

MANIFESTATIONS OF POWER AND RESISTANCE: AN EXPLORATION OF QUENTIN TARANTINO'S *DJANGO UNCHAINED* (2012) AND STEVE MCQUEEN'S *12 YEARS A SLAVE* (2013)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the manifestations of power and resistance in films using *Django Unchained* (2012), directed by Quentin Tarantino, and *12 Years a Slave* (2013), directed by Steve McQueen, as case studies. The research findings suggest that films are texts and terrains that are used to address class structures politically, socially, economically and culturally. Dominant classes use film to produce and reproduce ideologies of power and resistance. The films under scrutiny reflect an aspect of control, whereby conservative superior classes exercise the power to mistreat those who are viewed as 'second-class citizens'. The argument of this article is that film images are mirrors of the 'real' world, where ideological domination is either achieved or resisted. The article deploys eclectic theories like semiotics, Marxism, critical discourse analysis, language

interpretation and thematic analysis to analyse the selected films. It is hoped that the approach of these theories will help to investigate the manifestations of power and resistance in films.

Keywords: *12 Years a Slave*; *Django Unchained*; film; power; resistance

INTRODUCTION: MANIFESTATION OF POWER AND RESISTANCE THROUGH FILM – RETHINKING POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY

Power, according to Collins English Dictionary (2012), is ‘the possession of controlling influence’. Power, by its very nature, can involve either an internal or external process; internal in terms of the psychological need to gather strength and encouragement from others in order to boost one’s own confidence, and external as the physical presentation of an individual through their brute strength and as perceived by people physically as well as their mental fortitude. Douglas Kellner (1995) states that film, through the portrayal of characters, demonstrates who has power and who is powerless. Film distinguishes between who is allowed to exercise power, force and violence and who is not. Kellner (ibid.) writes that films dramatise and legitimise the power of certain forces at work, and show the powerless in positions of oppression. He argues that film is a misperceived source of cultural pedagogy, as it actually educates people on how to behave, what to fear and desire, and how to act. Learning how to read, criticise and resist socio-cultural manipulation can help an individual to empower him/herself in relation to dominant forces within the media. Kellner (ibid.) postulates that film can enhance individual sovereignty through culture and give people greater power over their cultural enhancement. This is because films empowers them express and challenge the world they are exposed to and also see the world in a different light.

Antonio Gramsci (1971) elaborates that a man is not ruled by force alone, but by ideas. The estimation of such power (creative and conservative) is often used to enforce totalitarianism and dominance, rather than tolerance and democracy. Gramsci’s argument is thus that ideas are not powerful enough to eliminate class struggles, but they do help to make society function. In the context of this argument, Kellner & Ryan (1988) argues that Hollywood film has, since the 1960s, closely connected with the political movements and struggles of each epoch. Kellner & Ryan (1988) asserts that films transcend and translate the representations, discourses and myths of everyday life into specific cinematic terms; hence they intervene in the power or political struggles of the day. They add that films should be seen as a contested terrain, as they can be interpreted as a struggle around ways of representing and constructing a social world and everyday life.

Through ideology, power is manifested. Kellner (1978) points out that power manifests in images, symbols, myths and narratives as well as systems and beliefs. Theories related to ideology unearth the complex ways in which images, myths, social practices and narratives are bound together to produce ideology and power (Barthes 1976, Kellner 1978). Therefore, images constitute part of the ideological representation of sex, race and class, as embedded in the power depicted in films. Films can therefore be read as sites of conservative hegemony, rather than simple variations of the same dominant ideology. Luhman (2004) states that 'power is mostly introduced as a substantially determinable possession, as a good or an ability being personally attributed, asymmetrically distributed, and which is seated at a centre or has its basis there' (at the periphery of the upper class, for example). How power manifests in films is only seen when films are read politically (Kellner 1988). This can provide insight, not only into how film reproduces existing social struggles, but also social and political dynamics. Thus, film reflects cinematic texts in terms of actual struggles for power. Power is almost exclusively understood as 'restricting freedom' (according to Popitz 1992) and as a reduction and hindrance towards freedom. Films point to social conflicts and to forces that threaten the political hegemony. Kellner (1998) believes that manifestations of power in films can be achieved through ideological domination. On the other hand, projects of ideological domination can be conceptualised in terms of reactionary resistance to popular struggles against traditional, conservative values. Kellner (1998) postulates that the power ideology cannot be a force in the capacity of the ruling class but can be seen contextually and relationally as a response to manifested power by those who resist it.

Manifestations of power in films are open to interpretation, so that 'symbolisation' becomes a necessary feature of power (Röttgers 1990). Exercising power by simply threatening with 'brute force' requires imagination and cannot be explained without the symbolic acts of recognition and acceptance. Hollywood brings a picture of how key 1960s films promoted the views of radicals, and how film in the 1970s reflected a battle for power. Film is thus a social production and reproduction that serves either to dominate or to enable people to resist and struggle against domination. One may argue that power is not 'owned' but exercised, in that 'we have power only as power over others, without them the concept of power is senseless'. Film perceives society as a hierarchical set of social relations characterised by the oppression of a subordinate class, gender, race, ethnicity and national stratum. Gramsci's (1971) model of hegemony and counter-hegemony seeks to analyse the 'hegemonic', social, political and cultural forces of dominant classes. Ideology and film are inextricably bound, and one of the main aims is to make subordination appear natural and just in films. On this note, the agenda of film is to make viewers sensitive to how relations of power and domination are 'encoded' in cultural texts. However, people can 'resist the dominant encoded meanings and produce their own critical

and alternative meanings' (Fiske 1987, 79). A semiotic approach subtly captures how power is dramatised through film's use of signs and symbols.

MANIFESTATIONS OF POWER IN *DJANGO UNCHAINED*

The opening scene of *Django Unchained* (2012) shows physically downtrodden, psychologically strained, desperate and chained men in a barren, mountainous land. Manifestations of power in films are inevitably connected to interpretation, so that 'symbolisation' is a necessary feature of power (Röttgers 1990). Being chained symbolically implies control. In the film, conservative whites exercise power over mistreated blacks who are viewed as second-class citizens. The representation and depiction of black characters in chains, with half-naked bodies, is a reflection of power where freedom is restricted and respect compromised. In the narrative, Django is rescued by Schultz who overpowers the Speck Brothers after much bloodshed. Schultz becomes the 'messiah' to Django, who cannot fight for his freedom as he lacks both physical strength and the will power that Schultz possesses simply because he is white. Schultz owns Django, having purchased him: 'Mr. Speck how much for a young gentleman here?' The black man becomes a commodity and a 'bill of sale' is required. A capitalist ideology is reflected by Schultz, who kills foreign men to protect and preserve the capitalist system of white power. One film student/respondent is of the view that the film manifests power in its title, which points to inherent class struggles where certain individuals in society decide who to free or not to free. This idea is supported by Schultz who says: 'I have never given anybody their freedom before...' This means Django's freedom is not optional but decided by those with hegemonic power. Someone has to unchain him.

Foucault (1980) argues that power is not 'owned' but exercised. In one scene a perplexed Django says: '...kill white people and they pay you for it?' Shultz's response demonstrates his power: 'This is my world, and in my world you got to get dirty, and that's what I am doing.' Kellner (1995) asserts that films dramatised and legitimate the power of the powerful and show the powerless their oppression. Shultz represents a powerful nation which, even today, terrorises people. He is a symbol of America's hegemonic power, referring to 'my world' and that can be interpreted as 'my rule'. The question of American hegemony and power is clearly manifest in the character of Shultz, who says: 'I, as a representative of the criminal justice of the United States of America, cannot be shot on the street.' In this case, he aims to prove the superiority of his country over other countries as he goes unpunished for shooting dead a man in broad daylight, in front of the authorities and heavily armed police officers. The film constructs words and expressions that give a clear position of classes within society, as supported by Stam (2000, 275) who asserts that film is 'aware [of] the text's discursive heterogeneity'. Tarantino, in *Django Unchained*, represents America as the most powerful nation – one that commands and owns the world.

Django Unchained demonstrates who has power and who has not. Weber (1970) asserts that power means someone has every chance of asserting his/her will within a relationship. Sigmund Freud's (1970) theory of personality discusses human selfishness and the drive to do whatever it takes to achieve his personal interests and to preserve those interests sufficiently to stay in power. Schultz and other slave masters are represented as having the power to own human beings as property and make them a product or commodity. Schultz also makes money from selling corpses; 'Like slavery, its cash for business,' he says. Commenting on the film's manifestation of power, a film student at Midlands State University noted that the history of art forms involves a degree of conflict between cultural and commercial values. Schultz pays \$120 for Django and metaphorically owns him, saying: 'I feel vaguely responsible for you'. This sentiment denotes a powerful being that has control over someone else. Django is given American regalia, confirming Kellner's (1978; 1979) view that the manifestation of power involves analysing images, symbols, myths and narratives, as well as systems and beliefs. Django is engulfed in American power structures. As an 'object' of manipulation he does not represent himself, but the hegemony of the slave master. When Schultz orders him to wear the costume, he says: 'You can never break a character'. In other words, Django is free by all appearances, but in reality he is still in chains. As they walk around the plantation, Schultz introduces Django as 'an extension of myself'. Power is inevitably connected to interpretation and is productive; flowing through the language people use. Django's triumph in killing white people does not leave him a hero, but makes him an extension of Schultz's dominance, power and prowess. Roland Barthes (1967) states that language is a constitution and collection of words that relate meaning. Schultz gives Django an American disguise, but in reality he remains a slave. Django is therefore swallowed up by the power structures of a powerful nation that kills people and goes unpunished.

Images form part of the ideological representation of race, sex and class, as embedded in power. The oppression of slaves defines how power manifests in *Django Unchained*. Films transcend and translate representations or discourses into cinematic terms (Kellner & Ryan 1988) by intervening in the power-political struggles of the day. Film shows who has power and who does not, who discriminates, oppresses or exploits and who does not. Social life is decided by the power that the superior classes use for totalitarian purposes and dominance. Django and other slaves are referred to as 'poor devils', 'niggers', 'cow boy', 'intruder' and 'scary'. One character states that Django must be taken away from the city because he will 'scare all these nice people'.

A slave is a source of cheap labor and fulfills the desire of a capitalist society that thrives on profit making. Human rights violations stem from certain classes oppressing and exploiting others, whom they see as objects of manipulation. Schwartlaänder (1973) argues that power is nothing more than alleviated violence, while Popitz (1972) asserts that it is almost exclusively understood as restricting freedom. In the film a slave is attacked by dogs while the slave masters holding

guns look on. The gun becomes a symbol of power. One respondent locates power in the gun, not in bullets. It protects the power of the ruling class, as the subjugated are intimidated and afraid to fight back. As Perkins (1993) states, film images are constructions of the 'real' world and through them power becomes a 'mode of activity or inactivity which aims to maintain an established order.



Figure 1: A slave being mauled by a dog for questioning the power structures. Screen shot from *Django Unchained* (2012).

Power is inevitably connected to interpretation, so that 'symbolisation' is a necessary feature of power (Röttgers 1990). Tait (2000) argues that sub-cultural theory problematically assumes power to be coercive, 'imposed upon pre-given class subjects' as well as coming from a single source. Black people are racially discriminated against, and therefore have their own dwellings. As Django moves into a white-dominated area he draws attention: people peep through windows, perplexed at seeing a black man astride a horse. A horse symbolises prestige and authority in the Western world; Django is has neither prestige nor power, but having been instructed not to 'break the character', he does not represent himself but a certain ideological class in America. Despite the opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of status, he still carries the burden of being a slave. Schultz explains that 'they have never seen a negro on a horse'. Django is still a 'negro'; therefore the question of him being 'unchained' or escaping the reality of slave life remains a pipe dream. Power is embedded in representations of race, gender, sexual orientation and class.

Feminists propose reading film texts 'against the grain'. The power of masculinity over femininity stands out in *Django Unchained* where women are voiceless. Tarantino emphasises the power of men in his film. A film director and student at Midlands State University observed that Django's wife, Broomhilda, is never heard speaking. Grierson (1946) argues that silence is a form of language and that the era of silent film reflects technological backwardness in cinematography.

The argument is made that ‘today “silence” is a rhetorical device that serves certain ideological purposes and is a form of communicating some critical ideas that haunt the memory of individuals’ (Rwafa 2008). Sharon Smith (1999, 18) supports this view, stating that ‘women as women’ are not represented, do not have a voice and the female point of view is not heard. Broomhilda is portrayed as a ‘deaf and dumb damsel’. She cannot speak about issues affecting women in the film. Women are thus victims of power. It is impossible to understand woman and femininity without understanding concurrent ideologies of manhood and masculinity. Power is made and remade through human activity. In power relations, women’s representation becomes a signifier in patriarchal discourse (Cook 1974). Broomhilda is shown as naked and pretty. Her image is portrayed in half not in fully human form. The focus is on her private body than her entire body saving the voyeuristic pleasure of man. In other words, women are not fully human, but a collection of body parts. The power of masculinity in the film manifests as women being used as sexual objects who offer sexual gratification to the male gaze. Steve, on behalf of his slave masters, owns women. Calvin, a slave master, confidently says: ‘Hilda is my property’. Women are commodities that can be sold or used. Power and authority are exerted over women, thus they can be manipulated. Women are powerless to define or defend themselves. Broomhilda is waiting for a male voice and can ‘consider herself a free woman’ after being rescued by a man. On the other hand, power is hidden in representations of women roaming the plantations seemingly without doing anything. Tarantino fails to give women a ‘voice’, perhaps to show that they have no value in terms of economic progress.

Power is manifested and achieved through different tactics of persuasion, making use of signs, symbols and images (Jowett and O’ Donnell 1992). The character, Calvin Candie, rhetorically asks: ‘Why don’t they kill us?’ referring to the slaves. He brags about his power, as no one can challenge him. Film texts modify and combine codes, playing some codes off against others to constitute a semiotic system. In a scene, Candie holds the skull of a recently deceased slave.

Power in films is a ‘tested and tried ingredient’, hence films are ‘cued’ as formulaic. Metz (1968, 189) believes that ‘while the viewer wishes to understand the film, the semiologist wishes to know in addition how the film is understood’. Owning the skull of a dead slave is a symbol of power. The film relates history, in that the lives of those who threatened the established colonial order were taken by the colonial masters. For example; Chief Chaingira of Zimbabwe is one such victim, while King Herod and King Nebuchadnezzar demanded the skulls of those whom they considered as threats. In *Django Unchained*, Candie’s actions can be understood through the science of phrenology. Calvin hacks open the back of the skull with a saw and removes the cranium as a metaphor for domination and power. As Barthes (1967) notes, language is made up of signs that communicate meaning. Once a sign

is produced, it takes on a life of its own, independent from the person who generated it; hence one can argue that power can be read through texts and dialogue.



Figure 2: Calvin Candie with the skull of a slave. Screen shot from *Django Unchained* (2012).

Including the Bible as a symbol of religion is, for one participant, proofs on ‘an ideology’ that serves the interests of a certain group. The Bible represents a source of oppression, hiding the agenda of those who seek power. Here, the Bible is used to make a point. One may argue that *Django Unchained* ‘satisfies the goal perpetuating the capitalist system by ensuring its continuous survival’. The slave master opens the Bible and justifies the oppression of slaves by saying that ‘the rule of men gonna be on the beasts of the earth...’ having just referred to slaves as ‘beasts’. Goldman (1992, 494) supports the argument that ‘Marxist perspective on film is centered on the institutions responsible for stimulating desire, making the oppressed people inferior and finding pleasure in their subordinate position which leads to the continuous domination of the system.’ Thanks to religion, slaves cannot question their position; hence they abide by the powers of their slave masters. They cannot escape even if they have a chance to do so, being psychologically dominated through the power manifested and hidden in religion.

MANIFESTATION OF POWER IN 12 YEARS A SLAVE

Film constitutes one of the superstructures of the capitalist system which works to maintain the status quo. *12 Years a Slave* (2013), directed by Steve McQueen and written by John Ridley, is based on the eponymous memoir (1863) written by Solomon Northup. Through its narration of Northup’s life as a slave, McQueen shows that the story of slavery cannot be understood without questioning power

structures or hegemony, i.e., the political, economic, ideological dominance of one group over another.

Kellner (1995) asserts that film is a contested terrain, where various groups and ideologies struggle for dominance. Slavery and capitalism are dominant features of *12 Years a Slave*. Slavery is a cash business where capitalists control the economy and profits at the expense of marginalised groups. *12 Years a Slave* starts with a freedman, Solomon Northup, being coaxed, drugged, kidnapped and sold to a slave master. Simba Dhewa, a Zimbabwe Broadcasting Cooperation (ZBC) staff member, when interviewed by the researcher, said: 'Starting the movie with a free man was a drastic transformation from liberty to slavery and it was a juxtaposition of being black and black slavery.' As in *Django Unchained*, Northup is swallowed up by the white man's system by being a 'stoical saint' who is educated. Being 'learned' is a symbol of excellence, but the colour of his skin proves otherwise. The same people who control education exercise their power by selling a man as a commodity to a slave master. Kellner (1979) writes that films dramatise and legitimise the power of the forces at work. Power denounces what people own. Northup has the education that other slaves are denied, yet he is stripped of his rights to an education because of power relations and class contradictions. Northup's education and talent see him invited to Washington, and in light of Gramsci's (1971) idea that man is not ruled by force alone but by ideas, Northup finds himself chained. Umberto Eco (1976) notes that semiotics involves symbols and signs of power, but 'the acceptance of this way of coding is undoubtedly supported by the contextual pressure of other already coded sign-functions'. The sudden transition from being a 'free man' to a 'chained' man is interpreted as domination, control and 'framed' by power structures. In reality, Northup is no longer free. Eco (1976, 206) adds:

A semiotic of film is possible if one accepts that semiotics is neither a province nor a byproduct of linguistics. But one should at the same time accept the hypothesis that movie images 'say' something and, since not everybody understands them, there must be semiotic rules governing this kind of communication.

Eco (1976) accepts that film is a text; therefore power can be interpreted through text. After watching the film, one respondent said Northup represents hope for black Americans through education; he stands for what might be if freedom were a reality, unrestricted by power.

Words help us understand social realities. McQueen brings together the concepts of slavery, history, memory and identity, using words, expressions and signs to produce semiotic materiality. Master Eppy, the slave master, refers to Northup as 'boy'; a degrading term that disrespects a family man. His identity is degraded as the slave master refers to Northup as 'Plat'. Northup responds: 'My name is Solomon. I am a free man.' The master responds: 'you not any free ...you are not free man', thus affirming Northup's position. Here, a powerful minority group defines freedom. Educated as Northup is, he cannot attain his own freedom.

A close-up image of a woman grabbing a man's hand so he can help her reach orgasm shows women's sexual representation being controlled by men. A male thus controls the filmic fantasy and a man emerges as the representative of power (Johnston 2004). Northrup and the woman have sexual contact and seek comfort in the face of a systematic dehumanisation due to slavery and unfair power structures. The film under study does not shy away from the realities of sex across the colour line. Naome Gilbert in *Women and Film* points out that 'the female is portrayed with an archetypal ambivalence' (1999). Women are drawn to this film to consume such images and with a sexist ideology. Johnston in *Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema* (2004) argues that 'it is probably true to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent'. In films directed by men, such as *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave*, women have been portrayed as objects and commodities. Women struggled to defend and define themselves in circumstances that sought to strip them of their humanity. In *The Place of Women in the Cinema of Raol Walsh*, Pam Cook and Claire Johnston (1975) develop this argument:

... characters are presented as 'autonomous individuals': but the construction of the discourse contradicts this convention by reducing 'real' women to images and tokens functioning in a circuit of signs the values of which have been determined by men.

Women have been victims of power. One cannot understand women and femininity without understanding recurrent ideologies of manhood and masculinity. Power is made and remade by the activities of men and women heavily skewed in favor of men. Through these contested power relations, women's image becomes a signifier in patriarchal discourse. Cook (1974) argues that the image of a woman is a sign emptied of its hypothetical denotation. She is a dehistoricised signifier of the patriarchal connotation-'non male'. The argument is a revelation of the relationship between film and women in relation to power struggles. It is through the films that ideologies that suppress women are preserved and re-enacted so that stereotypes about women are stuck for 'all times sake'. Power is not only political but is also packaged in the social spheres of gender and sex. *12 Years a Slave* manifest power that fails to recognise women.

In his film, *12 Years a Slave*, Steve McQueen brings out representation of women that are stripped of their historical agency. The most profound element is that women are victims of power regardless of color, ethnicity or race. Mistress Eppy rises to the occasion and confronts her husband, Master Eppy (a slave master), for his infidelity. Unfortunately, just like other enslaved women she is a victim of oppression and patriarchy-pre-figured by male dominance. She is also equal to a property as Master Eppy clearly tells her that he 'would send her back to where he picked her up'. Relations of power and gender are sanctioned by male discourses as women are deprived of power in *12 Years a Slave*. Women are sexually oppressed

and physically abused by men in the society who control power structures. Being a black woman and at the same time a slave is a double burden faced by women in the film under scrutiny. Women are represented as sexual objects.

Women are seen bathing together with males and a close up of a woman image is seen. Balaz in *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (1970) says that close-ups give the impression of a mere naturalistic preoccupation with detail. Close-ups radiate a tender human attitude in contemplation of hidden things. Therefore, the close-up in the film scene is a dramatic revelation of what is really happening under the surface of appearance. In *12 Years a Slave*, the close ups of female characters are the images expressing the poetic sensibility of the director. The powerful class conserves their power not only because there are the masters of the plantations but because there are male. Mulvey (1988) in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* says that a woman is an image and man is a bearer of the look. The slave master comments on the naked woman as he is about to sell her and says, 'this marvelous creature can you believe...' Her 'marvelous', 'sexual body' is worth \$700 far more expensive than other muscular men in the building. The master says, '700 for Laiza'. Laiza is sold for \$700 as a commodity. Tait (2000) views that the ideology on manifestation of power through signs and symbols contain discourses, concepts and images. Laura Mulvey goes further to argue that:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female...determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly... women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness...

Based on the above notion, a film director from Red Pepper Pictures, when interviewed, expressed the view that film manifests power that benefits men on the expense of women. Due to the internal bitterness and frustration, women end up unsympathetic, even towards other women. This is shown by Mistress Eppy when she says, 'strike the life from her...' Due to the reality that she could not break the power structures of her man, she places her frustration on an innocent woman. Symbolism is therefore a feature of power, where power structures are protected due to fear or inferiority. Failing to attack the root cause of the problem is a symbol of failure to address potent power issues. Women are unconsciously taking part in preserving male superiority.

The question of power and resistance in relation to women begs to answer this question: 'can woman speak, and can images of women speak for women?' In the film, women play a pivotal role in the production of symbolic language and culture but they are depicted as having a negative relation to language. MacCabe (1975) says women cannot wield control over the symbolic act; they do not carry in themselves the symbol of the signifier, the phallic authority for signification, only the 'absence' which sets the signifier in place. Women help to form language but cannot operate

it due to the presence of stereotypes that demean their contribution. Laiza cannot rescue herself even if she could. A man has to rescue her just the same as Hilda in *Django Unchained*. Mulvey (1988), in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, asserts that power in societies is controlled by man as she argues that women 'stand in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which men can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command.

The dominant classes 'lead' society. Religion has been used in *12 Years a Slave* as a tool to maintain power just as it was used in *Django Unchained*. Christianity is a form of social order that has used scriptural justifications for slavery. Similarly, civil society is the sphere within which the state maintains hegemony. Buttigieg (1995) asserts that hegemony operates through the social institutions of civil society like religion which helps create in people certain modes of behavior and expectations consistent with the hegemonic social order. Steve McQueen in *12 Years a Slave* deploys religion as a tool to control the slaves. Northup is frustrated and says, 'you must know that I am not a slave, before I came to you I was a free man'. His substantiated claim is answered through a Slave master who opens a scripture from Mathew that reads, '...lord's will... shall be beaten with many stripes...' The slave master whips him again and says 'that's the scripture' a justification of his oppressive conduct towards a black man. Master Eppy and other slave masters are the agency of a powerful class and therefore religion justifies their acts of owning other human beings. Master Eppy says, '... these are my property' and hence can even call women slaves as 'miserable black dogs' as he please. According to Gramsci (2003) this is an achievement of coercive political society. Master Eppy explains and justifies himself as he says, '...there is no sin in hunting a black human being.' Before he says, 'I am the God of Abraham'. Solomon Northup's masculinity; a strong willed, masculine, brave individual of intellect, is shadowed by religion. The scriptures give him a position and therefore his physical and intellectual prowess cannot protect him. Below is the screen shot showing slave masters justifying their oppressive conduct through the reading of scriptures from the Bible.



Figure 3: Solomon Northup and other slaves in a Bible reading session. Screen shot from *12 Years a Slave* (2013)

Umberto Eco, in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (1977), brings out the notion that semiotics are used to manifest symbols and signs of power. Power is not anything which somebody ‘owns’ but something he exercises, ‘we have power only as power over others, without them the concept of power is senseless (Foucault 1980). *12 Years a Slave* shows Solomon Northup being hanged on a tree for a long time. The movie uses duration to lay out an ‘ecosystem’ of power and powerlessness, thereby symbolising the United State of America’s lasting power, social underpinnings, racial inequality and racial power. What is really astonishing in this film is that people watch this man hanging on the tree and they proceed with their day to day business as if it’s a natural phenomenon. A woman gives him water after a long time. Gramsci (2003:12) support the argument by saying coercive power is used to enforce ‘discipline’ on those groups who do not conform. Solomon Northup tries to resist and hence coercive power is used against him. A poet at the Department of Film and Theater arts at Midlands State University brings out his observation when he argues that historically, and even today, the United States of America hangs people whom they see as a threat to the ‘established’ order. Historically, Nehanda and Kaguvi of Zimbabwe were hanged for their resistance against the oppressive regime. By hanging an individual, the hegemonic class dwarfs resistance and maintain their powerful status in society. Picture below shows Solomon Northup being hanged.



Figure 4: Solomon Northup being hanged from a tree. Screen shot from *12 Years a Slave* (2013)

Fear is instilled through both physical and emotional violence to maintain control in the plantation. Marxism argues that film sometimes perpetuates and betrays the ideological mechanism. Master Ford, a stereotypical, benevolent patriarch that many plantation owners believed themselves to be, is perceived as someone who cannot stand on his principles and goes against what he does not stand for. He has his norms and values and respect for humanity. This is evidenced by his statement when he says ‘... these niggers are human beings’. He goes on to tell Master Eppy that ‘laws change’, meaning to say that even power is a socially constructed and not natural, therefore it changes. In his argument, Master Ford goes on to say, ‘...this conversation concerns what is factual and what is not...’ Films can be associated with a political movement fighting for indoctrinating or opposing to injustice and support for peace and stability for a free and democratic society. Master Ford is coming back to his mind and expresses his deep sympathy and empathy for black slaves. What is very unfortunate of him is that he recognises that slaves are more than property, but he does not actively try to change that because it would compromise his masculinity and power. The film therefore is used to maintain and conserve power.

MANIFESTATION OF RESISTANCE IN *DJANGO UNCHAINED*

Kellner and Ryan (1988) believes that through ideology, manifestation of power in films can be achieved by ideological domination while on the other hand, projects of ideological domination can be conceptualised in terms of reactionary resistance to popular struggles against traditional conservative values. The authors postulate that ideology cannot be a force in the capacity of the ruling class, but can be seen contextually and relationally as a response to the manifested power. Tarantino in his film *Django Unchained* gives us a cinematic cover for slavery and capitalism. Slavery being one of the foundations of capitalism implied the exploitation of black labor force. The film is a revelation of how black people were integrated into this system, while at the same time being disintegrated from their families and identities. This is evidenced by Django's hunt for his wife, doing everything possible to rescue Broomhilda, braving torture and death. Giroux (1983) views resistance as an action that emerges out of a 'latent or overt ideological condemnation of the underlying repressive ideologies'. Django is first seen 'chained' and 'half naked' with other six men. Two white men are riding horses and armed with guns. It is Doctor Schultz who seems to rescue Django after a deal. The task of Django is to hunt and kill the Speck brothers for Doctor Schultz and Django's reward is to get back his kidnapped wife. Umberto Eco (1977) says, 'since a word is a medical symptom and a movie image are material occurrences sending us back to something else', the task of Django is to symbolical kill the system of slavery by killing its agencies.

Resistance must have a revealing function that contains a critique of domination and provide theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and struggle in the interest of social and self-emancipation (Giroux 1983). Django strives for a better change and challenge the status quo. Django whips a slave master in one of the scenes as a way of showing his frustration. The other male slaves attack the slave masters in a bid to protest for their freedom. In an attempt to come out of this domination and cruelty of the oppressive group, they retaliate by hitting and burning Mr. Speck and his horse. Below is a screen grab of slaves attacking Mr. Speck.



Figure 5: Slaves attacking a white slave master as an attempt to resist slavery. Screen shot from *Django Unchained* (2012).

The fact remains that power is something that is possessed by the dominant groups and exercised against the subordinate; the subordinate may resist and attempt to seize power. Django is fighting for identity and freedom.

Film as a form of ideology seeks to demystify ideas and powers of the ruling class and once film construct words and expressions, meanings are derived and resistance is manifested. Django is quite in most cases unless if he is answering a question. Speech without the power of authority is useless therefore Django is more in action. Django is using the gun and the bullet to seize the power and freedom to find his wife and also to stop the brutal force against his fellow slaves. The wife resembles the family disintegration caused by slavery.

Resistance through such films has been noted as most people of the world are in the struggle to take back their resources, sovereignty and history. On the verge of celebrating the white men's power, the slave trade through the manifestation of resistance in the film took revenge on the white men. Tarantino captures the manner in which violence was an ever present aspect of slave life that helped to maintain and protect the power relations and institution of slavery. In the film, Django removes his shirt to reveal a lifetime of scars-a revelation of painful moments.



Figure 6: Top left and bottom right: Django whipping a slave master. Above right: a white slave master shot by Django. Bottom left: Django showing his scars. Screen shots from *Django Unchained* (2012).

Django understands that the one who owns the gun inspires the most profound respect therefore he engages in affirmative repossession of power and value through manifestation of power in a way of resisting the unjustified oppression. He uses the gun and a horse – a symbol of superiority and power to fight against white domination and its powers (see Figure 7 below).



Figure 7: Screen shots of Django in his quest to resist power. Screen shots from *Django Unchained* (2012).

The images and statements are pregnant with a meaning and they can serve the same purpose. Metz (1974) says that these are two actualised units, whereas the word in itself is a purely potential unit of code. He goes on to say an image is almost

always assertive. Tarantino uses Django's actions to tell more than what the word could do. The images are very appealing. Django rides a horse and carries a gun to claim his freedom. Ronald Barthes (1976) argues that resistance is packed in signs, symbols and film text as different groups strive for resistance in quest for power. Django hits someone for referring to him as a 'nigger', a sign of not accepting racial discrimination, before he kills a number of slave masters and their associates. Killing numerous white people is a metaphor of resistance and rejection of unjust power structures.

To speak a language is to use it, but to 'speak' cinematographic language is, to a certain extent, to 'invent' it (Metz 1974). It is on this view that the film *Django Unchained* was analysed considering the spectators view. A participant argued that the whole film traces Django's reaction to the exploitation and oppression, and his journey in search of his wife. Men resist forces of evil that suppress their freedom of socialisation and harmonious co-existence with their families. Django draws upon his physical and emotional fitness to resist power structures as a slave. Unlike in *12 Years a Slave*, where Solomon loses his wife and children, thereby also losing his ability to be a head of the family, Django braved for the safety and return of his wife. Django stands as a bitter individual who desires nothing more than the freedom of his people by indirectly challenging power structures. Power relations can be played out on the threshold of the spectator's gaze and the gaze of the body as a speaking subject. The image asks a question of 'who am I' in the context of power relations (Rwafa 2008). Django's image gives an impression of an individual who is seeking for justice and equality in the society.

If power can be manifested through film text, so is resistance. An image is equivalent to a verbal sentence. Images are at work at all levels. Film is the 'meeting point of many semiotic phenomena' (Eco 1976, 207). Eco furthers the argument by stating that, 'without a semiotic awareness, films are viewed as magic spells'. It is on this support that at the end of the film, Django reduced the building to flames. Steve, a black man in a white man's house, is also burnt with the building. Steve was a 'puppet' of the white slave masters in commercialising black enslaved women. The building in flames 'represents' the resistance of power structures and the film is a revolutionary call for change. It is very dangerous to refuse to recognise semiotic laws acting in cinematographic and filmic phenomena (Eco 1976, 207). The argument is that 'films are spontaneous reproduction of reality' where the marginalised groups call for equal treatment and opportunities in human race regardless of color, class, ethnicity or origin. At the end of the film, Django is seen with his wife; both of them galloping on horses. They repossess the power and freedom, while white power is burning in satirical ashes.

MANIFESTATION OF RESISTANCE IN *12 YEARS A SLAVE*

Film is an intense battleground embedded with ideologies. Block (1986) views an ideology as a 'Janus-faced' or two sided phenomena. In *12 Years a Slave*, McQueen narrates the story of slavery. The relationship of slavery and capitalism is the main feature of the film. Domington (2014) asserts that *12 Years a Slave* seeks to address black freedom with black slavery. He further argues that the film is an 'essential piece of filmmaking embodied in microcosm, the long and shameful chapter of American history'. Women, men and children, were oppressed, exploited and abused, due to their color of skin, by those who claimed to have power.

In *12 Years a Slave*, resistance is arising from an inner essence of humanity and through reaction to experience just like in *Django Unchained*. Resistance emerges through the experiences of the oppressed (Giroux 1983). Solomon, an educated and intelligent man who is a victim of slavery, fights for his identity and respect when Mr. Eppy calls him 'boy'. With a furious voice he responds, '...my name is Solomon...' One respondent argued that in black culture it is important not to refer to an old man as a 'boy' because that shows lack of respect. Solomon fights for his recognition and respect. The word 'boy' signifies someone who is immature and under the control of someone else. The word 'boy' becomes a signifier in power discourse, hence Solomon strives to resist such an embarrassment by insisting on his name repeatedly. At one point, the slave master refers to Solomon as Plat and Solomon stands on his identity by saying, 'my name is Solomon, not Plat'. Film manifests resistance by giving characters a character of bravery and principle. Solomon does not compromise his identity, even when the slave master reminds him that 'he is not a free man'. Solomon is in chains but he feels he still has a place in the history of humanity, as he insists that 'he is a free man'. Therefore, he still has an identity different from what the slave master thought. Resistance is thus expressed through symbols and behavior (Wills 1997). When Solomon is asked if he is a slave, his response is 'No'. Text should be read as the expression of a multiplicity of voices rather than as the enunciation of one ideological voice which is there to be specified and attacked (Barthes 1976). Resistance is therefore manifested in verbal words and also in symbols and signs as evidenced by Solomon, who does not eat the food he is given by slave masters, neither does he want to participate in music as demanded by the slave masters.



Figure 8: Solomon Northrup demonstrates his resistance by refusing to play a violin. Screen shot from *12 Years a Slave* (2013)

Resistance is manifested as slaves discuss issues among themselves. One of the slaves says, ‘...we can fight’. Despite the fact that these slaves could not physically challenge their slave masters, their words reflect a marginalised group that is willing to take up a stand and fight hegemonic powers. Reactionary resistance is thus seen through the words uttered by Solomon’s conversations when he says, ‘... three can go against the whole crew’. Film text should be read between the grain and therefore these slaves are keen to fight for their freedom as one slave says, ‘...I don’t want to survive, I want to live.’ Films perpetuate the capitalist system by ensuring its continuous survival, and the slaves want to resist the survival of this oppressive system and regime. By saying they don’t want to ‘survive’ can be interpreted as stating that life is so challenging and they are not enjoying life at all. By comparing ‘surviving’ and ‘living’, one respondent had the view that the two words represent two groups; where the one ‘lives’ whilst the other merely ‘survives’. The marginalised slaves ‘survive’; they endure and hold on. The hegemonic group is ‘living’; enjoying the privileges at the expense of slaves. Hence, McQueen manifests resistance through the words uttered by the characters.

In another scene, Solomon punches Master Eppy until Mr. Ford comes to his rescue. Filmic manipulation transforms what might have been a mere visual transfer of reality, into discourse (Metz 1974). Just like in *Django Unchained*, a slave grabs the oppressive agent of oppression by brute force in a bid to show their intense hatred of slavery and exploitation.



Figure 9: Master Eppy groaning in agony after being punched by Solomon. Screen shot from *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

Unlike Django, Solomon is very vocal and refuses to be an object of manipulation. However, Patsey believes that Solomon needs to be man enough and do something. Instead of shouting to the white slave masters, the woman shares her grief to Solomon as she shouts, ‘...don’t accuse me for protesting my freedom’. Solomon is trying to calm Patsey, who is crying. McQueen represents women as ‘cry babies’, as they cry whenever they need a solution. One participant had the view that women cry because ‘crying is easier than thinking’. Another participant argued that crying is a language on its own; it is a desperate appeal of too much suffering as well as a consolation in times of troubles. Solomon seems to be taking things easy while the woman is stressed of her children. One participant, from the department of Archeology and Museum Studies, proposed that patriarchy as an ideology has given males certain roles; hence issues of children do not worry men, but women instead, as it is the latter’s duty to do so.

Ideology is identical with the lived experiences of human existence itself, and the experience is not given by a pure ‘reality’, but rather by the spontaneous ‘lived experience’ of the ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real world (Althusser 1971, 205).

Solomon is confronted by Patsey because she woman believes being a man comes with responsibility. On the other hand, she is attacking patriarchy because in patriarchal culture, they tend to be in a repressive condition. Hence, she believes the presence of a ‘penis’ has an advantage over herself, therefore demanding Solomon to take action as she shouts; ‘...they have nothing for you, nothing!’. Her resistance is embedded within man. Resistance can manifest as being either effective or reproductive. Effectiveness is determined by whether hegemonic structures are successfully challenged, while reproductive resistance seeks to determine whether the attempted challenge reproduces the status quo. Resistance should be a struggle in the emancipation of marginalised people and hence women’s resistance,

though not practical, is seen by their words condensing into substance as Solomon thereafter confronts Master Eppy and says, ‘...if something wrong, is wrong with the instruction...you must know that I am not a slave, before I came to you I was a free man.’ Resistance is a challenge of power relations, instructions and stereotypes hence the slave cannot condone slavery and its ruthless repression. One respondent from the department of History and Development Studies has the view that when a women slave said ‘I have no comfort in this life...’ she is not giving up but is contemplating on the hidden pain inside her heart because of the powerlessness of her gender.

Foucault (1978) considers resistance to be an integral component of power relations; therefore resistance is not against power, but rather imbricated within it. *12 Years a Slave* uses the song ‘Roar Jordan, Roar!’ as a song that emphasises perseverance, mere moments after Master Ford speaks out against slavery when he says to Master Eppy, ‘...laws change...these niggers are human beings...’ Master Ford tries to resist slavery, as he recognises that slaves are more than property, but because of power he seems to struggle in identifying himself with the plight of black slaves. Film therefore manifests resistance in different ways. The effectiveness of resistance will be determined, whether the dominating forces are successfully challenged or whether the attempted challenge reproduces the status quo. Resistance is thus a challenge of either to get the power or remain in power as seen in the two selected films.

CONCLUSION

The thrust of this article’s study was to explore manifestations of power and resistance in film. The films *Django Unchained* (2012) written and directed by Quentin Tarantino and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) directed by Steve McQueen and written by John Ridley, were used as case studies in this research. The article deployed thematic and semiotic analyses as a way of interpretation. Archival research was also used as a method of gathering information. Film is a text; therefore people read the text differently. Findings of the article reveal that the selected films do manifest power and resistance. The article establishes that films serve not only to entertain, but also explore terrains and social productions embedded and pregnant with ideologies that might be used to either dominate or resist and struggle against domination. The article noted that both films, as historical narrators, highlight the role of slavery in leaving countless black people disintegrated, abused, exploited, oppressed and marginalized by European countries, with the United States of America serving as catalyst. The films therefore narrate the story in different perspectives, but the element of manifestation of power and resistance is illuminated in both accounts. Addressing power relations of the world is also a magnificent element revealed by the article. The article strived to show the social, political, cultural and economic

relationship between the marginalised groups of the world and the powerful nations of the globe. It is a call for society to address issues of justice and equality across the globe regardless of race, gender, ethnicity and geographical location. As nations try to engage in globalisation, the article attempts to tell the story of inequality; one of the many long-term effects of slavery that, to this very day, continues to burden other continents in their development. The article has revealed the hidden agendas of films on issues centered on power and resistance.

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