

The intellectually bankrupt defenders of *Django Unchained* and *Zero Dark Thirty*

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The release of *Lincoln* (Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner), *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal) and *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino) in the latter part of 2012 ignited an intense and still ongoing media debate on the films' respective merits and related historical issues.

The discussion goes to important questions, although much of what has been written is superficial and careless. In their essence, the various comments reflect opposed class attitudes toward both history and contemporary events.

Remarkably, although perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of critics and commentators—especially perhaps the liberal-minded and “left” ones—have made clear their fondness for *Django Unchained* (in particular) and *Zero Dark Thirty*, and in some cases, their preference for those two films over *Lincoln*. We have already noted the positions of Jon Wiener of the *Nation*, filmmaker Michael Moore and others.

From the aesthetic point of view, at first glance, that preference seems incomprehensible. Notwithstanding its weaknesses, *Lincoln* endeavors to get at how the various major and minor figures conducted themselves in the Civil War epoch, provide the viewer with some insight into the workings of history and politics and present human personality in a relatively nuanced manner, with a degree of humor and compassion.

Tarantino's *Django Unchained* is peopled largely by monsters, whose motives are almost without exception the basest. In the writer-director's misanthropic, racist view of the world, slavery was demolished or should have been demolished through acts of bloody individual vengeance. The film does not let the fact that the institution was not demolished in this manner stand in its way. Its events are contrived and unconvincing, the characterizations overwhelmingly one-dimensional and the dialogue is puerile.

Zero Dark Thirty is a dull, murky account, based on the CIA's view of events, of the tireless efforts of one female intelligence agent to track down Osama bin Laden and see him assassinated. Its central assumption—that the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the “war on terror” were honest and patriotic responses to the events of 9/11—is a lie and inevitably and fatally skews every aspect of the work. The life story, uncritically told, of an imperialist interrogator/torturer cannot, in the end, make a serious artistic or dramatic impression.

Two of the commentators weighing in most recently on the merits of the three films are Ann Hornaday of the *Washington Post* and Frank Rich, the former *New York Times* columnist, writing in

New York magazine.

Hornaday's piece (“Why Tarantino is better than Spielberg at portraying slavery”) is simply one of the innumerable commentaries claiming that Tarantino's *Django Unchained* brings its audience closer to the truth about slavery than Spielberg's *Lincoln* does.

Thus, she writes that *Django Unchained*'s writer-director takes on the slave system “with exploitative excess... It could be that to capture the perversity of a system of kidnapped human beings who were routinely bought, sold, raped, maimed and murdered, it takes genre filmmaking at its most graphic and hyperbolic. How else can movies make proper symbolic sense of America's bloodiest, most shameful chapter?”

This is ahistorical moralizing. Slavery was part and parcel of the early development of world capitalism, a system whose operations today Hornaday would not think of calling into question. Marx explained in *Capital*, “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.” These “idyllic proceedings,” he explained, were key moments in the primitive accumulation of capital.

Horrible conditions also existed in the industrial towns and cities of England, where children, according to a contemporary commentator, “were harassed to the brink of death by excess of labour ... were flogged, fettered and tortured in the most exquisite refinement of cruelty; ... they were in many cases starved to the bone while flogged to their work and ... even in some instances ... were driven to commit suicide” (cited in *Capital*). In the same work, responding to an exposure of the conditions of the slaves in the American South, Marx observed, “For slave-trade read labour-market, for Kentucky and Virginia, Ireland and the agricultural districts of England, Scotland, and Wales, for Africa, Germany.” Entire generations were killed off in factories, workshops and mines. The life expectancy of a working-class man in Manchester in 1840 was 17.

In fact, *Lincoln* brings an audience far closer to the truth because it locates slavery in real history, not as the product of innate racism and filthiness, à la Tarantino and his apologists, but as an economic system doomed by its backwardness and cruelty, as well as by the political and moral opposition it generated. To see a

human being torn to pieces by dogs does not bring us closer to the heart of the matter, it merely brings us nearer to Tarantino's morbid and unhealthy obsessions.

Throughout her *Post* column, Hornaday makes the argument that slavery was such a "perverse" and irrational phenomenon that it calls for distortion and untruth in its treatment. "But even at its most lurid, preposterous and ahistorical, 'Django Unchained' communicates truths that more solemn, self-serious treatises [i.e., *Lincoln*] might miss" and "Perhaps it takes the inaccurate insanity of *Django* and [*Abraham Lincoln*:] *Vampire Hunter* (!) to account for the insanity of a country that became a global power on the backs of chattel."

Art requires abstraction, condensation and exaggeration. This is not what Tarantino or Bigelow are about. Their representations of life are false not because they are trying through such means to get at essential realities, but because, in the end, they want to cover those up. By painting pictures, in the one case, not of an economic order that must be overthrown, but of a country and a population that implicitly deserve to be incinerated (*Django Unchained*) and, in the other, of a military-intelligence apparatus engaged and occasionally 'crossing a moral line' in the battle with unfathomable, alien evil (*Zero Dark Thirty*), Tarantino and Bigelow are coming to the ideological and moral defense of the American status quo.

What is it that the global pseudo-left in particular objects to about *Lincoln* and so values in *Django Unchained*?

This well-heeled social layer, conditioned by decades of academic anti-Marxism, identity politics and self-absorption, rejects the notion of progress, the appeal of reason, the ability to learn anything from history, the impact of ideas on the population, mass mobilizations and centralized force. It responds strongly to irrationality, mythologizing, the "carnavalesque," petty bourgeois individualism, racialism, gender politics, vulgarity and social backwardness.

To such people, *Lincoln* is boring, staid and hagiographic, because it treats ideas and historical actors seriously and even admiringly. A film can hardly be degraded or "dark" enough today for these so-called radical commentators. The latter feel disdain for any expression of confidence in the best instincts and democratic sensibility of the American people, whom they view as always on the verge of forming a lynch mob. The Civil War brings out the worst in these ex-left elements, because the ideological commitment and sacrifice of large numbers of white Northerners in the antislavery cause stands as a refutation of their conceptions and has to be dismissed or slandered.

Frank Rich's column in *New York* magazine ("Torture, Compromise, Revenge") is a rambling and dispirited piece. One senses, above all, intellectual prostration and exhaustion. Rich had his moment in the sun as a critic of the Bush administration, its drive to war in the Middle East and attacks on democratic rights. In 2005, for example, Rich noted in the *New York Times*, in regard to events in Iraq, that "we still don't know the whole story of how our own democracy was hijacked on the way to war."

But that is behind him now. Rich explains that what troubles him most about *Zero Dark Thirty* is not the film's stance on torture, but the fact that its supposed success reveals the American

population's own attitude toward torture: "They don't mind it. The anguish *Zero Dark Thirty* has aroused on op-ed pages simply has not spread to the broader public." The reaction to the film is "consistent with the quiet acquiescence of most Americans, Democrats included, to the Obama administration's embrace of drone warfare (civilian casualties notwithstanding) and domestic surveillance."

Rich provides no evidence for his claims. How does he know how the population at large feels about torture? Does it have any means of articulating its opinions within the corporate-owned political system? The columnist is mixing up what goes on in the media and political establishment, his circles, with wider public opinion.

Confusion certainly exists. How could it not, after more than a decade of a 24-hour-a-day propaganda bombardment on the subject of "terrorism" and the need to defend "the homeland," in which Rich's former base of operations, the *Times*, has played a foul and leading role? But a good deal of water has flowed under the bridge since September 2001: there is no popular relish for war, torture and foreign conquest, and the government is widely disbelieved about everything it says.

Rich joins in the shameful chorus of critical approbation for *Django Unchained*, asserting that the film's "reverie on the Civil War era, a crazy amalgam of the nightmarish and the comically surreal, dredges up the racial conflicts left unresolved by both Lincoln and *Lincoln*—and that even now present hurdles for the nation's first African-American president." Each to his own, but what the columnist experienced as "nightmarish and comically surreal," this reviewer found crude, inartistic and tedious almost beyond endurance.

In any case, more importantly, Rich here takes sides with Tarantino and Obama against a supposedly racist population, as he does throughout the latter portions of the article.

The *New York* magazine piece concludes on the following note: "That moviegoers of both races are willing to check out a white filmmaker's profane, impolitic riff on the most sacred African-American history says something hopeful about America. Should the president keep on his present course of bringing a little more of the unchained Django into his second-term battles in Washington, we may yet see more change there as well."

Only a deeply demoralized individual, who hopes no one is paying attention and apparently isn't paying much attention himself, could pass in the same article from portraying himself as a lonely opponent of the administration's illegal and murderous drone warfare to support for the man who presides over that program.



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