

Telling the Truth about Slavery

THE first 20 slaves from West Africa were brought to the colony of Virginia in 1619 to work on the production of labour-intensive crops such as tobacco. The trade began in earnest in 1636 when the first American slave carrier was launched in Massachusetts. From then until 1808 when the importation of slaves into North America was abolished, 12 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic, mostly to the Caribbean and South America, with a death rate during the journey of 10-20%. Only 500,000 or about 6% went directly into what is now the United States, most of them being shipped there from the Caribbean, and by 1865 there were 4 million slaves in the US.

Their treatment varied but generally it was brutal and inhumane. Whipping and execution were common: one study of a plantation in Louisiana with 200 slaves found that there were 160 whippings between 1840 and 1842. Rape was widespread and black women were often confined to a life of sexual exploitation. Slaves were usually prevented from becoming literate in order to maintain control and prevent aspirations for rebellion. Some states even outlawed the education of slaves.

Clearly, then, the experience of black people in the US between 1619 and 1865 – the date of abolition by the 13th Amendment – was generally appalling. Yet this experience is hardly reflected at all in US culture. The myth of American niceness conceals a society which refuses to acknowledge its often sinister history, whether in its treatment of native Indians or imported blacks. It took films like *Soldier Blue* – excoriated as an exploitative gore-fest by critics who never protested at countless movies where the Indians butchered the US cavalry – and books like Dee Brown's classic Indian history of the American West, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, to offer glimpses of the less than glorious treatment of the natives.

In the cinema there have been a few dozen films touching on the subject of American slavery, but the vast



Scars of a whipped Mississippi slave photographed in 1863

majority are apologetic or even overtly racist. The first, and most notorious, was D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which dramatises the rise of the Ku Klux Klan 'saviours' of the American nation after the Civil War. Freed slaves are depicted as sex-mad buffoons, good for nothing but subservient labour. In one scene, the heroic KKK deliver summary justice to a black man whose sexual advances towards a white woman lead her to jump off a cliff to her death. The poor man actually wanted to marry her, but intermarriage is seen here as the worst crime against the 'purity' of the white race.

Gone with the Wind (1939), based on Margaret Mitchell's novel set in roughly the same period as Griffith's film, depicts a romantic view in which blacks, who are incapable of living an independent existence, are happy to be slaves because they are well-treated by their masters, who regard them as members of the family. Softer in tone than *The Birth of a Nation*, it nevertheless shares the latter's white supremacist version of America's past.

The myths of white supremacy and idyllic master-slave relationships also run through Disney's first live-action feature *Song of the South* (1946). As a musical, it perpetuates the legend that slaves were simple folk who sang because they were happy whereas, of course, it would be nearer the truth that, as Frederick Douglass suggested in the 19th century, slaves sang most when they were unhappy. Although it had black actor James Baskett in the lead role of Uncle Remus, he was unable to attend the movie's premiere in Atlanta because he couldn't find a hotel that would agree to put him up.

More recently, perhaps due to the Obama effect, slavery features in Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) and Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), but in both the slaves are largely voiceless spectators. In *Lincoln* it is the white leader who frees the slaves, not the slaves themselves, who are virtually invisible in the film. Yet it was also Lincoln who had told the Senate a few years earlier: "I as much as any other man am in favour of having the superior position assigned to the white race".

As for *Django Unchained*, Tarantino has referred to America's 'horrible past with slavery', but this avowed disapproval is just an excuse for the director to indulge in his customary gratuitous violence and sadism. As Spike Lee put it, "American slavery was not a Sergio Leone spaghetti western. It was a holocaust". Essentially, the movie turns the savagery of slavery into pulp fiction. Or as Christopher Caldwell wrote in the *Financial Times* (5th January 2013), "*Django* uses slavery the way a pornographic film might use a nurses' convention: as a pretext for what is really meant to entertain us. What is really meant to entertain us in *Django* is violence".

The fact is that in a hundred years American cinema failed to depict the real horrors of the 'peculiar institution', as a 19th century euphemism for slavery called it. It is an Englishman who has at last broken the taboo. Steve McQueen's



SOLOMON IN HIS PLANTATION SUIT.

Solomon Northup

12 Years a Slave, based on the 1853 memoir of Solomon Northup, has received rave reviews, David Denby in the *New Yorker* describing it as “easily the greatest feature film ever made about American slavery”. Yet, when we consider its predecessors, this in itself is not setting the bar very high. It is certainly a good film and an important social document, but one to be endured rather than enjoyed.

In a sense McQueen is restricted by his source material. Solomon Northup was a free man, a carpenter and violinist, who lived happily with his wife and children in Saratoga Springs, New York. One day he was tricked, kidnapped by traffickers, given the name Platt and sold into slavery in Louisiana. The book and the film chronicle his experiences until he is finally rescued when he manages to send a letter to friends back north who come and prove his true identity.

The problem with this story is that it is one-dimensional, and McQueen makes it even more so by omitting Northup’s escape from one slave owner. Here he is no Spartacus but instead plays along with his masters, even pretending that he is illiterate, so there is no romantic rebellion in which our hero resists his oppressors. Even his white *deus ex machina*, a pro-abolitionist Canadian carpenter called Bass (Brad Pitt in a jarring cameo), does nothing more than write and deliver letters, admittedly no doubt then a risky undertaking.

Northup’s passivity in the face of unrelenting cruelty is frustrating as well as painful to watch. We want him to fight the barbarity and

injustice but he never does, and this might send out the message that slaves, like Jews in the Holocaust, went like lambs to the slaughter – not entirely true in either case.

McQueen’s sombre narrative has been compared to Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*, surely the most powerful movie ever made about man’s inhumanity to man. It has a Nazi hero, but he is not alone and throughout we witness acts of defiance by Jews. There is optimism as well as despair, but in *12 Years* there is no sign of hope for those left behind when Northup is freed and leaves them to their fate. There is no justice and no comeuppance for the villains, who are free to continue their brutality unimpeded for another 12 years.

Also, Spielberg does not show the full horror of the Holocaust: although he teases with a shower scene, he does not take us into a gas chamber. Steve McQueen, on the other hand, doesn’t do restraint. As he showed in *Hunger*, he has a fixa-



tion with tortured bodies which borders on sado-masochism. Two incidents stand out. In the first, Northup is almost hanged, then spared but not cut down. The only way he can save himself from strangling is by touching his toes repeatedly on the ground. While he dangles between life and death, other slaves wander about, doing their chores, not daring to glance in his direction. McQueen dwells on the scene because he wants the audience to experience something of Northup’s predicament, but holding a shot too long defies all the advice given in film schools because it dissipates the tension and just fixes the scrutiny on itself. And when a director keeps doing it repeatedly, it has a distinctly alienating effect in which we become repulsed by the technique rather than the action it depicts.

The second episode illustrates the point even more clearly. In it, a

young black woman called Patsey, the slave owner’s favourite, is whipped to within inches of death for sneaking off to a nearby plantation for a bar of soap. The lashings seem to go on for ever, and afterwards she moans and twitches as other slave women treat her ravaged back. Here we’re in the torture porn territory of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and McQueen’s self-inflicted sufferer Bobby Sands in *Hunger*.

Surely the artist’s role is not to *inflict* an experience on us but to help us to *understand* and feel it *emotionally*. We know that slavery was brutal, but we want insights into why it happened, why black people were treated in this way and why so many white and black people accepted such iniquity for so long. And why it happened in a country which prides itself on its basic principle that “all men are created equal”. How indeed could Jefferson, the man who wrote these words, keep slaves himself?

To be fair, *12 Years a Slave* does touch on the religious factor. Slavery in America was underpinned by Christianity. Most Christian sects, with the notable exception of Quakers, supported it. In the Bible Abraham and many other Old Testament leaders had slaves. Black Africans were seen as descendants of Ham, son of Noah, whom the latter cursed, along with his son Canaan, for Ham’s indiscreet gaze upon his father as he lay drunk and naked in his tent: “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Genesis 9:25).

New Testament texts were also deployed in defense of slavery. Jesus never criticised it nor reproached anyone for owning slaves. Paul returned a runaway slave, Onesimus, to his owner Philemon, and in several Pauline Epistles slaves are admonished to obey their masters (e.g. Ephesians 6:5). Many theologians referred to the ‘Pauline mandate’ for slavery.

The first of Northup’s owners is William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), who reads the Bible to his slaves in a makeshift Sunday service (he was actually a Baptist minister). He is portrayed as a pathetic hypocrite, though in Northup’s memoir he is described as a good man and considerate to his slaves, but blinded by his circumstances and upbringing.

He actually preaches to his slaves on God's love for his children, quoting Luke 17:2: "it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones". The irony is that one of his listeners, Eliza (Adepero Oduye), is still weeping because she has just been bought by him and thereby separated for ever from her children. The disconnect between his faith and practice, of course, escapes Ford. He offers no justification for ownership other than financial considerations and finally sells some of them because he has bills to pay.

Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender) is Northup's other master here. A psychotic drunkard and rapist, this bible thumper also quotes from Luke (12:47): "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes". After he has read it, he waves the Bible in the slaves' faces and exclaims: "that's scripture!" He takes the verse to heart and whips the slaves who pick the least amount of cotton each day. When the crops fail, he blames it on a biblical plague brought on by his slaves' wickedness. When Bass asks what, in the eyes of God, is the difference between black and white, he replies that it is like comparing a man with a baboon. Ironically, he is the real animal in the film, preying on his black victims.

While religion is used as a tool of oppression for the powerful slaveowners, it is presented as a tool of empowerment for the oppressed blacks. For them it is an instrument of community, comfort, joy, dignity and hope. When a slave dies, they gather around his grave and join in a chorus of the negro spiritual *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Northup himself participates in the singing, as if the song gives him sustenance. Otherwise, we make of it what we wish, for we are told nothing about his religious upbringing or beliefs.

12 Years a Slave possibly wants to argue that slavery survived on a combination of cruelty and Christianity. Yet the film seems confused on this point. At times it suggests that the slaves rejected the version of Christianity of their masters in favour of a different version. Both

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racists and slaves took from the Bible what they wanted to support their beliefs and behaviour. If you like, the slaveowners took the more nasty bits in the Old Testament and the Pauline epistles, whereas slaves followed the Christian message of turning the other cheek and having faith that the owners will receive their just deserts in the next world. Of course, neither is a distortion: both messages are there in the text and the Bible DID sanction slavery.

Mostly, however, *12 Years a Slave* gives the impression that it was not really religious ideology but physical violence that subjugat-



ed and dehumanised blacks. And, if we contrast the characters of Ford and Epps, it argues that human nature, not ideology, guides the actions of the owners.

Yet we should never forget the words of Keynes that the world is ruled by little else but ideas or those of Marx that "religion is the opium of the people". Throughout history religion has constantly degraded and humiliated its followers in order to elevate and glorify its gods, and from ancient times it has been used as a powerful weapon of social control. The thoughts of Rousseau in the *Social Contract* are highly relevant: "The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty". Then, too, there is Seneca's remark that "religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful".

In McQueen's film this aspect is concealed by the fact that Northup was once a free man. He knows that there is an alternative to slavery, whereas most of his companions have experienced nothing else. In general, I suspect that most slaves were duped by religion into believing that their condition was God's will and that He commanded them to obey their earthly masters.

12 Years a Slave has superb acting, notably by Chiwetel Ejiofor as Northup, Mexican-Kenyan newcomer Lupita Nyong'o as Patsy and Michael Fassbender as Epps. But Ejiofor's necessary restraint cannot hope to compete with Fassbender's maniacal intensity and the latter largely steals the scenes from about halfway so that the film becomes a study in depravity rather than the story of an oppression.

Steve McQueen is an award-winning artist as well as a film director, and his painterly eye shows in some truly stunning images the heartless beauty of nature in the sweltering Louisiana plantations amidst the human horror show. But, again, this disjunction of beauty and ugliness (epitomised by shit painted on a wall in *Hunger*) is curiously disconcerting, as if a Turner picture had been touched up by Hieronymus Bosch.

McQueen has said that he is not interested in style and that form must follow function. He has also said that he wanted to tell the truth about slavery. I am not entirely convinced by either statement. Not only is *12 Years a Slave* highly formalised and clinical but also it does not tell the whole truth. For the peculiar institution was not just beatings, whippings, executions and rapes. These were the symptoms, not the causes, never mind the cures. Historical truth is not only about 'the facts'; it is also about the whys and wherefores.

McQueen does dip into this territory by including a religious dimension, though its precise role is ambiguous. A more daring film would have clearly pointed the finger where it belongs, at institutionalised Christianity. Capitalist economics was also culpable, but that is treated even more incidentally.

Steve McQueen satisfies himself with a part of the truth, namely that slavery was a monstrous crime against humanity, and at least for that we should be thankful.
