Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*

David Walsh
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Written and directed by Quentin Tarantino

As we have noted before in regard to Quentin Tarantino, even an unserious act (or film) can have serious consequences. The writer-director's new work, *Django Unchained*, treats the truth with contempt in its depiction of America's past. In presenting slavery, at least by implication, as the nation's original sin and racism as somehow bound up with the character of its people, Tarantino also aligns himself with numerous "left" cultural critics who have been made extremely uncomfortable and unhappy by Steven Spielberg's-Tony Kushner's *Lincoln*.

The overall concern for historical fact at work in *Django Unchained* can be gauged by its initial title, which explains that the film opens in 1858, "Two years before the Civil War," a conflict that began in 1861.

Django (Jamie Foxx), a slave being transported across Texas, is freed from his owners by Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waitz), a German-born bounty hunter. Schultz has need of Django because the latter can recognize three brothers, for whom the authorities are offering a large reward. In exchange for the slave's partnership in tracking down additional wanted men, Schultz will help Django rescue his wife Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) from a Mississippi plantation owned by Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio).

After initial unease about shooting a man down in cold blood (the pursued individuals are "Wanted *dead or alive*"), Django takes to the work with relish. The pair eventually make their way to Candieland, the plantation in question, presided over by its monstrous master, who stages fights to the death between slaves as a form of entertainment and orders one runaway to be torn to pieces by dogs in front of his visitors.

Schultz and Django pretend to be interested in buying one of the prized black gladiators, with Broomhilda merely thrown in as an afterthought, but Candie's head slave and henchman, Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), soon awakes to the fact that the woman is Django's wife. An outraged Candie thereupon vastly increases the amount demanded for her and, moreover, insists that Schultz shake hands with him to seal the deal.

Pushed to the limit by this final act of humiliation, the bounty hunter shoots Candie, and is killed, in turn, by one of the latter's thugs. Wholesale slaughter ensues, which ends only with Django wreaking revenge on all the surviving inhabitants of Candieland, including Candie's unarmed sister.

Django Unchained is a miserable work, implausible and unconvincing from beginning to end (unlike the best "spaghetti Westerns" Tarantino claims to admire). The scenes at Candieland are especially preposterous. Schultz' and Django's flimsy pretext for coming to the plantation (and their sudden interest in the female slave), which endangers Django's life at every instant, would not fool an infant. The reaction of the plantation owner, who presumably now knows that he has in Django an escaped slave on his hands and only asks for a larger sum in payment for Broomhilda (in addition to the ridiculous handshake), has no psychological or social logic. The four lead performers (Foxx, Waitz, DiCaprio, Jackson), all talented individuals, work strenuously to make some sense out of the sequence of events.

The violence in the film is stupid and pointless, not too far removed from—or perhaps a sub-category of—the porno-sadism genre. The critics, by and large, have responded with enthusiasm to the brutality on display. In *Django Unchained*, writes the *Washington Post*, "Tarantino resorts to his usual fall-back position, which is to bathe everything and everyone in sight in gunfire, gore and geysers of blood. … There's an infectious, unfettered fearlessness to *Django Unchained* that makes it enormous fun to watch." The *Los Angeles Times* reviewer gushed, "In *Django*, Tarantino is a man unchained, creating his most articulate, intriguing, provoking, appalling, hilarious, exhilarating, scathing and downright entertaining film yet." People who are entertained by such material … ?

I found *Django Unchained* at two and three quarter hours nearly unendurable. (I confess that I slipped out of the theater for eight to ten minutes somewhere in the middle, as a form of self-protection.) Anecdotally, I did not sense that the audience members at the showing I attended, mostly college aged, were especially thrilled with the time spent. No doubt they have been led to believe, and may believe it themselves, that Tarantino is "anti-establishment" and his films are not to be missed, but the actual experience may be something else again.

As a seriously unskilled artist, Tarantino has the story pivot on inconsequential or contrived incidents, which do not in themselves concentrate any of the film's supposed concerns. The various incidents are nothing more than the clumsy preparation for the final bloodbath, the film's actual raison d'être, toward which everything is inevitably gravitating. So any possible meaningful drama in the various moments is lost. Similarly, the characters are cartoons and stereotypes (all of the Southerners simply subhuman), which a decent, journeyman Hollywood studio director of another day would hardly have dared to bring to the screen.

When *Django Unchained* is not preposterous, it is simply mean-spirited. Almost everyone is filthy, even leaving aside the psychotics and racist maniacs who dominate the goings-on. Schultz kills people for money, although he does admit to despising slavery. When Django, new to bounty hunting, hesitates at the prospect of shooting his first victim, Schultz urges him on, reminding him that the man in his sights, harmlessly plowing a field with his son, has robbed stagecoaches and killed in the past—and is therefore a legitimate subject for execution. Tarantino thus projects "targeted assassination" back into the antebellum period.

Django later reminds Schultz of that moment, at a critical juncture in the film (which Tarantino underlines with rare close-ups), arguing that

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the world is a dirty place and no one can keep his hands clean. Where have we heard this kind of thing before in the US in recent years? Is Tarantino aware of what he's saying and doing, and to whose agenda he is lending credence?

If the filmmaker was primarily self-conscious and irritating in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and even demonstrated a vague interest in actual human life in *Jackie Brown* (1997, thanks mostly to the presence of Pam Grier and Robert Forster), his post-September 11, 2001 output has been unspeakable.

Tarantino is something of a cultural huckster, with a minor talent for pastiche, reworking genres and creating blackly comic moments. Under healthier circumstances, no one would have paid much notice. The flippant tone and cynicism of his crude efforts, however, accorded with a developing mood in sections of the upper middle class, who, in response to threatening global affairs and the social situation in the US, felt less and less sympathy for democratic niceties. Tarantino's characters, in their amused, nonchalant, punishment-free lurching from one sadistic act to another, increasingly represented a fantasized version of how such people wished they (and the interests of the American elite generally) could navigate the world.

For this crowd now, anything goes, as former "avant-garde artist" Kathryn Bigelow's case for torture and assassination in *Zero Dark Thirty* reminds us. This is simply being "dirty in a dirty world." Such people will justify any crime.

No fool, Tarantino, after the failure of *Death Proof* (2007, and its double-bill pairing in *Grindhouse*), clearly recognized that the barebones glorification of violent lowlifes had run its course. In *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), he latched on to the struggle against the Nazis, fighting fascism with fascism. Now he has done the same for the anti-slavery cause.

Taken at face value, *Django Unchained* treats slavery in an entirely false and ahistorical fashion. The slave system in the US and elsewhere was bound up with the global development of capitalism. As Marx noted, with bitter irony, "the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins" was one feature of "the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."

In Tarantino's version of things, on the other hand, chattel slavery and its cruelties seem to emerge from the bottomless racism of the Southern (or perhaps American) white population. Since the director has stacked the deck in this fashion, eradicating the offending populace in a hail of gunfire appears the only solution. This ignorant, misanthropic view even passes for "radical" today.

In fact, *Django Unchained*, with its racial-mythic approach to American history, intersects with the outlook of various "left" cultural critics at a number of points. And some of the latter have not been shy to acknowledge it, especially in the wake of *Lincoln* 's release. (Of course, for his part, Tarantino has no particular use for the "identity politics" crowd. He has far bigger fish to fry in the global film and entertainment industry.)

In the *Nation*, one of American left liberalism's chief organs, Jon Wiener contrasts the two films in " *Django Unchained*: Quentin Tarantino's Answer to Spielberg's *Lincoln*." He comes down on the side of Tarantino, writing, for example:

"In Spielberg's film, old white men make history, and black people thank them for giving them their freedom.

"In Tarantino's, a black gunslinger goes after the white slavemaster with homicidal vengeance. …

"Spielberg says the history in *Lincoln* is true. Tarantino says the history in *Django Unchained* is 'very right on. In fact, if anything, I'm actually holding back somewhat from some of the more extreme stuff.'

"Spielberg's film displays the director's 'integrity and seriousness of purpose.' (Hendrik Hertzberg, *The New Yorker*)

"Tarantino's displays the director's 'signature rococo verbal theatrics, outlandish humor and flair for both embracing and subverting genre conventions.' (Christopher Wallenberg, *Boston Globe*)"

In passing, it should be noted, that the recurring identification of vigilantism and individual vengeance with the struggle against slavery in nearly all the positive reviews of *Django Unchained* is itself a hallmark of a reactionary, petty bourgeois standpoint. The social revolution is not an act of revenge.

Stephen Marche speaks even more forthrightly in "*Django Unchained* Is a Better Movie About Slavery Than *Lincoln* " in *Esquire* magazine. He observes, "Its physicality is why *Django Unchained* is so necessary. If you watch *Lincoln*, you might imagine that American slavery was a matter of debate and policy, that it was a matter of law, and that all white people needed to do was correct their intellectual error of categorizing personas as property. … *Django Unchained* knows that America's relationship to slavery was not merely through legal institutions; it was a physical reaction to black flesh—a potently horrific mixture of abjection fused with desire."

Racialism consumes these layers. Even as the chasm in America between the handful at the top and the working population grows malignantly larger and larger, the petty bourgeois left can only see black and white, in the past or present.

It galls this element no end that between 15 and 20 million people in the US have seen *Lincoln* and, by all accounts, watched it with considerable interest.

The latter film has distinct artistic and historical limitations, but this is not why the semi-anarchistic, egoistical "left" media attacks it as, for example, "Steven Spielberg's White Men of Democracy," along the way deriding the sacrifice of the 300,000 to 400,000 white soldiers from the North who died in the Civil War (the equivalent of three to four million Americans today).

Well-heeled, conservative, self-satisfied, these people despise and fear the "great unwashed" in America, of every color. Part of the project of forestalling social upheaval in the US is to slander the population and deny its revolutionary traditions. Proving that the American people have always been bigoted, violent—if not homicidal—and certainly incapable of responding to a rational, progressive social appeal is one of the shameful tasks that the "left" in the US has currently set itself.

Tarantino's *Django Unchained* gives off a foul and sinister odor, as does the social layer attracted to it.

The author also recommends:

A culture at the end of its rope: *Kill Bill, Vol. 2*, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino

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