
HOW WELL DOES POLITICAL CORRECTNESS SELL? PORTRAYING RACISM FOR THE MASSES IN *THE HELP* (2011) AND *DJANGO UNCHAINED* (2012)

Ioana Baciu, PhD, Student, ‘Alexandru Ioan Cuza’ University of Iași

*Abstract: The article is a comparative exploration of the social realities reflected in Academy Award-winning *The Help* (2011) and *Django Unchained* (2012) with a view to the liberties taken by directors in portraying the thorny question of race in the Obama era. A central element in the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, the abrogation of the segregation laws and equality of rights for citizens regardless of race is the main topic of the 1960s-set *The Help*. Despite the irrefutable inequality of the Southern realities it describes, the cinematographic adaptation is subject to the pragmatic requirements of the industry. Tailored to sell, capitalizing on the ongoing appeal of its politically correct subject matter, the film adaptation reduces the book to its emotional essence, obliterating the unnecessary. Balancing a tendency towards melodrama with bursts of humour, the film has the merit that it educates, capturing an act of civil disobedience that occurs at the same time as the marches into Washington. The illicit publication of the black maids’ accounts working for whites ultimately provides a different packaging for an old Hollywood favourite: the class and race-transgressing story of the emotional connection between blacks and whites at a time when the crossing of such divides was a life-threatening taboo. *Django Unchained*, on the other hand, fulfills the same prerogative of the mass-pleasing industry as *The Help* from a tongue-in-cheek angle. Untouched by melodramatic undertones, Quentin Tarantino’s film is a hyperbolic rendition of racial clichés and a subtle, though never admitted, critique of the current political correctness obsession in the United States of America.*

Keywords: slavery, racism, cinematography, civil disobedience, *The Help*, *Django Unchained*

In recent years, the recovery of stories with and about slavery is a constant presence at the Oscars. In 2014 there’s *12 Years a Slave*, a vivid, raw depiction of the kidnappings of educated, free African-Americans from the un-segregated North and their relocation in the South as slaves; before that, the most resounding success belongs to an adaptation of Kathryn Stockett’s novel *The Help*, a winner in the Best Actress in a Supporting Role category for Octavia Spencer at the 2012 Academy Awards. The film is important from an educational point of view – the bringing to life of real stories of the atrocities and hardships suffered by African-Americans before the Civil War. *The Help*, however, is different in exposing the *de facto* continuation of the practice well beyond the official abolition of slavery - as late as the 1960s, the perpetuation of slavery through the discrimination of blacks in the segregated South was an established fact of life. Both Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* and Tate Taylor’s *The Help* are based on original texts – the first is a slave memoir from 1853, while the second is based from a work of fiction, based on a Southerner’s memories of the lives of Black women in the South, raising white children, while their own offspring had to be either sent off or brought up by others.¹ In the transition from book and film, the cinematographic adaptation is subject to the pragmatic requirements of the industry. Tailored to sell, the film

¹ Stockett provides the autobiographical inspiration for *The Help* in an explicative piece at the end of her book. Skeeter’s nanny, Constantine, is based on Stockett’s own nanny: ‘Demetrie was born in Lampkin, Mississippi, in 1927. It was a horrifying year to be born, just before the Depression set in. Right on time for a child to appreciate, in fine detail, what it felt like to be poor, colored, and female on a sharecropping farm.’ Kathryn Stockett, *The Help*, G.P. Putnam’s sons, 2009, p. 779.

(films about slavery, in particular) capitalizes on the ongoing appeal of its politically correct subject matter. Thus, the film adaptation reduces the book to its emotional essence, obliterating nuances, sharpening corners, polishing details and curves into straightforward lines to make the story fit squarely into approximately 90 minutes of film.

The story, which revolves around the lives of two maids in Jackson, Mississippi, and their brave decision to collaborate with aspiring writer and journalist Skeeter (Eugenia Pheelan), is a touching glimpse into the everyday lives of black women working for the whites, prevented from the dangers over-sentimentality by well-spaced scenes of comic relief. By convincing their friends to take part in the initiative despite the real danger involved by their secret meetings, African-American maids Minnie and Aibileen help Skeeter collect enough stories to please the editor of Harper & Row and get their accounts published in a book, to tremendous success. The manifold humiliations of the black help are thus avenged as their lifetime struggles are made public, while the proceeds are used to get out of debt and find better work. Despite the predictable happy end of the typical ‘good prevails’ Hollywood plot, the film is more than a generic, *post-festum* expiation of racism in America: the way in which the maids break the laws of the South in order to get their accounts published is as dangerous as it gets. The law effectively restricts contact between blacks and whites to a minimum: Skeeter is not allowed to pay visits to the maids’ private dwelling at the other end of town, fear of lynching is common, while the exposure of the maids’ real identities would inevitably lead to scandal and the loss of income. Consequently, what the maids and Skeeter do is a deliberate, subversive act that exposes and resists the oppressor through non-violent means.

If the seminal 1849 ‘Civil Disobedience’ reinforces and expands what Rousseau called ‘the social contract’,² direct Transcendentalist opposition to slavery is voiced in Thoreau’s 1854 essay ‘Slavery in Massachusetts’, as well as in 1859’s ‘A Plea for Captain John Brown’. The first is a response to the capture and return to slavery of fugitive Anthony Burns, while the second summarizes Thoreau’s reaction to the execution of the abolitionist revolutionary who attempted to arm and lead the slaves of the South against their masters. Both essays have in view the inhumanity of slavery and the controversy sparked by conflicting amendments in the Constitution – one that upholds equality, another which grants the inviolability of private property. Bearing in mind that slaves *were* property and, according to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 (reinforced in 1850), citizens were forbidden to aid or shelter fugitives, Thoreau pleads for civil disobedience against that segment of the law that frustrates man’s elementary right to freedom and deems the Constitution gratuitous and harmful as long as it can be used to justify acts of inhumanity:

The judges and lawyers — simply as such, I mean — and all men of expediency, try this case by a very low and incompetent standard. They consider, not whether the Fugitive Slave Law is right, but whether it is what they call constitutional. (...) They persist in being the servants of the worst of men, and not the servants of humanity. The question is, not whether you or your grandfather, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement to serve the Devil, and that service is not accordingly now due; but whether you will not now, for once and at last, serve God — in spite of your

² With one key difference, though, pertaining to the means through which social change is to be achieved: Rousseau’s social contract entitled the people to remove the erring king through violence, whereas Thoreau’s philosophy encouraged non-violent resistance, for the state can get hold of the man’s body, but not of his soul.

*own past recreancy, or that of your ancestor — by obeying that eternal and only just CONSTITUTION, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being.*³

Fellow Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson had already warned of the perils associated with stubborn allegiance to dogma in ‘Self Reliance’⁴ by famously asserting that "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" and urged the substitution of conformity and submission with independent thinking and action. A hundred years later, during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, a wider and more fruitful effort against slavery was made by resorting to civil disobedience. Although abolition had been completed at the end on the Civil War, in 1865, what the Civil Rights Movement underlines is that its *de facto* presence had persisted through the first half of the twentieth century. Just as it had taken American Transcendentalists the 1776-1830 interval to advance a philosophy exclusive to their nation, it was not before almost one hundred years had elapsed before the former slaves demanded the end of the segregation (‘Jim Crow’) laws that continued to psychologically, as well as formally, condition them to a state of subservience. Martin Luther King’s non-violent protests, such as the boycott of segregated Montgomery buses following the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955, are an enactment of both Black self-reliance⁵ and civil disobedience

Several serious trespassings of the established coda of race relations take place in order for the initiative to be successful. As far as Skeeter is concerned, she is already an outsider to the community because of the four years she spent away at college (Ole Miss) for the purpose of obtaining an education, not of finding a husband. Tall, curly-haired, intellectual and single, she is already considered spinster material by her conventionally pretty friends who already have husbands and children. Revealingly, the only job she can find as a writer in Jackson is the domestic advice column (the *Miss Myrna Letters*) in the local newspaper – which is why she approaches her friend’s maid for advice. Skeeter furthers her difference by talking to the black help - a violation of the norms of white Southern household. When Skeeter finds out that a new initiative is to be passed in order to make whites build separate toilets for their servants, the idea occurs to look into the humiliations these women have had to put up with from their white employers through the years. Skeeter is also prompted by an unpleasant event in her own family – Constantine, the old, faithful black servant and the woman who had actually raised her had been fired, in Skeeter’s absence, because she had been too slow in waiting upon company. If Eugenia is reckless in visiting Aibileen at her house in the ‘black belt’, the maids are even more endangered by their decision to open up to her. As in the case of Skeeter, there is a particular event that triggers their act of civil disobedience: Minnie, the best cook in town, is fired because she dared use the ‘white’ bathroom instead of using the outside privy during an all-sweeping storm.

Minnie’s revenge on whites is twofold – first, she goes back to her employers bearing gifts (a chocolate pie – one of her culinary specialties) in what seems to be an honest attempt

³ Henry David Thoreau, ‘Slavery in Massachusetts’, paragraph 35, <http://thoreau.eserver.org/slavery.htm>. Consulted on 22nd January, 2013.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Essays:_First_Series/Self-Reliance. Consulted on 22nd January, 2013.

⁵ Although less notorious than Martin Luther King, Malcolm X (real name: Malcolm Little) was a strong advocate of not only Black self-reliance, but of black supremacy.

at reconciliation. Her motive, however, is to see her ruthless former mistress eat a piece of pie – which, as we understand from Minnie’s temperamental ‘Eat my shit’, contains something more than just chocolate. Secondly, it is she who convinces the other maids to expose their history of mistreatment, showing that the hired black help is not better off than in times of slavery. Unemployed, but refusing to be blackmailed into a lower salary by her former mistress, Minnie is forced to take her eldest daughter out of school and send her to work in order to make ends meet and pacify an abusive husband.

Working for the white families has an undeniable negative effect on the families of the blacks: the maids not only clean and cook, but are also nannies for the white children, often neglecting their own. Aibileen, who starts work at 14, forms strong attachments to the children she takes care of, attachments which are supposed to be easily severed upon leaving service. The children, often neglected by their biological mothers –women who do not have jobs and spend the day waiting for the husband to come back from work - arrive to consider the black help their ‘real mommy’, all the while suffering of emotional distress and lack of confidence due to their parents’ neglect. It is the nanny’s job to provide the care and love that would help the child develop into a healthy adult. Constantine is the one to console Skeeter when she’s bullied because of her height and rejection of conventional femininity, while wise Aibileen, enraged at her mistress’s lack of affection towards her two year-old, insists on telling the child what she ought to hear every day: ‘You is [sic!] kind. You is [sic!] smart. You is [sic!] important.’

While the film accurately retains this particularly unfair aspect of life in the South – the children are lovingly raised by Black maids, who instill them with the emotional necessities to mature into emotionally sound grown-ups, just to perform the same kind of social injustice towards Blacks when growing up (‘I look down at Baby Girl, who I know, deep down, I can’t keep from turning out like her mama’- p. 53), several aspects undergo changes in the transposition from the page to the screen. One particularly interesting aspect is the fact that the film emphasizes the whiteness of the Jackson women. The preoccupation with otherness, triggered and supported by the carefully excised and segregated blackness of the maids’ body, is a central debate of feminism and cultural studies and, when applied to the social issues of the South, it usually refers to taboo represented by the union of an interracial couple. *The Help* swerves from the forbidden Southern union of a white woman-black man body (Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockinbird* springs to mind as a well-known example), concentrating on parallels between black and white female bodies instead. The repulsive Hilly Hollbrook, for instance, is nothing like the immaculate porcelain-skinned, auburn-haired sylph of the film – she is dark, plump, bursts out of her clothes, has a tendency to over-eat – the very definition of spite and greed. The many varieties of blackness are kept in film, though, to psychologically reinforce the unbridgeable divide between the segregated communities, the black employees and their white employers: ‘The women are tall, short, black like asphalt or caramel brown. If your skin is too white, I’m told, you’ll never get hired. The blacker the better.’ (p. 451)

Despite the maids’ essential contribution to the white community in the rearing of their children, what the law requires is a different story. As does the book, the film quotes some of the segregation laws of the time, which prove that people are unaware of the way in which they are governed:

*No person shall require any white female to nurse in wards or rooms in which Negro men are placed. Books shall not be interchangeable between a white and colored school but shall continue to be used by the race first using them. No colored barber shall serve as a barber for white women or girls. **Any person printing, publishing or circulating written matter urging for public acceptance or social equality between whites and Negroes is subject to imprisonment.**(my emphasis)⁶*

The lack of essential change in the black's community after the Civil War in the South is underlined by Aibillen's interview. When asked if she had always known she would be a maid, she answers in the affirmative: 'My momma was a maid, my grandmamma was a house slave.' Like all maids, raising the employers' children is a part of their job: 'I done raised [sic!]17 kids in my life. Lookin' [sic!]after white babies, that's what I do. I know how to get dem [sic!]babies asleep, stop cryin' [sic!] and go to the toilet bowl (...)' The situation is all the more distressing because of Aibileen's own personal history: her only son, Treelore, who worked at a local factory, is killed and dumped in front of the colored hospital, but it's too late for doctors to help him.

The women's civil disobedience is consistent with Thoreau's line of thought in the sense that it attempts to right a wrong through non-violent means. The women refuse to continue observing the degrading segregation rules of Jackson, Mississippi: not only does Skeeter refuse to publish Hilly Holbrook's initiative for the segregation of toilets in white homes in the newspaper, but she also exposes the South's backward race policies by writing her tell-all book. A more effective civil disobedience would have been, arguably, for the maids to boycott the whites by refusing to work for them. But the maids did not have an alternative income and they would never be hired if the rumour had spread they had been 'sass mouthin'' their employers, due to the solidarity of the tightly-knit white community. When she is fired by Mrs. Holbrook and threatened she will never find work again, Minnie applies for a job at the house of the only white outcast: Celia Foote, a blonde, not-so-bright bride with the misfortune of falling into the category of 'white trash' by Jackson standards. The other young wives do not appreciate in the least her having married one of 'their' men and therefore ostracize her from their gatherings. Both women have been pushed to the margins by the majority, but they found ways to oppose the norm. As Thoreau argues, the state does not know what its citizens want, the legal system is often flawed, used to enforce the wishes of the government, not of the people⁷ – thus it is every man's duty to be first moral, although he/she might be overstepping the legal limit.

As the alternate title to Thoreau's essay points out, civil disobedience is a *duty*. The fact that the film is set in the 1960s, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, is telling, because it seems to have very little impact in the self-sufficient community of Jackson. There are few scenes that intimate of a bigger struggle for change taking place in the outside world – the only scenes that hint to such social upheavals are scarce: the magazines Skeeter reads with Martin Luther King's picture in it, the TV broadcast of Kennedy's death and the sorrow

⁶Tate Taylor, *The Help*, Touchstone Pictures, min. 37:17 -37:58/146.

⁷ Henry David Thoreau, 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience', paragraph 2: 'Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage.'
<http://www.constitution.org/civ/civildis.htm> , consulted on January 24th, 2013.

surrounding it, Kennedy's framed picture on Aibileen's living-room wall, next to the graduation portrait of her dead son, Treelore. Jackson, Mississippi, is thus a closed environment which stifles any initiative to shift the existing order. Although it transpires more in the book than in the film, the preoccupation with the Civil Rights Movement is solely pursued and hoped for by the black community, utterly ignored by the whites: 'Only three things them ladies talk about: they kids, they clothes, and they friends. I hear the word *Kennedy*, I know they ain't discussing no politic. They talking about what Miss Jackie done wore on the tee-vee.' (p. 17)

At the time of the tumultuous marches on Washington, in the closed community of Jackson Ms. Hilly Holbrook reigns supreme, wielding her power to pass bills for the segregation of toilets, permanently damaging a housemaid's reputation and chances of employment through libel, by unscrupulously resorting to accusations of theft. For the women to overturn the abusive 'governing' of Hilly Holbrook, they need to take matters into their own hands, to exit the "mass of men" who "serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies"⁸. No Martin Luther King will ever march into Jackson – the women finally understand that if they want rights, they must fight for them themselves.

The portrayal of racism in *Django Unchained*, however, bears the stamp of classic Tarantino mischievousness. The hyperbolic narrative plot, the over-the-top twists and the caricatural depiction of Southern types – the racist, sadistic slave-owner played by Leonardo di Caprio, the 'uncle Tom', played by Samuel L. Jackson, whose devotion to his oppressor obliterates any potential awareness of social injustice, the confident slave whose freedom is gained amidst many ploys to deter him from his path to victory – are markedly dual in their reassessment of the western, the action film and what could be termed, in the wake of recent Oscar nominations, 'the slavery film'. Jamie Foxx's character and the protagonist of the film, Django, is super-imposed on the image of the American hero – in itself a political statement, given the slight number African-American actors upon which such roles are bestowed (with the exception of Will Smith). As critics have already observed, the film is 'partly based on the 1960s cult Django westerns starring Franco Nero (who returns in cameo here) and partly on the notorious 1975 exploitation picture *Mandingo*'⁹. A third parallel could be drawn between *Django Unchained* and a classic of English-speaking literature – Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem *Prometheus Unbound*, whose theme of release from captivity echoes the stakes of Django's own quest.

Tarantino's film deviates from the sentimental or tragic norm of 'films about racism' not only because it is not inspired from real events – like *Malcolm X*, or slave narratives, but because it substitutes a baroque story of black empowerment to the endless narratives depicting the oppression of the slaves. Instead of indulging the public's taste in political correctness, it explodes the current wave of African-American self-pity and fixation on the injustice of the past in a delicious fiction in which white racists are actually punished for their transgressions during their lifetime. A cathartic re-writing of the past with an African-American actor cast as the hero, the film also re-inforces the perception of how both the

⁸ *Ibidem*, paragraph 5.

⁹ Peter Bradshaw, *Django Unchained*- review, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jan/17/django-unchained-review>, consulted on 8 October 2014.

public and black people identify – as Americans or African-Americans. Having a white action film actor such as Bruce Willis save United States (and, implicitly, the entire Western world) from biological epidemics or terrorists is relevant because the hero is implicitly a representative of the class he defends – in the casting of Django the slave as the victor, the film achieves a twofold target: it challenges the public's racial bias, for those such bias applies, and gratifies the need to champion a misfit in those unto whom such bias is inflicted. On the other hand, Django's quest to free his loved one, the beautiful slave Broomhilda (the mispronunciation of the German name Brünhilde), in its chivalric overtones and comical disproportion between antagonists, pertains to the paraphernalia of the flawed medieval hero, whose undoing lies in his very heroism.

Caught in the full blast of a dynamic plot, that requires the full immersion into the film and the suspension of disbelief, the viewer misses the very fact that Django's exploits, entertaining as they are could never have been possible, and that the former slave's revenge upon his oppressors remains confined to the screen. In the Obama era that dedicates itself to the bringing of African-Americans to the fore, Django is an uncomfortable hero – uncomfortable to watch for the racial community Django represents, since the hero's death-defying qualities are so exaggerated, one questions their legitimacy; also uncomfortable for the white community, whose past of oppression is being re-inforced. Compared to the melodramatic, victimizing *The Help*, a film which carefully treads the line of political correctness by a clear-cut denunciation of the white oppressors and an extension of sympathy and compensation towards the injured party (the maids' book is ultimately a success), Tarantino's film is challenging because it reverses the usual 'slave film plot' – Django's success in accomplishing his plan is so resounding it dulls any expectation of the 'African-American as victim' discourse. Tarantino sells political correctness in an unusual packaging, leaving behind a whiff of uncertainty about its intentions once the viewing excitement has evaporated. Django's entitlement to all-sweeping win might be read as an echo of a current reversal of sides in the status-quo of political correctness.

WORKS CITED:

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 'Self-Reliance',
http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Essays:_First_Series/Self-Reliance. Consulted on 22nd January, 2013.

Bradshaw, Peter, *Django Unchained* - review,
<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jan/17/django-unchained-review>, consulted on 8 October 2014.

Taylor, Tate, *The Help*, Touchstone Pictures, 2011

Thoreau, Henry David, 'Slavery in Massachusetts', <http://thoreau.eserver.org/slavery.htm>. Consulted on 22nd January, 2013.

'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience',
<http://www.constitution.org/civ/civildis.htm>, consulted on January 24th, 2013.

*This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133652, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.