

Remembering the US Civil War and Slavery in 21st Century Hollywood

Steven Bishop

University of Warwick

Abstract

Using contemporary worldwide debates over the removal of statues of historical figures to frame the debate over history, memory and the arts, this article focuses on how Hollywood is currently remembering the US Civil War and slavery. Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), Gary Ross' *Free State of Jones* (2016) and Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) are examined in order to consider three key questions: why are certain histories recalled, which parts of history are not being recalled and finally, how should certain histories be remembered? In considering this, this article seeks to highlight how the answers to these questions are complicating Hollywood's fidelity to the historical record, and how in turn public history through cinema is shaping the public's perceptions of this epoch in American history.

Keywords: Hollywood, Slavery, Public History, Historical Memory, Cinematic Fidelity, Cinematic Fidelity

Essay

On August 11th 2017, the topics of slavery and the US Civil War were brought to global attention once more as protesters and counter-protesters clashed over the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Confederate General had also been the namesake of the park until two months prior to his statue's removal, when it was renamed as Emancipation Park, a name which evokes the demise of the institution of slavery in contrast to the man who led the South's fight to keep it. The riots sparked an international

debate over how history is remembered by academics, journalists, politicians and the general public. Challenging the ideology behind the statue's removal, namely that it was a symbol of white subjugation of African-Americans, President Donald Trump contended the hypocrisy of not extending this to more universally revered figures in American history:

George Washington was a slave owner. Was George Washington a slave owner? So, will George Washington now lose his status? Are we going to take down statues to George Washington? How about Thomas Jefferson? What do you think of Thomas Jefferson? You like him? OK good. Are we going to take down his statue? Because he was a major slave owner. (Washington Post, 2017)

In his lifetime Thomas Jefferson owned six hundred slaves and possessed 150 at the time of the Declaration of Independence. (L.E. Horton, 2006: p.136) Both Washington and Jefferson were slaveowners yet are revered as Founding Fathers of a nation which declared that all men were equal – as long as they were white. Historian Gary Nash argued that “it would be a misfortune to perpetuate the historical amnesia about the founding fathers and slavery.” (Nash, 2006, p.79) It is not fashionable to agree with comments the current American President makes in this present era, but it seems that historians such as Nash would not be able to find fault with Trump's comments about Washington and Jefferson.

The memorialisation of contentious historical figures is not a uniquely American phenomenon. Two years previously, both Europe and Africa were engaged in a debate over statues and the history they memorialise. At Oxford University in 2015, Rhodes Scholarship student Ntokozo Qwabe became a prominent figure in “Rhodes Must Fall”, a campaign challenging the memorialisation of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes. Critics claim that Rhodes advocated white supremacy and was an “architect of apartheid” in his activities in Rhodesia. (Castle, 2016) Whilst the British arm of the movement failed to achieve the removal of the statue of Rhodes from Oriel College at the University of Oxford, the more vociferous wing at the University of Cape Town in South Africa did succeed in the removal of its statue of the colonist in 2015.

In opposition to the removal of the Rhodes statue in Oxford, Chancellor of the University of Oxford and former Governor of Hong Kong Lord Patten warned that: "Education is not indoctrination. Our history is not a blank page on which we can write our own version of what it should have been according to our contemporary views and prejudices." In defending the necessity of freedom of argument and debate as fundamental to the heart of the concept of a university, Patten argued further that: "Because we value tolerance...we have to listen to those who presume that they can re-write history within the confines of their own notion of what is politically, culturally and morally correct." (Lord Patten, cited in Espinoza, 2016)

Therefore, as historian and columnist David Olusoga comments, it would appear that "statues, along with names of streets, schools and other institutions, have been one of the ways in which certain versions of the past have been given literal solidity...[and] they have become physical targets in a conflict that is otherwise about what is less tangible – ideas and history." (Olusoga, 2017) If President Trump's comments are accepted at face value, where do we stop with the re-remembering of history? As Yale Professor David Blight asks, should institutions such as Yale University, with its former connections with slavery, "frantically delve into every corner of its past looking for complicity with slavery, and then label or relabel buildings, fellowships, the residential colleges themselves? Should it gear the loss of memory in a wave of constant revision of honorific practices, inscriptions, or institutional identities?" (Blight, 2006: p.20)

Perhaps it is at this juncture that it should be noted that these so-called "history wars" are in fact "memory wars" and the debate at hand is how history should be remembered. Historian John Lukacs stated in 1968 that "the remembered past is a much larger category than the recorded past." David Blight explains that history is revised and interpreted, whilst memory passes down through the generations and manifests itself in monuments, sites, and other works of art, with neuroscientist Daniel Schacter claiming that "artists can best illuminate the impact of memory in our day-to-day lives." (Schacter and Lukacs, cited in Blight, 2006, pp.21-4)

As the contemporary furore concerning Confederate monuments has shown, the American Civil War and the broader issue of slavery form one of the battlegrounds where the contest of how history is remembered is being fought. This paper will take three films released in the past decade

that deal with the issues of the American Civil War and/or slavery in an attempt to shed light into this paper's three research questions. Firstly, why were certain histories recalled in these films? Secondly, which parts of history are *not* being recalled in these movies? And lastly, how do these films engage with the debate over *how* certain histories should be remembered? The answers to these questions will show the complexities these directors have encountered when handling the historical record, and in turn how this shapes the audience's perception of the histories these films portray.

Why are certain histories recalled in Hollywood?

Director Steve McQueen's 2013 award-winning film *12 Years a Slave* (McQueen, 2013) follows the real-life story of free-man Solomon Northup, who is kidnapped from the antebellum North of the United States of America and sold into slavery, eventually ending up in the hands of Edwin Epps, a brutal Louisiana slave-owner. Northup endures severe physical and psychological cruelty from Epps, before he comes into contact with a Canadian plantation-hand who believes Northup's story and informs the authorities; they in turn eventually rescue Northup and return him to his family in New York. The movie won multiple accolades, including the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture.

It is hard to critique the historical accuracy of the movie. Steve McQueen's epic is based on Solomon Northup's own narrative of his life.¹ However, it is interesting to consider *why* Northup's history was recalled to mind in 2012. Steve McQueen answered this question himself in an interview re-published in the journal *Transition*:

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: How did you discover the Solomon Northup story?

Steve McQueen: What happened was that, from the beginning, I wanted to tell a story about slavery. I just felt there was a hole in the canon of cinema. Also, I sometimes feel that slavery has disappeared from the discussion, that it's not looked at in a way that it is deemed important. I wanted to take a look again, and I had an idea of a free man—a free African American who gets kidnapped into slavery, and that's where I got stuck. After that, I met

¹ *12 Years a Slave* (Northup, 1853)

John Ridley and had a conversation with him about this original idea, but things weren't going so well. That's when my wife said to me, "Why don't you look into firsthand accounts of slavery?"...

Gates: So you started with the concept, and there was old Solomon Northup 150 years ago, and he fit the bill?

McQueen: Absolutely (McQueen, cited in Gates Jr., 2014: pp.186-7)

McQueen then goes on to argue that one cannot underestimate the influence that President Barack Obama has had on all these recent films on African American life, claiming that the movie would not have been made if Obama had not helped to create a culture where this type of memory could be recalled on screen. (McQueen, cited in Gates Jr., 2014: pp.186-7) McQueen explains that Northup's last two lines—an apology to his family and a plea for forgiveness—offer a way to confront the legacy of slavery through the movie. When he apologises, he is also asking the US to apologise for slavery and its slave society. "When has a US president ever apologized?" McQueen told Gates "How do we go forward? It's time for the US, it's time for the British, it's time for the Dutch, the French, the Portuguese, et cetera, to apologize. Only then can the legacies of slavery be confronted. With an apology, there can then be forgiveness, and the beginning of healing." (McQueen, cited in Stauffer, 2014: p.323)

Therefore, it could be argued that McQueen started with a particular memory he wished to remember about antebellum American slavery and *then* he searched for the history to fit the bill. For McQueen, the choice to recall Northup's history, and the choice to include fictitious injections to the story,² ensured that the history fit the bill. This, in Jasmin Nichole Cobb's opinion, reveals that "a feature-film based on historical records can invite much excess...[because] objectivity on the question of blackness cannot guarantee consistent results with regards to slavery". [Nichole Cobb, 2014: p.343] As John Ernest argues, the "power of this film is that it involves so many acts of

² Northup's masturbation of a fellow female slave in the opening scene of the film is a fictitious event. Patsy's desire for suicide is fictitious (it is rather Mistress Epps who seeks Patsy's death in Northup's narrative.) The murder of a black slave named Robert who intervenes in the rape of a female slave by a white sailor is fictitious. (12 Years as Neo-slave Narrative) Harriet Shaw's eloquent and powerful encouragement to Northup and Patsy that God will have His day of vengeance on the slave-owners is part-fictitious, part-owing to the words not of a slaveholder's black wife but to Bass, the Canadian Carpenter who eventually rescues Northup.

representation, so many responses to the call for empathy, so many conceptions of accuracy and truth— and in this way, the film gathers together the many histories involved in the history of slavery”. [Ernest, 2014: p.372] In short, Northup’s narrative could not solely achieve the all-encompassing picture of slavery McQueen sought to produce, echoing Robert Brent Toplin’s assertion that “no specific individual’s experience perfectly touches all the major historical events an artist wants to depict...” (Toplin, 2002: p.202)

Gary Ross sought similar aims in his remembering of Newton Knight’s secessionist movement in *Free State of Jones* (Ross, 2016). The film chronicles the plight of Newton Knight as he becomes disenchanted with the Southern cause and deserts the Confederate army. Hiding out in the swamps, Knight meets a band of runaway slaves and eventually other white deserters. Together they lead skirmishes against the Confederate army and raids on food stores “stolen” from Southern women and their families. Eventually Knight declares his county the “Free State of Jones”, seceding from the Confederate States of America. The latter part of the film is dedicated to depicting the successes and ultimate failures of the Reconstruction era. The movie’s opening still claims the story to be based on “actual events in Jones County, Mississippi, 1862”.

Firstly, it should be noted that director Gary Ross has a rare regard, respect and reverence for historical truth which should be commended. Basing the film on Victoria E. Bynum’s *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War*, all the primary and secondary sources Ross discovered during his research were compiled into a website for the public to access.³ Arguably Ross’ *Free State of Jones* has become the defining history of the rebellion in the public’s imagination, with this previously little-known story becoming household knowledge. Why was this formerly obscure part of history recalled on screen in 2016? Ross’ fictitious characters help explain Ross’ broader goals.

The characters of Daniel, Moses and Elias Hood were all creations for the film and were not based on any real-life individuals in any of the actual accounts of Newton Knight. Daniel, whom Ross

³ Ross’ website lists 35 different scenes, parts or points of interest in the film, with timestamps. Ross breaks down each of these with justifications for his portrayal. Footnotes can then be explored, listing the primary and secondary sources he used to come to his conclusions. <http://www.freestateofjones.info>

presents as Knight's teenage nephew, is conscripted into the army and fatally shot in the trenches. In arguably one of the film's most moving and memorable scenes, Newt tries desperately in vain to get his nephew medical attention, before he dies in his arms and Knight carries him all the way on horseback to his mother. Ross explains that Daniel is a "whole-cloth illustration" and a "fictional invention to explore these issues: the outrage of conscription, the class division inherent in it, and the human cost of the war even to boys in their mid-teens". (Ross, 2016) Undoubtedly, plenty of boys Daniel's age would have lost their lives on the front lines for the South. Yet, Daniel is nevertheless an emotionally powerful tool which tugs at the audience to empathise morally with Newt's decision to desert the army, when in fact Victoria Bynum suggests that other factors were far more important for Knight's desertion than conscription.⁴

Moses, the second most important fictionalised character, is a runaway slave, whom Knight meets in the swamps after he deserts the army. Moses exemplifies one of the film's major taglines, "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight" and embodies Newt's resentment of the Twenty Negroes Law.⁵ The audience is drawn particularly to Moses' plight ahead of the other runaway slaves in the swamps due to the spiked collar trapped around his neck – the debilitating punishment resulting from former attempts at escape. As the movie progresses, Newt frees Moses from his collar and the two fight side by side. When the war ends, Moses is eventually reunited with his wife and child who had been sold to a plantation in Texas. Newt then rescues Moses' son from an "apprenticeship", portrayed as a guise for postbellum slavery, before Moses is tragically emasculated and lynched for his Republican activities, serving as a harrowing conclusion to a life destroyed by slavery and white racism.

However, Moses is not part of the real Knight story. He is not even based solely on one individual from the accounts of Knight's life. As Ross explains:

⁴ Bynum explains that the amalgamation of "economic distress, fears of death, and resentment of those who benefitted from exemptions encouraged Newt and other men less ideologically driven...to turn their backs on the army." Bynum also quotes Newton Knight's resentment at the Twenty Negro Law. (Bynum, 2001, pp. 100, 104)

⁵ The Twenty Negro Law was part of the Second Conscription Act passed by the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War in 1862 which exempted from military service one white man for every twenty slaves owned on a Confederate plantation.

The character of Moses is a fictional invention, but one based on research and ample precedent. There are numerous examples of cooperation and alliance between maroons (escaped slaves living autonomously in the wilderness) and white deserters who resisted the Confederacy. (Ross, 2016)

Whilst Moses is by no means ahistorical, historian Margaret Storey casts doubt on the egalitarian relationship portrayed by Ross between Knight and Moses:

I find the notion that some white men might cast themselves as slaves to the Confederacy believable enough, but the idea that they saw themselves as sharing a common, equal-rights-based cause with actual slaves in that effort is more ahistorical. This is not to say that it didn't happen—just that the egalitarian sentiments that undergird this development in the film are harder to substantiate in the historical record. (Storey cited in Keating, 2017: p.407)

Elias Hood, the Confederate general who harasses Knight's band, is actually an embodiment of three real-life men, foremost of whom is Amos Deason, a general whom the real-life Knight assassinates far less righteously in his own home *before* the secessionist band's activities. (Bynum, 2001: p.106) Without the emotionally charged death of Daniel, an embodiment of all the horrors of slavery in Moses and a villain in Hood, Ross' broader aim in using Knight's story to highlight many of the horrors of slavery may be shrouded in far more moral ambiguity.

Lastly, Quentin Tarantino proved even more transparent in his reasoning for *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012) than either Ross or McQueen. For Tarantino, *Django* did not have to be empirically true. Just as the opening title of the recent film *Victoria & Abdul* (Frears, 2017) claims the film is "based on true events...mostly", *Django's* director openly admitted that his film was "history without the capital H". (Tarantino, cited in Bonilla, 2013, p.74) Truillot suggests that for Tarantino, it is not about the "faithfulness to the historical record, but about the current moment of historical production and consumption... *Django* speaks to us about the contemporary era of black power—or, more precisely, the era of one exceptional black man in power, and the fear of retribution he inspires". (Truillot, cited in Bonilla, 2013: p.73) That is not to say that Tarantino does

not have one eye on historical fact. He admits that “I’m telling a historical story, and when it comes to nuts and bolts of the slave trade, I had to be real and had to tell it the right way”. (Tarantino, cited in Gates Jr., 2013, p.58) However, telling it the right way means not “just telling about what happened then, but about what is happening now, what that past means today, what relationships it authorizes, what words can and cannot be used to describe it, what accrued meaning these words carry, and what injuries they perpetuate in the present.” (Bonilla, 2013, p.74) For Tarantino, the chief importance of *Django* was creating a movie that spoke to the present, rather than a film that dotted all the i’s and crossed all the t’s of historical fact.

Which histories are not being remembered?

The second question in seeking to establish the relationship between history and memory is what is *not* remembered when certain histories make it to Hollywood. Running alongside the central narrative of the secession of Jones County from the Confederacy in *Free State of Jones* is Newton Knight’s romantic relationship with a slave named Rachel, who eventually bears his children, despite Newt already being married to his wife Serena. The film periodically flashes forward to the 20th century, where one of Knight’s descendants is in court facing charges of breaking anti-miscegenation laws by marrying a white woman when he is alleged to be one-eighth African-American, with the lawyers debating whether he was one of Newt and Serena’s or Newt and Rachel’s descendants.

The movie first introduces us to Newt’s wife, Serena, as she nurses their sick son. Newt seeks out the help of Rachel who remedies the boy and sees him return to full health. As the film progresses, Newt deserts Serena and his son to defend other families from Confederate raids, and then eventually forms an intimate, consensual bond with Rachel which leads to the birth of a child. When the war ends, the two women, one his long-suffering wife and the other his lover, are depicted as harmoniously living side by side, sharing a laugh or two at the table once they have become familiar with one another. Ross’ intent in his portrayal of the dynamic is unambiguous. He explains:

Newt’s relationship with Rachel has been disparaged by many who have sought to diminish his reputation or the principles that drove him. They try to impute an exploitive motive,

implying a Thomas Jefferson/Sally Hemings power dynamic. But nothing supports this. In fact, in a world where Newt was not legally allowed to marry Rachel, he went to the remarkable lengths of deeding her 160 acres of land, making her one of the few African American women to own land in the South. All evidence indicates a respectful, loving relationship that grew over time. (Ross, 2016)

The relationship between Newt and Rachel in the movie is not only completely sympathetic, but a wholesale celebration of a respectful, egalitarian romantic pairing of white and black, in the midst of a white supremacist society. Robert Brent Toplin, in his measured and reasoned assessment of the challenges of the historical movie genre, concedes that “[m]oviemakers often manipulate the historical record to ensure that their stories will feature a workable romantic interest. Wives and children can stand in the way of such portrayals - or certainly complicate them - so they are often erased from the story.” (Toplin, 2002, p.47) Whilst Ross does not wholly expunge Knight’s wife Serena from the movie, Margaret Storey is one of the few to highlight Ross’ treatment of Newt’s spouse as problematic:

Here I might add that one of the least explored and, to my mind, most problematic, of these alliances is the postwar one between Rachel and Serena Knight, presented as happy cowives contented to jointly take care of their man, or be taken care of by him, while sitting on the porch spinning wool and tending Rachel’s baby. There is so much shorthand and assumption here, rather than historical explication, that it’s hard to know where to start. In the end, there’s little evidence to explain the nature of the women’s relationship, though we know that they, and their children, shared extended households for many years. (Storey, cited in Keating, 2017: p.411)

Ross’ omissions in the Knight family dynamic are striking. Firstly, the film neglects to inform the audience that Rachel had actually been a slave *of* the Knight family, owned by Newt’s grandfather presumably until his death in 1861. Whilst Newton and his father did not own slaves, and thus by the time Knight deserts the army Rachel would presumably have been sold to an unrelated slave-owner who could have been an Eakins-type, would not the sympathies of the audience towards Newt be dimmed if Ross had made it clear that Rachel had been a slave of the family? And if

Victoria Bynum's heavily researched Knight family tree is to be trusted, by the time we are thrown into the war in the film in 1862, the real-life Newton Knight would have been deserting Serena and three of his sons and a new-born daughter by 1864, instead of the one child seen in the movie. Whilst the movie correctly depicts Rachel giving birth to a child, with ambiguity over the parentage, what Ross does not show during the Reconstruction period is the children Newt would bear with *both* women. By 1875, Knight would have fathered a further nine postbellum children, four with Rachel and five with Serena, sometimes fathering a child in the same year to both women. And lastly, and perhaps most alarmingly, Ross' film falls short of showing Georgeanne, Rachel's daughter and Newt's step-daughter, taking her place with Knight many years later, separating him from Serena, and allegedly bearing two children with him in the 1890s. (Bynum, 2001, p.86)

Similarly, the parts of Solomon Northup's narrative that do not fit comfortably with the story Steve McQueen wishes to portray are ironed out, albeit less consequentially than Knight's. Whereas Ross overlooks the morally deficient aspects of Knight's character, McQueen omits some of the less negative parts of Northup's story. In his final passage of the book, Northup concedes that "If I have failed in anything, it has been in presenting to the reader too prominently the bright side of the picture." McQueen has carefully removed the bright sides, Stanley Fish argues in an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, and:

gives us no reason to conclude, as Northup does, that there "was much in [Mistress Epps's] character to admire." He does not suggest, as Northup does, that "it is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel so much as it is the fault of the system in which he lives." (In the movie they are one and the same.) He omits the lyrical passage in which Northup marvels at the beauty and gentleness of Miss Mary McCoy, an owner of hundreds of slaves who treats them all fairly and is "beloved" by them in return. (This is Northup's "Gone With the Wind" moment.) (Fish, 2013)

Thus, Robert Brent Toplin's claim that Hollywood often "rub[s] out the grays of history, producing portraits in white and black" can be seen in *Free State of Jones* and *12 Years a Slave's* purposeful elision of dimensions of Knight's and Northup's true narratives, complicating their faithfulness to the historical record. (Toplin, 2002: p.27)

How should these histories be remembered?

The final question in assessing the complex relationship between history and how it is remembered in recent US Civil War movies is *how* should these histories be remembered? Must certain historical representations in the arts strike a certain tone? Is a highly stylised film like *Django Unchained*, an appropriate and respectful way to portray such a brutal institution such as slavery? The question is not solely limited to cinema. Disney held plans to open an attraction to portray slavery, including designs for an Underground Railroad to show visitors the plight of runaway slaves. William Styron, a descendant of a family enmeshed in the complexities of slavery, wondered whether the Disney exhibit could represent this complicated tale of how, in his words, the suffering of both masters and slaves were “intimately bound.” (Styron, cited in Bonilla, 2013, p.70) In his book *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot grapples with this, as Yarimar Bonilla explains:

the problem invoked by Styron was not one of historical accuracy, but of historical authenticity... the Disney park was doomed to fail. For, regardless of how empirically sound its exhibits might be, the idea of gum-chewing tourists lining up for the Underground Railroad trivializes the history that stretches between that past and this present. It silences the institutionalized racism, structures of inequality, and practices of denigration that bridge the history of slavery to the present day. (Trouillot, cited in Bonilla, 2013: p.71)

For Tarantino, the comedy had to be just right in *Django*. He admits that “when it comes to more thematic things and operatic view, I could actually have fun with stylization—because it is taking parts from a spaghetti Western. And I am taking the story of a slave narrative and blowing it up to folkloric proportions and to operatic proportions...” (Tarantino, cited in Gates Jr., 2013, p.58) Does *Django* cross the line of historical authenticity in its depiction of slavery?

The answer to this question can be found in Stanley Fish’s response to McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave*. He writes how it took two viewings of the film for him to discover “the point of the relentless sequence of physical and psychological degradation in “12 Years a Slave” is to withhold from the audience an outlet for either its hope or its sympathy”. (Fish, 2013) Ernest argues that *12 Years a*

Slave “is forced to attend to such basic ground, recreating scenes almost unbearable to watch so that audiences might finally confront the realities of their shared past”. (Ernest, 2014, p.369) In one of the movie’s startling and sobering scenes, the camera fixes upon Northup’s half-lifeless, half-struggling body as he hangs from a noose for a duration that runs into hours. McQueen explains that this moment “had to represent all the hundreds of thousands of people who were lynched” in the postbellum era.” (McQueen cited in Gates Jr., pp.191-2) In the same way as *Django*’s horrifically brutal Mandingo fight lingers long in the memory, are such graphic and gratuitous depictions appropriate in such a sensitive film genre as antebellum slavery? Whilst Karen Haltunnen describes this cinematic technique as a pornography of pain (Haltunnen cited in Stauffer, 2014: p.318), John Stauffer argues rather that “they enable viewers to empathize with the plight of slaves, offering access into their emotional and psychological states.” (Stauffer, 2014: p.318) Irrespective of their differences, Haltunnen and Stauffer’s viewpoints prove that *how* historical narratives, and in particular slave narratives, are remembered is almost, if not equally, as important as how faithful they are to the historical record.

Conclusion: Cinema as Public History

James Oliver Horton argues that because people learn history in a variety of non-academic settings, the public historians “in charge of telling the complex and contradictory national history in public spaces, become crucial”. (J.O Horton, 2006, p.36) As the public have been learning history in cinemas for over a century, film directors play a crucial role as public historians as they choose which histories are remembered and recalled in their cinematic productions. Gary Ross helps elucidate this:

In the modern world, where we get so much of our information from popular culture, the filmmaker is under even more pressure. Today, people read less and watch more, and whether we like it or not, academic history is often overwhelmed by popular history. *Les Mis* actually *becomes* the French Revolution, *Homeland* is somehow the “real” war on terror, and Lincoln is inevitably remembered as he was in *Lincoln*...

Historical films are an odd hybrid. They have constraints of traditional nonfiction writing and the dramatic demands of popular filmmaking. It's no wonder that they occasionally wind up in the middle of an argument: How much creative license is legitimate? How much responsibility to history does the filmmaker have? (Ross, 2016)

As has been argued in this article, the choices Steve McQueen, Gary Ross and Quentin Tarantino made in deciding what history they remembered, which parts they forgot and how they represented these histories on screen, has impacted their faithfulness to the historical record and this, in turn, affects how the general public remember slavery and the US Civil War. The relationship between history and memory, as Kenneth Moynihan describes, is “an ongoing conversation that yields not final truths but an endless succession of discoveries that change our understanding not only of the past but of ourselves and of the times we live in”. (Moynihan, cited in Nash, 2006, p.101) This reciprocal relationship between the past and the present has caused all three directors to choose their histories based on certain contemporary reflections on history they wished to portray on the screen, namely the confrontation of the present with the legacy of slavery around the time of the sesquicentennial anniversary of the American Civil War.

Toplin proposes that

cinematic history needs to be addressed with a different vision of achievement and failure...[Hollywood] must resort to fictionalization. Historical evidence is too fragmentary to provide a neat, seamless tale for screenwriters to dramatize, and no specific individual's experience perfectly touches all the major historical events an artist wants to depict. (Toplin, 2002: p.202)

In spite of this, this paper has sought to resonate with Gary Ross' concession that cinema's role as public historian carries with it a certain responsibility to the fidelity to the historical record as historical films continue, as Robert Burgoyne claims, to “become part of the public sphere in ways that only a few artistic artefacts can claim”. (Burgoyne, 2008, p.19)

As *12 Years a Slave*, *Free State of Jones* and to some extent *Django Unchained* have become almost the definitive guides to their histories in the public sphere, has their use of the historical record, with McQueen's cramming of Northup's narrative into his preconceived notions for a film about slavery's legacy, Ross' forgetting of Knight's morally problematic personal life and Django's operative violence, betrayed the histories they sought to portray? This paper has sought to argue that to varying extents the answer to that question is yes, and that raising awareness of Hollywood's inevitable difficulties in handling the historical record is therefore crucial for audiences' ability to grapple with the past through public history.

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