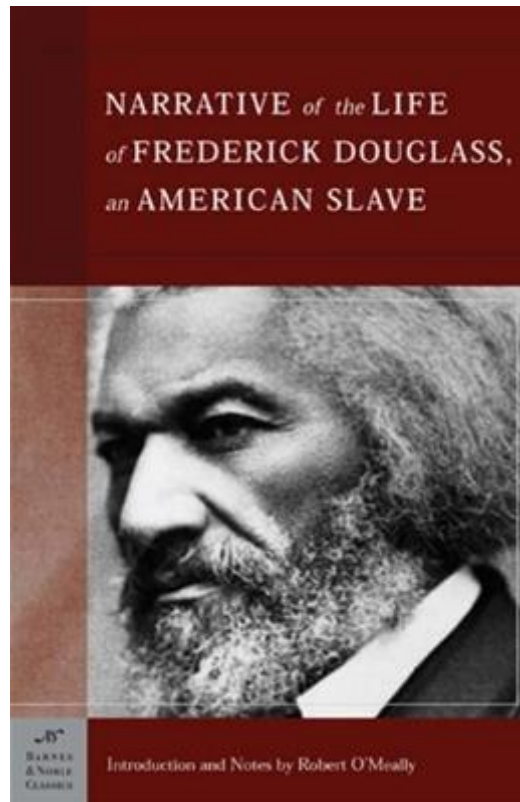


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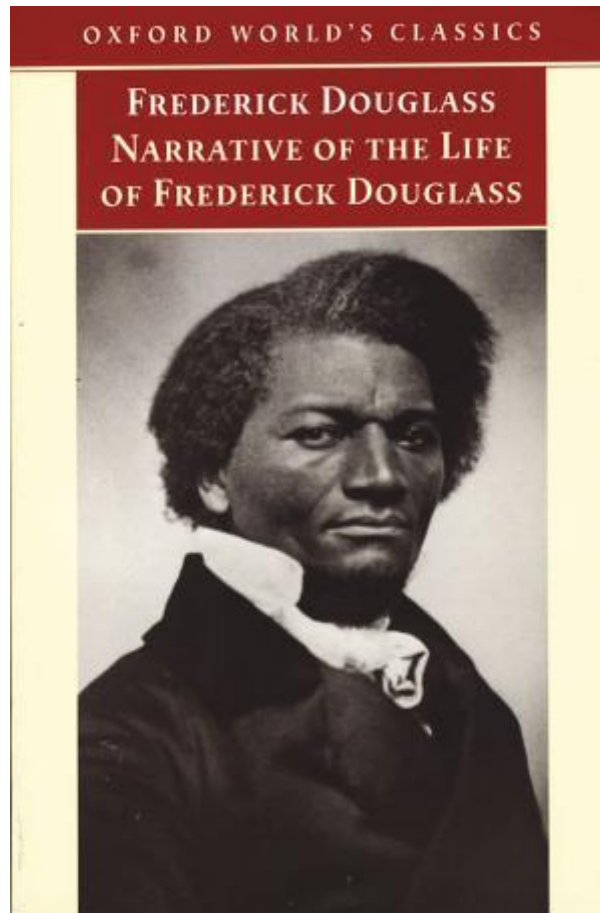


On Defining *Slave Narrative*

Slave narrative is a genre of writing that recounts the personal experiences of slaves or former slaves. It serves the anti-slavery cause and portrays the atrocities committed by the slave owners and shows how the dominant society accepted the pro-slavery ideals. *Britannica Encyclopaedia* defines slave narrative as,

...an account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally. Slave narratives comprise one of the most influential traditions in American literature, shaping the form and themes of some of the most celebrated and controversial writing, both in fiction and in autobiography, in the history of the United States (“slave narrative”)

Frederick Douglass' Narrative



A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, by Frederick Douglass, Boston (1845) is a perfect example of a slave narrative. In contemporary works, especially fiction inspired by the slave narratives, the term Neo-Slave narrative is used. In his work *The Afro-American Novel*, Bernard W. Bell describes “neo-slave narratives” as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (qtd. in Smith 168). Valeria Smith modifies the description further:

...although over time that definition has expanded to include a more diverse set of texts than Bell's initial description could have anticipated. This genre, which includes some of the most compelling fiction produced in the last fifty years, has evolved to include texts set during the period of slavery as well as those set afterwards, at any time from the era of Reconstruction until the present” (Smith 168).

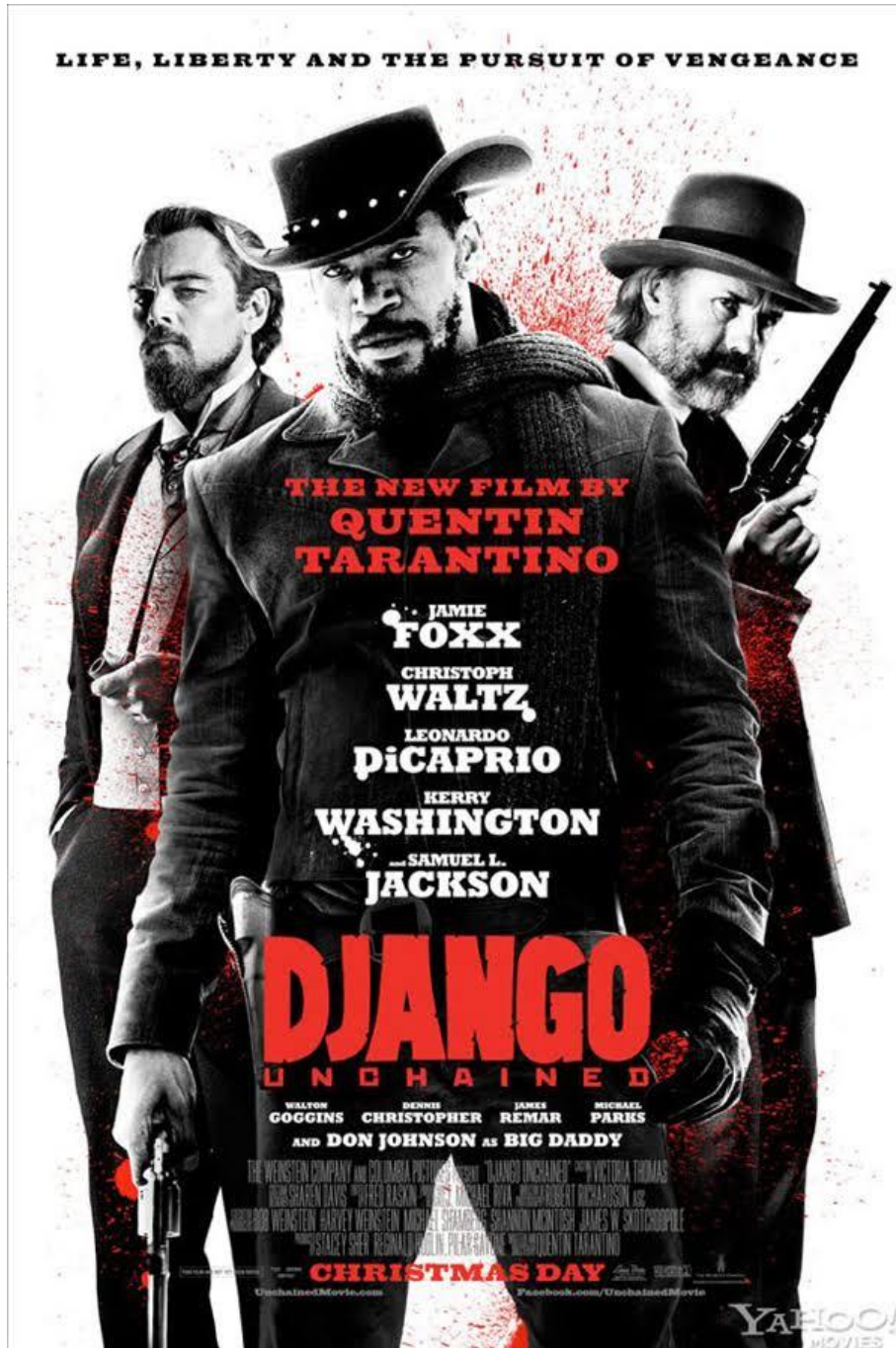
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The Film *Django Unchained* – About a Black Slave

The term *slave narrative*, which is usually used in the context of fiction and occasionally to poetry in order, is used as a frame to study the American Western film, *Django Unchained* (2012) directed by Quentin Tarantino. This film is about Django a black slave, who, when freed, sets out to exact his revenge on the Whites who enslaved him, while saving his wife Broomhilda.



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Spaghetti-Western and Blaxploitation Films

In this western, as a kind of counter-narrative, the typical gun slinging white hero is replaced with a black man who kills a number of whites. In generic terms, *Django Unchained* is a combination of **Spaghetti-Western** and **Blaxploitation** films. Spaghetti-Western films are the Westerns produced in the 60s, by the Italian film companies.

Characteristically, a **Spaghetti-Western** is a low budgeted movie set in the American civil war backdrop depicting the adventures of one or more white heroes.

Blaxploitation films are mostly low budgeted violent action movies, featuring black characters. The genre was most popular in the 70s America and the films were targeted towards the urban black population. David Walker remarks, “Blaxploitation films changed how black men and women were portrayed in films. Gone were the old negative stereotypes that had dominated films for over 70 years” (ix).

Director Quentin Tarantino

Quentin Tarantino is an influential American film maker who has written and directed films like *Pulp Fiction* (1995), *Kill Bill Volume 1* (2003) & *2* (2004) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). Describing Tarantino’s filmmaking, Charles Mcgrath says,

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom, Blake wrote, and for the last few decades no one in Hollywood has followed that road more assiduously than Quentin Tarantino. His movies are famous for their violence and bloodshed; their blaring soundtracks; their offbeat, Pinteresque dialogue; their startling performances from actors you had almost forgotten about; and their encyclopedic range of references to other movies, especially schlocky ones. (Mcgrath)

Tarantino is usually known for his non-linear plot structures, razor-sharp dialogues and the portrayal of excessive violence in his films. Though he alludes to a number of other films in his works, he has attempted to fuse two contrastingly different film genres into one. The 1996 Film, *From Dusk till Dawn* directed by Robert Rodriguez and scripted by Tarantino is a combination of a Hardboiled Thriller and a B Grade vampire flick.

Fusion of Two Genres

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In *Django Unchained*, Tarantino once again has fused two film genres: the Spaghetti-Western, which focuses on the adventures of a White gun slinger, Bounty Hunter or a treasure seeker (E.g. *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), *Django* (1966) and *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964)) with the Blaxploitation (*Shaft* (1971), *Hit man* (1972) and *Black Caesar* (1973)) where the new Black Man exhibits his heroics.

In simple terms, Tarantino has effectively attempted to subvert the genre of the slaver using the genre of the slave in *Django Unchained*, which makes it a unique Slave narrative with a capital S. The idiom, 'with a capital A/B etc.' means 'Something that you say in order to emphasize a particular quality' or 'the most formal and often limited understanding of that' ("with a capital [A etc.]").

Focus of This Paper

The paper treats the first definition as the usage of the colonised and the second as the coloniser's and employs the former to discuss the film *Django Unchained*. It aims to study *Django Unchained* as a slave narrative which portrays not just the suffering of the slave but also the slave's revenge (which is borrowed from the Blaxploitation genre), differentiating itself from the other slave narrative films not just in terms of story but also in terms of genre and film making techniques and present it as a slave narrative film with a strong emphasis on the slave.

Portrayal of the Suffering and Agony of the Slaves

The slave narratives are usually centred on the suffering and agony of the slaves. The films based on the slave narratives serve the purpose of presenting the hard-to-digest facts about slavery to the world like the recent film *12 Years a Slave* (2013) which is based on the memoirs of Solomon Northup, a former slave. Films like these visually present the inhuman punishments meted out to the black slaves in the name of law and religion.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

The Fugitive slave act of 1850 strengthened the powers of the slavers allowing them to punish the captured run-away slaves to any extent. The Fugitive slave act reads

And be it further enacted, That when a person held to service or labor in any State or Territory of the United States, has heretofore or shall hereafter escape into

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another State or Territory of the United States, the person or persons to whom such service or labor may be due, or his, her, or their agent or attorney, duly authorized, by power of attorney, in writing, acknowledged and certified under the seal of some legal officer or court of the State or Territory in which the same may be executed, may pursue and reclaim such fugitive person, either by procuring a warrant from some one of the courts, judges, or commissioners aforesaid, of the proper circuit, district, or county, for the apprehension of such fugitive from service or labor, or by seizing and arresting such fugitive, where the same can be done without process, and by taking, or causing such person to be taken, forthwith before such court, judge, or commissioner, whose duty it shall be to hear and determine the case...(sec. 6)

***Django Unchained* – In a nutshell**

As the film's opening credit sequence plays we see Django among four other slaves being led by the Speck Brothers and in a close up we see the runaway 'r' burnt into his cheek revealing his identity as a former-fugitive who was captured. Throughout the film, in chunky flashbacks we get to see Django's cruel past where he tries to run away from his slaver with his wife Broomhilda and is captured. His slaver mercilessly whips his wife's back while Django is made to watch. Soon after giving them their 'r's, the slaver sells them to different buyers in the Greenville Slave auction in Greenville, Mississippi.

Django's past resembles many of the other slave narratives and the films that are based on them. While the other films stop with the suffering of the slaves, *Django Unchained* goes a step further. The plot of the film begins where the other slave narratives end. Within the first 12 minutes of the film, Django becomes Django Freeman. He is freed by the German dentist turned Bounty hunter Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz).

Soon Django gets promoted as a Bounty Hunter by Dr. Schultz. A Bounty Hunter, which is a recurring stereotype in many of the American and Spaghetti-Western films (played by white actors), is re-constructed as a black man in *Django Unchained*. We have seen the Blacks rebel in a number of films based on slave narratives including *The Last Supper* (1976). The rebellion is usually curbed with the iron hand of law and the slaves pay the price for rebelling and fighting their white masters. But in *Django Unchained*, unlike the rebelling

slaves in other slave narratives, Django kills all the whites who were responsible for making him suffer and saves his wife from the inhuman Calvin Candy, finishing what he had started.

American Civil War Focus – White Saviour Dr. Schultz

Some of the films based on the Slave narratives focus on the American Civil war which was responsible for the abolition of slavery from America. But in *Django Unchained* which is set two years before the civil war, we see a deliberately anachronistic reference to the north or the union which supported the anti-slavery cause. When Dr. Schultz frees Django, pointing north he tells the other slaves: ‘Oh, and on the off chance that there's any astronomy aficionados amongst you, the North Star is that one’ (*Django Unchained*). Dr. Schultz plays the typical White liberator or the White messiah who saves the black victims, but with a difference. A White saviour in a film about slavery or racism is usually glorified and given the guardian angel status (E.g. *The Blind Side* (2009)).

Dr. Schultz, right from the beginning, when he sees the lash marks on Django’s back till he is shot dead, is unable to digest the cruelty that is meted out to the black slaves by the other whites around him. When the plot begins, he kills the Speck Brothers and frees the slaves. He raises the status of Django to that of a bounty hunter and treats him equally. Though he is a character who despises slavery, he saves Django with an ulterior motive that is to find the Brittle brothers. He promises to give Django his freedom and 75 dollars if he helps him in his quest to find and kill the Brittle brothers.

What looks like the plot of the entire film ends very soon. The Brittle Brothers are found and killed within the first 40 minutes of the film. Later, fascinated by the German name of Django’s wife, Dr. Schultz helps Django find his wife Broomhilda. In the process he gets killed and it is Django, the *internal-focaliser* who takes the plot forward and succeeds in their joint mission.

Unlike the White liberators with faux-friendliness (E.g. The Count in *Last Supper*) and holier than thou attitude, the German Bounty Hunter is a humane non-black character who finds it too hard to accept the atrocities committed by the whites in the name of slavery. As Owen suggests in his article about *Django Unchained* and *Spartacus*, ‘Whites perpetrated the injustice of slavery, and whites therefore are required in order to achieve rectification.’ Even in a film which is born of the union between Spaghetti-Western and Blaxploitation

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genres it becomes impossible to leave out the white liberator, though he is not an American in the film in question. Though we do not know much about Dr. Schultz's backstory, he reflects the guilt that is provoked in every white man in the audience from being inside the film.

Sergio Leone Zoom

Dr. Schultz acts as a foil to all the other white characters in the play, who find it obnoxious to see a black man on a horse. Tarantino makes it a point to emphasise the reaction of every single white character who appears in the film to Django being a Freeman. When Dr. Schultz and Django enter the inn in Daughtrey, Texas, Tarantino uses a *Sergio Leone zoom* to highlight the reaction of the bartender, who has never seen a black man visit his place.

Sergio Leone zoom is a camera zoom-in technique popularised by the legendary Spaghetti-Western maker Sergio Leone, from Italy. It is usually used to attract the attention of the audience while in a wide shot to a specific character's face or to an object of extreme importance. Tarantino uses this sudden zoom in technique quite a few times in *Django Unchained*.

A Parody

The use of Sergio Leone zoom to underline the reaction of the nameless bartender who appears only once in the film appears ridiculous at first look but contributes something brilliant to elevate *Django Unchained* from an ordinary slave narrative to a Slave narrative with a capital S. A technique used in the Spaghetti-Western films which illustrate the bravado of white gun slingers, is exceptionally parodied in *Django Unchained* to bring out the cruelty of slavery like the eloquent abuses of Caliban in the language of his masters in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Caliban says, 'You taught me language, and my profit on't is I know how to curse' (Tem.1.2.363). A white man's technique is used in this slave narrative to 'curse' the white men in Caliban's terms.

Use of Violence

Violence is a common denominator in the Spaghetti-Westerns and Blaxploitation films and Quentin Tarantino is known for his highly stylised use of violence in his films. Right from his 1992 debut feature *Reservoir Dogs* to *Django Unchained* Tarantino has been heavily criticised for the aesthetization of violence. Will Kallenborn writes,

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Tarantino has compared his use of violence to the cinematic use of dance sequences. It seems Tarantino considers violence to be the medium in which he works. Violence is an important aspect of reality that should be represented in film, but Tarantino's violence has no basis in reality, and even worse is that his violence has no real basis in fiction. (Kallenborn)

In a 1993 interview, Tarantino famously remarked to Jessica Seigel of the Chicago Tribune,

This is how I am when it comes to movies: I love movies. I love movies in color, and I love 'em in black and white. I love B movies. I love foreign movies.

The bottom line is I'm not responsible for what some person does after they see a movie. I have one responsibility. My responsibility is to make characters and to be as true to them as I possibly can. (Tarantino)

Binary portrayal of Violence

In *Django Unchained*, there is a binary portrayal of violence: the violence inflicted by the masters on the slaves and the violence that the slavers are subjected to, at the hands of Django. Most of the slave narratives comprise the former and in for most parts while *Django Unchained* is full of shots illustrating the white men being killed like 'flies to wanton boys' (Kin. 4.2.36) by Django. Tarantino employs a typical *Hong Kong Shootout* in the third act, at the end of which most of the white men are dead. *Hong Kong Shootout* is an elaborate action sequence interspersed with slow motion shots. It is a technique popularised by the Asian film maker John Woo (*The Killer* (1989), *Hardboiled* (1992), *Face/Off* (1997) and *Mission: Impossible II* (2000)) which has become an inevitable ingredient in Action movies all over the world. It is interesting to see that Tarantino, who is a connoisseur of Hong Kong action films, borrow a technique from a prominent Director of the Third world cinema (before he moved into Hollywood) to be used in his Spaghetti Western – Blaxploitation Conglomerate, which results in the birth of the Slave narrative with a capital S. When the film ends, Django demolishes the 'Big House' in Candy land and walks proudly to his wife with the house burning in the back drop in John Woo style.

Some Privileges Extended to Django

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On the lighter side, when Django plays Dr. Schultz's Valet, he is left to choose his own costume. Django chooses a costume which Tarantino refers to in the script as 'blue satin little lord Fauntleroy outfit'. This particular outfit is inspired by Thomas Gainsborough's painting "The Blue Boy" (1770) which in turn is a homage to Van Dyck's portrait of a young Charles II. When Django puts it on, Dr. Schultz takes him to Bennett Manor, a plantation in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, where Spencer 'Big Daddy' Bennett instructs Betina, one of his slave girls to show Django the farm. While they walk together, Betina asks Django after confirming that he is no slave, asks him: 'You mean you wanna dress like that?' treating us with a farcical moment. Tarantino ahistoricises a particular outfit which belongs to the whites and uses it on Django to be poked fun at, by a black slave girl, to subvert a white 'thing' creating a case of mimicry 'because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics' (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin 139).

An Avant-garde Attempt

Tarantino's avant-garde attempt to fuse two popular genres from completely different eras does not stop at the level of being a mere academic exercise but it enables him to place his black slave right at the centre of the narrative. In this slave narrative film, the techniques belonging to Blaxploitation subverts the Spaghetti-Western allowing Django to do what the slaves in other narratives could only dream of. The title of the film is a reference to the 1966 film *Django*, a Spaghetti-Western. The Django of *Django Unchained* is definitely not the Django of *Django* since he is a black man. Instead, the Django in the title *Django Unchained* could be seen as a reference to *Django*, the Spaghetti-Western itself. *Django Unchained* is about what happens when a Spaghetti-western is unchained with the tools of Blaxploitation, placing the emphasis on the slave and makes the film a Slave narrative with a capital S.

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