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McQueen's Revival

Throughout the United States' cinematic history, there has been a seemingly formulaic approach to making movies about slavery in the United States' past as these films typically either convey vengeance or forgiveness to the South. This approach has, unfortunately, dulled the impact that the discussion and portrayal of slavery has on audiences; they have become accustomed to this subject and, with little variation among these films, feel as if they know what is to occur in each movie from start to finish. However, a director has recently shattered this standard and blown away both critics and audiences with his artistry and radical approach to creating a movie about slavery. In 2013 director Steve McQueen accomplished an astonishing feat: he combined a strong cast, superb directing techniques, and an interesting story about an important topic to create *12 Years a Slave*, what is now regarded as the greatest film about slavery in the United States South.

Because audiences first analyze a film's acting, McQueen skillfully casts a variety of talented actors whose individual skills were utilized during the course of the movie. For the most part, these actors have each received multitudes of praise from several film critics, but one actor, Brad Pitt, has been remarked by some to be a negative aspect of the film. Popular film critic for *The Atlantic*, Christopher Orr voices the concern shared by others that Pitt's appearance in the film reduces some of the movie's realism as audiences may be unable to view Pitt as his

character but only as himself. Orr does note, however, that as Pitt had a significant role in getting *12 Years a Slave* produced, his negation to the film can be overlooked and viewed as insignificant. Since Brad Pitt's appearance was the only negative aspect of the film critics commented on, this further demonstrates how well-made the film is and how great the other actors' performances are. Critics, John Latchem of *Home Media Magazine*, in particular, have praised the performance of Chiwetel Ejiofor, the film's main character. As Ejiofor is the focus of the entirety of the film, his acting reflects the greatness of McQueen's movie, and Ejiofor's rigid poise and painful stillness throughout the film contrasts with the rest of the film's chaos and destruction to further convey the film's message of just how horrible slavery was and how it affected even seemingly ordinary people (Orr). Being one of the film's major characters, Michael Fassbender is cast by McQueen because he was previously assured of Fassbender's acting abilities in his films *Hunger* and *Shame*. McQueen is not let down as film critics have compared Fassbender's performance to even the stunning performance of Chiwetel Ejiofor and view the performance of Michael Fassbender as critical to the movie's message (Latchem). These men's performances, supported by a cast of stars, such as Benedict Cumberbatch, Paul Giamatti, Taran Killam, Paul Dano, Sarah Paulson, and Lupita Nyong'o, who won Best Supporting Actress for her role, both aid the film's greatness and deservedness of praise and fittingly support McQueen's goal of showing audiences the extent of slavery by bringing them into the madness.

While creating *12 Years a Slave*, McQueen employed various directing techniques to create a film that draws in audiences and leaves them with a better understanding of what slavery in the United States' South was like. First of all, Megan K. Nelson of *Civil War Times* notes that McQueen artfully angles the camera in ways that convey both the extent of main character's,

Solomon Northup, suffering and a feeling of being placed with in that same, brutal situation (44). By once again drawing audiences into his film, McQueen clearly demonstrates his aptitude as a director and the high quality of his most recent film. Another of McQueen's techniques, flashbacks are used to "emphasize the contrast between present and past, and allow [McQueen] to create narrative suspense" (Nelson 44). This aspect of the film makes it clear to viewers that *12 Years a Slave* is a well-directed movie by grabbing their attention with an advanced plot development technique. McQueen does not stop at flashbacks; he also maintains an obscurity of Northup's location, mimicking the disorientation that victims of the slave trade undoubtedly experienced during their journey to their new, burdened lives (Nelson 45). Such a difficult task as making Northup's location unclear does not go unnoticed by viewers and brings praise to the film through audiences' recognition of this advanced aspect of the film. Like the obscurity of Northup's location, the timeline of the film is also kept vague to audiences, notes Wesley Morris, film critic for *grantland*. Once again, McQueen uses his directing talent to demonstrate to audiences the overall experience slaves endured; in this case, through the unclear timeframe, resembling that of slaves' lives, of the film. Lastly, McQueen reflects his film's raw portrayal of slavery with the sparing use of an intense soundtrack (Morris). This allows audiences to witness violent acts, such as those that were committed during the era of slavery, without the reassurance of music, forcing viewers to observe in as close a way as possible to the way in which they would have if they had seen them during this era. Tying all these directing techniques together, McQueen creates an outstanding film about slavery that remains barely rivaled in its field.

Because McQueen chose such an emotional and relatable true story, audiences are better made to comprehend the horrors of such a major topic as slavery. The story is also so astonishing that it makes it easy for audiences worldwide to feel a connection with the story's owner,

Solomon Northup, points out many critics, such as Peter Debruge of *Variety* magazine (72). By connecting audiences to a personal story, a movie displays its capacity for emotional movement, making *12 Years a Slave* a successfully emotional film. McQueen's use of a true story also improves the historical accuracy of his film (Nelson 43). Although this is not critical for a movie's success, more historically accurate films earn the respect of critics and audiences and make directors seem even more impressive. Most significantly, McQueen provides a rare, honest portrayal of slavery in the American South by including in his film all of the heinous acts committed during the slave trade (Nelson 44). This unique, barely altered presentation about the topic is thoroughly impressive to viewers of all types and gives reason for appraisal of McQueen's directing abilities. Through thorough examination of the film, audience members can clearly see that *12 Years a Slave* "radically shifts the perspective of the American racial historical drama from the allegorical uplift to the explanatory wallop" (Morris). Going above audience members' expectations, the film's divergence from its genre's standard is a clear example of McQueen's talent and the film's reason for appraisal. The film, in fact, diverges so far from the historical drama normality that, to some people, *12 Years a Slave* is considered a horror movie as the pain endured by the main character is so intense and graphic (Debruge). Seeming that McQueen used horror movie qualities to impact audiences, his film gives viewers a sort of wake-up-call to the actuality of the slave trade by, in a way, scaring them with brutality and violence, the truth. Because of McQueen's film's praised aspects, including its historical accuracy, many films like it suffered for their lack of these qualities; for example, *Django Unchained* directed by Quentin Tarantino receives negative reviews after a comparison of it to *12 Years a Slave*. Tarantino's film severely lacks in historical accuracy, and while McQueen uses camera angles to make his film more real, Tarantino uses them to create a more fantastical world

for his film (Darling; Nelson 44). This comparison, prevalent as *Django Unchained* was released only a year before *12 Years a Slave*, not only diminishes Tarantino's film, but also makes McQueen's film look all the more amazing as it is considered better than that of such a successful director as Quentin Tarantino. All in all, McQueen uses a fascinating story about one man's suffering to better portray the reality of the slave trade and is relatively unrivaled by other films for its success in this attempt.

When watching *12 Years a Slave*, it is difficult not to be taken aback by the film's amazing acting, directing, and historically accurate storyline. The film, in fact, stands alone in modern times as it has combined the qualities of which make a conventional film great with that which make a historical drama great. This makes McQueen's film both a revival of how history should be portrayed in cinema and of how slavery in the American South should be remembered. Audiences, left disgusted at the actuality of the slave trade and surprised at the content of a historic film, understand that *12 Years a Slave* can easily be labeled as one of the greatest films so far in the twenty-first century.

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