on set and on-screen, but the writer in some parts failed to provide precise examples and detailed analysis, especially when compared to those provided in Thomas Cripps's work.

Thomas Cripps's *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900- 1942* (1977) followed by a second volume, *Making Movies Black (*1993), which completed the story of the first volume, provided the most detailed and informative analysis at the time. The white liberal cultural historian dedicated most of his academic life before retiring in 1996 to the study of the Black presence in film. *Slow Fade to Black* was a result of more than twelve years of archival research and exploration of film material. In this first volume, Cripps attempted to apply some of the newly established theories of film history to his research findings to set the ground for an African American film history. The book investigated the role Black Americans played in the movie industry over its first half a century. He highlighted the 'slow growth' of Black Americans' influence on the cinematic industry and how that growth paralleled social and political struggles. In his introduction of the book, Cripps considered the summer of 1942 meeting between the NAACP and major studio heads to be a turning point in Hollywood's representation of African Americans that 'changed the whole tune and nature of Hollywood's response to the Afro-American role in film and, by extension in American life as a whole.' Such a statement can be considered the least to be an overt optimism or an exaggeration, especially when considering that Cripps himself has acknowledged that the problem was bigger than Hollywood itself and the issue of racism is more complex than to be solved in a single meeting. But his optimism is understandable as

[66] Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade,* p.263.

someone who was a contemporary witness to what was an unprecedented and important moment in Hollywood's history. [67]

The latter volume, *Making Movies Black*, investigated the effect of the liberalism that arose from the Second World War, and fed the Civil Rights Movement, on Blacks in motion pictures in the following years. In addition to these two books, Cripps wrote several other articles and essays that covered almost all issues related to the African American experience in film from its early years to the late 1990s. His work added to academic understanding of race through a study of the Black community and the films that it and white society saw. Although written years ago, his work, remains one of the richest accounts of the American movie industry's generally negative treatment of African Americans on-screen and off. [68]

These seminal works presented slightly different perspectives concerning the history of Black Americans in the motion picture industry, and in some instances even contradicted each other. The differences were a result of personal interpretation, the sources used, and the extent of analysis and focus chosen by each author. Yet, the objective was the same and all these worksmanaged to illuminate the Black experience in films during its first five decades with a general agreement that the content of the early film promoted racist propaganda under the guise of entertainment with real-life implications. The significance of these early works is that they managed to introduce the work of specialists to general readers. All these scholars agreed that there was 'no favorable portrayals of the Negros in this early period.' [69]

These early anthologies were very informative and remain influential to this day. Written almost five decades ago, many of the key ideas and arguments in these studies remain central

[67] Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, p. 7.
[68] Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[69] Edward Mapp, *Blacks in American Films Today and Yesterday* (Metuchen, N.J: Rowman & Littlefield, 1972), pp. 16–17.

to the analysis of the cinematic representation of African Americans to this day. These texts were crucial to the development of African American criticism as they finally gave voice to generations of African Americans viewers to express their frustrations with their representations in cinema. Nevertheless, these works were what Cripps called 'scholarly historical surveys.'[70] They surveyed many films from different eras and different genres and themes in one volume relying on a narrative mode in their investigation, identification, and criticism of the recurrence of Black stereotypes in Hollywood films. Furthermore, the issue with these works was their focus on negative or positive representation and failure to engage deeper with the complex nature of racial representation. Many scholars that followed in the following years highlighted these issues. In his *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (1992), James Snead argued that the ''black Hollywood' books of the seventies took a binary approach, sociological in its position, hunting down either 'negative' or 'positive' images.' Such a method could not grasp what closer rhetorical and discursive analysis of racial imagery can. He criticised the fact that these works did not engage with the developing film theories of the time as well as their failure to deeply investigate filmic texts and their implied audiences.[71] Similarly, bell hooks has also highlighted the need to move beyond debates about 'good and bad imagery' when critically discussing race and representation.[72]

By the 1990s, an extensive wave of scholarship was produced, mainly by African American scholars, who highlighted the rise of Black cinema at the time. Several scholars across the

[70] *The Harvard Guide to African American History*, ed. by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Leon F. Litwack, and Darlene Clark Hine, Harvard University Press Reference Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 186.
[71] James A. Snead, Colin MacCabe, and Cornel West, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–2.
[72] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992), p. 4.

disciplines of political science, cultural and film criticism, feminist studies, anthropology, art history, and history attempted to identify and examine representations of Blacks in visual media. These works were influenced by what became to be known as the golden age of Black cinema and the several successful Black films made during the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially those by Spike Lee. These scholars made use of the observations of Bogle, Leab and Cripps in tracking the Black presence in Hollywood since the beginning of cinema but advanced the literature on the subject by going into more subject or time period specific works. They focused more on the emergence of Black film images, their success and popularity, and how that made Blacks part of the American film landscape. These works weregeared to understanding the contours of Black film criticism and the history of Black cinema from its beginning to its contemporary state.

Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film (1993) by Ed Guerrero examined the construction of the Black image in commercial cinema from *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to Spike Lee's *Malcom X* (1992). Guerrero attempted to move away from earlier works' 'simplistic notion' that Black Americans are victims of the cinematic industry and went to analysing more complex issues and images by drawing on different film criticism theories. His analysis was influenced by Louis Althusser, and the study of films as cultural productions arising from 'a divergent number of causes coming from varied registers in a given society.' He argued that 'representations of blackness in commercial cinema are, in fact, "overdetermined."' Yet, since ideology is constantly changing, it would not be possible for Hollywood to maintain an everlasting portrayal of white superiority in its films, the same way that it cannot eliminate the historical resistance and continued efforts of African Americans to improve their situation in society. Thus, Black filmmakers, critics, and even audiences should continue to aspire for a better presence in commercial cinema. He also relied on Freudian

psychoanalysis where he considered films to be similar to dreams, both having hidden meaning and messages. These meanings and messages are ignored by the dreamer as "only dreams", the same way the film industry hides the strong ideological influence of its films by claiming they are only "harmless entertainment." He also employed semiotics and narratology in his discussion of Black images in the films under analysis.[73]

Guerrero attempted to uncover the hidden social and political messages in the feature films he examined in relation to the construction of the Black image. One element of Guerrero's central thesis is that the profit motive in Hollywood structurally relegates Black presence in cinema. His analysis of the rise and fall of Blaxploitation films in the 1970s revealed how the issue of racism in films fluctuates depending on profit-making and change only occurs when the industry is under pressure from multiple sources, political, social, and most importantly economic.[74]

The book dedicated two chapters to the subject of slavery because it is 'the founding historical relationship between blacks and whites,' argued Guerrero. The two chapters track its representation from *Birth* to *Mandingo* (1975) and then move to more contemporary representations in *Brother from Another Planet* (1984) and the *Color Purple* (1985). Chapter one explores in details *Birth of a Nation*, the racial stereotypes it introduced and its influence on the image of Blacks and on the cinematic representation of slavery for long years after its release, especially on the plantation films, made during the Great Depression years, which carried the same negative racial stereotypes but chose a more toned-down approach on racial violence and more luxurious lifestyle in the Old South. The chapter then tracks the shift that

[73] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Culture and the Moving Image (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 5,6,7.
[74] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 85.

happened in the representation of slavery following the years of the Great Depression and the war. Guerrero argued that with the cultural and political revolution of the 1960s, and the rise of Blaxploitation and their profitability, Hollywood's representation of slavery 'began to slide from revision into actual reversal.' Contrary to V. J. Jerome's argument, who considered them a continuation of racial stereotypes as mentioned above, Guerrero considered the films made after the Second World War such as *Pinkyn* and *Lost Boundaries* to be a revisionist cycle where the earlier influence of revisions in the sentimental cinematic representations of slavery occurred. [75]

Similarly, in their book, *Screen Saviors,* Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon briefly track the history of Hollywood's representation of plantation slavery and the slave trade. The writers noted that in films made during the 1930s, such as *Gone with the Wind* 1939 and *The Littlest Rebel* 1935, Hollywood has 'denied the horror of slavery by sentimentalizing it.' It wasn't until the 1950s and early 1960s that the cinematic industry saw few direct treatments of the subject like that in *Band of Angels* (1957). The late 1960s and 1970s marked a turning point, with several blaxploitation films such as *Mandingo* (1975) and its sequel *Drum* (1976) '[driving] a stake through the heart of the plantation genre.' Only in the 1990s did Hollywood turn to 'more direct, serious treatments of slavery,' Vera and Gordon asserted, citing movies such as *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), *Amistad* (1997), and *Beloved* (1998).[76]

Black American Cinema (1993) edited by Manthia Diawara was another rich volume which addressed issues specific to Black film with the contributions of several prominent film historians and cultural critics. The volume is divided into two parts. "Black Aesthetic" covered famous Black artists and their contributions to introducing Black images on screen

[75] Ibid., pp. 3, 31.
[76] Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 54–55.

and the roles such representations played within American society. The essays discuss how Black culture existed in the early Black films, Black literature, literary criticism, and the division between nationalist versus integrationist politics. The essays in this first part created some heated debates between prominent scholars. In their chapters, Jane Gaines and J Ronald Green discussed the works of Oscar Micheaux and highlighted their importance, especially *Within Our Gates,* and blamed previous scholars for ignoring the Black filmmaker.[77] Thomas Cripps replied in the following chapter demonstrating that his works, and that of Bogle and Leab, in the 1970s, addressed the works of Micheaux despite the lack of resources, since the films weren't restored until later on in 1990.[78] The second part of the volume dealt with "Black spectatorship" with several essays building on psychoanalysis and feminism in the analysis. The chapters are in dialogue with each other providing a variant range of opinions and arguments on how to theorize Black spectatorship and make use of contemporary film theory, as well as exploring whether Black films, both old and contemporary can be a true alternative to Hollywood films.[79]

Representing Blackness: issues in film and video (1997) edited by Valerie Smith followed in the same vein with an edited collection of eleven essays, some original and some already published, with an introduction by Valerie Smith. In her introduction, Smith noted that the 1970s scholarly works were important in developing and introducing African American film criticism and highlighting the rising awareness of Black audiences to the unfair representation of their race in films.

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[77] Gaines suggested that in *Slow Fade to Black*, Cripps gave the impression that Micheaux represented Black people in'unflattering characterizations' through his films which lacked cinematic aesthetics and technical sophistication. While Green accused Cripps of assimilation with Hollywood and failure to properly evaluate successful Black independent films.

[78] See J. Ronald Green, "'Twoness" in the Style of Oscar Micheaux", Jane Gaines, "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux", Thomas Cripps, "Oscar Micheaux: The Story Continues" in *Black American Cinema*, ed. by Manthia Diawara, AFI Film Readers (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[79] *Black American Cinema*, ed. by Manthia Diawara, AFI Film Readers (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Nonetheless, she noted that these same scholars 'legitimised a binarism in the discourse around strategies of black representation that has outlived its usefulness.' She criticised the focus on positive/negative and authenticity in black representation which dominated African American film criticism in the 1970s and identified several problems withit, such as the negligence of Black directed cinema, failure to establish a clear definition of what a positive image should be like and what ideological purposes the Black character types introduced are meant to serve. These issues are discussed and explored throughout the different essays with varying theoretical and textual criticism combinations.[80] The book is a coherent collection that thoroughly explored the complexities of "representing blackness". The different essays, written by several established scholars in the fields of film history and film studies, engage each other both implicitly and explicitly in a consistent and fruitful way.

These works and many others such as *Blackframes: critical perspectives on Black independent cinema* edited by Mbye B. Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (1998) and *Redefining Black Film* 1993 by Mark A. Reid provided a variety of perspectives on the growing African American independent cinema. However, the cinematic representation of slavery was not of central focus, especially since the contemporary time period of these works didn't witness many productions on the subject and the majority of slavery films made remained in the golden age of classical Hollywood.

In their ensemble, scholars of the 1970s and 1990s provided rich and valuable insights into the history of African American presence in cinema and the importance of Black independent cinema. Yet, it wasn't until 2000, that the first scholarly volume dedicated solely to cinematic representations of slavery was released by social historian Natalie Zeamon Davis. *Slaves on*

[80] *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. by Valerie Smith, Rutgers Depth of Field Series (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 3,4.

Screen (2000) was the first full-length book that explored a selection of feature films on the subject of slavery. The book examined five well-known slavery films, Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), Gillo Pontecorvo's *Burn!* (1968), Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *The Last Supper*, Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997), and Jonathan Demme's *Beloved* (1999). The writer investigated representations of resistance and revolt in historical films. The book offers a collection of essays that attempt to expand what Davis terms "historical vision."

Davis defended the value and importance of film in historical inquiry regardless of whether they are "true" or "false" arguing that more productive questions should be put forward. She noted that stressing the difference between traditional history and the history portrayed on the screen is essential to consider films as 'a source of valuable and even innovative historical vision.' In the course of her book, Davis argued that over the years, cinematic representations of slavery have followed works of historians, but in some cases 'the cinematic treatment was independent or even in advance of that by historians.' In those cases where the filmmakers choose to depart from the work of historians and the historical evidence for "dramatic license", Davis stressed that the audiences should 'not be given the false impression of "a true story." Another 'bad habit' of filmmakers which Davis expressed her disappointment about is how filmmakers frequently design cinematic history to look and feel exactly like the present. She explained that in their attempts to engage their audiences and make their films speak to the contemporary concerns of their viewers, filmmakers often fail to communicate "the strangeness" of history. She argued that audiences want to know what is different about the past as well as what is familiar. Although she noted that, to a certain extent, all the movies under examination in her book speak to the times in which they are made, she argued that films wouldn't be as successful if "wish fulfilment" about

contemporary messages is prioritised.[81] Davis's book is one of the seminal works on the representation of slavery in film, but its focus was not solely on the cinematic history of American slavery. The writer only discussed two American films in the book, *Beloved* and *Amistad*.

The second major wave of interest in the history of slavery in films has occurred around the last fifteen years. Influenced by the political atmosphere in the country, especially with the election of Barack Obama as the first-ever Black president in American history, many scholars turned to investigate the position and image of African Americans within the American society. Consequently, the history of slavery, and its cinematic representation received much attention. These works moved beyond the narrative mode of the early works and relied more on deep analysis of films and the attitudes of their makers, making use of the accessibility of primary archival materials which were not available in the earlier years. The making of several new slavery films was also a contributing factor to the regrowing scholarly focus on the cinematic representation of American slavery. Thus, many historians who were essentially specialized in the history of slavery found themselves writing on the history of its cinematic representation.

In her chapter "Mammy, Mandingo, Django and Solomon: A century of American slavery in cinema from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *12 Years a Slave"*, historian Lydia Plath explored a range of cinematic representations of slavery spanning over more than a century and argued that looking at such a wide range of films enables the historian to explore how filmmakers employed their films to comment on contemporary race relations as well as inform their audiences about race issues. As her title suggests, Plath looked at films from the early 1900s

[81] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 123–31.

up to 2013. The chapter explored the complicated nature of the history of American slavery and its continued presence in American society. Plath tracked the change that occurred in filmic representations of slavery and how it was influenced by important historical moments noting that 'slavery has not been resolved; it is not in the past, and therefore it cannot be treated with historical distance.' Each of the films analysed in the chapter is directly discussed in light of the contemporary racial debates. She concluded that exploring 'changing representations of slavery over time provides a lens through which to view race relations in modern America.'[82]

Similarly, in her article "Filming Black Voices and Stories: Slavery on America's Screen", Brenda E. Stevenson also reviewed cinematic and television representations of slavery from their early days of silent cinema to modern time underscoring the importance of slavery in American life and how such representations have changed over time in parallel with changes in scholarship as well as social and political realities. Stevenson argued that 'film is a powerful medium that has been used both to solidify popular and scholarly images of history and to radically challenge them.'[83] The two articles used close divisions in tracking the historical development of representation of slavery on screen, beginning with silent cinema and the growth of racial stereotypes, moving to Hollywood's Golden age and the domination of the plantation myth, then, the era of Civil Rights Movement and finally the late twentieth and early twenty first century and the truth claims in film representations.

Another contribution to scholarly research on slavery filmography was *Celluloid Chains* 2018 edited by Rudyard J. Alcoer. The volume claims to be the 'most complete collection of critical essays' examining slavery film in the Americas by 'cast[ing] a necessary, multifaced

[82] Plath, "Mammy, Mandingo, Django and Solomon: A century of American slavery in cinema from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *12 Years a Slave*", pp.120,138.
[83] Brenda E. Stevenson, 'Filming Black Voices and Stories: Slavery on America's Screens', *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, 8.3 (2018), 488–520 (p. 488).

new light on the cinematic genre.' It uses Natalie Davis's *Slaves on Screen* as 'a stepping-stone' and intentionally avoids dealing with the same films as her. The editor asserts that 'slavery films are much about the present as about the past. Even when they are plainly about historical moments involving-accurately or not- the past, they must be considered in light of contemporary societal debates regarding the relationship of the past to the present.' Same as *Slaves on screen*, *Celluloid Chains*, also dedicated a small part of the book to discussing films on American slavery. It is the main aim of the collection to position films about slavery as a specific genre of cinematic representation by moving beyond regional limitations and exploring representations across the Americas.[84]

The individual films chosen as case studies for this research have been part of different scholarly discussions. The silent cinematic representations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have been examined by several scholars throughout the years. Harry Birdoff's The *World's Greatest Hit-Uncle Tom's Cabin* 1947 is one of the best scholarly accounts written on the Uncle Tom stage plays' effects on crystallizing Americans' feeling towards slavery from the Antebellum days to the Jim Crow Era. The book dedicated a chapter to examining the silent Uncle Tom films, which provide an excellent contemporary review to the later adaptations, being released in the writer's time. It is a shame that the book doesn't include any citations for the materials and sources examined by the writer.[85] The 1970s literature examined how the "Uncle Tom" stereotype was introduced to cinema as early as it emerged highlighting the direct influence of the stage version on the early Uncle Tom films. In the *Celluloid South*, Edward D.C. Campbell argued that the film companies 'drew heavily upon the literature of Southern local color and the minstrel shows' to provide the most appealing image and attract

[84] *Celluloid Chains: Slavery in the Americas through Film*, ed. by Rudyard Alcocer, Kristen Block, and Dawn Duke (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018), pp. x, xxi.
[85] Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit-Uncle Tom's Cabin ... Illustrated, Etc. [On the Plays Based on the Work by Harriett E. B. Stowe.]* (New York: SFVanni, 1947, 1947).

audiences to their films.[86] In their book, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film*, Ben Brewster and Leab Jacobs have accurately traced the gradual "decomposition" of the static theatrical tableaux in subsequent early film version of *UCT* from the Porter version to the later adaptations.[87]

Later scholarship addressed the legacies of the Uncle Tom stereotype in popular culture and the historical memory of slavery. In her article "Uncle Tom's Cabin: Before and after the Jim Crow Era", African American feminist author and cultural critic Michele Wallace explored the images of Uncle Tom and investigated the legacies of the early Black performance in minstrelsy on Black Images in mass culture. Wallace argued that, in their totality, the Uncle Tom film versions were not as memorable as other silent-era films, yet they provided a varied 'ideological tilt of the narrative.' The variation depended on the makers of the different versions, producers, directors, and actors, as well as the time period in which the version was made. She found the version made by Daly in 1914 to be exceptional compared to the others, especially the act of slave resistance the film portrayed where a slave shoots and kills his white master. [88]

Similarly, *Song of the South* has been discussed in terms of its representation of racial stereotypes by the 1970s scholars, who considered it as a restoration of the Old South myth in films. Cripps characterised the film as a prime example of what he called Hollywood's post World War II 'Thermidor' following the heat of its wartime efforts to move forward in its depiction of African Americans onscreen.[89] Bogle considered the film's depiction of the

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[86] Edward D. C. Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), p. 12.
[87] Benjamin Robert Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film*, 1st edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[88] Michele Wallace, 'Uncle Tom's Cabin: Before and after the Jim Crow Era', *TDR (1988-)*, 44.1 (2000), 137–56 (p. 140).
[89] Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, p. 175.

Uncle Remus character as 'glowing with sunshine and joy and a paragon of contentment and domesticity' unacceptable for the 1946 context. He noted that Remus was a 'harmless and congenial, a first cousin of the Tom, yet he distinguishes himself by his quaint, naïve, and comic philosophizing,' a stereotype used by Disney to suggest Black man's satisfaction with the system and his place in it. Bogle went as far as calling the movie a 'corruptive piece of Old South propaganda put together to make money.'[90]

In his White *Screens, Black Images*, James Snead has called the film 'one of the best imaginable elaborations of some deeply revealing and disturbing American fantasies about slavery and blackness.'[91] Guerrero considered the film a way for the cinematic industry to figure its path following the war, noting that it was either going to be a nostalgic approach to slavery through *Song* or a more serious and exposing one through the *Foxes of Harrow.* [92]

Investigating the film's reception upon its initial release in Atlanta, Matthew Bernstein's article 'Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony: "Song of the South" and Race Relations in 1946' tracked the press response to the first showing of the film and compared how it varied between Black and white local newspapers. The article also discussed the events surrounding the film's release including two lynching accidents that happened a few months before the premiere.[93]

Of all the scholarly research done on *Song*, *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence, and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South* by film scholar Jason Sperb offers the most in-depth analysis of the carefully researched history of *Song of the South*'s reception over the last seven decades. Sperb strongly opposed the view of *Song* as "a product

[90] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, pp. 6, 121–22.
[91] James A. Snead, Colin MacCabe, and Cornel West, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (Routledge, 1994), p. 86.
[92] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness.* p.35.
[93] Matthew Bernstein, 'Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony: "Song of the South" and Race Relations in 1946 Atlanta', *Film History*, 8.2 (1996), 219–36 (p. 220).

of its time" and considered this assumption as 'racially ignorant, culturally destructive, and just plain historically inaccurate' for the film became more popular, not less so, as the years passed noting that nostalgia was a very important factor to the film's success and survival for over seventy years. Sperb has aptly documented the way Disney remediated *Song of the South* countless times and with increasing popular success before deciding to stop rereleasing the film in the 1980s because of its controversial treatment of race.[94]

In the 1970s and 1980s, the film's sudden appeal was deeply rooted in a conservative desire to undermine the political and cultural gains made by African Americans in the preceding three decades, argued Sperb. While observing the film's online fan action, he found that the fans contest any charges of the film's racism to this day.[95] Sperb's excellent archival research and his complex analysis are obvious throughout the book. However, he barely refers to any of the other films produced at the same time as *Song of the South* or the films with the same theme. He considers the film as a Disney product and builds his analysis on that ignoring the state and circumstances of the film industry at the time the film was made as well as the motivations of the studio behind making the film. Also, many arguments are lost within the sections and subsections of his chapters which seem a bit arbitrary in terms of organisation. Unfortunately, a lot of great insight is ultimately difficult to trace through other parts of the book.

Scholarly discussions on *Mandingo* varied in their approaches and conclusions but shared the same focus on the film's controversial depictions of slavery and its focus on the sexual dynamics between the enslaved and their masters. Film critic Andrew Britton wrote an extended contemporary analysis of the film published in the British magazine *Movie*,

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[94] Jason Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence, and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), p. 12,15,29.
[95] Ibid., pp. 14, 33,35.

followed by an interview with the director. Britton objected to the negative review of the film in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, an official publication of the British Film Institute, and accused the reviewer of not even bothering to go see the film since some of the elements criticised are not in the film. He argued that '*Mandingo* is a masterpiece of Hollywood cinema' that portrayed the complexity of slavery and its destruction of lives, both Black and white. He described critics' dismissal of the film as an 'erotic sensationalism' as 'absurd'.[96] The film then disappeared from scholarly discussion until the 1990s.

In 1997, Robin Wood, who was Britton's teacher and monitor, dedicated a chapter to the filmin his book *Sexual politics and narrative film: Hollywood and beyond*, where he renewed Britton's vindication of *Mandingo*. Wood noted that up until that date, he didn't feel like he had anything to add to Britton's article. But it was his impression the film has been forgotten by academics and the enthusiasm of his Black students to the film when he showed it to them in his lectures that convinced him to write about it. In his book chapter, "*Mandingo* the vindication of an abused masterpiece", Wood argued that despite its rejection by critics upon its release in 1975, *Mandingo* is 'the greatest film about race ever made in Hollywood, certainly prior to Spike Lee and in certain respects still.' He defended the filmmakers' audacity and courage with their representation of slavery in the film noting that 'If *Mandingo* is the greatest Hollywood film about race, it is because it is also about sex and gender.' Yet, Wood still identified many flaws with the film which all originate from the fact it is made by white filmmakers who 'are unable to cross racial boundaries' to portray enough empathy withBlack characters. Yet, the film should be considered as 'an extraordinary achievement' made by an industry dominated by whites which deserved a reissue in the late1990s, concluded Wood.[97]

[96] Andrew Britton, *Movie* 22, February 1976, p.5.

[97] Robin Wood, *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, Film and Culture (New York:Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 265,266,282.

Despite Wood's claim that *Mandingo* has been largely ignored until his publication, the film was discussed in most scholarship on African American image in Hollywood produced in the 1990s. Ed Guerrero in *Framing Blackness* argued that *Mandingo* was a complete reversal of the plantation films genre and a clear manifestation of the Black Power movement in its negative representation of life at the Falconhurst plantation, its dialogue and turn of events. [98] Edward D. C. Campbell in *Celluloid South* noted that the film's aim to reverse earlier presentations of the plantation as a fancy mansion by presenting the Folconhurst as 'seedy plantation' was clear but was soon lost because other plantations in the film were 'overflowed with wealth.'[99]

The close relationship that historians established with filmmakers during the recent years added a new dimension to film analysis and criticism and informed much of the scholarly interpretations. This relationship has made it easier for film historians to identify the biases and motivations of the filmmakers. *12 Years a Slave* received much scholarly attention. Being based on a true story and having a well-known historian, Henry Louis Gates Jr. as a historical consultant, many scholars focused their criticism on the historical inaccuracies. *12 Years a Slave* was an important contribution to slave filmography because its director, Steve McQueen, made use of previous representations of Southern slavery. The result was one film that is 'unflinchingly stamping the institution and its benefactors with a savage, violent brutality, physical, psychological, and sexual—that leaves no room for excuses, apologies, or

[98] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 31–40.
[99] Edward D. C. Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), p. 86.

miscomprehension,' wrote Brenda E. Stevenson. Yet, she criticized the director and scriptwriter for their lack of scholarly inquiry and unfamiliarity with the particularities of the institution of slavery that led to misrepresentation of the slave community, especially with the inaccurate creation of the houses in the South, and the unrealistic portrayal of Solomon Northup in the North before his kidnapping. She also criticised the negligence of resistance in the slave community in the film, especially among enslaved women. [100]

Sean Kelly interpreted the film's historical inaccuracies as a result of 'McQueen's larger aesthetic and political vision for the film rather than to a cavalier attitude toward history.' He argued that the director's decision to portray New York as 'a colour-blind utopia' and glamourizing Northup's life before his kidnapping was made to draw a clear contrast between his life before and after slavery for the viewers. [101]

From their part, Valerie Smith and Lydia Plath highlighted the film's direct ties to the contemporary political and social circumstances of African Americans. Smith noted that as the viewers watch the film and see Northup hanged between life and death in one scene and as they follow his 'sudden descent from freedom into captivity' they are reminded of the many African Americans in prison who are victims of a racist system. [102] McQueen's intentions to make his film speak to contemporary issues was no secret, wrote Plath. She explained that McQueen's concerns with contemporary issues are most evidenced when comparing his version with the earlier version by Gordon Park's, *Solomon Northup Odyssey* 1984, which also spoke to the contemporary social and political atmosphere of the 1970s, with the celebration of Black power and Black men strength. She also found the inclusion of

[100] Brenda E. Stevenson, '12 YEARS A SLAVE: NARRATIVE, HISTORY, AND FILM', *The Journal of African American History*, 99.1–2 (2014), 106–18 (pp. 108–9).
[101] Sean M. Kelley, 'Twelve Years a Slave and the "Unthinkability" of Enslaved Autobiography', in *Biography and History in Film*, ed. by Thomas S. Freeman and David L. Smith, Palgrave Studies in the History of the Media (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 171–89 (p. 183).
[102] Valerie Smith, 'Black Life in the Balance: 12 Years a Slave', 2, 2014, 362.

the lynching attempt scene a way to connect the violence of the past to that African Americans are still facing in the present. [103]

Surveying reviews and responses to the film, Cultural historian Erica L. Ball found that most viewers considered *12 years a slave* hard to watch because of its violence and brutality. Ball attributed the discomfort American viewers felt while watching the film to 'the constant threat of violence and the sense of liminality characterizing black life.' The latter are intended by the filmmakers to urge their viewers to reassess their understanding of slavery and its nature as a system that denied the slaves human dignity and reflect on how modern racialised politics continue to deprive African Americans of their rights as equals to whites. In doing so, *12 Years a Slave* 'has as much to say about what it means to be black today as it does about our past,' argued Ball. She concluded that the story of Solomon Northup served 'as grim reminders of our continuing vulnerability, and just how easily, in our "post-racial" American moment, any of us might fall.'[104]

My research builds and expands on these works. While most of the early scholarship mentioned above does an adequate job in tracking the presence of African Americans in cinema and its relationship to changing racial attitudes, very few are dedicated specifically to the subject of slavery. And even those dedicated to slavery, aren't specific to American slavery. The book chapters and the articles dedicated to the historical examination of filmic representations of slavery also provide valuable insights but due to the limited length of those works, a detailed examination isn't possible. Therefore, by focusing solely on the representation of slavery in American films and its development over a little more than a century through detailed discussions over four analytical chapters, this thesis closely tracks

[103] Plath, "Mammy, Mandingo, Django and Solomon: A century of American slavery in cinema from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *12 Years a Slave*", pp.135-136.
[104] Erica L Ball, 'The Unbearable Liminality of Blackness: Reconsidering Violence in Steve McQueen's 12 Years a Slave', 119, 2016, 175–86 (pp. 177, 186).

how films have dealt with the subject of slavery to comment on contemporary race relations and how audiences have engaged with such representations. This research aims to test the arguments made by the previous scholars mentioned above, mainly Lydia Plath and Brenda Stevenson, on the link between representations of slavery in film and contemporary American race relations. The extended and detailed analysis of these arguments throughout the different case studies and the added focus on the reception history of these films reveal the main contributions of this research.

I examine American slavery's representation on screen at four cultural-political moments and junctures that, taken together, range over the historical continuum of Hollywood's production of commercial narrative films, from the beginning of cinema and the first representation of slavery on the screen in 1903, to the years of the Great Depression and the Second World War, to the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power rebellion with its social and political changes and the white backlash against it, to finally the so thought to be post-racial era with the first Black president in power and the rising of the Black Lives Matter Movement. My thesis is not intended to be a complete history of all cinematic representations of American slavery. It rather relies on a selection of four feature films as key case studies to focus on the filmic representation of slavery at different time periods and how these representations both reflected and influenced contemporary race relations. Through these filmic representations, I can track the industry's ideological power to shape the audience's racial and social attitudes over time.

The choice of the subject of this research relied on the observation of popular Hollywood feature films which portrayed American slavery. Feature films best serve the purpose of this research for their popularity which makes them resonate among the audience and consequently offer more about people's attitudes on contemporary race relations. Although this research acknowledges the existence of other forms of slavery representations in films such as the slave trade, the middle passage, and the Civil War, plantation slavery has been chosen as a unified theme in all four case studies to allow for a precise and thorough

discussion of its evolution over the years. The experience of slavery on the plantation provides space to explore different themes across the film case studies such as the slave-master relations, the representation of violence, sexual exploitation of the slave, and resistance, and how these themes have been shaped by the different time periods of each case study.

Unlike previous studies, this research carefully tracks the changing representation of slavery over time focusing on all the key factors influencing such change from historiographical change, different motivations of the filmmakers, and society's comfort levels with the subject of slavery and race. All these factors are addressed in detail throughout the different chapters. The different films chosen as case studies are all tied together in their focus on the concept of "the plantation" highlighting the different visions of its representation in cinema throughout over a century. The thesis as whole tracks how the vision of the Southern plantation was first presented as a beautiful and mythical place with a nostalgic appeal and then how such a vision shifted to a darker image with violent slave maters and suffering slaves and how this shift resonated with audiences over the years.

As the research is a chronological investigation of the representation of slavery, the case studies have been chosen from different time periods to enable the examination of the change and evolution of this representation. Starting with the silent era, a very important period in the history of Hollywood's handling of race and slavery. It is mainly during this period that most racial stereotypes, which continued to haunt the presence of African Americans in popular culture, were established. Chapter one will discuss the nine silent *Uncle Tom's Cabin* films made between 1903-1927 to investigate how slavery was introduced on the screen as early as 1903. These films have been chosen because they are relatively less known and discussed in academic circles compared to other silent films, such as *Birth of a Nation*. They also provide space to explore silent cinematic representations of slavery over more than two decades and how such representation both reflected and was influenced by the complicated racial atmosphere of the Jim Crow period. The chapter will explore the reasons

behind the making and the success of several Uncle Tom films during the Jim Crow years, when racism and segregation were common practices, despite the strong anti-slavery theme of the story, and how these films were influenced by the heated race problems of their time.

Chapter two will explore Disney's controversial *Song of The South* 1946, which despite its makers' claim that it was all about "racial tolerance", was considered by many contemporary critics as a restoration of pre-war racial stereotypes with its nostalgic representation of the South. Unlike previous literature which discussed the film as another Disney product, this chapter will discuss the film's relation to the plantation myth era as well as being an outcome of the Second World War progressive racial attitudes and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. The film's controversial reception and the backlash against it also allows for the exploration of contemporary audience's engagement with racial progress following the years of the Second World War and moving into the era of the Civil Rights Movement.

Chapter three continues tracking the representation of slavery in film where the previous chapter leaves it by surveying post war and Civil Rights era films on slavery and race. The chapter explores Paramount's *Mandingo* 1975. The latter was a controversial film that received almost unanimous negative criticism and feedback from contemporary critics, both Black andwhite, but was widely popular among Black filmgoers. The film's representation of slavery as a violent and exploitative system that destroyed the lives of both Blacks and whites and its reversal of its predecessors' image of the Southern plantation as a beautiful and mythical place was not accepted by many critics and viewers. The makers of the film were accused of exploitating the theme of slavery for purely commercial reasons. The film will be discussed in light of the Civil Rights era and the white backlash against it, the revisionist cycle of slavery films, and the Blaxploitation films era.

Chapter four will discuss Steve McQueen's 2013 *12 Years a Slave* which despite some criticism and audiences' discomfort over its exaggerated violence, was a very successful film and won several awards. The film will be discussed in light of its release in the Obama Era and the re-emergence of debates over racial relations and institutional racism in the wake of

the twenty-first century, and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The films selected for analysis represent a range of different historical settings exemplifying the key stylistic tendencies and mediating the dominant social and cultural concerns of the period in which they are made. This research will contribute to an ongoing conversation on the cinematic representation of slavery and its relation to race relations in the US. Reviewing the literature, I have noticed that most scholarly research on the topic tends to rely either on surveys where a long list of films is analysed, and most details and the particularities of the films are not fully explored or focus on individual films. This research attempts to strike a balance between the two. Using four key case studies that cover over a century of representation, will allow for an examination of how slavery has been represented and used by filmmakers to comment on American race relations in their time and how such representation was received by American critics and the general public. Putting the films in dialogue with one another should provide a full view of the progress of race relations as portrayed in cinema from the early twentieth century to modern times. The conceptualization of race in this research is influenced by the work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their book *Racial Formation in the United States.* They define race as a 'fundamental organizing principle of social life, one that deeply structures politics, economics, and culture in the United States.' Because race is 'socially constructed and historically conflictual 'it changes from one place to another and form one period to another due to social and historical pressures so it can endure.[105]

[105] See Michael Omi and Howard Winanant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third edition. (New York ; Routledge, 2015).

Chapter 1 A Wonderful, 'Leaping fish'": *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Silent Films, 1903-1927.

When Henry James described Stowe's novel as a "wonderful, 'leaping fish'" in his *A Small Boy and Others,* he was referring to the popularity of the novel and its ability to 'naturally fly' across different mediums and how it 'made itself at home' by adapting to different art forms and times.[1] The novel, which was a cultural phenomenon for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century has, in the words of Mark Dimunation, chief of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division at the Library of Congress, 'changed the way that Americans talked about race, both at the time of the Civil War and [for long years] after.' The story had a long engagement with racial issues in the United States. It was among the few works in American culture that received a variety of interpretations and has been transformed from a novel into stage plays and eventually into several film versions. [2]

This chapter examines the silent Uncle Tom films made between 1903 and 1927. It discusses how the famous novel was represented in cinema and how the Black experience and slavery were remembered in the early twentieth century. The silent Uncle Tom films were made during the Jim Crow years, a time when the country was still trying to heal from the years of the Civil War and Reconstruction. It was a time when racism and segregation were common practices of everyday American life.[3] These factors made Beecher's novel a very

[1] Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others: A Memoir* (London: Gibson Square Books, 2001), pp. 83–84.
[2] 'How Books Shaped the American National Identity', Interview by Talk of the Nation, August 14, 2012. (https://www.npr.org/2012/08/14/158771705/-books-that-shaped-america)
[3] See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction : America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, The New American Nation Series (Harper & Row, 1988].

controversial film project. Yet, several filmmakers chose to turn the story into motion pictures throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. This chapter argues that the story of Uncle Tom, which had the power to 'convulse a mighty nation' upon its release, had lost its seriousness, strong abolitionist tone, and political influence during its post-war theatricalizations to become a mere perpetuator of the racial attitude of White Americans in the films made during the early years of the twentieth century.[4] These films introduced slavery to the silver screen but also introduced stereotypes of Black Americans and a domesticated vision of plantation slavery and the Old South, which would remain part of American popular culture for long years.

These attitudes were a result of the nationwide reconciliation efforts made to reunite the country. The reconciliation vision, argued David Blight in *Race and Reunion*, enabled Americans to leave the Civil War behind and rewrite a history that praised both North and South. After the Civil war and Reconstruction, Americans had to figure out ways to reunite their country and embrace the memory of the bloodiest war in their history. In addition to reconciliation, two other visions of Civil War memory were forged. The white supremacist vision, which was bedded in the heart of the Lost Cause, consisted of a Civil War memory on Southern terms that resulted in several acts of violence against Black Americans and the emancipationist vision, which argued that the most important legacy of the war is emancipation, the citizenship of the ex-slaves and Constitutional equality. Yet, Americans were obliged to find a way to recover from the war that destroyed their first republic at any cost. And that cost was justice for African Americans. In the end, reconciliation among whites and healing overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture and 'the inexorable drive for reunion both used and trumped race.' The party which benefited the least

[4] George F. Whicher, "Literature and Conflict" , in Robert Ernest Spiller *Literary History of the United States: History*, 3rd ed. revised (New York, 1963, 1966), p. 563.

was African Americans. Reconciliation turned out to be between North and South only, and completely excluded African Americans. [5]

Reconciliation was overwhelmed by Southern efforts to maintain an image of a glorious South, made mainly by the United Sons and Daughters of Confederacy. The sacrifice of racial justice was the cost of the formal and informal remembrance of the Civil War. The nation opted for a reconciliationist memory that denied the four million emancipated slaves their rights, hopes, and dreams. The American Spanish war in 1898 brought African Americans to many disadvantages. The wartime reunion between North and South gave white Americans the chance to complete their reconciliation that commenced in Appomattox. The latter 'gave the promoters of Jim Crow in the South a freer hand than ever fashioning a segregated social system.' For, the age of Jim Crow 'was not only the creation of aggressive Southern legislatures but the result of the North's long retreat from the racial legacies of the war,' argued Blight. Throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century and until the first world war, the memorialisation of the Civil War came under the control of Southern organisations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and the United Confederate Veterans (UCV). The efforts made by these two-organisation succeeded in shaping a national reunion on Southern terms. With the turn of the twentieth century, the lost cause gained considerable influence over American historical imagination. [6]

In Popular culture, African Americans were represented as being happy to be enslaved. The memory of slavery and Black experience that films represented is one that confirmed the established stereotypes of African Americans and reinforced the belief that they were better off before they gained their freedom while glorifying the memory of the Old South and the

[5] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), Pp. 1-5.
[6] Ibid., p. 331,364, 352, 356.

kind slave owner. The filmmakers who adapted Stowe's novel presented a vision of Southern lore that created a 'false nostalgia' for the new generations. The film adopted a culture of healing where 'romance triumphed over reality.' After all, what the 'American public always wants is a tragedy with ahappy ending,' noted Blight. Nevertheless, some of the Uncle Tom films adaptations were influenced by the contemporary advancements made by African Americans in the first decadeof the twentieth century and managed to present a more complicated approach to slavery witha focus on the lives and experiences of the slaves. [7]

The nine silent film versions were made between 1903 and 1927. All were called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Edison/Porter 1903, Sigmund Lubin 1903, Vitagraph 1910, Thanhouser 1910, Imp 1913, Kalem 1913, World Production 1914, Famous Player-Lasky – Paramount 1918, Universal 1927. Out of the nine, only four have survived and are still available for viewing (Edison/Porter, Vitagraph, World Production and Universal). The others have unfortunately been lost. Out of the four surviving versions, three are abridged versions that were re-released in 1927 when the Universal film was made.

In order to understand the story of Uncle Tom and its relation to American popular culture and the Black experience, it is first important to investigate how the story was represented in different mediums. This will allow the discussion of the changes that were made to the text when adapted to other art forms. It will also inform the discussion of the film adaptations and their relationship to the racial and political attitudes of the time they were made. The story of Uncle Tom survived the years of The Civil War, Reconstruction, and the First World War. Throughout these years, many elements were incorporated into the original story. These variations were a result of political and cultural influences. The following section will discuss

[7] Blight, *Race and Reunion*, p. 1.

how the story first came into existence and the motivations of the author behind writing her novel. [8]

"**The Greatest Book of Its Kind**"

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe was one of the most read and popular novels of the nineteenth century. The story first appeared as a forty-week serial in *The National Era*, an abolitionist periodical, from June 5, 1851, to April 1, 1852. The story was instantly popular among the readers, that several protests were sent to the *Era* office when the writer missed one issue. The novel was published as a two-volume book with six full-page illustrations by Hammatt Billings engraved on March 20, 1852, in Cleveland, Ohio.[9] The novel consists of two plots that follow the story of two slaves sold by their "kind master", Mr. Shelby of Kentucky. The first story is that of Uncle Tom, the loyal servant and a pious Christian who stands by his religious beliefs and chooses to be a loyal servant and a trustworthy friend, even if that leads to his demise. He dies at the hands of Legree for refusing to tell on Eliza and Cassy after they run away from the Legree plantation. The second is that of Eliza, whose young son Harry is also sold by Mr. Shelby. However, unlike Uncle Tom who accepts his fate, the brave mother driven by her maternal instincts chooses to save her son from a horrifying fate and runs away with him. The writer alternates between the journey of Eliza crossing the frozen Ohio River, making her way North to be reunited with her husband, then escaping together to Canada with the help of the Quakers, and that of Uncle Tom. The latter is sold down river first to St. Clare, whose daughter, Eva, befriends Tom till both she and her

[8] Alan Gevinson, and American Film Institute, *Within Our Gates: Ethnicity in American Feature Films, 1911-1960* (University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1078–82.
[9] Michael Winship, '"The Greatest Book of Its Kind": A Publishing History of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 109.2 (1999), p. 313.

father die. Tom is sold again, this time to Simon Legree, the cruel slave owner who beats him to death.[10]

Christianity was one of the main themes in Stowe's novel. Daughter of the famous preacher, Lyman Beecher, Harriet and her siblings had a very strict religious upbringing. Most of her brothers became ministers themselves, while she married a man of religion. Calvin Stowe was a strong critic of slavery. After the two got married in 1839, the Stowes supported the Underground Railroad and provided shelter to many of the runaway slaves before they made their way to freedom in Canada. Through her contact with the fugitive slaves during the years she lived in Cincinnati, with only the Ohio river between her and Kentucky, a slave state, and her involvement later on with the Underground Railroad, the writer witnessed the suffering of slave families being torn apart. Stowe came to believe that the argument that slavery was sanctioned by the Bible was falsified because the teachings of Christianity oppose slavery.

Stowe wrote her novel to condemn the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and advance the anti-slavery cause.[11] She presented Christianity as the solution to slavery in her novel. The noble characters in the story were associated with Christian values and portrayed as kind to the slaves. Most of these characters oppose slavery, especially Eva, who Stowe portrays as having angelic traits and being a strong opponent of slavery despite her young age. On the other hand, Legree, the antagonist of the story, has absolutely no religious beliefs and does not tolerate any form of religious practices on his plantation. He ridicules Uncle Tom for his religious devotion and takes away his Bible. Uncle Tom's religion and devotion make him a trustworthy slave and a respected man among both his fellow slaves as well as whites. Mr. Shelby even trusts Tom with his business and money. Uncle Tom endures the many trials he

[10] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Third edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017).
[11] Citizens of free states were forced by law to cooperate in the capture and return of escaped slaved to their southern masters.

faces after being sold South, especially at the Legree plantation, through his Christian faith. He triumphs over the injustice of Legree, the 'poor miserable critter', by being a good Christian, and forgives him before dying.[12]

The success and worldwide popularity of the novel were unprecedented. In the few years following its first publication, the novel was translated to different languages and sold thousands of copies in Europe and other countries around the world. Despite few quarrels between the writer and her publisher, John Jewett, the novel managed to stay among the most sold and read books in the United States.[13] In 1862, Stowe signed a contract with Ticknor and Fields as the sole publisher of the novel in the US for the duration of its copyrights. Different editions were printed every few years and sold in thousands beating the records of the first release. These new conditions kept the novel in circulation for most of the second half of the ninetieth century and the turn of the twentieth, with new editions printed and released every few years. Even after the copyrights expired and the work entered the public domain, the novel was still selling very well. Jewett's promotional efforts had an important role in the success of the novel. But what made Stowe's novel exceptional and enabled it to mark its place in American literature, culture and history was the sentimentality with which the writer handled the themes of her novel.[14]

The novel had its literary defects, yet what was most appealing was its anti-slavery stance.[15] The story, as told in Stowe's words, reached the hearts of her readers, and enabled them to

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[12] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 386.

[13] The disagreement between Stowe and Jewett were eventually advantageous for the writer. Jewett had some financial problems before going bankrupt during the 1860s. He would have been able to keep releasing the novel. The new publishing firm was one of the most established firms at the time and managed to contribute to the success of the novel and put it to new uses over the years. In 1879 edition repackaged the novel as an American classic. Stowe had a bigger percentage of the profits than when she was working with Jewett.

[14] Winship, '"The Greatest Book of Its Kind": A Publishing History of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"', p. 325.

[15] Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), p. 166.

see a glimpse of the suffering of a mother whose child is about to be taken away from her, and a pious servant suffering for his faith and values. Stowe's experience with the loss of her own new-born child, Samuel Charles, who died of Consumption enabled her to empathise with slave mothers who had to endure the separation from their little ones. [16] By telling the story of Uncle Tom, Stowe wanted to expose the horrors of slavery and make Northerners aware of the horrible fates awaiting those poor runaway slaves they will have to help return back to their owners under the obligation of the new law. She also wanted to draw the attention of Southerners to how ugly and evil slavery can be. Stowe also focused on female empowerment and agency in her novel. She portrayed the advancement of white women's role in society starting from the 1830s through the characters of Mrs. Shelby and Mrs. Bird who have strong opinions against slavery and influence their husbands to do good by the slaves. She also featured agency in her Black female characters, Eliza and Cassy, who defy the institution of slavery itself and bravely make their way to freedom. Sadly, these elements, as we shall see in the next sections, slowly faded away till they completely disappeared in the stage and film versions of the story. [17]

Upon the release of the novel in 1852, responses differed, and reviewers used different criteria in their analysis of the text. What is indisputable, though, is the fact that the novel was more popular in the North. White abolitionists appreciated and praised the anti-slavery stance, even those who had their doubts that it would have an effect on solving the problem of slavery. Nevertheless, the artistic merits of the work and the construction of characters were criticised. It was the colonization argument and how Stowe introduced it at the end of her story that bothered northern abolitionists the most, especially Blacks who strongly objected to this theme and some even rejected the novel altogether because of it. They were

[16] Noel B. Gerson, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Biography* (New York: Praeger, 1976). P.206.
[17] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

also unhappy about the excessive meekness of Uncle Tom. Still, they were very reserved in their criticisms because of the abolitionist message and their hopes that it might have the power to change people's views on slavery.[18]

As expected, the novel was not very popular among Southerners. Stowe's views on Southern slavery and her depiction of the institution generated a wave of rage and denunciation in the South. The writer was accused of exaggeration and falsification of facts, especially since she has only been in touch with slavery once in her life while visiting a Southern state. Even though the novel was banned in most Southern states, white Southerners were still annoyed by the continuing success and popularity of the novel in the North and abroad, even if many of them never read the novel and are unfamiliar with its actual content. The most disturbing response to the novel was a package that arrived at the Stowes' house containing a cut off ear of a Black with a note scoffing at the writer's stance against slavery. Fortunately, the packagewas received by Calvin Stowe, who disposed of the package and never told his wife.[19]

Novelists and reviewers also commented on Stowe's work. 'The fundamental weakness of the novel was the assumption that black people are like white people' wrote George Frederick Holmes in *the Southern Literary Messenger*. [20] For, most Americans at the time believed that Black people were inherently inferior. Novelist William Gilmore Simms claimed that Stowe went asfar as portraying her Black characters as if they were better than whites. For Simms, the best of the novel was the death of little Eva, yet this was something that has already been seen in Dickens's death of Little Nell and the grief of her grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and Stowe was just copying it.[21] Stowe was strongly condemned by women in the South who felt like she has insulted the image of the southern lady and were offended by the character of

[18] Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture,* pp. 167–184.
[19] Ibid., p. 185,211.
[20] Ibid., p. 193.
[21] Charles S. Watson, 'Simms's Review of Uncle Tom's Cabin', *American Literature*, 48.3 (1976), 365 (pp. 366–67).

Marie St. Clare. They also criticised the fact that Stowe discussed sexual issues in her novel. One of these women wrote in a letter to New *Orleans Picayune* that Stowe had 'proved herself false to her womanly mission . . . [and] painted from her own libidinous imagination scenes which no modest woman could conceive of.'[22]

Those who had favourable comments on the novel in the South preferred to write them anonymously fearing the consequences they would have to face if it was known they were supportive of the novel. Daniel Goodloe, a northern Carolinian who published a few anti-slavery pamphlets arguing that slavery was the reason behind the weakness of the Southern economy, expressed his admiration of the novel and its anti-slavery argument in a published letter. He argued that Stowe did not attack the South in her novel. This is evidenced in the construction of her characters. The Shelbys were kind and compassionate southern slave owners. Unlike Legree, who is from Vermont, and Haley with his Northern accent, who were the villains of the story. He asserted that 'she directed her batteries against the institution, not against individuals.' Opponents of Stowe did not consider the possibility that Stowe's construction of the Legree character was a conscious decision she made to clarify that her criticism is against slavery as an institution rather than the white South. [23] Unsurprisingly, Goodloe lost his government clerkship in Washington when the letter was published in *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin.*[24] The latter was published in 1853 by Stowe as a response to all the accusations of falsification and twisting facts. The writer explained where her characters were inspired from and provided documents and sources she consulted while writing the novel. [25]

[22] Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture,* p. 191.
[23] This will later be twisted by filmmakers to make slavery the fault of the North only.
[24] Gossett, pp. 186–196.
[25] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon Which the Story Is Founded: Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (London: Clarke, Beeton, and Co.).

Another contemporary form of response to *UTC* was the Anti-Uncle Tom Literature, written by Southern authors and novelists to defend the South and its system of slavery. The aim of these writers was to show that slavery was beneficial to African Americans and that the evils of slavery as depicted in Stowe's book were not true. This was done by focusing on the harmonious relationship between the slaves and their kind and loving masters in the South.[26] Black characters constituted minor roles in these literary works. They were either the loyal, docile, and childlike servant who is usually old or the rebellious, non-obedient young slave. These novels portrayed white abolitionists in the worst way possible as either ignorant or as people driven by their sexual desires and being the reason behind the Civil War. These works represented an early effort to subvert the message of Stowe's novel and rewrite it from a pro-slavery perspective. [27]

These reactions, both public and critical, had a direct effect on how the story was dramatized on stage and screen. Theatre managers and filmmakers used the public's reactions to learn about what the audiences appreciated most about the novel and used that in their favour. They also added elements to the novel to make it more appealing. Unfortunately, the liberties they took in making modifications to the original text stripped the story from its anti-slavery stance and its political and social influence.

Minstrel shows and Uncle Tom

As *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a cultural phenomenon, it was soon integrated into other contemporary art forms, among these were minstrel shows. Blackface minstrel shows are

[26] Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, p. 214.
[27] Charles S. Watson, 'Simms's Review of Uncle Tom's Cabin', *American Literature*, 48.3 (1976), 365 (p. 366). The most famous of these novels were *The Sword and the Distaff by* William Gilmore Simms, *The Planter's Northern Bride by* Caroline Lee Hentz, *and* Mary Henderson Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*

important, yet a very controversial element in the history of American popular culture. These shows began in the 1830s as a combination of songs and dances performed in theatres and saloons by white men in black faces and developed throughout the ninetieth century to become full evening entertainment attracting large audiences, mainly low-class workers, and immigrants at first and then middle-class whites. Frederick Douglass described these shows, in an article in *The Northern Star*, published in 1848, as a theft, where 'the filthy scum of white society who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens.'[28]

Uncle Tom's Cabin's connection to blackface minstrelsy is undeniable. During the first half of the ninetieth century, minstrelsy developed side-by-side with American abolitionism and elements of one often found their way into the other. When *UTC* was published, minstrelsy was more popular than ever before. Therefore, it is very likely that the writer absorbed some of its stereotypes and reproduced them in her novel. Yet, she enriched these borrowed characters with unexpected intelligence and surprising emotional depth.[29] The most obvious scene where Stowe borrowed from minstrelsy appears in the first chapter of the novel, in which Mr. Shelby introduces little Harry to the slave trader Haley as 'Jim Crow' and asks the boy to perform what seems like a miniature minstrel show. Harry's performance begins with a round of singing and dancing with 'one of those wild, grotesque songs common to the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music.' He then represented a round of mimicry, another staple of minstrel shows where, 'the boy drew his chubby face down to a formidable length, and commenced toning a psalm through his nose, with imperturbable

[28] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 223.
[29] Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 23.

gravity.' As in all minstrel shows, the performer was rewarded, in this case, with a quarter of an orange tossed to him by Mr. Shelby. [30] Stowe continued to infuse her novel with minstrel influences, mainly through her Black characters. Aunt Chloe, who seemingly values her master's son more than her own children, perfectly fills the role of the mammy. Sam and Andy are both Sambos. Then there is the troublemaking, hyperactive pickaninny Topsy, who would become one of the most recognizable and heavily marketed of Stowe's characters. [31]

Minstrel shows also borrowed from Stowe's novel. The story served as source material for their performance for long years. Uncle Tom and several other characters were incorporated into the shows and adapted to serve its entertainment purposes. These characters were stripped of all forms of agency or value and used only for comedy and mimicry. The 'immense magnetism' of the minstrel show distorted the 'fundamentally serious nature' of the story.[32] Songs and other elements of minstrel shows were later incorporated into the stage versions of *UTC*. In the years following the Civil War, stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became as ubiquitous as the minstrel show had been before the war. The marriage between black minstrelsy and the story of Uncle Tom created the Tom Shows. By the late nineteenth century, Tom shows, just like earlier minstrel troupes, toured widely to practically every area of the United States. As the nineteenth century ended, the Tom show had fully appropriated and incorporated not only the various forms and conventions of the then-faded minstrel show but its stereotypes and racial ideology as well. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had become, as cultural historian Eric Lott aptly noted, a 'continuation of minstrelsy.'[33]

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[30] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 13.

[31] Gerson, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Biography*. Pp 223-43.

[32] Francis Pendleton Gaines, *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition*, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1962), p. 103.

[33] Lott, *Love and Theft,* pp. 217–18.

"The World's Greatest Hit": Uncle Tom at the theatre

When Stowe's novel arrived at the theatre, the country was already swept by a "Tom mania" and a strong public interest in the book.[34] The latter intrigued many enterprising managers and playwrights who wanted to capitalize on the success of the novel, with or without Stowe's approval.[35] The stage adaptations gave an opportunity for people who were unable to read the novel themselves to see it in a live performance. Gossett noted that 'Perhaps as many as fifty people would eventually see Uncle Tom's Cabin, the play, for every one person who would read the novel.' [36] Overall, the play had the longest run-in theatre history, over ninety years, and more than one million performances.[37]

Several theatrical adaptations of the novel were made before the Civil War. The first two plays were Southern adaptations made before the novel was even published as a book. The first was performed on the evening of January 5, 1852, at the Baltimore Museum. The scriptwriter described it as a 'version of the slavery point of view.'[38] It portrayed Tom as a submissive slave who in one of his lines says "'Sha! I was born a slave, I have lived a slave, and bless de Lord, I hope to die a slave!'" The second adaptation was by Charles Taylor at Purdy's National Theatre in New York. The plot and names of the characters were altered that even people who were familiar with the story found it hard to follow the narrative.

Numerous songs and tableaux were added. In a typical minstrel tradition, the play had a happy ending with the return of Uncle Tom to his home.

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[34] Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, p. 1.
[35] At that time, copyrights were yet to be extended to dramatic works, therefore Stowe's story was adapted into stage performances without her consent.
[36] Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture,* p. 260.
[37] *New York Times*, January 4, 1948.
[38] The scriptwriter allegedly adapted it from a pro-slavery book written in response to *UTC* authored by William L. G. Smith (Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen,* p 31).

The play provoked good comments:however, it only ran for eleven performances before it closed. Another version was made at the Boston Museum by H. J. Conway on November 15, 1852. This version included more serious criticism of slavery. But the most successful and memorable adaptation was the so- called Aiken-Howard version. [39]

The latter has often been regarded as the most important stage adaptation. It was the most faithful to Beecher's text. It opened first in Troy, New York in 1852. The scriptwriter, who had anti-slavery sentiments, kept the abolitionist argument clear. The play started with three acts that ended with the death of Eva but was later extended into a six-act play, with eight tableaux and thirty scenes, as a response to the desire of the audience to see the work from beginning to end. It was a first in theatre history where a violent act, the whipping and death of Uncle Tom at the hand of Legree, had been performed on stage. [40] George Howard managed to avoid the failure of his predecessors by presenting a play that was appealing to audiences. In the words of *The Budget* reviewer, 'crowds flock[ed] nightly to witness its performances, and the touches of human nature which it develop[ed] in the crowd of spectators is refreshing to behold.' The play 'has drawn a class of auditors to the museum who heretofore opposed the stage, after seeing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, have gone their homes with better impressions in regard to it.' The audience was deeply touched by the play and many reportedly changed their perspective on slavery after seeing it. Even G. C. Germon, who was at first not happy with blacking up to impersonate a Black character as in minstrelsy,later caught some of the spiritual qualities of Uncle Tom through constantly playing the role and became a very devout man, reported the newspaper article. [41]

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[39] Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit-Uncle Tom's Cabin. Illustrated, Etc. [On the Plays Based on the Work by Harriett E. B. Stowe.]* (New York: SFVanni, 1947, 1947), p. 21.

[40] George L. Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, 1852.* Full script available at (http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/scripts/aikenhp.html)

[41] Unsigned, *The Northern Budget*, October 7, 1852.

In 1853, the play opened inthe national theatre in New York. It was the first time a single play constituted the entire evening's entertainment. The play was an astounding success and managed to attract 'a full and delighted audience' every night.[42] *The Times* reported that Howard's play was a 'constantsuccession of crowded houses for now nearly nine weeks be any evidence of the popularity ofa piece.'[43]

During its pre-war performances, the Howard play preserved the antislavery message of the story and allowed it to reach beyond the largely female readership of the printed version, for theatre was initially almost entirely attended by males. The audience, who came into the playprepared to laugh and be entertained by the Black characters, were confronted with Black characters in serious situations and immediately empathized with them. Blacks, who were allowed to watch the play in segregated seating, could see whites sympathizing with the slaves. A *Liberator* reviewer, in August 1853, praised the play and its strong anti-slavery message writing that 'If the shrewdest abolitionist amongst us had prepared the drama with a view to make the strongest anti-slavery impression, he could scarlessly have done the workbetter.'[44]

[42] Unsigned, *The National Era*, November 3, 1853.
[43] Unsigned, *The New York Times*, September 10, 1853.
[44] Unsigned, *The Liberator*, August 1853.

The pre-war performances stayed close to the original story, yet some elements were left out due to the nature of the medium and time constraints. Tom's religion, for example, and the Quakers were not given much space. As melodrama was a very important element in theatre, much attention was given to scenes such as Eliza's jumping the ice floes. The scene was described in a short paragraph in the novel but became the most important scene in the play and will later become a staple in all the other adaptations and film versions. Four figures werestuck in the minds of Americans when they heard of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: 'Little Eva ensconced in Old Tom's Lap, Eliza pursued across the ice by the bounds, Lawyer Marks striking that grandiloquent posture, and Topsy doing a breakdown,' noted historian Harry Birdoff. [45] The character of Topsy in particular was an opportunity for Aiken to emphasise his play's departure from minstrelsy.[46] Nevertheless, many songs and tableaux were added to the play in the late 1860s. A comparison between the script of the play in 1869 and 1876 shows how the play was altered to become very close to the Tom Shows.[47] The significance of the Aiken Howard play remained in that all the playwrights that came after used it as a reference in developing their scripts. All in all, until the beginning of the Civil War, the story of Uncle Tom, in both its page and stage version was doing very well and the anti-slavery message was still preserved. However, Stowe did create in the words of Richard Yarborough, a 'Trojan horse named Uncle Tom.'[48] After the Civil War, the story will never be the sameas Stowe meant it to be.

[45] Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit-Uncle Tom's Cabin,* p. 1, 19.

[46] John W. Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 60.

[47] Scripts are available in (http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/scripts/aikenhp.html.)

[48] Cited in Jo-Ann Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture*, First Edition, 1st edition (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2007), p. 5.

The Postbellum Tom shows

After the Civil War, The Tom shows, a merge between the story of Uncle Tom and the minstrel shows, as the hundreds of stage adaptations of the novel came to be known, drifted far away from the source text and from its anti-slavery aim. Since slavery no longer existed, the novel lost its purpose with its many dramatizations and the stereotype of Uncle Tom as a submissive and loyal slave was created. After the Civil War, "serious" Uncle Tom never came back on stage.[49]

After Reconstruction, the Tom show excitement struck the country anew and grew remarkably for the next two decades. The latter might have been a reflection of the anti-Black hostility and segregation of the Reconstruction Era and the Jim Crow years. These shows were an opportunity for some white audiences to see their hostility towards Blacks practised, even if only as a performance. It was possible that they may have been drawn to the Tom show expressly to witness and vicariously participate in a white man's beating a Black man todeath. Historian Linda Williams noted that by the end of the nineteenth century, 'it became traditional for Simon Legree to foam with rage and beat Tom at length both with the whip

[49] Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit-Uncle Tom's Cabin,* p. 213.

and on the head with its handle. Tom would have a container of red fluid to smear over himself as such moments.' [50] Although this scene had existed since the Aiken Howard adaptation, the way it was performed in the post- Reconstruction South had more to do with cultural and racial factors than theatrical and dramatic necessities.

Uncle Tom lost its social and cultural value with the Tom shows. 'Comic Uncle Toms, Lawyers Marks and Foot- tapping, cork-smeared Topsys' took over the stage. The dogs chasing Eliza as she crosses the icy river became a staple in the shows and the bloodhounds became almost as important as the main characters of the story.[51] Dogs never existed in the novel nor in the original Aiken play. The Tom shows became a national sensation starting from the 1870s and stayed as an important form of entertainment till the first two decades of the twentieth century competing with films. In 1879, as listed in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, the number of Tom shows travelling the country went from 49 to 500, within twenty years. These shows became an industry. [52] Some actors had spent their entire life as Tommers moving from one role to another as they grew old. The reason behind the lasting popularity of these shows is probably the same as the popularity of Beecher's text, its ability to adapt to changing times.[53]

The Character of Tom was completely altered by these shows both physically and morally. In her novel, Stowe describes Tom as a 'large, broad-chested, powerfully made man' whose young child is still just a baby. That is also how Billing features him in his illustration made for the first publication of the novel, a dark-haired man in the prime of life. However, with

[50] Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 86.
[51] Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit-Uncle Tom's Cabin,* p. 292.
[52] Unsigned, *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, November 1879.
[53] Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit-Uncle Tom's Cabin,* p. 6.

the Tom shows, Uncle Tom became to be understood as old.[54] This latter was intentionally done to avoid any sexual interpretations of the relationship between him and little Eva, especially since the scene of Tom and Eva in the garden, with Eva sitting on Tom's lap, became one of the most important scenes of the play.

By the late nineteenth century, Tom Shows were once again altered to fit with the changing times. During the 1880s and 1890s, new generations of Americans who did not witness the Civil War became interested in reading and learning more about it. Many veterans wrote about their experiences of the war in newspapers. Of course, these accounts were filtered to go in line with the reconciliation movement of the time. The stories they told confirmed the claim that the war was not about the continuation or abolition of slavery and emphasised the image of the loyal happy slaves.[55] As a result of this, the scenes of white violence against slaves were remarkably reduced in Tom shows and most shows had a happy ending. The focus was shifted mainly to an image of happy slaves with many scenes of dance, song, and storytelling. This was done to create some form of nostalgia for the old South and influence a less harsh and terrifying memory of slavery in popular culture. [56]

Tom shows became all about comic relief and entertainment. All the performances reproduced the scene of Eliza crossing the river chased by dogs. Marks, who is a minor character in the novel and appears only in a few chapters in volume one, became a central character used mainly for entertainment purposes. The Quakers were almost entirely eliminated from the plot. The steamboat race between the Robert E Lee and the Natchez was another element that the stage performances introduced to the story. The race which took place in the summer of 1870, had no relation to the original text. It was rather added to Tom

[54] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 40.
[55] Blight, *Race and Reunion,* p. 164.
[56] Williams, *Playing the Race Card,* p. 86.

Shows for entertainment purposes but also as a form of celebration of Southern culture. The representation of Uncle Tom as an old man was also a feature of the tom shows. All of these will remain important parts of the story as it reached the big screen.

Uncle Tom Goes to the Movies

After half a century from its first publication, the story of Uncle Tom reached the big screen and was turned into several silent films. The story arrived on screen with many legacies from its success and controversy as a text and long years of stage performance. It was because 'the sources of movies were nostalgic and because blacks struggling among themselves for hegemony expressed no clear voice [that] moviemakers continued to derive racial themes from dated sources', argued Cripps.[57] But it was mainly the success of the story that attracted filmmakers, as they wanted to invest it in their emerging industry. With a strong belief that the success the story achieved in one medium will infect the work created in another, filmmakers preferred to experiment with a familiar plot and a presold story. For years, different production companies invested in turning the famous story and play into moving pictures. The year 1903 marked the beginning of slavery filmography with the first Uncle Tom film by Edwin S Porter.

Movies, which are now considered the most popular and influential cultural medium, had their beginnings at the turn of the twentieth century. They made their way from the bottom up, attracting the attention of the lowest classes only at first. Their path 'was similar to that of the favorite American folk play: low admission prices, and performances in lowly surrounding, cheap halls slovenly basements, empty stores, while clergymen and editors

[57] Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, p. 21.

thundered against the 'sinks of sin.'[58] Cinema developed during its first two decades side by side with social structure in America. Most early films were made by and for the millions of immigrants that arrived in the US during the early twentieth century. Jews immigrants especially became involved in the cinema and made their way up to become heads of major studios. Immigrants and the lower working class had found themselves a home away from the interference of the upper classes. Theatre was still the main entertainment form for middle and upper classes audiences who did not become interested in films until late 1914. Every night the nickelodeons, as the early film theatres were called, were packed with male immigrants, most of whom were non-English speakers, labourers from lower-class whites, and African Americans.[59] The main aim of the nickelodeons was to provide entertainment for their audiences. Thus, films constituted mainly of entertainment and dance. [60]

The main reason behind the several Uncle Tom films was not the filmmakers' interest in its social and political message but rather its familiarity and appeal to audiences. As much as the new medium provided possibilities, it was still very limited in its first years. No film could be longer than one reel which did not allow for the development of the plot. Also, the lack of dialogue made it very hard for filmmakers to convey the stories of their films. They relied on title cards or stage narrators who explained the scenes directly to the audience. Therefore, the audiences' familiarity with the Uncle Tom story, as well as its pre-sold quality, made it a perfect option. As Stephon Railton noted 'as soon as the actress playing Eliza puts her hands on her ear, they could "hear" the dogs in pursuit. If Eva coughs, they know she is dying. A Quaker hat means Phineas Fetcher; and umbrella identifies Marks.'[61] Also, the extension of

[58] Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit*, p. 393.
[59] The first movie houses were called "nickelodeons," The term combines the price of admission which was a nickel, a five-cent coin, and the Greek word for theatre.
[60] Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, p. 9.
[61] Stephen Railton, 'Readapting Uncle Tom's Cabin' in *Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen*, ed. by R. Barton Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 65.

copyrights to include motion pictures in 1908 prevented filmmakers from using contemporary literary works in their films. Thus, many went back to classics whose copyrights had expired and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was on top of that list. [62]

Authenticity and fidelity to the original text was a complicated issue for the silent *Uncle Tom's Cabin* films. As discussed above, the novel had been extensively adapted and altered by theatre companies that to many Americans the version played in Tom Shows became the "true" story. Being adaptations of pre-existing texts, The Uncle Tom films adapted prior conceptions from both the text and the theatrical dramatizations. Scenes such as Elisa being chased by dogs while crossing the Ohio river, the importance given to the Marks character, the boat race and many other elements never existed in the novel. However, audiences would have felt that something was wrong with the film if it did not include them. Therefore, filmmakers found themselves obliged to incorporate them into their films. As we shall see in the next section, these elements became staples in all the films. Interestingly, filmmakers were promoting their film as the true story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and emphasised their fidelity to Beecher's text. This authenticity claim was most likely due to commercial reasons rather than true fidelity to Stowe's text. In the early 1900s stage plays and films were in competition, especially since they were performed in the same theatres and opera houses. Therefore, filmmakers promoted their films as following the book rather than stage adaptations. The first two cinematic adaptations of Uncle Tom were made just as the cinematic industry was being formed. Consequently, the films relied heavily on theatre and included several tableaux and dances. However, as cinema developed, the influence of the

[62] David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 3rd ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 32.

theatrical stage effect was gradually eliminated. As this decomposition occurred, the films became more conversant with contemporary racial issues.[63]

The first silver screen Uncle Tom: Edison/Porter and Lubin 1903

Uncle Tom made its first appearance in cinema during its early years. Edwin Porter, who was at the time working for the Edison company, made the first film, released in August 1903. The film ran 1,100 feet to become the longest and most expensive film yet made, with a prologue and fourteen tableaux.[64] Uncle Tom, as well as all the other leading characters, were played by white actors in a blackface. The names of the actors are unknown.[65] Few weeks later, Sigmund Lubin released his version, also called *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Lubin had a reputation for copying other production companies' films and many lawsuits had already been filed against him. The Lubin film was a shorter copy of Edison's with minor modifications (700 feet vs 1.100 feet).[66] Existing Tom troupes were used in the making of both films. In their attempt to outperform the stage plays, the two filmmakers relied on innovative displays in scenes like the boat race and the death of Eva. They wanted to make use of the new techniques of cinema and provide the audience with what Tom shows could not. The two films give a vivid idea of how the Tom shows represented the story. The Lubin

[63] In their book, Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film, Ben Brewster and Leab Jacobs have accurately traced the decomposition of theatrical tradition in the silent Uncle tom films.
[64] Unsigned, *The New York Times*, August 1903.
[65] During the early days of cinema most actors were not identified in films. This was mainly because the actors were ashamed to appear in films that were aimed at the uneducated working-class, unlike theatre where they usually perform for upper class educated audiences. Second, Edison and his Trust which controlled movie making at the time feared that actors would gain more prestige and power and demand more money if they became known. This was later challenged by the independents when they introduced the Star System and started using their starts to advertise their films.
[66] Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, History of the American Cinema, v. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press; New York: Scribner, 1990), pp. 360–61.

film is lost while the Porter film is the only non-abridged version of all the nine films and is still available for viewing today the same way that audiences saw it in 1903.[67]

Porter, who was at the time one of the leading filmmakers, started his career as a stage projectionist touring the country, Canada, and the Caribbean before joining the Edison Company in 1899 where he became in charge of the New York studios. Porter's experience as a technician and electrician enabled him to master the mechanisms of cinema making. He also had a good understanding of the audience's tastes. His early films at the Edison Company were mostly trick films and comedies, contemporary audiences' favourites. He then made *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, which changed the parameters of filmmaking and made an astonishing success. Although the Uncle Tom movie was not as successful and praised as *The Great Train Robbery* or many of the other Porter films for that matter, it made history for being the first-time slavery was introduced to the big screen.[68] Porter was familiar with theatre. He had seen several theatrical performances, including the *Uncle Tom* play, which was performed many times in his hometown, Connellsville, Pennsylvania, during his childhood years. He had even acted out the story as a child, playing the role of slave owner Simon Legree. When marketing the film, Edison declared that it will be 'a departure from the old methods of dissolving one scene into another.' The story 'has been carefully studied and every scene posed in accordance with the famous author's vision.' Yet, Porter hired an existing Tom troupe for his film and used certain scenes from their performance rather than staging his own film. Therefore, his film inevitably reflected the stage traditions and conventions from which it sprang. [69]

[67] A detailed comparison between the two films is available at Stephon Railton, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/films/1914/fire35dt.html
[68] Charles Musser, 'Before the Nickelodeon', p. 247.
[69] Ibid., p. 21.

Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* starts with an introduction where 'Eliza pleads Tom to Run Away'. Viewers are not given any explanation of why that might be, so it would be impossible for people who are not familiar with the novel and the stage versions to understand and follow the narrative. The ideological power of Tom shows and theatre and their influence on early cinema is best exhibited in this version. Fifth of the film is slaves' dance. They dance even at a slave auction.[70] The dancing and gambling in the auction sale never existed in Stowe's novel. It was rather introduced with the Conway and Barum stage adaptation as early as 1852.[71] The auction scene happens in chapter thirty of the novel, where Adolph and Tom, from the estate of the late Augustine St. Clare, and Emmeline, the house servant of kind New Orleans lady who passed away indebted to a firm in New York, are put on the block and sold, Tom and Emmeline to Simon Legree, who enters the novel in this scene. As far as these essential narrative elements go, the film follows Stowe's text, although she describes Emmeline's sale last. However, the seriousness of the scene is completely striped away. Beecher describes the sadness of the scene when the mother and daughter are sold to different masters to be separated for life. The sobbing mother begs her new owner to buy her daughter, before she is sold to Legree and the two say their goodbyes in utter sorrow.[72] The film, however, features the auction as a joyous space with dancing Blacks whom we see when the scene opens and a white man with the top hat and umbrella, likely to be Marks, who is so active during the bidding sequences. Porter, who later in his life adopted the conception of 'cinema as filmed theatre', has incorporated elements from theatrical performances into motion pictures from the beginning of his filmmaking career.[73] Even in *The Great Train Robbery,* he included a random group dance in one scene. In *Uncle Tom's*

[70] Edwin S Porter, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903).
[71] Henry J. Conway, *Uncle Tom's Cabin 1852*. Full script can be found in (http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/scripts/conwayhp.html)
[72] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 288.
[73] Musser, 'Before the Nickelodeon', p. 22.

Cabin, four of the film's fourteen scenes include dancing. Scene seven, one of the longest in the film, is a strange tableau featuring a very well-dressed group of Black men and women doing an elaborated choreographed cakewalk dance in St. Clare Garden before Eva and Uncle Tom enter. [74]

Due to the constraints of cinema at the time, the two-volume novel had to be compressed into a fifteen-minute film. The latter did not allow for the development of the story and characters. However, Porter maintained most major characters and events as well as the original narrative, except for the death of both St. Clare and Legree. Porter suggested that St.Clare died while defending Uncle Tom and Legree was killed on the hands of Lawyer Marks, who was avenging the deaths of St Clair and Uncle Tom. Unlike the novel where St. Clare is stabbed in a random fight, in which Tom was not present, and Legree never dies. Porter might have chosen to make these two modifications to the original text to further strengthen his vision of the story. A vision that complies with the reconciliation efforts which shaped the historical imagination of the Civil War, the most divisive and destructive war in American history, at the turn of the century 'as a tragedy that forged greater unity.'[75] With the death of Legree, the evils of slavery and disunion are ended. The Legree character was the incarnation of all the evils of slavery and with his death and Uncle Tom's, slavery ends, and the country is reunited. This is further illustrated in the final tableau of the film. On the right side of the screen opposite to the dead body of Uncle Tom, we see John Brown being led to his execution, a Civil War battle scene, Abraham Lincoln standing with a Black slave kneeling at his feet with broken shackles and Ulysses S. Grant, and Robert E. Lee shaking hands at the end of the war. All these images suggest that the sacrifices many people made were not for

[74] Porter, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
[75] Blight, *Race and Reunion*, p. 386.

nothing and that after the long years of slavery the country did manage to find its "happy end". [76]

Throughout his career, Porter was criticised for appropriating his themes and plots from other filmmakers. He relied heavily on 'pro-filmic elements of set construction and gesture, which were highly conventionalized.' Yet, he was still the most important filmmaker between 1899-1909 and an important figure in the development of cinema.[77] Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* represented a sustained exploration of the filmed theatre genre that remained an important aspect of his filmmaking career. The film was a brave and ambitious attempt by Porter to represent the history of slavery and the Black experience in film from its early years. Even if the Tom show tradition was more prevalent than the actual story, the film opened the way for the making of several other versions in the coming years, which would give more space for the story of Uncle Tom to be developed. The Porter and Lubin films served to introduce the story of Uncle Tom and impose a Black presence on the big screen from its early years. In the following years, Black characters were still being portrayed in films, but it was not until 1910 that another Uncle Tom film was made.[78]

Towards a more progressive representation

The Compromise of 1877 marked the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of decades of segregation and racism in the South. By agreeing on the terms of the compromise, the Republicans abandoned their Black elected officials and left Black Americans subject to

[76] *Uncle Toms Cabin.* Directed by Edwin S Porter. Edison studios 1903.
[77] Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, p. 24.
[78] Charles Musser, 'Before the Nickelodeon', p. 243.

racism and harassment.[79] The Democrats restored white political supremacy over the South and established Jim Crow Laws. Southern Democrats took several arrangements to prevent African Americans from voting. They passed constitutional amendments and laws that made voter registration very difficult for African Americans. By 1908, they succeeded in disenfranchising most Black citizens, as well as many poor whites. Racial violence and lynching became very common practices in the South. Between 1890 and 1917, wrote historian Alexander Byrd, 'white gangs and mobs murdered two to three black southerners a week.'[80]

The fiftieth anniversary of the Civil war reinforced racial prejudices. The celebrations completely excluded Blacks and focused on intersectional reconciliation as a theme celebrating the reunion of the country. The celebrations evidenced Southern victory over Reconstruction and the memory of the war. The ceremonies at Gettysburg in 1913 was a strong affirmation of the mythology of Civil War in the popular imagination as a 'sacrifice in order to save a troubled, but essentially good, Union, not as the crisis of a nation in 1913 still deeply divided over slavery, race, competing definitions of labor, liberty, political economy, and the future of the West.' The exclusion of African Americans from the celebration of the anniversary made them reflect on their contemporary issues and how they are excluded from access to their basic right as citizens. Also, when Democrat Woodrow Wilson won the

[79] The compromise followed and settled the controversial election of 1876. The Republicans and the Democrats made an undocumented agreement allowing the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, to become president in return the Republicans had several terms including the removal of Federal troops from the South, the investment of federal funds to build a transnational railroad to the South and revive southern economy, the appointment of Southern Democrats to Hayes' cabinet, and most importantly, Republicans gaining political control over Southern states. Michael Les Benedict, 'Southern Democrats in the Crisis of 1876-1877: A Reconsideration of Reunion and Reaction', The Journal of Southern History, 46.4 (1980), 489–524.
[80] Alexander X. Byrd, 'Studying Lynching in the Jim Crow South', *OAH Magazine of History*, 18.2 (2004), 31 (pp. 31–35).

presidential elections in 1912, he issued several segregation policies for Blacks working in theNorth that deprived them of their basic right as citizens. [81]

However, despite racial and economic hindrances as well as the exclusion from historical memory, Black Americans made their best efforts to demonstrate their improved conditions to conquer white racism and unify their community. Challenging white segregation and racism, African Americans managed to create their own systems and institutions which enabled them to survive the Jim Crow years. These institutions provided education, health care and work opportunities for Blacks. [82] If it was not for 'the parallel institution that the black professional class created, successful challenges to white supremacy would not have been possible.' Being segregated 'provided blacks with the chance, indeed, the imperative to develop a range of distinct institutions they controlled'.[83] The rhetoric of 'progress of the race' became the main theme in African American press and schools. African American newspapers became repositories for both celebrations of Black progress and intense debate about the obstacles of the Jim Crow and violence. The Negro Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), established in 1909, launched a campaign against segregation practices in the federal government in the summer of 1913. The Black press, the NAACP and other Black associations managed to gain a voice and influence during the second decade of the twentieth century and began to advance the rights of African American citizens as well as their representation in popular culture and film.[84]

[81] Blight, *Race and Reunion,* p. 386.
[82] Among the various Institutions and organisations created to serve the needs of the Black community are the national Association of Colored Women (NACW), the National Negro Business League (NNBL), the National Bar Association (NBA), the National Medical Association (NMA), the National Association for Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN).
[83] Darlene Clark Hine, 'Black Professionals and Race Consciousness: Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 1890-1950', *The Journal of American History*, 89.4 (2003), (pp. 12079–80).
[84] Blight, *Race and Reunion,* p. 334.

This resistance and agency among Black Americans were portrayed in the 1910 and 1914 Uncle Tom films, especially that, Southerners, who had full control of the political and cultural scene at the time were not concerned about what was being portrayed in films. Filmmakers were still targeting lower-class citizens, including African Americans, and continued investing in making Uncle Tom films and presenting them in a manner that would please the tastes of their ticket buyers. Starting from 1910, the Uncle Tom films presented a more sophisticated and progressive image of the Black experience showing agency and strongwill in the Black characters.

With the development of cinema and refinement of movie-making techniques, filmmakers could present more sophisticated images. In 1910, two Uncle Tom film versions were made by Vitagraph and Thanhouser. The Vitagraph film was advertised as 'The most Magnificent, Sumptuous and Realistic Production Ever Attempted of Uncle Tom's Cabin.' The film was screened in three parts on different nights. The Thanhouser Classic announced that their film was 'Not a Tedious Drawn-Out, Continued-in-Our Next Affair, but complete in one reel.' The film was 1000 feet, with Frank Crane as Uncle Tom and Marie Eline, known as the Thanhouser Kid, as little Eva.[85]

The Vitagraph film was Directed by J. Stuart Blackton and Written by Eugene Mullin.[86] The American Vitagraph Company was founded by two English Immigrants, J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith in 1897 in Brooklyn, New York. Thomas Edison had no idea

[85] Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit*, p. 396.
[86] The Vitagraph film still exits while the Thanhouse is lost.

he was creating some serious competition for himself when he sold a set of films and a projector to Blackton during a meeting between the two when Blackton, working as a reporter, was sent to interview Edison.[87] The company, which started in 1897 on the rooftop of a building on Nassau Street in Manhattan, became by 1907 the most prolific American film production company, producing many famous silent films including comedies, animation, and adaptations. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* might not have been the most successful Vitagraph film, but it was exceptional in its sophisticated and progressive portrayal of the famous story.[88] The 1910 Vitagraph film was the first time an American company released a dramatic film in three reels. At the time, most full-length movies were one-reelers (about 15 minutes long) and were shown in theatres as part of about an hour's worth of entertainment usually involving a live singer as well as several films. Vitagraph's three reels were released on three different days.[89]

Blackton brought back the seriousness of Beecher's novel. His film revealed signs of improvement compared to the earlier Edison and Lubin films, both in terms of its handling of slavery and its technicality. The director shot his scenes from different camera angles allowing viewers to see from the viewpoint of the enslaved, something that the stage versions could never offer. From the start of the film, the director gives his viewers shots of the Uncle Tom Cabin both from inside and out, showing in one scene Aunt Chloe and her little ones in front of their cabin before Uncle Tom returns home. Blackton portrays the daily lives of the slaves in a manner that was not done before on stage or in the earlier film versions. Viewers

[87] Eileen Bowser, 'The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915 (History of the American Cinema)', p. 23
[88] Charles Musser, 'American Vitagraph: 1897-1901', *Cinema Journal*, 22.3 (1983), 4–46 (p. 6).
[89] Whether theatres subsequently combined them into one longer film, or invariably showed them over different days is not known. Two version of the film seem to have survived. A print Vitagraph designed for European distribution in 1910 with titles in Danish, is preserved in The National Film and Television Archive, in London. The other version was made later in the 1920s by a different company and was half the length of the original.

are for the first time invited inside the famous cabin in the scene where Eliza goes to Uncle Tom to tell him about the sale and her plan to escape. The sale of little Harry to Haley is another instance where the viewers get to see the slave's point of view. Shooting the scene from behind the door where Eliza was eavesdropping on the conversation between Haley and Mr. Shelby, Blackton captures the scene through Eliza's eyes providing the viewers with a glimpse of the venerability and helplessness of the slave mother. An experience that even Stowe herself did not provide for her readers as the moment was recorded by the white narrator and not Eliza. The female agency in Stowe's novel was also revived in this film with the escape of Eliza. She escapes directly making her way through the woods chased by the dogs, who became a staple in this scene, to cross the river without stopping in the tavern as in the novel nor receiving help from anyone until she manages to cross the river. The film, however, eliminated the character of George Harris, thus the river crossing is the last we see of Eliza's story in the film, which is a shame for the character of G. Harris and his agency would have been a nice addition to this version in particular. From here the plot follows the story of Uncle Tom only. [90]

The second part of the film starts with the slaves being loaded into the steamboat to be sold South. Unlike the Porter version where slaves are shown dancing, the scene here does not feature any signs of joy and celebration. Uncle Tom is shown sitting on the boat next to another slave woman with both his hands and feet shackled before Haley removes his chains. All the boat scenes are more realistic, being filmed on an actual boat and not a stage set like the 1903 films. The sale of Tom to St. Clare also differed from Porter's version. Here Haley and St. Clare actually discuss the purchase before St.Clare signs the bill under the pressure of

[90] J. Stuart Blackton, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Vitagraph Company of America, 1910). The film is available at the British film institute library. BFI Identifier: 22168.

his young daughter. Once arrived at the St.Clare estate, Blackton maintains his serious commitments to the story. The exaggerated dancing in the Porter and Lubin versions are omitted, only Topsy dances in a few scenes. Blackton's film included clear signs of an emerging realism in filmmaking. The scene of Eva's death is more realistic in this film. The descending angel is eliminated, and Eva dies with her head falling back on the bed.[91]

The sale auction is scene one in the third part of the film. This time without the gambling, dancing, or the jumping all-around of the Marks character in the previous versions. There was nothing happy or comic about the way these slaves were treated while being examined by the buyers. Legree's sexual intentions towards Emmeline are emphasized, an element that has never been part of the stage or the early film versions. Blackton's depiction of the character of Legree is very close to Stowe's. He is depicted as a harsh slave owner who is drunk in most of the scenes he appears in and is frequently abusing his slaves physically and emotionally. Legree doesn't die in this version, as a matter of fact, he dies in all the versions except this one. This might have been a conscious choice by the director to avoid Porter's vision suggesting that slavery ends with the death of Legree. Compared to its predecessors, The Vitagraph film represents a clear advancement in movie making. But the most important aspect of this film is its attitude toward slavery and the Black experience. Blackton revived the abolitionist origins of the story. The film also clearly reflected the advancement made by African Americans at the time.[92] The film was well-received by the audience and reviewers. *The New York Dramatic Mirror* praised the film in general, yet it suggested that due to its screening on three separate days, it was better if audiences were informed at the end of each real that the story will continue in other reels.[93]

[91] J. Stuart Blackton, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
[92] J. Stuart Blackton, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
[93] Unsigned, The *New York Dramatic Mirror*, August 6,1910.

Based on *The Moving Picture World* review, The Thanhouser film introduces Legree from the beginning of the story. It is him who buys Uncle Tom and little Harry from Shelby and not Haley. This version best emphasised the agency and resistance of African Americans through the Uncle Tom character. He is represented as subversive and resistant breaking the stereotype that the character became associated with on stage. He disobeys his new owner, Legree, when he gives little Harry back to Eliza after he is put under his care by Legree. He also helps her escape. After her risky escape, Eliza finds herself in the home of Senator Bird of Ohio. This version is the only one that include Mr. and Mrs. Bird. The rest of the film is the usual story.[94]

Two more versions were made in 1913 by Kalem and Imp, both are lost. The imp film had in its cast Harry Pollard and Marguerita Fischer, who blackened up to play Uncle Tom and Topsy.[95] Based on the review in *Variety* magazine, the Imp film contained some of the tendencies of the Tom shows and previous films but stayed as close as possible to the original narrative. Legree dies on the hands of Marks just like in the Edison and Lubin films. All the other major scenes inherited from the stage tradition, the escape of Eliza, the auction scene and death of Eva, are reproduced. What caught the attention of the reviewer is the St. Clare plantation featured 'in Dixie fairly irradiating the wealth of the old-time Southern atmosphere [and] the scene introducing perhaps a hundred guests, all reflective in their costumes and bearing the social glory of the Southland of long ago.'[96] The film also brought back George Harris to the plot and introduced him in all the scene of the escape till the reunion with his family.[97]

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[94] Unsigned Review, *The Moving Picture World*, New York, August 6, 1910.
[95] Pollard and Fischer, who were not yet married at the time, will make another Uncle Tom film in 1927 where Pollard would be the Director and his then wife will play Eliza. The film will once again be produced by Carl Laemmle.
[96] This will later be thoroughly emphasised in the 1927 remake.
[97] Corb, *Variety*, September 5, 1913.

The Kalem film, according to a notice in *The Moving Picture World* was a two-reeler that opened on 17 December 1913. The reviewer appreciated the role of Simon Legree played by Hal Clemmons, which for him was 'The best [and]the strongest portrayal of the part' he has seen anywhere before.[98] Little is known of the lost film but based on the Photoplay Story of the film that *the Motion Picture Story Magazine* ran in January 1914, the movie included most of the major elements of the original story.[99]

The First Black Uncle Tom

On August 10, 1914, the World Film Corporation released its version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in New York. [100] The forty minutes film was adapted by Edward McWade, produced by J. V. Ritchey, and directed by William Robert Daly. African American actor, Sam Lucas was cast as Uncle Tom. The 72 years old Sam Lucas, who had a long career of playing Uncle Tom on stage, was the first African American to play the role on screen. The film starts with a forward, 'This is the story of an exotic race, whose ancestors, born beneath a tropic sun, were brought to the New World by heartless traders and sold into slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, and the characters of Aunt Ophelia, Eliza, Marks the Lawyer, Topsy, Little Eva, and the immortal UNCLE TOM will live forever'.[101] This suggests that the focus of the film would be on the history of slavery and the significance of Stowe's novel as a historical text. According to a publicity piece in *The New York Times*, Daly was 'concerned more with the book itself than with the dramatized versions' while making his film. [102]

[98] Unsigned Review, *The Moving Picture World*: New York, January 1914.
[99] Karl Schiller, *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, New York: M.P. Publishing Co., January 1913.
[100] This was a very short-lived production compamy (1914-1919).
[101] William Robert Daly, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (World Film, 1914).
[102] Unsigned Review, *The New York Times,* August 23, 1914.

This was true, similarly to the Vitagraph version, dancing is basically non-existing. The film contains only one scene where a group of slaves are shown frenetically dancing in the background. World Productions seem to have invested a decent budget in the making of the film. The director used natural locations of cotton plantations, swamps, the Ohio River, and other scenes of the action of the story which provide beautiful scenery for the film. He was also the first to film the scene where Eliza crosses the icy river pursued by a pack of bloodhounds in the actual frozen Ohio River instead of the usual papier mâché chunk of ice. Compared to the previous films, this version included most of the elements from the original text and didn't eliminate important figures and events. Yet, the film included certain elements that derive directly from the Tom Shows, like the fact that Tom himself is portrayed as an old man. Also, many scenes involve the character Marks, a slavecatcher who plays a small role in Stowe's book but who became a hugely popular source of comic relief on stage. By 1914, audiences became very familiar with the character and once they saw his iconic hat and tiny donkey, they were already culturally programmed to laugh, and Daly gives them many opportunities for that. [103]

Nevertheless, Daly's film included several elements that distinguish it from the other versions and highlight the advancements made by African Americans during the first decade of the twentieth century. The fact that it cast an African American in the main role was one, although the character of Tom in this version gives the impression of docility, this might have to do more with the age of the actor rather than the intentions of the director.[104] The second scene in the film revives Stowe's main aim behind writing the novel, the Fugitive Slave Act. The scene features the runaway slave, Jim Vance, hiding on a tree while a white man hangs a wanted poster of him with a reward of one hundred dollars. Daly shot this scene from

[103] William Robert Daly, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

[104] Sam Lucas was 72 years when he played the role. He allegedly died few months after the film was made after being sick from jumping in the river to save Eva during the making of the film.

different angles including an angle where the camera joins the runaway slave on the tree and the viewers get to observe the scene from the perspective of the slave in hiding. The theme of religion is also revived in this version through the character of Uncle Tom. The latter is shown preaching to a group of Black people gathered around him while onboard the boat. The mostimportant moment in this version is initiated when Uncle Tom, refuses to whip a slave and disobeys Legree. In response to Legree's threat to kill him if he doesn't obey, Lucas stands straight up, folds his arms defiantly across his chest, and tells Legree he may have bought hisbody, but he doesn't own his soul. This results in Tom being beaten to death by Legree. This was the stimulus for the most powerful scene in the film when the slave, whom Uncle Tom refuses to whip, gets his hands on a pistol and shoots Legree to avenge Uncle Tom.

Motivated by sympathy and revenge as indicated in the title, the slave shoots Legree with a smile in his face which Daly's camera catches in a close-up. For the first time in film history, a Black character was given such agency. Black violence against whites was introduced to American popular culture with this exact scene. [105] An article at *The Washington Post* announced that The Chicago censor board has ordered the producers of the film to eliminate the flogging scene. The scene was then omitted in all later releases of the film, including the print held at The British Film Institute.[106]

The film was popular among audiences. According to a *New York Tribune's* review in August 1914, the picture 'has been booked far ahead in New York', indicating that those who have had a chance to see it liked it.[107] *The Moving Picture World* praised the film as a 'strong portrayal of the famous old story' and praised Daly for using many coloured players in his film. The reviewer was particularly happy with the casting of Uncle Tom, whose acting he

[105] Unsigned Article, *The Washington Post,* August 30, 1914.
[106] William Robert Daly, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
[107] Unsigned Review, *The New York Tribune,* August 25 ,1914.

described as 'dignified and display[ing] a grasp of dramatic values'.[108] *The New York Herald* also praised the acting and Daly's efforts to 'obtain a proper scenic setting.' [109] A criticism of the film appeared in *The Movie Pictorial,* where the reviewer felt that the separate flights of Eliza and George Harris are 'so jumbled that only people familiar with the book would suspect that the two negroes did not start and pursue most of their journey together.' Yet, he upheld that this version is the best of all the others and 'will serve until the day when it will occur to photo-play producers that something more than scenery and competent actors and crowds of super-numeracies is needed to catch the spirit that made a classic novel.'[110]

Towards a moonlight and magnolia representation

By late 1914, the motion picture industry, which had made remarkable technical advancements as filmmakers became more in control of their products, started targeting middle and upper-class audiences. Nickelodeons were replaced by more sophisticated film theatres in better areas where the new target audience could go to see the films.[111] As their products improved, studios became more conservative in their film's content. They worked for increased middle-class acceptance and had to shape their films to satisfy the tastes of their new educated and cultivated audience. This meant more complicated and well-developed plots and sophisticated mise-en-scenes. But it also meant that filmmakers had to be more careful with how their films handled racial issues. Several films were made for the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, celebrating the plantation setting and southern culture while representing slaves as living happily during pre-emancipation. These films were very

[108] George Blaisdell, *The moving Picture World New York*, August 22, 1914.
[109] Unsigned Review, *The New York Herald,* August 5, 1914.
[110] Vanderheyden Fyles, *The Movie Pictorial,* Chicago, September 19, 1914.
[111] The majority of these theatres were situated in the Deep South and border states.

appealing to white audiences. The last two silent versions of *Uncle Tom's cabin* went in that line. The focus of the story was shifted to the harmonious slave master relationship where the honourable and kind slave owners lived in extravagant houses on big plantations and treated their slaves with utter love and kindness. On their part, the slaves also loved their masters and served them faithfully.

Famous Players Lasky- Paramount made their *UTC* film in 1918, directed by J. Searle Dawley and produced by Adolph Zukor.[112] The film was released in August 1918 when America was fighting the Great War (WW1). That context explains the studio's decision to promote the film as "The Greatest Piece of Democratic Propaganda."[113] White actress, Marguerite Clark played both Topsy, in a black mask, and Eva in this version although she was thirty-five years old. Makeup and double exposure photography were used to give the illusion that the two characters were played by two different actors. [114] The film was advertised in a notice in *The Los Angeles Times* as having Marguerite Clark as its main star and 'Miss Clark is supported by an excellent cast of characters.'[115]

Clark received most of the appraisal in this film for her Topsy role. The character, which was used as a comic relief since the Tom Shows and in most of the film adaptations, was slightly different in this version. Through her contact with Miss Ophelia, who kindly takes her under her care and teaches her white manners, Topsy evolves to become 'almost good enough'. She is featured in a scene sitting next to Miss Ophelia in a boat, most likely going back to Vermont after the death of St.Clare, well dressed and behaving almost like a lady. Frank Losee blackened up to play Uncle Tom. In an interview with *Motion Picture Magazine*, the

[112] This is also a lost version, but some clips of the film survive and are available at the British Film Institute.
[113] *Photoplay Magazine*, August 1918.
[114] Unsigned, *Dramatic Mirror of Motion Pictures & the Stage*: New York, 1918.
[115] Unsigned Notice, *The Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1918.

actor criticised the racist behaviour of white Americans. He narrated an incident that happened during the making of the film when he took an elevator with a group of whites while he had a black face on. The actor described how they looked down at him because of the black face and remarked, 'Had I been the villainous old Simon Legree, I might have ridden all day in their elevators!' [116]

Much attention was given to the setting, location and costumes while making the film. The scene of the slave market was filmed in front of the old St. Louis Hotel, in New Orleans, a historical landmark and one of the most famous slave auction places in the South during slavery days.[117] According to *Variety*, the film featured 'old fashioned paddle wheel steamers plying up and down the river laden with cotton and the crowd of darkies singing at their work' suggesting the "atmosphere" of a southern plantation. However, these scenes 'appeared more like a series of episodes than a running story.'[118] The film received much public enthusiasm and had many children in the audience at its different screenings. The reviewer at *The Chicago Tribune* noted, from the viewpoint of a child's edition, the film has 'considerable homely pathos and much of the kind of comedy that children love.' However, from an adult perspective, it is disappointing. 'It lacks incident. The dramatic has been sacrificed to the sentimental.' [119]

The first World War was another important mark in the advancement of African Americans. Black Americans volunteered for the American army and fought the war with honour, despite racial mistreatment from their white counterparts. Unlike all other events, there was no opposition to Black participation in the war. On the contrary, many Southerners saw it as an

[116] Dorothy Nutting Brooklyn, *Motion Picture Magazine,* September 1918.
[117] Unsigned, *Dramatic Mirror of Motion Pictures & the Stage,* New York: June 1, 1918.
[118] Unsigned Review, *Variety*, New York, August 9, 1918.
[119] Unsigned, *The Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1918.

opportunity to get the country rid of potentially disruptive men. Black soldiers were confined to a segregated division of four regiments commanded by whites. The rest of the black draftees were assigned to service only. Soldiers in the Black division were not allowed to trainwith weapons because of southern paranoia. Yet, despite these precautions, several Black men were hanged, sentenced to death and others were prisoned for shorter periods during the war for being accused of mutiny. Many others would have had the same fate if it wasn't for the interference of the NAACP. Also, the army did not allow Blacks to be promoted to higher ranks. Lt Colonel Charles Young was forced to retire, for allegedly not being fit for duty, to avoid any possibility of him commanding white officers if he was given charge of the Black division. Yet, Black soldiers still managed to fight bravely.[120] After the war ended, the heroism and involvement of Black soldiers in the war was completely ignored by white America. Unlike Black soldiers who fought for the French and British, African American soldiers were not included in the victory parades held in Paris and London following the end of the war.[121]

Once back home from the war, Black soldiers witnessed worse violence and racism than ever before. Lynching in the South and race riots in the North significantly increased following the war. The idea of Blacks with combat experience and their exposure to social equality overseesfrightened white Americans. Therefore, they took measures to increase white supremacy and control Black communities through violence and terror. Black newspapers, the New York *Age*and the Chicago *Defender*, accused President Woodrow Wilson of hypocrisy for taking part in a war against German atrocities in Europe while tolerating racism and violence in the South.[122] In the North, the returning veterans found their jobs taken by immigrants from the

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[120] Jack Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History,* (New York: Praeger, 1974), pp.115-6.
[121] Gail Lumet Buckley, *American Patriots*, 1st Trade Pbk. Ed edition (New York: Random House USA Inc, 2002), pp. 220–21.
[122] William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920*, 1 edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 76–77.

South, who escaped segregation and came North looking for better employment and living conditions. The migration intensified racial tension across the urban North. By the end of the 1920s, 164,566 Black people were living in Harlem, making it the most densely populated Black area in the world.[123] Racial tension in urban cities between Southern Black immigrants and the second generation of European immigrants and the competition over labour led to several race riots. The Chicago riot in July 1919 was one of the most violent, 23 African Americans and 15 whites died in three days of street fighting. This became known as the Red Summer of 1919. Several other violent riots broke in different cities during the 1920s due to racial tension. [124]

At times of increased racial tension and violence, filmmakers continued presenting harmonious relations between Blacks and whites in their films. When he finally managed to remake *UTC*, Pollard chose a domesticated vision of slavery with a focus on romance in an attempt to absorb the wrath of African Americans of their miserable living conditions. He focused on creating a vision of domesticated memory of slavery and an honourable Old South. The 1927 film was the ultimate transformation of the Uncle Tom story in favour of the South. The Universal film was the last made during the silent era and one of the costliest productions of the time. The 2,600,000 $ film was produced by Carl Laemmel and directed by Harry Pollard.[125] Universal started preparing for the film as soon as August 1925. Yet, the actual making of the film did not begin until a year later when the film's director finally came back to the studio, after almost a year away due to poor health.[126] Another issue that delayed

[123] C. MARKS, *Farewell - We're Good and Gone: Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: John Wiley & Sons, 1989), p. 121.
[124] Ellis Mark, 'J. Edgar Hoover and the "Red Summer" of 1919', pp. 45–48.
[125] Both had previously made an Uncle Tom film in 1913 when Pollard played Uncle Tom himself and Carl produced the film under his newly founded company called IMP at the time.
[126] Unsigned, *Variety*, New York, August 12, 1925, and August 26, 1926. Pollard, who has been planning to remake *UCT* for years, and the whole cast, faced major setbacks when the making of the film did not go as smoothly as planned. After Pollard's hospitalisation, Universal hired Lois Weber, one of the few female directors in business at the time, to replace Pollard. The new director shot a few scenes only before she

the film was the casting of actors. Initially Universal announced that Charles Gilpin was chosen to play the Uncle Tom character, but the actor left Universal, after shooting a few scenes, and the studio had to find another actor to replace him. The role was later given to James B. Lowe. [127] Pollard also had a hard time finding an actress to play Little Eva. Once the shooting finally started, the crew had to travel to several states to get all the shots that Pollard wanted. There, they faced other problems because of the bad weather and snow. Although the director had to give up his original plan when he couldn't shoot several scenes as he wanted, Pollard still believed that would not affect his film to a great extent and he compensated by investing heavily in building the Shelby, St. Clare and Legree estates, which emphasised the wealth and generosity of the South. All these factors made the film cost a lot more than was originally anticipated, yet the producer had hopes that the final result will be worth the budget he invested. [128]

The film created controversy even before it was released. When they heard of the making of the film, The Natchez Association of Commerce sent a letter to Universal Studios expressing their concerns about the image that a *UTC* film would portray. The letter stressed that the shooting of the film in Natchez might be interrupted because 'the subject as described in the book is very objectionable to Southern people and is calculated to create racial prejudice.' Pollard immediately replied that 'Universal has never made, nor will ever take a picture calculated to offend any persons or group of persons. It would be manifestly unfair to

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resigned. Convinced that no producer can realise this film project except for Pollard, Laemmle decided to put the film on hold until he recovers.

[127] Universal declared that Gilpin was obliged to leave the studio because of the delay in making the film and his prior commitment to other works. Yet, Thomas Cripps and Peter Noble seem to have other opinions on the subject. Peter Noble wrote in his *The Negro in Films* that Gilpin refused to play a role that 'helped to malign his people' once he read the script. (*The Negro in Films* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1948), p. 32.) Thomas Cripps from his part suggested that Giplin was fired by Universal because of his "aggressive reading of Tom and, according to gossip, to his drinking" (*Slow Fade to Black*: *The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 161). The *Afro* referred that the actor had 'serious disagreements with the director on September 18, 1926.

[128] Times Grace Kingsley, *The Los Angeles*, July 15, 1926.

transcribe to the screen a picture version of what was written in hot-blooded protest at the time when pre-Civil War feeling ran dangerously high'. He reassured the association that his film is not meant 'to disseminate propaganda of any sort [nor] create racial prejudice,' but rather, will be a production that 'every Southerner can and will be glad to take his wife or mother, son or daughter to see.' From his part, Laemmle declared that his film 'will only show that slavery did exist, under varying conditions, and that because it did exist, it caused trouble, misunderstanding, a split between the states and finally, a great Civil War, with brother taking arms against brother in a conflict probably without parallel for drama, tragedy and heartaches.' [129] In addition to The Natchez Association of Commerce, members of the Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest of the United Daughters of Confederacy also objected to the shooting of the film in Memphis. Yet, no official action was taken to interfere with the making of the film.[130]

The Southern reactions to the film, before it was even made, resulted in several statements by the film's producer and director to reassure their Southern audiences that the film will not be offensive to the South. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will present to the world 'a true and beautiful portrayal of the Old South.' It will show how the slaves 'were more prosperous and contented under their Southern masters; not until they fell into the hands of Northern traders did the Negroes, in the main, undergo the suffering and hardships described by Harriet Beecher Stowe,' declared Harry Pollard. As a result of these declarations, Four Chambers of Commerce in the South welcomed the crew to shoot their Southern scenes, the Mississippi Riverboat scene was taken in Memphis.[131]

[129] Unsigned, Universal Studios Publicity Notice, June, and December 1926.
[130] Unsigned, *The Scimitar*, Memphis: November 5, 1926.
[131] Paul Thompson, *Motion Picture Classic,* Los Angeles: September 1927.

On the other hand, Pollard and Laemmle had to make sure they do not offend their Northern audiences to avoid the controversy and backlash that *Birth of a Nation* had caused. Therefore, Pollard stated later in the same year that his film 'will be neither pro-North nor pro-South. But it will emphasize certain truths hidden between the lines of Mrs. Stowe's book.' The Black press, which had by the 1920s 'matured into a nationwide network capable of reportingon the growing urban black community,' followed closely the making of the film.[132] They hoped that a Black actor starring an epic production of a story with a strong Black persona would uplift the image of African Americans in popular culture. Although Black culture was still an exotic atmosphere for white plots at the time, an Uncle Tom film seemed like an opportunity for racial ambiguity to peer through, especially since the Black acting corps had been significantly growing and Pollard himself hired several Black extras in his film. The New York *Amsterdam News* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* covered the shooting of the film in Natchez and wrote that every southern Black should be happy to have been 'selected to take part in a clean-cut motion picture . . . [which] help[s] portray conditions as they were in the days of oppression.' The reporters also highlighted that Universal is making sure that the Black extras are working under the best conditions, and everyone working in the film is beingpaid daily, despite their colour. [133]

The film was advertised as being a closer representation of the source text. [134] The characters of Tom, Eva and Topsy were played by actors of the same age as the novel and the basic plot involving the story of Eliza and Uncle Tom was kept. The side story of Topsy and Eva, the tragedy of Cassie, the St. Clare episodes and the various elements of the book all appear in the picture, even to the ascent to Heaven of Little Eva, and the humorous episodes of Topsy. The film, however, completely erases any trace of the abolitionist message. It instead gives

[132] Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, p. 152.
[133] The New York *Amsterdam News*, December 1, 1926, and the *Pittsburgh Courier,* December 4, 1926
[134] Harriette Underhill, *The New York Herald Tribune*, November 5, 1927

the impression that slavery should never have been abolished. Pollard took many liberties in the making of the film. He chose to start the story before Stowe did in the novel, with the inclusion of Eliza and George Harris's wedding, and end it long years after Stowe's time with the inclusion of the Civil War.[135] From the first scene, Pollard's Southern biases become obvious. The film opens with a picture of Robert E. Lee, who has been glorified in the Southern historical imagination as the heroic figure who saved the country from a guerrilla war, with the quote, '"There are few, I believe, in this enlightened age who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil." Robert E. Lee Dec. 27, 1856.'[136] The idea that slavery was not the responsibility of the South was a belief of the Lost Cause ideology fostered by the efforts of the UDC and UCV. They promoted the idea of slavery as a European inheritance which the South was not responsible for nor for 'the great war which resulted from the agitation.' On the contrary, the South was the victim of the war as well as the dreadful Reconstruction period. [137]

The next scene is at the Shelby home in Kentucky, 'an honoured name in the South since Revolutionary days' as the intertitle indicates. The plantation where everything seems to go well, and everyone is happy including the slaves, is a massive estate with beautiful gardens and young Black slaves running around stealing watermelon while preparations for the wedding are being made. Pollard's version of the story shifted the focus from Tom, who was on screen for less than nine minutes and does not appear until later in the movie when he comes back from a trip where he was 'doing Shelby's business', to the plight of Eliza played by the director's wife Margarita Fischer, and George Harris. Both characters were played

[135] The wedding was briefly referred to in the novel, but the writer did not provide many details nor present it the way that Pollard did.
[136] Harry A. Pollard, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Universal Pictures, 1927).
[137] Cited in Blight, p. 344.

without black masks.[138] Mr. and Mrs. Shelby, 'whose gentle rule of the slaves was typical of the South' threw a deluxe gala party preceding the wedding of their beloved slave Eliza, to which many white men and women are invited. The addition of the wedding to the plot of the film gave Pollard much space to reinforce the image of the beauty and romanticizing of the Old South. The film portrayed the slave family as almost as any other white family. [139]

Pollard kept all the familiar characters in their respective roles. But the main theme of the film became the love story of Eliza and George. The romance, separation and the final reunion of the couple and their child, form the natural divisions of the action. Pollard used the story of the Harris family to turn around one of the main themes of the novel, the separation of slave families, and used it to serve the aims of his film. In Pollard's narrative, slavery is what held slaves' families together. The Harris family came to existence thanks to the Southern kind masters who decided to reunite their favourite slave, Eliza who 'couldn't have had a better education and training if she had been [their own] daughter', and George Harris. The family lived happily and had their child in the South until the Northern slave trader arrives to disrupt that happiness and tear the family apart. This was also the case with Uncle Tom's family. In one of the scenes, we see Uncle Tom and his family sitting around a table having dinner, with him and Aunt Chloe talking and laughing while their kids are playing around them. This family will also be torn apart because of Northern Haley. Similar to the original story, Uncle Tom and Little Harry, son of Eliza, are sold to Haley. However, Pollard makes few modifications. Eliza is caught after her escape and is separated from her son. He is sold to another slave owner while she ends up being bought by Legree, just like Tom. The separated family is eventually reunited again with the forces of the federal troops.[140]

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[138] This was probably done to make the love story appealing to whites who would not have been interested in seeing a love story of two Black characters.

[139] Pollard, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

[140] Pollard, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Pollard blames the horrors of slavery and the Civil War on the North throughout his film. Northern Haley disrupts the harmony of the Shelby plantation and destroys two Black families living happily under the care of the Shelbies. Legree is also transformed, and the brutality of the character is overstressed, although this was later amended when the film was shown in the South. He is portrayed as someone who is driven by his sexual desires and does not seem to care about his plantation and business, unlike in Stowe's text where he closely monitors the performance of his slaves in the fields and even weighs the cotton picks of his slaves daily to flog those who did not pick enough. Legree is portrayed as the embodiment of all evils of slavery in Pollard's film. He has several episodes and breakdowns triggered by his fear of ghosts and belief that his house is haunted. The film ends with Federal troops arriving at the Legree plantation to eliminate slavery, an evil they held responsibility for, and save the slaves from Legree. The Union soldiers march toward the plantation was presented, 'as if to affect a rescue, which they finally do, liberating other slaves as they go,' wrote Calvin Floyd in the Pittsburgh *Courier*.[141] Legree dies just as they arrive falling off a window while trying to run away from the ghost of Uncle Tom, whom he believes has come back to take his revenge. George Siegmann was very praised for his performance of the role.[142]

All the exaggerated dancing of the previous versions is less apparent in Pollard's film. Dancing is exclusive to the wedding of George and Eliza. However, Topsy, played by white actress Mon Ray in a black mask, preserved her comic relief. She is portrayed as ever hyperactive, dancing around, and stealing from Miss Ophelia. Through the character of Topsy, Pollard presented his most racially offensive portrayal of Blacks. In a scene with Eva,one of the most popular scenes of the film, Topsy tells her white "friend" that she does not feel loved or worthy of love, 'cause niggers ain't worth nuthin, nohow.' Eva replies that she loves her. Topsy evolves throughout the film when she senses white love from Eva at first and then from Ophelia.

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[141] Calvin Floyd J., *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 26, 1927.
[142] Pollard, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Another controversial scene appeared in the original release of the film where Miss Ophelia catches Topsy ‘dabbing powder on her ebony countenance’ in an attempt to whiten herself ‘to become better.’ The scene never existed in Stowe’s novel, yet it did appear in Tom Shows before Pollard incorporated it into his film but was later omitted forbeing too racially offensive.[143]

The film opened in New York on September 15, 1927. After the screening, the talk in the lobbies was mainly on how the picture will be received in the South, reported *The Morning Telegraph*. For, ‘Shots of Sherman's ravaging march to the sea cannot be expected to call forth many cheers below the Mason-Dixon line.’ However, the studio had thought of that well ahead and kept the possibility of cutting out any controversial parts of the film if needed.[144] The reception of the film in the South was well accounted for by the filmmakers who made several cuts and additions to the film before it reached Southern theatres. According to *Variety*, the film was first shown in border cities such as Louisville ‘to gauge sentiment’ before it reached the deep South.[145] When the film was screened in Dallas, some of ‘the "cruelty" footages were eliminated, and a prologue added explaining that such occurrences were not the usual thing in the South of pre-war days.’ The term "War Between the States" was substituted for "Civil War." Based on the notice in the *New York Times*, these alterations were a result of protests made by a delegation from the United Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy who witnessed two private showings.[146] The film had favourable reception when shown in Florida, following the careful editing of the picture. The scenes of Sherman's "march through Georgia" were eliminated, for not even a ‘conquered and

[143] Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times,* November 27, 1927.
[144] Regina Carewe, The *Morning Telegraph*. November 7, 1927
[145] Unsigned Article, *Variety*, December 14, 1927.
[146] Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times,* August *23*, 1928.

reunited people would relish the glorifying of an incident that brought tragic consequences to thousands of helpless women and children who were made to suffer under the iron heel of war,' reported the reviewer in the *Weekly Film Review.* [147]

As mentioned above, the Black press initially had an optimistic vision of the film and praised its makers for hiring many Black actors. However, following its release, Black critics had varying opinions on the film. The *Afro American* commented that the film has been so altered that the North became responsible for all the harm that fell on the slaves' backs. 'If Harriet Beecher Stowe were to see the filmic version of her story playing in Texas, she'd probably say she never wrote it.' The reviewer was mostly bothered by the transformation of the Legree character who is 'no longer the unmerciful villain beating his slaves in true Southern fashion, but merely a pessimist who is made so from being aggravated by the North.' The prologues added to the film were described as the 'most childish thing.'[148] Exploring audiences' reactions to the film, the *Afro American* reported that Black audiences objected to the film's handling of slavery in Gary, Indiana. The white owner and operator of the mixed Roosevelt theatre, Nick Bikos, withdrew the film after it ran for only the first of the four days it was scheduled after local Black citizens denounced the violent scenes depicting slavery in the South and the selling of slaves from the auction block. The latter was a unique incident, as it was usually white Southerners who protested the film for not showing the South "in its proper light" concluded the reporter. [149] Similarly, *the Negro Star* noted that the screening of the film at this particular time was unwise suggesting that Stowe's story should be forgotten about, 'Let the past be past and let it lie in peace.'[150]

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[147] Anna Aiken Patterson, *Weekly Film Review*, April 28, 1928.
[148] Unsigned, *The Afro American*, September 1, 1928.
[149] Gary Indiana, *The Afro American*, July 6, 1929.
[150] Unsigned, *Negro Star*, September 7, 1928.

On the other hand, the *Pittsburgh Courier* described it as an 'opposite view of the Negro from that Griffith portrayed in his 1915 film.' The film was praised for avoiding the race hate that *Birth* incited and exposing the exploitation of slaves. The reviewer also referred to the fact that white audiences sympathised with the Black characters as the film was being shown by applauding for Black characters. [151] The *Afro American* and the *Amsterdam News* praised Lowe's acting of the role, which 'no other African American actor could have done better,' and the casting of Black characters. [152] The *Afro* reviewer also noted that 'all the famous highpoints of the story are wonderfully staged' and received the approval of the critical audience.[153] The article applauded 'the splendid work of James B. Lowe, at whose feet England sent some of her leading men and women to sit in wonder.' Eliza 'the white lady taking the leading part in the picture ran second to Lowe in point of acclaim when the film was viewed by a neutral public.' Lowe did receive much positive feedback when the film was shown in London and the actor was honoured several times.[154]

Despite Universal's efforts to avoid racial prejudice and present a picture that would be appealing to the South, both Black and white newspapers reported that the film was still prohibited from showing in several Southern states. In Birmingham, a city well-known for lynching and Ku Klux Klan activity at the time, the film was barred in all theatres, following a screening attended by members of the Birmingham Better Films committee and a number of officers of the United Daughters of Confederacy, due to fears that it would encourage rebellions on the part of 'the innumerable Negro workers held in peonage and serfdom in this state,' wrote the *Afro American*. The public excuse given was that 'it might excite hatred.'[155]

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[151] Calvin, Floyd J., *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 26, 1927.
[152] Unsigned, The New *Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1928.
[153] Perry, Geo., *The Afro American*, November 5, 1927.
[154] *Amsterdam News*, August 22, 1928.
[155] Unsigned, *The Afro-American*, December 29, 1928.

A screening of the film was also cancelled in Atlanta by the local board of reviewers and the mayor, due to protests following a private showing. Protestors argued that it was "unwise" to revive the sentiments that the release of the novel would generate at the present time.[156] The New York *Amsterdam News* commented that the South 'apparently hasn't the guts to view the story of Harriet Beecher Stowe … They haven't the courage to sit in a theatre and see unfurled for their edification a time in the history of this nation and incidents attended thereon the most despicable in the annals of Christianity. But they can revel in such a picture as *Birth of a Nation*,' noted the reviewer. [157]

Similar to the Black press, reviews also varied for the white press and the public. In a fan letter to *The Chicago Tribune*, G.C.S. wrote that after seeing the film, he felt annoyed at the way the old story has been distorted for commercial purposes. He argued, 'If they were afraid of offending the South by telling facts, why put the picture on at all? It has been in pictures a couple of times before, anyway.'[158] The film is an 'over-done hokum melodrama almost wholly devoid of any redeeming features' wrote the *Los Angeles Evening Herald.* Such 'an antiquated flapdoodle of a story' as that of Stowe could not 'possibly provide the right kind of material for an impressive super-film.' The film was described as 'lacking in nearly all of the essentials necessary for a successful picture of this type' and will not meet a 'great deal of favor even when presented in the regular weekly change theatres of the country.' [159] On the other hand, The *Los Angeles Times* reviewer praised Pollared's picture noting that 'it is a relief to see the old drama beautifully done.'[160] And the *Daily News* found the film 'a worthy piece of melodrama, touching, poignant, sympathetic, and, for the most part, convincing.'[161]

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[156] Unsigned, *Moving Picture World*, November 1928.
[157] Unsigned, The New York *Amsterdam News*, August 22, 1928.
[158] G. C. S., The *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1929.
[159] Annabel Lane, *Los Angeles Evening Herald*, March 29, 1928.
[160] Marquis Busby, *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1928.
[161] Irene Thirer, the *Daily News,* 17 September 1927.

Despite the big-budget, two years of making and the several changes made to make it appealing to Southern audiences' tastes, the film barely recovered its cost and was struggling within its first month of release.[162] However, the film was the reason behind the re-release of several of the older adaptations. Even if Pollard choice to incorporate the Uncle Tom story with Southern glories was not as successful as he expected it to be, the film set the ground for a plantation life of the glorious Old South film sensation which will dominate cinema for the following two decades. For most parts, white and Black Americans seemed to have agreed that the idea of making another Uncle Tom film was unwise and in the words of Jones William in the *Afro-American*, 'the place for books of this kind is in the sacred and hallowed archives of the past.'[163] Southerners were not happy with the film although Pollard made it into a pro-South story and African Americans were bothered by the image of slavery that Pollard represented, especially after the different cuts and editing. What both parties wanted was to forget about the past and put Stowe's book in archives. The burden of the memory of slavery and the Civil War was not something America could handle in the late 1920s. Or at least not through Uncle Tom's story. In the words of William Faulkner, Americans, Black and white, opted to 'forget quick what they ain't brave enough to cure.'[164]

Conclusion

Emphasising the way in which contemporary concerns are refracted through the lens of the historical film, this chapter has examined how the Uncle Tom story adapted and appropriated changing racial attitudes when turned into several silent film versions from 1903 to 1927. The

[162] Unsigned notices, *Variety*, November 23, and December 28, 1927.
[163] Jones William, *The Afro American*, September 8, 1928.
[164] Cited in Blight, *Race and Reunion*, p. 3.

novel, which presented one of the strongest anti-slavery arguments in pre-Civil War America, was completely stripped away of its anti-slavery argument with its post-Civil War theatrical and cinematic dramatizations. The nine silent Uncle Tom films reflected how Southern ideology progressively took hold over American racial imagery and historical memory. The Southern control over the nation's collective memory of the Civil War turned the experience of slavery in the old South into "happy old good days" when the slaves and their white owners were living in harmony. This image of slavery as a benign institution and the mythical representation of the plantation will continue to dominate Hollywood for the 1930s and 1940s where several films glorifying the antebellum South and romanticizing slavery will be made. This notion of a magnolia and moonlight glorification of the South in film and its relation to the social, political, and economic contextof the years of the Great Depression will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 Myth vs. Reality: Plantation Films and Walt Disney's *Song of the South (1946)*

Following the introduction of the myth of the Southern plantation in silent films and their appeal to Southern audiences, as discussed in the previous chapter, the 1930s and the early 1940s witnessed the making of several films which celebrated plantation life and glorified the Old South. These films were extremely popular among audiences who needed entertainmentrelief from their daily struggles during the Great Depression. They engraved a pro- South vision of the Civil War and a positive image of slavery as a benign institution, with which slaves were content, in America's collective memory. They offered Americans a 'beguiling picturizations of the antebellum South as some country of Cockaigne where men were chivalrous and ladies glamourous, and their former slaves were attached to them by silken bonds,' noted contemporary cultural anthropologist, Ruth Landes.[1]

The success of plantation films came to an end with Walt Disney's *Song of the South* in 1946. The film followed earlier films in its presentation of slavery as a benign social system and its picture of plantation households as harmonious and happy. But unlike its predecessors, when this film was released, it received sustained and severe criticism from both black and white critics for its racist representations. This chapter argues that *Song of the South* was a pivotal moment in Hollywood's representation of slavery and plantation life. The backlash against it marked an end to the popularity of plantation films. The fierce protest against *Song of the South* was a result of the growing Black activism against Hollywood's racist representation of American history.

I will begin by exploring the mythology of the Southern plantation and the Old South in films, and how this mythology flourished during the years of the Great Depression. The

[1] Ruth Landes, 'A Northerner Views the South In Search of the Regional Balance of America - Part II. On Regional Analysis and Interpretation', *Social Forces*, 23.3 (1944), 375–79 (p. 375).

interest in the antebellum South, and the myth of its harmonious prosperity and lack of class conflict was a result, as will be shone in this chapter, of two separate but powerful forces converging. One was economic. Interest in the American South as a haven for tourists and an attractive vacation destination rose in response to improved travel, especially by automobile, and increased affluence. At the same, increasing industrialization, and the tensions it created made the agrarian South seem more tranquil and leisurely.[2] When the affluence disappeared with the Depression, the image already created in advertising, novels, plays, film and songs remained, fascinating those buffeted by hard times. The other force was political and social. As World War I and the great migration of Black Americans to the North threatened the Jim Crow system, the myth of slavery as the necessary mortar that held Southern society together against agitators and insurrectionists was voiced ever more stridently. Filmmakers were aware of these forces, and anxious not to offend any segment of their audiences, did not seek to challenge them. [3]

The Advent and Growth of a Mythology

Since the antebellum period, the American South had tried to define itself as a chivalric society with many spiritual and agrarian values increasingly lacking in the North due to industrialization.[4] Novelists and poets celebrated the wealth, etiquettes, and ideals of the mythical South. *Swallow Barn* (1832) by John Pendleton Kennedy was among the earliest successful novels of plantation life which focused on the idyllic setting and romantic treatment of slavery. Kennedy was also responsible for promoting the plantation as an

[2] Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp. 109–15.
[3] Ibid., p. 83.
[4] Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865- 1920*, 2009 ed (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2009), p. 3.

American cousin to the medieval manor.[5] Since then, many other writers have exploited this attraction and the South as a region of massive plantations where hundreds of loyal slaves lived in harmony and had a good relationship with their wealthy masters.[6] However, these images of 'Cotton Kingdom' were far from reality. Not everyone residing in the South was a wealthy planter. In 1860, seventy per cent of the 1.5 million white families residing in the Southern states, did not own slaves at all. [7]

With the surrender of Lee at Appomattox and the end of the Civil War, the American South started an endeavour to win the cultural and ideological fight through controlling the collective memory of the war. This was achieved through the dissemination of the Lost Cause Ideology, a highly romanticized narrative of the Civil War aimed to help the South cope with the defeat, survive Reconstruction, and preserve the Southern honour and identity, allegedly forged during the war years. [9] The ideology of the Lost Cause grew and changed over time. With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the Lost Cause ideology entered its second stage, what film historian Melvyn Stokes termed the 'outer' Lost Cause. Contrary to the first stage, 'inner' Lost Cause, which focused on justifying the war and the defeat, the second was a nostalgic and glamorised image of the Old South which lasted from the 1880s to the Second World War. This second stage was manifested in the works of Southern writers who

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[5] John Pendleton Kennedy, *Swallow Barn: Or, A Sojourn in the Old Dominion*, Hafner Library of Classics, no. 22 (New York: Hafner Pub. Co, 1962).

[6] In her book, *Dreaming of Dixie,* historian Karen Cox stresses that the promotion and spread of such images of the South came from the North where publishing companies, mostly located in New York, who published Southern writers' s works giving them a national, and even international, reach and influence. Aware of readers fascination with the South and its ways of life and seeking profits, Northern publishers promoted these works as an authentic portrayal of the region even if they contained racist stereotypes.

[7] Peter J. Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 26–27.

[8] Hollis Griffin, 'Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South.', *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film & Television*, 55, 2005, 68–70 (p. 44).

[9] Christine Bucior, 'Lost Cause-Ism in American Southerners' News Writing About the First Russo-Chechen War (1994-1996)', *Society*, 55.3 (2018), 262–70 (p. 262).

represented images of simpler, more stable times than Americans, both North and South, were living in during the later nineteenth and early twentieth century.[10] This vision of a glorified Southern plantation where slaves and their white masters lived in blissful harmony and wealth became increasingly popular in Hollywood throughout the 1930s and early1940s. Their popularity had strong ties with the political, economic, and cultural challenges of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and the Great Depression. The ideology reinforced white supremacy but also extolled the virtue of the antebellum South. The advocates of The Lost Cause argued that slavery was not the reason behind the Civil War and that this was proven by the slaves' loyalty to their masters during the war. According to the myth, the South would eventually willingly abolish slavery, which was a 'serious and weighty responsibility.'[11] After the Civil War, literature, theatre and eventually films served to heal the war's wounds and revive the rest of the nation's interest in the region's ways. Such works enticed curiosity about the South that many Americans, and Europeans, travelled South to chase the myth they saw in books and films.[12]

Early filmmakers, following the example of novelists and playwrights, adopted the fiction of the Old South as a time of purity and prosperity, with the honourable plantation owner and his wife, the beautiful, feminine yet strong woman who supported and tended to everyone on the plantation and their children, the Southern belle and the young, educated gentleman. The romantic elements of life on the plantation and the idea that slaves were treated well and, more importantly, their control was vital to the South's way of life, were embellished in

[10] Melvyn Stokes, 'Gone with the Wind (1939) and the Lost Cause: A Critical View', in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, ed. by James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), pp. 13–26 (pp. 13–14).
[11] Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 100.
[12] Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie,* pp. 106–9. Many middle-class Northerners travelled South to explore the exotic southern landscape, escape the city and enjoy the Southern way of life. Southerners capitalised on this and provided their northern and European guests with the full Southern experience of the chivalrous planter, the southern belles, and the faithful Black servants.

films. D.W. Griffith's 1915 epic *Birth of a Nation* was among the first successful plantation films that glorified the Old South. Yet, in contrast to later plantation films, it presented Blacksas a source of danger to whites, especially women, and incited a wave of racism.

Filmmakers realised that such sustained controversy was counterproductive. They continued to promote racist interpretations of slavery, however, the focus moved from Black violence and miscegenation to portraying Black people as happy and content to be guided by their 'superior'white masters, as was the case with the Uncle Tom films discussed in the previous chapter, especially the 1927 adaptation by Universal. By the 1930s, films became more wrapped in the moonlight and magnolia plantation myth.[13]

The interpretation of slavery as an institution populated by faithful servants and benevolent, paternalistic masters reflected in these films was prompted by both academic and non-academic history of slavery. U.B. Phillips' deeply influential, and highly racist, 1918 book *American Negro Slavery* describes the plantation as 'not a mere economic institution, but an entire way of life' which functioned 'primarily [as]a method of social control of a 'stupid, genetically inferior race.'[14] Another respected scholar, Charles Ramsdell, went somewhat beyond Phillips arguing that slavery was not the reason behind the war and Lincoln deliberately manipulated the Fort Sumter crisis in 1861 to force the South into armed hostility.[15] This scholarship of "Moonlight and Magnolias" mythology of slavery, was what American university students were taught in the 1930s and the 1940s.[16] Consequently,

[13] The production Code Administration established in 1934 discouraged controversial aspects (especially racial) in the films.
[14] Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime*, Louisiana Paperbacks, L9, 1st paperback ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), pp. 342–43.
[15] Charles W. Ramsdell, 'Lincoln and Fort Sumter', *The Journal of Southern History*, 3.3 (1937), 259-288.
[16] David Brion Davis, 'The Central Fact of American History', *American Heritage*, 2005, p.1. <https://www.americanheritage.com/central-fact-american-history> [accessed 29 October 2019].

slavery was seen as a benign system that may have denied human rights, but it still had many benefits, especially for the slaves.[17]

The Old South became a nostalgic Eden for Americans struggling with every aspect of life and anxious about modernity. Filmmakers went back to the days of the Civil War and Reconstruction and dwelled on a simpler and more prosperous time. A time that had its difficulties, but the strong will of Southern men and women and the loyalty of their slaves, conquered all obstacles. The Civil War became a period when the cause was lost in spite of heroic struggle. The South found pride in its stoic endurance of loss and destruction. Old South films became increasingly lavish and presented a sense of wealth and comfort where Americans lived not that long ago. The romanticising of the pre-war South gave audiences the impression that the Depression was only an interruption that will pass. [18] This was a major reason behind the popularity of *Gone with the Wind*, book and film, as Americans related to the strength and strong will of Scarlett O'Hara who managed to rebuild Tara after its total destruction in the war. Viewers of the film, struggling with poverty and economic insecurity, resonated with Scarlett swearing that she would 'never be hungry again,' in an epic scene strategically placed just before the intermission.[19]

Gone with the Wind (1939), an adaptation of the 1936 best-selling novel by Margaret Mitchell, covered the American Civil War and Reconstruction, depicting how life in the South changed because of the war and the life of Scarlett O'Hara, Vivian Leigh, as she grows

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[17] Kenneth Stampp's seminal *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* 1956 discredited the Phillips interpretation of slavery from the mid-1950s onwards and exposed the exploitative and violent nature of the system that tore apart families and was the reason behind many crimes.

[18] Tony Badger, 'Gone with the Wind: A Great Book?', *The Historical Association*, 2020, p.35. <https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/9734/gone-with-the-wind-a-great-book> [accessed 26 February 2020]. Such representation **c**ountered the popular image of the South as 'a land of dirt, dilapidation, and disease; of chain gangs and lynching,' poverty and dysfunctional white**s,** portrayed in such popular works as Erskine Caldwell's **'**Tobacco Road', 'God's Little Acre 'and other contemporary representations.

[19] Victor Fleming, *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick International Pictures, 1939).

from being a spoiled daughter of a wealthy Georgia plantation owner to become a strong-willed woman who survives the great tragedies of the war and life.[20] The film, which took three years in the making, a large budget, a cast of stars and had the genius of Selznick as a producer, turned out to be everything its makers promised.[21] It was 'a bigger and better *Birth of a Nation*, a kindred triumph for this day and time.' [22] Selznick spared no effort in making sure his film appealed to all contemporary viewers. He transformed Tara from a modest Georgia plantation to a columned mansion.[23] In Mitchell's novel, The O'Haras are not as wealthy as the film portrays. They are rather financially comfortable Irish Catholic immigrants who struggled to make their way and settle in North Georgia frontier. Mitchell never intended her novel to be associated with the "moonlight and magnolia" myth, but the film version turned the story into one. [24] As expected, viewers were captivated by the splendour of Tara and Twelve Oaks. As one contemporary viewer noted, the film's 'treatment of the age of Southern chivalry that was lost with the cause of the Confederacy . . .can be termed nothing less than masterful.'[25]

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[20] Fleming, *Gone with the Wind*.
[21] For detailed insights into the making of the film, see Aljean Harmetz*, On the Road to Tara: The Making of Gone with the Wind* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996).
[22] *Motion Picture Herald*, December 16, 1939.
[23] Margaret Mitchell and Richard Barksdale Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind Letters, 1936-1949* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987), pp. 36–137.
[24] Tony Badger, 'Gone with the Wind: A Great Book?', p.34.
[25] *Press Herald*, February 9, 1940.
[26] As a matter of fact, the film's huge success was a result of Selznick's efforts to please all parties. In addition to adhering to the Southern mythology while avoiding offending the Black community as much as possible, Selznick also sought approval from the UDC, which had a considerable influence in the region. The organisationfirst opposed casting any actress to play Scarlett other than a native-born Southern woman, yet the producer managed to convince them of his choice of Vivien Leigh and the latter was even made an honorary member of the organisation. (Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, p.94).

In addition to making sure of his film's appeal to white Southerners, Selznick also avoided offending Black viewers.[26] The filmmaker claimed he eliminated much of the direct racism in the novel and omitted any reference to the Ku Klux Klan. Contrary to Mitchell's narrative, a white man attacks and attempts to rape Scarlett instead of a Black man, and she is saved by Big Sam, a loyal former slave. Selznick noted that he had 'no desire to produce an anti-Negro film.' He wanted his Black characters to 'come out on the right side of the ledger.'[27]

Determined to avoid the controversy of *Birth* and any campaign against his film from the NAACP, Selznick consulted and followed the recommendations of Walter White by eliminating some racially controversial aspects of the novel. Selznick's strategy worked, although the film did receive criticism from the Black press, it did not include NAACP.[28]

The Black characters in the film were loyal servants who did not want to be free. Even after their emancipation, they stayed at Tara serving their masters. This was a result of the good relationship and trust between the slaves and their masters. Earlier in the film, the slaves are shown working in the fields without any white supervision because they knew when 'its quittin time in Tara.' This good relationship and loyalty are further reinforced later in the filmwhen big Sam tells Scarlett in Atlanta that he and the other slaves were going to dig trenches for the Confederates 'to help them win the war.' The Mammy character played by Hattie McDaniel is another symbol of Black loyalty. Mammy is a mother figure to Scarlett, who cared for her and kept her disciplined. She tells Scarlett 'if you don' care what folks says about this family, I does.' The most negative characterisation in the film was the lying, foolish and irresponsible house slave, Prissy, played by Butterfly McQueen.[29] Describing his experience as he watched the film in Mason, Malcolm X recalled that he 'was the only Negroin the theatre,' and 'when Butterfly McQueen went into her act, I felt like crawling under the rug.'[30]

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[27] David O. Selznick and Rudy Behlmer, *Memo from David O. Selznick* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 151.
[28] Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 7,21.
[29] Fleming, *Gone with the Wind*.
[30] Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 113.

The reaction of the Black press to the film varied in intensity. The *Chicago Defender* described it as more vicious than *Birth* and 'a weapon of terror against Black America [which] . . . distorted and twisted the history of an era [and] deliberately thrown down the gage of battle for those who are seeking to advance democracy today.'[31] *The Pittsburgh Courier* published a four-column editorial cartoon illustrating Hollywood's manipulation of history for propaganda purposes blowing out of the window 'reality, justice, fairness, truth, impartiality and facts.' The editorial described the film as part of Hollywood's campaign in 'presenting pictures of the past to conform to the PREJUDICES of the present' arguing that the film is produced to merely 'soothe the wounded ego of the adherents of defeated and lost cause that DESERVED to be defeated if there is ANY justice in the world.' Blacks, 'are again played down, ignored, eliminated or presented as happy house servants and unthinking hapless clods.'[32]

Many Black Americans picketed the film in several cities including Chicago, Washington D.C and evenLondon. The Colored People's Association in London considered the film 'insulting to the Negro Community' and asked the London County Council to ban the picture. The International Labour Defense, National Negro Congress, The Worker's Alliance, and the American Student Union picketed the film in front of a downtown theatre in Washington protesting the showing of the film which is a 'Blow At American Democracy' and 'Incites Race Hatred' as the signs read.[33] However, these protests fell on deaf ears in Hollywood and never reached the mainstream white press.

Other Black critics appreciated the film. A reviewer in The *Chicago Defende*r praised the 'outstanding' performance of Hattie McDaniel which 'equalled in brilliance to that of Clark

[31] William L. Patterson, *The Chicago Defender*, January 4, 1940.
[32] *The Pittsburgh Courier,* January 6, 1940.
[33] *The Chicago Defender,* February 10, 1940

Gable and Vivien Leigh.'[34] Harry B. Webber in the *Afro* thought the film showed the 'default system of slavery' and praised McDaniel's performance.[35] Commenting on the pickets of the film in its Washington, D.C premiere, Ralph Matthews, a Black columnist in *the Afro* noted that Blacks in the District of Columbia are known to be easily offended and thefilmmakers had the right to present their own view of reality.[36] Lilian Johnson, another *Afro* columnist, noted that people protesting the film are probably not even aware of its content.

For her, the film was a 'true representation of the period,' even if members of her race opposed that representation. She highlighted Selznick's efforts to avoid offending Black Americans and creating racial tension.[37] Billy Rowe, the New York editor of *the Courier*, noted that even if the film glorified the South, It also 'glorified many great qualities of the race.'[38] From their part, the reviewers at *the Crisis*, the official NAACP journal, did not find the film offensive, noting that it had 'little material, directly affecting Negroes as a race, to which objection can be made.'[39] When McDaniel won the Oscar for her Mammy role, in March 1940, most Black newspapers wrote to congratulate the actress for being the first African American to win an academy award even if many were annoyed it was for the role of a Mammy. Selznick's strategies and efforts succeeded, and his film touched the hearts of both Blacks and Whites. His promotion of the film as less vicious and racist than the book was appealing to many Blacks and prevented major opposition to its content. The film was highly influential, and its Southern mythology infected the nation.[40]

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[34] *The Chicago Defender*, December 23, 1939.
[35] Harry B. Webber, the Afro, January 13, 1940.
[36] Ralph Matthews, The *Afro*, March 9, 1940.
[37] Lilian Johnson, *The Afro*, March 19, 1940.
[38] Billy Rowe, Pittsburgh Courier, January 13
[39] *Crisis*, January 1940.
[40] At least one Southern child, who had seen the film, is reported to have told his black nanny that she would still be a slave and 'Daddy would not have to pay you' but for the Yankee,' noted L. D. Reddick, 'Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures Radio, The Press, and Libraries', *The Journal of Negro Education*, 13.3 (1944), 367–89 (p. 377) .

Paramount's *So Red the Rose* (1935) was another Civil War-era romance and a story of an aristocratic Southern family whose life is ruined by the war. The film depicted the struggles of women in the South after the men join the Confederate army, who have to survive the harassments of the Union army and rebellious slaves whose idea of freedom is 'just sitting in the sun!' and 'sit and do nothing.' The film represented enslaved people as lazy, naïve, unwilling to work but good-natured and master loving.[41] The most disappointing aspect of the film, for the *New York Times* reviewer, was the portrayal of the Union troops 'as they dash about the lovely Southern landscape putting crazy notions in the heads of the plantation slaves' which leads to a rebellion.[42] Gato, the rebellion's leader, is portrayed as hateful and ungrateful, turning against the gentle hand that has fed him and the other slaves for years. He manipulates the other slaves to rebel telling them 'All this is yours! Go and get!' The viewers are left with the impression that the **s**lave rebellion had no reason, for they have been well-treated and cared for by their white masters and it is the white masters who are the victims here being robbed of their properties. Yet, these same slaves are easily controlled by their young white mistress who sentimentally appeals to them, and the slaves respond warmly.[43] The film was supported by the United Daughters of the Confederacy when shown in the South. [44] In an article entitled, 'Uncle Tom, Will You Never Die?' *New Theatre* criticised the film's aggressiveness in its portrayal of Blacks which might provoke 'an even greater hatred by the whites for the Negroes.'[45] Yet, the *Atlanta Constitution* thought the film was 'rich with the color and the culture of the Old South.' [46]

[41] King Vidor, *So Red the Rose* (Paramount Pictures, 1935).
[42] Andre Sennwald, *New York Times*, November 28, 1935.
[43] Vidor, *So Red the Rose*.
[44] *Motion Picture Herald,* November 23, 1935.
[45] *New Theatre*, January 5, 1936.
[46] *Atlanta Constitution*, December 13, 1935.

Unlike *So Red the Rose*, the Shirley Temple films avoided much of the racial and sectional criticism by focusing on the themes of romantic reunion and reconciliation. They provided a humorous relief, much needed during the Depression years, for both children and adults. *The Little Colonel* (1935) was the first of two Shirley Temple vehicles that year whose plots a *New York Times* reviewer thought, made the Civil War 'decidedly chummy.'[47] The film is a post-Civil War comedy-drama based on an 1895 children's novel of the same title by Annie Fellows Johnston. The film avoids all the military aspects of the Civil War by focusing on the friendship of little Lloyd Sherman, Shirley Temple and Walker, Colonel Lloyd's butler played by Bill Robinson, a Black dancing star of the first rank. Walker teaches Shirley the famous staircase tap dance, the first interracial dance in Hollywood's history, followed by many others between the two in several other films despite Southern objections. The film gives the impression that slavery never existed, and the war never happened. A *New York Times* reviewer wrote that the film was 'adrip with magnolia whimsy and vast, unashamed portions of synthetic Dixie atmosphere.'[48] Robinson's role in the film was proof that the film industry has not grown up in terms of racial representation, objected contemporary historian Peter Noble.[49] The film also features a Mammy character, Mom Beck, played by Hattie McDaniel. With her infant charm and stubbornness, Lloyd manages to reconcile her estranged parents and grandfather. The film ends with a party in the colonel's mansion with his daughter, son-in-law, granddaughter, and their Black servants all reunited and happy.[50]

The Littlest Rebel was the second Shirley Temple film released in 1935. The extravagant sixth birthday party of Virgie Cary, Shirley Temple, is interrupted by the news of the attack on Fort Sumter and the declaration of war. Slaves are again portrayed as loyal servants who

[47] Andre Sennwald, *New York Times*, December 20, 1935.
[48] *New York Times,* March 22, 1935.
[49] Noble, *The Negro in Films*, p. 91.
[50] David Butler, *The Little Colonel* (Fox Film, 1935).

opposed the Civil War and their liberation.[51] They secure the road for their Southern master, who enlists for the Confederate army and Uncle Billy, Bill Robinson, even risks his life to get him to visit his dying wife. He later also contributes to saving the lives of his master and Colonel Morrison.[52] Uncle Billy performs his famous tap dance with Vergie in public to collect money for a train ticket to Washington to appeal to President Lincoln for a pardon.[53] The latter welcomes them in his office, shakes hands with Uncle Billy and sits Vergie on his desk, cutting her slices of an apple as she tells him the story of her family's struggles caused by the war, and her father and Colonel Morison's imprisonment for trying to get her to her aunt in Richmond. Mr. Lincoln holds the child in his arms and comforts her as he writes his pardon and sends it to General Grant. The film ends with Virgie happily singing "Polly Wolly Doodle" to her father, Colonel Morrison and a group of Union soldiers. *Variety* magazine wrote that in *the Littlest Rebel*, 'all the bitterness and cruelty' of the war had 'been rigorously cut out' and the Civil War was portrayed as 'a misunderstanding among kindly gentlemen with eminently happy slaves.' Despite criticism from film reviewers and press, for their unrealistic portrayal of slavery and the Civil War, the Shirley Temple films were a huge success among audiences and the biggest selling films of the year. [54]

Warner Brothers' 1940 *Santa Fe Trail* promoted one of the earliest arguments of the Lost Cause; that the abolitionists were the reason behind the conflict between the North and South which eventually led to war.[55] It portrayed the abolitionist John Brown as an inhumane fanatic who refused reconciliation arguing that 'America is on trial,' and 'she must pay in

[51] Once again, the film introduces several Southern racial stereotypes, from the dancing happy Uncle Billy to the naïve James Henry who provides much of the film's comic relief as well as the Mammy and the little Black children.
[52] Colonel Morison is imprisoned and sentenced to death for treason after helping Herbert to escape by providing him with a pass and a Union uniform.
[53] David Butler, *The Littlest Rebel.* (20th Century Fox, 1935).
[54] *Variety*, December 25, 1935.
[55] Wilson, *Baptized in blood*, p. 4.

blood for her sins.' Once again, slavery was portrayed as a minor issue. The slaves are portrayed as if they have no desire to be free and are forced to the Underground Railroad by Brown and his men. A female slave declares that Brown has promised them freedom, but if 'this here Kansas is freedom then I aint got no use for it, no sir!' Another slave interrupts, 'me neither, I just wanna get back to Texas and sit till kingdom come.' When John Brown sets the slaves free as he leaves for Kansas, the first thing these scared and passive creatures worry about is 'How we're gonna live? Get food and shelter?' as if their existence depends on whites. [56] *Time* magazine reported that the film, 'in spite of its hackneyed romance, becomes a brilliant and grim account of the Civil War background.'[57]

Plantation films, with their immense popularity among white, and even some Black, audiences, confirmed that the 'South has indeed won the ideological war.' And that even if the slaves are free, they will continue to be inferior to the white race. [58] The roles played by Black characters in these films embedded Southern racial stereotypes in American popular culture. Nonetheless, reactions to these films revealed a growing Black criticism and opposition to stereotyped representations. With the coming of the Second World War, such opposition grew stronger and gained more support from white liberals. This would be reflected in the reaction to *Disney's Song of the South*, a plantation setting film and an attempt by Disney to recreate the success of earlier plantation films, especially *Gone with The Wind.*

[56] Michael Curtiz, *Santa Fe Trail* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1940).
[57] *Time*, December 23, 1940.
[58] Noble, *The Negro in Films*, p. 75.

The End of Plantation Films

During World War II, Black Americans had to 'fight for the right to fight' for democracy, noted Walter White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Black leaders and intellectuals saw the war as an opportunity to move beyond racism and discrimination, especially since the nation was fighting for the eradication of Fascism abroad. Yet, the Roosevelt government had other priorities and was more concerned with wartime unity rather than taking real actions toward racial equality. [59] The Office of War Information (OWI), established by President Franklin Roosevelt on June 13, 1942, served to keep Americans and its allies 'truthfully informed about the common war effort.' The agency would provide 'informed and intelligent understanding' of the 'status and progress of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims of the Government,' declared the president. Elmer Davis was appointed as director. [60] Davis, a liberal respected by conservatives and a man who enjoyed a good reputation for his honesty and integrity among the public, stressed that the agency under his direction was committed to delivering the truth about the war. Nevertheless, throughout its three years in operation, the OWI was under severe pressure from the government to support and disseminate certain propaganda symbols and ideas. Consequently, it was often performing a 'circumscribed role' and substituted propaganda for truth.[61]

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[59] Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, 'Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion-Picture Propaganda in World War II', *The Journal of American History*, 73.2 (1986), 383–406 (p. 383).

[60] Franklin D. Roosevelt, Executive Order 9182 Establishing the Office of War Information. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210709. OWI consolidated the functions of the Office of Facts and Figures, the Office of Government Reports, and the Division of Information of the Office for Emergency Management. The Foreign Intelligence Service, Outpost, Publication, and Pictorial branches of the Office of the Coordinator of Information were also transferred to OWI.

[61] Winkler, Allan M, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945 (Yale Historical Publications: Miscellany, 118)*, 1st edition (Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 55–62

Convinced of the power of films to shape public opinion, Davis established the agency's Bureau of Motion Pictures and its Hollywood Office to liaise with the American motion picture industry. The office coordinated the production, distribution, and exhibition of theatrical films that advanced and interpreted the government's war aims. Yet, Hollywood often refused to cooperate and continued to make films its way. Most filmmakers avoided war issues and felt that audiences would be more interested in the entertainment aspect of the film rather than its message. To make sure that the industry was more engaged with the war, BMP's Hollywood office issued manuals instructing studios on how to support the war aims. BMP supervised scripts, pressured studios to modify or eliminate controversial elements and made sure that films reflected a positive image of America as a racially harmonious and united nation. [62]

In the late summer of 1942, the nation's most frightening issue, race, stood in the face of BMP's agenda of national unity when MGM announced the making of *Tennessee Johnson*, a biopic of President Andrew Johnson.[63] The film was a Southern white supremacist vision of the story of Johnson's impeachment portraying him as a hero and defender of Southern interests and national reunion while ignoring his anti-Black attitudes, opposition to economic programmes for the advancements of freed Blacks, and his support of Black Codes.[64] The script distorted the life of Thaddeus Stevens, the Radical Republican Pennsylvania congressman and supporter of Black rights, by presenting him as a demonic figure whose only concern is plotting against Johnson and the South.[65]

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[62] Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, 'What to Show the World: The Office of War Information and Hollywood, 1942-1945', *The Journal of American History*, 64.1 (1977), 87–105 (p. 90).

[63] The original title of the film was *Man of America's Conscience,* but the studio settled on a less controversial title after pressure from the OWI.

[64] William Dieterle, *Tennessee Johnson* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corp, 1942). The film portrays Johnson committed to achieving equality for the South. Once he is president, he grants amnesty to white Southerners and announces, 'here at this desk where Lincoln freed the slaves, I now free their masters.'

[65] The works of W. E. Dubois *Black Reconstruction* (1935) and James Allen's *Marxist Reconstruction: Battle for Democracy* (1937) had recently introduced a positive historical interpretation of Stevens and redefined him as

The film was the ultimate test of OWI's commitment to both racial justice and its informal alliance with Black leaders to improve the presentation of Blacks in films. Avoiding domestic racial conflict's threat to wartime unity and eliminating any opportunities for the Axis's propaganda scenarios were top priorities to OWI. When the film's original script was leaked by the Communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, Walter White and other Black leaders were appalled and objected to the film. Consequently, BMP chief, Lowell Mellett, pressured MGM to either eliminate the controversial aspects of the film or hold its release until the end of the war. For, such representation would be 'injurious to national war morale and especially that of the country's Negro population,' reported the Los Angeles-based, African American newspaper *California Eagle*. The newspaper noted that 'the action marks a milestone in the battle of Negro people to break the Hollywood tradition which has to date completely distorted the history of our heroic people in American life.'[66]

Although the studio finally gave in and reshot some scenes of the finished film, Louis B. Mayer, MGM's head, still denounced the fact that 'a minority should dictate what shall be seen on the screen' and blamed the controversy surrounding the film on the Communists who leaked the film's script.[67] The film was released with much disappointment among Black leaders. It included modifications such as eliminating Stevens's Black mistress. Stevens who 'was originally conceived to look like the shaggy one of the Three Stooges, was slicked up a little,' wrote a *PM* film critic.[68] Some white liberals also protested against the film and its softening of President Andrew Johnson's racial prejudices, including Vincent Price, Ben

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a nemesis of the planter class and a source of Black political hopes. However, in their defence of MGM's representation of Stevens, OWI relied on social critic, Dorothy Jones and his argument validated by the Southern California Civil War historian, Frank M. Garner who asserted that most scholars had a favourable view of Johnson while Stevens was considered an irrational man more obsessed with punishing the South than interested in advancing the lives of Black Americans. (Cripps, 69) and (Clayton and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War,* 88*)*

[66] *California Eagle*, September 24, 1942.

[67] Cited in Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 70.

[68] John T. McManus, *PM*, January 13, 1943

Hecht and Zero Mostel. The latter was blacklisted by MGM for his protest.[69] The released film reflected wartime unity propaganda by emphasising Johnson's success story and his Southern reconciliation efforts and plight for unity between North and South despite differences, but completely ignored the issue of race. OWI was pleased with the superficial modifications. Mellett considered it 'a forceful dramatic exposition of the development of the democratic government in this country' while Nelson Poynter, director of BMP's Hollywood office, advised Walter White not 'to make a major issue of the film.' [70]

However serious OWI's intention might have been to improve the portrayal of Blacks in film,war and the white majority were prioritized to the Black minority. The controversial film exposed the incompatible aims of OWI and the NAACP. Walter White, who managed in early 1942 to convince major studio heads to sign a pledge to avoid racial stereotypes and include Black roles in the same proportions they held in American society, lost most of his optimism after *Tennessee Johnson* and the continued racially stereotyped representations in Hollywood.[71] Having learnt their lesson with the *Tennessee Johnson* controversy, OWI proceeded to stricter monitoring of films. Scripts had to be submitted to BMP for review before production began.[72]

OWI had kept a close eye on the Black community's war morale and their willingness to engage with the war since its beginning. A survey conducted in Harlem in 1942 revealed that

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[69] Jared Brown, *Zero Mostel: A Biography* (New York: Atheneum, 1989), pp. 35–36.

[70] Cited in Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 88. The film was protested by many Hollywood stars and Black intellectuals who signed a petition asking OWI to bam the film, but the agency continued its positive attitude towards the film despite the disturbing experience and their concern about the racial tension.

[71] Thomas Cripps, '"Walter's Thing" The NAACP's Hollywood Bureau of 1946-A Cautionary Tale', *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 33.2 (2005), 116–25 (pp. 177-178).

[72] Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, 'Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion-Picture Propaganda in World War II', *The Journal of American History*, 73.2 (1986), 383–406 (pp. 383–84). Although the OWI did not have the power to censor films, its collaboration with the Office of Censorship, as instructed by Roosevelt's Executive order, led most studios to follow OWI's propagandist recommendations by mid-1943

most of the Black community felt that the war did not change the widespread segregation, if not made it worse. Furthermore, a big percentage of the population felt they might be better off under Japanese rule, fellow people of colour, but not the Germans.[73] The agency's liberal officials suggested several social programmes to advance the Black community on the home front and improve Black soldiers' treatment on the battlefields earlier in the war. Yet, these programmes never saw light because the government found them too ambitious for wartime. Therefore, OWI focused its efforts on films, radio, and the press to include Black Americans in the war and absorb their growing rage and frustration with segregation. For, as noted Davis, 'the easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized.' [74]

The Black press played a major influence on Black morale during the war. Concerned about the growing Black rage and frustration with segregation at home and the army, the Black press elevated the morale of the race and channelled the hostility into a positive attitude about their role in the war while also pushing for advancements of the race.[75] A *Chicago Defender* editorial entitled 'For Democracy and Unity', suggested that due to the current state of war, it is important for African Americans to be loyal to their country but they should also be 'allowed to serve their country fully', the editorial referred to 'the broken promises of the past', which should be avoided.[76] The "Double V" Campaign which first appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* on February 7, 1942, called for 'victory at home and victory abroad'. The article affirmed African Americans' determination to 'protect our country, our form of

[73] Lee Finkle, 'The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric: Black Protest during World War II', *Journal of American History*, 60.3 (1973), 692–713 (p. 701).
[74] Koppes and Black, 'Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion-Picture Propaganda in World War II', p. 388.
[75] Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), p. 40.
[76] *Chicago Defender*, December 13, 1941.

government and the freedoms we cherish for ourselves and the rest of the world.' But also called for a 'two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who would enslave us.' The article concluded 'WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT . . . WE ARE AMERICANS TOO!'[77]

To consolidate the efforts made by the Black press, lessen the racial tension on the home front, and make Black Americans feel like an integrated and important part of the nation, the OWI promoted the production of two all-Black cast musicals. The two films provided opportunitiesfor a bigger Black star presence in Hollywood.[78] *Cabin in the Sky* 1943 by MGM was an exaggerated fantasy, based on a successful and well-received Broadway musical of 1940, portraying the battle between the soldiers of heaven and hell over the soul of Little Joe, played by Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson, who despite being a good man, is often tempted by money and women.[79] The latter was a big radio star and the other members of the cast including Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington were major entertainers; whose presence in Hollywood was considered 'useful' by the NAACP and was in line with the OWI's strategy of trying to create Black stars. This presence was one of the main reasons behind the film's financial success.[80]

Despite the film's script review report by BMP, which warned that the film might be 'resented by Negroes' and stimulate 'already existing prejudices' because it represented Blacks as 'simple, ignorant, superstitious folk, incapable of anything but the most menial labor,' OWI's Washington headquarters still supported the film and considered it as non-

[77] William G. Nunn, Pittsburgh Courier February 7, 1942.
[78] The two musicals were preceded by other all Black cast made in Hollywood such as Hearts *in Dixie* 1929 and *Hallelujah* 1929 which portrayed the actors in stereotypical menial and comic roles.
[79] Vincente Minnelli Busby Berkley, *Cabin in the Sky* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, 1943).
[80] 'Lena Horne: In Her Own Words' *YouTube* video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rDh4LqGujg&list=LL_VQBVJqnxTAA6QWLmYcRog&index=23&t=0s> [accessed 20 July 2020].

offensive to anyone.[81] Walter White, who had been for a long time pleading for Blacks to be portrayed as ordinary people, praised Marc Connelly, the scriptwriter for the film, for 'a marvellous job in transforming what was the average white man's notion of Negro religion,' yet, he doubted that an all coloured film would be the best solution to the race issue in Hollywood.[82] Romana Lewis in the *Amsterdam* criticised the film's representation of Black life. She found it an 'insult masking behind the label of folklore.' She was disappointed that whites 'seemed to believe this was the normal pattern of Negro life.'[83] *The New York Times* thought it was a 'bountiful entertainment.'[84] For *Variety*, it was an OWI tract rather than a movie that contributed a 'wider interest in the Negro throughout the country' even if it was 'doubtful material in the South.' The film was among the biggest grossers of the season making 1 million 650,000$ in the US.[85]

Stormy Weather 1943 by Twentieth Century-Fox was a fictional version of the life of Bill Robinson. The film's war propaganda efforts were clear in the consistent reference to the Black military participation in both the First and the Second World Wars. William Grant Still,a famous African American composer, was hired as the film's music supervisor, but resigned because he did not want to make money while helping to 'carry on a tradition directly opposed to the welfare of thirteen million people,' wrote the *California Eagle*. [86] The film focused on Black Americans in the entertainment industry highlighting the progress they made, starting with the cakewalk dances to performing highly sophisticated tableaux and songs. Walter White objected to the 'vulgar things' Lena Horne, his family friend, was called on to do noting that the producer would 'not think of having a white actress do.'[87] Despite criticism,

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[81] Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, pp. 182–83.
[82] Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, p. 80.
[83] Romana Lewis, *Amsterdam News,* June 13, 1943.
[84] *New York Times*, May 28, 1943.
[85] *Variety*, April 8, 1943.
[86] *California Eagle*, February 14, 1943.
[87] He also objected to her role as the temptress Georgia Brown in *Cabin in the Sky*.

the film was popular among Black audiences, especially young viewers.[88] The film was released in the middle of what is known as the 'zoot suit' riots which took place in Harlem, Detroit and Los Angeles in 1943. That almost caused Twentieth Century-Fox to pull the film from theatres, especially since Cab Calloway performs in a striking white zoot suit throughout the film. The decision to run the film despite the riots earned Fox praise from the Black leaders and press. The film was a box office hit even if half of all first-run theatres refused to book it.[89]

The two films introduced Black actors to white audiences and gave the opportunity for some to rise to stardom, even if only temporarily, yet they kept them locked in the mould of the entertainer and gave false perceptions of Black life. Commenting on the two films, contemporary journalist, Claude Barnett wrote that the objection to the films' representations 'is a healthy sign', for had they been made a few years earlier, the films would have been widely acclaimed. The journalist highlighted the progress made by African Americans, who no longer accept such presentation because they 'know that their protests have brought results and will continue to do so.' Barnett's prediction proved to be true with the strong objections to *Song of the South*.[90]

As a last effort to maintain a positive image of America abroad, OWI encouraged studios to make combat films that include 'an ethnically and geographically diverse group of Americans who would articulate what they were fighting for, pay due regard to the Allies, and battle an enemy who was formidable but not a superman.'[91] These combat films gave Black Americansa space to escape stereotyped representations. MGM's *Bataan* (1943) was a clear departure

[88] Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena*, 1st Limelight ed edition (New York: Limelight Editions, 1986), p. 175.
[89] *Hollywood Reporter*, 13 August 1943.
[90] Claude A. Barnett, 'The Role of the Press, Radio, and Motion Picture and Negro Morale', *The Journal of Negro Education*, 12.3 (1943), 474–89 (p. 478).
[91] Theodore Kornweibel, 'Humphrey Bogart's Sabara: Propaganda, Cinema and the American Character in World War II', *American Studies*, 22.1 (1981), 5–19 (p. 8).

from conventional representations of people of colour in Hollywood. The film integrated soldiers of different colours and races fighting one battle for America. African American actor Kenneth Spenser played Pvt. Wesley Epps. [92] Although the dignified characterization of Epps did not reflect the reality of the time, for there were no integrated American army units during WW2, it was still 'one of the outstanding merits' of the film, noted Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times*.[93] He also wrote in another article that the film reflected 'a new attitude towards negroes' and 'a certain realization of racial equity.'[94] Despite the minor role and the limited dialogue, Epps is portrayed as a brave and competent private whose skills with demolitions and explosives help keep the Japanese away. His skills as a student preacher are also put into use when his fellow soldiers die. Epps dies as heroically as the others in the face of the overwhelmingly superior Japanese force. Nevertheless, the role was not completely free of stereotypes, Epps hums St. Louis Blues throughout his screen time.[95] The film received criticism in the South and was banned in several theatres. In early June 1943, the NAACP awarded MGM a scroll of merit for the film's realism and its showing 'how superfluous racial and religious problems are when common danger is faced.'[96]

Sahara (1943) by Columbia Pictures also featured a Black actor in a heroic officer role. However, Tambul, the Black soldier, was an officer in the 'Sudan Defence Force,' rather thanan American soldier due to fear**s** of Southern objection**s** to the depiction of courageous Black soldiers in combat. The film was the studio's biggest money-maker in 1943. [97] The film, which was closely monitored by the OWI while in the making, was the ultimate war

[92] Tay Garnett, *Bataan* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, 1943).
[93] Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, June 4, 1943.
[94] Bosley Crowther, *New York Times,* June 6, 1943.
[95] Garnett, *Bataan*.
[96] *Hollywood Reporter*, June 13, 1943.
[97] Kornweibel, 'Humphrey Bogart's Sabara: Propaganda, Cinema and the American Character in World War II', (p. 6).

propaganda. The scriptwriter was urged to make the Sudanese equal to the other characters.[98] In one of the film's scenes, Tambul, converses with Waco, a White Texan who offers him a cigar and philosophizes that he learnt a lot from other folks in the war where 'the gap of race and religion has been effectively bridged.' The war against the same enemy 'united far-flung Allies in international brotherhood.' Despite not being an American, the character of Tambul promoted a positive image of the Black race in Hollywood.[99]

Although most wartime films did not fully break racial stereotypes, OWI was under sharp attack in Congress. The humble efforts made by the agency to improve race relations were denounced by Southern Conservatives who pressured Congress into reducing its budget and eventually ending its operations in 1945. At the war's end, Hollywood was still a long way from equal representation yet, it had a stronger awareness of racial issues. Although the war films were limited by wartime propaganda rather than a real sense of racial justice, they raised the expectations of Black Americans and opened their eyes to the possibility of change in Hollywood. This was the main reason behind the great dissatisfaction with *Song of the South*. The Disney film represented racial stereotypes, even if its makers claimed that it was all about racial tolerance. It was, in Congressman Adam Clayton Powell's words, an 'insult to minorities.'[100] Fully aware and warned, by both Blacks and whites in his circle and people he consulted, of every negative connotation the film might have due to the sensitivity of the time and the negative reaction that the Uncle Remus character might have from the black community, Disney still chose to go ahead with his film project.

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[98] Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, p. 303.
[99] Zoltán Korda, *Sahara* (Columbia Pictures, 1943).
[100] Cited in Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2007), p. 438.

Racial Tolerance or Racial discrimination? The Uncle Remus Tales and the Making of *Song of the South*

The idea of making *Song of the South* first began in 1939 when Walt Disney bought the tales from the Harris family. However, the project had to be postponed due to the war. The stories consist of eight Remus collections written and published by Joel Chandler Harris throughout the thirty years of his life.[101] Uncle Remus is a fictional Black character created by Harris who tells animal tales and adventures to a little white boy. Harris learned the animal tales while working as a printer's apprentice for *The Countryman*, one of the largest newspapers in the South during the Civil War.[102] Aware of the literary and cultural value of the tales he heard from the slaves; he dedicated his career to presenting them to a larger audience.[103] The first of his volumes, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* was published in 1880. The tales were immensely popular among adults and children alike and increased interest in the South's tourist industry.[104] The tales include many animal characters, but the hero of most tales is Brer Rabbit, the physically weak but shrewd animal who survives being captured by the other animal predators.

Uncle Remus represented another possibility of slavery where the former slave had 'nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline,' noted Harris.[105] His characterization of Uncle

[101] He wrote most of his Uncle Remus stories after joining the editorial staff of the Atlanta Constitution where he stayed for nearly twenty-five years.

[102] Harris was born into a poor family in Eatonton, Georgia around 1848. His journalistic career and interest in Black folklore began while working as an apprentice for the *Countryman* on a Southern plantation.

[103] Paul M. Cousins, *Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography* (Louisiana State University Press, 1968), pp. 68–77, 92, 177.

[104] Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie,* p. 116.

[105] Joel Chandler Harris and A. B. Frost, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, New and rev. ed (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1947), pp. vii, xvii.

Remus was criticised for being stereotypical.[106] A contemporary reviewer of one of Harris's books in the *Atlantic Monthly* stated that Uncle Remus is 'more like Uncle Tom than like Zip Coon.'[107] Also, in 1933, the Black critic, Sterling Brown, classified Uncle Remus in the category of the contented slave and his philosophizing about the old days of slavery as 'wistful nostalgia.'[108] Nevertheless, Harris introduced several Black characters in his tales other than Remus, who had to be portrayed in the mould of the storyteller. His description of Remus gave no suggestion of anything clownish in his appearance. He was 'tall and muscular, with grey hair and a "rugged face."'[109] Many of the Black characters introduced by Harris broke the stereotype and challenged the conventional white understanding of race.[110] To avoid the controversy of the origins of the tales and the racial implications of their interpretations, Harris claimed that he was only an 'editor and compiler.'[111]

White Southerners argued that the tales are unlikely to have originated in America because slaves were unable of such sophisticated thinking that produced complicated plots and meanings. However, the works of several historians investigating Black folklore have revealed otherwise. Slave folklore 'decisively repudiates the thesis that Negroes as a group had internalized "Sambo" traits,' asserted Stuckey.[112] Despite the hardships of slavery, slavesforged their own culture. They developed a lifestyle with a set of values and ethos that enabled them to preserve their African heritage. If it was not for such culture and folklore,

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[106] See Thomas P. Riggio, 'Uncle Tom Reconstructed: A Neglected Chapter in the History of a Book', *American Quarterly*, 28.1 (1976), 56–70.
[107] 'No Writer Approaches Harris's Knowledge of the Negro', Atlantic *Month,* February 1892.
[108] Sterling A. Brown, 'Negro Character as Seen by White Authors', *The Journal of Negro Education*, 2.2 (1933), 179 (p. 185)
[109] Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, pp. 201–12
[110] Wayne Mixon, 'The Ultimate Irrelevance of Race: Joel Chandler Harris and Uncle Remus in Their Time', *The Journal of Southern History*, 56.3 (1990), 457–80 (p. 465).
[111] Joel Chandler Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus, Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*, 24th ed (Boston, Mass, 1890), p. xiii.
[112] Sterling Stuckey, 'Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery', *The Massachusetts Review*, 9.3 (1968), 417–37 (p. 435).

slaves would have ended up being the 'Sambos whom nineteenth-century whites and their descendants so liked to romanticize.'[113]

Harris's emphasis on the Brer Rabbit trickster tales might have denied his readers the opportunity to fully discover other elements of Black folktales, yet this did not distort their nature. For, antebellum slaves did in fact demonstrate a large portion of their culture through trickster tales emphasizing the victories of the weak over the strong. Slave tales functioned on several symbolic levels. They taught new generations born in the new world the history of the race, morals on survival, as well as religious teachings. Most tales centred upon everyday human relationships. The moralistic tales focused on the importance of family ties and the obligations of children and parents. Yet, the trickster tales were the most popular among the slaves and continued to be after emancipation. The trickster is a weak but resourceful creature who is assaulted by a stronger opponent but manages to win after fighting back with any weapons they have. The trickster was either an animal, usually Brer Rabbit, or a slave character in whose victories slaves could experience victorious joy. [114]

Such folklore gave slaves a feeling of moral superiority over their white masters.[115] The latter considered the tales to be mere entertainment depicting 'roaring comedy of animal life,' but for the slaves, the victories of the trickster became their own where justice was achieved, and they obtained relief and hope.[116] Unlike what was commonly perceived during the nineteenth and twentieth century, slaves' songs and tales were a form of social criticism, ridicule, and protest, rather than entertainment and humour. Fredrick Douglass noted that slaves sang 'when they were most unhappy' to relieve their pains of slavery. [117] The triumph of the weak

[113] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.83, 93,98, 106.
[114] Ibid., p. 83.
[115] Stuckey, 'Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery', (p. 432).
[116] Levine, p. 114.
[117] Quoted in Stuckey, 'Through the Prism of Folklore', p. 426.

over the strong in most tales was interpreted as a form of slaves' rebellion against Southern norms.[118]

The victories of Brer Rabbit were 'compensatory dreams' of the slaves.[119] The wish fulfilment and fantasy aspects of the trickster tales were essential elements that enabled the slaves to escape the reality of their situation. Yet, some tales were more realistic and had strong morals on survival in such a vicious world. The tales show slaves receiving punishment when they make mistakes. Even the Rabbit himself is defeated, although by other weak tricksters rather than brute force, when he lets his guard down and thinks too much of himself. Slaves also used irony and parody of the white man's world and his greed for power and leisure repeatedly with their animal stories. [120]

One tale after the other, the trickster proves to be as cruel as his stronger opponent. Brer Rabbit, like the slaves who wove tales about him, was forced to make do with what he had to save himself from trouble. [121] Yet, his brutality was sometimes unjustified. He went from only defending himself to turning into a 'supreme manipulator' who is willing to do anything. He tricks, exploits, steals, tortures, humiliates and mercilessly kills his opponent. Such cruelty was a result of the hardships slaves experienced daily in plantations where they were beaten, sexually assaulted, and taken away from their families. The unjustified brutality and irrationality were the slaves' vision of the world they lived in, after being taken away by force from their native environment and brought under a violent system, argued Levine. The

[118] See Bernard Wolfe, 'Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit.', *Commentary*, 8 (1949), for a more detailed discussion of the tales' origins as well as their significance and interpretations.
[119] *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People*, ed. by Benjamin Albert Botkin (New York: Crown Publishers, 1944), p. 652.
[120] Levine, pp. 99, 110.
[121] Ibid, p. 112.

trickster served as an agent of the world irrationality and as a reminder of the man's fundamental helplessness.[122]

Such features of Black folktales completely disappeared when Disney adapted the tales in his film. The deep meanings and the symbolic functions were distorted. The Disney version, in both the film and the Golden book released with it, denied the complexity and richness of Black culture and presented the tales in correspondence with the white Southern notions of Black Americans as incapable of sophisticated thinking by reducing them to mere entertainment animal adventure stories. Toning down texts has always been a characteristic of Disney's films. Throughout his career, Disney was criticized for being too simplistic with his adaptations. He significantly altered the source texts by eliminating all the negative or inappropriate elements to fit with his family entertainment brand. The trickster tales were too violent and vicious. In the original tales, Brer Rabbit was a merciless trickster who was responsible for the deaths of several animals. Yet, in the Disney film he is a goofy character whose biggest crime is getting Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox attacked by bees.

Although it is true that the criticism of Remus, and the animal tales, did not begin with Disney's adaptation and existed since Harris's time, as discussed above, Disney's simplification of the Remus character and the tales is what created racial prejudice and controversy. Harris's characterisation of Remus was complex. He made him a smart and wise teacher yet disguised him under the mask of the storyteller to avoid objection from his contemporary readers. Disney turned Uncle Remus from the teacher that Harris made him to a mere entertainer and a storyteller who describes himself as 'just a worn-out old man who don't do nothin but tell stories.'[123] Unlike in the Harris volume where Remus contributed to raising and educating two generations of white children, the Disney Remus is just a

[122] Ibid, pp. 108, 114,117, 120.
[123] Walt Disney, *Song of the South* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1946).

storyteller and entertainer who cannot even stand for himself. While making *Song of the South* into a plantation film with a flavour of Disney entertainment, the true value of the animal trickster tales was distorted, and their deeper meanings were sacrificed for mere entertainment.

The making of *Song of the South*

In 1941, Disney's studio endured one of the biggest labour strikes in the history of the film industry.[124] The employees objected to the unequal salaries and the absence of fixed rules for raises and bonus systems.[125] Disney refused to recognize the Screen Cartoonist Guild as his employees' representatives and the legitimacy of their demands. He believed that the strike was a communist effort. This belief would resurface in Disney's dismissal of criticism of *Song of the South* as being the work of left-wing radicals. Gunther Lessing, the studio's legal counsel, made things worse when he advised Walt and Roy to hold a line against the strikers, the decision broke the trust and the good spirit in the studio forever.[126] The studio also struggled with finances. The profits made with *Snow White* were spent on making *Fantasia* (1940) and *Bambi* (1942), as well as building Disney's dream Hollywood studio which cost $3.8 million leaving him in debt to banks by roughly $4.5.[127] With the coming of World War II and the closing of the foreign market things became worse. The studio nearly went bankrupt and barely survived making government films during the war years.[128]

[124] Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney.*, 3 edition (Ivan R. Dee, 1997), pp. 192, 347
[125] Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life.* (University of Missouri Press; Reprint edition, 2001), Pp. 203-206.
[126] Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, p. 426.
[127] Schickel, *The Disney Version,* p.236.
[128] Ibid., p. 232.

The strike and the war years affected Disney, the person and the studio, severely. Fun and confident Uncle Walt was replaced by a cautious corporate leader who relied on ARI surveys rather than trust his artistic instincts.[129] Short on money, Disney did not want to take any risks and searched for a film project that would be a guaranteed financial success. After the war, Disney announced that his studio is 'through with caviar. From now on, it's mashed potatoes and gravy.' [130] Yet, he needed to make a film that would bring the cheerful entertainment of his pre-war films. Conscious of the financial and popular success of *Gone with the Wind* and attempting to replicate the success of his own *Snow White* with an original American story, or at least written by an American. Disney decided to make *Song of the South.* The Remus tales served as a great way to save the studio more money than making a full animated film. Combining animation sequences, where Uncle Remus narrates his tales, and live action would implement the 'mashed potato and gravy' policy. The hybrid film was 'a way to get into live-action, and have his cartoon too,' declared a Disney animator.[131]

While preparing for the film, many people in Disney's circle had concerns. 'The negro situation is a dangerous one,' wrote Disney publicist Vern Caldwell to producer Perce Pearce arguing that, 'between the negro haters and the negro lovers there are many chances to run afoul of situations that could run the gamut all the way from nasty to controversial.' Disney's brother Roy, who often reined in Walt's more impulsive decisions, also had doubts about the film. He worried about the racial controversy as well as it not 'being enough in calibre and natural draft' to make an interesting film project. Everyone in the studio was pessimistic

[129] Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, p. 442,438,441. I should note that this section will rely heavily on Neal Gabler's work for historical information on the Disney studio and the making of *Song of the South*. Gabler was one of the rare people who were allowed access to the studio's archive and the opportunity to make exhaustive research. The latter explains the writer's sympathies with Walt Disney and sometimes even his defensive tone toward Walt's decisions.

[130] Schickel, *The Disney Version,* p. 226.
[131] Gabler, p. 432.

about the film, both in terms of the reaction of the Black community and the studio's lack ofexperience with live-action, except Disney himself. [132]

Disney was clearly aware of the racial implications his film might have. He was well informed of the controversy surrounding previous plantation films, yet he was convinced that the aesthetic and entertaining aspects of the story, especially the combination of folktales and infant charm, will appeal to audiences. To reassure all people who had concerns about the film's racial politics, Disney hired Maurice Rapf, a communist scriptwriter, to work with Dalton Reymond, the original scriptwriter, to repress Reymond's 'white Southern slant.' Among the changes that Rapf made to the script was omitting references to 'negro boy' and 'negro girl' and cutting a line that described a boy running like a black 'streak.' He also added the poor white family to the story to make it clear that the film was set in Reconstruction and the Blacks living on the plantation were not slaves. Nevertheless, Rapf warned Walt that making a film about Uncle Remus might be dangerous and remind people of the Uncle Tom stereotype. What also added to Disney's confidence in his project was the positive feedback he received after sending the script to people both inside and outside the studio to read. [133] He even invited Walter White to come to the studio and work on revisions with himself, but White turned down the invitation because he had other commitments. [134]

RKO, the Disney distributor, investigated the experiences of other studios with pictures dealing with Black material and foresaw interference from at least one organization, the League for the advancement of the Negro. Walt instructed one of his publicists to meet with

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[132] Gabler, *The Triumph of the American Imagination* p. 434.

[133] Although that feedback came from controversial figures. Gunther Lessing the Studio's legal consultant who was responsible for making matters worse during the strike wrote Walt, 'I can't find a damn thing to criticize or suggest.' Several members of the Disney board also validated the script. But for Disney, the most important solicitation came from Black Americans, especially actress Hattie McDaniel who praised the script and was excited to take part in the film. The latter was already under attack from members of her community for playing the Black mammy stereotype in *GWTW* and other films. (Gabler 434-435).

[134] Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, pp. 433-436.

Bill Kupper, the sales manager of Twentieth Century Fox to learn about their experiences in distributing *Stormy Weather* (1943). Kupper suggested that while showing in the South, it would be better if the Disney film is booked into two theatres, one for whites and one for Blacks. He also suggested that the film would be made 'in a way that scenes featuring blacks could be cut or Southern exhibitors wouldn't show them.' This was a standard practice done**,** for example, with the staircase dancing scene in *The Little Colonel* among other films. [135] This was a piece of advice that Disney seems to have taken to heart and portrayed his Black characters in a way that no WHITE Southerner would object to.

Joseph Breen, who was charged with approving scripts under the Motion Picture Production Code had sent the film's script to a colleague for comment, the latter passed it along to Alain Locke, a Black Howard University scholar and a Harlem Renaissance leader, asking that he write Disney directly with his criticisms. Breen's colleague suggested a few changes eliminating the word 'darky', but also warned that scenes of Blacks singing happily could be resented by contemporary Blacks. Locke advised Disney that the film 'could do wonders in transforming public opinions about the Negro' but only if he shunned stereotypes, and he advised that Walt consult other Black representatives. But to Wanger, Locke confided that Walt made a mistake by not having consulted black leaders while the script was being written.' [136]

During the making of the film, many rumours circulated suggesting that the Black press was unhappy with the film and planned to campaign against it. Disney assumed that the critics of himself and the film were communist efforts, just like the strike. An FBI investigation, requested by Disney, revealed that Clarence Muse, whom Disney consulted while preparing for the film had objected to the representation of Black characters for being 'insufficiently

[135] Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, p. 434.
[136] Ibid, p. 435.

dignified,' yet Disney dismissed his opinion which made Muse reach out to the Black press toprotest the film. Disney's version of the story, however, suggested that Muse wanted the role of Uncle Remus for himself and his campaign against the film was a bitter reaction to his rejection. [137] Other Black critics and social activists also opposed the making of the film fearing that a cinematic representation of these stories would inevitably feature stereotyped Black characters, especially that of Uncle Remus. Even before the film went into production, many Black actors turned down the role of Uncle Remus, knowing that 'the portrayal of slavery in film and theatre will always be offensive to Black Americans who are still to this day discriminated and enjoying only a second-rate citizenship.'[138] The NAACP and the International Film and Radio Guild (IFRG) had been working hard to move towards a just depiction of African Americans in films. They succeeded in pressuring MGM into giving up their project of making another *Uncle Tom's Cabin* film in 1946. Yet their objections to the making of *Song of the South* were unsuccessful.[139]

The storyline of the film is based loosely on *Told by Uncle Remus* (1903), which critics argued was a less serious treatment of black folklore than Harris's earlier works. Johnny is the second little boy presented in the tales, the son of the boy to whom Remus told his tales in earlier years. The film opens with Johnny (Boby Driscoll), his mother, (Ruth Warick), his father, (Erik Rolf) and their Black maid Tempy, (Hattie McDaniel), arriving at the Georgia plantation to visit Johnny's maternal grandmother. Johnny is excited to meet Uncle Remus after hearing of his tales from his father. Once they arrive at the house, John, leaves his son and wife to go back to Atlanta. [140] The devastated boy, feeling abandoned by his father,

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[137] Ibid.
[138] *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 7, 1946
[139] Noble, *The Negro in Films*, p. 218.
[140] The film does not give many details about the character of John and why he has to leave back to Georgia but the Microfiche of the film in the BFI states that he is 'aggressive Atlanta newspaper editor caught between domestic responsibility and political challenge.' He is obliged to leave his son and wife to go back to Georgia to 'fight for his political life.'

attempts to run away from the plantation and back to his Atlanta home. The incident puts the child under the care of Uncle Remus, James Baskett. Remus tricks Johnny to abandon his escape plan by telling him the tale of Brer Rabbit when he wanted to leave his Briar Patch and how he could never run away from his troubles. After their first meeting, Remus becomes dedicated to the welfare of the boy through the age-old custom of telling moral fables and instructive tales.[141] Uncle Remus tells Little Johnny the animal stories to help him adapt to his new life on the plantation. Giving less space to the animation segments prioritised white presence in the film and emphasised the role of the little Johnny more than the Black folklore. [142]

Defying all warnings, Disney kept the plantation setting intact in the film. The Black characters are devoted to the service of whites as in the days of slavery. All the Black servantson the plantation must look after the boy and tend to his problems. Toby, played by child actor Glenn Leedy, is instructed by the grandmother to look after Johnny and 'if he gets in trouble, you see he gets out of it.' As a matter of fact, the film's content makes the time in which the film is set very hard to distinguish. The presence of Uncle Remus and many other Black characters on the plantation and them walking in groups to work in the fields gives the impression that it is set in the era of slavery. Yet, the fact that Uncle Remus is able to leave the plantation when told to stay away from Johnny suggests that he is free, and the film is set in the postbellum South. [143]

One of the most objectionable aspects of the film is its idyllic representation of the Southern plantation. The film suggests the idea that 'the racial tolerance' claimed as the motivation

[141] Uncle Remus's devotion to Johnny is similar to Uncle Tom's devotion to little Eva. This relationship between an old Black figure and the young white master was one of the Southern mythology's staples reinforced in cinema with the Shirley Temple and Robinson films.
[142] Walt Disney, *Song of the South* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1946).
[143] Disney, *Song of the South*.

behind the film by the Disney studio, is conditioned by Blacks accepting their subservience. When telling his tales, Remus describes the setting as a time when 'everything was mighty satisfactual.' That was the kind of 'days when you can't open your mouth without a song jumping out of it' and '… In dose days . . . twas better all-around.'[144] Viewers were left with the impression that the time being described is the time of slavery. Another controversial scene in the film is when scores of Black servants are gathered outside the mansion harmoniously singing and on bended knees, praying for the poor, white child. A scene that Americans saw many times with the death of Eva in the Uncle Tom films and plays. Miss Sally was the audience's most despised white character in the film embodying white supremacy. In addition to being the reason behind Remus's leaving the plantation, she is not friendly to the other servants.[145] In one scene, she enters her son's room where Toby is present, he is apparently responsible for waking Johnny and carrying water to his room so he can wash his face. The mother completely ignores Toby, she barely looks at him and he rushes out of the room. The idea of racial tolerance based on Black people humiliating themselves isstressed by the film's end. As soon as the humiliated Uncle Remus rushes back to the plantation after being called by his white masters, everything is back to normal, and it is another wonderful day on the plantation.[146]

Release, Reception and Controversy

The film premiered in Atlanta in November 1946 with big celebrations of Southern culture and racial tolerance propaganda. The big premiere in Atlanta was very successful. White

[144] British Film Institute Microfiche.
[145] In an interview with the *Atlanta Constitution* on November 13, 1946, Ruth Warrick jokingly told the journalist that she as a person is nicer than the character she played in the film.
[146] Walt Disney, *Song of the South* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1946).

Atlantans thought the film was, 'Uncle Remus at his best' and praised its outstanding representation of the Old South, reported the *Atlanta Constitution.* The main theme according to the press release was 'happy.' [147] The release of *Song of the South* brought back the old pre-war stereotyped representation of African Americans to Hollywood. The film ignored the wartime progressive racial attitudes, although its publicity campaign suggested it was all about racial tolerance. The film was a subject of widespread controversy in Black as well as White press since the beginning of its filming. Following its release, opinions were divided into two main camps. One maintaining that the story material reflected and introduced folklore and Southern culture to a nationwide audience with Disney's usual charm and family entertainment, with no intention to offend any party. The other argued it was propaganda, antebellum and "Uncle Tommish". But more dangerously, derogatory and a step backward in the advancement of African Americans. Although many reviewers and critics appreciated the artistic and aesthetic merit of the film, it was its political and racial message that created controversy.

The reactions varied even among Black press. The strongest criticism of the film was in the *Afro.* Dier described the film as a 'vicious white supremacy propaganda,' and felt 'thoroughly disgusted' after seeing the film. For him, Disney should have called his film "Song of the Decadent South." For, contrary to the studio's claim that the film brings a new spirit of tolerance and understanding between the races, *Song of the South* emphasises white supremacy and Black subservience to appeal to white Southerners. The characterization of Uncle Remus is 'humiliating and degrading to the race.' When they referred to tolerance, Disney meant 'tolerance of white supremacy surely.'[148] John Jasper objected to the inaccurate

[147] *Atlanta Constitution*, November 14, 1946
[148] Richard Dier, *The Afro*, November 30, 1946.

depictions of slavery in the film by comparing it to Charles Dickens' travel memoires to the American South where Dickens described the brutalities and severe violence of the Southern plantation owners. [149] Another reviewer criticised James Baskett's absence from the premiere, due to racial discrimination laws in Atlanta, and the irony of the film's claim to 'bringing a new spirit of tolerance and understanding between the races in America's tense melting pot.[150] General Black public also voiced their disappointment with the film through a column the newspaper dedicated for readers' thoughts of the film. Deaderick F. Jenkins wrote that the film reflects a 'bit of sadism' and 'a false belief in white supremacy in order to compensate for an inferiority complex' by humiliating minorities.[151]

Nevertheless, not all Black press objected to the film. An *Amsterdam News* reviewer thought the film was 'a great entertainment for the old and the young.' The film was praised for its 'wealth of song and music blended with action of the players and with the animated folklore sequences.' [152] In two columns entitled 'Views and Reviews', George Schuyler in The *Pittsburgh Courier* commented on the Black reactions to the film. [153] Mr. Schuyler started his column denouncing *Ebony's* and NAACP's statements which he described as 'a hysterical hue and cry' against *Song of the South. Ebony* had expressed fears that the film will 'disrupt peaceful race relation.' The magazine considered the film's 'lily white propaganda' detrimental to the cultural advancement of Black Americans. Yet Mr. Schuyler considered it acelebration of Black culture.[154]

[149] John Jasper, *The Afro*, December 28, 1946.
[150] *The Afro*, November 23, 1946.
[151]Jack Flodin, *The Afro*, June 14, 1947.
[152] Amsterdam News, February 8, 1947.
[153] Both columns specifically state that they represent 'the personal opinion of Mr. Schuyler and in no way reflect the editorial opinion of the Pittsburgh Courier.'
[154] Schuyler George, The *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 8 and 22, 1947.

For several months following the film's release, the Black press continued reporting the reactions of different organisations and general public to the film as it was showing in different cities. The organizational director of the Brooklyn Council of the Negro National Congress demanded the Rand-Frost Theatre chain of Brooklyn to ban the film neighbourhood movie houses due to its 'derogatory nature' as well as its 'strengthening and firmly entrenching the evils of Bilboism in this country.'[155]

The National Negro Congress, the International Film and Radio Guild, the American Youth for Democracy, the United Negro and Allied Veterans and the American Jewish Council picketed the film in the Pantages RKO Hillstreet Theatre in Los Angeles. The picketers accused the film of presenting the Negro in 'the stereotyped characterizations associated with slavery and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and perpetuat[ing] the monstrous lie that paints slavery as a delightful social system.'[156] News of the picketers being jailed was reported in the *Amsterdam News*.[157] The film was also picketed when showing in the Warner Brother theatre in San Pedro. The protests were supported by the San Pedro NAACP branch, the Council of Civic Unity, the National Maritime Union and other groups. News of the National Negro Congress picketing by the Palace Theatre, Broadway and the Forty-seventh Street was also featured in the *New York Times*. Hollywood writers also joined the campaign against the film and called for 'an end of the stereotyping of minorities in radio and films and for the treatment of all people with honesty and realism.' Disney wrote back to the organisation noting that he 'had no intentions of misrepresenting minorities' in his film.[158]

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[155] *The Afro*, February 8, 1947. The reference is to the notorious Theodore Bilbo, former governor of Mississippi and the U.S Senator who worked actively to deny Blacks the right to vote.
[156] Wendell Green, *Los Angeles Sentinel,* February 6, and *Amsterdam News*, February 8, 1947.
[157] *Amsterdam News,* March 1, 1947.
[158] *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 20, 1947

The white press coverage and reactions to the film were not very far from that of the Black press. The film was made at such a sensitive time that even major white newspapers objected to it. The *New York Times* reported the NAACP's disappointment and disapproval of the film which helps to perpetuate the impression of 'an idyllic master-slave relationship' in the South. Walter White, in telegrams to newspapers, noted that the association recognises the artistic merit of the picture, but 'in an effort neither to offend audiences in the North or South, the production helps to perpetuate a dangerously glorified picture of slavery. Making use of the beautiful Uncle Remus folklore, *Song of the South* unfortunately gives the impression of an idyllic master-slave relationship which is a distortion of facts.'[159]

Film critic Bosley Crowther, one of the most influential writers in America at the time, noted in the *New York Times* that Disney has been losing his touch with the recent live action, especially his latest 'shenanigan', *Song of the South*. The film's story, not even worthy of a 'second-grade producer', was a big mistake in 'this troubled day and age,' especially in such a 'strictly from Dixie' manner. The film portrays the slave master relationship with so much harmony that one might think 'Abe Lincoln made a mistake' with emancipation. Disney had 'permitted a sad misapplication of [his] art and [his] name.' [160] *Variety* found the film 'sometimes sentimental, slow and overlong. But its many virtues more than balance.' The reviewer praised the cartoon sequences but didn't appreciate the live action that much.[161] The *Time* reviewer wrote that 'Uncle Remus, who cheerfully knew his place in the world of 19th century Georgia, is a character bound to enrage all educated Negroes and a number of damn

[159] Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, November 28, 1946.

[160] Bosley Crowther, *New York Times,* December 8, 1946.

[161] *Variety*, December 6, 1946.

yankees.' The film's success in the South, which, 'unabashedly dotes on the good old days, is already assured.'[162]

After *Song*, Disney had lost favour with critics and viewers. With all the severe criticism of *Song of the South*, he found no other way to defend his film except to blame it on communism. Baskett himself criticised the protest against the film, stating, 'I believe that certain groups are doing my race more harm in seeking to create dissension, than can ever possibly come out of *Song of the South*.'[163] Even after the film's release and the backlash it received, Disney still refused to admit that his film was offensive to Black Americans. Fredrick Mullaly, a reporter for the *Tribune,* asked Disney at a press conference whether he was aware that educated Black Americans are protesting about the treatment of Remus in his film, regarding it as a not very subtle attempt to confirm the white American's argument was a much more likeable fellow when, like Uncle Remus, he 'knew his place' and had no impertinent political or social aspirations?' 'If Mr. Disney had replied, in effect, that he was conscious of this criticism, was sorry that some Negroes took it that way, but had decided that Remus ought to be above the hurly-burly of the contemporary minority struggles, I would have been glad to leave it at that,' noted the reporter. Yet, Disney denied that there would be any real antagonism towards the film and went on to assert that the criticism came from the radicals, 'who just love stirring the up trouble whenever they can.' He added that 'the time had not yet come when Negro susceptibilities could be treated with as such delicacy as Hollywood reserves for say, the American Catholics!' [164] Disney's seeming ignorance or carelessness was also demonstrated when he injected another bit of humour into his film's

[162] *The Time*, November 18, 1946.
[163] Watts, *The Magic Kingdom,* p. 277.
[164] Fredrick Mullaly, *the Tribune*, November 22, 1946

premiere party in Atlanta when he said he was forced to tone down the dialect in the movie because 'he had been informed that people down here didn't know they talked that way.' [165]

Disney would have run much less risk of offending African Americans had he refrained from weaving in as much story continuity and left *Song of the South* a picture of three children and Remus. Even if he had good intentions with adapting the Remus tales and presenting Black folklore to contemporary audiences, Disney had chosen a wrong time frame for his film. Thomas L. Griffith Jr., the president of a local chapter of the NAACP, denounced the portrayal of African Americans in the film. He argued that the stories of Harris as represented by Disney are 'a distorted picture of slavery' and 'real offenders in this regard.' Although Disney might not have had the intention to offend Black Americans, the picture is offensive and such representation should be avoided in the future. [166]

The fierce protest and objections to the film were a result of Disney's influence on young generations and on American culture in general. Most cultural critics of the time admired Disney's success. He was even described as 'the greatest educator of the century.' [167] Specialists of children literature objected and were really concerned about what Disney was teaching children. Walter White denounced the January Parents Magazine medal awarded to *Song of the South* noting that such 'half-truths which are planned in the unsuspecting minds of young people' are the reason behind racial frictions and lead to dangerous prejudices.'[168] The American Federation of Teachers also denounced the film and its 'insidious and subtle propaganda against the Negro' arguing that Baskett, in his characterisation of Uncle Remus, portrayed the 'fixed conception of the Negro as lazy, hat-in-hand, spiritual, inferior "old

[165] *Atlanta Constitution*, November 13, 1946
[166] *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 10, 1947
[167] Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, pp. 349–50.
[168] *The Afro*, January 18, 1947.

rascal."' They also objected to Disney's assimilation of the animals and the portrayal of Blackcharacters as if their lives revolve around solving whites' problems. [169]

What neither Walt nor his advisors accounted for was the escalation of the reactions against the film. The fierce campaign against the film was a continuation of the long years of hard work to promote a better representation of Black Americans in film. Black leaders and organisations who have protested the earlier plantation films were infuriated by *Song of the South*, Disney's reluctant attitudes, and the studio's ignorance of their demands for equal treatment in films. In a 1987 *LA Sentinel* article discussing the film's re-release in 1986, Henry A Morton, a reader of the newspaper, wrote expressing his frustration and disappointment of how passive African American leaders were to the re-release. Mr. Morton was among the picketers of the film in 1946, 'the thing which made [him] racially active.' The protests which did not put an end to the showing of the film, 'at least opened the eyes of a lot of people in Hollywood and in other influential places that we were not about to be taken for granted and depicted in negative fashions without at least voicing our protests.' He continued noting that the 'muscle and the strength we utilized in the upcoming of the Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s began, I believe, with that long-ago protest over that film, mild by today's standards, but it was a beginning.' [170]

[169] *Atlanta Daily World*, January 12, 1947, *The Chicago Defender*, January 18, 1947, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 16, 1947.
[170] Stanley Robertson, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Jan 8, 1987.

Conclusion

This chapter explored Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (1946) and its controversial representation of slavery and plantation life. The Disney film was highly influenced by plantation films. The latter had an important role in shaping contemporary audiences' views of slavery and the South. The Depression years had revived Americans' appetite for Nostalgia of the Old South. Between 1929 and 1941, Hollywood produced more than 75 nostalgic plantation films romanticising the Old South.[171] These films represented an alternative reality and a fantasy to an audience struggling to survive the Depression. The enormous appeal of the Shirley Temple and Robinson movies and the enduring popularity of *Gone with the Wind* promoted the perception of slavery as a benign and harmless system for generations. For White Americans, Blacks were either happy servants who needed white supervision or superstitious folks who provided entertainment. Such racial stereotypes were Southern in origin but became embedded in American popular culture. Despite the critical opposition to these films, for their unrealistic portrayal of the past and their promotion of stereotyped conceptions of slavery, most were box-office appeals. An appeal that Disney hoped he could attain with his film.

Yet, *Song of the South* was made in a different era than most of the other plantation films. An era marked by growing Black activism and opposition to racial stereotypes. Had Disney madehis film back in 1939, when he first bought the Uncle Remus tales from the Harris family, thefilm might have been successful. However, by 1946, the social, economic, and political situation in the United States had remarkably changed.

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[171] *Ed Guerrero, Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film, Culture and the Moving Image (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 19.*

The nation was more prosperous as it emerged victorious from the Second World War. Americans no longer needed to escape their realities through film and racial stereotypes became less tolerable. A fact that Disney significantly underestimated. The film was an idyllic representation of slavery and the Old South which revived racial stereotypes the film industry had avoided during the war years to eliminate racial tension and disunity. The latter promoted a greater willingness among Black intellectuals to articulate their opposition to stereotypes of their race in film and demand advancement within the American society. Consequently, the film received severe protest andobjection from the Black press and organisations, as well as denunciation from the white press.

Song of the South was not the money maker that Disney hoped it would be. The racial opposition affected its box office, and the studio did not make much money until later re-releases. The backlash of *Song of the South* marked the end of the popularity and profitability of plantation films. The 1946 release marked a turning point in Hollywood's representation of plantation slavery. Although Hollywood, and the nation, were far away from being free of racial prejudice, the years following *Song of the South* marked a change in Hollywood's image of the Old South and its romantic representation of slavery. With the social and political change of the 1950s Civil Rights Movement and President Truman's executive orders to end segregation in different sectors, Hollywood ventured into a different portrayal of the South and its racial history. A portrayal that revealed a much more complicated image of slavery. Staring from the 1960s, the image of the "happy" plantation will no longer be part of the cinematic representation of slavery as filmmakers will take a different approach in their portrayal attempting to reveal the violent nature of slavery to echo the contemporary social and political atmosphere of the Civil Rights and Black Power. These representations and their controversies will be discussed in detailed in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: From Magnolias to Maggots: *Mandingo* (1975) and the Revisionist Slavery Films Cycle.

Following the decline of the plantation myth films' popularity in the late 1940s, presentations of the Old South and slavery entered a period of revision where filmmakers focused more on the origins of racial issues and the unsentimental history of slavery and racial segregation. The first stage of such revision was mainly during late 1940s and throughout the 1950s when white filmmakers, inspired by the post-World War II liberalism and the rising Civil Rights Movement, explored racism and discrimination. During the turmoil years of the 1960s and 1970s, American society and culture were completely redefined. The film industry entered a new, not so prosperous era, and struggled to cope with the social and political change and keep its revenues. Yet, it soon found its way out of the crisis and adapted itself to the changing tastes and attitudes of the time.[1]

Growing racial tension, economic instability, political scandals in the White House, mass protest against the Vietnam War, and Black power activism redefined the concept of freedom of expression in America at the time. The latter influenced representations of race and slavery in films resulting in a more drastic second stage of revision where filmmakers explored aspects of slavery that had never been explored before. *Mandingo* 1975 completely overturned Classical Hollywood's representation of a stable and benevolent Southern slave society. It was the first mainstream Hollywood film to acknowledge the presence of interracial sexual exploitation in the American system of slavery and expose its violent

[1] See David Londoner, 'The Changing Econmics of Entertaimnet' in *The American Film Industry*, ed. by Tino Balio, Rev. ed (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

nature. Its makers asserted that their intentions were to dramatize the harsh truths about America's racial history. The film aimed to disrupt the long-standing conventions of the old plantation genre and subvert the mythology completely with shocking images of plantation cruelty, lust, and depravity.

However, being made following the blaxploitation boom and during the golden age of pornography as well as the debates circulating in the 1970s in regard to court rulings on obscenity, the film was outright dismissed by critics as exploitation of history and condemned for its graphic violence and sexual content, although such elements were present in most mainstream films of the time. Despite being universally denounced by the critics for distorting and sensationalizing history, the film appealed to Black audiences and was one of the most commercially successful films of the year. The film's reception was divided on issues of race as well as class division within the Black community. This chapter will explore the reasons behind the film's negative critical reception and unexpected commercial success.

I will argue that, despite its many historical inaccuracies, *Mandingo* foreground the sexual politics of slavery and slaves' resistance, challenging earlier perceptions of it as a benign institution. The violent institution of slavery is presented as the main problemof the Old South which leads to the destruction of the lives of both Black and white. Unlike the majority of previous literature which focused mainly on the interracial sex themes and exposureof sexual exploitation, this chapter will also shed light on the film's slave resistance theme, which was subtle but strong, and perfectly echoed the contemporary African American growing social and political consciousness and militancy. The film's controversial reception also gives space to explore the shifting dynamics of race realations during the 1970s.

Revising Slavery and Racial Representation

The hopeful optimism and the social and cultural progressiveness that came out of the war years were soon overwhelmed by the paranoia that would sustain the Cold War. American society went back to experiencing a rebirth of alienation and racism at home with minority groups and people of colour struggling against the oppressive forces of cultural "containment." As Lawrence Wittner noted, 'if Fortune smiled on the post-war United States, she reserved her keenest delights for the forces of privilege.'[2] However, the conscious liberalism inherited from the war years continued to attract audiences and interest makers of popular culture. By the late 1940s, 'if an author wants his novel to sell better than the best sellers, he has only to choose for his subject either the evil of drink or the prejudice against Jews, Negroes, or, sometimes, Chinese,' asserted William Tindall.[3] In Hollywood, filmmakers explored these subjects and made several films on issues relating to racism and discrimination in American society.

The year 1947 was marked by more courage than usual in dealing with questions of racial and religious prejudice with the production of *Crossfire* and *Gentlemen's Agreement.* Amongst strong resistance from the Joseph Breen office and the restrictions of the production codes, RKO announced the making of *Crossfir*e, an adaptation of the novel The *Brick Foxhole* 1945 by Richard Brooks. The novel dealt incidentally with anti-Semitism, but the crucial murder in the plot was explained by homosexuality. However, the scriptwriter had to change the story and establish anti-Semitism as the sole motive for the murder because of censorship and completely eliminated the homosexuality theme.[4] Edward Dmytryk, Adrian Scott and the newly installed head of production at RKO, Dore Schary, teamed up and began

[2] Lawrence S. Wittner, *Cold War America, from Hiroshima to Watergate* (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 140.
[3] William York Tindall, 'The Sociological Best Seller', *The English Journal*, 36.9 (1947), 447–54 (p. 247).
[4] Thomas F. Brady, *New York Times,* Mar 16, 1947.

working on the film's project. Adrian Scott, a socially conscious filmmaker, wanted to produce a statement about the evils of bigotry. He wrote a letter to the RKO executive petitioning that 'Anti-Semitism is not declining as a result of Hitler's defeat. The recent negro race riots even in a high school is symptomatic of the whole cancer. Anti-Semitism and anti-negroism will grow unless heroic measures can be undertaken to stop them. This picture is one such measure.'[5]

The controversial film production embodied many of the dilemmas that faced America in the wake of World War II. It reflected the identity crisis and the bigotry that hunted every American at the time.[6] The film 'was rushed to completion' in twenty days on a budget of 550.0008$, 'for its theme was both timely and important,' as noted Schary in the film's trailer.[7] A *New York Times* article described *Crossfire* as one of the first Hollywood films of the 1940s to 'face questions of racial and religious prejudice with more forthright courage than audiences have been accustomed to expect.'[8] *Variety* described it as 'a frank spotlight on anti-Semitism' where the producers 'pulled no punches.'[9] E*bony* magazine gave the film its annual award for 'improving interracial understanding.'[10]

Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* credited the efforts of the producers, Dore Schary and Adrian Scott, in 'bringing to the screen a frank and immediate demonstration of the brutality and religious bigotry as it festers and fires ferocity in certain seemingly normal American minds.' He appreciated how the theme of anti-Semitism is introduced slowly in the

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[5] Ceplair Larry and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-60*, Reprint edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 444.
[6] Edward Dmytryk, *Crossfire* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1947).
[7] Trailer available at (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFbxVZbGCi0&list=LL). Another reason the film was rushed to completion was to beat 20th century Fox's *Gentleman's Agreement*. Scharay managed to release *Crossfire* several months before *Gentleman's Agreement.*
[8] *New York Times,* March 1947.
[9] *Variety*, June 25, 1947.
[10] *Ebony*, December 1947.

film but criticised the 'irritating confusion of detailed exposition.'[11] The *Time* wrote that the film deserves an 'A for effort' even if the argument could be stronger.[12] The film was very successful and won an award for the best social film at the Cannes film festival despite the controversy on Dmytryk and Scott's involvement with the Communist Party and their refusal to testify for the House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings on Hollywood, which led to them being fired from RKO. A few years following the controversy, Dore Scharay declared that he would have made *Crossfire* again even under these circumstances. He affirmed that he 'sees no sign of change in screen content to avoid subjects of social significance.' For, 'even in their weakest moments,' he declared, 'the producers stood firm on one point during the Congressional investigation, that there has never been a subversive film or subversive material in any film.'[13]

Gentleman's Agreement 1947 was another courageous initiative from the small-town-Nebraska-born producer Darryl Zanuck in bringing the story of anti-Semitism to the silver screen.[14] Unlike *Crossfire*, *Gentleman's Agreement* was a big-budget film that took several months in the making. The film's story revolved around a journalist, Philip Green played by George Peck, who pretends to be Jewish to investigate anti-Semitism for a magazine article he is assigned to write.[15] The film was an adaptation of a novel with the same title by Jewish writer Laura Z. Hobson. Bosley Crowther noted that 'every point about prejudice which Miss Hobson had to make in her book has been made with superior illustration and more graphic

[11] Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, July 13, 1947.

[12] *Time*, August 4, 1947.

[13] Thomas F. Brady, *New York Times,* January 25, 1948.

[14] In a November 16, 1997, *New York Times'* article marking the fiftieth anniversary of the film *by* Custen, George, Midwesterner Darryl Zanuck is described, at length, as the brave outsider (in Jewish Hollywood) who brought Gentleman's Agreement to American viewers as part of his 'master narrative of more than a thousand films' dealing with a social problem, including *Pinky*.

[15] Elia Kazan, *Gentleman's Agreement* (20th Century Fox, 1947).

demonstration in the film so that the sweep of her moral indignation is not only widened but intensifies thereby.' The reviewer acknowledged the merits of the film and its authenticity in bringing to millions of people the 'ugly and disturbing issue to light.' However, he felt that the focus on the upper class makes its message limited.[16] An observation which a reader, Milton R. Stern, denied as he wrote to the newspaper arguing that 'it is the anti-Semitism of the well-to-do which gives sanction to the Anti-Semitism of the hoodlums.' If people living good lives 'cannot discipline themselves to democratic behaviour, how can people living in overcrowded slums be expected to do it?'[17]

The two films were both popular among critics and audiences. They marked Hollywood's shifting response to discrimination and had what can be considered a positive effect on American attitudes toward anti-Semitism. A 1960 article entitled "Ethnic Prejudice and Susceptibility to Persuasion," in the *American Sociological Review,* which examined motion pictures' influence on American's tolerance towards a minority, its scope, and its correct perception, as intended by its makers, reported that most studies have found that 'motion pictures which urge tolerance toward minority groups and foreign nationalities are effective in reducing the expression of ethnic prejudice.' The study used *Gentleman's Agreement* as a case study and found that the film appeared to have a considerable impact on the participants' attitudes and sentiments against Jews, even if it can't be guaranteed that the influence was a lasting one. [18] The two films had an effect on Hollywood's representation of Black Americans, as George Norford noted in the *Opportunity*, 'having at least mustered the courage to do films on such a controversial issue, it is but another step for Hollywood to talk

[16] Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, November 12, 1947.
[17] Stern, Milton R, *New York Times,* November 30, 1947.
[18] Russell Middleton, 'Ethnic Prejudice and Susceptibility to Persuasion', *American Sociological Review*, 25.5 (1960).

about prejudice against the Negro.'[19] Consequently, Hollywood began to move away from the crude stereotyped representation that had predominated in the plantation films.

Only a year apart from Disney's *Song of the South*, *the Foxes of Harrow* 1947, an adaptation of a novel by Black author Frank Yerby, challenged the perception of slavery as a benign institution by showing a slave woman choosing death over raising a child under slavery.[20] Death became preferable to living in the "kind and loving" society as prescribed in the plantation films. Edward D. C. Campbell cited *The Foxes of Harrow* as the first American film to depict slavery in a negative light followed by many others which widened the scope of this discourse.[21] In the following years, the focus shifted to more contemporary issues as a number of films addressed bigotry and racism in America, albeit from a white point of view. *The Home of the Braves* and *Lost Boundaries* (1949) were the two films whose success initiated a wave of social problem films, which included *Pinky* (1949), *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) and many others. The majority of these films were more about the way that whites treated Blacks than about Blacks themselves. White characters were the main heroes of the story whose moral was that African Americans deserved to be treated better.

Home of the Brave 1949 was a continuation of the war movie genre and its integrationist agenda. It highlighted anti-Black bias in the army and the psychological effects of racial prejudice on an African American soldier, Private Peter Moss played by James Edwards. Private Moss is assigned to a reconnaissance patrol on a Japanese-held island in the South Pacific where he feels alienated because of his skin's colour. The film's plot is told in

[19] George Norford, *Opportunity* magazine, Summer 1948.
[20] *Foxes of Harrow* was the first novel by an African American writer to be adapted to a Hollywood film and the first to be nominated for an Oscar.
[21] Edward D. C. Campbell, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), p. 154.

flashbacks where Moss narrates the events during his therapy sessions. He confesses to his doctor while under hypnosis that he always felt excluded because 'none of them are like me, I'm coloured.' His feelings of being an 'outsider' are further worsened by his guilt after the death of his white friend and fellow soldier, Finch played by Lloyd Bridges, for which he blames himself. The film ends with Moss overcoming his paralysis, both physical and mental as his doctor yells a racial slur, 'You dirty nigger, get up and walk.' Moss is able to walk again and gets over racial prejudice which has been tormenting him his whole life.[22] Both Black and white press praised *Home of the Braves*. The *Amsterdam* took it as no less than 'a new era for Negroes in Hollywood.'[23] Even in the South, the film was well-received, mainly because it allowed viewers to see racism as a national rather than a Southern problem. The *Chicago Defender* reported that the film showing in Texas Richmond had 'sensational results in spite of the terrific heat wave.'[24]

Lost Boundaries 1949 extended the formula to embrace an entire Black family by setting them in a sleepy white village in New Hampshire. The film's story is that of a Black medical school graduate, Scott Carter played by Mel Ferrer, who passes for white after failing to find a job in Black hospitals because of his fair skin. He eventually settles with his family in a small New Hampshire town called Keenham, a fictional town, where the whole family is believed to be white. The newly appointed doctor soon gains the respect and trust of the residents and is integrated into the white community. The truth of the family's race is well hidden for long years, even from their own children. When the secret is finally revealed the children are in shock and the son decides to move to Harlem to 'find out what it's like to be a Negro' to find himself involved in a gun shooting. The film ends with Dr. Carter and his son

[22] Mark Robson, *Home of the Braves* (United Artists, 1949).
[23] *Amsterdam News*, May 7, 1949.
[24] *Chicago Defender*, July 30, 1949.

going back to Keenham. They are welcomed by the residents and attend the Sunday church service as usual where the minister preachers about racial tolerance and announces the government's decision to end the Navy's racial policy, enabling the father and son to enlist as they wished.[25]

Despite its exaggerated racial tolerance theme and its superficial portrayal of general blacks' struggle, for which it was criticised by Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times*, the film was generally well-received for its social message. [26] Walter White praised the script as 'one of the finest . . . and certainly most courageous treatment of the Negro in motion pictures to date.' [27] *Life* named it 'Movie of the Week' and praised it for 'setting off a round of raves, brotherhood awards, and hopes by DeRochemont that independents at last would receive recognition for showing how to introduce low budget pictures in the Hollywood system.'[28] Lilian Scott in the African American *Chicago Defender* made sure to praise the 'excellent' actors who carried the movie beyond the 'Hollywood boundaries of mediocrity and fear' but criticised producer DeRochemont for his 'less than painfully honest' Southern sequence and his failure 'to grapple too strenuously with the issues raised.' Even those Black reviewers whocriticised the film, supported it when it was censored in the South as it became a symbol of struggle against political censorship. [29]

Unlike *Lost Boundaries* and *Home of the Brave*, *Pinky* 1949 was the first major studio production on racism in the South. Pinky, Jeanne Crain, is a fair complex biracial young woman who attends a nursing school in the North, passing as white. There, she meets and

[25] Alfred L Werker, *Lost Boundaries* (Films Classics, 1949).
[26] Bosely Crowther noted that the film 'touches the immediate anxieties of only a limited number of Negroes.' (*New York Times*, July 30, 1949).
[27] *Chicago Defender*, February 25, 1949.
[28] *Life*, July 4, 1949.
[29] Lilian Scott, *Chicago Defender*, August 27, 1949.

falls in love with a white doctor who isn't aware of her racial heritage. She returns South to visit her grandmother, who pressures her to stay in the South to take care of an old and ailing white lady, Miss Em played by Ethel Barrymore, whom Pinky never liked for her racist attitudes. In her Southern hometown, Pinky faces all forms of racial discrimination, including a rape attempt. She eventually is obliged to challenge a prejudiced justice system when Miss Em, as a sign of gratitude for Pinky's efforts in taking care of her, leaves her a property. The will is then challenged by Miss Em's relatives, but Pinky eventually manages to keep her inheritance with the help of a white attorney friend of Miss Em, despite doubts and opposition from the entire community. The film ends with Pinky turning the inherited property into "Miss Em's Clinic and Nursery School" where she would benefit her community as Miss Em wished. [30]

Walter White was very happy with the script sent to him. He responded to Darryl Zanuck, 'it begins to look as though what you and Wendell and I have been working for all these years is beginning to show results.' Zanuck declared that the film which deals with 'a problem that exists in America, rather than on the Continent, will have a beneficial effect when seen here because it tends to prove by the very fact that such a picture can be produced in the United States, that America is a working democracy.' He continued that 'American filmgoers do not shy away from adult themes if they are presented in terms of hard-hitting plots which emphasize warm, human, entertainment value.'[31] However, the film's message and its aims to confront racial bigotry was probably weakened by the casting of Jeanne Crain, a white actress in the role of Pinky. A decision which the studio and the director were obliged to make taking into account the production codes, which wouldn't allow a love scene between a Black actress

[30] Elia Kazan, *Pinky* (20th Century Fox, 1949).
[31] *New York Times*, September 11, 1949.

and a white actor and also the fact that audiences were still not ready for such a step forward, especially in the South.

Bosley Crowther found the film vividly 'revealing and emotionally intense as it assembles illustrations of the cruel humiliations and abuse to which this girl is subjected after her identity is found out.' [32] In a different article, Crowther gave credit for Zanuck and the people at Twentieth Century-Fox for being brave with their film which takes viewers 'right into that area of most conspicuous racism, the Deep South, and have mirrored some ugly illustrations of the dark reign of Jim Crow rule down there.' He confirmed his previous criticism of *Lost Boundaries* and *Home of the Brave* as 'marginal representations,' unlike *Pinky* which marks 'a distinct step forward' as it 'comes right out with evidence of [the] real operation [of racism] in the South.' He still criticised the film's white prejudice through Pinky's and her grandmother's loyalty to the old lady and concluded that the film only scratched the surface of racism in the South.[33] Unlike Crowther who saw virtue and potential in the film, the Black press criticised its limited vision and its white prejudice. The *Eagle* thought the film was 'a false picture which had some good scenes.'[34] *Ebony* took a middle ground acknowledging the film's misgiving but noting that 'the key to the Pinky role is the growth of racial awareness.'[35]

Despite its uneven critical response, the film exposed discrimination practices in the South better than any other production before it. The fact that it was made by a major studio gave it dignity and credibility which benefited its message and the liberal cause in general. The

[32] Bosley Crowther *New York Times*, September 30, 1949.
[33] Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, October 9, 1949.

[34] *California Eagle*, October 20, 1949.
[35] *Ebony*, September 1949.

film's script writer, Philip Dunne, wrote in the *New York Times* noting that *Pinky* marked another 'break with the long-standing taboo against films dealing with the problem of racial and religious prejudice.' He believed that following the release of *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Crossfire, Pinky* and at least two other films (*Home of the Brave* and *Lost Boundaries),* 'the motion picture industry will touch on the inflammable topic of the Negro in American life.' [36]

Due to its racial content, *Pinky* was banned in Birmingham by police chief C. Floyd Eddins, who argued that the film 'violates the section of the city code dealing with Indecency and obscenity.' [37] A cut version of the film was shown in the Atlanta opening to avoid racial conflict.[38] The screening was attended by both whites and Blacks. The Policemen who were present to prevent possible demonstrations reported 'nothing louder than a sneeze' except for one instance, 'when the balcony on Negroes and ground floor for whites applauded "victory" for the Negro heroine played by Jeanne Crain.'[39]

The release of *Pinky* was followed by another message movie by a major studio. *Intruder in the Dust* 1949 by MGM was an adaptation of William Faulkner's race relations fable, with the same title, which defined Black experience as both entwined with white and morally superior to it. With the arrival of Schary at MGM, coming from RKO where he made *Crossfire*, director Clarence Brown could finally convince Mayer to make a movie which the latter opposed. Schary was a strong believer that 'films must provoke thought in addition to entertainment,' and that was the goal behind the making of *Intruder in the Dust*. [40] The film

[36] Philip Dunne, *New York Times,* May 1, 1949.
[37] *New York Times,* January 28, 1950.
[38] *New York Times*, October 29, 1949.

[39] *New York Times, November 18, 1949.*
[40] T.M, *New York Times*, May 16, 1954.

was shot on location in Oxford, Mississippi, a segregated town at the time of production, which forced Hernandez to live apart from the rest of the film's cast and crew.[41]

Lucas Beauchamp, played by Juano Hernandez, is a respectable Black landowner who finds himself falsely accused of the murder of a white man and imprisoned for it while the white man's family demand to lynch him themselves. With the help of two teenage boys, the town lawyer and an elderly lady, Lucas is proven to be innocent. The struggle to prove the innocence of the Black man leads to white recognition that it was them who 'were in Trouble not Lucan Beauchamp' because of their prejudices. Lucas becomes 'the keeper of [their] conscience' as notes the white lawyer and the young Child at the film's end. [42] The film's message and its conscious liberalism were well received and praised by the press, both white and Black. *California Eagle* called the film 'a smashing weapon against intolerance.'[43] The *Memphis Press-Scimitar* acknowledged the film's entertainment value and asserted that 'its argument will be heard, understood, perhaps heeded.'[44] Crowther in the *Times* thought the film 'slashes right down the core of the complex racial resentments and social divisions in the South.'[45]

Despite their different focuses and many flaws, message films did in one way or another encourage and support liberal thinking in post war/ Pre-civil rights movement America. They introduced issues of racism, discrimination, and injustice, which had been long ignored, to American mainstream popular culture and opened the way for further explorations. B*and of Angels* 1957 marked the comeback of slavery and the Old South to the silver screen. The

[41] *New York Times,* April 16, 1949.
[42] Clarence Brown, *Intruder in the Dust* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1949).
[43] *California Eagle*, November 17, 1949.
[44] *Memphis Press-Scimitar,* October 13, 1949.
[45] Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, November 19, 1949.

film, an adaptation of Robert Penn Warren 1955 novel, tells the story of Hamish Bond, played by Clark Gable, a former cruel slave trader who is ashamed of his past. Hamish buys a biracial slave, Amantha Starr played by Yvonne De Carlo, who had thought she was white all her life, only to find out after the death of her father that her mother was actually a slave, and she is sold into slavery to pay for her deceased father's debts. The story also includes Rau-Ru, Sidney Poitier, Hamish's slave and servant who is bitter that his master has been nice to him and considers that to be the worst kind of slavery. The particularity of *Band of Angels* was the fact that it presented White and Black Americans as neither all good nor all evil under the systemof slavery. The relationship between Hamish and his slave overseer Rau-Ru, and that between Hamish and Amantha expressed the evils of slavery and how it ruined innocent livesand relations.[46]

However, compared to the novel, issues of race, slavery and miscegenation were less focused on. The story was rewritten so that Amantha falls in love with her owner, and Rau-Ru regrets his unappreciative attitude towards his master. He frees him, after being captured by Union forces for burning his corps, as he realises that his federal commander was actually more prejudiced than his former Southern owner.' Nonetheless, the film softened Hollywood's supremacist assumptions about the South reinforced by the plantation films. *Band of Angels* was also the first film to focus on the sexual relationship between the master and his female slave in its promotion to attract audiences away from their TV sets. [47]

[46] Raoul Walsh, *Band of Angels* (Warner Bros., 1957).
[47] Raoul Walsh, *Band of Angels*.

'From Sambo to Superspade'[48]

Following the years of civil rights activism of the late 1950s to the 1960s, the Black community developed a rising sense of social and political consciousness and a growing vocalised dissatisfaction with the continued racism and inequality in American society, which led to the rise of the Black Power.[49] The long years of non-violent protest and political activism, led by Martin Luther King Jr., resulted in the signing of the Civil Rights Act by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, rendering segregation illegal in all public facilities and employment.[50] Yet, a few days after the signing of the act, a series of riots and insurrections erupted in Watts, California, leaving thirty-four people dead, hundreds arrested and $40 million in damage. The building racial tension and Black Americans' frustration with the system which secured their legal and political rights but only allowed them a second-degree citizens' status, as Black unemployment, political impotence, slum housing, and perceived lack of governmental concern persisted, led to a series of more than 384 violent uprisings in 298 cities between 1967 and 1968.[51]

By the mid-1960s, young, inner-city Black Americans' militancy distinguished itself from themainstream Civil Rights Movement led by King. Organisations such as the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) and the revolutionary Black Panther party rejected racial integration and celebrated their Black culture through fashion, literature, arts, and

[48] Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).
[49] For a detailed discussion on the ideologies of the Black Power, its emergence, leaders and politics of the period's militancy, see Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2006).
[50] Full transcript of the Act is found at: https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=97&page=transcript.
[51] Cornel West, 'The Paradox of the Afro-American Rebellion', *Duke University Press*, No. 9/10. The 60's without Apology (1984), 44–58 (pp. 50–53).

popular culture. They expressed racial pride and asserted their dissatisfaction with the limited and degrading representation of Black history and culture.[52]

African Americans became increasingly dissatisfied with the film industry's portrayal of African American life, especially the younger generation who felt that their mounting rage and militancy, is not being adequately represented in films. [53] Sidney Poitier, the first Black superstar in Hollywood, was under close scrutiny from the Black community and critics for the roles he played. As the Civil Rights movement reached its climax in the mid-1960s with historic legislations passed, the actor was becoming an increasingly contradictory figure.[54] After 1968 and the rising sense of rebellion and a desperate need for change, Blacks began toperceive 'the neutered or counterfeit sexuality of Sidney Poitier's roles as obsolete and insulting, especially when contrasted with the rising Black nationalist calls for a new, liberated Black sense of manhood and self.'[55] The sharpest criticism of the star was by Black dramatist Clifford Mason in the *New York Times.* In an article entitled 'Why Does White America Love Poitier So?' Clifford described Poitier as 'a showcase nigger, who is given a clean suit and a complete purity of motivation so that like a mistreated puppy, he has all the

[52] Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938*, Pelican Books (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 231–234.

[53] For a detailed discussion on Black-themed films made in the 1960s and how they were influenced by race relations see Christopher Sieving, *Soul Searching: Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation*, Wesleyan Film (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2011). The book discusses five case studies; *Gone Are the Days* (1963), *The Cool World* (1964), *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (never produced), *Uptight* (1968), and *The Landlord* (1970). The five films had disappointing returns and critical reception despite their claim of an honest depiction of contemporary race relations, but the experiences of their makers were useful for the Blaxploitation boom and the makers of these knew what audiences wanted to see on the screen.

[54] At the beginning of the 1960s, Poitier's cultivated, and well-dressed characters were perceived by the Black community as a sign of racial advancement and defiance of older stereotypes but by the second half of the 1960s, as his stardom peaked, his characters were becoming more controversial and Black cultural commentators described him a s as an 'inverted stereotype' and a 'million-dollar shoeshine boy.' Larry Neal, *New York Times*, August 3, 1969. For a critical survey of Sidney Poitier's films from this period see Edward Mapp, *Blacks in American Films: Today and Yesterday* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1972).

[55] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 72.

sympathy on his side and those mean white are just so many Simon Legrees.' He asserted that Poitier's characters are there only to reassure whites of their superiority, 'good nigger he is.'[56] Although another article was published the next month, where many readers and film industry people wrote to the newspaper defending Poitier and his career, many others agreed that Poitier's star persona didn't fit with the rising Black social and political consciousness. His *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* 1967, despite being a big box-office hit and winning several awards, reduced the social and political dimensions of the race problem. The successful Black doctor who is accepted as a suitor for a white daughter of a wealthy liberal family was a character whose qualities were not representative of most Black individuals at the time. The film was criticised for having no connection with contemporary concerns and struggles of the Black community. It marked Hollywood's last attempt in exploring the integrationist theme in its films.[57] The film's criticism made it clear that it was time that Blackcharacters are portrayed differently in films.

At the time, the film industry was facing major difficulties and a deepening recession. The 1960s and 1970s was a period of 'declining and fragmenting audiences, crisis and re-adjustment within the film industry, and conflict and turbulence within wider society.'[58] The once unified Hollywood audience was becoming more and more fragmented since the late 1940s. With the advent of coloured television, movie attendance and box office receipts began to fall drastically. To compensate for their losses, studios started leasing their products to television networks. In 1961, the average motion picture leased to a television network received $150.000 for two airings during a three-year period. By 1968, television networks

[56] Clifford Mason, *New York Times*, September 10, 1967.
[57] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Culture and the Moving Image (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 76–78.
[58] Tom Symmons, 'The Historical Film in the Era of New Hollywood, 1967-1980.' (Queen Marry University of London, 2016), p. 7.

stopped buying due to the rising cost, which reached 800.000$ and the film industry lost a major market. [59] By the late 1960s, Hollywood nearly collapsed. Major studios lost between $15 and $45 million, Columbia and Fox almost went bankrupt.[60]

To work its way out of the crisis and its staggering losses, the industry had to find new strategies for promoting its products and catering to the changing tastes of the contemporary audience. As a response to growing pressure from Civil Rights activists and recognising the commercial potential of the inner-city audience on box office profit, the film industry started paying more attention to the Black social experience and Black filmmakers. The two most noteworthy films in this respect were *The Learning Tree* (1969), African American director Gordon Parks' semi-autobiographical coming of age story depicting his childhood in the1920s Kansas. The film proved the potential of Black filmmakers by employing an all-Black crew. Next was *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) by another Black director, Ossie Daviswhose leading characters are two Harlem Black detectives, which set the key theme and aesthetic conventions of blaxploitation. The two films were popular among America's young,Black working class.[61]

The Blaxploitation Boom

The following year, the unexpected success of Melvin Van Peebles independent *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* 1971 created the perfect opportunity for Hollywood to exploit

[59] Attendance figures saw a brief rise in 1964-65 but dropped steeply than ever afterward. Some theatrical releases still managed to attract audiences, such as Twentieth Century Fox big-budget blockbuster, *the Sound of Music* 1965. The film cost $10 million but managed to gross over $100 million in rentals. Yet these films were big risks had they failed at the Box office, especially since the short-term bank loans, which were financing the theatrical productions were no longer enough to finance them.

[60] David Londoner, 'The Changing Economics of Entertainment' in *The American Film Industry*, ed. by Tino Balio, Rev. ed (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 607.

[61] *Variety* estimated ticket sales to African Americans accounted for up to one-third of the national total, but they made up only 10-15 percent of the population. Figures cited in Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 83.

the consumer potential of the Black audience to survive its financial crisis.[62] The film markedthe beginning of the Blaxploitation cycle. The term "blaxploitation" was coined by *Variety* magazine, combining the words "black" and "exploitation," to emphasise how these films exploited Black audiences' desires to see themselves on screen and their apparent appetite for'sex, violence and 'super-cool' individualism.'[63] The films were set in the inner city with contemporary jazz scores. *Sweetback* champions a '"bad nigger" who challenges the white oppressive system and wins,' noted Guerrero, 'thus articulating the main feature of the Blaxploitation formula.'[64] The film was followed by Gordon Parks' *Shaft* and *Super Fly* by Gordon Parks Jr., both in 1972, which were aesthetically better and crystallised the blaxploitation formula. They were later followed by a cycle of female-centred action-sex films such as *Cleopatra Jones*, *Coffy*, and *Foxy Brown*.

These films were very popular among Black urban audiences and made big financial success, despite their cheap budgets. *Sweet Sweetback* made 4.1 million in rentals, *Shaft* and *Superfly* generated $7.1 million and $6.4 million respectively.[65] After long years of trying to be integrated into the system and being equally represented by the film industry, Blaxploitation was Black's form of separation, although, in reality, many of these films were produced, distributed, or written by whites and helped the recovery of the predominately white film industry. The reason behind these films' success, noted Donald Bogle in an interview for the *New York Times*, is because they met the aspiration of the Black audiences who were tired of

[62] The film was written, directed, starred, and independently financed by Melvin Van Peebles. He leased the film to small distributors specialised in low budget exploitation films. Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, p. 247.
[63] Josiah Howard, *Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide* (London: Fab Press Limited, 2008), p. 12.
[64] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 86.
[65]Figueres form Lawrence Cohn, 'All-Time Rental Champs', *Variety*, 10 May 1993.

Poitier's desexed characters and wanted to see a 'viable, sexual, assertive, arrogant black male hero' on the screen.[66]

Black critics and several religious and cultural figures considered blaxploitation films another distortion in the representation of the race and opposed their violent and inappropriate content as well as Hollywood's exploitation and corrupting of the Black audience. Ed Guerrero observed that Blaxploitation films 'brought to the surface of African American discourse the subtle fissures and cracks of class tension, ideological conflict, and aesthetic arguments that had been simmering since the winding down of the civil rights movement.'[67] *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* provoked a heated debate following its release. It received backlash from most major Black newspapers for its exploiting and glorifying of the seamier sides of Black working-class life. [68] Yet, Huey Newton dedicated an extensive analysis and defence of the film in the *Black Panther* Party newspaper where he described it as 'the first truly revolutionary Black film made.'[69] Reacting to Newton's article, Lerone Bennett wrote in *Ebony* criticising the film and its aesthetic and concluded that it was 'neither revolutionary, nor black.'[70]

Shaft was more toned down compared to *Sweetback* and was praised by both White and Blackcritics. Yet, joining his voice to Bennet's in highlighting the weakness and danger of blaxploitation films, Clayton Riley wrote in the *New York Times* that *Shaft* and other

[66] Hale Broun, New York Times, August 26, 1973
[67] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 83.
[68] Jon Hartmann, 'The Trope of Blaxploit, ation in Critical Responses to "Sweetback"', *Film History*, 6.3 (1994), 382–404 (pp. 393–95).
[69] Huey P. Newton, *Black Panther,* January 6, 1971. The article is a reflection of the ideology of the party and its young members who felt the film expressed their community's unity against the oppressive whites and expressed support for the film as evidence of the potentials of an independent Black cinema and Black filmmakers to be commercially successful, unlike *Shaft*, for example, which was distributed by MGM.
[70] Lerone Bennet Jr., *Ebony*, September 26, 1971.

blaxploitation films 'ensure the wellbeing of the American spirit by offering Black life as an exercise in passive unreality.' He added that such films reworked old stereotypes and served to repress and contain rising African American political consciousness.[71] *Super Fly* sparked the greatest controversy and was considered the most dangerous of the three films for glamorizing the life of a cocaine dealer, which allegedly led to an increase in cocaine use among young inner-city Blacks. Large Black crowds lined the streets outside of theatres carrying signs that read 'Black Shame, White Profits!' and 'We Are Not All Pimps and Whores!'" [72] Soon after its release the Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB) was formed, made up of several civil rights and community groups, including the NAACP, CORE and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). CAB demanded direct action against such a 'cultural genocide.'[73] Defending his film against the accusations of corrupting the Black community and being an unrealistic portrayal of Black life, Gordon Parks noted that 'It's ridiculous to imply that blacks don't know the difference between truth and fantasy and therefore will be influenced in an unhealthy way.' [74]

By 1975, over 200 blaxploitation films had been released.[75] Yet, their increased critical opposition, the wave of cheap imitation that followed the earlier films, as well as the industry's recovery from the economic crisis marked the end of their boom. Throughout their short span of popularity, blaxploitation served the purpose of solving Hollywood's political and financial problems.[76] By the late 1970s, interest in Black-themed films waned. White action films such as *Walking Tall* (1973) contained the same core themes and motifs found in

[71] Clayton Riley, *New York Times*, August 13, 1972.
[72] Howard, *Blaxploitation Cinema*, p. 12.
[73] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 87,100.
[74] Charles Michener, *Newsweek*, October 23, 1972.
[75] Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s*, Twentieth-Century American Culture (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 98.
[76] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 75.

blaxploitation. Thus, the film industry no longer needed Black-themed films to draw its black audiences. This was evidenced when surveys showed that as much as 35% of the audience for *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973) were Black.[77]

Exposing or Exploiting Slavery?

Following the Second World War, American openness to foreign markets led to the rise of independent art houses. These were small neighbourhood theatres that specialised in non-Hollywood films and showed exclusively foreign and independent films.[78] By the late 1950s, as the popularity of these art houses rose, especially among young audiences, the subjects of the film shown became more "liberal". Foreign films were not covered by the Code of Production; therefore, their makers had more freedom to explore sensitive subjects and include scenes of nudity and sex. The foreign films provided American audiences with the titillation which was missing in television and the family entertainment Hollywood films. [79] Hollywood, again, motivated by commercial success and influenced by the rise of the art house's popularity, soon abandoned its production Codes, which had been weakening for years. In 1968, Jack Valenti, the newly elected head of the Motion Picture Producers Association, replaced the codes with the MPAA Ratings System (G, PG, R, X), which allowed filmmakers to explore themes that had been taboo for decades.[80]

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[77] James Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, the Power, the Money, the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 193.

[78] In the beginning, art houses showed films that were the 'cream of European filmmaking' and their audiences were convinced that such artistic products cannot be found in Hollywood film, which was more commercial. Yet the content of the films soon changed to more sensitive subjects which could not be addressed in Hollywood films because of censorship.

[79] Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. 293–95.

[80] Leonard J. Leff, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s / Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), p. 285.

As a result, graphic sex, violence, language, and other "adult" themes that would lure audiences away from their TVs became increasingly prominent in mainstream films. Violence became the main theme in the era's most successful productions such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Films with explicit sex scenes an X rating were even rewarded with Oscar nominations such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and The *Last Tango* in Paris (1972). The promise of taboo-breaking depictions of sex and violence became the main attraction for audiences. The big success of the infamous *Deep Throat* 1972 inaugurated the Golden Age of pornography. The film cost $24,000 and earned a staggering $20 million, due to its crossover appeal to middle-class cinemagoers. [81] Within a few years, cinema and American culture, in general, was completely changed. Social norms were pushed to the limit that distinguishing between artistic liberty and obscenity became a difficult task. Although these films were often raided by local law-enforcement officers for their obscene content, they became widely accepted into the mainstream movie industry and were acknowledged by critics. State legislative bodies tried to tighten their laws against obscenity and protect the liberties of the more conservative-minded citizens who didn't want to be exposed to obscene materials. [82] This resulted in the Miller v. California Supreme court decision which redefined obscenity.[83]

The changing social norms of American society and the rising Black militancy of the late 1960s inspired international and national filmmakers to produce films addressing racial issues. Unlike Blaxploitation which dealt with contemporary issues, these films opened windows into the past and went back to where it all started, slavery days. The filmmakers

[81] Sklar, *Movie Made America*, p. 300.
[82] David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979 (History of the American Cinema)* (Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press, 2000), p. 275].
[83] For full details see, https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ceos/citizens-guide-us-federal-law-obscenity

promised a revision of slavery that will expose the "truth." This revisionist cycle started with a German remake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Onkel Toms Hütte* (1965) by Géza von Radványi. The film still contained some of the Old South romanticism yet, it reflected Black growing social and political consciousness by depicting the exploitation of slaves. It contained several scenes of whipping and focused on Legree's sexual exploitation of Cassy. Due to racial tension that year and fear of triggering violence in theatres, the film wasn't released in the US in 1965. Later in 1969, following the assassination of Martin Luther King and Black militancy reaching its peak, the film was released in the US by exploitation film presenter Kroger Babb. Bab edited the movie to a shorter version, eliminating all the scenes of white idealism and slaves' submissiveness. He reshot several scenes adding sexual content to the film. But his biggest efforts were put into the promotion with a massive roadshow campaign and a big premier in Savanah. Bab used the historical significance of the story and its nostalgic appeal among southerners. But also wanted to appeal to Black audiences by highlighting Black resistance and adding new footage of interracial sex, promoting his film as Blaxploitation. The film was released again in 1977 following the success of the miniseries *Roots* to capitalise on its success.[84]

Another international film on slavery was *Addio Zio Tom* or *Goodbye Uncle Tom* 1971. An Italian semi-documentary film co-directed and co-written by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi. The film is a sadistic exploration of life in antebellum America with graphic depictions of the degrading conditions slaves lived under in the South. It includes several scenes of graphic violence, nudity, and sexual exploitation. Film critic Roger Ebert thought the film was 'disgusting, contemptuous insult to decency ever to masquerade as a

[84] For a detailed discussion of the Uncle Tom remakes see, Jacqueline Pinkowitz, 'Revising Slavery, Reissuing Uncle Tom's Cabin: Interracial Sex and Black Resistance in the Black Power Era Slavery Exploitation Film Cycle', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 52.4 (2019).

documentary, and a cruel exploitation, of poor African extras who played the slaves and had to enact the most dehumanizing situations.' [85] Attempting to capture Black militancy, the picture ends with a modern African American man daydreaming and fantasising about raping white women and murdering white families while reading *the Confessions of Nat Turner*.[86]

The first attempt of the slavery revisionist cycle in the US was announced in 1967. Producer Philip Langer declared that his film, *Slaves*, was intended 'to make a definite connection between the past and the fact that slavery was the cause of many racial problems that exist today.'[87] Actor Ossie Davis, who starred in the film, stressed that the film 'not only has historical validity but is indirectly related to the problems of today.'[88] The film was released on May 6, 1969, and starred singer Dionne Warwick as Cassy and Ossie Davis as Luke. The film's plot is very similar to that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* [89] Arthur Stillwell, a Kentucky slave owner in the 1850s, is forced to sell his faithful and trustworthy slave, Luke. He is bought by Nathan MacKay, Stephen Boyd, a former slave ship captain and a Mississippi plantation owner. MacKay is very fond of African culture and has his house fully decorated with African art. In one scene he gives his southern guests a speech on African artistic and cultural history and the scientific achievements of African Songhay and Timbuctoo. He believes in the African race superiority, yet he considers slavery a profitable business. The film captured the moment of Black racial pride through the slave mistress Cassy. She is portrayed as a strong character who is proud of her blackness and African origins and asserts, 'I am black and Comely. . . black as the African day.' She proudly wears her African accessories and gowns, gifted to her by Mackay, but refuses to submit to his sexual desires and defies him

[85] Roger Ebert, *the Chicago Sun,* November 14, 1972.

[86] Gualtiero Jacopetti, *Addio Zio Tom (Goodbye Uncle Tom)* (Cannon Film Distributors, 1971).
[87] A.H. Weiler, *New York Times*, December 24, 1967.
[88] *New York Times,* January 19, 1969.
[89] The script was written by novelist John Oliver Killens and released into a novel accompanying the film.

throughout the film. Unlike Uncle Tom, Luke is strong and defiant. He, Cassy, and other slaves plan to run away but when MacKay discovers their plot, Luke is flogged to death for refusing to tell his owner Cassy's whereabouts, even in exchange for his freedom. His death leads to a slave rebellion when the housekeeper sets the cotton sheds on fire to distract Mackay and enable Cassy to escape with the help of a sympathetic white neighbour.[90]

Slaves was among the year's biggest grossing films for Continental Distributing.[91] Yet, it received negative reviews from critics. Lou Cedrone of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* thought the film had the potential of enlightening viewers about slavery as it 'really was' yet, it was unfortunately badly done with a very backward cutting and direction which makes the film look like it was done in the silent era.[92] Larry Neal, in the *New York Times*, shared the same opinion noting that the film was an 'artistic and social failure' because it 'lacks focus' and depth as the director couldn't decide whose story to tell, the enslaved or the enslaver. Larry asserted that the scene with Mackay telling his guests about African cultural and scientific heritage had big potential- and was a significant moment in the history of film. Yet, it was 'marred by cheap concessions to the current sex craze, by editorial indecisiveness's, and by a failure to reach into the maw of the characters and the issue.'[93]

Clifford Terry of the *Chicago Tribune* called it 'a horrendous box-office exploitation of a horrendous historical exploitation' remarking that 'everyone involved with the creation of this pitiful production deserves, at the minimum, a good, sound whupping.'[94] Bruce Vilanch of the *Detroit Free Press* called the film 'a cheap, poorly-executed, thinly-veiled

[90] Herbert Biberman, *Slaves* (Continental Distributing, 1969).
[91] *Variety*, June 18, 1969.
[92] Lou Cedrone, *Evening Sun (Baltimore),* May 8, 1969.
[93] Larry Neal, *New York Times*, August 3, 1969.
[94] Terry Clifford, *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1969.

plea for black militancy,' noting that 'in Hollywood's former days it would have been called a 'heavy meller,' or melodrama gone sour, but in 1969 it is just a shade above sheer exploitation.' He praised the performances of Davis and Warwick. [95] Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* described the film as 'a kind of cinematic carpetbagging project in which some contemporary movie-makers have raided the antebellum South and attempted to impose on it their own attitudes that will explain 1969 black militancy.' But it turned out to be a 'pre-fab 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' set in an 1850 Mississippi where everybody—masters and slaves alike—talks as if he had been weaned, at best, on the Group Theater, and, at worst, on silent-movie titles.'[96]

The Making of *Mandingo*

Around the same time the above-mentioned films were being made, the project of *Mandingo* was first attempted. The novel written by Kyle Onstott had good critical reception and popularity abroad, especially in Italy where Italian producers Maleno Malenotti and Dino De Laurentiis teamed up and bought the rights to the novel in 1967. The film project for M*andingo* was officially announced at a 1969 press conference in Rome. [97] However, the making of the film was delayed due to financial problems in Malenotti's studio, who eventually retired and left the rights to the movie and book to De Laurentiis. The latter postponed the making of the film until he could secure a major studio and large budget production. The aim was achieved in 1973 when Paramount agreed to partially finance the

[95] Bruce Vilanch, *Detroit Free Press*, July 4, 1969.
[96] Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, July 3, 1969.
[97] Robert Malenotti and Damiano Damiani were assigned as scriptwriters and Alberto Lattuada as director. The film was planned to be shot in Brazil and the role of Mede was offered to heavyweight boxer Mohamed Ali who turned it down for religious reasons. (96-97)

film. [98] This delay in the making of the film might have been the reason behind its negative reception, as will be shown below. Released in 1975, the film missed the moment of Black militancy that the previous films captured and coincided more with the white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement.

Mandingo, the novel, was published in 1957. Kyle Onstott was not a novelist, yet he had previously written a novel on dog breeding, which was his passion. His motivation to write *Mandingo* came from his personal interest in slavery and was further encouraged by his adoptive son's, Philip Onstott, studies on Western African history and the Mandinka people.[99] In the novel, Mandingo is defined as 'a hermetic tribe of Western Sudan believed to be Arab or Berber in origin. Many of them very handsome, very strong, sturdy and robust. The pure breed one were of a rich copper colour and had Moorish features as opposed to negro features.' The writer emphasised that Mandingos are 'distinctly not Negroes' but 'they were lumped in with the true Negroes and enslaved when the slavers were able to acquire them.'[100]

In an interview promoting his just-published novel with *Newsweek*, Onstott narrated that 'since my childhood in Illinois, I have always been horrified and strangely drawn to slavery.' He had heard many bizarre stories and tales of slavery from his mother's relatives who lived in Kentucky but didn't own slaves themselves. When he decided to write *Mandingo*, Onstott based some of his characters on those stories, but he also made extensive research on the subject.[101] In an article for *True: The Man's Magazine*, Onstott described American slavery

[98] Paul Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo: The Falconhurst Books and Films*, Illustrated Edition (New York: iUniverse, 2009), pp. 98–99.
[99] Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo*, p. 5.
[100] Kyle Onstott, *Mandingo* (United States: Fawcett Crest Books, 1957), p. 7.
[101] *Newsweek*, May 13, 1957.

as a shocking system where 'slaves had no rights whatsoever [and] most slave owners regarded their slaves as we might today regard domesticated animals.' There were no laws to protect slaves, and slave owners believed it was their right to rape their female slaves or offer them to other white men.[102] Despite its bulk of over 600 pages, Onstott's novel sold over 4.5 million copies in the US alone. Onstott himself was not particularly fond of the work, but it brought him enough revenue to retire. Its critical reception was mixed. Earl Conrad in the *Associated Negro Press* thought it 'was the most sensational, yet the truest book [he had] ever read.' Reverend Daniel Poling in the *Christian Herald* noted that 'never had anything in fiction as appalling, so terrible, and alas, so nauseating but at the same time so convincingly authentic come to this reviewer's hand.[103]

Influenced by the historical writing of the time, *Mandingo* challenged the benevolence of slaveholders and portrayed slavery as a merciless and exploitative system. When Onstott was writing his novel, historiography on slavery was entering a phase of revision with the work of distinguished Northern historian Kenneth Stampp *The Peculiar Institution* 1956. Stampp's work challenged the conclusions made by U.B Philips, which had dominated scholarly and even popular understandings of slavery for years. *The Peculiar Institution* relied on the same framework as Phillips, however, Stampp's research acknowledged the maltreatment of the slaves who were victims of a profitable economic system. Stampp overturned Phillips' interpretation of slavery as a mild but inefficient system, for the slave owner, and concluded that slavery was harsh but profitable.[104]

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[102] *True: The Man's Magazine*, October 1959.
[103] Cited in Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo,* pp. 19–20.
[104] Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964).

A few years later, Stanely Elkins once again revived controversy around the history of slavery with his *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life,* first published in 1959. In his book, Elkins compared the Southern plantation to a Nazi concentration camp and argued that slaves suffered from the same psychic trauma which leaves them damaged for life and turns them into "Sambos" completely controlled by their masters. [105] Elkin's controversial book, which was not based on any empirical data, raised new questions among scholars and stimulated several new works. His emphasis on slavery's 'depersonalizing' impact on the slaves provoked many scholars to focus their research on slaves' life, culture, family, and resistance, leading to the rise of the "culture and conscience school" of the 1970s. Another controversial work that influenced much of the 1970s revisionist scholarship, especially by Black nationalist scholars, was *The Confessions of Nat Turner* 1967 by William Styron. The controversial writer imagined Nat Turner, the leader of a slave resistance in the Antebellum South, as psychologically damaged. Despite severe criticism from the Black community, Styron's work won critical acclaim and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1968.[106]

Onstott's novel was revolting for the standards of the times when even scholars were still defending the institution of slavery. It condemned slavery as a dehumanising system where slave children are used as footstools for their master to treat their rheumatism and women are encouraged to mate with several males to have children who will be taken away from them to be sold. But it also justified it by presenting the slave owners themselves as victims of the institution, who don't know any other way of life. They are convinced that 'slavery was ordained by God and there ain't nothing' they kin do about it.'[107] And the slaves as being

[105] Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery; a Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).
[106] William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (London: Cape, 1968).
[107] Kyle Onstott, *Mandingo* (London: Pan Books Ldt., 1961), p. 37.

happy with that and enjoy white attention of any sort, including rape and whipping, because they genuinely love their masters, especially Hammond who is portrayed as a "kind" master. He notes, 'I 'sponsible fer 'em. I'm right fond of our niggers, and right proud of 'em. Every one of 'em is a hickory.' The writer's passion for dog breeding influenced the main theme of his novel. The Maxwells, father and son, run a large plantation where breeding and selling slaves is the main business. [108]

The script of the film focused mainly on the final quarter of the novel, which contained most of the book's plot and avoided earlier chapters' sentimental description of the plantation and the slaves' loyalty and love to Hammond.[109] Producer Ralphe Serpe told a *Los Angeles* journalist who visited the set in New Orleans that 'the film was a human, sociological story that's going to bring about a better understanding between the races.' He noted that the film is 'faithful to the story of the book but not the spirit,' for the book was 'repulsive.'[110] When he started preparing for the film in 1973, De Laurentiis wanted Richard Fleischer to direct the film.[111] The director recalled that De Laurentiis first sent him a copy of the screenplay, which was a translation from Italian into English that contained 'all the worst elements of the novel.' Fleischer immediately dismissed it, but De Laurentiis insisted that he at least read the novel. The Director was still not convinced, and it took several attempts, and even hiring another director, before he finally agreed to make the film on the condition that another screenplay would be written, which he and scriptwriter Norman Wexler worked on together

[108] Onstott, *Mandingo*, p. 39.
[109] Especially Meg, one of the twin boys servants, who the novel suggests he is sexually attracted to Hammond. Similarly, Big Pearl is portrayed as having feelings for Hammond and waits impatiently for their sexual encounter although she is well aware that the master is interested only in light skin slave girls and she is a pure Mandingo with dark skin and strong musk. Unlike in the film where she is very reluctant, even upset, but has no choice.
[110] Jeff Millar, *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1975.
[111] The two men had been friends and worked on several film projects before.

and the producer approved.[112] Wexler noted that the final script 'was dispel[led] of all the racist myths.'[113]

Fleischer was not the only one who hesitated before accepting to direct the film. The controversial subject of the film made all the cast hesitate before accepting their roles. Susan George declared that she 'wasn't at all keen to do the film, I thought it was unnecessarily sensational. It wasn't until I learned that the whole story is based on fact that I agreed to accept the part.'[114] Commenting on the similarities between her character and that of Scarlett O'Hara, in *Gone with the Wind*, George ironically noted, 'aren't they both bitches?' She said she never saw *GWTW* and was not trying to imitate Vivien Leigh.[115] Perry King and ken Norton also hesitated. Norton refused the role twice because he was offended by the way Black people are depicted in the story. But then, 'I felt that it was something that needed to be told, that was never told before,' noted Norton.[116] The heavyweight boxer didn't have any acting skills, but the director made a smart decision by giving him very few lines and only relying on his physique for the role.

Before starting the making of the film, Fleischer claimed he did 'considerable research into the background,' and read as 'much material as was available,' even though he had confidence that the book was 'well researched' and 'based on true incidents.'[117] Fleischer thought that *Mandingo*, the novel, was the most honest representation of slavery he could

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[112] Interview by Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, "Richard Fleischer on *Mandingo*" *Movie* 22, February 1976.
[113] Studio pressbook 1975, British Film Institute- BMM-36891.
[114] Susan George was best known for her shocking role in Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1975), which featured George in a notoriously brutal gang rape scene.

[115] *Daily Express*, September 13, 1974.

[116] Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo,* p. 113.
[117] Interview on *Mandingo*, *Movie* 22.

find. Everything else was the images of 'happy darkies strumming banjos. . . It's shocking to think that [slavery] existed in our country as late as 115 years ago.' Fleischer asserted that he was 'not interested in making white people feel guilty about slavery but just to show what black people had to go through to arrive where they are today.' From his part, De Laurentiis declared that *Mandingo* was intended to 'reach beyond the sentimentalized South of other films with uncompromising honesty and realism to show the true brutalizing nature of slavery.' [118]

The film is set on a decaying plantation, Folconhurst, in 1840. The owner Warren Maxwell, James Mason, and his crippled son, from a childhood accident, Hammond played by Perry King, run a slave breeding plantation. Maxwell is eager for his son to get married and have children yet, the son is more interested in his Black mistresses and afraid he 'wouldn't know what to do with a white lady.' When Hammond finally marries his cousin Blanche, Susan George, he discovers she is not a virgin on their wedding night and completely abandons her after falling in love with a slave named Ellen, Brenda Sykes, who becomes his concubine. He also buys himself a Mandingo for breeding, Mede played by boxer Ken Norton, who becomes the centre of his attention as he trains him to become a fighter. Frustrated by her husband's ignorance and driven by her jealousy of the slaves who have her husband's full attention, Blanche calls Mede into her room and seduces him. Their encounter leaves the white mistress pregnant, but she convinces her husband the baby is his, until the child is born black. This latter leads to the downfall of everyone on the plantation. The baby is killed by the doctor, Blanche is poisoned by her husband and Mede is boiled to death also by Hammond. The killing leads to a slave rebellion where Mem, the house slave, shoots and kills his old master before running away and Hammond is left to face all the destruction. [119]

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[118] Jeff Millar, *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1975.
[119] Richard Fleischer, *Mandingo* (Paramount Pictures, 1975).

Fleischer eliminated most of the novel's shocking aspects and added other themes connecting the story to contemporary racial issues. The director and scriptwriter moved away from the heavy sexual content and slave breeding themes.[120] Slave breeding as the main business of the Maxwells is found in both the novel and the film. Yet, in the novel, Warren Maxwell asserts that 'Falconhurst ain't no cotton-growing' plantation. Jest a nigger farm, a nigger nu'sery.'[121] In the film, the slaves aren't shown working in the fields either but that is because the scene was cut while editing, explained the director. Nevertheless, Fleischer still seems to be convinced that the Maxwell's main business was slave breeding. He suggested in an interview that they 'were breeding and selling slaves [which] was much more profitable than growing cotton. Cotton prices went up and down, but slave prices went on going up until the Civil War.'[122] Slave breeding in the South was one of the most contested topics among historians at the time the film was being made and until this day. In their *Time on the Cross*, Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman dedicated a section entitled "The Myth of Slave-Breeding" where they noted that 'the evidence put forward to support the contention of breeding for the market is meager indeed.'[123] Although many scholars have acknowledged the profitability of the slave trade and the existence of slaves' selling by the upper South to the developing lower South, a systematic breeding of slaves for markets was never

[120] Incest between the slaves is briefly mentioned in the film when Hammond and his father find out that Mede and Big Pearl are siblings, after buying him but Maxwell still insists on mating them, even with the risk that their children might be born deformed. However, in the novel, incest is normalised. Mede is bought, mainly because Hammond finds out he is Big Peral's brother, which makes him a pure Mandingo. He is mated with both Big Pearl, his sister and Lucy, his own mother and everyone on the plantation is fine with that, including the slaves. Similarly, the Mammy character of the story, Lucrecia Borgia is mated with several slave males in the novel, a subject which is openly discussed at lunch while the Maxwells are entertaining guests. The slave is proud to have borne 25 children and to be pregnant again despite her age.
[121] Onstott, *Mandingo*, p. 27.
[122] Interview on *Manding*, *Movie22.*
[123] Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 1st ed. (Boston; Toronto: Little, Brown and Co, 1974), pp. 78–86.

evidenced. [124] Yet, the concept was widely present in the popular literature on slavery. In his controversial and best seller work *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, William Styron has one of his characters, Judge Jeremiah Cobb, describe Virginia as 'A monstrous breeding farm' to supply 'Little black infants by the score, the hundreds, the thousands, the tens of thousands! The fairest state of them all, this tranquil and beloved domain-what has itnow become? A nursery for Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas.'[125]

Nonetheless, slave owners encouraged slave breeding on their plantations and established certain rules to regulate such practices noted Gregory Smithers in his book *Slave Breeding : Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History.* Using testimonies of formerly enslaved African Americans shared with interviewers from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Smithers identified several points emphasized by the former slaves when recalling their experiences with slave breeding. First, they all agreed that "special slaves" were chosen by their masters for the purpose of breeding. The men 'were known as plantation "studs" or "bucks," the women as "wenches."' Second, they noted that the forced breeding of slaves resulted in dehumanizing social practices that separated the "breeding" slaves from the average field slave leading to the separation of many families and suffering of family members. [126]

[124] Richard G. Lowe, Randolph B. Campbell., 'The Slave-Breeding Hypothesis: A Demographic Comment on the "Buying" and "Selling" States', 42.03 (1976), 401–12.
[125] Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner,* p. 77.
[126] Gregory D. Smithers, *Slave Breeding Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), p. 101.

From the first scene, the film distinguished itself as a reversed representation of slavery and plantation life from earlier Classical Hollywood plantation films. It begins with a scene in Folconhurst where a slave chattel is being led for inspection by a slave trader who denies them any human dignity. In the background of the scene, a funky protest blues plays, with the refrain 'I was born in this time, to never be free,' sung by eminent bluesman Muddy Waters. The inhumane and exploitative nature of the slave trade is again emphasised in a scene of a slave auction in New Orleans where Mede is bought by Hammond after being thoroughly inspected by a German middle-aged woman, including slipping her hand into his loincloth. The audiences are introduced to the exploitative nature of the slave-master relationship, which is based on the profitability of the master at the expense of the slave's freedom and dignity.

Fleischer noted that his intention was 'to make primarily a gothic horror story' and at the same time, he wanted 'to make a film that had something important about our society.' For him, slavery corrupted and destroyed the lives of both whites and Blacks. Contrary to earlier plantation films' big mansions, Folconhurst is introduced to viewers as a run-down plantation with no furniture and stained and cracked walls. Fleischer's depiction of the plantation aimed 'to portray visually the barrenness of the people's souls and the corruption of their morals and ethics.' He wanted his viewers to imagine slavery as 'a beautiful cake that's filled with maggots, so that when you are distance away from it, it's very beautiful and romantic, but when you get up close it's horrible.'[127] Reflecting on his planter role, Perry King remarked that his character 'could neither rise above nor even question the society which has so warped him.'[128] James Mason concurred, adding that *Mandingo* was meant 'to enlighten the audience insofar it exposes in dramatic terms the truth about slave labor and its adjunct, slave breeding.'[129]

[127] Interview on *Mandingo, Movie 22*.5, 1975.

[128] *Atlanta Constitution,* May 1975.

[129] *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1975.

The film introduced the theme of rebellion among the slaves, which no Classical Hollywood film ever fully explored, and inverted the myth of the slaves' devotion and submissiveness to their gentle owners through the rebellious slave Cicero, Ji-Tu Cumbuka. The character was a creation of the film's scriptwriter and did not exist in the novel. Cicero serves as the embodiment of Black militancy and resistance. He is the voice of rebellion against white control. He proudly carries an R scar on his back for attempting to run away multiple times. On his last night in Folconhurst, after being sold to a slave trader, he still preaches to the other slaves, 'How y' all feel layin' here chained while white men walkabout, do his pleasure with a black girl?' He encourages Mem, the house slave, to abandon his submissiveness around his master and stand for himself. He teaches him how to read, an act which Mem is punished for by a whip but awakens his rebellious spirit as Mem eventually becomes Cicero and kills his master. After being sold, Cicero steals his new master's gun and leads a slave uprising killing a white family before he is caught and lynched. Mede helps capture him.

Before he is hanged, he blames Mede but proudly tells him, 'Leaswise, I ain't gonna die like you gonna die, like a slave.[130]

Until his last-minute, Cicero defies slavery and expresses his pride in his ancestry. Just before he is hanged, he delivers a resentful speech to his lynchers: 'I ain't going give no lifetime of misery and sweat to these peckerwoods, I'd rather die than be a slave! You, Peckerwoods, that's right! You peckerwoods were oppressed in your own land. We was free and you brought us here, in chains. But now, we here. And you just better know, this is much our land as it's your'n…' Just before he is hanged, he still defies his lynchers telling them, 'after you hang me, kiss my ass!' Cumbuka recounted going to see the film in New York where he found that audiences were most responsive to his character and everybody 'jumped and gave the high five' after Cicero gave his speech before being lynched. He also went to a drive-in theatre where everyone started 'turning on their lights and honking their horn' after the scene, noted the actor.[131]

After Cicero's lynching, Mede who until that moment has had a special relationship with Hammond and been treated better than the other slaves, mainly because he is his prize-fighter, begins to doubt his loyalties. His doubt is further intensified when Mem asks him when 'are you gonna learn the colour of your skin?' and stop being 'a white man fighting animal.' The question triggers a feeling of guilt and regret which climaxes when Mede has to kill another slave in a Mandingo fight. [132] Even though the Mandingo fights were limited to only two, one being accidental, in the film compared to several in the original texts, critics still condemned their violence.

[130] Fleischer, *Mandingo*.
[131] Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo*, p. 143.
[132] Fleischer, *Mandingo*. The director later noted that the film had more scenes featuring Mede's growing sense of rebellion and regretted having deleted them while editing. (Paul Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo*, Pp.135-136).

Slaves wrestling among themselves for entertainment purposes was a common practice on plantations, mainly on Sunday mornings. This was even encouraged by the slave owners but not to the extent of slaves killing each other's as portrayed in the film, as the latter would contradict the profitable nature of slavery and no slave owner would be willing to sacrifice a healthy and strong slaves. In his autobiography, Henry Bibbs describes in detail the nature of these fights noting that the slave owners even gave their wrestling slaves whiskey before the fight. They would then make their bets and lay chips on one slave's head, 'daring another to tip it off with his hand; and if he tipped it off, it be called an insult, and cause a fight'. He continues noting that, during the fight, the slaves are 'not allowed to fight a duel, nor to use weapons any kind. The blows are made by kicking, knocking, and butting with their heads; they grab each other by their ears, and jam their heads together like sheep. If they are likely to hurt each other very bad, their masters would rap them with their walking canes, and make them stop. After fighting, they make friends, shake hands, and take a dram together, and there is no more of it.' [133]

The scene of the bloody Mandingo fight in New Orleans, which is around four minutes, where Mede fights and kills another slave fighter by biting his jugular vein, is very hard to watch indeed. Fleischer admitted that the exaggerated violence ofthe scene was intentional to expose the violence of slavery. He recalled that the original scenewas even more violent, but he had to 'manipulate' it because of censorship, a 'compromise' that he was 'very unhappy about', asserted the director. For it was a scene he 'wanted to appear real and actual' more than any other.[134]

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[133] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave.* (New York, 1948), p. 23 <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15398/15398-h/15398-h.htm> [accessed 9 June 2022].

[134] Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo*, p. 101, 121, 137.

It was the violence of that fight that made Mede doubt his relationship with his master and finally spoke up telling his master that 'ain't nothing worth all this fighting and killing.'[135]

Another revision of the plantation myth was the introduction of interracial sex between a black male and a white woman. *Mandingo* wasn't the first film to explore the sexual exploitation of slaves by their masters, but the film inverted Hollywood's tradition of representing rape and sexual assault of innocent young white women by black "beasts," introduced in *Birth of a Nation.* The sex scene between Blanche and Mede destroyed the image of the white Southern lady and her purity. Seducing her husband's slave and threatening him to have sex with her, Blanche becomes the white 'black brute' Gus from *Birth of a Nation* and Mede becomes Flora Cameron, who is forced to jump off a cliff to save herself from rape. However, Mede is not given the opportunity to save himself and the act he is forced into eventually leads to his death.

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[135] Fleischer, *Mandingo*.

The scene was one of the most criticised aspects of the film even though 'sexploitation' strategy and such scenes were present in most film of the time to attract audience away from their television where entertainment was more conservative. Critics accused Fleischer of using such titillation only for profit. Fleischer admitted he found such elements 'distasteful but necessary.' He stressed that he wasn't trying to make an exploitation film, explaining that he only used graphic violence or sexual content when the story required it. He elaborated, 'there was no reason to show Mede laying Big Pearl [a slave girl], that would be outright pornography.' However, the sexual encounter between Mede and Blanche was necessary, 'to see the real reason for Mede being killed, you have to see the sex act.' He found the scene effective and the 'contrast between the white skin and the black skin . . . almost like a work of art.' [136]

Even the end of the film was a reversal of plantation myth, no lovers reunited, no war ends, no plantation rebuilt, just total destruction. Fleischer chose an ironic and more interesting end to the story than that of the book. Everything that Hammond, who was portrayed as a liberal and caring master throughout the film, worked hard for was lost and destroyed. He lost his wife, favourite slave, father, and the child he had long been waiting for, to be an heir to his plantation and business, within a few minutes. These events revealed his more traditional slave owner ways as he kills Mede by boiling him in hot water and poisons his wife as a punishment for their infidelity. His love for Ellen, which seemed to be real and was one of the reasons behind his wife's infidelity, suddenly disappears and he tells her 'Don't think because you get into my bed, you anything but a nigger' when she tries to stop him from

[136] Interview on *Mandingo, Movie22.*

Killing Mede, after having reassured her throughout the film that 'No one, black or white, gonna take your place.' [137]

Aware that African Americans are going to be the film's biggest audience, De Laurentiis promoted it as an exploitation film. The poster of the film had a red background with few sentences invitingviewers to 'Expect the savage. The sensual. The shocking. The sad. The powerful. The shameful. Expect all that the motion picture screen never dared to show before. Expect the truth. Now you are ready for *Mandingo*.'[138] The main section has images of the two interracial couple. A black muscular man holding a white woman with a nude back, and nextto them a white man carrying a fainted black woman in his arms, which looks like a parody of *Gone with the Wind*'s poster which features Clark Gable holding Vivien Leigh the same way. The lower section of the poster has images of the film's most revolting scenes, the boiling of Mede in hot water, the beating of Mem, the Mandingo fight and Maxwell using a child slave as a foot stool.[139]

The film opened in New York on Wednesday, May 7, 1975, at the Criterion on Broadway, a venue for many black action hits, and at RKO 86th Street Twin. In his interview with film and pop culture historian Paul Talbo, Fleischer recalled that the first screening was 'tremendous' and the audiences were very responsive, especially African Americans who yelled 'Go get 'em!' and applauded the scene where James Mason gets killed.[140]

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[137] Richard Fleischer, *Mandingo* (Paramount Pictures, 1975).
[138] *Mandingo* Poster, British Film Institute.
[139] Edward D. C. Campbell in *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*, claims that the studio hired the same artist who did the *GWTW* poster and made sure the same design to highlight the contrast between the two film and their presentation of slavery. p. 185.
[140] Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo*, p. 139.

The latter was a consciousdecision made by the director, for the character doesn't die in the book but when making the film, Fleischer 'felt very strongly that an audience would be left very dissatisfied if we didn'tkill one white person.'[141]

The following day, the New York critics condemned the film and its obscene content. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*, described the film as a 'steamily melodramic non-sense.' The reviewer thought that the serious intentions the filmmakers might have had to expose the reality of slaves' life on the old plantation, were completely 'denied by the camera's erotic interest in the techniques of humiliation mostly with sex and violence.' [142] In another article, Canby put *Mandingo* in the category of bad films, noting that the film 'has less interest in slavery than *Deep Throat* has in sexual therapy.'[143] *Variety* described the film as a 'ludicrous' and 'embarrassing' representation that 'wallows in every cliché of the slave-based white society in the pre-Civil War South.[144] However, the New York audiences didn't seem to care about the bad reviews. The film scored $130.000 at the Criterion and RKO 86th St. [145]

The producer's reputation for making exploitation films influenced most of the reviews in the white press.[146] Critics almost unanimously denied any historical or even artistic value in the film and condemned it as 'vulgar' and far from the historical moment, it attempts to represent.[147] Kevin Thomas, in the *LA Times*, noted that the film's 'condemnation of slavery'

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[141] Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo*, p. 139.
[142] Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, May 8, 1975.

[143] Vincent Canby, *New York Times,* May 18, 1975.

[144] Murf (Arthur D. Murphy), Variety, May 7, 1975.

[145] *Variety*, May 14, 1975.
[146] Thomas Meehan, *New York Times*, July 27, 1975. The article described him as possessing an 'uncanny knack, especially for a foreigner, for sensing what American audiences want in the way of entertainment.' In the interview De Laurentiis noted that the secret of a successful film is an exciting story which makes the person who buys a ticket happy.
[147] Richard Schickel, *Time,* May 19, 1975.

is ‘but an excuse to project the most salacious miscgesnation-inspired sex fantasies ever seem this side of an X rating.’ [148] Andrew Sarris, of the *Village Voice,* even regretted that his senior editor thought the film ‘is too significant as a ‘popular phenomenon’ to be dismissed with concise disgust,’ but felt he was best fitted to review the film rather than letting a ‘more charitable soul do a trendy think-piece.’ Same as most other reviewers, Sarris condemned the film as racist and sexist. [149]

As the film was shown in other cities around the country, critics continued their scathing reviews of the film, its graphic violence and large amount of nudity which ‘gives the R rating a bad name.’[150] Pulitzer winner critic, Roger Ebert, attended the film’s screening in Chicago where he was unpleasantly surprised that the city of Chicago allowed children, accompanied by their parents, to attend the screening, despite the film’s R rating. The critic was deeply upset with the city’s relaxed censorship and concerned about the film’s negative influence on the young viewers. He noted, ‘if I'd been one of the kids in the audience, I'm sure I would have been terrified and grief-stricken.’[151] Sceptical of Ebert’s review of the film and his claim about the film’s influence on children, Bob Greene of the *Detroit Free Press,* wrote a column where he reported the attitudes of youngsters who saw or heard of the film.[152] Shockingly, they all unanimously admired the film and were most fond of its violent scenes.[153]

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[148] Kevin Thomas, L.A. Times, June 13, 1975.

[149] Andrew Sarris, *Village Voice*, May 26, 1975.

[150] *Boxoffice*, May 19, 1975.

[151] Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 25, 1975.

[152] The survey was conducted by a second-grade teacher in a large ethnically mixed Chicago elementary school. The children raged from second to seventh grade.

[153] Published in *Boxoffice*, July 7, 1975.

Ebert's review described *Mandingo* as 'racist trash, obscene in its manipulation of human beings and feelings.'[154] The critic was most repulsed by the exploitation of 'interracial sexual intercourse, which is the only kind that takes place.'[155] Aesthetically speaking, the critic felt the film's structure was odd. Many important events are missing which makes the story hard to follow.[156] He thought James Mason's performance was 'adequately decrepit.' Ebert's opinion was shared by Hank White, in the African American *Common Bonds*, who was very critical of the actors' performance and wrote that James Mason's southern accent sounded like Redd Fox doing an impression of Hitler and Ken Norton 'should have stayed in the ring as he merely grumbles through his lines.'[157] He saved his strongest criticism to Susan George, who he thought was probably the worst actress in Hollywood and her acting sounded more like she was doing a parody of the film itself.[158]

A *Chicago Tribune* article listed *Mandingo* in the "porno parade" alongside *Deep Throat*, and Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci's arthouse drama *Last Tango in Paris* (1973).[159] White reviews of the film mostly related to the debates on obscenity of the time and blamed De Laurentiis for using miscegenation, sex, and physical cruelty for promoting his film.

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[154] Ebert's criticism of the film was particularly ironic given the fact that he wrote the screenplay for the bawdy sexploitation parody *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) for the infamous soft-porn director Russ Meyer.
[155] Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 25, 1975.

[156] The director admitted that the first version of the film was over three hours, so he had to cut many scenes which made 'all the incidents tumble on each other, I think too rapidly.' *(*Interview *on Mandingo, Movie22)*
[157] Many reviewers, both British and American, criticised Mason's accent despite the actor's claim that 'for a British, the Southern accent is much easier to do than those in other parts of the United States' and his efforts to develop it by listening to recorded speeches by elderly North Carolina senator Sam J. Ervin Jr.
[158] Hank White, *The Common Bond*, December 1, 1975.
[159] Marlyn Beck and Ellsworth Redinger, *Chicago Tribune*, September 28, 1975.

The filmwas categorised somewhere between pornography and blaxploitation. A review in the *Independent Film Journal* even accused it of inciting racial violence due to its end with theslaves call to arms.[160]

The US Catholic Conference issued a statement through its broadcasting and film division condemning the film's scenes of 'nudity, graphic sex, violence, sadism laid with a cynical disregard for the demands of morality and art,' upholding that such elements were included only for box-office and not intended to expose the brutalizing nature of slavery and its destructive effects on both owner and slave, as claimed the studio. The film, the Conference concludes, 'leaves the field strewn with victims, one of them being the MPAA code, which left [the film] get by with an R rating.' [161] These 'distasteful elements', as noted by the Catholic conference, contributed to the film's grossing over $100.000 in its six-day debut at New York City's Criterion Theatre.[162] The film was one of the biggest money-makers of the year despite the critics' denunciation. Following its New York opening, it continued to make big grosses when showing all over the country.

Charles Shere of the *Oakland Tribune* was one of the very few white critics who found value in the film. He argued that the film might be 'exploitive, but certainly, no more than the system it describes.' Sphere was the only critic who seems to have understood the filmmakers' aims and interpreted the film's explicitness as its filmmaker had intended. He

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[160] *The Independent Journal of Film*, April 30, 1975.

[161] *Jet*, 5 June 1975. The film grossed $20.717 on opening day at two theatres in New York City. (*Boxoffice*, May 19, 1975.)

[162] *Variety,*4 June 1975; Pittsburgh, '*Mandingo* is blazing away in the first week at the Gateway as the rest of the first runs go through another modest week.' Buffalo,' *Mandingo* hit both sides of the color line in Greater Buffalo debut grossing $12.000 at inner-city Loews Teck and $8.000 at suburban Holiday.' *Variety*, Jun 11, 1975; Cleveland, '*Mandingo* is the only ray of sunshine in an otherwise rainy weekend and dull box-office with drive-ins pacing the way. *Mandingo* is racking up a smash $95.700 in opening round at an 11-house showcase.' *Variety*, May 28, 1975; Philadelphia, 'the film is a blockbuster $90.000 at the Fox.'

found the sex and violence 'natural and inoffensive.'[163] Fleischer explained that violence was necessary for a real presentation of slavery, which according to the director, 'has been mistreated, lied about, covered up and romanticised so much that I thought it really had to stop.' He continued that the exaggerated brutality was the only way to 'show how these people suffered. I'm not going to show you them suffering backstage, I want you to look at them.'[164]

Shere denounced the critics, most of whom are incidentally white, attack on the film and defended the efforts of its makers. He wrote that the film 'records history unblinkingly, dramatically, and does a good job of it.' He also defended the stars of the film and their performances which he found balanced and 'well-paced' considering the complexity of the roles, even Susan George whose character is 'fatiguing.' He claimed that white critics could not have possibly understood the film, and anticipated that Black reviewers would appreciate,as he did, the film's historical and social merits. Yet, his assumptions could not have been more incorrect.[165]

Most white critics and intellectuals, even those with liberal views, were unable to accept the film's representation of slavery as a dehumanising system. They immediately attributed it to exploitation films and condemned it as racist. Such reaction revealed that slavery was an experience that many whites liked to have if not romanticised, then repressed. However, the reaction to the film by Black reviewers wasn't too far from that of whites.

[163] Charles Shere, *Oakland Tribune*, May 13, 1975.
[164] Fleischer interview, *Movie22*, p. 23.
[165] Charles Shere, *Oakland Tribune,* May 13, 1975.

Mandingo's reception among African Americans paralleled the class division among the black community in the 1970s and their different approaches to activism. Black critics and intellectuals, most of whom belonged to the middle class and advocated for integration and accommodation while avoiding racial tension and confrontation, joined their white counterparts and condemned the film for its graphic violence, sexual content, and distortion of history while the general public, who belonged to the poor working class struggling with the effect of racism and discrimination in their daily lives as well as their economic and social conditions flocked to see it. For many of these viewers, the film justified their rage and frustration with the system which has been exploiting their race since the days of slavery and legitimised their rebellion against it. Activist organisations whose ideology was that of separation and Black nationalism defended the film and its historical vision.[166]

Same as the white press, the Black press also denounced the film's obscene content, violence and clichés which leave viewers 'if not laughing, disgusted,' as noted Angela Smith in the *Amsterdam News*.[167] Jacqueline Trescott, a Black reporter covering arts and entertainment for *The Washington Post*, wrote that a film based on the 1957 novel 'proves that trash only begets trash' and described it as a 'racist and senseless exploration of human degradation in a whirl of slave auctions, hangings, whippings and fornication.'[168] However, Black journalists and reviewers went beyond white concerns and denounced the exploitation and the negative representation of the race for commercial purposes. As discussed in the previous chapters, the Black press had been fighting for the advancement and integration of the race by covering the racism and the injustice practised against Blacks by White individuals and institutions. They

[166] For a detailed analysis of the different approaches to Black activism and rebellion during the 1960s and 1970s see Cornel West, 'The Paradox of the Afro-American Rebellion', *Duke University Press*, No. 9/10. The 60's without Apology (1984), 44–58.

[167] Angela E. Smith, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 17, 1975.

[168] Jacqueline Trescott, the *Washington Post*, May 21, 1975.

hated that the film was made to capitalise and make money on the backs of Black audiences.Vernon Jarrett, the first Black journalist at the *Chicago Tribune*, expressed these concerns noting that *Mandingo* is just 'money passing from black hands to white pockets for the degradation of black people. That film is a good example of why people who are sick of distortions, filth and violence must never cease to resist.' He associated the film with the blaxploitation cycle and described both as 'sickening spectacles.'[169]

The other criticism of the film was its claim of telling the truth about the past and slavery, especially since it was made by whites. Black press argued that it was only a tool used by Hollywood, which was 'running out of storylines for making economically lucrative Black movies', to draw on 'historical situations to infest their *Shaft* and *Super Fly* themes.'[170] Angela E. Smith of the *New York Amsterdam News* wrote that '*Mandingo* is the kind of film that makes Black history courses worthwhile, for if one had to wait for filmmakers to tell the real truth about slavery, Black folks might still be walking around, singing the praises of the Emancipation Proclamation.' [171] Athena Fonville in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* and Jacqueline Trescott in the *Washington Post* also denounced the filmmakers' claims of telling the true story of the way in which slavery was instituted and thought the film was nothing but 'Another Sickening Exploitation film' with no historical context. [172] A *Jet* magazine article reported that even 'black theatregoers have raised their eyebrows in disapproval of the film.' Their anger was directed mostly towards actress Brenda Sykes and boxer Ken Norton for 'lending their efforts to a film, which critics have called a "rip off" of Black people's past.[173]

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[169] Vernon Jarrett, *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1975.

[170] Hank White, *The Common Bond*, December 1, 1975.

[171] Angela E. Smith, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 17, 1975.

[172] Athena Fonville, *New Pittsburgh Courier*, June 14, 1975, and Jacqueline Trescott, the *Washington Post*, May 21, 1975.

[173] *Jet*,1 May 1975.

Hank white of the *Common Bond* thought the film was 'the current *attempt* by Hollywood to explain the militancy of the sixties through a cinematic expose of "pre-freedom" epoch.' The reviewer described the film as 'one of the poorest excuses for a film that [he has] seen in the last 4 years.' For him, *Mandingo* was a 'terrible film' that contains 'every hackneyed cliché you can possibly extract out of a plantation setting' as well as the decade's 'plastic morality' infused with rhetoric of 'social consciousness.[174]

On the other hand, the Black Panther, whose rhetoric of the time was to 'reject both the social, economic and political means of the system and the social, economic and political values of the country', praised the film and its historical revisionist theme.[175] The newspaper article described it as 'a powerful, uncompromising, largely accurate portrayal of the degrading effects of the slave system on those who kept slaves in the American South,' noting that what is presented in *Mandingo* is a reality that is denied in history books. The article argued that the white critical attack against the film was because the truth about slavery, the slave's resistance for freedom, and maintaining their human dignity were finally highlighted by a major studio. A fact that annoyed those 'racist' critics whose attitudes are a result of their ignorance and denial of the truth of the bestiality of slave owners and that the 'sexual interaction between the white slave owners and the slaves was as common as eating and drinking.' The reviewer noted that the film would be 'cheap, vulgar, or unbelievable' only to those who 'deny black people their dignity, self-respect and the capacity for universal human strivings.'[176]

Despite the overall negative Black critical response and warnings of the film's exploitation and degradation of the race, *Mandingo* was most popular among Black audiences whose

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[174] Hank White, *The Common Bond*, December 1, 1975.

[175] Joseph Scott, 'The Black Bourgeoisie and Black Power', *The Black Scholar*, 4.4 (1973), 12–18 (p. 16).

[176] *The Black Panther*, June 14, 1975.

reception contrasted the critical community's nearly outright dismissal of the film. Fleischer, who has admitted that he was 'very conscious' that a large part of his film's audience in America are going to be Black, noted that even he was really not prepared for the great success of the film. He 'thought it might be blasted by the critics but ignored by the public, who fortunately flocked to see it.'[177] As the director had anticipated, Black filmgoers associated the struggles of the slaves in the films with their own. It reminded them of what 'the situation was like in the past' and justified their impatience 'to have their rights.'[178]

A *New Pittsburgh Courier* column investigated local impressions and opinions of the film by randomly interviewing six Black Pittsburghers. Opinions differed, for example, Nate Smith agreed with the critical views. He found the film 'disgraceful' for making light of a 'shameful past.' Tommy Lafitte was ambivalent and thought it was 'alright.' He was most impressed by the stars and their acting as well as 'the amount of time and money' put into the film. Three out of the six people interviewed praised the film. Melanie Stewart 'dug the movie,' and cited it as being 'factual and real. That was the way it really was.' Interviewee Bruce Young also asserted that *Mandingo* 'told the truth and opened my eyes. There is no such thing as good whites.' Melanie Stewart added that the relationship between whites and the slaves was really like that.' Mattie Bender had not even seen the film but acknowledged that it was trying to depict historical realities from what she heard. She also noted, 'you can hear about the things that whites do to Blacks in those southern states without going to see a whole movie.' Herman Drawn went as far as recommending the film as a pedagogical tool that 'should enlighten kids and those who did not know that this sort of thing ever happened.' Comparing Herman's suggestion to show the film to kids for pedagogical reasons to Robert Ebert's predictions that seeing *Mandingo* will leave a psychological scar in the kids reveals the

[177] Fleischer Interview, *Movie22.*
[178] *Milwaukee Star* (Wisconsin), August 8, 1974.

massive difference in perspective between reviewers and Black audiences. [179] Fleischer's claim of exposing the truth about slavery which, in his words, 'has been lied about, covered up and romanticised so much,' and De Laurentiis's promotion of the film convinced Black viewers to 'expect the truth.' [180] Despite their different opinions on the film, the interviewees agreed that *Manding* was, to some extent, historically accurate.

The audience's interpretation of the film as real history was also noted by Ida Peters who recalled that following her negative review of *Mandingo* in the *Baltimore Afro American*, the film critic received a call from a Black reader who wanted to express his thoughts. The reader was fully aware that *Mandingo* 'is just a movie,' but he argued that it shows 'just how many colors black people come in and how they got that way,' including his grandfather who has told him 'tales of slavery days and they were like the movie.' Another reader wrote to the newspaper defending the film's historical accuracy and direct influence on contemporary race relations arguing that 'slavery was exactly what the film let it be known to be. Blacks then were beaten, degraded, killed, and oppressed ... Now that Blacks know and have seen some of the things that happened to their ancestors, they will stop and think about what they are doing to themselves today. I think that it's time we all learn to accept what happened. Maybe if we do, we'll be able to understand things about ourselves a little better and treat ourselves better and give ourselves the human dignity that we so deserve.' [181] Another anecdote of the film's Black reception was featured in *Jet* Magazine in 1977 when following the release of *Roots*, Ken Norton told *Jet* that he enjoyed the series and while '*Mandingo* was fictitious, people could relate to *Roots* easier.' Following this, a reader wrote back disagreeing with the actor's claim about *Mandingo* being fictitious. She noted that all 'he has to do is talk with

[179] Flipping and Harris, *New Pittsburgh Courier,* June 21, 1975.
[180] Interview with Fleischer, *Movie22*. BFI, *Mandingo* promotional Poster.
[181] Ida Peters, *Baltimore Afro American*, May 31, 1975.

enough of our old people and he will find what Kyle Onstott originally wrote in fiction form was once reality.'[182]

Black audiences were less surprised and shocked by the violence and the brutality in the film because most had grown up hearing such tales from their parents and grandparents. Slave tales that exposed the brutality of slavery, including sexual exploitation and violence, were told in almost every African American family and are a staple in Black folklore. Historian Lawrence Levine noted that slave used humour and irony in their tales to survive the agony of slavery and 'no part of the traditional stereotype of the Negro was more commonly played with and joked about in Black expressive culture than the element of sex.'[183] For these reasons, the story of *Mandingo* was more credible among Black audiences.

Critics and intellectuals, both Black and white, who condemned the film and advised their readers against going to see it, wrote disappointedly in their columns and articles when viewers lined in front of theatres showing the film. Ida Peters in the *Afro* criticised Black organisations which did not act against the film. She specifically called out their double standards, noting that 'Black folks screamed so loud about . . . *Super Fly* but nobody in the trade even hinted that *Mandingo* was out of line . . . Blaxploitation is alright when it's done by rich white folks?' Peters' views were shared by C H Mason, a Harlem schoolteacher who wrote to the *New York Times* noting that 'CORE, Congress for Racial Equality, must fight these cheap and unscrupulous ventures and their stars of little talent and even less racial integrity such as *Mandingo* . . .'[184] The following week, Peters wrote again narrating, 'After my blast at *Mandingo*, which is an insult to you, you and you, guess what? Huge crowds of

[182] *Jet*, March 3, and 12 May 1977.

[183] Levine, pp. 310–32.

[184] Letters, *New York Times*, Aug 3, 1975.

our folks are patiently lined up around the theatre panting to get in and get insulted.'[185] Paul D. Zimmerman in the *Newsweek* also condemned everyone who found any value in the film to be 'sadists, masochist, bigots [and] sex fiends . . .'[186] Similarly, Vincent Canby noted that *Mandingo* was made 'strictly for bondage enthusiasts.'[187]

When shown in Britain, the film received a lot of press attention because of the two British stars in its cast.[188] Many reviewers associated it with *Gone with the Wind*, which had another British actress in a leading role.[189] The *Daily Mail* even described it as 'a soft porn, comic-strip version of *Gone with the Wind*.'[190] In general, the film's historical value was doubtful for most reviewers who criticised its distortion of history and its sexual content. Russel Davies in *The Observer* noted that if it was the only source of the past available, people might 'assume that what slavery chiefly repressed was not basic human freedoms, but naughty interracial sexual urges.'[191] Yet, many critics acknowledged the film's 'attempt to say something significant about slavery and race relations' and its pioneer handling of interracial sexual acts which would have not been permitted on the screen few years earlier.[192] Reporting on British audience's response, Kenneth Robinson wrote in the *Spectator* that audiences in the theatres where he watched the film 'didn't believe it at all.' They laughed

[185] Ida Peters, *Baltimore Afro American*, May 24 and 31 1975.
[186] Cited in, Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo*, p. 145.
[187] Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, May 18, 1975.
[188] The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) cut three minutes of the original film. The scenes cut included the slave Haemorrhoid inspection, the bloody images in the wiping scene, the moment where Perry King stabs the Mandingo with the Pitchfork. The physical encounter between Mede and Blanche was cut into half and all shots of private parts as well as all nudity shots in the film were deleted. Nonetheless, the film was rated X. (Paul Talbot, *Mondo Mandingo*, p, 150).
[189] However, Susan George, who had a reputation of playing controversial roles and had shocked fans with the multiple rape scene in *The Straw Dogs 1971* was considered 'not the costume-role type.' (Russel Davis, *The Observer*, September 14, 1975.)
[190] Margaret Hinxman, *Daily Mail*, September 13, 1975.
[191] Russel Davies, *The Observer*, September 14, 1975.
[192] Arthur Thirkell in *Daily Mirror,* September 13, 1975.

and cheered at several scenes, including those of violence, but they were 'quite convulsed' when the white husband chose his Black servant over his white wife. The intimate interracial scenes were not 'revolting' or at least not more revolting than those between the same race. A man in the audience even commented that slavery was such a long time ago and should be forgotten. However, the reviewer, found the film's significance in the fact that it influenced conversations about whites and Blacks in a way that it would not have been possible fifteen ortwenty years ago. The film isn't 'a great production' but it is 'a sort of milestone . . . in the development of films about racial discrimination,' concluded the reviewer.[193] Such an interpretation was missed by most American reviewers, regardless of their opinions of the film. For, even those who had favourable opinions of the film saw value in its representation of history rather than its influence on racial relations at the time of its making.

British *Time Out and Movie* Magazines had the most positive reaction to the film. *Time Out* praised Fleischer's exposure of 'real sexuality and violence behind slavery to mount a compelling slice of American Gothic which analyses, in appropriately lurid terms, the twists and turns of distorted society.'[194] Andrew Britton wrote an extensive review of the film, in *Movie* Magazine, defending it as 'a masterpiece of Hollywood cinema.' Britton denounced other critics' attack on the film and noted that some apparently didn't bother to go see it and criticised details which existed in the novel and not the film.[195] He defended the two British actors, especially Susan George whose performance he found beautiful and perfectly

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[193] Kenneth Robinson, *The Spectator*, September 20, 1975.
[194] David Pirie, *Time Out Magazine*, October 10, 1975.
[195] He was referring to Geof Brown's review in Monthly *Film Bulletin* which had many inaccuracies and remarks on details which existed in the novel and not the film such as his criticism of Blanche character referring to details of her infidelity which are present in the original character of the novel. In the film she is doesn't show interest in any other man except her husband and her intercourse with Mede was only a result of sexual frustration and revenge for her husband's infidelity. Also, the plantation slaves' other slaves resenting Mede and Maxwell ordering the killing of Blanche's black born baby which are only the book but not in the film. But he also denounced reviews in *the Spectator* and *Sight and Sound.*

expressed the tensions the character lives in. He found the first bedroom scene between Hammond and Ellen 'one of the most beautiful and moving love scenes in cinema . . . moving in the complexity, depth and honesty in it.' The film with its 'assurance, fluidity, economy, and its supreme example of a conventional art form' is overall 'great and achieved work of art,' concluded Britton.[196]

The director, who was aware that his film is going to be controversial, expressed his surprise of the uniform critical hostility. Looking back, he declared in 2003, 'I was very surprised and very hurt. I felt so many of the reviews were inaccurate if not outright lying and criticising scenes that weren't even in the picture.' *Mandingo* was not one of the movies mentioned in the Fleischer amusing memoir *Just Tell Me When to Cry* (1993), but not because the director was ashamed of it. It's mainly because it didn't fit with the memoir's vision. Fleischer explained, 'I wasn't trying to do a 'and then I directed' book. [I was] showing the craziness of Hollywood and there wasn't much about *Mandingo* that I thought could be entertaining reading.' [197]

Mandingo's tremendous success inspired a host of imitators across slavery, blaxploitation, and sexploitation films and reissues, including its sequel, *Drum* 1976, also produced by De Laurentiis. The film was even more daring in its representation of interracial sex, homosexuality, and violence. Other productions in the 1970s which went in the same line and reinforced the sexual exploitation, miscegenation and violence in slavery were the *Quadroon* 1971 and *Passion Plantation* 1976. At the same time these films were being released and making big profits among Black urban audience, the film industry was catering to another category of audience by producing and re-releasing filmic celebrations of the Old South. The re-releases of *Gone with the Wind in* 1971 and 1976 and *Song of the South* 1972 were very

[196] Andrew Britton, *Movie* 22, February 1976.
[197] Talbot, pp. 148–49, 145.

successful among suburban white audience and ranked amongst the highest grossing films of the year. Similarly, Reader's Digest family entertainment *Tom Sawyer* 1973 and Huckleberry *Finn* 1974 promised to take viewers back to those 'golden days' when 'life was a lot more fun.'[198] With their sentimental appeal of the Old South, music, and adventure, the two films were both among the biggest money makers of their years. The sharp contrast between these films and *Mandingo* reveals how different the narratives of race relations in the 1970s were. As optimistic Liberals hailed developments in race relations of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the advancements made by African Americans, many Blacks, especially those in lower classes, were still dreaming of social and economic equality. For these viewers, *Mandingo* was a chance to vent their frustration and express their rage of a system which has enslaved and exploited their ancestors and continues to do so.

Despite its exaggerated representation of slavery and its almost unanimous dismissal by critics, *Mandingo* managed to influence conversations around the history of the institution, its violent nature, and the reality of the slave master relation at the time of its release. These conversations were reinforced with the revolutionary scholarship on slavery in the 1970s. The major studies by John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, Lawrence Levine and many others during the 1970s marked the golden age of historical research on slavery. These works broke away from the images of slaves as helpless victims and explored their developments and daily efforts to adapt to and survive slavery and even participate in the overall history of the peculiar institution.

Black historian John Blassingame's research on Black community argued that the plantation was a business establishment where the slave owner was sometimes obliged to compromise to ensure his slaves' cooperation. He distinguished between slaves' lives amongst themselves, their primary environment in the quarters and that in their secondary

[198] *Tom Sawyer* 1973 official trailer. Available at (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yqzIPjRv2k&t=109s).

environment which centred on their work experience and the contact with whites. He asserted that it was in their primary environment, where they were free from white supervision, that the slaves practiced their human relations, solidarity, and ethics.[199] He explained that slave communities developed their culture by combining their heritage of West African culture, their experiences with plantation life, being enslaved and their own creative response to bondage.[200] Lawrence Levine supported the same argument in his *Black culture and Black consciousness: Afro-American folk thought from slavery to freedom* which explored different forms of Black folklore as a way of expression and resistance.[201] Blassingame and Levine even highlighted the African influence on Southern way of life and eventually American culture while Herbert G. Gutman's work looked at Black family and how slaves could sustaintheir families under the restrictive circumstances of slavery. Gutman's research reveals that family ties constituted a primary value of slave life which they tried their best to maintain. [202] Eugene Genovese in his *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* provided a compelling argument that slaves were not just passive participants but active contributors to the labour system under which they were forced to live.[203]

The revolutionary research and scholarship on slavery reached mainstream popular culture through the work of Alex Haley, *Roots* 1976 book and miniseries where the writer traced back his ancestry back to Africa. The TV miniseries was a cultural phenomenon that captured American audience, both Black and white. The story begins by describing the world of a young African, Kunta Kinte, who was enslaved and shipped in chains to America in the

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[199] John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, Rev. and enl. ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 105–6, 147–48.
[200] Ibid., pp. 3, 104.
[201] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 310–32.
[202] Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976).
[203] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

1700s. The series took viewers throughout the life journey of Kunta Kinte, who is born in an African tribe and grows up to be a strong fighter until he is captured and shipped in chains to be sold as a slave. The length of the series, which was shown in eight episodes, allowed American viewers a first-hand experience of slavery for the first time in entertainment history. Unlike previous cinematic representations which could only focus on few aspects of the slavery experience, *Roots* exposed the horrors of slavery from the moment of capture, the suffering of slaves in the middle passage, the sale, the resistance to adapt to being enslaved, the violence and the Black family ties. These elements allowed viewers to sympathise with the slave and discover slavery like never before. *Roots* rejected the notion that American slaves had been docile. As scholars were also doing at the time, it portrayed Haley's ancestors as brave, resourceful human beings who had been proud of their African heritage and determined to shake off their shackles.[204]

Roots had unprecedented success. Approximately 130 million American, more than half of the nation's total population of 220 million, were estimated to have watched a part of the series. Some 100 million people tuned in for the final episode. Although it is never easy to determine the reasons behind such popularity, it has been argued that *Roots*' popularity reflected an earnest search by Americans, whites as well as Blacks, for their own "roots," as away of better anchoring themselves amid the social and economic turbulence of the times. Interest in genealogy and local history boomed in the next few years.[205] Yet, I believe it was - the revisionist cinematic representation in films like *Mandingo* and the controversy around it as well as the revisionist scholarship that obliged Americans to reconsider negative

[204] Marvin J. Chomsky and others, 'Roots' (ABC, 1977).
[205] Christopher Capozolla, "'It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country': Celebrating the Bicentennial in an Age of Limits," in *America in the Seventies*, ed. by Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), pp. 29–49.

stereotypes of African Americans that had long flourished in textbooks, film, and television, and to react positively to Haley's account.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the representation of slavery during the 1960s and 1970s as a revision to earlier classical Hollywood plantation films. Such revision started following the Second World War when filmmakers began making social message films exposing issues of racism and discrimination. These representations became stronger in tone as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. By the late 1960s Black filmmakers invented the Blaxploitation formula which absorbed Black urban audiences rage and expressed their rebellions through the Black heroes in these films who defied and conquered the white system. Aware of the power of Black audience, Hollywood soon endorsed these films whichhelped the industry recover from its economic crisis.

Mandingo 1975, which was one of the year's biggest grossing films, received scathing reviews from contemporary critics. Critics associated it with Blaxploitation and accused it of capitalising the past of slavery only for commercial purposes asserting that 'life on the old plantation was horrendous . . . but movies like this are less interested in information than titillation, which in turn, reflects contemporary obsessions rather more than historical truth.'[206] For contemporary critics, the film was a poorly done imitation of *Gone with the Wind* which used sex and violence as well as historical revision claims to make money. The film's association with Blaxploitation and pornography destroyed its reputation and kept it away from scholarly debates for years to come.

[206] Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, July 31, 1976.

By the 1970s, film critics' influence on a film's return grew significantly. This was mainly due to the establishment of film studies as an academic discipline and the proliferation of competitive film festivals. Following this, film critics 'achieved a degree of influence, prestige and even celebrity that earlier critics never had,' noted Shyon Baumann.[207] Although *Mandingo'*s returns were not affected by its bad critical reception, its reputation was. The critics' dismissal of the film limited its long influence on perceptions of race and slavery and denied its historical revisionist attempts. However, as this chapter has shown, the film had much to say on the development of racial relations in the 1970s. Despite its exaggerated representation of slavery, *Mandingo* was the first major studio film to explore interracial sexual relations and miscegenation between a white mistress and a Black slave. The film also broke docile slave stereotype through its Black characters who resisted slavery. The film's reception revealed the troubled racial relation during the decade as Black urban audience revealed their dissatisfaction with the American system which on the surface provided them with right and laws but left them struggling for a real equality and decent life. These elements contributed to the changing representations of slavery and its past in popular culture by the second half of 1970s and onwards which will be further explored in the following chapter. The chapter will highlight how these changing and revealing representations of slavery came to be more accepted by critics and audience during the new millennium as conversations on slavery, its violent nature and its enduring legacies rose to prominence with the election of the first ever African American president.

[207] Shyon Baumann, 'Marketing, Cultural Hierarchy, and the Relevance of Critics: Film in the United States, 1935–1980', *Poetics*, 30.4 (2002), 243–62 (pp. 259–60).

Chapter 4: *12 Years a Slave* and the Twenty First Century Filmic Slavery Experience

Entering the twenty-first century, American attitudes towards slavery were still inconsistent and many preferred to avoid the subject of slavery and race. A 2011 CNN poll showed that when asked about the Civil War, around one in four Americans sympathized more with the Confederacy than with the Union. And 42 per cent believed slavery was not the main reason the Confederacy seceded.[1] These statistics were made during a time when the first Black American president was in office, and many believed America was entering a post-racial period. Yet, several scholars argued that Obama's presidency only made things worse for people of colour.[2] 'The popular narrative that emphasizes the death of slavery and Jim Crow and celebrates the nation's "triumph over race" with the election of Barack Obama, is dangerously misguided,' affirmed historian Michelle Alexander.[3]

Yet, even if Obama's presidency did not advance the situation of Black Americans, it influenced reflections on racial progress since the days of the Civil Rights Movement as well as questions on the legacies of slavery. These reflections led to the rekindling of calls for reparations, social and political movements to advance the lives of Black Americans and

[1] https:// politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/12/civil-war-still-divides-americans/.

[2] See chapter 10 of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=208519a8-0715-4f4f-95b5-616615dbf418%40sessionmgr101&ppid=Page-__-1&vid=0&format=EK> [accessed 15 March 2021].

[3] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: [Jackson, Tenn.]: New Press; Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2012), p. 11.

marked the return of race and slavery to popular culture, with many slavery-themed films made. Filmmakers went back to the days of slavery and emphasised its cruelty, violence, and exploitative nature. Among these films was Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013). The film was an adaptation of Solomon Northup's autobiographical narrative of his kidnapping into slavery in the 1840s.

Inspired by the contemporary racial situation in the United States and motivated by his personal interest in Black history, McQueen began looking into making a film that tells the story of a free Black man kidnapped into slavery. His search almost reached a dead end, until his wife suggested looking into true accounts and he was surprised to find Northup's narrative. While writing the script with John Ridley, McQueen focused on aspects of Northup's story that spoke to contemporary racial issues in America and emphasised injustice, brutality, and despair. McQueen noted that evidence of slavery is present in everyday life, 'all you've got to do is walk in the streets.' He highlighted the Black prison population, poverty, poor education, and mental health problems in the Black community which all 'goes down to what happened in slavery.' These issues needed a platform 'and that platform for me as an artist was cinema,' declared the director. In the film, the South, or the plantation, stands for America today, a beautiful place where horrible things happen. McQueen hoped that contemporary viewers could resonate with a story of a Black man whosefreedom is taken away from him while living in a time when the largest portion of the prison population is Black. The film served as a reminder that similar to the past, Black Americans can still lose their freedom anytime, even if such freedom is protected by the law.[4]

The film's content echoed popular interests and academic trends, with a timely schedule, being released a few weeks after the anti-racist organization Black Lives Matter was founded.

[4] https://www.npr.org/2013/10/24/240288057/12-years-a-slave-was-a-film-that-no-one-was-making.

From its first screening, *12 Years a Slave* was unanimously well-received by critics and viewers and went to win three Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and many others, including Best Picture at the Golden Globes and Best Film from BAFTA. Thus, the film had an important influence on popular perceptions of slavery. Critics credited it for revising older myths of the Southern plantation and ending the dominance of Scarlett O'Hara over popular imagination of Southern slavery. These revisionist aims, which had been attempted since the 1960s, were finally achieved by McQueen, although the latter was never pronounced about them.

This chapter argues that the uniqueness of *12 Years a Slave* is in its complexities. The film was clear in its focus and the development of characters reflected the complexities of the system of slavery and its effects on both the enslaved and enslaver. Unlike earlier film representations, which were either oversimplifications or exaggerations of plantation slavery, *12 Years a Slave* portrayed the complexities of the South and the institution of slavery and in doing so defined the complexity of contemporary race relations in the Obama era. Parts of the significance of the film comes from Northup's memoir and its detailed description of everyday life slavery. McQueen recreates such descriptions, with texture and sweep emphasising scenes of slavery's extreme privations and cruelties, but also its work rhythms and routines, sunup to sundown, along with the unsettling intimacies it produced among the owners and the owned.

The Northup Narrative

The film is based on the 1853 autobiography of Northup, under the original title *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, kidnapped in Washington*

City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853. Northup, a free-born Black family man from Saratoga, New York, was kidnapped by two men who introduced themselves as Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton. The two men offered him a work opportunity in a Washington circus, claiming that they came North to see the country and were financing their journey by presenting exhibitions. They offered Northup a generous sum to provide musical performances for their shows. Northup, who was struggling financially, immediately accepted. Northup left with the two men without even leaving a letter to his wife.[5] Brown and Hamilton's plan to kidnap Northup worked perfectly, and his journey to bondage soon started.[6]

Northup's nightmare began when he woke up in a slave pen in Washington, after being drugged and sold to James Burch. From there, he was sent on a ship to New Orleans where he was sold first to William Ford and then to Edwin Epps, where he spent most of his years in slavery. Throughout his 12 years in captivity, Northup never lost hope of gaining his freedom back. Once at the Ford plantation, he immediately offered his skills and experiences to his "kind" master. In the narrative, Northup seems very fond of William Ford and his kindness to his slaves. He remarked that 'those who treated their slaves most leniently, were rewarded by the greatest amount of labour.'[7] Although Northup's luck soon changed as he was first leased

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[5] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Norton Critical Editions (New York), pp. 21–23.

[6] David Fiske, Clifford W. Brown, and Rachel Seligman, *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave* (Westport, UNITED STATES: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013), pp. 43–44 <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1524107> [accessed 28 January 2021]. Although Northup doesn't mention that anyone attended his conversation with Brown and Hamilton, a witness to the meeting who later testified in court said that they had warned Northup from Brown and Hamilton but the latter was too tempted by the generous offer and willing to take a risk. At the time he met Hamilton and Brown, Northup was in desperate need of any sort of employment 'until the busy season should arrive.' Another reason why he wasn't very suspicious of such an offer is that although Kidnapping of free Blacks was common at the time, they were very rare in Saratoga.

[7] Solomon Northup, p. 60. Unlike in McQueen's film, Northup never tells Ford the truth about being free, although the latter must have sensed Northup's exceptionalism compared to the other slaves. Northup truly trusted Ford and felt safe on his plantation. He runs to him for refuge from Tibeats but Ford can only think of selling him to another master, Epps, as a way to protect him from Tibeats' grudges.

to John Tibeats, who held a personal grudge against him and attempted to kill him more than once, and then sold to Epps, who had a reputation of being "a nigger breaker", he still relied on his intelligence, skills, and training to survive. [8]

Compared to other slave narratives, Northup's account of slavery is exceptional because he was able to be around different people in the South, from the slaves he lived with, to the different slave masters he worked for and his fiddling which gave him access to the region's Great Houses and the opportunity to familiarise himself with many important details of the white social structure. Being an intellect with many life experiences, Northup was able to provide detailed descriptions and reflections on slavery in the deep South which no other slave narrative included, especially since all other slave accounts were in the upper South. His previous experiences and background in farming and artisanal work were reflected in the detailed description he provided in his narrative. Another significance of Northup's narrative was that, unlike other antebellum narratives which depicted the slave's way to freedom, his was a story of freedom to slavery and then back to freedom. A journey that completely changed his perspective of slavery and the life of a free Black man.[9]

During his time in the South, Northup attempted to gain back his freedom by writing to his family and friends several times. In the narrative, he mentions three attempts of communication with his family which were successful but only the last one resulted in his rescue by attorney Henry B. Northup.[10] The story of his rescue created a national sensation.

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[8] Unlike other slaves, Northup was literate. He had years of experience in different fields including agriculture, rafting, fiddle playing, and carpentry. He was smart and could read people easily, which saved him from trouble several times. Also, unlike most slaves, he could swim, a skill which came to use when he ran away from Tibeats and swum across the swamps back to Ford's plantation.

[9] Fiske, Brown, and Seligman, *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave,* pp. 81–114.

[10] The first attempt of communication was a letter mailed for him by the sailor John Manning upon the arrival of the *Orleans* in New Orleans on May 24, 1841. The letter is likely to have arrived but since it didn't have any information about where he was sold after having arrived in New Orleans, no action could have been taken. The second communication was through Clem Ray, who met Northup in Williams' Slave Pen. Clem stopped by Saratoga on his way to Canada to inform the Northup family about his situation, but again, since he didn't have

The *New York Daily Times* ran a huge page-one story summarizing Northup's kidnapping and recovery from slavery.[11] Other major newspapers soon followed with the Whig press being more positive than the Democratic press, but coverage by both was extensive. Northup's story became part of the political debate on slavery, especially that Northup, soon after his rescue, became acquainted with major abolitionists such as Fredrick Douglas, Jermain Loguen and Stephen Myers. The series of trials that Northup began against his kidnappers were also widely covered by the press. Whig newspapers and politicians, who supported the rights of African Americans, defended Northup's claim against his kidnappers, while Democrats supported the white kidnappers. The case soon became a matter of public interest and race played an important role in the trial and was one of the main reasons the kidnappers were not convicted. [12]

Following such a sensation and with the aim of exposing the struggles of slavery to the public, advancing the abolitionist cause, as well as condemning his kidnappers, Northup soon wrote and published his story. Deprived of the opportunity to testify against his kidnappers in court, Northup took matters into his own hands and wrote his testimony for a larger audience, who read it and sympathised with his struggles. The narrative became part of the antislavery movement, especially after Northup began giving talks throughout the country and Canada and eventually became involved in the Underground Railroad, helping slaves make their way to freedom. The book sold more than 17,000 copies in the first four months and reached 30,000 copies in the ensuing months. Following the steps of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet

information about his exact location, Northup's rescue was again not possible until he met Bass. Samuel Bass, a Canadian carpenter whom Northup met on the Epps plantation, agreed to draft, and mail a set of letters for him. One of the letters was forwarded to his family who contacted an attorney, and his family friend, Henry B. Northup and the latter began legal procedures. For more details on the rescue and the legal procedures, see Fiske, Brown, and Seligman, pp. 89–110.

[11] *New York Times*, January 20, 1853.

[12] Fiske, Brown, and Seligman, *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave,* pp. 125–42.

Beecher Stowe, to whom he dedicated his narrative, Northup produced two plays, one in the spring of 1854 and the second in the fall of 1855, but neither was successful. Two years later, the production was recalled as having been unsuccessful 'owing to adverse circumstances.'[13]

Following his short experience with theatre, Northup focused on public talks, which were popular in the first years but soon turned hostile. His last recorded public appearance was in Streetsville, Ontario in 1857, where a lynch mob tried to seize him before his lecture. At about the same time, a court decision was made to drop the charges against his kidnappers. Northup, who seems to have lost his case and cause disappeared from public view completely. Until this day, no clear information is available on how and when he died.[14]

Despite its initial popularity, Northup's narrative soon went out of print and disappeared from public consumption until 1969, when historians Joseph Logsdon and Sue Eakin republished it with the Louisiana State University Press. Since then, the book has been used in classrooms and was known mostly among those interested in slave narratives. It was not until McQueen made his film that most Americans became aware of the Northup story. However, McQueen was not the first filmmaker to turn the story into moving images.

Solomon Northup's Odyssey

The first film adaptation of Northup's story was made as a television film, which aired on PBS in 1984. *Solomon Northup Odyssey* was the second in a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, following *A House Divided: Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* in

[13] Fiske, Brown, and Seligman, pp. 117, 120.
[14] Ibid., p. 123,145. The writers provide several factors that might have led to the decision of dropping the case.

1982. According to contemporary historian Robert Toplin, who was involved in the making of both films, the project was the result of years of planning by a team of professional historians and media specialists. Toplin recalled that he suggested the idea of making films on individual slaves to television producer Shep Morgon, who had received a planning grant from the NEH to come up with innovative projects to attract public interest in educational programmes, as early as 1976. Morgon liked the idea, but the release of *Roots* in 1977 delayed the project because television executives 'thought *Roots* said all there was to say about slavery,' noted Toplin. Yet, the latter argued that *Roots*' impressive success was proof of the audiences' interest in the subject of slavery and viewers would be eager for more.[15]

The two films echoed the contemporary scholarly interest in the history of slavery and slave culture.[16] The Solomon Northup film script was written so that 'the actors' language would, we hoped, give the viewers several perspectives on the historians' debates and prod them to ask questions,' noted Toplin. Developing the characters of the story also closely followed the works of historians, in addition to how they appeared in the original narrative. For example, the limits of Master Ford's paternalism were interpreted in the film in terms of Genovese's discussion in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* with his generosity ending 'at the point of considering freedom for his slaves or allowing any limits to his own authority over them' explained Toplin.[17]

The film was directed by Gordon Parks. The latter had previous experience with autobiographies when he directed his own, *The Learning Tree* in 1968 by Warner Bros.,

[15] Robert Brent Toplin, 'Making a Slavery Docudrama', *OAH Magazine of History*, 1.2 (1985), 17–19 (p. 17) .
[16] In addition to Toplin several other prominent scholars were involved in the making of the films such as Ira Berlin, David Brion Davis, Eric Foner, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, Nathan Huggins, Benjamin Quarles, Armstead Robinson, William Shack, Kenneth Stampp, and Peter Wood.
[17] Robert Brent Toplin, 'Making a Slavery Docudrama', *OAH Magazine of History*, 1.2 (1985), 17–19 (pp. 18–19).

making him the first Black to direct a major studio picture. In an interview with the *Times*, thedirector declared, 'I decided to do this one because I thought it was important . . . so little is said about slavery. This was our holocaust, and it's always hushed, hushed, hushed.' Commenting on the changes made to the story, Parks noted that 'Solomon was very tolerant in a terrible situation and very fair in reporting . . . I tried to remain fair in my reporting and not go overboard, although it's very difficult not to when you know how much happened that was so bad to so many people. But there were things I had to change.' He justified some of the omissions he made, such as Northup's lynching attempt, by Tibeats, by his intention 'to make [the film] bearable for people to look at it . . . I wanted to minimize the violence in it if I could, and still tell the truth.' Nonetheless, Parks complained of the pressure he was under from the producers and the historical consultants who were, in his words, always 'breathing over your shoulder. I was asked in certain areas to keep it toned down . . . and there are some sort of compromises you always have to make.' The most important objective for Parks was the impact of the film on young Black Americans 'who feel hopeless.' He wanted them to watch the film and think 'what I got here is not as half as bad as what Solomon had . . . I want them to say, 'By God, Solomon made it out- I can make it out.'' [18]

Parks' adaptation avoided the violence and brutality of slavery depicted in the narrative but focused on the lives of the slaves in their quarters. The slave community is shown as united and supportive of one another under the advice of Uncle Noah, Joe Seneca. When first introduced to viewers, the latter gives an impression of an Uncle Remus, being a "retired" older slave who lives on the Ford plantation and 'all [he does] is fish.'[19] But as the story unfolds, viewers learn that he is a rebel in his own way. He becomes Northup's mentor and tells him about his several attempts to run away throughout the years which were never

[18] Leslie Bennetts, *New York Times, February* 11, 1985.

[19] The character doesn't exist in the original narrative but might have been inspired by other slave characters which Northup mentions such as Uncle Abraham.

successful, so he had to let the idea go but tells Northup (now named Platt), that 'white folks never know what I'm thinking, that's how I've survived.' The film also highlighted slaves' everyday lives as depicted in the narrative. The Christmas party is described by Northup as a massive celebration, where slaves gather from all surrounding plantations wearing their best outfits and showing up in couples and families. The film faithfully portrays the celebration but adds Epps joining the festivities and happily dancing with his slaves. This latter comes out as considerably less vicious than in the narrative, with most of the violence omitted by the filmmakers.[20]

Rather than focusing on Northup's story as an individual, the film tracked his attitude changes as he integrates into the community. Although Northup never stops considering running away, he loses his early remoteness and befriends the other slaves on the plantations he lived on. Northup's integration into the slave community turns him into a leader, as he shares his knowledge and skill with his fellow slaves. Even when he is rescued, the film shows him continuing the mission. He doesn't leave without a word, like in the McQueen version. Rather, he takes his time saying goodbye to all his companions on the Epps plantation and tells them, 'I wish I could take everybody.' As Northup and Old Noah say their goodbyes, the old man asks him, 'these folks are in your hands now, you tell somebody about us, you tell them to send help.' Northup responds, 'I promise you as long as I'm alive,' in a clear reference by the director to Northup's abolitionist and underground railway activities once back North.[21]

The film departed significantly from the original narrative in some parts. The character of Patsey is erased or at least replaced by a fictional character named Jenny, played by Rhetta Green. Unlike Patsy, who does not appear in the narrative until Northup is sold to Epps,

[20] Gordon Parks, *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (The Fremantle Corporation Past America Inc., 1984).
[21] Gordon Parks, *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*.

Jenny shares Northup's journey to slavery from the beginning when they meet on the slave boat to Louisiana. At the Ford plantation, they become lovers until she is sold to Epps and becomes the object of her master's lust and mistress's loathing. In the narrative, the extent of Northup's relationship with Patsey is not revealed, but any romantic involvement would have been extremely dangerous for both of them, given Epps's possessiveness toward her.[22] Also, due to the abolitionist purpose of the book, the writer doesn't give many details about himself and his sexuality.

Jenny's simultaneous longing for Northup and vexed appreciation of Epps's gifts and sexual attention distresses Northup and ultimately puts him at great risk. When Mistress Epps learns of their past affair from Eliza, she forces Northup to whip Jenny. But rather than whipping her, Northup takes jenny away from the mistresses' eyes and only pretends to beat her as she fakes screaming and laughs about outwitting Mistress Epps.[23] Northup's life is put under threat when Jenny tells Epps about the incident and the enraged slave master attacks him as punishment. Whether the decision to replace Patsey with Jenny was Parks's, the historical consultants', or both, her absence is troubling. The character as presented by Parks didn't reflect the true struggles of female slaves described in the narrative. [24] The *New York Times* review acclaimed the film for portraying 'the slaves as living and feeling rather than just coerced creatures . . . [and] dramatiz[ing] the darkest pages of American history.'[25] Yet, the film was, in general, very toned down in terms of the violent nature of slavery when compared to both the original narrative and McQueen's adaptation, as will be shown in the following sections. The filmmakers aim to reflect the works of contemporary historians by keeping the focus of the story on the slave community and eliminating the violence of slavery

[22] Fiske, Brown, and Seligman, p. 86.
[23] The scene had some truth as it might have been inspired by the fact that Northup when on his driver's duties in the fields used to only pretend to whip the slaves when the Epps was not around.
[24] Parks, *Solomon Northup's Odyssey.*
[25] John Corry, *New York Times, February* 13, 1985.

described in the narrative, whenever possible, made slavery and Northup's experience come out as far away from the historical reality but clearly reflected comfortability levels of American audiences at the time.

The Obama Era

The significant scholarly attention given to the subject of race and racism in the US was sparked by the 2008 presidential elections, where for the first time in history, a Black American became president. A victory that was considered historic and a 'quantum leap in the racial progress of the United States.'[26] Questions of whether America has truly entered a post-racial period soon emerged. The years of Obama's presidency were marked by extensive scholarship that questioned the notion of a racially egalitarian society. In *Racism without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argued that in fact, throughout his presidency, 'Obama always tried to avoid seeming too black.' Such political choices prevented him from having a clear and strong response to racist events. Throughout his first term, 'the president said less about race than any president since 1961.'[27] Even as he was re-elected for a second term, Obama still avoided issues related to race and racism and preferred, in the words of a *Los Angeles Times* column following his win of the elections in 2008, to serve as a 'president not of a race or a religion but of a nation.'[28] Obama was the great hope for many progressives in the United States, yet he, unfortunately, failed to deliver on his grand promise of "change." 'With

[26] Michael Eric Dyson, *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2008.
[27] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, pp. 140–41 <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=208519a8-0715-4f4f-95b5-616615dbf418%40sessionmgr101&ppid=Page-_-1&vid=0&format=EK> [accessed 15 March 2021].
[28] *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2008.

eight years of compromise, condescension, and center-right politics, he, ultimately, left BlackAmericans worse off than we were before he took office.' [29]

As far as race relations are concerned, what happened in the United States, argued Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow,* is that since the collapse of Jim Crow what changed 'has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language, we use to justify it.' She elaborates that America entered an era of colour-blindness, where direct discrimination based on race was no longer permissible but was substituted with the use of the criminal justice system to categorise people of colour as "criminals" and discriminate against them with a legal pretext. She maintains that mass incarceration is the New Jim Crow and 'the most damaging manifestation of the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement.'[30] A view shared by Prof. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva who notes that what changed was the justification for racism which went from 'God placing minorities in the world in a servile position' to 'they are behind because they do not work hard enough.' A new ideology that became a 'formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order and serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era.'[31]

From 2010 to 2015, the United States became the highest in rates of incarceration in the world, even surpassing those of highly repressive regimes like Russia, China, and Iran.[32] These rates and the ongoing police brutality against Black Americans has given rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. A social media hashtag that went viral following the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012, an incident that demonstrated that the dispensability of Black lives isnot exclusive to law enforcement. Young Martin was shot and killed in February 2012 while

[29] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, p. 156.
[30] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: [Jackson, Tenn.]: New Press; Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2012), pp. 2, 11–12.
[31] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, p. 13.
[32] Cited in Alexander, the *New Jim Crow*, p. 6.

walking back to his home by George Zimmerman, who was a member of the local neighbourhood watch and legally owned a gun. Mr. Zimmerman claimed he had shot Martin in self-defence when the teenager attacked him and tried to grab his gun. With no eyewitnesses present at the scene to contradict his account and due to Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, Zimmerman was not initially charged, until six weeks later, when the incident sparked mass protests across the United States. [33] The incident was unfortunately followed by many others in the following years. The year 2015 was the deadliest year on record for police killings. The Black Lives Matter movement became stronger in Ferguson following the killing of Michael Brown in 2014. It went from being a social media hashtag to an actual movement with chapters in thirty-one US cities. The activities of the movement continued in defence of Black lives including demanding police demilitarization and mandatory body cameras for law enforcement. [34]

In this heated political and social environment, historian Edward Baptist released his book, *The Half Has Never Been Told,* which explored the expansion of slavery in the United States following independence and uses source materials ranging from slave narratives, plantation records, newspapers, and politician's statements. The book offered a new understanding of American history as it probes the evolution and moderation of America and the exploitation of slaves to build the American economy. It tells the story of slavery and the slave economy through the eyes of the enslaved people and explores their connections to the political, economic, cultural and demographic development as the central story. Chapter five, entitled Left hand, explores how "the punishing system" increased cotton production in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana between 1800 and 1860, following the invention of the cotton gin. As the planters needed to increase their productivity to meet the demands of the market, 'the

[33] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-23275988.
[34] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists,* p. 36.

whip drove men and women to turn all of their minds to the task of picking faster and faster.' McQueen's portrayal of the labour system on the Epps plantation, including working from sunrise to sundown with minimum breaks, the daily weighing of cotton picked by slaves and the whipping of those who do not pick enough cotton compared to the previous day are validated by the testimonies that Baptist records in his book.[35]

With these scholarly revelations and the filmic explorations, calls for reparations for slaves' families rose back to the surface. An article written by Ta-Nehisi Coates, for *The Atlantic* magazine in its June 2014 issue, was credited for rekindling a national discussion on the reparation of American slavery and institutional racism. The essay exposes how slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and federally backed housing policies systematically robbed African Americans of their possessions and prevented them from accruing intergenerational wealth. He argues that the idea of reparations is frightening to many, not because of the financial aspect, but because it 'threatens something much deeper—America's heritage, history, and standing in the world.' Ta-Nehisi advocated for the case of reparations because 'the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.' [36] A vision that McQueen adopted while promoting his movie, asserting that facing the history of slavery is the only way that America can move forward. He even suggested that it's time for the United States and other countries involved in Atlantic slavery

[35] Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), pp. 116, 144, 134.

[36] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *the Atlantic,* June 2014. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/

to apologise, as did several African presidents, so nations can go forward.[37]

McQueen's film was announced in the press in 2011 by *Variety*, which confirmed that McQueen was to direct and Brad Pitt to produce.[38] The director later recounted the story that led to the film's production, which started back in 2008, when he was making his first film, *Hunger*, starring Michael Fassbender. McQueen had the idea of making a film about a free Black American kidnapped into slavery, a story which McQueen searched for long years until his wife, cultural critic Bianca Stigter, suggested looking into true accounts and the search led them to the Northup narrative. McQueen was fascinated by Northup's story. The idea he dreamed of was in his hands virtually in script form. 'As soon as I had it in my hands,' he recalled, 'I was trembling. Every page was a revelation.' 'People think they know slavery,' he said, 'often, it's the case they don't.' The director confirmed that eighty per cent of the film's dialogue is lifted from the book. Scriptwriter, Jhon Ridley, noted that he had to be 'reductive as opposed to additive' while writing the script. He wanted to 'have an invisible hand' and not introduce anything new to the story as much as possible. With his long-time cinematographer, Sean Bobbitt, McQueen shot the film with one camera in thirty-five days, drawing inspiration from the Louisiana setting, where 'everything was new: the heat, the crickets, the mosquitoes, it was like going to a prehistoric land,' remarked McQueen.[39]

Literary critic, historian, and the editor of a recent Norton critical edition of Twelve *Years a Slave*, Henry Louis Gates Jr., served as a consultant for the film. McQueen cast Black British

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[37] Henry Louis Jr. Gates, '12 Years a Slave: A Conversation with Steve McQueen', *Transition*, 114.1 (2014), 185–96 (p. 189).

[38] Jeff Sneider, *Variety*, August 16, 2011. https://Variety.com/2011/film/news/mcqueen-to-direct-12-years-a-slave-1118041373/#

[39] Dan P. Lee , *Vulture,* December 8, 2013. htt ps://www.vulture.com/2013/12/steve-mcqueen-talks-12-years-a-slave.html.

actor Chiwetel Ejiofor for the role of Northup. The actor, who has Ghanaian parents, declared that he had a personal connection with the history of slavery and was excited to play the role of Northup, despite some hesitation at first. He was passionate about the story because it revealed the specifics of slavery which are rarely depicted. 'You don't think of specifics, little freedoms. The difficulty of obtaining a pen and paper, how a bar of soap can have life or death implications, the distinction between slaves who cut timber and cut sugar cane and those who picked cotton,' declared Ejiofor, 'those industries could create completely different lives on their respective plantations. The violence of one wouldn't necessarily be present on the other.'[40]

In most of his interviews during and following the making of his film, McQueen maintained that he has a personal connection with the subject of slavery despite being British, with one parent from Grenada and the other from Trinidad. 'Grenada is where Malcolm X's mother comes from and Stokely Carmichael is Trinidadian. It's about that diaspora,' asserted McQueen. His aim with the film was to offer a visual depiction of slavery in a way that had not been seen before. He explained, 'I wanted to see the lash on someone's back. I wanted to see the aftermath of that, psychological and physical. I feel sometimes people take slavery very lightly, to be honest. I hope it could be a starting point for them to delve into the history and somehow reflect on the position where they are now.' He thought the timing was most appropriate for such a vision to be realised. He felt that 'people are ready.' With the Trayvon Martin incident, the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, and a Black president in office, he thought 'there's a sort of perfect

[40] Roger Moore, Rogermovienation.com. October 14, 2013.

storm of events and people want to reflect on that horrendous recent past in order to go forward.' [41]

As McQueen shot his film, other films dealing with the subject of race appeared. The Year 2013 was labelled 'a renaissance of black cinema' by the BBC.[42] Before the end of 2013, around ten movies telling Black stories and made by Black filmmakers came out, marking a significant increase compared to the previous year. These pictures included a broad range of films from historical dramas to musicals. Among them were *Fruitvale Station by* Ryan Coogler and *Lee Daniels's The Butler*. The two films examined race in America from numerous angles, measuring strides taken and distances to be covered.

The *Butler* was inspired by the *Washington Post* article, "A butler well served by this election", which sheds light on the story of Eugene Allen.[43] Allen was a butler who worked in the white house for three decades and served several American presidents, renamed Cecil Gaines in the movie. Daniels takes his viewers on a journey through history from the 1920s to 2009, tracking the progress of race in American society and politics. We first meet Cecil, Forest Whitaker, as an old man in 2009 as he waits in the White House to meet the new elected Black president, Barack Obama. Cecil recounts his story to viewers, going back to his childhood in 1926, on a cotton plantation in Macon, Georgia. Cecil's life is soon interrupted when the farm owner rapes his mother and kills his father. The young boy stays on the farm and is trained as a house servant until he is eighteen. After leaving the plantation, he starts a career as a servant in a hotel until he reaches the white house in 1957, during the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. From there, the film tracks major events in Cecil's life, family, and

[41] https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/movies/a-discussion-of-steve-mcqueens-film-12-years-a-slave.html
[42] https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20130718-a-renaissance-of-black-cinema.
[43] https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/a-butler-well-served-by-this-lection/2019/01/02/b2a805a6-07b1-11e9-88e3-989a3e456820_story.html.

American society such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, the war in Vietnam, and others. [44]

Critics were sceptical of the film's historical significance. Due to its extended setting, the film felt like it has too much history fitted into it. Kenneth Turan, in the *LA Times*, found it a bit illogical that Cecil's son, Louis played by David Oyelowo, goes from being part of the freedom riders, the Black Panther and eventually runs for Congress.[45] Yet, *Variety* found that through the character of Louis, the director developed a 'strong sense of the inner complexities and contradictions of the civil-rights landscape.'[46] Critics also found fault with its exaggerated sentimentality and historical inaccuracy, especially the characterisation of the presidents. The characterisation of Ronald Reagan was widely denounced by his allies, including his son Michael Reagan, who described the film as 'Hollywood's absurd version of Eugene Allen's life story.' He argued that 'despite what Hollywood's liberal hacks believe, my father didn't see people in colors. He saw them as individual Americans. If the liberals in Hollywood, and Washington, ever start looking at people the way he did, the country will be a lot better off.'[47] The film 'is not primarily about the moral awakening of white people. Nor does it neatly divide whites into snarling bigots and paragons of tolerance,' wrote the *Times* reviewer.[48]

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[44] Lee Daniels, *The Butler* (The Weinstein Company, 2013).

[45] Kenneth Turan, *LA Times,* August 15, 2013. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-review-the-butler-story.html.

[46] Scott Foundas, *Variety,* August 3, 2013. https://variety.com/2013/film/reviews/lee-daniels-the-butler-review-forest-whitaker-oprah-winfrey-1200575215/.

[47] Paul Bond, the *Hollywood Reporter,* August 26, 2013. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/politics-news/president-reagans-son-attacks-lee-614568/.

[48] A.O. Scott, New York Times, August 15, 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/16/movies/lee-daniels-the-butler-stars-forest-whitaker.html.

Despite the controversy over its historical accuracy, the film's handling of race was significant. It provided an interesting perspective on how racial issues are seen by different generations through the eyes of Cecil, who lives his butler role even outside the White House and refuses any form of resistance and his son Louis, the rebel who gets involved in every political movement to create a better life for himself and community. The two roles won the NAACP award for best actor in motion picture and best supporting actor.[49]

Fruitvale Station was another Black film that debuted in 2013, released in US cinemas on the same weekend as a Florida jury found George Zimmerman not guilty in the fatal shooting of an African American teenager, Trayvon Martin. The script was based on the true events that led to the death of Oscar Grant. He was a young Black man killed by a white police officer in 2009 at the Fruitvale BART station in Oakland, California. The film dramatized the last day of Grant's life, showing his struggle as a young Black man to maintain a steady job, provide for his family, and avoid the temptation of being involved in drug dealing. On a train back home,Grants gets into a fight with a former inmate, from his time in jail. BART police immediatelyrespond, and several male Black passengers are arrested, including Grant and his friends.

While being restrained, Grant pulls out his phone and tries to film the scene, while calling his girlfriend to let her know he is safe. As the officers confiscate his phone, Grant is held face-down on the ground, while one of the police officers shoots him in the back. He dies shortly after being rushed to a hospital.[50]

The real incident was filmed by several passengers, and the court released dramatic footage of the incident, which were included in the film.[51] As the film ends, an epilogue explains how

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[49] Aaron Couch and Arlene Washington, *Hollywood Reporter*, February 22, 2014. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/naacp-image-awards-winners-682585.

[50] Ryan Coogler, *Fruitvale Station* (The Weinstein Company).

[51] https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2010/06/dramatic-video-of-bart-shooting-released-by-court.html.

Grant's killing went viral and sparked a series of protests and riots across the city. The officer who shot Grant was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter, after claiming he mistook his gun for his Taser.[52] The film was highly praised by critics for dealing with a timely topic and being a 'forceful picture that captures some of the texture and detail of one human life.'[53] Todd McCarthy in the *Hollywood Reporter* thought the film was 'a powerful dramatic feature film.' On the other hand, Kyle Smith in *Forbes*, accused the filmmakers of changing facts about Oscar Grant's life by falsifying some parts and leaving others out, to make him look like a victim, who was killed while trying to make his life better. The result of such changes, noted Smith, is that the incident comes out as a 'vicious or depraved attack of the kind that should spark rallies and riots and federal charges' while in reality, it was 'a monstrous accident caused by a decision made in a split second in a chaotic and potentially dangerous situation.'[54] The timely release sparked several conversations on Coogler's portrayal of Oscar, and many compared his death to that of Trayvon Martin.

Another film, which though close in subject matter was very far from *12 Years a Slave* in its vision of slavery, was Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, released in December 2012. Unlike McQueen, Tarantino insisted he was not making a film about history and that his main aim was an entertainment project where a slave wins against whites. The film is a spaghetti western-inspired revenge fantasy set in the antebellum South. It follows the adventures of Django, Jamie Fox, a former slave who is rescued from slavery by Dr. King Schultz, Christoph Waltz. The two men then join forces on a bounty hunting business and eventually

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[52] Ryan Coogler. *Fruitvale Station.*

[53] Stephanie Zacharek, *the Village Voice*, July 20,2013. https://www.villagevoice.com/2013-07-10/film/fruitvale-station/.

[54] Kyle Smith, Forbes, July 25, 2013. https://www.forbes.com/sites/kylesmith/2013/07/25/fruitvale-station-is-loose-with-the-facts-in-an-effort-to-elicit-sympathy-for-oscar-grant/?sh=4a562c6e693c.

target a plantation owner, Calvin J. Candie played by Leonardo DiCaprio, who owns Django's wife, Broomhilda, in an attempt to save her.[55]

The film was inspired by Fleischer's *Mandingo*1975, which Tarantino thought gets 'closer to the truth of slavery' more than other movies. Hence, *Django* contains a lot of violence which Tarantino classifies into two categories: 'the brutal reality' depicting the horrors that slaves lived under for over two hundred and forty-five years, and then there's 'the violence of Django's retribution' which is, in the director's words, 'fun and cool.' 'What happened during slavery times is a thousand times worse than [what] I show,' he says. 'So if I were to show it a thousand times worse, to me, that wouldn't be exploitative, that would just be how it is. If you can't take it, you can't take it.' What mattered the most for Tarantino is that, as they are watching the film, viewers are cheering for Django, who eventually walks out triumphant.[56]

The film grossed $162.8 million in the United States and Canada and a total of $425.4 million worldwide, making it Tarantino's highest-grossing film.[57] Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, who was a strong opponent of exploitation films and gave *Mandingo* a poor review, rated *Django* four stars out of four and described it as 'brilliant entertainment', going so far as to say, 'had I not been prevented from seeing it sooner because of an injury, this would have been on my year's best films list.'[58] The release of *Django Unchained* opened a way for

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[55] Quentin Tarantino, *Django Unchained* (The Weinstein Company, 2012).

[56] Terry Gross, nrp, January 2, 2013. https://www.npr.org/2013/01/02/168200139/quentin-tarantino-unchained-and-unruly.

[57] https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=djangounchained.htm.

[58] Robert Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 11, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20130111022127/http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2013/01/django_unchained.html.

America to face its past and rekindled discussions of slavery in popular culture and imagination which were further explored with *12 Years a Slave.*

In their ensemble, these films helped bring back to the surface discussions on the legacy of slavery and its relation to the contemporary racial controversy, especially when combined with other various explorations such as the re-emergence of calls for reparations, renewed scholarly attention to the relationship between slavery and capitalism as well as mass incarcerations as a new form of racism, several anniversaries commemorating the abolition of slavery and civil rights benchmarks, and the rise of what became to be known as the Black Lives Matter Movement.

'The greatest feature film ever made about American slavery?' [59]

12 Years a Slave takes viewers to the world of slavery straight away with an opening scene in a sugar plantation where we see a group of male slaves being given instructions on how to cut sugar cane, by a white overseer. This is where viewers are introduced to Platt, the slave who cuts sugar cane all day, eats a small meal at night, desperately tries to write a letter home using blackberry juice as ink, and sleeps on the floor in a room packed with other slaves, both males and females. In a flashback, we meet, Northup, the free, well-dressed man in Saratoga New York 1841, playing his violin in a big white ball, tucking his kids to bed, and lying in a comfortable bed with his wife. McQueen highlights the contrast between Northup's life before and after slavery. Although the affluent lifestyle- the Northup family has, and what seems like a total integration into the white society, is far from being the reality of the time,

[59] The expression was used by David Denby in his review of *12 Years a Slave* for the *New Yorker*.
David Denby, *The New Yorker*, October 14, 2013

the sharp contrast between Northup's life before and after his kidnapping renders the film's message clearer. In both the narrative and the Parks adaptation, Northup's financial instability and struggle to find a steady job in Saratoga is clear. The first seven minutes of the Parks film are all about the family's suffering with limited income and the hardworking of the two parents to make sure their children don't spend the rest of their lives living in poverty.[60]

But what McQueen wanted viewers to remember was not Northup's struggle to make a living in the North, but rather his survival from slavery in the South and his ability to hold on to hope despite the violence and despair. The first twenty minutes of the film alternate between Northup's life in Saratoga and his waking up in the slave pen and his journey South, creating an eagerness among viewers to learn more of the story.[61] Valerie Smith contends that 'Northup's sudden descent from freedom into captivity recalls the number of African Americans wrongly convicted and incarcerated due to racialised policies . . .'[62] From the beginning, McQueen has his Black viewers hooked and relating to the struggles of the film's protagonist with their own in contemporary America, which feels like it's still the same as almost 200 years ago. One of the strongest moments in the film, which might be stuck in the mind of everyone who saw the film, is a silent scene near the end of the film where Ejiofor stands on the Epps plantation with his body facing the camera, glances away from the horizon and then looks directly into the camera with a look in his deep eyes filled with sorrow and agony. A look that conveys the struggle of generations of slaves and their will to survive, feelings which again many Black viewers can easily relate to. Actress Alfre Woodard, Mrs. Shaw in the film, declared in an interview that the scene was McQueen's way of relating the

[60] Gordon Parks, *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*.
[61] Steve McQueen, *12 Years a Slave* (U.K.: Entertainment One, 2013).
[62] Valerie Smith, 'Black Life in the Balance: "12 Years a Slave"', *American Literary History*, 26.2 (2014), 362–66 (p. 365).

historical treatment of his film to all contemporary concerns and making his audiences wonder where they stand on all those issues.[63]

Too brutal or just real?

The magnitude of violence and brutality that enslaved African Americans experienced are the main focus of the film's depiction of slavery. Whipping is part of the slave's daily routine on the Epps plantation. Yet, such violence is introduced earlier in the film in the slave pen, where a confused Northup wakes up to find himself in shackles, having been drugged and sold by his kidnappers and brutally whipped by James Burch. The latter insists that Northup is a Georgia runaway and beats him with a paddle until it breaks and then continues with a whip, as Northup insists that he is a free man. The scene ends with Northup crying for help while looking from his cell window and the State Capitol building looms on the horizon. A view that captured the helplessness of a state and a legal system that existed hand in hand with a slave pen and is unable to protect the life of Black citizens.[64]

One of the most memorable images, and most brutal scenes in the film, is Northup's lynching attempt after he beats an overseer named Tibeats, in self-defence, on the Ford plantation. Northup hangs from a tree holding on to dear life with only his toes barely reaching the muddy ground keeping the noose around his neck from choking him, his arms and legs tied and his eyes almost popping out. The viewers are exposed to such horrors for three minutes consisting of a mix of long and medium shots edited to appear to circle around Northup's hanging body, making it the longest shot in the film. The way McQueen chose to depict the

[63] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZlLA004KdQ&list=LL&index=11&t=300s .
[64] McQueen, *12 years a slave*.

lynching attempt in his film wasn't exactly how Northup described it in his narrative. The lynching attempt happened, and Northup was saved last minute by another overseer, who prevented Tibeats from hanging him. But he didn't hang from a tree for long hours. He mentioned that he had the rope hanging on his neck and was so tightly tied unable to move all day. He described his suffering and pain of being left tied in ropes all day and standing without his hat under the Southern midday summer heat. The Unbearable pain he was in made him write that he would gladly have given longer years of service if he was only moved under the shadow.[65]

The cinematography and editing of the scene added to its intensity, especially when combined with the absence of music. The only sound viewers can hear is that of Northup's difficult breathing, his toes as they touch the mud, the sound of the wind, crickets, and children playing in the background. While Northup is on the verge of death, life continues as usual in the background with slaves doing their daily chores and children playing.[66] Even Mr. Chapin, J. D. Evermore, the overseer who saves Northup from being lynched, watches him from the piazza and leaves him in extreme agony until Master Ford arrives and cuts him down. The Mistress of the plantation herself does not get involved and watches the scene from her balcony. The only person who intervenes is the slave Rachel who quickly enters the scene, gives Northup a sip of water, wipes his face and quickly retrieves back. The length of the scene, although extremely uncomfortable for viewers, can be seen as the central metaphor of the film. Throughout his 12 years as a slave, Northup's life literally hangs between life and death. Death is lurking around him either at the hands of Tibeats who is jealous of him and attempts to kill him more than once or by Epps who tortures his slaves for fun and almost

[65] Solomon Northup, p. 72.
[66] This was a dramatic alteration made by McQueen. In the narrative slaves were in the fields working and didn't witness the incident.

cuts Northup's throat with a knife while drunk or by white patrollers if he ever attempts to run away. [67]

The two other overwhelmingly violent scenes in the film involve not Northup but Patsey, a slave that we meet on the Epps plantation, "queen of the fields" as Epps calls her. In his narrative, Northup first describes Patsey as 'a splendid animal' who 'neither labor, nor weariness, nor punishment could destroy.' She was 'a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence. Yet Patsey wept oftener and suffered more than any of her companions . . . because it had fallen her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress.'[68] According to McQueen, Epps is in love with Patsey but doesn't know what to do with his love. [69] A vision that is reflected in the rape scene where we see Epps violently raping the helpless slave who lies as a dead corpse. A state which enrages Epps and makes him turn to violence as he slaps her on the face and almost chokes her to death.

The other most violent scene in the movie is also triggered by Epps's "love" and jealousy after he thinks Patsey went to a neighbouring plantation to see Mr. Shaw, a white planter who has a Black wife. Although Patsey begs for mercy and explains that she only went to Mr. Shaw's plantation to ask Mrs. Shaw for some soap, which she brings out of her pocket after Mrs. Epps has refused to give her any, to prevent her from cleaning and repel Epps. Despite her clear innocence from Epps's doubts, he still orders her whipping and has her stripped and tied to a pole to be whipped by Northup first. He then finishes himself, after Northup refuses

[67] McQueen, *12 years a slave*.
[68] Solomon Northup, p. 108.
[69] In an interview with Charlie Rose for *PBS*, McQueen note, "I think Epps is a human being first of all, just like everyone here at this table… He doesn't understand how, he, a white slave owner, is in love with this Black slave. There is a passion there which, you know, love is a thing where it decides. You don't decide. And he's dealing with that is classic. It's a classic tragedy in a way.' The full interview is available at https://charlierose.com/videos/23146.

to continue, until 'her screams and supplications gradually decreased and died away into a low moan. She no longer writhed and shrank beneath the lash when it bit small pieces of her flesh. I thought that she was dying!' described Northup in the narrative. The scene is the film was faithful to its description on the narrative, despite few minor modifications such as the way Patsey was tied.[70]

She is then carried to a cabin to be tended to by other slaves. As her wounds are being treated, she lies on her stomach in extreme agony. She lifts her head slightly and her eyes meet Northup's. She looks at him as if blaming him for not killing her, as she had asked, to relieve her of her misery. In an earlier scene, Patsey wakes Northup up and begs him to take her to the marsh and drown her. 'Do what I ain't got the strength to do myself,' she pleads, 'God is merciful and forgives merciful acts.' As she looks into his eyes, Northup seems to understand her blame and a tear falls out of his eyes.[71] The scene is the only one where 'the emotional weight of the subject overwhelmed' McQueen. He narrated in an interview that when the tear dropped from Chiwetel's face out of nowhere, I said, 'Cut! I have to go for a walk.'[72]

In his focus on exposing the violence and horror of slavery through Northup's eyes, McQueen stayed away from any signs of benevolence. The slaves are only shown working in the fields all day or doing different chores on the plantation. Everything in the film represented violence, 'even dancing. It represented violence because it perpetuated black

[70] Solomon Northup, p. 146.
[71] McQueen, *12 years a slave*.
[72] Dan P. Lee , *Vulture,* December 8, 2013. https://www.vulture.com/2013/12/steve-mcqueen-talks-12-years-a-slave.html

subjugation,' notes historian Kellie Jackson in a review of the film.[73] The dancing and music were not a form of entertainment to the slaves, nor a cultural expression, but rather master's entertainment. In addition to owning every single minute of the slaves' day and having them work from sunrise to sundown, Epps also wakes the slaves to dance for him. In his narrative, Northup describes slaves dancing for their own entertainment at the Christmas party. Yet, McQueen interpreted it as part of their subjugation. In addition to being dragged out of their beds to dance for Epps, both dancing scenes in the film include additional violence towards Patsey when Mrs. Epps attacks her and scratches her face with her fingers in the first scene and throws a bottle of wine at her in the second.[74]

Speaking of the brutality and the graphic violence in the film, McQueen noted that it is minor compared to the book with only five acts of violence in total, out of a film which is two hours and eleven minutes. He found the violence in his film particularly minimal if compared to thrillers, or any horror movie where, in his words, 'someone is being shot in the head at least every 15 minutes, or cut up or whatever . . . but maybe in the context of the truth it becomes quite different, I suppose.'[75] Replying to a question in an interview with his historical consultant, on whether he thinks the Patsey whipping scene might have been too much and too brutal to see, McQueen affirmed, 'either I was making a movie about slavery or I wasn't, and I decided I wanted to make a movie about slavery.'[76]

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[73] https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2013/10/23/a-historians-perspective-on-12-years-a-slave/.

[74] McQueen, *12 years a slave*.

[75] Luke Goodsell, *Rotten Tomatoes*, October 17, 2013. https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/interview-steve-mcqueen-and-chiwetel-ejiofor-talk-12-years-a-slave/.

[76] Gates, '12 Years a Slave: A Conversation with Steve McQueen', p.192.

As they are exposed to the horrors of slavery, viewers are also exposed to the beauty of the South, the place where such horrors occur. The contrast between the gorgeous images of the trees and skies of the bayou country, and the terrible goings-on among the human beings achieve the moral tension of the film. Unlike earlier plantation films, where the beauty of the Southern plantation was synonymous with the benevolence of the enslaver and the benignity of slavery or in *Mandingo* where the plantation was depicted as an ugly run-down place, McQueen asserted that the Southern plantations are 'so beautiful.' But 'horrific things happen in beautiful places.'[77] The film's cinematographer, Sean Bobbit, also noted that 'while filming in actual plantation, 'every frame has a truth to it.' He insisted that 'the film had to feel true, but it also had to feel beautiful. We didn't want to layer the horrors of slavery with dirt and mud and everything else because, in reality, the locations are really quite sumptuous, and it would be unnecessary to make it look bad. It's simply the contrast between the beauty of nature, in which they all existed, and the horrors of the world and life they had to live through.'[78] Thus, in paralleling the beauty of the space with the ugly and inhumane system of slavery, the film served as a natural revision to the plantation myth.[79] An objective which even the filmmaker himself did not prioritise but was well received and praised by critics and viewers as we shall see in the reception section.

Another aspect of the plantation myth that the film touched upon was the plantation Mistress. McQueen's portrayal of Mrs. Epps, played wonderfully by Sarah Paulson, focused on the evil jealous mistress, introduced by Fleischer in *Mandingo.* Although the portrayal of the character in the film slightly departs from Northup's characterizations of her, where she is

[77] Ibid.
[78] https://www.searchlightpictures.com/post/3880/12-years-a-slave-featurette-the-team/.
[79] Not that these big and beautiful plantations were the norm during the time of slavery. A lot of plantations consisted of just a cabin or two, surrounded by tree stumps.

described as a reasonable and kind mistress compared to her husband, but it's her jealousy of Patsey that renders her mad. In the narrative, she doesn't provoke her husband to whip Patsy as the film shows but she stands watching from a distance 'with an air of heartless satisfaction.' Her jealousy of Patsey also drives her to tempt Northup to 'put her secretly to death and bury her in some lonely place in the margin swamp.'[80] An act which McQueen changed and made it look as if it's Patsey who wanted to die. Such portrayal served to correct or reverse the cultural fascination with the revered women of the South that began with *Gone with the Win*. *12 Years a Slave*, like Catherine Clinton's *Tara Revisited*, a sequel to her authoritative book, *The Plantation Mistress*, effectively served as a corrective to the longstanding cultural nostalgia for the mistress' manners, refinement, and style.

While upending stereotypes, McQueen underplayed the issue of resistance. Carole Boyce Davies, professor of Africana Studies and English, described *12 Years a Slave* as a film that 'fails to show resistance,' except for Northup's emotional resistance and the scene where he stands for himself against Tibeats. She highlights instances of resistance that are found in the narrative, mainly slaves' escape attempts. Northup mentions several runaway slaves who he and his fellow slaves helped hide and feed. He even tells the story of a Black slave woman named Celeste, who lives for months in the woods and confirms that 'it was not unusual for slave women as well as slave men to endeavour to escape.' Even he indicates that not a day passed without him contemplating escape. [81] American studies scholar, Rebeca Fraser argued the opposite observing that while it is true that 'no outright "resistance" is actually achieved,'

[80] Solomon Northup, pp. 144, 109.
[81] Carole Boyce Davies, *The Guardian*, January 10, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/10/12-years-a-slave-fails-to-show-resistence

enslaved people's daily struggle of attempting to retain a sense of dignity and personhood beyond that of the one-dimensional image of "slave" was in itself a form of resistance.[82]

The film does in fact lack direct actions of resistance, especially when compared to the original text, which the filmmakers confirmed they stayed very close to, and the Gordon Parks film where Northup never stops thinking and talking about running away. This might be a result of McQueen's choice of exposing the horrors of slavery and showing American's aspects they didn't know about or at least haven't seen in a movie before. Yet, he was careful about his choices and took into consideration contemporary circumstances. Aware his film was going to be released in a racially intense moment, he focused his attention on gaining audiences' sympathies with Northup and having them relate to their own but avoided the possibility of inciting violence by portraying slave resistance.

Yet, he balanced the omissions of certain actions of resistance in the narrative with others, such as the character of Mrs. Shaw. One of the changes that McQueen and Ridley intentionally made to the story was the Character of Mrs. Shaw, Alfre Woodard. The latter was in the original text, but she didn't have any dialogue, she is only briefly mentioned by Northup. It was McQueen who gave her a voice and created an interesting character who is black but lives as a white mistress. The dialogue given to Mrs. Shaw is inspired by a conversation between Bass and Epps in the narrative and has a strong anti-slavery tone. She is a source of relief to Patsey but also a voice of resistance when she affirms, 'the Lord will manage Epps… the Lord will manage them all.'[83] Another addition in the film, which McQueen meant as a form of resistance and rebellion against slavery, was the unnamed slave

[82] Rebeca Fraser, *the Conversation*, March 3, 2014. https://theconversation.com/oscar-winning-12-years-a-slave-is-an-artistic-and-educational-triumph-23932.

[83] McQueen, *12 years a slave*.

woman at the beginning of the film who forces Northup into a sexual act. McQueen noted that it was a moment where the female slave, whose life was owned, takes control of her body through that moment of tenderness. Yet, as she soon remembers her reality, 'she's back where she was. She's back in hell, and that's when she turns and cries.'[84]

Although it is true that a single movie cannot include everything and McQueen's declared his aim was to expose the suffering and ugly aspect of slavery, the film lacks the presence of the slave community. Highlighting the other slaves' characters and Northup's relationship with them might have enriched the story more. The book mentions several instances of sociability and a sense of community between the slaves. At the Epps plantation, Northup descriptions give a sense of dependence on himself from the other slaves as well as mutual trust and complicity. Both were psychologically important for Northup's survival. He could rely on his companions for support when needed, and their dependence on him gave him a feeling of purpose. The slave community was one of the reasons that helped Northup survive. But as historian Eric Foner notes, in most slavery films, including *12 years a slave*, 'there's a tendency toward: You've got to have one hero or one figure.' That's why historians tend to be a little sceptical about Hollywood history because you lose the sense of group or mass.'[85]

In focusing too much on Northup as an individual, the film ignored the lives and suffering of the other slaves, except for Patsey. Such neglect is obvious when comparing *12 Years* to the Gordon parks film, where the stories of the other slaves and their solidarity as a community is highlighted. The best example of this can be found when comparing the portrayal of the raft scene in the two films. The idea of building the raft was Northup's biggest achievement while

[84] https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/movies/a-discussion-of-steve-mcqueens-film-12-years-a-slave.html Round table with Steve McQueen, Chiwetel Ejiofor, and Eric Foner.
[85] https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/movies/a-discussion-of-steve-mcqueens-film-12-years-a-slave.html Round table with Steve McQueen, Chiwetel Ejiofor and Eric Foner.

enslaved and made Ford pronounce him the 'smartest nigger in the Pine Woods.' [86] In the Parks film, Northup comes up with the idea on his own but, the making and floating down the river was a team effort in which the slaves are portrayed celebrating and being credited together, unlike in McQueen's film where Northup solely floats it and emerges as the only hero. Another detail in the narrative reflecting Northup's complicity and solidarity with his fellow slaves, which the film leaves out is the fact that during his last eight years on the Epps plantation, Northup was appointed as a driver. Drivers, 'in addition to the performance of their equal share of work, are compelled to do the whipping of their several gangs. Whips hang around their necks, and if they fail to use them thoroughly, are whipped themselves.' Northup narrates, 'during my eight years' experience as a driver, I learned to handle the whip with marvellous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair's breadth of the back, the ear, the nose without, however, touching either of them.' He arranged with the slaves to 'squirm and screech in agony' as he pretends to whip them if Epps was around. [87] Leaving Northup's driver role is a choice that McQueen might have made to keep audiences' sympathies with Northup and avoid any mixed signals about his position as a victim rather than contributing to the victimisation of other slaves. Yet, the inclusion of his agreement with the other slaves and his concern not to have them whipped whenever possible was an important act of solidarity that defined the slave community and is missing in the McQueen film.

[86] Solomon Northup, p. 61. In the narrative, Northup doesn't say much about other slaves' involvement but used 'we' when referring to how the raft was poled down the creek.

[87] Solomon Northup, pp. 127–28.

Reception and Influence

The film was rated R for violence, cruelty, some nudity, and brief sexuality. It premiered on August 30, 2013, at the Telluride Film Festival and immediately received a positive response. Due to its content, the film's commercial release in October was limited to 19 theatres, aimed primarily towards art houses and African American viewers, then gradually extended to other locations. But even with the limited release, the film grossed $2.1 million and had a strong performance throughout the dozen cities where it was showing in 123 locations in its second week. [88] Black audiences might have initially gone to see *12 Years* to support the overwhelmingly Black cast and the production which was endorsed by Black celebrities such as Kanye West and Diddy Combs, but they soon found themselves relating to the struggles of Northup and his plea for freedom.[89] The film then went on to make 187.7 million, including $56.7 million in the United States.[90] The audiences' reaction to the film was mostly positive. The film scored 8.1 out of 10 on IMDB with 636 out of 902 reviews being above 8. The 29 out of 902 reviewers, who rated the film one star complained that it was too cruel, historically inaccurate compared to *Roots*, which many referenced as "the most honest depiction", and not entertaining compared to *Django.*[91] Similarly, from more than 100,000 reviews, the film scored 90% positive responses from the audience on Rotten Tomatoes. [92]

The film received much attention from academics who used their expertise in their reviews and discussions. Emily West, who specialises in enslaved women history, was 'pleased to see

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[88] John Horn, *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2013. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-12-years-a-slave-box-office-20131029-story.html.

[89] Amy Kaufman, *LA Times,* October 23, 2013. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-diddy-kanye-12-years-slave-20131023-story.html.

[90] https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl376866305/

[91] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/reviews?ref_=tt_urv. Accessed 22 March 2021.

[92] https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/12_years_a_slave/reviews?type=user. Accessed 17 May 2021.

the highly realistic depictions of enslaved women's lives in this film, especially the often-brutal sexual assaults they endured at the hands of white men. . . [and] the plantation mistress [who] reacts in a typically jealous fashion by blaming the victim.' She thought the film represented slavery 'so accurately' despite the sequences of Northup's life in the North prior to his enslavement which were 'over-emphasised' and far from the reality of the times but concluded that such 'strong juxtaposition' was necessary to highlight his physical and mental trauma under slavery.[93] Kellie Jackson, an African American Studies professor at Harvard University, thought the film 'was probably the most powerful, authentic piece of film I have seen on slavery.'[94] The Director of the African American History and Culture Museum, Lonnie Bunch, argued that the film might help to 'illuminate one of the darkest corners of American history' and enable Americans to understand the 'centrality of slavery and its continuing impact on our society.' [95]

When asked about the impact the film will have on people, historian Eric Foner thought the film was 'much more real, to choose a word like that, than most of the history you see in the cinema.' The historian highlighted some touches which were added to the film making it close to 'the real world of slavery.'[96] In a round table discussion of the film between several prominent historians, Natalie Davis Zemon declared that 'as a cinematic depiction of the "horrors" and terrible cruelty of slavery in the American South and of the agony of the individual person deprived of freedom, *12 Years* a Slave is a resounding success.' Susan Eva

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[93] Full text available at https://www.historyextra.com/period/historian-at-the-movies-12-years-a-slave-reviewed/.

[94] https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2013/10/23/a-historians-perspective-on-12-years-a-slave/.

[95] Lonnie G. Bunch III, Smithsonianmag.com, November 5, 2013. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/the-director-of-the-african-american-history-and-culture-museum-on-what-makes-12-years-a-slave-a-powerful-film-180947568/.

[96] https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/movies/a-discussion-of-steve-mcqueens-film-12-years-a-slave.html Round table with Steve McQueen, Chiwetel Ejiofor and Eric Foner.

O'Donovan thought McQueen's film was a 'very passionate film that does not sugar-coat antebellum American slavery' despite 'a number of sour notes' caused by 'an overemphasis on violence and an underemphasis on a critical engagement with his primary source.' [97]

The critical reception of the film was also almost unanimously positive. Metacritic, a review aggregator, assigned the film an average score of 96 out of 100 based on 57 reviews from mainstream critics. A score that is considered "universal acclaim", making it the best-reviewed film of 2013.[98] Rotten Tomatoes, another film review aggregator reported a 95% positive rating by critics, based on 365 reviews. [99] Several critics acknowledged the film's ability to revise older myths of plantation slavery. The film was seen as 'a fierce refutation of the genial racial stereotypes on display in the Margaret Mitchell novel and David O. Selznick's movie version.'[100] The *New York Times* wrote that it may be a film that 'finally makes it impossible for American cinema to continue to sell the ugly lies it's been hawking for more than a century . . . [it] is an argument about American slavery that both reveals it as a system and demolishes its canards, myths and cherished symbols.' [101] The reviewer in the *New York Post* shared the same opinion noting that ' It will be impossible to ever look at *Gone With the Wind* the same way after *12 Years a Slave*, a brutally powerful and emotionally devastating film that takes great pains to rip any lingering vestiges of

[97] 'Film Roundtable: 12 Years a Slave', *Civil War History*, 60.3 (2014), 310–36 (p. 311).
[98] https://www.metacritic.com/movie/12-years-a-slave/user-reviews.
[99] https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/12_years_a_slave/reviews?sort=fresh.
[100] Richard Corliss, *Time*, September 09, 2013. https://entertainment.time.com/2013/09/09/12-years-a-slave-and-mandela-two-tales-of-racism-survived/.
[101] Manohla Dargis, *The New Times*, October 17, 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/movies/12-years-a-slave-holds-nothing-back-in-show-of-suffering.html.

romanticism from America's most shameful institution.' He described the film as 'the *Schindler's List* of slavery films.'[102]

For these reviewers, the film's representation of slavery served as a 'powerful corrective' to popular imaginations of the Old South, and linked images of 'savagery and injustice' with those of the 'tranquil antebellum South that Hollywood has often peddled' in the mind of all viewers.[103] Tim Grierson in the *Screen Daily* found that *12 Years* goes beyond the average message movie and delves into how slavery 'operated in its time as well as consider the moral repercussions of its existence.'[104] *Variety* praised Chiwetel Ejiofor's strong performance and predicted that the film will resonate with audiences and 'could conceivably transform their worldview.' [105]

12 Years a Slave was widely compared to other slavery films made since the 1970s. It was considered 'an artist's rebuke to Quentin Tarantino's high-pitched, luridly extravagant *Django Unchained*,' and 'a necessary corrective' to its antics. [106] The *New Yorker* reviewer described Tarantino's choice with the character of the house slave as a reflection of his 'terribly immature judgment of people,' while McQueen offered a more 'wise and empathetic

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[102] Lou Lumenick, *New York Post*, October 17, 2013. https://nypost.com/2013/10/17/12-years-a-slave-powerful-and-devastating/ and David Denby, *The New Yorker*, October 14, 2013.

[103] Bob Mondello, npr, October 18, 2013. https://www.npr.org/2013/10/18/235486193/for-a-free-spirit-a-grim-12-years-in-chains.

[104] Tim Grierson, *Screendaily*, September 2013. https://www.screendaily.com/12-years-a-slave/5060149.article.

[105] Peter Debruge, *Variety*, August 13, 2013. https://variety.com/2013/film/reviews/film-review-12-years-a-slave-steve-mcqueen-1200593984/

[106] Peter Rainer, *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 18, 2013. https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2013/1018/12-Years-a-Slave-is-a-necessary-if-stiff-look-at-the-history-of-slavery.

view' through the character of Mrs. Shaw who does her best to improve her situation and that of other slaves. [107]

The brutality and the violence of the film were received and interpreted differently by critics. For some, it was a way to revise older idyllic representations and expose slavery as a system that 'destroyed everyone's humanity, from the hand that wielded the whip to the back that was scarred by it,' but for others it was an unnecessary exaggeration which made the film uncomfortable to watch. [108] An online reviewer described her experience watching the film as feeling 'smothered by McQueen's insistence on wallowing in the extremes of human anguish,' and described McQueen's choices with his previous films as a 'miserablist approach' where the director 'aestheticiz[ed] suffering,' let alone when the subject matter is a historical horror on the order of slavery.'[109]

When asked about his personal interest in psychic and physical pain, especially taking his previous films into consideration, which are all about the body, McQueen denied such a tendency, noting that his real interest was in important and neglected subjects. He explained that *Hunger* was about the 'biggest political event that happened in Britain in the past twenty-seven years' and *Shame* came out of his personal curiosity to explore the phenomenon of sex addiction, which concerns everyone but is the 'elephant in the room'. As far as slavery was concerned, McQueen noted that its evidence and traces are present in the everyday life of

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[107] Richard Brody Should a Film Try to Depict Slavery? October 21, 2013. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/should-a-film-try-to-depict-slavery.

[108] David Fear, *Time Out*, October 14, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20150131010428/http://www.timeout.com:80/us/film/12-years-a-slave-movie-review.

[109] Dana Stevens, Slate, October 17, 2013. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2013/10/_12_years_a_slave_directed_by_steve_mcqueen_reviewed.html?via=gdpr-consent.

Black communities, but there is a huge silence in media and cinema about it. Responding to the criticism of including too much violence in the film, McQueen declared, 'I'm not going to apologize for the torture, the brutality, the cruelty that was done to African Americans in this country.' Yet, he noted that his aim was not to make anyone feel guilty for what happened in the past. He considered the recent situation with Trayvon Martin's unfortunate killing, having a Black president in office, the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the Voting Rights Act being taken away, and the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington to be 'a perfect storm for the conversation.' The conversation was not exclusively on the brutality. However, the story the movie was telling included violence and 'If you take the violence out of it, you don't have a movie.' [110]

In one of the more controversial reviews, Armond White wrote that '*12 Years a Slave* belongs to the torture porn genre [where] . . . brutality, violence and misery get confused with history . . .' He accused McQueen of being interested in 'sado-masochistic display, highlighted in his previous features *Hunger* and *Shame*.' He also accused Fox Searchlight, the distributor, as well as screenwriter John Ridley and historical advisor Henry Louis Gates of taking advantage of the political and social misfortunes of Black Americans and the popularity of stories about Black victimization, due to the "Obama effect," for commercial purposes rather than 'social or historical enlightenment.'[111]

Despite such criticism, McQueen's film had a strong influence on the popular imagination of slavery. The film's near-unanimous acclaim was a first in the history of films on slavery. The critics' labelling of the film as a complete revision of the plantation myth was also a first. This is particularly interesting when observing that, unlike other filmmakers before him

[110] Terry Gross, npr, October 24, 2013. https://www.npr.org/2013/10/24/240288057/12-years-a-slave-was-a-film-that-no-one-was-making.
[111] Armond White, New York film Critics Circle, October 16, 2013. https://www.nyfcc.com/2013/10/3450/.

(Fleischer for example), McQueen never claimed to be attempting any revisions.[112] He even declared he didn't look into any other filmic representation at all. He only aimed to tell Northup's story and introduce him to the public and relied only on historical records and his historical consultants in the process.[113]

The film also influenced several conversations on contemporary racial issues in the US. Even those who appreciated the film itself criticised the fact that Hollywood still shies away from such topics, as the *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis commented, one of the shocks of the film was its reminder of just how infrequently stories of slavery have even been told on the big screen.[114] For, 'movies may have come a long way since the days of Uncle Remus and of Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*, but the tacit gentlemen's agreement not to press the issue - not to go too far in rubbing the South's face in it - has kept Hollywood reticent up to the present, much more reticent, say, than Germany has been about its Nazi past.'[115]

On the other hand, some of the criticism the film received was on the choice of the subject. Black Canadian columnist, Orville Lloyd Douglas, wrote in the *Guardian* wondering 'why can't black people get over slavery?' and why are films about slavery still being made?' He confirmed that he would watch neither the *Butler* nor *12 Years a Slave*, complaining that 'the narrow range of films about the black life experience being produced by Hollywood is actually dangerous' because it doesn't allow real progress to take place.[116] Echoing

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[112] See chapter 3.
[113] Gates, '*12 Years a Slave*: A Conversation with Steve McQueen', p. 193.
[114] Manohla Dargis, *The New Times*, October 17, 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/movies/12-years-a-slave-holds-nothing-back-in-show-of-suffering.html.
[115] Mick LaSalle, Sfgate, October 31, 2013. https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/12-Years-a-Slave-review-view-of-a-horror-4943304.php.

[116] Orville Lloyd Douglas, *the Guardian*, 12 September 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/12/why-im-not-watching-the-butler-12-years-a-slave.

Douglas's editorial and augmenting commentary over the lack of insurrectionary impulses, Demetria Lucas praised *12 Years a Slave* overall but asked for more options beyond watching Blacks suffering in servitude with stoic dignity. She noted that if films on slave narratives need to be made, 'can I least get a Nat Turner movie where a black man goes H.A.M. at the injustice of it all? If I must watch servants, can I get more maids, like the character Minnie from *The Help*, who exact revenge? Must black people always be calm and righteous in the face of social abuses?' She concluded that something more contemporary reflecting her daily struggles as a Black woman would be more interesting to watch. [117]

Reacting against these two opinions, Michael Arceneaux wrote in *Newsone* describing Orville Lloyd Douglas *Guardian*'s article as 'the most frustratingly stupid articles of all the time.' calling it ironic that Douglas wants Hollywood 'to stop making white people "feel bad about slavery," but is peddling this nifty form of nonsense in a mainstream paper for major White consumption.' Although he agreed that more contemporary portrayals of Black lives in cinema are much needed, he noted that the year 2013 has already seen a new wave of Black films being made spanning a number of subject matters, including musicals, romantic comedies, social dramas, and holiday-themed comedies. It's 'utter silliness of suggesting that historical works stop being made because some people are exhausted by them.' He concluded, 'What white people and their black friends like Orville Lloyd Douglas must understand is that entire nations across two hemispheres were built on the free labor of millions of Africans.[118]

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[117] Demetria Lucas, *The Grio*, October 31, 2013.https://thegrio.com/2013/10/31/12-years-a-slave-loved-the-movie-tired-of-the-theme/.

[118] Michael Arceneaux, *Newone*, *September 19, 2013*. Available online at https://newsone.com/2722271/orville-lloyd-douglas-slavery/.

As Arceneaux noted, the making of *12 Years a Slave* and the Obama presidency, with all the conversations it sparked regarding race and racism in the United States influenced the making of several movies. In addition to those films made and released within the two terms of Obama's presidency, many others appeared afterwards, clearly influenced by the Obama cultural moment and dealing with different aspects of race. Ava DuVernay's 2014 *Selma* and Kathryn Bigelow's 2017 *Detroit* both depicted civil rights struggle and violence against African Americans in the modern period. Both were released in commemoration of the historical events they depict. *Selma* is a historical drama film based on the 1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches. The film was the first major studio film that brought the story of Martin Luther King Jr. to life.[119] It had good critical reception and was screened at the White House. Yet, the film had a lot of controversy around it, mainly its historical inaccuracy in the portrayal of President L.B. Johnson and his relationship with King and the omission of several civil rights leaders from the film's story. LBJ Presidential Library director Mark Updegrove argued that unlike what the film falsely shows, Johnson had a very good relationship with King and was a supporter of civil rights legislation noting that 'the partnership between LBJ and MLK on civil rights is one of the most productive and consequential in American history.'[120] Replying to the controversy, the African American director defended her vision to place the film in light of contemporary race relations. She told the *Boston Globe*, 'If, in 2014, we're still making 'white savior movies' then it's just lazy and unfortunate. We've grown up as a country and cinema should be able to reflect what's true.

[119] Ava DuVernay, *Selma* (Paramount Pictures, 2014).
[120] Mark K. Updegrove, *Politico magazine*, December 22, 2014.

And what's true is that black people are the center of their own lives and should tell their own stories from their own perspectives.'[121]

Detroit is an American period crime based on the Algiers Motel incident during Detroit's 1967 12th Street Riot. The film highlights police violence and harassment against a group of young Black men, and two white girls, who are terrorized and interrogated for long hours as aracist police officer insists, they are hiding a weapon in the motel, which was in reality a starter pistol. The incident leads to the killing of several of the Black youngsters, while others are released after being terrorised not to mention anything about the incident. After the riots are over, the white officers are identified and charged with murder, but they are eventually found not guilty by the all-white jury.[122] Peter Travers in the *Rolling Stone* thought the film was 'far more than a liberal howl against the escalating toxicity of racism in America.' He praised the film for bringing the 'brutal historical event' to life and allowing Americans to feel it.[123] Both films spoke directly to the contemporary problems of Black Americans still struggling with police brutality and the injustice legal system.

White racism and racial construction were also subjects which many filmmakers chose to comment on through their films. Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* 2018 was an American biographical Black comedy crime film based on the 2014 memoir *Black Klansman* by Ron Stallworth. The film is set in1970s in Colorado Springs, Colorado where Ron becomes the first African American detective in the city's police department. He soon becomes part of an investigation to infiltrate and expose the local Ku Klux Klan chapter. The film captures racism in American society with a light comedy touch by Lee.[124] The director received critical acclaim for his choice of themes and handling of a timely subject. The film was

[121] Loren King**,** *Boston Globe*, February 20, 2015.

[122] Kathryn Bigelow, *Detroit* (Annapurna Pictures, 2017).
[123] Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone,* July 25, 2017.
[124] Spike Lee, *BlacKkKlansman* (Focus Features, 2018).

nominated for several awards and won a few including Best Adapted Screenplay. *The New York Times* reviewer found the film 'both political and provocative in opening up discussion on timely subject matter following Charlottesville.'[125]

Starting from 2016, representations of slavery took a new turn following the release and astounding success of Get *Out*, which combined the experience of slavery with modern day racism and white supremacy. The film's theme of the Black body subjugation by a white family echoed Black bodies subjection by slave owners during slavery days. This imaginationof slavery was further developed in 2020 in the film *Antebellum* which was a direct 21st- century imagination of slavery and white racism stemming out of the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd and the resurface of debates on white racism and white supremacy during the presidency of Donald Trump.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the filmic representation of slavery in the twenty-first century and its relationship to the scholarly, critical, and public conversations on racial relations and the legacy of slavery in modern America. *12 Years a Slave* by Steve McQueen served as a reminder and a wake-up call for American racial consciousness. McQueen exposed his film's viewers to the horrors of slavery and the struggles of enslaved people and left them to reflect on their contemporary race problem. The film was, by both viewers and critics accounts, a success in reversing older representations of plantation slavery and replacing the over-

[125] Scott,A.O, New York Times, August 9, 2018.

simplistic and romanticised vision of the Old South with a more realistic and closer to the truth representation. It was ranked among the 21st Century's 100 greatest films by BBC.[126]

As Northup's story in slavery ends with his rescue, McQueen chose an open end to his film without telling viewers what happens after Northup is reunited with his family, what happens to the slaves he left on the Epps plantation and all the others he met while in the South. Viewers are left to think of all the slaves who couldn't make their way to freedom. McQueen also left the way open for other filmmakers to continue making films on true accounts of slavery which reveal the struggles of the millions of men and women enslaved. The influence of the film was shortly seen in other slave biography films being made, such as *Birth of a Nation* (2016) which examined the famous 1831 revolt led by Nat Turner in Virginia, and *Harriet* (2019), a biography of Harriet Tubman and her escape from slavery.

[126] https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160819-the-21st-centurys-100-greatest-films.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated Hollywood's complex history of representing slavery on screen, its reception, and its relationship to contemporary American racial relations. A selection of four key film case studies have been used as windows to peek into the time of their making and explore contemporary American racial attitudes. Filmic representations of slavery, it has been argued, say a great deal about the times in which the films are made and reflect their makers attitudes, society's comfort level with the subject of race and slavery as well as the industry's profit-making agenda. The critical and public reception of the films also reveal contemporary racial attitudes through audiences and critics engagement with the films. The in-depth analysis of four significant plantation slavery films asserts this claim. The representation of each case study has been interpreted with reference to its production context, representational strategies, and reception, as well as in relation to changes in the film industry, audiences, and within American society at large. It has also been comparative, with each film discussed within the broader dominant stylistic tendencies of the period. Thus, by closely following the history of the cinematic representations of American slavery since 1903, and highlighting the noteworthy commonalities and differences between the various case studies, this conclusion will outline its major defining characteristics

Hollywood's silent era was a period intersected with the Jim Crow era, which was marked by racial segregation and divisions over race. Therefore, slavery was introduced to the industry in its worst lights. Stereotypes of African Americans, inherited from theatre and the blackface minstrel shows were the defining characteristics of slavery films. Due to the constraints of the medium at the time, with films being very short, no dialogue, and basic filmmaking techniques, comic acting, and dancing were the only achievable outcome of most films. Comic relief and cheerful entertainment were the mould in which the vicious institution of

slavery was introduced on the silver screen, accompanied with racist attitudes towards Black Americans, who were not even allowed to be part of these early films as characters of African Americans were acted by white actors in a black face. These characteristics would soon then become part of American popular culture and continue to dominate cinematic representations for long years. Yet, these racist depictions were sometimes interrupted with reflections on positive social and political advancements of African Americans.

Chapter one of this thesis examined the nine silent cinematic representations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These cinematic representations have been relatively ignored by scholars compared to other films, such as *Birth of a Nation* for example, which is often cited when referring to silent cinema and representations of slavery. The chapter explored the reasons behind the making of the several Uncle Tom films in the silent era despite the original story's abolitionist aims, which didn't fit with the Jim Crow era racial attitudes. The examination has revealed that at first, it was mainly the story's pre-sold quality and the audience's familiarity with it that motivated filmmakers to adapt it to compensate for the industry's limited possibilities for a plot development during its early years. But the story soon became a symbol of racist white fantasies.

The chapter explored the transformation of the story from its written form to stage form, until it finally landed in the silver screen. This examination revealed that the Uncle Tom stage adaptations have themselves been influenced by different cultural and social moments. Just before the story was introduced to cinema, the stage adaptations were severely influenced by the Lost Cause ideology and the efforts of Southern organisations to create a nostalgic pro-South memory of the Civil War. Therefore, when presented on screen, the story was completely stripped of its abolitionist theme and all signs of violence towards the slaves. The main theme became cheerful entertainment, nostalgic appeal, and the slaves being happy to be enslaved, to the point that they danced on the auction block before being sold.

Examining all the nine films clearly revealed how stereotypes of African Americans were introduced to cinema in its early days with Edwin S. Porter's 1903 adaptation, which was heavily influenced by theatrical representations of the story with many dance tableaux included and the Uncle Tom character played by a white actor in a black mask. Despite its limited cinematic techniques, the film still managed to reflect on contemporary racial relations by including images promoting the reconciliation vision at the film's end.

As the later versions were made, cinematic industry began to show signs of improvements. The films made between 1910-1914 became more focused on the development of story and characters and had clear influences from the time of their makings. Although always represented in a stereotypical manner, the Uncle Tom's character in Robert Dally's 1914 film was exceptional featuring signs of resistance and agency among the slaves. This representation was mainly a result of advancements made by African Americans in an attempt to establish a better situation for themselves but also due to the film industry's commercial aims. African Americans and lower-class whites were the main ticket buyers of films at the time, as middle- and upper-class whites were still attending only theatre. However, as the industry grew to attract the attention of middle- and upper-class white Americans, the representation soon changed to cater to their tastes. The 1927 Universal version completely changed the Uncle Tom story to a pro-South tale. The film pioneered the theme of the Southern plantation epic with its representation of Southern wealth and prosperity and emphasis on the extreme kindness of Southern slave owners. It introduced a domesticated vision of slavery to American cinema which continued to flourish in the next decade.

My chapter on the silent film adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provided insightful conclusions on how stereotypes of African American were introduced and developed over the silent era from its beginning in 1903 to its end in 1927. It revealed the positive potentials that

the story of Uncle Tom could have had in cinema if it wasn't for the effect of social and political circumstances as well as the commercial motivations of the industry. It also revealed how the vision of a domesticated plantation slavery came into existence and influenced the growth of the plantation myth epic in the 1930s. My examination of the nine silent Uncle Tom films exposed how Southern ideology progressively took hold over American racial imagery and historical memory. Put all together, the films represented slavery as a benign institution with loyal and contended slaves, who are well treated by their masters with no inclusion of violence, except few rare instances.

The Second World War was another important moment in the history of Hollywood's representation of slavery. The war unity propaganda efforts employed by the government and the war time progressive racial attitudes provided the perfect atmosphere for African Americans to advance their social and political equality cause. The several war time films made by major studios proved Hollywood's potentials to create dignified representations of African Americans and encouraged Black Americans to seek a better representation in all films, not just those prompting war time unity. The war years were the reason behind the interruption of the plantation films genre popularity, which dominated the previous decade. Plantation films were extremely popular during the Great Depression years as they provided entertainment relief for Americans struggling with financial stability. The films became nostalgic havens that reminded audiences of better and more prosperous times. Yet, for BlackAmericans, these films were sources of racist and degrading representations. By celebrating the Old South, plantation films promoted a pro-South vision of the Civil War and a positive image of slavery as a benign institution, with which slaves were content, in America's collective memory.

In compliance with the plantation myth, *Song of the South* 1946 represented the plantation as a space free of violence and characterised by good relationships between White and Black people. The latter happily serve their white masters and entertained their children with cheerful singing and storytelling. Yet, the film marked a turning point in Hollywood's

representation of plantation slavery by ending the popularity of plantation films after receiving major backlash from both Black and White critics and audiences. The film which attempted to replicate the success and popularity of the plantation films made throughout the 1930s, ignored the impact of the Second World War and its unity propaganda on Americans' tastes and comfort levels of the Old South myth still being made in films. This is not to say that themyth completely disappeared following the war, but the timing of the film's making was toocritical when the country was under the eyes of the word after the victory in a war that was fought for Democracy.

The film's negative reactions were a result of the social and political advancements made by African Americans during the war years which rendered racial stereotyping unacceptable by the contemporary standards. The chapter explored the film's influence by the plantation myth films and its makers', mainly Walt Disney, ignorance of the war time progressive attitudes. The latter led to major backlash against the film, from both Black and Whites Americans.

The significance of this chapter is that it captured a very important moment in the progress of American racial attitudes and Hollywood's representation of slavery and African Americans on screen. Unlike previous scholars who examined *Song of the South* as another Disney product or a moment of backlash against plantation slavery films, this chapter considered the film's relationship to both the plantation myth and the Second World War and concluded that the severe backlash against the film which marked a pivotal moment in Hollywood's representation of slavery was a result of long years of African Americans' activism to advance their social and political situation and promote better representations in popular culture.

The Civil Rights Era was the next historical moment which this research focuses on. The post war years influenced several cinematic representations on contemporary race relations in the USA which claimed to expose racist practices against minorities in the United States and advocate for better race relations. These films were made during the years of the rising Civil Rights era; therefore, their handling of racism, discrimination, and injustice was more daring than what Hollywood was accustomed to presenting. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, African Americans became increasingly dissatisfied with white filmmakers' representations of Black characters, which according to many, were not reflective of reality, especially those played by Sidney Poitier. As the Black Power movement and its ideologies infiltrated the Black community, audiences were no longer interested in seeing Black characters being integrated in the white system and advocated for complete separation.

This historical moment was fully embraced by the cinematic industry, which was in need of revenue to recover from its economic crisis in the 1960s. Therefore, several all-Black cast movies have been made during the later 1960s and early 1970s. These films were known as Blaxploitation film. The Blaxploitation boom and its commercial revenues inspired many filmmakers to incorporate its themes of violence, Black revenge, and excessive sexual contentinto their representations of slavery to reflect the contemporary atmosphere of Black militancy. Among these was Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis who began a project to adapt a slave breeding plantation novel into a film.

Chapter three of this thesis explored *Mandingo* 1975 and its controversial representation of slavery. The film's director was outspoken about his aims of reversing the plantation myth of earlier films and presenting slavery for the violent and exploitative institution it was in reality. The film omitted any signs of prosperity or joy on the Folconhurst plantation and

presented it as an ugly rundown place. The main theme of the film was the exploitative nature of slavery in its physical, sexual, and emotional forms. Yet, slavery's detrimental effects were not exclusive to the slaves. The film represented slavery as the reason behind the destruction of both Black and White lives. In doing so, *Mandingo* overturned Classical Hollywood's representation of a stable and benevolent Southern slave society.

Mandingo was dismissed by critics, both Black and White, as a racist exploitation of history and condemned for its graphic violence and sexual content. Yet, the film was very successful among Black audiences and was one of the most commercially successful films of the year. Exploring the reasons behind the film's critical dismissal through an analysis of its content and reception, the chapter concluded that it was the film's association with Blaxploitation and contemporary cinematic interest on titillation as well as Black critics' refusal of white filmmakers' exploitation of race and history for commercial gains rather than exposing historical facts on slavery, which undermined the film's message. Yet, despite of its historical inaccuracies and critical dismissal, the film highlighted the sexual politics of slavery and slaves' resistance, challenging earlier perceptions of it as a benign institution. Black audiences resonated with the film's representation of slavery because they were already well informed of such violent occurrences in slavery by their families who carried the tradition of storytelling.

Comparing the film's contemporary reception with its reference in later film reviews reveals that American audiences in the 1970s were still not ready for a full exposure of the violence practices of slavery and still refused to acknowledge it. It wasn't until the second decade of the millennium that the ugly and violence side of the plantation was fully exposed. The film's significance was only acknowledged after long years of its original release. A 2013 *New York*

Times reviewer of *12 Years a Slave*, noted that 'one of the shocks of *12 Years a Slave* is that it reminds you how infrequently stories about slavery have been told on the big screen, which is why it's easy to name exceptions, like Richard Fleischer's demented, at times dazzling 1975 film, *Mandingo*.'[1]

The last chapter of this thesis explored the modern period focusing on the Obama presidency and the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement as a defining moment of racial progress in the United States. Being the first Black president in American history, the Obama presidency was marked by a focus on racism and race relations. Many optimists who thought that the election of a Black president was the beginning of a "post racial" era in the United States, were soon to be disappointed as his two terms in office were marked by several events of violence against Black Americans and a continuation of racist practices within the government institutions. Chapter four of this thesis explored Steve McQueen's 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* and its representation of slavery in the twenty first century. The film was analysed within a framework of 'Films of the Obama Era.' Steve McQueen himself has declared that his film 'wouldn't have been made if Obama wasn't president.'[2]

Examining the film has revealed that McQueen's representation of slavery echoed popular interests and academic debates over police violence against African American and mass incarceration as the New Jim Crow in the modern era. The film's emphasis on the violent nature of slavery and the story of Solomon Northup who was kidnapped to slavery despite being a free men served as a mirror of reflection for contemporary injustices of a system which still deprives hundreds of African American their freedom after being wrongly convicted and imprisoned. The film's handling of Northup story served as a reminder that a

[1] Manhola Dargis, *The New Times*, October 17, 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/movies/12-years-a-slave-holds-nothing-back-in-show-of-suffering.html.
[2] Henry Louis Jr. Gates, '12 Years a Slave: A Conversation with Steve McQueen', *Transition*, 114.1 (2014), 185–96 (p. 183).

Black man's struggles of the past still haunt many other in the present. Analysing the film as part of the Obama cultural moment and examining its critical and public reception has revealed that after a little over than a century of representation in cinema, Americans have finally made peace with viewing slavery for the violent and exploitative institution it was in films. *12 years a slave* critical acclaim and box office success has influenced the making of several other films commenting on the race questions in the following years.

A sub-argument of this thesis has also been those changes in Hollywood's representation of slavery and its handling of race are often motivated by commercial considerations and profit-making agendas. The Uncle Tom story has been introduced to Hollywood specifically for its commercial profit potentials and filmmakers' hopes that the film version will be as successful as the stage versions. When the tickets buyers were primarily lower-class Americans, including many African Americans, filmmakers delivered exceptional representation of the story to engage their audience. Yet, as soon as middle- and upper-class whites became interested in film, the representation soon changed to a pro South vision of the story to attract audiences to theatres, which the majority of were located in the South. Carleton Moss, producer of The *Negro Soldier* confirmed this in 1946 when he stated to *Our World* that motion pictures provide major revenues and profit making is the primary motive for its makers. He explained that the cinematic industry 'stands tenth in American business.' Because a 'large percentage of the annual net profit of the industry comes from the six thousand three hundred and fifty cinemas which are situated in the Deep South and border states (thirty one percent of the total cinemas in the USA)' the south had a major influence on what is portrayed in film and how African American are represented. Films 'dealing

realistically with Negro life are never given any consideration. Producers have made it a policy to consider only Negro stories that can be made into all Negro musicals.'[3]

Song of the South was another demonstration of this argument. The film was mainly made as a result of Disney's belief that, after the war's end, a nostalgic representation of the Old South in film will be a guaranteed financial success with its nostalgic appeal that made Disney chose a plantation epic vision for *Song*, despite warnings. Similarly, the *Mandingo* chapter has shown how the Blaxploitation film rise and fall was a result of the cinematic industry's profit-making agenda as the films were made and distributed so that the industry can recover from its economic crisis. As soon as the crisis passed, the films popularity started waning until they disappeared completely. Both Fleischer and De Laurentis have admitted that the choice of vision for their film's representation of slavery was made knowing that their ticket buyers would be mostly African Americans who would appreciate violence and the exposure of sexual exploitation of the slaves. Same goes for *12 years a slave* which was a clear product of the Obama era and debates on racism, its origin, and its legacies in modern times. Such debates sparked public interest in seeing movies on the topic and McQueen's film was timely. McQueen's choices to make his film speak to contemporary concerns and his promotion of it as a product of the historical movement guaranteed its financial success.

Exploring this argument throughout the four case studies, this research has shown that improved conditions for Blacks as a group, even within the film industry, are normally the result of structural and political economic changes affecting white America. In their totality, the four case study chapters explored how filmic representations of slavery progressed over a little more than a century with changing political, social, cultural, and economic circumstances. The change highlighted was in the representation of violence, slave-master

[3] Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1948), p. 206.

relationship, sexual exploitation, and resistance among the slaves. These themes were completely neutralized and wrapped in a romantic vision of the Old South flavoured with racist stereotypes in cinematic representation made before the Second World War. As civil rights activism gained momentum and scholarly revisions of the violent nature of slavery have been undertaken, cinematic representation of slavery dug deeper into exploring and emphasising those themes of violence and exploitation.

For the most part, films have represented the period of enslavement in a manner that reflected society's comfort level with the issue at the time. This was reflected in audience and critics reaction to *Django Unchained* 2013, which the director has openly declared was influenced by *Mandingo.* This latter was by the 1970s standard unacceptable, violent, and exploitative. But in 2013, with a Tarantino touch, it became acceptable. Film critic Roger Ebert gave *Mandingo* a scathing review condemning its violence and calling it 'racist trash.' Yet he found *Django* 'brilliant entertainment', and commented, 'had I not been prevented from seeing it sooner because of an injury, this would have been on my year's best films list.'[4]

This research has contributed to an ongoing scholarly conversation on cinematic representations of slavery and their relationship to the time in which they are made and its race relations. In the aim of adding knowledge to the field, this research attempted to strike a balance between the other scholarly discussions available on the topic. It focused in-depth on individual films as case studies exploring their representation of plantation slavery and how that has been received at specific time periods, but it also provided an overview when moving from one chapter to the other exploring the change that happened over more than a century of

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[4] Robert Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 11, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20130111022127/http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2013/01/django_unchained.html.

representation and how that has spoken to contemporary race relation in the US. My research focused on filmic representations of slavery on the plantation as a unified theme across the four film case studies to allow for a clear analysis of how such representation progressed over time and how it reflected and was influenced by racial progress. As films on slavery continue to be made, scholarly discussion on how these films comment on contemporary race relation will continue to matter and further research will continue to yield valuable insights into the United States complicated history with race.

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