

12 Years a Slave: Unrelenting violence, not real history

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Directed by British filmmaker Steve McQueen, *12 Years a Slave* is based on the 1853 book of the same title by Solomon Northup (born in 1808), a free black man who lived in Saratoga Springs, New York, before he was kidnapped in Washington, DC in 1841 and sold into slavery. He was eventually rescued in 1853.

McQueen's film opens with Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) living happily with his wife and children as a musician and a respected citizen in New York state. When his wife is away one time, Solomon falls into the hands of slave traffickers, and the movie proceeds quickly to the most graphic presentation of the barbarity of slavery.

A slave auctioneer (Paul Giamatti) sadistically displays his naked human goods, including Solomon, before wealthy clients who prod the slaves as if they were livestock. Transported to New Orleans by ship, Solomon first becomes the property of William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), a Baptist preacher, the least violent of Solomon's eventual masters. In order to survive, Solomon must hide the fact that he is educated, since the slave owners, vastly outnumbered by the slaves, above all fear the rebellious spirit that literacy and culture might impart to the savagely oppressed black population.

Unspeakable (and nearly unwatchable) cruelty is meted out to Solomon and the other slaves by the merciless John Tibbeats (Paul Dano). Solomon is then sold to the "slave-breaker," the psychotic Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender). The movie's drama crescendos, as McQueen admits in an interview, toward the whipping of Epps' female slave Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), an interminable, lurid sequence. The intervention of a pro-abolitionist Canadian carpenter (Brad Pitt) alters Solomon's fate.

Director McQueen is known for his "brutal" and "unflinching" style. His first feature movie, *Hunger* (2008), depicts the hunger strike led by Irish republican Bobby Sands in a Northern Irish prison. This was followed by

Shame (2011) about a New York City "sex addict." Both previous films employ McQueen's signature gratuitousness.

Likewise, with a deafening soundtrack and visually suffocating camera work, *12 Years a Slave* goes from one hideous detail to another, with an eye towards maximum exploitation of each episode.

McQueen speaks about this in an interview with *Indiewire*. Asked why he lingered on difficult moments, the director replied: "I'm a filmmaker, so I always think: When is the breaking point? Sometimes you've got to go beyond the breaking point, and then you catch it. When is long enough? It's one of those things you have to look at, walk away, and go home and find out what it is. It's sometimes beyond the breaking point, because you go through that barrier of the pain of this person. In the book, Solomon is hanging [from a rope] all day... So I wanted somehow for the audience to sort of experience that, for a fraction, as much as I could."

This conception of the artist, as someone who subjects his audience to suffering, is distinctly postmodernist and distinctly false. It is an evasion of the artist's central responsibility, which is not to *inflict* a given experience, but to *arrive at its truth*. Unfortunately, those two undertakings are confused by many artists today, not only filmmakers.

Although his work is not as malicious or pyromaniacal as Quentin Tarantino's, in *Django Unchained*, for example, McQueen has a good deal in common with the latter, who openly presents himself as a sadist: "I think the role of a filmmaker can very well be as a sadistic relationship to the audience's masochist. I've always really believed that the audience needs to be tortured, all right, and the torture is not so bad. It's a lot better than being glazed over. It's a lot better than being bored and have images just glaze over you."

There are repercussions to McQueen's unmediated, non-contextualized approach. The logic of the film is spelled out by the (perhaps wishful) warning in the right-wing British *Daily Mail* "that the film has already made many Americans uneasy about their past. Some are even suggesting it could threaten to reignite the racial tensions that are always

simmering below the surface of American society.” Whatever McQueen’s intentions, and there is no need to believe them entirely innocent, his presentation encourages racial and identity politics.

In his 1853 narrative, Northup takes a different approach. First of all, he dedicates his work to “Harriet Beecher Stowe [the author of the recently published antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*], whose name, throughout the world, is identified with the great reform.” He then quotes from British poet William Cowper’s famed Enlightenment-influenced work, “The Task” (1785), which argues that “Such dupes are men to custom...that even servitude, the worst of ills...is kept and guarded as a sacred thing” and asks whether it can “bear the shock of rational discussion, that a man...should be a despot absolute”?

Northup proceeds to explain that, “I can speak of Slavery only so far as it came under my own observation—only so far as I have known and experienced it in my own person. My object is, to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, leaving it for others to determine, whether even the pages and fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or a severer bondage.”

A comment by the University of North Carolina’s Patrick E. Horn speaks to the book’s objective style and content: “The second half of Northup’s narrative is chiefly devoted to describing life on a cotton plantation. He provides detailed descriptions of the processes of planting, cultivating, and picking cotton, character sketches of his fellow slaves, and gradations of punishment for various offenses. As he was periodically hired out to sugar plantations as well, Northup describes the methods of planting, harvesting, and processing the cane in similar detail. Though his account reveals the misery and despair of field slaves, like many other slave narratives, it also reflects the wry humor with which Northup endured his situation.

“For example, in describing the meager rations allotted for each week’s subsistence, he quips that ‘no slave of [Edwin Epps’s] is ever likely to suffer from the gout, superinduced by excessive high living.’ Likewise, he begins his description of slave huts by stating that ‘the softest couches in the world are not to be found in the log mansion of the slave.’ Ironic metaphors and understatements such as these render Northup’s account all the more compelling, leavening the extent of his degradation with a wry and persistent sense of humor.”

It goes without saying that this element is missing from McQueen’s film. More importantly, any understanding of slavery as a historical phenomenon is absent, despite the occasional reference to slaves as property. Slavery was not simply the sum total of beatings and whippings—as real as they were and as much as they were an integral part of the

institution.

The chattel slave system in the US and elsewhere was bound up with the global development of capitalism. As we have noted before, Karl Marx pointed to slavery’s place in history 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, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.” These “idyllic proceedings,” he explained, were key moments in the primitive accumulation of capital.

Horrifying conditions also existed in the industrial towns and cities of England, for example, 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 horrific conditions of the slaves in the American South, Marx observed, “For slave-trade read labour-market, for Kentucky and Virginia, [read] Ireland and the agricultural districts of England, Scotland, and Wales, for Africa, [read] 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.

What is the message and thrust of McQueen’s film? Whatever he is seeking to accomplish, the content and tone of the film make clear that his version of *12 Years a Slave* is not oriented toward a struggle against present-day forms of oppression—and that is the most severe criticism one could offer.



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