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Django Unchained Racial Analysis

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The story of a former slave's return to plantation life in search of his wife, *Django Unchained*, a 2013 film directed by Quentin Tarantino, provides a look into the world of black life during the pre-Civil War era. However, the film is much more than just a love story enveloped by slavery. Tarantino, a creative mastermind, seeks to promote strong racial thinking in his film using the representation of blacks. This is centered on the accruelement of power and how this influences the racial relations. In order to emphasize this, he creates a variety of black representations, such as the brute slave and the Uncle Tom, prevalent during the film's setting. He then furthers these representations using stereotypes and scripts through the white characters in the film to show how the races related, such as their views of blacks as being subhuman. However, upon doing so, he then adds in a twist that can be expected from only Tarantino. He perverts these representations through a reversal of roles of whites and blacks on a symbolic level. By doing so, this allows him to make a tremendous directorial statement through the film's black hero, Django. Tarantino's creation of a thematic foundation through representation allows him to create such strong implicative messages. In his gloriously gory cinematic masterpiece, Tarantino gives a depiction of the exploitation of blacks in the 1850s South using scripts and stereotypes. However, his portrayal of Django as a dominant protagonist creates a shift in power and forms a discourse centered on the achievement of black power.

A film focusing on slavery during its height in the nineteenth century will clearly be focused on race and the divergences between whites and blacks. Tarantino, however, takes this and blatantly emphasizes it for the audience. Django's struggle with whites and his own blackness creates very racially charged themes. This emphasis on racial relations is founded on that "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (Fanon). From the opening

scene, Tarantino places emphasis on physical blackness, with the first shot being of a slave's brutally whipped back. The prevalence of race is also seen in the use of the epithet "nigger" throughout the film, as it is used over 100 times. While this is an accurate depiction of the time the film is set in, it has greater thematic importance. Its use exemplifies the thematic role of race in the film by overtly drawing the attention of the audience to it. The use of the phrase is still very polarizing by nature: many whites feel uncomfortable hearing or saying it, and many blacks are offended by hearing a white say it. This is seen even in a recent interview about the film, where Samuel L. Jackson, a black star of the film, tries to pressure a white reporter into saying "nigger," making him visibly uncomfortable, yet the reporter is still steadfast in his refusal to do so (Hamilton). This succinctly illustrates how such a phrase can have such a profound impact on the audience, thus making the excessive use in the film more than just a historical depiction. It reveals the greater role of its use, making the film into one that provokes racial thought and forces audience members to become cognizant of racial relations. This racial thinking is based upon the perpetuation of the idea of differences based on race and how they are hierarchically arranged (S. Iftkhar, personal communication, November 12, 2013). In doing so, this lays the foundation for Tarantino to make his directorial argument centered around the achievement of black power through Django's freedom and success.

In order to accurately portray the contemporary prevailing attitudes towards blacks, Tarantino develops the stereotypes that were most often associated with them at the time. The most prominent aspect of stereotypes employed by Tarantino is that of "emphasiz[ing] some easily grasped or perceived feature(s) of the group in question and then suggest that these are the *cause* of the group's position" (Brandston). In pre-Civil War America, this was the prevailing ideology was that blacks were innately inhumane and needed slavery as a source of protection,

creating the “white burden.” This is seen in the script, or behavioral actions giving stereotypes meaning (Brandston), of Calvin Candie arguing that he needs to give the slaves a function for their own sake. Further, Tarantino plays into the contemporary stereotype of blacks as being animal-like and uncivilized. This stereotype image, known as the “brute negro,” exemplifies blacks as barbarous by nature (S. Iftkhar, personal communication, November 12, 2013). All the atrocities involving blacks are staged as viscerally as possible, and are highly emphasized in film. This is particularly evident in the chilling Mandingo fighting scene, in which one slave is forced to ferociously beat another slave to his death, ultimately smashing his victim’s head with a hammer. The sound effect of the hammer being driven into the skull is unsettlingly clear, and works to make this scene truly resonate with the audience and make Tarantino’s directorial statement. Black depiction as uncivilized through these scripts is highlighted further through the dress of the characters, particularly Django. Another typical script of uncivilized nature of blacks is their shabby and rough clothing (Turner). When the audience first sees Django, he is dressed in only ragged blankets. However, once he symbolically throws off the blanket, he becomes a freed man, and thus has the opportunity to dress for himself. He overcompensates in his dress and chooses to wear regal style clothing. This highlights the importance in clothing as a signifier of racial image, as Django wants to clearly show that he is not a slave and has some power. These depictions of blacks as brutish and uncivilized play into the representation of race in the film by Tarantino that sets up his ultimate directorial statement.

Stephen as the “Uncle Tom” presents another prominent stereotype of blacks during the pre-Civil War era that Tarantino depicts to portray contemporary attitudes. Uncle Tom is a phrase from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, an epithet referring to slaves who saw themselves on a higher level than others, in attempts to be “white” (S. Iftkhar, personal

communication, November 12, 2013). As Calvin Candie's subservient and loyal house slave, Stephen achieved a level of power unseen in the other black slaves, as he sees himself as just below white men. His depiction as an Uncle Tom slave is seen most notably in his scripts of sycophant behavior towards Candie. When Candie tells a joke, Stephen is seen laughing for too long; when Candie scolds a slave, such as Broomhilde, Stephen admonishes them further and more viciously; when Candie is speaking, Stephen repeats for emphasis. More importantly, Stephen sees himself as more powerful than the other slaves, and is incredibly angered that Django, as a freed man, is able to enjoy privileges he would not, such as sleeping in the main room. By having Stephen depicted as a villain, Tarantino forces the audience to emotionally side against him. Therefore, Stephen's negative association with whites illustrates him as a secondary antagonist with Calvin Candie, thus furthering Tarantino's argument in favor of black power. The final scene provides a dramatic conclusion to the struggle between Django and Stephen, and thus powerful blacks versus those more submissive. As Stephen tries to escape from the house, Django calls out to him "Not you Stephen, you right were you belong". This serves to show the audience that acting as an Uncle Tom, as Stephen did, was wrong, and that abandoning powerful black values will end up with a similar gory fate. Stephen's behaviors act as scripts for the greater illustration of Uncle Toms and their relation to the prevailing themes, thus providing further representations of race.

In order to accentuate the image of blacks during the pre-Civil War era, Tarantino also illustrates the prevalent feelings of whites towards their perceived subjugates during this period. The actions of the white characters throughout the film provide ample scripts to allow the audience to understand Tarantino's representation of blacks in relation to whites. Early in the film, as Django rides a horse through Daughtry, Texas, the white civilians look on

disapprovingly, while others exclaim in shock at the fact that a “nigger is on a horse”. The use of high-angle shots furthers this representation of white antagonism towards Django and blacks, as they are symbolically looking down upon him. During the scene, Django even rides past a noose, furthering this imagery. As such, this provides a representation of blacks being so far below whites. The most illustrative scene of Tarantino’s racial representation, however, is in Calvin Candie’s cadaver speech. In it, he expounds the “separation of our two species” (black and white) and compares blacks to a “subhuman species”. This script exemplifies the stereotypical representation of white feelings of blacks as subhuman animals. Candie truly believes, as many whites did, that the two races were of entirely different species, and that blacks were animal savages, thus providing this representation. Contrarily, while most of the whites generally act in a deplorable manner throughout the film, Dr. Waltz actually exhibits some redeeming qualities, thus coming to represent a feeble white consciousness. He laments his exploitation of Django’s situation, explaining "On one hand, I despise slavery. On the other, I need your help and if you're in no position to say no, all the better. I'm going to take advantage of the situation. But I feel guilty". However, he suppresses his moral code in order to achieve his goal, thus exemplifying the hierarchy between blacks and whites and the greater representation of the relations between the races. Dr. Waltz, like the other white characters in the film, supports the hierarchical arrangement of races, and Tarantino uses this to build the representations that serve as the thematic foundation of his film.

Despite the powerful representation of white supremacy over blacks, Tarantino provides a role reversal between Django and the whites in order to promote strong racial thinking. Upon arriving at the Bennet Manor, Django seeks to kill John Brittle, delivering the iconic line “I like the way you die, boy,” a reciprocal reference to Brittle’s demeaning “I like the way you beg,

boy” as he whipped Broomhilde years earlier. As such, the roles of both men are reversed in this encounter. This is furthered as Django takes the whip and whips Brittle to his death, a clear representation from Tarantino suggesting a reversal of roles, as whippings are a fundamental script of representing white power through slavery. The imagery continues with Django killing Ellis Brittle later in the scene. As he shoots him, blood splatters all upon the leaves in the field. This shot is rife with symbolism, as “blood on the leaves” is a phrase that has been used in popular culture to conjure images of lynching, such through songs as Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” (1939) and Kanye West’s “Blood on the Leaves” (2013). Tarantino is obviously playing on the symbolic function of the shot in conjunction with its connoted meaning in order to provide this representation of a role reversal. By having Django be the one who kills Ellis Brittle and the fact that it is a white man’s blood that is being sprayed on the leaves—classic Tarantino goriness nonetheless—he is suggesting the assumption of power on the part of Django and thus perverting the typical representation that has been provided of other blacks. This greater reversal is seen in the lynch mob scene, where the white crowd is unable to figure out the eyeholes on their intimidation masks. Whereas whites have typically been represented as the intelligent race compared to the black uncivilized nature, this incompetence furthers this inversion of stereotypes by Tarantino that allows him to create his own representations of races. The role reversal serves a tremendous thematic function in developing the foundation for the accrual of black power by Django.

Django as the protagonist of the movie provides a discourse of black power, as evident of his overcoming the societal constraints of blacks of the time in order to achieve his goal. By being freed by Dr. Waltz, Django is in a position of power not seen by blacks at the time. However, he still finds himself bound by the constraints of society and the contemporary feelings

of racial relations. A scene featuring Rick Ross' "100 Black Coffins" as the background music serves as an explanation of this from Django's perspective, claiming "I threw off the chains/only the realest remain" (Ross). This reveals the stigma surrounding black men at the time, that even upon gaining his freedom—throwing off the literal chains—Django still faces intense scrutiny from the whites—the "realest" chains that remain. However, as the film progresses, the development of Django is prominent. Early on, Django has limited understanding of even moderately advanced speech, such as not knowing what "positive" means. By end of film, however, he has become extremely confident in speech and actions, highlighted best in the closing scene. He speaks eloquently and is able to miraculously kill all those who stand in his way, depicted as a gallant figure. This is accentuated by the prominent use of the low angle shot, as well as the inclusion of a powerful horn sound effect, which portrays Django as a savior. The work of Tarantino to depict Django in such a way serves to propagate his directorial message of the accruelement of black power.

The exemplification of Django as the valiant hero who slays all those who stand in his way, however, provides a conflicting dichotomy from Tarantino. Django does successfully achieve power by the end of the film, as he gallantly walks away from the exploding plantation house with his prize, Broomhilde, in hand. Despite this, Django is only able to achieve such a glorious victory through the use of violence. This creates a significant conflict of messages from Tarantino from his racial representations and their implications. As explored earlier, blacks, especially when depicted as slaves, are shown to have savage instincts and as subhuman, more similar to animals than people. Therefore, Tarantino is simultaneously rejecting and reinforcing typical representations of blacks as barbaric by showing that racial superiority of blacks can only be achieved through savagery. While Tarantino does make a powerful statement about the

achievement of black power through Django's ultimate victory, he does so while also confirming the existent discourse on racial superiority and representation of blacks. His valiant depiction of Django and his successes in the film's end culminate the strong message of black power that Tarantino had been propagating throughout the film. However, he does so in a way that provides implications of his message that revert back to previous representations that he sought to downplay. As such, Tarantino has his directorial message have two key foci: one of black power, but also one of reinforcement of traditional representation of blacks.

Django Unchained provided a unique approach to the representation of race in slavery movies. While there have been many others before it, none took the approach of the exquisitely ambitious Tarantino. Most films about slavery include the typical representations of blacks, being the brute slave and the Uncle Tom, just as Tarantino did. Almost all will also focus on the disparaging view of whites towards blacks to give this representation a greater context to operate within; Tarantino does the same. However, it is his unparalleled directorial ingenuity that makes this film such a powerful work on race. By perverting the symbolic roles of black and whites in regards to slavery, Tarantino makes the representation of race reversed and in turn the film takes on an entirely new discourse. The film then becomes about the achievement of power by blacks through Django. His ability to overcome societal restraints and eventually achieve victory by the film's end provides this strong directorial message from Tarantino. Despite all of this work to create a discourse on black power, Tarantino still has the typical representation of blacks existent in the film's end, as Django is only able to win his ultimate freedom by killing everyone savagely, which brings back the earlier articulation of blacks as barbaric. By emphasizing the prevalent racial representations and then perverting them, the film works to create a strong statement from Tarantino on the achievement of black power.

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