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**“You ain’t gonna get away wit’ this, Django”: Fantasy, fiction and subversion in Quentin Tarantino’s, Django Unchained**

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# **“You ain’t gonna get away wit’ this, Django”: Fantasy, fiction and subversion in Quentin Tarantino’s, Django Unchained**

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## **Abstract**

From 2009 to 2015, U.S. director, Quentin Tarantino, released three films that were notable for their focus on particular historical events, periods and individuals (Inglorious Basterds 2009; Django Unchained 2012; The Hateful Eight 2015). Together, these films offered a specifically “Tarantinian” rendering of history: rewriting, manipulating and, for some, unethically deploying history for aesthetic effect. With regard to Django Unchained, this article examines how Tarantino’s historical revisionism provides a valuable point of inquiry into the ways in which “history” is depicted on-screen and, more importantly, how depictions of “the past” can prove useful for highlighting underlying contradictions, ambivalences and ambiguities in the “present”. Drawing upon Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian approach to film analysis, it is argued that through a combination of fantasy, subversion and counterfactual possibility – most notable in the film’s final stand-off between its leading black characters – Tarantino is able to render the Real of U.S. slavery as an ahistorical antagonism. This antagonism highlights the ongoing trauma of these events in the present as well as the use of fantasy to explore their traumatic subject matter. Such historical fictions are not fixed to the past but, via an encounter with the Real, can be used to appraise the present.

Following the release of Inglorious Basterds (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), both Django Unchained (Quentin Tarantino, 2012) and The Hateful Eight (Quentin Tarantino, 2015) represented a clear change in direction for the U.S. director, Quentin Tarantino. While all three

films were notable for drawing upon historical events and individuals, they also reflected a specifically “Tarantinian” rendering of history. This was apparent in Tarantino’s re-writing of the end of the second world war (Inglorious Basterds); his manipulation of historical figures as narrative devices (Inglorious Basterds, The Hateful Eight); and, his unethical depiction of historical events and people to fulfil cinematic tropes (Django Unchained) (Charania 2013). Unsurprisingly, for many, Tarantino’s approach posed “the risk of offending those who deem treating dark periods of history as sacrosanct” with the “solemnity” of these periods being “diminished by embellishment or blithe handling” (Temoney 2014, 124). Indeed, Roche notes that while:

Historical movies (and more generally historical fiction) are, in a sense, subjected to the same criterion as adaptations, that of fidelity; they are, in the many words on the subject, regularly scrutinized for their handling of historical facts and their sensitivity to various interpretations and bones of contention. (2018, 15).

With this in mind, the following analysis will examine Tarantino’s 2012 release Django Unchained. In the film, Django (Jamie Foxx), a black slave, sets out to free his wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington), from the plantation owner, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). In doing so, he is assisted by the bounty hunter, Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), who “frees” Django at the start of the film. Over the course of the film, Tarantino’s portrayal of slavery in the Antebellum South and, specifically, his use of historical revisionism, offers a valuable point of inquiry into the ways in which “history” is depicted on-screen and, more importantly, how depictions of “the past” can prove useful for highlighting underlying contradictions, ambivalences and ambiguities in the “present”. Subsequently, while this analysis will draw upon discussions regarding the relation between “historical truth” and the depiction of history on film (Morris-Suzuki 2005), when considered in relation to Django

Unchained, these discussions will be used to examine how the film can pose wider questions on “the relationship between history[, ] myth, fact and fiction” (Ralph 2015, 155).

In support of this, the work of Slavoj Žižek and his Lacanian approach to film analysis will be applied (Žižek 1992). Drawing upon Lacan’s notion of the symbolic order, attention will first be given to examining how Tarantino’s subversive restructuring of generic conventions (reflected in his decision to use the “spaghetti western” sub-genre) as well as his deliberate subverting of historical “truth” (through the use of fiction and fantasy) emphasize the importance of adopting a counterfactual approach when appraising the significance of historical representations on film (Bunzl 2004). Notably, this discussion will lay the ground for examining Lacan’s notion of the Real (Žižek 2018). Here, it will be argued that Tarantino’s combination of fantasy, subversion and counterfactual possibility, provide an encounter with the Real; most notable in the film’s final stand-off between its leading black characters, Django and Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson). In particular, this analysis will draw upon Lacan’s reference to the “voice” in order to direct attention to “the disruptive and radical power of film” (McGowan and Kunckle 2004, xvii). Central to this argument, will be the contention that such disruption can work to radically align past and present antagonisms so as to challenge post-racial assertions (Lentin 2014). Before this, however, we turn to Lacan’s symbolic order and its use in film analysis.

### **Analyzing/subverting the symbolic order: film, fiction and reality**

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the symbolic order is what is commonly known or accepted as “reality”.<sup>1</sup> It refers to communication, human relations and language and it reveals the individual’s adherence to society’s laws, values and beliefs. In short, it relates to human existence and the encompassing frameworks that are adopted in order to make sense of this

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<sup>1</sup> Lacanian psychoanalysis uses three registers: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real.

existence. Consequently, while the subject is formed in relation to the symbolic order, similarly, in film, the characters portrayed form part of a symbolic order (the film's narrative), which provides each character a name, a history and a function within the narrative (Vighi 2014). As a result, film's symbolic order has been used to "explor[e] ... the unwritten rules ... that remain invisible in everyday life" (McGowan 2015, 32-33), so that while we often fail to question the apparent "reality" of the symbolic order, film's symbolic fiction allows us to explore this constitution as it appears on-screen (Flisfeder 2012). In doing so, Flisfeder argues that it is "in the form of cinematic fiction" that "cinema [... allows us] to understand the appearances that structure our everyday – fake – Symbolic reality" (2012, 95). In other words, film reveals a "functioning Symbolic reality" (Flisfeder 2012, 150) that mirrors how "reality" is "at least minimally "gentrified," [and] adapted to a given fictional/symbolic narrative, a script" (Vighi 2014, 135).

It is in this sense that "Filmic fantasy works for Žižek as a complex and somewhat magical mirror of reality, encouraging us to locate the most fundamental mechanisms that determine our relation to the world" (Vighi 2014, 132). This dislodges traditional separations of "reality" from "fiction" in order to explore their interloping effects. As Fuchs outlines, while Theodor Adorno believed "that fictionalization is just a form of escape from bad reality and is therefore apolitical", Žižek's assertion is "that fiction can tell us something important about reality, that it contains something real, something that is more real than reality" (2009). Certainly, Žižek is not suggesting that "*one should ... mistake reality for fiction*", but instead, "one should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are only able to sustain if we fictionalize it" (2016, 189 [italics in original]). Indeed, this posits a number of important contentions.

First, it serves to emphasize how "truth" is often achieved through fictional narratives. In fact, following Lacan's well-known assertion that "truth has the structure of a fiction", Žižek (2016) highlights how it is through fictional narratives that we approach the truth. Indeed,

“anecdotes about famous persons, even when invented, often characterize the core of their personality more appropriately than the enumeration of their real qualities” (Žižek 2016, 299). This is echoed by Temoney (2014), who, in commenting on Joseph Conrad’s, “Heart of Darkness”, argues that the use of fiction helped the writer to convey the truth of European imperialism. In such instances, Temoney asks, “Both Tarantino and Conrad’s accounts are fictional in the purest sense, but are their accounts any less “true” or powerful than nonfiction in imparting the actual horrors of slavery?” (2014, 129).

Second, film fiction can often “becom[e] “more real than (Symbolic) “reality” itself” (Flisfeder 2012, 95). Here, Žižek frequently refers to the Polish director, Krzysztof Kieslowski, whose move from documentary to fictional films reflected an attempt by the director to offer a truer depiction of his subject matter (Flisfeder 2012). This approach to “reality”, via fiction, is echoed in Jordan Peele’s 2017 film, Get Out (Jordan Peele 2017). In her analysis of the film, Landsberg highlights how “through artificial means (outrageous, unrealistic plots, heavy-handed visual and aural shocks) the present and everyday is rendered unfamiliar and grotesque in order to bring the real conditions of society into sharp relief” (2018, 632) – in this instance, ongoing racial tensions within the U.S.

Together, the relation between truth and fiction in film offers an opportunity to examine Tarantino’s depiction of the history of the Antebellum South, as characterized by his often-cited disregard for historical truth. Many critics argued that Tarantino’s Django Unchained was mere fantasy, with Anderson et al. asserting that the film “reinforces the act of black resistance as nothing more than a fantasy” (2014, 237). Certainly, the character of Django can be read as a form of white-liberal escapism that shields contemporary audiences from the “reality” of slavery.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for Dawson, debates on and, specifically, criticisms of, Tarantino’s hyper-violence and fantasy narrativization, can often fail to “discu[ss] the more radical ways in which

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<sup>2</sup> Previous to Django Unchained, various commenters had noted Tarantino’s penchant for drawing upon the “revenge fantasy” (most notable, Kill Bill: Vol. 1 (Quentin Tarantino 2003) and Vol. 2 (Quentin Tarantino 2004)) (Dawson 2014).

he transforms the underlying structures of revenge tragedy” (2014, 122). In the case of Django Unchained, what is ignored is the extent to which the use of fantasy, can effectively render the horror of slavery. That is, it is through such fantasy that slavery’s cinematic depiction can be presented via fictional characters and fantasy narratives that emphasize slavery’s “reality”.

This is demonstrated in Django Unchained when the film’s fictional portrayal of “force as a way to achieve redress” bears a striking “real-world” resemblance to the use of force which “undergirds the U.S. criminal justice system, as in the case of capital punishments” (Ralph 2015, 157).<sup>3</sup> Here, Tarantino draws attention to wider political commentaries regarding violence and its use (Ford 2015). Indeed, “The only viable way of [Django] freeing him-self, reuniting with Broomhilda, and finding some legal protection is through yet another legal exception, the bounty hunter’s legal sanction to kill without being brought to account” (Ford 2015, ref).

In support of this, Carpio (2013) draws comparisons between Tarantino and the African-American comedian, Dave Chapelle. Carpio notes how both Tarantino and Chapelle “use their mediums to enact rituals of redress for the crime of slavery, a crime that in its enormity can never be repaired” (2013, ref). As a result, “they use fantasy to effect scenes of retribution using humor to both sharpen the edge of that ritual and to highlight the very artificiality of their representations” (Carpio 2013, ref). In doing so, we are forced “to consider the “real” world implications of these representations” (Roche 2018, 33), by deconstructing the “truth” in the fiction.

In these examples, we can begin to observe how the fictional symbolic order, created in Django Unchained, reflects an underlying subversion of generic conventions (the use of the “spaghetti-western” sub-genre) as well as a more literal subversion of “reality’s” symbolic order (deliberately re-writing the past through the use of historical inaccuracies). More

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<sup>3</sup> Ralph extends this example to include “extrajudicial killings like Operation Geronimo, which resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden, as well as the drone strikes that have become a mainstay of U.S. foreign policy during the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama” (2015, 157 [parenthesis removed]).



importantly, this subversion can highlight symbolic contradictions as opposed to either ignoring or supporting them (Fagan 2013). Indeed, this does not overlook the fact that “subversive actions” can work to supplement the symbolic authority of hegemonic groups.<sup>4</sup> Tarantino’s subversion is not meant as a radical reinterpretation or outright opposition to the symbolic order but, instead, serves to provide a location from which the formative features of this symbolic order are brought to bear. This occurs in two ways: first, in Tarantino’s genre subversion; and, second, through Tarantino’s subversion of history.

### *Subverting genre*

With regard to Tarantino’s genre subversion, Kraus asserts that “The movie is both reassuring in its adherence to the conventions of genre and subversive in its granting so much directorial authority to a vision at odds with that genre” (2016, 452). Indeed, much was made of Tarantino’s “pairing of American slavery with the spaghetti western tradition” (Fagan 2013, 1). Emerging in the 1960s, the “spaghetti-western” sub-genre refers to a series of films inspired by the Italian director, Sergio Leone (a noted Tarantino influence) and which centered on the “American Western”. The reference to “spaghetti” was adopted by U.S. film critics, due to the fact that many of the films were directed and produced by Italians (as well as other Europeans). Django Unchained’s titular character, Django, was drawn from Sergio Corbucci’s 1966 “spaghetti-western” film, Django (Sergio Corbucci 1966). While at first critically acclaimed – indeed, the sub-genre was notable for demythologizing the “American West” – later films steered towards comedy and slapstick violence. In drawing upon the aesthetics of this sub-genre, many believed that Tarantino discredited any considered appraisal of the political

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<sup>4</sup> Žižek (2016) frequently reflects upon the role of jokes during the Communist regime in Yugoslavia; jokes that worked to support the ruling Communist regime.

sensitivities surrounding the history of slavery in the US as well as ongoing tensions in US “race” relations, past and present (Weaver and Kathol 2014).<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, while “some suggested that using slavery as a backdrop for a spaghetti Western was inherently distasteful”, Bonilla highlights that:

Around the same period that *Django* was released, the movie *Lincoln* also appeared in theaters but failed to spark anywhere near the same level of angst-ridden debate. By emerging in the right “genre” – that of a dramatic period piece – *Lincoln* took on a patina of accuracy that *Django* did not (2013, 72).

Remaining truthful to the symbolic conventions of its genre, *Lincoln* (Steven Spielberg 2012) failed to receive the same levels of criticism that were accorded to *Django Unchained*. Similar contentions were raised in 2017 when *Get Out* was nominated for the Golden Globe in the category of “comedy or musical” and not a horror, drama or thriller (Landsberg 2018).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, while acknowledging the criticisms surrounding Tarantino’s decision to use the “spaghetti western” sub-genre, further attention can be given to examining how this decision served to “transfor[m] the underlying structures” (Dawson 2014, 122) of both the “spaghetti western” and, more widely, the historical depiction of slavery on film.

In fact, it is Tarantino’s generic subversion which stands in contrast to analyses which have argued that his generic style follows a form of pastiche (Wucher 2016). While the notion of pastiche presents a level of re-appropriating past styles and re-using and re-inventing these styles in “new” forms of coalescence (Jameson 2009); in contrast, the work of Gunkel (2012) draws attention to the significance of the “mashup” in cultural formation. Here:

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<sup>5</sup> Notable film director, Spike Lee, echoed these concerns. While refusing to watch the film, he later stated that “American slavery was not a Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western. It was a Holocaust. My ancestors are slaves stolen from Africa. I will honor them” (Child 2013).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, in a cited interview, Peele explained ‘that the movie subverts the idea of all genres’ (Virtue 2017).

the mashup constitutes a precisely calculated and deliberately aberrant short circuit in the network of contemporary culture, crossing wires that should not be crossed in order to produce noisy cross-talk or static that has the effect of disturbing the smooth flow and functioning of things (Gunkel 2012, 9).

As a result, it is the “mashup” which “produc[es] shocking – understood as both unanticipated but also disturbing – effects within the networks of popular culture” (Gunkel 2012, 6) and which separates it from the sedated effects of Jameson’s (2009) pastiche. In doing so, Tarantino’s subversive potential emanates from his ability to render “disturbing effects” by manipulating (mashing-up) the symbolic order of generic classifications and their conventions. It is through such subversion that Tarantino is able to palpably render the “truth” of slavery via a restructured generic form that fictionally allows him to depict the “reality” of slavery. In other words, Tarantino’s subversion works by fictionalizing what we consider to be (historical) “reality” and making “Real” what we would usually consider to be mere fiction. As a consequence:

The effective potential of ... Tarantino’s film ... is due in large part to his aesthetic choices ... all of which encourage a “not quite right” disposition in the viewer that can act as the seed for investigating the complex themes and messages of the film (Temoney 2014, 136).

In addition to subverting generic conventions, such a “not quite right” disposition” is made palpable in Tarantino’s subversion of the past’s symbolic order.

*Subverting history*

While Tarantino subverts generic conventions by restructuring the symbolic order of particular genres, such subversion can also work at the level of “reality”, most notable in the extent to which Tarantino restructures historical events and people. To note, the symbolic order includes what we consider to be “the past” as well as historical accounts that sustain this past in the present (Wilcox 2005). As a consequence, the symbolic order maintains a degree of authoritative power by organizing the knowledge which constitutes “the past”.

In Django Unchained, the subversion of “the past” is grounded in a historical narrativization which reveals “contradictions and temporal ruptures” (Elsaesser 2014, 170). With regards to the former, Tarantino’s historical contradictions are effectively achieved via the use of fictional scenarios and character depictions. For example, Roche highlights how Tarantino’s decision to include “Mandingo fighting” (both Django and Dr. Schultz pretend to be Mandingo owners in order to gain access to Calvin Candie) “comes from Richard Fleischer’s 1975 *Mandingo*” (2018, 25). This inclusion is particularly problematic due to the fact that there is no historical evidence that such fighting occurred (Desilet, 2014). Instead, as noted by Roche (2018), the idea was appropriated by Tarantino from a former (incorrect) depiction of slavery on film. In commenting on this scene, Roche (2018) draws upon the work of Nama (2015), who argues that the inclusion of Mandingo fighting functions as a “racial metaphor”, echoing Carpio’s assertion that the Mandingo fighting is used to underscore “the cruelty of slavery” (2013, 7). Here, Temoney adds that:

ironically, this counterfact conveys a “truth” about the sadistic practices of the slave trade in a manner that no singular depiction of an actual abuse could – the utter dehumanization, the violence, and the implication of victims in their own victimization (2014, 130)

Drawing a connection between the fictional Mandingo fighting and the present, Nama notes how the inclusion of Mandingo fighting serves as “a potent signifier of the relationships between black professional athletes and team owners, a vast majority of whom are white men” (2015, 73). This inclusion allows Tarantino to effectively articulate a short circuit between “reality” and “fiction”, by aligning a fictional event (Mandoingo fighting) with the “reality” of contemporary professional sports.

More importantly, these “fictional” inclusions are not separated from the racist ideologies that supported slavery. In many instances, Django Unchained temporally ruptures any past-present distinction, by subjecting the audience to the racism of the American South. As Fagan points out:

everybody but the German character of Dr. King Schultz is interpellated in the racist ideology that supports the institution of slavery, and the characters of the film, black and white alike, go to great lengths to preserve the ideology that rests on the subjugation of black Americans (2013, 2).

Consequently, by maintaining a certain connection to the racist symbolic order of nineteenth-century America, Tarantino is able to draw attention to the mundane, everyday “reality” of slavery through temporally rupturing the symbolic order of the past. Take, for example, the scene where, upon arriving at Big Daddy’s ranch, Big Daddy, advises a black slave on how to treat Django, bearing in mind that Django is a “free man”.

BIG DADDY:           Betina, sugar

BETINA:               Yes, sir?

BIG DADDY: Django isn't a slave. Django is a free man, you understand? You can't treat him like any of the other niggers around here, cause he ain't like any of the other niggers around here. Ya got it?

BETINA: You want I should treat 'em like white folks?

BIG DADDY: No, that's not what I said.

BETINA: Then I don't know what'cha want Big Daddy

BIG DADDY: Yes, I can see that.

Big Daddy thinks for a moment. He turns to another Black slave – a Mammy – stood beside him.

What's the name of that peckawood boy from town that works with the glass? His mama work over at the lumber yard?

MAMMY: Oh, you mean Jerry.

BIG DADDY: That's the boy's name, Jerry!

Big Daddy turns to Betina.

You know Jerry, don't'cha sugar?

BETINA: Yes 'em, Big Daddy

BIG DADDY: Well that's it then... you just treat him like you would Jerry.

In this scene, Tarantino pauses the film's action in order to have his white plantation owner struggle to explain Django's status as a free-man. This is certainly not achieved in the same way that metafictional narratives are aware of their "fictional" status (Roche 2018); but, rather, Tarantino's achievement lies in subversively translating the racial doxa underpinning chattel slavery – a logic that is presented and explained by a racist, to a Black slave but also, more importantly, to us, the audience. Here, the scene powerfully aligns the racist symbolic order with our own "cognitive dissonance" (Fagan 2013, 4); a dissonance that views both the racist explanation and its absurd justification comical (Django is different, but not "white-folk")

different). In effect, therefore, it is not that the everyday racism of slavery requires an explanation – an explanation that would not have been required at the time (the struggle to offer an explanation alludes to its “common sense”) – but that this scene confronts Big Daddy’s explanation through revealing the unstable logics which tenuously sustain its racist foundations. While the brutal depiction of racism’s subjective violence is not required, it instead remains effectively rendered in the scene’s symbolic translation of the systemic violence underlying chattel slavery (Žižek 2010).

Elsewhere, Temoney draws attention to a similar example that offers the same effect. In a scene involving a depiction of the Klu Klux Klan, a group of Klansmen:

argue about the impracticality of their hoods that have poorly cut and placed eyeholes and threaten their ability to conduct a raid and “kill a nigger” (Django), which is no laughing matter. Yet the finely crafted dialogue of an odious, racial theory and the pairing of jocularly with ill-fitting hoods and villainous proto-Klansmen, rather than detracting from their immense bigotry, exposes bigotry for what it is: absurd, and in this way, the film makes a compelling moral declaration against such evils (2014, 132-133).

What is significant in these examples is how the depiction of racism can be achieved through what may at first appear to be a rather casual, blasé illustration of slavery and its racist underpinnings. Yet, it is in these scenes that the implicit subtlety of racism in its uncontested and unquestioned forms are performed but, also, more importantly, exposed.

Therefore, in addition to subverting the “reality” of the past through fictional depictions of slavery (Mandingo fighting), at the same time, Tarantino accentuates a ““not quite right” disposition” (Temoney 2014, 136) by portraying the “reality” of slavery (the everyday representation of racist logics) through the film’s fictional symbolic order. While, in certain

instances, Tarantino is willing to subvert historical accuracy for fiction, in other instances, the “reality” of slavery is brought to light through fictional – and often comedic – depictions. In what follows, closer attention will be paid to aligning this subversion in accordance with a counterfactual approach to history and, in particular, to Lacan’s notion of the Real.

### **Film and counterfactual history: the enduring variety of alternative possibilities and never-ending events**

In commenting upon the relation between history and the symbolic order, Žižek notes that, “As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformation of the signifier’s network” (2008, 58). This highlights that a certain level of subversive potential resides within the symbolic order: “if the symbolic order is determinative in the past that it lays down for the subject, it doesn’t lay down this path smoothly but in a way that is fraught with peril” (McGowan and Kuckle 2004, xvi). Such “peril” surrounding the “determinative” order of “the past”, traces how our understandings of the past are neither fixed nor stable but, instead, can be retroactively altered, so that attributed meanings can be transformed, re-defined and subverted. As previously discussed, by drawing upon fictional events/individuals and locating these fictions in the “reality” of a Southern-U.S. grounded in racism, Tarantino deliberately subverts the symbolic consistency of the past. This subversion forces us to question what we are seeing, but also the contingency of what is being shown. In this way, Tarantino’s representation of slavery bears a resemblance to other examples of historical trauma, such as, the bombing of Hiroshima.

Shapiro, while drawing upon Benjamin’s notion of “temporal plasticity”, emphasizes how Hiroshima has been subject to a range of “future interpretative processes” (2016, 36). As a result:



Because the interpretive framing of Hiroshima, especially in a variety of artistic genres, has been ongoing, “Hiroshima” is a never-ending event; it endures as a variety of artistic and cultural texts ponder it, and it continually reasserts itself in the affective lives of those who have confronted its consequences directly (Shapiro 2016, 36)

In fact, in the years surrounding the release of Django Unchained, there were numerous cinematic releases which centered on the topic of slavery, including Lincoln; 12 Years a Slave (Steve McQueen 2013); The Birth of a Nation (Nate Parker 2016); and, Free State of Jones (Gary Ross 2016). Accordingly, rather than offering a consolidated, demarcated and “official” historiography, these films, and their varying depictions of slavery, point to an underlying deadlock in the representation of slavery as a “never-ending event” (Shapiro 2016, 36), especially on film. In particular, the use of metafictional narratives and alternative histories point to the ongoing trauma of these events in the present as well as the use of fantasy to explore their traumatic subject matter.

Crucial here is the move away from “some lost primordial original”, which underpins historiography, towards an appreciation of how history can present a “matrix of all [that is] possible” (Žižek 2016, 294). Flisfeder notes how:

The theme of alternative histories – alternative narrative lines – thus exposes another aspect of the supplemental underside of fantasy. All the various unrealized possibilities frame the perspective of the fully realized, retroactively necessary, Symbolic “reality” – the outcome. So long as they remain unrealized, these possible alternatives inform our perspectives on the realized Symbolic reality (2012, 115).

Flisfeder's (2012) account brings us back to the importance of the symbolic order and how any "realized Symbolic reality" is itself composed of those "unrealized" and "possible alternatives" that constitute its realization. Indeed, these alternative possibilities are best reflected in historiography's "counterfactual" form.

Rather than proposing a form of historical revisionism, counterfactual history considers the "what if" of history in order to better understand what did happen. Accordingly, while "implicit in every causal assertion, ... is a set of counterfactual implications" (Bunzl 2004, 855), for any narrative to be achieved, there needs to "be an acknowledgement of the inevitable openness of possibilities, and the impossibility, and risks, of attempts at closure" (Edkins 2006, 114). Consequently, counterfactuals present "a false premise that [... allows us to] see the true in its proper contours", so that "it is only from a counterfactual premise that we can grasp the truth of the factual" (Žižek 2016, 299).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, while this "discussion does not revolve so much around the constructed nature of historical fiction – after all, we live in an age where most scholars accept that history itself is a (set of) construct(s) and narrative(s)" (Roche 2018, 18), what becomes important is "locat[ing] the traumatic point, the antagonism, which remains untold and around which all variations and fragments circulate" (Žižek 2016, 294). In the same way that various "documentaries of Kennedy's assassination, coming out every few years, seem to be repeated attempts to capture the impossible real of a national trauma" (Wilcox 2005, 351); equally, the trauma associated with slavery continues to be subject to a variety of cultural interpretations and cinematic depictions.

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, Žižek draws upon a film example to help explain this point, "In Robert Harris's *The Ghost* (filmed by Polanski), a ghostwriter for Adam Lang, the UK former prime minister modelled on Tony Blair, discovers that Lang was planted in the Labour Party and manipulated all along by the CIA; the New York Observer commented that the book's "shock-horror revelation" was "so shocking it simply can't be true, though if it were it would certainly explain pretty much everything about the recent history of Great Britain." Do we not find here a perfect example of counterfactual statement: "If Blair were to be a CIA agent – which he was not – it would explain everything about recent UK politics"? In other words, the plot of the *The Ghost* is the perfect case of a lie, a false premise, which enable us to the truth of the Blair years, a counterfactual premise which renders palpable actual truth" (2016, 299).

Therefore, if we accept that a counterfactual approach to history can allow us to understand the various possibilities which remain ignored when accounting for “the past”; and, if we acknowledge that such possibility “is always organized into a narrative which is partial and engaged” (Žižek 2014, 103) and supplemented by fantasy (Flisfeder 2012); then, it is apparent that the creative license afforded to film directors offers a unique opportunity for that traumatic point, which continues to circulate in the present, to be located (Žižek 2016). Indeed, it is this circulation, around some traumatic point, which underpins the counterfactual approach to history. As Žižek notes, “Let’s say that this opportunity was missed and history took a different, less radical, path. The Real here is precisely that missed opportunity: the trauma of betrayal, of what might have been” (Žižek and Daly 2004, 102-103). It is in understanding this trauma – the Real – which this analysis now turns.

### **The Real of history: slavery and trauma on film**

In contrast to the symbolic order:

The Real is ... simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization and a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency. ... the Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes); but at the same time its status is thoroughly precarious; it is something that persist only as a failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature (Žižek 2008, 190).

To this extent, the Real should not be confused with “reality” (symbolic order), nor should it be conceived as existing “outside” reality. Instead, “The Real is not beyond the symbolic, it is

the impossibility inscribed at its very heart” (Žižek 2015, 108), so that the “impossibility of its inscription [... is] an impossibility which persists and which is only to be grasped by its distorting effects” (Moolenaar 2004, 273). These “distorting effects” underline how the Real cannot be approached directly, but only through the meaning attributed to it via the symbolic order (Žižek and Daly 2004). In doing so, “Meaning, far from being settled and stable, carries at its core a point of negation, antagonism and disruption; the seeds of its very destruction” (Seery 2008, 143). Rereferred to elsewhere as an “authentic failure” (Žižek and Daly 2004), such negation should not be discarded but, instead, incorporated as part of our interpretation(s) of the past. For Hurley, this allows us to:

think of the Real as both transhistorical and historically contingent, that is to say, as something that inevitably exists as long as the Symbolic Order does, but that exists differently for different Symbolic Orders – each historically specific articulation of the Symbolic brings into being its own historically specific Real (1998).

If we consider, therefore, that “history constantly excludes that which it tries to grasp” and that “Any signifying frame misses its historical referent; any attempt at totalizing explanation generates its own ambiguities, produces an unassimilable residue” (Wilcox 2005, 348); then, traumatic historical events, such as the holocaust or slavery, serve to highlight how “history is inherently “traumatic”” (Wilcox 2005, 351). In such instances, comedy, fantasy or other forms of narrative subversion are not ignorant of the “reality” of the past but instead emphasize the need for “a protective shield to lie to ourselves about our direct as well as indirect role in the course of history” (Elsaesser 2014, 216).

This “protective shield” is brought to light in the case of film, which allows us to “isolate the ambivalent yet intrinsically traumatic dimension of the Real (mostly missed in our ordinary experience) as condensed in splinters of cinematic fantasy that embody reality’s

ontological negativity” (Vighi 2014, 132). More importantly, as an “authentic failure” the meanings offered by film provide a level of insight from which “interpretation discovers meaning through the isolation and identification of the point at which meaning fails” (McGowan and Kunkle 2004, xxii). It is this point of failure which, in Žižek’s political writing, argues for a radical altering of the capitalist order (Noys 2010); but, in the case of film, can be used to present a point of confrontation with the Real. In fact, Fagan details how:

it is Tarantino’s allowance for the real to destabilize the symbolic order or law that governs his film that makes the film so engaging. As Lacan asserts, the real order does not lay dormant, but rather manifests in images or feelings that we struggle to articulate (2013, 3).

It is this struggle to articulate, which continually obfuscates the trauma of the past and which allows us to confront the Real.

Clearly, the argument being presented here stands in stark contrast to examples of cinematic realism. As noted in accounts of black cinema, Ford highlights how “Realism’s pursuit of the most accurate portrayal of life makes it effective at combatting stereotypes. Therefore, black artists should be aiming for realist depictions of black life and should be studied with this aim in mind” (2015, 200). This realism was clearly intended in Spielberg’s Lincoln; yet, in their critique, Hayes and Rodman contend that:

the racial significance of the historical events that (supposedly) lie at the core of the narrative – the end of chattel slavery – is pushed to the side, in favor of a less threatening set of lessons: how powerful white men can protect the nation (and their own power) while keeping the culture’s major racial hierarchies firmly in place (2014, 195).

In fact, this was not the first time that Spielberg had offered a “comfortable” appraisal of the U.S.’s past. In commenting upon Spielberg’s Amistad (Steven Spielberg 1997), Morris-Suzuki notes how Spielberg:

evok[es] empathy for [... a] reconstructed past, ... implicitly offering an idiosyncratic reinterpretation of American history. The Spielberg version serves to present US history as a narrative in which freedom, justice and racial equality have always been the central themes, and support for slavery appears as a kind of temporary aberration (2005, 152 [italics in original]).

The point being made in these examples is that, following Hayes and Rodman, Django Unchained’s depiction of slavery “is (allegedly) too controversial to take seriously – as art or as politics” (2014, 196); and, as a result, failed to receive the same admiration from notable African-American celebrities, such as, Oprah Winfrey (who, incidentally, lauded Lincoln). In such cases, attempts at historical realism can support an “abstention from delivering a direct political message” (Žižek 2006). This is brought to light by McGowan, who claims that, “If a film about the Holocaust is not disturbing enough, this is itself disturbing. The problem with Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993) is that Spielberg managed what seems unthinkable: he created an uplifting Holocaust film” (2015, 15, f/n.11). What McGowan (2015) draws upon here is the lack of any encounter with the Real in historical films.

Indeed, despite scenes of overt racial violence, Steve McQueen’s 12 Years a Slave continued on this path of ignoring the Real. A period-drama, 12 Years a Slave tells the story of Solomon Northup, a free-born African-American who is kidnapped and sold into slavery, where he remained a slave for 12 years, before returning to his family. While commendable for its production, direction and cast, the film fails to acknowledge what is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Northup’s life. That is, upon gaining his “freedom”, Northup wrote a

memoir of his experiences (later adapted into the film) and became a key proponent in the fight against abolition; yet, he would later disappear from historical records, with the details surrounding his death “unknown”. This does not suggest that the death of a black man on-screen is a required feature when portraying slavery on film; rather, what is ignored in the film and, perhaps, what remains significant in Northup’s story, is his disappearance – that which stands outside the “historical record” and which can speak more “truthfully” of what remains untold in the history of slavery.

Comparatively, Jonathan Demme’s, Beloved (Jonathan Demme 1998), an adaptation of Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel, shares Django Unchained’s “fantasy” narrativization, with both the novel and the film drawing upon the “magical realism” genre as a way of tackling the repression of slavery and its (often ignored) impact on the present. In fact, as a “strange” and “disturbing” genre hybrid (cultural “mashup”), which combines history and horror with drama and fantasy, both the novel and the film take place after the American Civil War and tell the story of Sethe, a former slave, whose home is haunted by a revenant/poltergeist, believed to be the ghost of Sethe’s eldest daughter. While the novel was well-acclaimed, the film adaption failed to achieve commercial success. Accordingly, Fisher argues that:

No doubt the film’s commercial failure was in part due to the fact that the wounds are too raw, the ghosts too Real. When you leave the cinema, there is no escape from these spectres, these apparitions of a Real which will not go away but which cannot be faced. Some viewers complain that *Beloved* should have been reclassified as Horror... well, so should American history... (2014, 128)

To this extent, an encounter with the Real is made possible in historical films whereby attempts to portray past traumas are subject to a level of symbolization that is both generated by, but also undermined through, the Real’s disturbing effects. It is in this regard that Tarantino’s

subversive, counterfactual approach to slavery provides what Ford (2015) refers to as a “refraction” of history. In outlining this approach, Ford details how:

Refracting history would question conventional orientations to film and the historical phenomena it claims to represent. It would remain unconvinced by cinema’s representational capacities in order to leave open the possibility of experimentation. This would not rule out the chance for failure. But a critical orientation open to more genres would remember that failure is indispensable to gaining artistic and political insight (2015, ref).

It is this “failure” – an “authentic failure” – which maintains an “opening” with the past in the present and from which past-present continuities can be temporally ruptured in order to provide an encounter with the Real. While Beloved, in its incorporation of fantasy, steers closer to the “magical realism” genre, Tarantino’s fantasy relies on a deliberate subversion of the past that serves to “refract” slavery’s history, creating a new symbolic order “that alerts the spectator to the trauma of the real antagonism rather than obscuring it” (McGowan 2015, 81). This requires acknowledging “some “hard kernel” which resists [...] which cannot be integrated in our symbolic universe” (Moolenaar 2004, 276).

Accordingly, what “remains non-symbolized” (Moolenaar 2004, 276) is the effects of the Real, encountered through “a series of structural effects (displacements, repetitions, and so on)” which distort the symbolic structure (Žižek 2008, 182). In the case of Gothic fiction, these effects are rendered by the fact that “although the horror might be temporarily vanquished, and the social order suspended or altered through the emergence of the monstrous, there is always a left-over that sets the whole process in motion again” (Noys 2010). In the case of the Django Unchained, it is possible to examine how this same “left-over” becomes visible when we consider the effects of “voice” and, in particular, the voice of the character, Stephen.



## **“You ain’t gonna get away wit’ this, Django”: examining the emergence of the Real through “voice”**

In his account of the Real, Lacan affords “voice” a “disruptive power” (Žižek 1992, 2), which “is deeply *subversive* and/or unsettling” (Sharpe 2004, 145 [italics in original]). In film, the significance of the “voice” can hold particular power as it serves to disrupt, undermine or subvert the action being performed. In Django Unchained, this subversion becomes apparent when, in the final scene, Django kills the members of Candie’s ranch, before turning to its last remaining member, Stephen. Played by Samuel L. Jackson, Stephen is the life-long house slave of Calvin Candie. It is Stephen who foils Django and Dr. Schultz’s original attempt to free Django’s wife, Broomhilda. The stand-off with Stephen proceeds as follows.

Standing in the entrance hall of the “Big House”, Stephen is shot by Django in the kneecaps. From a low-angle follow shot, we track Django’s footsteps as he walks past Stephen, lying on the floor, with Django walking towards the main door and Stephen’s antagonized screams heard wailing in the background. The camera cuts to Stephen, panting in agony, yet shouting:

STEPHEN:                    You ain’t gonna get away wit’ this, Django. They gonna catch  
                                      yo’ black ass. You gonna be on the wanted posters now, nigger.  
                                      Them bounty hunters gonna be lookin’ for you.

At this point, the camera cuts to a close-up of Django, who stands at the door to the “Big House”. While Django looks back at Stephen, the camera remains fixed on Django, following his lit cigarette as he lights a fuse attached to the door. While the camera follows the lit fuse,

we realise that the “Big House” is rigged with dynamite. The camera doesn’t return to Stephen again. Instead, the following is heard, off-screen:

STEPHEN:           You can run, nigger, but they gonna find yo’ ass. And when they do, oh I love what they gonna do to yo’ ass. They ain’t gonna just kill you, nigger. You done fucked up. This Candyland, nigger! You can’t destroy Candyland! We been here – they’s always gonna be a Candyland!...

Notice how Stephen’s voice sits – quite literally – between life and death. In the moments before the house explodes, we bear witness to a “voice” which addresses us off-screen. We never see these final words spoken by Stephen but, instead, hear them float freely as the fuse burns. We experience Stephen’s voice “as a detached object” (McGowan 2015, 77) spoken off-screen, yet a “voice” which envelops the action as if from somewhere beyond. This is different to mere sound (the sound of the lit fuse, for example) in that while being said off-screen, the words obtain a spectral quality. It is in this way that Stephen’s final words present the emergence of the Real as it “intrudes” on the film’s symbolic structure (Flisfeder 2012), with Stephen’s final remarks acting as a “harbinge[r] of an uncanny Real” that reveal the limits of the film’s symbolic order. Indeed, if we consider that, throughout the film’s duration, Tarantino has provided a refracted telling of history – a counterfactual tale of a slave seeking vengeance on a white plantation owner and his associates – then, it is in the following remarks that the fantasy Tarantino has created becomes clear: “This Candyland, nigger! You can’t destroy Candyland! We been here – they’s always gonna be a Candyland!”. These remarks provide a stutter, a stalling of the film’s symbolic order from which Stephen’s final remarks provide “the symptom [which] speaks through the film texture, in the sense that it makes itself visible by revealing the inconsistencies of that texture” (Vighi 2014, 142). As Hayes and Rodman explain:

Stephen knows – and the inclusion of this speech in the film is an attempt to make sure that we know – that Django’s destruction of Candyland is supposed to symbolize something bigger than just the end of a quest for personal revenge. But Stephen also knows that Django’s victory is only a symbolic one: that you can’t kill systemic racism with nothing but bullets and dynamite. It will survive this setback. And it will come after Django with a furious vengeance (2014, 190-191).

In this instance, Tarantino radically opens the film’s narrative to its fantasy structure and, ultimately, to “the failed symbolization of racial struggle in the Real” (Chen and Yu 2010, 411). Moreover, the effects of Stephen’s voice are significant in that it creates a division in the film’s symbolic order which draws attention to the very subversion that Tarantino has narratively created. Encountering the “voice” (the Real), we are subject to a “shift of perspective [which] consists in a sudden, surprising glimpse of [the] gap” (Bonic 2011, 106-107) sustaining the heterogeneous conjunction between “reality” and the film’s symbolic order. In the same way that the “Big Daddy” scene reveals to the audience the confused logics sustaining slavery’s socio-symbolic order, in this final scene, the audience are objectively reminded of the on-screen fantasy, of the fact that, despite Django’s “symbolic” victory over the members of Candie’s ranch, this is just fantasy. Yet, it is here, at the core of the film’s fantasy structure, that the conjunction between fantasy and “reality” emerge, so that, Django’s Real failure (to “kill” systemic racism) is performed. This failure bears a striking resemblance to the ongoing failures in U.S. race relations as well as the post-racial fantasies that have sustained U.S. society since its election of Barak Obama (Lentin 2016). In the following conclusion, the significance of this failure will be considered.

## **Conclusion: final comments and discussion**

This article has undertaken a critical interpretation of Tarantino's historical depiction of slavery in the film, Django Unchained. In formulating this critique, specific attention has been given to examining Tarantino's subversion of generic conventions as well as his subversive, counterfactual portrayal of U.S. slavery. In both instances, these subversions were considered in relation to Žižek's use of Lacan's symbolic order and, as discussed in the final part of the analysis, its relation to the Real. In what follows, a final precis of the film will be provided.

With regard to the above analysis, it is in the film's final scene that Tarantino's fantasy narrative encounters the Real, presenting a symbolic deadlock within the film's narrative order (Žižek 2000). It is here that the film's counterfactual approach stutters and the fantasy at play becomes acknowledged. In fact, despite Stephen's final remarks, the camera cuts to Django, now outside, who mounts his hoarse and, with Broomhilda by his side, sets off into the night sky. Here, the happy Hollywood ending highlights how the symbolic order quickly rectifies any perpetuation of the Real, emphasizing the transient presence of the Real within film's symbolic narrative.

Notably, this ending poses a more pertinent question regarding the effects of the Real in Tarantino's narrative and, in particular, the use of fantasy in constructing this narrative. It is on this level that McGowan takes aim at Tarantino for falsely projecting a "political danger" which uses fantasy to re-write a "lost" or, in this instance, traumatic past:

Quentin Tarantino, ... makes films about recovering an identity that has been lost through oppression. His counterfactual revenge films, *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (2012), succumb fully to the temptation of fantasizing the lost object into existence. In this sense, we should align the films with the very systems they purport to criticize – Nazism and slavery – because they all employ the same form of self-justification. ... In the two films, Tarantino's heroes reclaim what Nazism and

slavery took from them, avenge themselves on the criminal regimes, and thereby eliminate the traumatic loss. The problem with these films lies directly in the type of fantasy they proffer, a fantasy of the object's recovery (2015, 52).

Consequently, when we consider that Django's revenge pales in comparison to the racist society he set off into, Tarantino's "happy-ending" may simply "work to convince the spectator that the trauma of the real is actually nothing but a temporary symbolic hiccup" (McGowan 2015, 79). It is in such instances, that the film's historical revisionism may prove "seductive to white audiences who wish to deny the existence of racism, and who want to rest comfortably in a belief of their own distance from it" (Landsberg 2018, 634); indeed, "a way to lick the wounds of the past by disarming contemporary black and brown rage through fictional vindication" (Charania 2013, 60).

Nonetheless, despite these criticisms, this article takes a contravening approach. In fact, in full acknowledgment of the above criticisms, it is contested that the fantasy Tarantino provides, and the "reality" of slavery, coincide in a complicated coalescence that does not degrade one for the other. As noted at the start of this article, it is not that "reality" should be read like a fiction, but that our fictions should be read for the "reality" they portray (Žižek 2016). That is, when cinema succeeds in providing a "realist" account of the past, portrayed through "expected" generic forms such as, "historical period dramas", these are often subject to a level of political impotency that fails to consider, yet, succeeds in obfuscating, a past that is too traumatic to reenact. To this end, if we acknowledge that by the film's end "we are in the realm of make-believe"; then, in the case of Django Unchained:

This does not mean that the vicarious emotions viewers experience through Django are immaterial. If, as Freud argued, jokes, like dreams, are vehicles for the expressions of

fantasies, of wish fulfillments or repressed aggression, the same may be said of films like *Django Unchained* (Carpio 2013, 8).

Furthermore, if we consider Johnson's appraisal of the film's ending, then it is apparent that:

Django, ... is about to meet America in its other guise: the "domestic insurrection" clause in the Constitution, enlisting the United States Army in the defense of slavery; the Dred Scott decision, rendering the idea of being black and American at the same time a legal oxymoron; the Fugitive Slave Act, rendering even legally free people (and we're never actually assured that Django is) susceptible of kidnapping and transportation to the South (Johnson 2013, ref).

The significance of this is that such a world – the real U.S. – is prefigured in Stephen's final remarks. In doing so, the fantasy of Django and his subsequent revolt against a racist plantation owner, serves to emphasize this world in all its reality – a reality that is grounded in a form of fiction that remains aware of its own antagonisms. In such instances, *Django Unchained* – and here one can return to McGowan (2015) – "create[s] an encounter with the gaze[/voice] that alerts the spectator to the trauma of the real antagonism rather than obscuring it" (2015, 81). It is through such an encounter that the film draws a more pertinent connection between slavery's past and a "post-racial" present that is so often portrayed as being detached from the horrors of its past.

Indeed, such forms of detachment reveal an underlying tension between the centrality of "race" in matters of discrimination, a position undertaken by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement; and, the counter-assertion that forms of racial discrimination should not be posited in terms of "race", as reflected in the response, "all lives matter" (Rappeport 2015). In either instance, we observe the promotion or denial of "race" as a historical phenomenon, reflected

in contemporary forms of racial discrimination which are allied with past examples of racial inequality or, alternatively, post-racial assertions which seek to consign racism to the past. For the former, proponents of BLM have claimed inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement, with the movement serving as a precursor to ongoing forms of racial discrimination (Clayton 2018). Rather than ignoring, undermining or, as noted by critics, needlessly fictionalizing the horrors of U.S. slavery, Django Unchained's fictional narrativization radically aligns past and present via an encounter with the Real. This stands opposed to the racial neutrality that envelops post-racial discussions, where, instead of consolidating "race" and racism to the past, the film's final scene alerts us to the antagonisms underscoring contemporary racial tensions by subversively (re)structuring how these tensions have been historically portrayed.

Accordingly, if we maintain that a Žižekian approach to film encourages "us to use the Real to reconfigure our symbolic order" (Kunkle 2014, 5), then such a reconfiguration requires "learn[ing] to recognize [... the Real] in its terrifying dimension" and, more importantly, "to try to articulate a way of living with it" (Žižek 2008, xxvii). Certainly, this is not to suggest that this past, and, for that matter, the Real, can be "overcome"; but that a more fundamental acknowledgement of our relation to this past can be achieved by acknowledging the Real as part of the present (referred to in psychoanalysis as "traversing the fantasy"). In Django Unchained, such acknowledgment is achieved through "Tarantino's aesthetic" and "the film's text" which, together, "provid[e] an imaginative and bearable space for grappling with the complex, incongruous, and seemingly inscrutable phenomena of atrocities in unorthodox ways" (Temoney 2014, 126).

Furthermore, this highlights how the past "is itself ontologically "incomplete" and, as a consequence, is reflected in "a set of traces without meaning, and thus open to later reappropriations" (Butler et al., 2000, 246). Žižek supports this approach by drawing upon Santner's (2001) reference to the ways in which:

Symptoms register not only past failed revolutionary attempts but, more modestly, past failures to respond to calls for action or even for empathy on behalf of those whose suffering in some sense belongs to the form of life of which one is a part. They hold the place of something that is there, that insists in our life, though it has never achieved full ontological consistency. Symptoms are thus in some sense the virtual archives of voids – or, perhaps better, defences against voids – that persist in historical experience (cited in Žižek 2005).

This failure to achieve a “full ontological consistency” finds expression in those aspects of the past which continue to haunt or capture the public imagination in various forms. Indeed, it is this persistence which presents the opportunity for new meanings to be generated. To this effect, it is slavery’s persistence in the U.S.’s “historical experience” which effectively aligns it with the Real and that, in the case of Django Unchained, finds its symptomatic expression in a counterfactual fantasy narrative which serves as a conduit of the Real.

Yet, rather than ignoring or discounting this fantasy, acknowledging the counterfactuals that it sustains, can help remind us of:

the fragmented and contingent nature of every moment in the present, and therefore also in the past – everything that happens could have been otherwise – leaving the counter-factual and the counter-intuitive in play, while not diminishing the tension in which it stands to historicity as the decisive moment (Elsaesser 2014, 211).

It is in this sense that Django Unchained succeeds in maintaining the tension between past and present through a form of historical interpretation that deliberately re-interprets how the distinction between past and present is depicted on film. That is, the same failures that undergird contemporary U.S. race relations are shared by Django and, in such instances, the



past bears a striking resemblance to ongoing tensions (the Real) in the present. In doing so, *Django Unchained*:

is part of a larger debate not just 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, ref).

In conclusion, by acknowledging how a Žižekian approach can help examine the interloping effects of both the symbolic and the Real in film analysis, this article has highlighted how wider interpretations on the relation between film and historical representation can be made. Indeed, if “History is only ever a product of the present, a dialectic between what was with what is, and as such possesses the capacity to expose the crisis of the present” (Landsberg 2018, 640); then, “in order to change our future, we should first (not “understand” but) change our past, reinterpret it in a way that opens up toward a different future from the one implied by the predominant vision of the past” (Žižek 2017, 160). It is in this sense that Tarantino recharges the history of U.S. slavery with a contemporary significance that does not shy away from failing to interpret this past in all its “historical truth” (both factual and counterfactual). Instead, through his subversion of generic conventions, his counterfactual approach to history and his acknowledgement of the Real, Tarantino is able to draw a more fundamental connection between the significance of slavery, for both the past and the present.

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