



“Revenge is never a straight Line:” Whitewashing Blackness, Blaxploitation and the Development of White Imagery in Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*

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ABSTRACT

Despite its release dates back to 2012, Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* remains one of the most visual and memorable cinematic representations of slavery in American cinema. The film’s release inaugurated a long narrative cycle in Hollywood of bold portrayals of slavery on the big screen. However, Tarantino’s revisionist depiction of chattel slavery has generated a debate that is still open about the trouble for a white filmmaker to “revise” one of the darkest pages of American history infusing it with outlandish humor. The essay undertakes an analysis of how, beneath *Django Unchained*’s apparent depiction of black empowerment, Tarantino constructs an interplay between slave heroism and revenge, developing a form of “blaxploitation” through “white” revenge fantasies. In so doing, Tarantino creates a cinematic circularity that departs from the Spaghetti Western genre, develops the image of a black hero, ultimately creating a cinematic circularity that culminates in an aesthetic representation of vengeance that reclaims the memory of slavery and uses African American cultural history as a cinematic tool to offer a white perspective on chattel slavery. As such, the ultimate aim of this contribution is to shed light on how Tarantino’s whitewashes slave rebellion.

Keywords: Tarantino, *Django Unchained*, blaxploitation, race, revenge

Introduction

The release of *Django Unchained* (2012), written and directed by the oft-contested Quentin Tarantino, triggered a widespread debate about a white director’s improper misuse of the memory of slavery. The sharp critiques from filmmakers, among whom Spike Lee, were clear: “American Slavery is not a Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western,” and



Tarantino's representation of the slave past was disrespectful to American history.¹ Despite all odds, among filmic depictions of slavery, *Django Unchained* is also remembered for being "Tarantino's highest movie-grossing to date" (Knauer, 2023, p. 104).² As known, Tarantino's cinema, which has proven to be contentious to the public and critics, has always been a convoluted spinning of quotations, intertextual references, and inventions that irretrievably changed the logics of cinema as Tarantino's films became popular for their humorous reversal of conventions. Yet, when fantasy intersects with history, as exemplified in *Django Unchained*, the portrayal of a sensitive subject such as slavery in an ironic and deeply personal manner, weaving together the Western genre with the historical context, becomes somewhat problematic. As Joi Carr has noted:

When filmmakers create a film steeped in history, they do so knowing that negotiating spectators' complex attitudes related to particular events and time periods can be a daunting task. Yet, Oscar award-winning writer and director, Quentin Tarantino seems to have welcomed the challenge and strategically approached *Django*. He considered carefully his choice to use elements of historical realism while simultaneously subverting that reality with fantasy elements from the western genre for a greater purpose: one that involves critiquing black masculinity and classical Hollywood black cinematic stereotypes. Tarantino's success in this endeavor is up for close scrutiny. (Carr, 2016, p. 37)

Despite its release dates back to 2012, *Django Unchained* is not only regarded as one of Tarantino's best productions, but the film inaugurated a long narrative cycle in Hollywood cinema depicting the brutality of slavery, and its representation that, even today, seems not to rest. Without a doubt, *Django Unchained* is the most visual and successful depiction of slavery in cinematic history and popular culture after the success of the 1970s television miniseries, *Roots* (1977). Tarantino's film is replete with visual images that epitomize the visuality of America's slave past; the kneeling slave, slaves shackled together marching barefoot, the savage whip marks on the slave's back that Tarantino chooses as one of the

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- 1 This is not the first time Spike Lee has lashed out at Tarantino. Upon the release of *Jackie Brown*, Lee condemned Tarantino for his misuse of the n Word, used as many as 38 times in the film by Tarantino.
 - 2 In 2015, DC Comics published the graphic novel *Django/Zorro*. As Enrico Botta recently observed, although secondary within Tarantino's canon, it constitutes a significant of his output in that it connects the events of *Django* with those of *The Hateful Eight*. In the graphic novel, "a Mexican and an African American struggle together to dismantle forms of oppression of slavery, and, in the scene where *Django* disguises himself as *Zorro*, they merge and confuse to redefine the national paradigms of that American mythopoesis that Tarantino is recomposing also with *Django Unchained* and *The Hateful Eight*" (Botta, 2024, pp. 118-119).

first images in the opening sequence, are only some of the many photographic examples the American director uses to recall the visual history of slavery.

Additionally, Tarantino's fixation with black skin is a recurrent visual motif of the film; from the opening sequence shot with the close-up of the chains on the slaves' ankles, through the scars on Django's back, to the lacerated skin of Django's wife, Hildi. In a very recent essay, Serena Fusco has argued that if violence remains one of the most debated issues in Tarantino cinema, *Django Unchained* is arguably one of those films that intensifies the visibility of the body as a surface on which a mark and a signifier are imprinted—albeit painfully—and must be connected to a meaning. Indeed, the initial scene of *Django Unchained* depicts scars on the backs of slaves as they walk in a Chain Gang. In addition, as the story unfolds, we discover that after an escape attempt, Django and his wife are marked with the “r” for runaway on their faces (Fusco, 2024, pp. 26-27).³

For these reasons, despite an undisputed and evident difficulty, there is always a need to reconsider *Django Unchained* and constantly reread it from new perspectives. Nonetheless, the film is not only problematic because of its personal and original manipulation of the memory of chattel slavery—an uncovered wound in American history— but it is also equivocal because of its genre classification: it is rather difficult to say whether it is a Spaghetti Western, a slave narrative, or if it can be seen from a racial perspective. In this contribution, I aim to read the film through the lens of character development across Tarantino's a-historicist and fantastical lines, trying to understand how, albeit with certain perplexities, the director constructed an interplay between slave heroism and revenge developing a form of “blaxploitation” through a “white” revenge fantasy.

As recent criticism maintains, “*Django Unchained* was inspired by Blaxploitation films like *The Legend of N****r Charley* (1972), starring Fred Williamson, that was, according to Eric Benson, the ‘only slavery film before *Django Unchained* that told a story of Black-male empowerment’ (2013), and *Mandingo* (1975), as well as the Spaghetti Westerns of Italian film director Sergio Corbucci, whose oeuvre includes *Django* (1966), starring Franco Nero, who has a cameo in Tarantino's film” (Knauer, 2023, p. 110). Thus, in the American film industry, the emergence of movies with an African American hero

3 The visibility of violence imprinted on the body is present in other Tarantino films such as *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) and *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003).

at its core was somewhat problematic, as before the 1960s, black filmmakers lacked cinematic approval and financial support.

Discussing the first representations of blackness in Hollywood cinema, film critics have recurrently explained how images of black characters in movies in the past "have offered preconceived identities that are easy for white folks to understand and accept, even though these identities created a deeper marginalization of African Americans" (Navarro, 2013, p. 1391). On the other hand, films tackling the black experience were quite difficult for white Americans to such an extent that films centered on black characters by African American filmmakers were downgraded as independent movies until, after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, this genre of cinema took its course as anti-mainstream products became to be known as "Blaxploitation films." Tarantino's textual allusions to this film genre are evident in *Django Unchained*; the empowerment of the black character and the construction of black masculinity, are two important features of blaxploitation productions.

Nonetheless, Django's extreme individualism, as we shall see, divorces the character from the traditional heroes of blaxploitation films. For this reason, according to Johannes Fehrle, "Tarantino's use and abuse of African American disenfranchisement both in history and on screen, puts *Django Unchained* in a position of Neo-Blaxploitation" (2013, p. 2). Hence, it is important to recall that classic mainstream Western films treated the figure of the cowboy from a colorblind perspective. Indeed, when the Western became popular worldwide, the African American presence was erased from the genre that did not feature black characters offering an image of an "all-white" West. If we consider that black actors began to appear in mainstream westerns only in the 1960s and 1970s, during the height of the blaxploitation era, Tarantino anti-color blind approach and update of the Blaxploitation tradition was certainly innovative.

That said, in the forthcoming analysis, I will undertake an examination of *Django Unchained*, illustrating how Tarantino draws from blaxploitation films to appropriate black history and interweave it into the Western genre. In my view, this culminates in a cinematic narrative of vengeance that reclaims the memory of slavery and utilizes African American cultural history as a cinematic tool to present a perspective on chattel slavery from a white standpoint. Although with *Django Unchained* Tarantino blends the African American question into the Western, the construction of the black hero turns into a whitewashing exploration of the slave past. The apparent unoriginality of

Tarantino's plot is the result of a careful meta-film operation, of strategic and skillful reuse of certain themes (among whom slavery, revenge, bounty hunters, and so on) and their translation from the glorious Western cinema (or 70s spaghetti Westerns). On closer examination, the plot is filled with archetypes typical of the Western genre: the main hero gets revenge, the maiden is rescued, and love is denied. Indeed, as recent criticism emphasized, "Tarantino invented the name of a genre for this film. He calls it a Southern, a Western set in the South. His goal was not to accurately portray slavery but rather to be anti-historical. Django, "a Black Terminator" is sent back to correct the cinematic wrongs of Hollywood past" (Knauer, 2023, p. 112).

Despite the director's audacious foray into the Spaghetti Western, *Django Unchained* is a vivid cinematic tableau of revenge, redemption, and the unflinching, though questionable, portrayal of America's past of chattel slavery. Yet, before proceeding, a premise needs to be made. Very little is needed to characterize a Western movie: a small town in the Old West, the duel usually of two characters facing each other, men riding horses on expansive landscapes. However, it should also be noted that although it portrays a great American myth, the Western genre is among the most revisionist. In general, the Western has been often considered as a mythical reworking of historical materials that make it particularly difficult to identify the liminal boundary between fiction and reality. Nevertheless, the novelty, in the case of *Django Unchained*, is the interest in representing slavery and the racial question as it unfolds through the Western setting.

From its earlier days, Hollywood has been consistently akin to addressing the question of slavery on the big screen. However, for the most part, the first films depicted enslavement in a manner that reflected society's view of the issue at the time; or rather, according to the vision that white society had or wanted to give through the motion picture. The first visual representations of the pre-Civil War moment, such as Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)⁴ and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), showed slavery as a rather "civilized" and somehow benign institution portraying blacks either as prone to criminality, as Griffith's myth of the black as rapist confirms; or as relatively happy and loyal servants, which is the case of *Gone with the Wind*, through figures such as the memorable "Mammy." Indeed, both films have perpetuated strong historical inaccuracies

4 *Django Unchained* has been often compared to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), from which, by the way, Tarantino took inspiration for *Django* in the parodic scene depicting the Ku Klux Klan.

that even today generate problems regarding the representation of race in these films.⁵ Yet, decades after these early productions, as American society has unquestionably changed its approach to the racial question, portrayals of slavery in movies developed far more realistic, demonstrating Hollywood's increasing concern for representations that did not fail to ignore the brutality of the slave system. If the American motion picture industry has recently confirmed a growing interest in the depiction of America's slave past (as films such as *12 Years a slave* (2014), *Birth of a Nation* (2016), *Harriet* (2019), *The Underground Railroad* (2021), confirm), *Django Unchained* deserves a discourse of its own for Tarantino's highly unusual reinterpretation of American history.

Commenting on the historical quality of the film Tarantino said: "When slave narratives are done on film, they tend to be historical with a capital H, with an arms-length quality to them. I wanted to break that rock through that glass and shatter it for all times, and take you into it" (Tarantino 2012). Not surprisingly, recent criticism commented on the "a-historical quality" of Tarantino's film (Knauer x, 2023). According to Adilifu Nama, "Race-message movies," such is the case of *Django Unchained*, "express strong assimilationist impulses that end with lasting images of triumphant black achievement in the face of white racism" (Nama, 2015, p. 112). As such, *Django Unchained* compels inclusion in anti-slavery films and stands as a paradigmatic film for mythologizing slavery from a contemporary perspective, setting Tarantino's Western/black epic as a Blaxploitation movie.

To this end, Tarantino declared that his primary motivation for making the film "was to give black American males a Western hero, to give them a cool folkloric hero that could actually pay back blood for blood" (Tarantino in Vogel, 2018, p. 20). For Joseph Vogel, this statement is indeed perplexing as it takes for granted that "black men *needed* and *wanted* a cool 'Western' slave hero" (Vogel, 2018, p. 17). Overall, however, in *Django Unchained*, Tarantino offers the image of a reversed logic of blackness and slavery: slaves are empowered and the whites are destroyed. With a gripping narrative, the film offers a reversal of victims and perpetrators. Nevertheless, critics have also disapproved Tarantino's depiction of white men as evil, a sinfulness which is too oversimplified and diminishes the fact that blackness wins for the sake of a white rescuer (Dr. Schulz, as I will later discuss), who is responsible for the liberation of the black hero (Navarro, 2013, p. 1387).

5 In 2020, HBO Max removed *Gone with the Wind* from its catalog. The 1939 film, long celebrated as a pinnacle of American cinema, has drawn criticism for glorifying the pre-Civil War South while minimizing its history of racial injustices.

As the narrative unfolds, the viewer is exposed to a revisionist image of slavery in which a black slave is the agent of his future. If then, some film critics have praised Tarantino for his ability to propose a skillful and well-executed Hollywoodian retelling of African American history, others have criticized the premise of the film: a *white* director's appropriation of the black past. Indeed, the misuse of slave history by white authors and directors has always been a subject of controversy in the United States. It is worth mentioning a case similar to Tarantino's, that of white writer James Styron who, in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), decided to fictionalize the story of the famous rebellion headed by the black slave Nat Turner. Styron's goal, as with Tarantino, was to offer a white revisionist view by telling the story of a black hero from a white perspective. Yet, as Jelani Cobb maintains, in Tarantino's case, "There are risks implicit in doing this with a film about slavery that isn't nearly as significant in toying with the history of the West. The history of the West is settled in ways that are not the case for the history of the American South and slavery" (*New Yorker* 2013).

Whitewashing Blackness: Slavery Portrayal and Tarantino's White Emphasis

When analyzing *Django Unchained*, it is important to consider that Tarantino tried to portray an African American hero who ultimately assimilates "white" features. Alternative readings of the movie suggest how Tarantino's highly contrived film gestures offer "a new *white* construct of 'blackness,' for retributive catharsis, and reiteration of blaxploitation" (Carr, 2016, p. 42). From the very beginning, when Django (Jamie Foxx) frees himself from slave status and becomes a bounty hunter by joining Dr. Shultz (Christoph Waltz), Tarantino elaborates the journey of growth and realization of an outwardly black hero who on horseback—as he is portrayed for much of the film—encompasses the spirit of black empowerment and racial emancipation.

But if, as said, for white American directors, authors and artists, engaging with blackness has always been extremely perilous, Tarantino departs from the construction of the mythical hero or anti-hero, Django, to develop a revenge fantasy that although it offers an emancipated vision of the African American protagonist, retains traits of white revisionism. According to Marta Cafiso, "Setting the story and the journey of growth and fulfillment of the black hero Django in an antebellum South marked by the curse of slavery, Tarantino makes explicit his intent to redeem the African American element within a traditionally xenophobic mythopoetic representation" (Cafiso, 2018,

p. 122). In effect, Tarantino's construction of the black hero lies deep within the Nordic epic, and the myth of Wagner's Sigfried the director transports to the American South in 1858. However, as we soon understand, Django is neither of noble birth nor a man of Caucasian race, tall and with sinuous blond hair as Siegfried has always been portrayed instead. Unlike the paladin of the German epic, already endowed with all the physical characteristics of the classical/traditional hero (Cafiso, p. 123), Django is "whitened" by becoming the Sigfried of American slavery. To this end, Django is a whitewashed *black* Siegfried, who goes to slay the fierce dragon (slavery), to free his *black* Brunhilde (his wife Hildi).⁶

In this sense, if in the legend the traditional hero Siegfried is the exact opposite of Django, Tarantino's protagonist is a kind of anti-hero, or rather, a character who has been intentionally whitewashed. Scholars extensively suggested that, the Nordic epic can thus be thought of as a narrative device used to represent the evolution of the black protagonist from his condition of enslavement to that of an epic leading character ready to enter the myth. The comparison with Siegfried makes Django fully aware of being that black doomed to fight against his own dragon to save his beloved Broomhilda and finally recognize himself as a free man (Cafiso, p. 123).

While Tarantino chooses Django as his hero in the film, at the same time the director gives him many attributes of whiteness, beginning with the association with the Caucasian hero inscribed in the German tradition. Additionally, Dr. King Schultz's aristocratic flare—a character who is funny, cunning, refined, sentimental—instructs the black slave Django, who from the beginning of the film retains all the characteristics of an enslaved person. In the very first sequence, Django is in chains and on the body bears the marks of the whippings. However, Dr. Schultz teaches Django how to shoot, dress, and talk. In other words, he teaches him to behave like a white man. After the opening sequence, as the story proceeds, Django immediately acquires white privilege: he rides his horse and enjoys beer in a salon, arousing the outrage of those who are not used to seeing black people behaving like the whites. Indeed, as Django takes the first tentative steps toward his freedom path, Dr. Schultz seems to be figured as an enabling *white* savior (Dunham, 2016, p. 408). In an interpretative approach, Dr. Schultz plays a significant role in constructing Tarantino's black hero. Django's emancipation

6 For a through discussion of the presence of the German myth in Django Unchained see M. Cafiso. (2018). *Myth in Black: Revisionismo ed Epica in Django Unchained [Myth in Black: Epic and Revisionism in Django Unchained]*, *Iperstoria* 11, 122-26.

from slavery cannot be considered separately from the role of this white character who, among the many white characters in the film, is distinctive for being the only positive white figure. As such, the white man and the African American slave—though with different ends—struggle together to strongly dismantle oppression and slavery, and “the characters merge and blur to redefine the national paradigms of that American mythopoesis that Tarantino develops in *Django Unchained*” (Botta, 2024, p. 122).

By subordinating the African American characters of *Django Unchained* to the white savior, the white representation of the black hero is reconfirmed by Tarantino’s scene when Django is given freedom to choose how to dress and his choice of wearing fancy colorful clothes (a blue suit that marks Django’s transformation from a lowly slave into a princely hero⁷), causes considerable scandal among white characters becoming one of the film’s most ironic moments. In this moment, Django’s outfit is one of the most stylist ruptures from traditional history. Following this narrative trajectory, Tarantino shows how despite his former condition, in the film the black hero appropriates amenities for whites only. Despite being a well-rounded or nearly so black character, Django is consistently granted white privilege. This reading implies how Tarantino offers a renewed masculinity placing the black hero against the traditional white Western hero, making him to behave like a white character. Django is, indeed, a fictional slave. As critics suggested, “He is the discursive embodiment of what Tarantino imagines the black male slave (at least the ‘special’ black male slave) to be” (Vogel, 2018, p. 23). For Harrington “Tarantino’s black hero defiantly rebrands the traditionally *white* western protagonist,⁸ disrupting a section of Hollywood history that not only excluded African Americans, but actively dehumanized them in subordinated roles” (Harrington, 2016, p. 84).

The second aspect that needs to be considered is the question of revenge and its accomplishment through the black hero as depicted according to the abovementioned parameters. The phrase on the film poster read: “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of vengeance.” Echoing the *Declaration of Independence* (“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”), *Django Unchained’s* movie playbill already suggested how Tarantino’s film is first and foremost a story of vengeance, an entirely American revenge. Serena Fusco argued that the theme of revenge seems so inherent in Tarantino’s cinema that we are led to see it in every fold of the his films and as the driving force of the plot (Fusco,

7 Tarantino’s choice of the blue suit is said to be an allusion to Thomas Gainsborough’s 1779 painting “The Blue Boy,” a full-length oil portrait of a wealthy merchant’s son.

8 Emphasis mine.

2015, p. 71). In *Django's* case, however, revenge entrenches with violence (as in the majority of Tarantino's works), and in this case the film illustrates a form of vengeful violence. In this case, Tarantino develops two types of violence: the first lies in the vicious representation of the slave system, which is realistic and terrifying as much as it is explicit, whereas the second is the revengeful violence retained by the black hero against the whites.

Additionally, if revenge has been the main focus of Tarantino's career (from *Pulp Fiction* to *Kill Bill*- just to mention two of the most evident examples), in *Django Unchained* revenge is only achievable on account of the white bounty hunter, Dr. King Schultz, who frees Django and initiates him into possible revenge. Although in the film, vengeance is fundamentally associated with the African American hero, it is the good white savior, King Schultz, who frees Django and allows the hero to achieve his dream of revenge against slavery. The narrative of Django and the portrayal of the black hero are not derived from the black character but from the actions of the white character, Schultz, who is the architect of the whole plan and provides the impetus for Django to enact his revenge. From the very first scene, Django is presented to us as the equal of all other slaves, and given his condition, there is nothing to suggest that he wants to rebel against his bondage: no yearning for revolt, no form of minimal rebellion, or movement toward a goal.

The figure of the white Dr. Schultz is decisive both for the narrative course of the film, he will be the one to determine the events that follow, and he initiates the construction and revenge project of the Tartinian hero. As such, upon closer inspection, *Django Unchained* features two parallel storylines: that of Dr. King Schultz, who uses Django to find the Brittle brothers, and that of Django who exploits the doctor's liberation to get revenge and reach his beloved wife. However, Schultz's plot is the most significant and it is the only one from which the narrative develops. After the opening sequence, Django becomes a creature of Dr. Schultz, as his attire confirms; we meet him covered in rags and find him shortly afterwards fully dressed in an utterly comic electric blue suit. On closer inspection one can notice how the protagonists are actually two: first Schultz as the factual driving force of the story, and second Django who becomes the true protagonist only in the final part of the film dedicated to his revenge. Through Tarantino's black and white protagonist duo revenge, Django's evolution toward heroism is conceivable thanks to the presence of Schultz and his teachings; it is the doctor who makes the black slave the undisputed symbol of the

redemption of the oppressed, just as Schultz's death will be functional to Django's ultimate character evolution. All such attributions suggest how, in effect, Tarantino's black hero is, quite evidently, a creation of the white character/bounty hunter. At its core, Tarantino's picture shows the progression toward black activism unleashed only through the intervention of a white savior.

In addition, Dr. Schultz is the only positive white character in the story, white but not American—as he is of German descent—and almost oblivious to the brutality of slavery, as Django recalls, “Naw, he just ain't use to seein' a man ripped apart by dogs, he's all... him bein' German an' all, I'm a little more use to American's then he is”. The criticism Tarantino received from African American audiences also depends on this choice, *Django Unchained* is undoubtedly a film about African American heroism, but as it is constructed, the narrative seems to align itself with those movies where there is always a need for making the white savior the respectable protagonist. In *Django Unchained*, it is the white character who sets the mechanism of black violence in motion, and indeed as Stefano Rosso reminds us, Dr. King Schultz is the only positive and clever *white* character of the entire film (2013, p. 2). In *Django's* case, the *deus ex machina* is the white bounty hunter then followed by a heroic black slave who sets the liberation machine in motion, but then the machine proceeds on its own, and Django gets control of his actions and destiny. The outcome of this emancipation and its success is also confirmed by the conclusion when Django is framed from behind as the plantation burns down, reconfirming the triumph of the black hero's final revenge plan.

The last aspect on which it is deemed important to dwell upon is Tarantino's conception of blackness through blaxploitation lens. As said, *Django Unchained* is a black revenge tale and a Spaghetti Western, set in the pre-Civil War slavery. Though at first glance, Django represents the emancipated African American hero rebelling against oppression, the ironic and stereotypical image the white director presents can be perceived as somewhat racist. Critics agreed on how in Tarantino's film,

It is his [Tarantino's] exploitation of race, and particularly African American culture, however, that is a problem. It is problematic because it falls in line with a long tradition of white men profiting from exploiting black culture [...] Despite his incredible gift to creatively connect these disparate strains of African American culture into a potentially progressive collage, it cannot be ignored that Tarantino is using this culture as a provocative tool, without

any personal stake in its use, so that its primary purpose is titillation.
(Harrington, 2016, p. 84)

While also through a sometimes exaggerated use of violence, Tarantino seems to take the slave issue seriously—at least in the representation of its brutality—even though at the same time racial prejudice in the film is entirely dominated by an overtly comic register. It is undeniable that the ironic scenes in the film are quite numerous, not only concerning the African-American question. One of these moments occurs with the attack by racist, hooded white horsemen forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan against the two protagonists: the attack fails miserably because of the impracticality of the hoods the attackers are supposed to wear on their heads as a trademark of their devastating action.⁹ This scene, which provides some comic relief, is followed by numerous other controversies and Tarantino's racial choices. Clearly, then, Django is not the only the slave to whom Tarantino gives space. Upon arriving at the plantation of ruthless white landowner Calvin Candie (Leonardo Di Caprio), Django and Dr. Schultz run into Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), a loyal and faithful house slave. As Tarantino introduces the character, it seems that Stephen is the memorable example of an Uncle Tom who seemingly has no qualms in betraying his slave master. However, beneath the slave's feeble mannerism lies the personality of the second antagonist of the story. The servant leader is a black man who despises blacks, feels second only to his master, and proves more ruthless than Candie using his loyalty as a weapon of perverse power. "Snowball" Stephen, as Django nicknames him, is black but more fearsome than his white master. He will eventually be the one to discover Django and Dr. Schulz's plan as he will eventually sit in Candie's armchair holding a glass of whiskey sharing his suspicion of Django almost as if for a moment there was a narrative reversal and Stephen was the owner of Candyland.

Nevertheless, Tarantino's choice of making Stephen the anti-black character further complicates the white director's perception and representation of race. Indeed, besides Django, Stephen has more screen time than any other character, which confirms his narrative importance. However, film critics felt compelled to ask: why if *Django Unchained* is a film about black emancipation and slave heroism, did Tarantino felt the need to give so much space to this black character as the most significant enemy of slave

9 Tarantino's story takes place in 1858, before the Civil War, at the height of the slave regime, while the KKK was born after the war, to "put former slaves now free, too free, back in their place" by terror. The ride of the hooded men is a parody of the famous "Here come our people" in Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation". A scene that in Griffith is ignobly heroic and here becomes comically and ignobly disastrous.

rebellion and as the character who more than his white landowner tries to put an end to Django's plan? For Adilifu Nama, "When Stephen and Django occupy the same cinematic frame, they symbolize, albeit reductively, an ongoing and strident ideological divide within black political discourse over whether accommodationism or militancy is the most effective approach toward gaining racial justice in America" (2018, p. 121). Another surprising aspect lies in Tarantino's insistence on black-on-black violence at the end of the film when Django kills Stephen after a gruesome bloodbath. Commenting on Tarantino's ambiguous racial choice, Vogel poses some easily supportable questions:

Why, in Tarantino's mind, does black liberation demand interracial murder? Why is blackness presented as equally culpable for the institution of slavery? Why is Django, the film's hero, so consistently uninvested in black liberation or transformation? Why are there no humanizing or intimate conversations with fellow black slaves? Why no compassion for them? (2018, p. 24)

These questions seem entirely legitimate, especially when one considers that besides Tarantino's insistence on Django's black heroism and need for emancipation, in some passages of the film Django is quite complicit with the white order, as confirmed by the death scene of the black slave D'Artagnan. The slave's flesh is ripped by a series of dogs at Candie's request under the eyes of Django who demonstrates total disregard and cruelty for the man's life, as opposed to Dr. Schultz who, aiming to save D'Artagnan, wants to buy him to spare his life. Django looks at the scene with no apparent emotion, on the contrary, Dr. Schultz seems objectively proven by the horrific death of the black slave. Tarantino often shows how Django's emancipated superhero attitude is often single-minded, and his access to freedom is indeed individualized. In this sense, critics correctly maintained that "Django's rebellion cannot be considered a 'rebellion' in the social sense because it never includes other black people" (Nama, 2015, p. 24).

In his exploration of race representations in Tarantino's films, Nama further discloses how it is too reductive to consider the representations of African Americans in Tarantino's films merely as racist. A more challenging approach, to watching Tarantino's films, would be that of "deconstructing why and how his films resonate with establishing and emerging discourses concerning race in America" (Nama, 2015, p. 3). By looking closely at *Django Unchained* and its narrative trajectory, Nama cogently observes how

Tarantino's *Django Unchained* makes black romantic love the focus of the film and fulfills the conventional cultural work of Hollywood films to affirm individualistic heroism. Consequently, the forbidden love story of an enslaved couple is played out against the epic horror of slavery in America (Nama, 2015, p. 125).

Conclusion

Despite the cowboy clichés that characterize the film's ending, *Django Unchained* deserves credit for its legacy to America's racial politics (Nama, 2015, p. 126)¹⁰ and reverberates with contemporary cultural anxieties—just as it does today—on the matter of race. However, Tarantino's choice of making the African American protagonist exceptional in the film is a double-edged sword that generates a process of discrimination that considers all blacks to be inferior in most cases, as confirmed by the famous scene of Leonardo Di Caprio holding the skull of a former slave and becoming an expert in phrenology, demonstrating the innate inferiority of blacks to whites. On the basis of this evidence, Harrington repeatedly remarked how "Candie's white savior mentality diminishes African American cultural history, both on and off screen, to something manageable, specifically, something manageable by Tarantino." (Harrington, 2018, p. 86). As Nama further implies, "Rather than stabilizing whiteness, Tarantino's films home in on the mounting anxiety around black masculinity, interracial sexuality, and racialized violence in American society" (2015, p. 133). Tarantino's *Django Unchained* downplays aspects of slavery and systemic racism beyond the mere abolition of the system. As Jarrod Dunham explains, "The film's epistemology is replete with those myths that have become central to 'White America' limiting the institution of slavery to geographical and historical scope" (2016, p. 418), diminishing the psychological nature of blackness.

Read in this way, *Django Unchained* is deadly serious in representing black enslavement and slavery which, as Tarantino admitted with a certain insistence after being criticized for the film's overly violent scenes, he replied by saying: "I'm here to tell you, bad things happen in the movie, a lot worse shit actually happened during slavery." On the contrary, Tarantino creates an image of blackness that at times disrespects important racial concerns and whitewashes the figure of the black hero putting him in perspective with the white man as the agent of his freedom. As Joseph Vogel remarks, "What we see is

10 It is important to note that the film was released during a period of post-racial rhetoric following Obama's election to the White House in 2008.

Tarantino's 'dream' as *Django Unchained* is plagued from a lethal combination of arrogance and ignorance. His interest in the film, works and struggles, and also of black people is reduced from his enthusiasm for style, surfaces and spectacles" (2018, p. 26). Although *Django Unchained* remains a violently and visually important portrait of slavery in Hollywood films, Tarantino's mechanism is an unsophisticated reduction and an attempt to rewrite American history through what can be defined as a "colorblind fantasy."

However, more specifically, *Django Unchained* serves as a trenchant reminder of America's historical racial legacy and its connection to contemporary racial politics, a point emphasized by the anachronistic film's inclusion of rap music. Overall, however, much of Tarantino's choice of representing white-on-black, black-on-black and black-on-white violence, in the film comes from the context of *Django's* release. The film was brought to cinemas at a moment in American history when the United States was coming to terms with cases of police brutality and racial tensions which would even increase shortly thereafter. In effect, *Django Unchained* is fundamentally premised on an hypothetical scenario of "what if," implying an alternate historical trajectory for the protagonist. Despite being rooted in a fictionalized representation, the narrative conveys the complexities of seeking retribution, echoing a famous quote from another Tarantino film: "Revenge is never a straight line."¹¹

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11 One of Tarantino's most famous quotes from *Kill Bill: Volume 1*. (2003). Miramax Films.

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