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Film Review: *12 Years a Slave* (2013)

Dedicated to the California State University, San Bernardino History Department, and the students of the History Club. Thank you for your continued support and enthusiasm.

Introduction

The 2013 film, *12 Years a Slave*, portrays the true story of Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York who was kidnapped in 1841 and sold into slavery. He was then given a new name, Platt. It was under this new identity that Solomon would be subjected to a life of abuse and humiliation. The film offers intimate insight into the life and treatment of a slave in the Antebellum South, as well as the racial and social hierarchy that took place in the North and South alike. Solomon Northup, played by actor Chiwetel Ejiofer, is able to get word of his plight to his closest friends in the North, whom later rescue him and return him to his family in 1853. When he returns, Solomon, a once prominent member of society, is now a broken and rundown man, ashamed of his appearance and his absence from his familial obligations. It is with this last intimate scene, when Solomon is reunited with his family, that the film ends. The abolitionist message is clear, however. The institution of slavery was a poisonous thorn in the side of the country that led to the disruption of both the family and the human spirit.

Shortly after his return in 1853, Solomon Northup published his memoirs. The original book of the same name was dedicated to Harriet Beecher Stowe, and said to have been introduced as “another key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”⁵⁶⁸ It sold over thirty thousand copies. Therefore, it is not only one of the longest slave narratives, but also one of the best-selling.⁵⁶⁹

Decades later, in 1931, a dusty copy of the book was discovered in a library in Bunkie, Louisiana by twelve-year-old Sue Eakin. Eakin became fascinated with the story of Solomon Northup and eventually would write her master’s thesis on the story of *Twelve Years a Slave*. After graduating from Louisiana State University, Eakin continued her research of Solomon Northup, and in 1968, published a second edition of *Twelve Years a Slave*. In 2007, Eakin published an enhanced version, which included her research after 1968, as well as maps, pictures, and historian commentary. It was not until two years after her 2009 death,

⁵⁶⁸ “Solomon Northup,” Documenting the American South, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/summary.html>.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

that Solomon Northup's story would be picked up by Brad Pitt's production company, Plan B, and turned into an Academy Award winning film directed by Steve McQueen. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, after the film was released, the memoirs of Solomon Northup jumped from number three hundred twenty-six on amazon.com to number nineteen.⁵⁷⁰ This short essay will highlight leading critic reviews, as well as the major successes of the film. In addition, this essay will give insight into the racial and social hierarchy of the plantation South and the significance of the role of filmmakers as public historians, and their obligation to remain historically accurate.

Awards and Critic Reviews

According to IMDb.com, the film *12 Years a Slave* received 134 awards, and was nominated for 137 awards.⁵⁷¹ Among the most prestigious was the 2014 Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of the Year, and the 2014 Golden Globe Award for Best Picture – Drama. In addition, the film *12 Years a Slave* is the first film to be directed and produced by a black filmmaker (Steve McQueen), and to be written by a black screenplay writer (John Ridley), to win the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of the Year.⁵⁷² Lupita Nyong'o, who played the character of Patsy, also won the Academy Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role.

Although the film *12 Years a Slave* is not the first film about slavery in the United States, as stated by the *New York Times* film critic writer Manohla Dargis, "...it may however be the one that finally makes it impossible for American cinema to continue to sell the ugly lies it's been hawking for more than a century."⁵⁷³ Furthermore, Joe Neumaier, of the *New York Daily News*, stated that the film is "a harrowing, unforgettable drama that doesn't look away from the reality of slavery and, in so doing, helps us all fully, truly confront it."⁵⁷⁴ The raw and

⁵⁷⁰ "12 Years a Slave Oscar," *Hollywood Reporter*, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/12-years-a-slave-oscar-685803>.

⁵⁷¹ "12 Years a Slave: Awards," IMDb, accessed March 12, 2014, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/awards?ref_=tt_ql_4.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Manohla Dargis, "The Blood and Tears, Not the Magnolias," *New York Times*, October 17, 2013, accessed March 12, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/movies/12-years-a-slave-holds-nothing-back-in-show-of-suffering.html?_r=1&pagewanted=1&.

⁵⁷⁴ Joe Neumaier, "'12 Years a Slave': Movie Review," *New York Daily News*, October 17, 2013, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/12-years-slave-movie-review-article-1.1488866>.

graphic nature of the film dismantles the normative American narrative of the institution of slavery, as often portrayed through the all too familiar role of the revered “mammy” or the trusted “butler.”

Racial and Social Stratification

Solomon Northup’s account of his life as a freeman, and later a slave, gives the viewer insight into the social and racial divisions of the 19th century. Slaves were subject to a highly stratified social system. This hierarchy was constructed, and reinforced, by both the dominant white society and the slave society. The film portrays several instances in which blacks perpetuated a socially stratified system. The scene that best portrays this stratification is when Northup and several other captives are on board a ship headed for the south. In this scene, Northup suggest that the slaves should rebel against their captors. The character Robert, played by Michael K. Williams, expresses that the other captives on board are not like them, because they have been in an inferior status of servitude all their lives, and their spirits have been broken by the lash.

In contrast, the film portrays cases of blacks in a position of servitude that have not been subject to abuse and retain a higher social status among the slaves. One such instance is of Mistress Shaw, played by Alfre Woodard. Mistress Shaw is treated kindly by her white master and is handsomely provided for. She has used her sexuality and cunningness to reach an elevated position within the house, and has even obtained her own servants to attend to her every need. This scene of Mistress Shaw on the patio being waited on by other house slaves, while dressed in a fine gown, shows that masters were capable of being kind to their slaves, and that upward mobility within the slave hierarchy could be achieved.

Conclusion

In many ways, filmmakers take on the role of public historians and are expected to portray historical events accurately. Director Steve McQueen and screenwriter John Ridley expertly portray the reality of the institution of slavery in the Antebellum South with the film *12 Years a Slave*. By utilizing the memoirs of Solomon Northup, a free black man who was kidnapped and sold into slavery, the film offers intimate insight into the harsh realities of slavery, as well as the complexities of the relationship between slave and master. The film highlights the active role of slaves in establishing a racially and socially stratified system. In addition, the film combats the notion that slaves were passive agents, but rather that they were active in their attempts to manipulate their status in

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the hierarchical slave system. The story of Solomon Northup is significant in that it represents the plight of many African Americans of the period whose stories have not been recorded and whose voices have been lost.

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