

Close-Up: *Django Unchained*

Django Unchained: A Black-Centered Superhero and Unchained Audiences

Carli Coetzee

Abstract

Critical discussion of Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained (2012) centers around two related sets of questions. The first set concerns the representation of blackness on the screen and the gaze as racialized. The second set has been centered on questions of historical accuracy and the political implications of a historical cinema that thematizes slavery. This article argues, developing the insights of others such as Litheko Modisane, Tsitsi Jaji, and Manthia Diawara, that audiences are not enchained by a director's vision, but are creative and resistant in their responses to film. For this reason it is possible to theorize Jamie Foxx's Django as a black-centered superhero, if a certain audience is convened for the screening. This audience-centered response liberates viewers, in the United States and elsewhere, from the limitations imposed by a director's vision and enables discussions of black-centered identities.

In his *Wall Street Journal* response piece “Black Audiences, White Stars and *Django Unchained*,” Ishmael Reed offers a deliberately discomfiting description of his encounter with Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012): “I saw the film in Berkeley where the audience was about 95% white. They really had a good time.”¹ Reed’s alienated and critical response to the film is informed by his understanding of the central question of “who should tell the black story?” But his anecdotal analysis of the abomination that he assesses the film as may also draw attention to something else: who is watching alongside the viewer when a (or the) black story is being told, and how does this collective viewing experience shape, distort, or destroy a sense of community? “Foxx,” Reed writes, “is there for the audience that used to sit in the balcony at southern movie houses.”² In this invocation of the movie houses of the racially segregated past, Reed’s response points to a crucial issue in the reception of *Django*: the historically and racially informed gaze. In particular, what his viewing experience invokes is a room in which the black gaze

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becomes displaced—marginalized, in fact, as if that gaze has been removed to “the balcony at southern movie houses” (fig. 1).

Reed’s arguments against Tarantino’s right to tell a black story are convincing on many levels and in fact are representative of many black-centered responses to the film. Yet it is worth remembering that audiences are “unchained” and often react in ways that exceed and defy the narrowly imagined audience responses that the Hollywood machinery attempts to create. Manthia Diawara’s influential work on black spectatorship had already alerted us to the ways in which audiences can, and do, adopt difficult and resistant positions. Diawara in his “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance”³ writes, “Whenever blacks are represented in Hollywood, and sometimes when Hollywood omits blacks from its films altogether, there are spectators who denounce the result and refuse to suspend their disbelief.”⁴ These resistant spectators are typically “black spectators,” but blackness neither guarantees nor limits one’s ability to take up this position. In fact the development of such a resistant spectator position, Diawara shows, is a form of activist engagement open to anyone choosing to do so. One of the ways in which this resistant spectatorship can become focused and sharpened, he argues, is through independent black cinema, a cinema that questions the passive role of the spectator within dominant film culture. This spectatorial resistance practice is one that Quentin Tarantino, in his many interviews and discussions, seems to discourage actively.

Tarantino describes himself, performatively, as “always in control”⁵ of his actors—even when he paradoxically invites them to be free (or gives them permission to be free, Reed might argue). He also claims to be in control of his audiences, manipulating us, making us react as he wants. He concludes his set of three interviews with Henry Louis Gates Jr. for *The Root* with



Figure 1. Still of *Django* (Jamie Foxx). Copyright 2012. Courtesy of The Weinstein Company.

these words: “There’s that moment where Django turns to Broomhilda and has that kind of punky smile that he does. If I’ve done my job right, modulating this movie and doing it the right way, then the audience will burst into applause. They’ll clap with Broomhilda. They’ll laugh when Django and his horse do the little dance. That means I’ve done it the right way. The audience is responding exactly the way I want them to.”⁶ I have watched this ending in a number of contexts, and not once has this been the reaction. Maybe *we* (black and black-centered audiences) are doing something right, in our resistance to this moment.

Film scholar Litheko Modisane, in his original and challenging book *South Africa’s Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centered Films*⁷ argues this very point, in an argument with a reach well beyond the South African audiences he theorizes. For Modisane, the circulation of film has the potential, under certain conditions, to create audiences and publics and to stimulate critical public engagements on blackness.⁸ Modisane’s term “black-centered” describes a viewing experience very different from the one invoked by Reed, where the black-centered gaze was precisely unsettled and alienated by other responses *not* attuned to experiences of blackness. Manthia Diawara and Litheko Modisane offer us powerfully political ways of theorizing a black gaze; for Diawara, in particular, adopting the position of the “black spectator” is an activist form of viewing that is both necessary and transformative. In a room such as the one Reed describes, however, this activism is absent; the audience at this screening constitute a public to whom the black-centered gaze is peripheral, relegated to the metaphorical balcony (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Django whipping overseer. Copyright 2012. Courtesy of The Weinstein Company.

Furthermore, in her striking piece on what she calls “Cassava Westerns,” Tsitsi Jaji documents the responses of cinema audiences in Africa to the genre of the western, often regarded as regressive in its racial politics and certainly not black-centered. Jaji uses the “genre” of the spaghetti western as “an interpretive framework, literally a theoretical lens, to decipher the visual, aural and narrative tropes” of Abderrahmane Sissako’s oeuvre.⁹ She theorizes Sissako’s engagement with the western as a “formative influence”¹⁰ in African cinema, commenting in particular on the treatment of landscape and the use of quest narratives. Many have written autobiographical accounts of the identification between African cinema audiences and the figure of the cowboy, creating a counter-intuitive archive richly illustrative of the surprising and creative work done by audiences. This is particularly true, I would argue, for audiences that consist of individuals who self-identify as a community—for the purposes of this argument, a consciously black-centered community. Django’s character, viewed from within a cinema tradition such as the one Jaji documents, can easily and readily be understood as a black-centered hero, provided the viewer is placed within a certain community and provided that the film is viewed in those ways that can bring this racially conscious community into being (fig. 3).

For example, many accounts by black audiences from South Africa confirm the surprising and defiant ways in which westerns and kung fu films were consumed by black-centered audiences in apartheid era South Africa.



Figure 3. Still of Django and Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz). Copyright 2012. Courtesy of The Weinstein Company.

South African actor and writer John Kani has spoken animatedly about the “magic” of Hollywood¹¹ and also about how he and his schoolboy friends identified with the cowboys, in contrast with what one might expect of young black boys growing up in a highly politicized context. Kani’s account makes clear that black audiences took pleasure in ways that diverged from and resisted the meanings the film censors and apartheid distributors intended for them to take. In this case, the black spectatorship was one shaped by an all-black audience. Viewing this same film in the cinema where Reed watched *Django*, a different regime of spectatorship is likely to take shape.

South African scholar and activist Kopano Ratele writes (in a context unrelated to cinema) about the black gaze and its relationship to the white gaze: “Let me tell you, whatever you say or do as a black person, you feel it here, at the back, just below the shoulder blade, the white vice, always judging. You feel the white eyes on your back wanting you to give an answer that will always either allow them to put their judgment of you on hold, or destroy you in their eyes. Those eyes come from everywhere.”¹² In Reed’s encounter with *Django*, his awareness of the white gaze (the row of white women sitting in front of him), this set of white quotation marks bracketed the possibility of a black gaze.

Reed’s viewing experience at the cinema in Berkeley placed him within an audience whose response performed for him his exclusion, and repelled him. Adilifu Nama in his recent book, *Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino* writes, “Given the long history and legacy of white audiences laughing at black folk as minstrel caricatures and as various incarnations of comic buffoonery too numerous to list, the popularity of Tarantino films with whites raises concerns.”¹³ This, I would argue, makes it particularly complex for black folk to watch *Django* alongside those who are watching the film from a position that is invested in white concerns.

When Foxx was interviewed on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (2009–2014), he claimed Tarantino had insisted “we have to go back in a time machine and be slaves and imagine what that’s like.”¹⁴ This work of imagining, it is clear, is not symmetrical for Tarantino and for Foxx; their “time machine” to a slavery past starts off from different stations, and will arrive differently too. Tarantino, remembering and describing from *his* point of view the early artistic differences between him and Foxx, says simply, “He [Django] is not a superhero. . . . You have to express a lifetime of slavery. You have to express a lifetime lived on the plantation.”¹⁵ Tarantino thus wanted of the characterization of Django to “express a lifetime of slavery” and to underline his subjugation. He describes how he had instructed Foxx to build Django’s narrative arc from the opening scene by demanding Foxx play Django as weak and undernourished. Even when Gates insists in the interview that Django can be interpreted as a “Superman,”¹⁶ Tarantino brings the discussion back again

to the need for Django to curtail his power, to rein in his anger. The director describes how he allows, even *encourages*, actors to interpret their characters, but that Django's narrative arc necessitated a display of weakness in the first fifteen minutes. This arc, Tarantino interprets (using a jarring and surprising diminutive) as Django's "little origin story,"¹⁷ and later as the "origin issue of his comic book."¹⁸ It is, he insists, an arc that *has* to start in enslavement; Foxx's Django has to be broken so that he can be built and developed in front of the audience's eye. This arc is at the heart of many of the racialized divisions in audience responses to the film.

Much of the writing and discussion around *Django Unchained* centers around two related sets of questions: issues of representation and the racialized gaze, and issues around the historical accuracy of the events and characters created on the screen. Robert Rosenstone's insights on how historical cinema functions as an interpretation of the past can be used to reflect on the present in order to explore the forms of audience response to the film. In his argument, Rosenstone writes that historical film "stages and constructs a past in images and sounds,"¹⁹ using what he calls "visual metaphors." A film that is set in a different historical period can potentially tell us more about the time of its making and consumption than of the time it portrays on screen. Yarimar Bonilla in "History Unchained"²⁰ expands on some of these same issues, and asks about the spate of films referencing slavery:

What do these films tell us about the retrospective significance of slavery today? What do they tell us, not just about the events described, but about the context of their remembrance? Why have these representations emerged at this particular moment? Why, in the era of the first black president, is our gaze being turned towards the fear and fantasy of black revenge and the abstract promise of codified freedom?²¹

In Bonilla's reading of *Django*, Tarantino is not attempting to be faithful to the historic record, but instead to "the current moment of historical production and consumption."²² This point is well-taken, but it is worth disaggregating this scene of consumption and including in our theorization the diverse and complex audiences that are thus convened and brought into being.

Historical accuracy has been a dominant strand in discussions of *Django*, and Tarantino justifies his need for a weak Django by referring to historical documents: "Well, you know if you're going to make a movie about slavery and are taking a twenty-first century viewer and putting them in that time period, you're going to hear some things that are going to be ugly, and you're going to see some things that are going to be ugly. That's just part and parcel of dealing truthfully with this story, with this environment, with this land."²³

Tarantino says to Gates, telling Gates what he had said to Foxx (and so again addressing a black man, and re-enacting his conversation with Foxx in direct speech): “There is also a reality that you [Foxx, but in this conversation also Gates] need to play here in this opening scene, which is just before this movie has started, you’ve been walking from Mississippi to Texas. So when we see you, you’re half dead from this walk.”²⁴ Tarantino wants his audience (those who respond exactly as and how he wants us to) to see Django’s walk as he intends it to be seen—to be convinced by the weakness and by Django as a man enslaved. And it is in this context that Tarantino appeals to historical accuracy for justification. When making other decisions, however, he does not feel the same constraint to be true to history. He says: “It was interesting, because on the one hand I’m telling a historical story, and when it comes to nuts and bolts of the slave trade, I had to be real and had to tell it the right way.”²⁵ It is the “nuts and bolts” of enslavement that interest him when he thinks about accuracy and telling the story “the right way.” But audiences need not accept that he told the story “the right way,” as many have confirmed in responses to the film and its eponymous hero.

Rosenstone writes that historical film is a mixture of the familiar and making strange; central to his theorization of historical cinema is what audiences already know and do not yet know. While Rosenstone’s argument has nothing to say about the racialized gaze, his insights about audience, read alongside Diawara and Modisane, can be taken further to include asymmetrical and diverse audiences in the analysis. What audiences know and do not know includes embodied histories of race, as well as the contextualizing knowledge of cinema traditions and the ways in which communities cohere and fragment around questions of representation. What is familiar to some, and this is crucial, remains invisible to others; these are the hidden transcripts of representation which are often the most political aspects of a film. Django is, or can be, activated intertextually as an Afro-superhero for a black-centered audience despite the fact that Tarantino wants us precisely not to see him as such in the opening minutes.

In Adilifu Nama’s revolutionary study of black-centered superheroes, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, he writes about black audiences and white superheroes: “Ultimately the fear about media effects on black children that admire white superheroes is overly simplistic and fails to seriously take into account the fact that audience reception is a more complex phenomenon than is suggested by a strict stimulus-response model of media consumption.”²⁶ In his methodology, Nama unchains audiences from authorial intent and what he calls “surface perceptions,”²⁷ insisting on the intelligence and creative resistance of superhero consumption. Nama develops some of these same resistant audience positions in his recent monograph on Tarantino and provides an original argument about the generic

codes through which Django can be viewed (despite what Tarantino says). Nama's reading of Django places the film in a gothic tradition and Django's opening scene is read as that of "a man metamorphosing in the deep dark of night."²⁸ This gothic mode, Nama shows, is updated and allegorized in no small part by the anachronistic rap soundtrack, which acknowledges a politics of identity that is contemporary with the viewing of the film.

My argument about a superhero origin story for Django does not attempt to measure his narrative against historical accounts, the narratives of men who might have left lives as free Africans, or as free Americans, to become enslaved. What I suggest instead is a narrative arc created by a resistant audience position, and which places Django as *already* a superhero when the film starts. Foxx's resistant (resistant to Tarantino, that is) interpretation of Django shows an awareness of the trope of the black-centered superhero and makes his Django a potentially liberatory figure from the outset. The viewer of *12 Years a Slave* (directed by Steve McQueen in 2013 and often contrasted with *Django*), is meant to be outraged when a gentleman is mistakenly enslaved; in *Django* we are not asked to empathize with Django through seeing him built up as a respectable family man. Instead, the opening shots establish Django as a black male hero. The camera tracks his face and the desert landscape behind him, the focus changing so that his profile comes into sharp focus. While Django does not return the viewer's gaze, his beauty and strength are evident—despite the director's instructions that Foxx tone this down.

Tarantino recalls how he made clear to Foxx Django's lack of power, by drawing a line of X's to prove to Foxx the insignificance and smallness of his character in this moment: "I actually took a piece of paper and I made seven X's on it. And I took the little legs of the X's and connected them with little loops, like chains. And I circled the sixth one, in the back. And I go, this is who Django is when we first meet him. The sixth from the seventh in the back."²⁹ Yet for the black-centered viewer, the camera (which is not a black camera but can be, resistantly, claimed as one by a certain viewing position) makes clear that Django's identity exceeds that of the sixth figure in a chain gang of seven. He is singled out as the hero from the outset, the accompanying score emphasizing his singularity and promise, as his name is repeated in the title track "Django." Near the end of the memorable opening sequence, Django throws off his cloak in a gesture that recalls the transformation moment when superheroes are revealed to others for who they truly are—their human form a disguise that allows them to move among humans until their special powers are animated. When he throws off his cloak, the audience is already prepared for him to assume his role as superhero—we do not need him to earn it. Some have read that scene as the moment when Django's *enslaved* identity becomes revealed, thus emphasizing his identity as the sixth figure in a chain gang of seven. Instead, the discarding of the cloak

can be seen as Django's moment of losing the shape of an enslaved man, ready to adopt the many guises and disguises of his life as superhero.

The newly animated superhero figure is one familiar from many narrative traditions. These figures are plastic and changeable; the superhero trope is particularly open to syncretic reinterpretation and reinvention and attuned to political context. The narrative of the stories hinges on the reanimation or recharging of powers and the stories themselves often include self-referential audiences who live in fear, hoping for the arrival of the one with special powers. The reader identifies with the superhero, but also with the crowds of little people whose continued existence depends on the hero's intervention. The superhero mode lends itself to syncretic transformation and the encyclopedias of Marvel characters offer seemingly endless variations on each character, their origin narratives, and their special powers. Submerged or half-hidden references to current political and social events are superseded by new versions, as the superhero genre responds to context and to audience needs. I argue that it is this plastic and restless aspect of superhero culture which is so generative; it also makes it especially suitable to thinking through the potentially transformative nature of the black gaze.

The current proliferation of superheroes in African popular culture is highly political.³⁰ In "Popular Arts in Africa," published in 1987, but still widely regarded as mapping the territory of popular arts in Africa, Karin Barber made passing reference to the syncretic use made of Marvel Comic superheroes alongside figures from Twi folktales, in comics produced in Accra and Kumasi in the 1970s.³¹ In these comics, she showed, Marvel superheroes and folklore figures have in common their special powers and a past that stretches beyond the lives of everyday Ghanaians. In the current explosion of these figures into the lives of ordinary people, their special powers offer political transformation and access to an otherworldly (sometimes, but not always, ancestral) ability to change this world. The 1970s saw a range of superheroes; now, in the past decade, we see another such a high flowering of superheroes in African popular media.

Superheroes are reinterpreters, and recyclers, responsive to their audiences—both the audiences who inhabit their stories as well as those who are audiences to these stories. Their meanings are unstable and ever-shifting. An audience in Nigeria, for example, might see parallels between Django and Shango, the vengeful god of thunder and electricity, in a response that positions Django in a long line of interpreters of this particular superhero. Audiences' needs are ever-changing and the historical meanings of a superhero shift, and are reanimated. Tarantino's intentions and claims to the story become embedded in, and relativized by, such a meta-narrative. Another Hollywood example of a contextualized hero is that created by Foxx to explain the back story for Electro in the recent *Amazing Spider-Man 2*

(dir. Marc Webb, 2014). While this back story is not included in the film, it is freely available on the Internet,³² and in popular discourses it offers a supporting narrative for how many audience members have responded to the film, seeing in the black Maxwell Dillon's transformation into Electro an allegory of racialized anger.

My response to *Django Unchained* is not an attempt to locate Django in relation to Tarantino's politics, which are at best contradictory and at worst what Adilifu Nama calls "regressive."³³ Ishmael Reed's arguments about who should tell a black story are well-heeded. There are many good reasons to take issue with Tarantino's choice of material and his directorial decisions. Yet recent scholarly work on audiences unchained provides exciting ways of thinking about Django as an African superhero. The constitution of black-centered audiences offers a way of reframing Foxx's characterization. Audiences are resistant and creative in their responses, we do not need to do what Tarantino tells us to do. Tarantino's claim about Django *not* being a superhero becomes an irrelevance, as Jamie Foxx's Django becomes re-animated and refigured as a black-centered hero—in Adilifu Nama's memorable words, a Super Black.

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Notes

1. Ishmael Reed, "Black Audiences, White Stars and *Django Unchained*," *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2012, blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/12/28/black-audiences-white-stars-and-django-unchained/.

2. Ibid.

3. Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 767–75.

4. Ibid., 767.

5. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "An Unfathomable Place," *Transition* 112 (2013): 66.

6. Ibid., 46–66.

7. Litheko Modisane, *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centered Films* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

8. Ibid., 175.

9. Tsitsi Jaji, "Cassava Westerns: Ways of Watching Abderrahmane Sissako," *Black Camera* 6, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 154–77.
10. *Ibid.*, 157.
11. John Kani in an interview included in Peter Davis, *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996), 23.
12. Kopano Ratele in a section that offers a transcription of a conversation, by the three co-authors of a book on the implications of the racialized gaze on the South African Truth Commission. Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni, and Kopano Ratele, *There Was his Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* (Durban: UKZN Press, 2009), 128–29. For a fuller discussion of Ratele's argument, see the chapter "There was This Missing Quotation Mark" in Carli Coetzee, *Accented Futures: Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013), 17–43.
13. Adilifu Nama, *Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 132–33.
14. Quoted in Gates, "An Unfathomable Place," 48.
15. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
16. *Ibid.*, 57.
17. *Ibid.*, 55.
18. *Ibid.*, 63.
19. Robert Rosenstone, "The Reel Joan of Arc: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of the Historical Film," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 61–77.
20. Yarimar Bonilla, "History Unchained," *Transition* 112 (2013): 68–77.
21. *Ibid.*, 72–73.
22. *Ibid.*, 73.
23. Gates, "An Unfathomable Place," 54.
24. *Ibid.*, 48.
25. *Ibid.*, 58.
26. Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 11.
27. *Ibid.*, 5.
28. Nama, *Race on the QT*, 107.
29. Gates, "An Unfathomable Place," 48.
30. See the special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* on Afro-superheroes (forthcoming).
31. Karin Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 3 (September 1987): 39–41.
32. Electro (Jamie Foxx) "Chasing Spiders," www.youtube.com/watch?v=a66iMufYeHk.
33. Nama, *Race on the QT*, 120.