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Bio: I grew up in the eastern part of Nigeria, where the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967-70 was hard fought. The heritage of that war remained strong and present to this day. But the Nigerian government ensured that the history of that War remained as muffled as possible. Through stories and collective memory sites such as masquerades and festivals, memories of the War and its impact on the Igbo came to me. With my fascination with the strategies through which these atrocity stories were told, my interests in atrocity representations in violent narratives grew. Narrating and representing atrocity and the storytelling strategies for doing so have remained fascinating areas of research for me and have stimulated my interests in seeking the connections between human rights and literature. My doctoral research is based on representations of genocidal atrocities in narratives of the Nigeria and Rwanda genocidal atrocities.

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Abstract including thesis statement and main argument. 139 words

The cinema in the post-literate age was declared dead and with it cinephilia (see Sontag). This declaration came from the assumption that the image has lost its ennobling powers to animate humans. The genre of film most vilified for its potential to distort rather than animate is the historical trauma film. However, I will examine Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* as a historical trauma film that animates and ennobles repressed traumas of black slavery in America through intricate deployments of filmic strategies. I will base my analysis on Christian Keathley's insight over how cinephiliac or epiphanic moments induced by marginal filmic details can ennoble the spectator's metaphysical connection with the image. Like Keathley, I will argue that it is this ability of film to trigger the ineffable that gives historical trauma film relevance in a post-literate, information age.

Cinephilia and the Historical Trauma Film: Reanimating the Repressed in McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*

Like all other discourses of history, the historical film, particularly the historical trauma film, is one genre that will remain a site for contestations. Its relation to the past, especially in its attempts to find a filmic idiom or a suitable representational vocabulary for the traumatic past, places it in the spotlight for criticisms. One of the earliest criticisms of the historical film came from Louis Gottschalk, a University of Chicago historian in 1935. Writing to the president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer over the distorting potential of historical film, Gottschalk states, "If the cinema art is going to draw its subjects so generously from history, it owes its patrons and its own higher ideals to achieve greater accuracy. No picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had a chance to criticize and revise it" (qtd. in Rosenstone 50). Gottschalk's remark shows that he regards history as a truthful or an authentic empirical account of the past.

However, what stands out from Gottschalk's anxiety, a point that is still an issue with historical films till present, is the distrust over film's ability to represent the past accurately, adequately, or illuminatingly, without resorting to trivialisations, romanticisations and undue emotional falsifications (see Rosenstone). In a sense, these criticisms of the historical film operate on the assumption that the spectators of historical films could be cajoled through films' visual potentials into accepting certain distorted representations of the past, and also on the assumption that films could be a source of encountering history, or that films teach history in certain ways, to say the least. The fear is also that film, like still photography, potentially forces the spectator to remember, not the past, but the image of the past on the screen (see Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*).

Rehashing some of these criticisms of the historical film while also distancing my study from their distrust over filming history, I will engage Steve McQueen's historical trauma film, *12 Years a Slave*, as an attempt to reanimate the image and guide the spectator to recover empathetic stimuli responses to history in an era of excess image dissemination or abundance of stimuli. Rather than see historical films as failed attempts to represent unrepresentable pasts, I will discuss historical trauma film as a powerful artistic site from which the spectator potentially encounters the functional memory of their present. Christian Keathley's attempts to show how cinephiliac or epiphanic moments induced by marginal filmic details – prompted by film's capacity to draw its spectator into epiphanic fits – can ennoble the spectator's metaphysical connection with the image will provide the grounds of my arguments. For Keathley, it is this ability of film to trigger the ineffable that gives film relevance in a post-literate, information age. Working from Keathley's points, I will examine Steve

McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* to show how historical trauma films animate or reanimate repressed aspects of the past through intricate deployments of filmic strategies.

Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* is an adaptation of Solomon Northup's 1853 memoir by the same title. The film is based on Northup's twelve-year experience of slavery in the southern states of America. A freeborn black man living in New York with his wife and two kids and employed as a fiddler, Northup was tricked by two white men into joining their troupe for a performance in Washington D.C. In Washington, he was drugged and sold into slavery. He was later purchased by Theophilus Freeman who renamed him Platt. Subsequently, he was resold two times and eventually came to spend twelve years in one of the cotton plantations of Southwest America. Cotton was a booming business at the time, because of the increased export demands for cotton (Urban n.p.). While working at the plantation owned by Edwin Epps, Northup met a Canadian carpenter known as Bass, who expressed his abhorrence of slavery. Northup told Bass his story and got him to write to his white acquaintances in New York. Bass' letters led eventually to Northup's freedom and an eventual legal battle Northup brought against the two white men who sold him into slavery. The case was however stifled out of existence. Northup meanwhile dictated his slave experience to his lawyer, David Wilson, and it was published as *Twelve Years a Slave* in 1853.

In McQueen's adaptation of the book into film, there is an attempt to emotively recover Northup's experience and the atmosphere of the period. This point is expressed by the screenwriter, John Ridley, who says in an interview that his intent was to depict the "emotional honesty" and "emotional velocity" of slavery in America (Urban 83). McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* upholds a first-person narrative account that nuances the slave experience depicted in the film as anything but a universal slave experience of blacks in America. Rather, the film reveals a black freeman's glimpse into the horror of black slavery in America. The film is also a conscious attempt to avoid essentializing 'whiteness' as inhuman slave perpetrator and 'blackness' as vulnerable and powerless victim of slavery. McQueen explains that his depiction of Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender), for instance, is intended to make him as human as possible, rather than excuse his behaviour as inhuman and thus deny the point that slavery operated out of a strong rational and well-sustained intellectual practice of capitalist industrialisation. Epps's sexual desire for and rape of his slave, Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), provide insight into the nature of master-slave relationships that McQueen has intended. To illustrate this point further, the scene where Epps rapes Patsey is significant. After ravishing her with the utmost violence and disgust, expressed by slaps to the slave's face, Epps slumps on top of her and begins to cry. This show of frustration, self-disgust and vulnerability is conflated with the trope of the slave master whose sadistic crotch is set on fire by the servitude of his slave. His wild

passion for the slave is also the source of his self-disgust and the source of the instability of his family. As much as Epps will comfort himself with the lie that slaves are his property and that “a man does what he pleases with his property,” he exposes this lie through his frustration and dissatisfaction in coercing or raping his slave.

Significantly, notwithstanding that McQueen’s gendered depiction of the slave’s body as the master’s object of desire reinforces a gendered trope of the masculine perpetrator and the feminine violated, this depiction reveals two important revisionist possibilities. One, Patsey’s body, even in the reality of gruesome violation, refuses to yield to the master’s possession. Epps’s frustration is an expression of his inability to possess Patsey’s body and he vents his frustration ultimately through the physical battering of her body, a traumatising instance of which is the scene where he orders Platt (Northup, played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) to flog Patsey.

Two, McQueen nuances Northup’s place in the historical environment of slavery as both the insider-outsider whose body is appropriated by the master and the slave for their own orgiastic ends. The film’s opening scene shows an encounter between Northup and an unnamed slave woman. While in the slaves’ bunk house struggling to sleep, Northup rolls over on his side and finds the unnamed slave woman staring at him. Unable to get Northup to fully copulate with her, she grabs his hand and uses it as an instrument of pleasure. After she uses Northup’s hand to masturbate herself, she rolls over on her side and sobs. McQueen says that what he intends to achieve with that scene is to have a slave woman who is conscious of her body being owned by the slave master during the day, but who in the night “takes control of her own body. Then after she’s climaxed, she’s back where she was. She’s back in hell, and that’s when she turns and cries” (George n.p.). Like the slave master, Epps, the unnamed slave woman is in hell. Her orgasmic pleasure, like a brief night sleep, is momentary, and she wakes up to the reality of torture and servitude. Similarly, Epps wallows in occasional pleasures and glimpses of power expressed through rape. Moments after, he wakes up to the reality of his inability to fully possess or control the slave’s body. He cries in frustration, like the unnamed slave woman who also realises her inability to take possession of her own body as she wants to.

This opening scene, which recurs again in less detail after the film’s long flashback of Northup’s life, is significant in many senses and provides a filmic metaphor on the place the likes of Northup occupy in the history of slavery in America. Here, Northup loses autonomy over his own body, and he loses this autonomy to a slave woman. Not only does McQueen depict Northup’s body as a contested space, he also revises a gendered trope that rarely privileges the slave woman with control over her own body. The unnamed slave woman controls her own body and elicits pleasure with a fellow slave man’s body, however pitiable a circumstance she finds herself in. At the same

time, Epps uses Northup's body for his own purposes, either as labour or as a space for expressing his sadism. In a sense therefore, Northup can be seen as the slave that is not fully a slave. He struggles for his autonomy, even though he loses it at different times. His refusal to completely yield to the demands of either the master or the slave is further portrayed in his refusal to grant Patsey's request for mercy-killing. The question he asks Patsey, "there are others..., why [me]? Why would you consign me to damnation with such an ungodly request?" reveals McQueen's nuanced positioning of Northup in the American slavery experience as a liminal figure whose account cannot be a total representation of the experience.

While such a nuanced presentation of Northup reveals McQueen's revisionist intentions in imbuing an aspect of the history of American slavery with "emotional honesty" and "emotional velocity" as Ridley says, this nuanced presentation of slavery in *12 Years a Slave* also in some senses reinforces the tradition of depicting black slaves in America's southern states as "a backward, innately inferior lot who were greatly appreciative of benevolent white supervision" (Van Deburg 13). Although *12 Years a Slave* reveals that African-American slaves in the south are not the "easy-going, amiable, serio-comic [obedient servants who maintained] the same personal attachments to white men, as well as the same sturdy light heartedness and the same love of laughter and of rhythm," as Ulrich Phillips claimed (Van Deburg 13) or like films such as *Gone with the Wind* posit, McQueen's film, in sustaining a portrayal of Northup as more than a mere slave, a view that is also articulated by the slave woman, Eliza (Adepero Oduye), who cries all the time because she is separated from her children, keys into a tradition that polarises the humanity of slaves in the north and south of America. Yet, in a deployment of filmic capriciousness reminiscent of Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, McQueen's depiction of Mistress Shaw (Alfre Woodard), the black wife of a white slave master challenges a sustained reading of the film as a polarised account of the humanity of black slaves. Even though in Northup's book, as McQueen notes, Mistress Shaw is not given voice (George n.p.), in the film, she is not only given a voice, but her white husband is also hushed up in the background. In the only scene where she makes an appearance in the film, Mistress Shaw's figure quickly becomes juxtaposed with Patsey's as she plays mother and old housewife to Patsey. She appears in part as a cinematic foreshadowing of Patsey's life with Epps or McQueen's attempt to task the spectator's speculative imagination over Patsey's future. The slave master is not entirely devoid of affection or love for the slave. The helplessness and frustration he feels in struggling to muffle that affection is what often leads to his sadistic violence upon the slave. Mistress Shaw's brief appearance thus reveals an attempt to recover from what official histories have circumvented, the realities and possibilities that existed in the relationship between the slave and the master. There

were after all masters like Shaw who married their slaves, even when the law forbade such marriages (George).

McQueen's depiction of slavery is not altogether unrelated to the film's general atmosphere. The characters are portrayed as victims of a larger institutional menace: the capitalist industry. The dehumanising effects of capitalism are ultimately what McQueen champions as the fuel that propels human enslavement. Greed and the desire for cheap labour are what lead humans to dehumanise fellow humans on the basis of race, and use fellow humans to satisfy the bourgeoisie's economic greed. In this sense, Epps's insatiably harrowing sexual desire becomes an extended metaphor of the capitalist master's insatiable disgust and inability to possess and control labour fully. *12 Years a Slave* sustains a strong emotional sense of institutional power of capitalism over the individual. The shrieking forest sounds of the cotton plantation and the bush pierce through the soundtrack from the background or as brief interludes to provide a strong emotional atmosphere in the film. The camera does not show the birds that produce the shrieking sounds. Rather, the cotton plantation is portrayed as having a shrieking voice. The plantation's soulless, forest shrill in McQueen's narrative becomes the image of capitalist decadence and dehumanisation. This decadence is the kind that suppresses every feeling of empathy for a sense of common humanity. For example, the brief time Northup spends in Theophilus Freeman's (Paul Giamatti) fashionable mansion, which is also a colourful slave trade fair, he sees how capitalism undermines human emotions and feelings. One of Freeman's white customers having seen how one slave woman (Eliza) begs to have her and her children sold to the same plantation and not be separated, yields empathetically to the woman's pleas, only for Freeman to dispassionately lure him away from being unduly empathetic rather than thinking first of commercial profit. Eliza's plight in the film signals one disruptive impact of capitalist enslavement on the family.

McQueen's insistence on depicting the power of a concerted capitalist institution over the individual is further expressed in all of Northup's failed attempts to escape from slavery. Once, he tries to run and finds himself face-to-face with a white execution party and narrowly escapes death due to Epps's badge on him. His attempt to write a letter and use the plantation overseer, Armsby (Garret Dillahunt), to mail it to his friends fails, as Armsby betrays him. Even though he loses the money he has made from one of his performances, he also narrowly escapes death in Epps's hands by denying Armsby's report to Epps. His powerlessness and impotence over the capitalist institution is summed up symbolically when he burns the letter he has written to be mailed to his acquaintances in New York. As the red flames gradually dissolve completely into the darkness of the night, merging with the blacking out of the screen, Platt (Northup) at this point realises that only something supernatural and beyond the logic of an individual struggle can free him from slavery. At that stage

during the funeral of Uncle Abram – the slave who dies while working in the plantation, – Northup begins to accept his slave status and in one memorable instance he reluctantly yields himself to the sobering “Roll, Jordan, Roll” chorus of the other slave mourners. His distinct voice that provides a rough tenor to the slave choir gives him away as the newest born-again, the newly baptised. The invoking of biblical John the Baptist offers a redemptive message. Historically, the “Roll, Jordan, Roll” hymn was introduced to slaves in southern America to encourage their docility and make them as reactionary as possible (see Powers). However, the hymn became a coded message of escape among the slaves. River Jordan was their code for the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers through which many of the slaves escaped to the northern states of the United States, where slavery was already banished. Northup’s yielding to the song is both an expression of his determination to escape through the rolling Jordan to the north as he takes one more risk of revealing his identity to Bass, and it is also an acceptance of his powerlessness to liberate himself.

The entrance of Samuel Bass (Brad Pitt) changes the course of his story. Bass does not represent a lone voice or an individual per se; he represents, in the context of the film, a disenchanted category of white people who are opposed to slavery and in a sense, opposed to capitalism. In other words, like Armsby, Bass represents a working class institution opposed to slavery. His position is revelatory in two significant ways. One, as a disenchanted carpenter from Canada in search of work to survive, he represents the growing antagonism to capitalism by working class white individuals who saw black slavery as a disadvantage since their labour value is either under-priced by the bourgeois slave-owner or in most cases completely unwanted. That is, McQueen shows that black slavery was not ended simply because some white men woke up suddenly to realise that the practice was inhuman, but also because a class of white people found themselves threatened by the bourgeoisie’s full access to free labour. In the same way that rising unemployment in contemporary times is associated with the rise in intelligent computers which are displacing humans in the labour market, black slavery is revealed in *12 Years a Slave* as the bourgeoisie’s attempt to create an ideally free labour to the detriment of ‘human’ labour.

As the face of a grumbling working class institution, Pitt’s appearance, which in auteurist fashion is a way to endorse his idiosyncratic signature on the film’s ideological statement on the history of slavery in America, changes Northup’s fate. Brad Pitt is known for his bias for humanitarian political causes, expressed different times in films and his involvement in humanitarian social and political activities. To maintain the powerlessness of individuals over institutions, the spectator is denied visual access into Pitt’s efforts towards getting Northup’s acquaintances in New York to come and prove he is a free man. Once it is established that Pitt has agreed to help him, the first-person voice takes over the narrative and hushes up the place of individual efforts or even the

risks involved in mailing letters on behalf of a slave. One of the most powerful deployments of mise-en-scene in the film is the camera's exclusive framing of Northup's face as he awaits his fate. He does not know whether Bass will betray him as Armsby has done, or whether Bass will simply forget him and do nothing. That interregnum of psychological waiting is what the camera tries to convey to the spectator through the close-shot persistent lingering over Northup's face. The plantation with its shrieking voice echoing in the background and Northup's face take up half of the screen. At first as he waits and time lingers, he allows the spectator into his mind. He does not seem conscious of the camera. The spectator is drawn to his unfocused gaze and gradually he narrows his gaze directly to the camera, aware that the spectator is watching, that he has arrested the spectator's attention, that he has been found. The fight against oppression is won not because the world does not know there are oppressed groups but more because oppressed groups put themselves where they become seen, where they connect with the humanity of the privileged spectator who dwells in a removed, indifferent world where the sufferer and the oppressed do not either exist or exist as fiction. The oppressed needs something more than represented images to awaken the sensibility of the spectator. Often, when such connections are made, when the image on the screen takes on life, breaks out of the screen and becomes a haunting image in the already troubled mind of the spectator, liberation is born.

The coming of the sheriff – an institutional figure – signifies Northup's eventual freedom, even though the familial visual connection he has exchanged with the spectator has foreshadowed his freedom before the sheriff arrives. All the while, the spectator realises that they have not actually seen Northup's eyes so as to look into the abyss of the common humanity they share with him. All the while, the spectator has looked at Northup as an image, not as a person. The spectator's voyeurism is counter-balanced by the haunting displeasure of connecting with the pain of another human being. As an image, Northup is an object of entertainment, however morbid. But once the image, through the deliberate deployment of mise-en-scene, yields itself to the spectator, the expression of the ineffable, which is always the goal of historical trauma films, is achieved.

The marginal place the individual occupies in the scheme of enslavement and liberation in *12 Years a Slave* also becomes a potent tool that reverses capitalist endorsement of individual heroism. Northup's characterisation resists being coded or described as heroic. His powerlessness is articulated more trenchantly in the haunted past he leaves behind to embrace freedom. As he is being led away from Epps's plantation, Patsey and the other nameless slaves recede into the background. As if he has betrayed them by fleeing from slavery, Northup comes off as one of the privileged blacks who find themselves divided between their solidarity for the enslaved black and their desire to escape enslavement. Such black people are often torn between a repressive identity of blackness and

a seemingly progressive whiteness, often symbolised in their acceptance of education. These are the historical Uncle Toms. *12 Years a Slave* is thus unequivocal in stating that those who find themselves fortunate to escape the snares of slavery, those who occupy certain marginal spaces in the history of things, should only realise that they are just fortunate. They must never confuse their fortune with individual strength or will. Although this point seems to weaken McQueen's claim that he has portrayed the characters, especially the white characters, as human beings in full grasp of their rationality so that their roles in the trade in humans would not be excused as irrationality, it locates the film within a revisionist trope that tries to recover historical feelings, attitudes, tempers, and not just historical figures. The feelings and logic that motivated the actions of individuals are more important than the faces of the historical actors. Thus, institutions take pre-eminence over individual names; the shrieking sounds of cotton plantations become more charged than the organised music of the film's soundtrack or at the very least, the fiddle music produced by Northup.

If the privileging of institution over individual in *12 Years a Slave* is as revisionist as it is reactionary, the film's ending is even more so. In a sense, the film's supposedly happy ending and final message of hope, continuity and family reunion forces the spectator to accept a progressive view of the history of slavery in America. The film becomes an expression of one man's *brief* encounter with slavery. But in the end, it is a happy ending of family reunion and continuity. At the same time, this supposedly progressive narrative is undercut by the film's refusal to offer Northup's freedom as the end of slavery. Having seen the battering that the likes of Patsey go through in the plantation and how Northup leaves them behind in a feeling of helpless shame and disappointment, McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* insists that although some unfortunate people like Northup were fortunate to be the figures or personae through which the institution of slavery negotiated with itself, slavery is however not ended by any means, since the capitalist institution that sustained it in previous centuries is still healthily thriving at present. Hence, *12 Years a Slave* presents the paradox of capitalism in enslaving, as well as offering occasional chances of liberation. This paradox is articulated in many ways: Northup's story (traumatic experience of slavery) historically becomes commercialised as a product. Its commercialisation fuels certain capitalist interests, even as it purportedly exposes the trauma of slavery. As a film on the historical trauma of slavery, *12 Years a Slave* appropriates the reifying tools of bourgeois capitalism to commercialise trauma, while at the same time sensualising or ennobling the spectator with humanist feelings, what Keathley explains as the phenomenon of cinephiliac moments. The paradox of capitalism is that the same machine that reduces the slave's body to ideal robotic labour, or that turns the slave's story into a commodity, is also the instrument through which the slave's humanity is recovered and re-inscribed in history.

The significant use of mise-en-scene in *12 Years a Slave*, particularly the camera's fixations upon traumatizing scenes such as Patsey's rape, reinforces Walter Benjamin's view that the photograph – especially the motion picture – delivers the past in anything but a string of what Hayden White will call emplotted facts (Keathley). Rather, the photograph slows down the fast pace of modernism and holds or even freezes the image for the spectator's re-assessment of history (see Tweedie; Keathley). McQueen stalls upon certain historical practices – slave fairs in Freeman's house, bodily mutilation of slaves, sex – to give the spectator enough time to re-evaluate the experience of slavery in America, as well as re-evaluate their relation with capitalism at present. For Keathley, it is this filmic detail, engaged from the cinephile-spectator's panoramic perception that can elicit the cinephiliac experience that gives the image its metaphysical, as against material or merely sensuous, significance. It is also this ability in photographs to elicit the uncanny, the epiphanic, or what Benjamin refers to as the auratic, that Keathley sees as a strong link between cinephiliac experience and memory. The kind of memory Keathley links to cinephiliac experience is the kind Marcel Proust calls involuntary memories – *memoires involontaires* (Keathley 122). Proust identifies two forms of memory: recollection and remembrance. Recollection is the kind of memory that emerges from conscious experience and can be summoned through registered images in the mind. Remembrance on the other hand is the *memoires involontaires*; it is the kind of memory that emerges from images the spectator has never seen before they remember it (Keathley 122). This kind of involuntary memory is usually prompted by unexpected events or unplanned experiences, such as could be derived from spectatorial attentiveness to filmic images. Seen in this context, *12 Years a Slave* as a historical trauma film is not merely about representing or giving feeling to the past; it is equally a way of seeing, a way a spectator re-evaluates their relation to the world around them through involuntary epiphanic experiences that defy the voluntary images of historicist or historical materialism.

McQueen's film is also conscious of its place as a historical film in the era where history has been pronounced dead. With the triumph of Western capitalism over communism signalled by the collapse of the Soviet Union, critics such as Francis Fukuyama and Fredric Jameson variously declared that history was dead. For Fukuyama, history is useless because the postmodern world is both self-regulating and indeterminate (see Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*). Similarly, although approaching history from a different perspective, Jameson identifies the eclipse of history or "historical amnesia" (Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 28) as a consequence of Western capitalist consumerism expressed in the fast momentum of media dissemination of information. He historicises capitalism as evolving along the following trajectory: market capitalism, imperialism, and multinationalism. These three phases correspond with cultural

forms such as realism, modernism, and postmodernism. Jameson's lament over the disappearance of historical referents or the tradition of history in the postmodernist age is also distributed across other fields of cultures and the arts. The cinema and the love of it were pronounced dead by Susan Sontag (see Sontag, "The Decay of Cinema"). The obituaries of tragedy and the novel were already long sung by critics of language and history such as Georg Steiner, Walter Benjamin, José Ortega y Gasset, Roland Barthes, to mention a few (see Kathleen Fitzpatrick). McQueen's attempt to redeem history through motion pictures in an era of historical amnesia already suggests a difficult exercise. The immediate commercial popularity of *12 Years a Slave*, as well as its success as a historical trauma film, comes as a reminder that the cinema may have lost some of its old allure, but its ability to ennoble, to entrance and to re-humanise through the image is still powerful.

McQueen's refusal to dismiss capitalism in its entirety or to close it out of the history of the present is also reminiscent of Spielberg's nuanced depiction of capitalism as both destructive and redemptive in *Schindler's List*. However, where *Schindler's List* ends with an image of capitalism as a bankrupt, unproductive factory that rather than produce merchandise produces/saves human lives, *12 Years a Slave* challenges any positivist attempt that advances a view that capitalism, the bane of so-called Enlightenment modernity, is ended. Slavery and genocide may have ended for some, but for many others they have remained a reality. The vices of slavery and genocide cannot be proclaimed ended when the capitalist institution that propelled them is still thriving. Consequently, *12 Years a Slave* encourages its spectator to see how capitalism sustains itself through a versatile and consistent process of transforming labour. The film ends, however, with a restoration of the father in the family. Familialism is McQueen's counteracting message against capitalist material labour. *12 Years a Slave* overly conveys a message about the enduring character and perhaps victory of family over the destabilising and dehumanising capitalist mercantilism. The film emerges as an attempt to re-inscribe family, survival and continuity into the discourse of genocide and atrocity.

Yet, the familialism restored by the end of the film looks like a restoration of a family structure based on patriarchalism. This patriarchal posture is all the more expressed through the homage paid to Northup by naming his daughter's son after him. Slavery comes off as a disruptive element of family values. Northup is the absent father whom slavery removes from the family scene and denies the chance to participate in raising his children. His struggles for freedom, including his refusal to yield his body to sexual affairs with other slaves, are also a fight to keep the sacredness of the matrimonial bed intact. The trope of sexual restraint and fidelity is one that is not often associated with men. However, McQueen portrays a man who, against the damning odds of slavery, refuses to sexually violate his body under the pretext of frustration. Although this portrayal of Northup raises questions about the film's representation of slave reality in America, it makes a significant statement

in championing family values over market values. Slavery is not only depicted as disruptive to the families of the enslaved black, but also to the families of the white enslaver. Epps's relationship with his wife is strained because of his involvement with Patsey. The cordial familial atmosphere noticed in Mistress Shaw's home – though an uncomfortable representation of a successful matrimonial bond between the slave and the master – is absent in Epps's house. Even his attempts to project the slaves as his adopted infants, teaching them the bible and addressing them in the language of a patriarch to his subject, his relationship with his wife remains disrupted and dry of affection. Family reunion by the end of *12 Years a Slave* becomes McQueen's message of survival and continuity through reproduction. Even in Northup's absence, the family has kept his memory alive by naming his daughter's son after him. However, even though the film privileges the family institution, family fails to suggest a strong sense of hope, because it is a conservative institution that demands, in most of its incarnations, a demonstrated purity of relations, whether inherited by birth, or earned by and through service and suffering.

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