

DJANGO UNCHAINED: REDISCOURGING RACIAL RELATIONS DURING THE SLAVE TRADE

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of major Hollywood productions on the topic of slavery has surprised fans, critics, and scholars alike. Whilst previous productions have portrayed black people as a docile, primitive and an amenable race, Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), through its portrayal of Django and Stephen, refutes previous stereotypes. This paper examines the relationship between blacks and whites as portrayed in the film. Through the theory of anthropophagy, it argues that Django and Stephen redefine the struggle against slavery by learning and adapting the 'enemy's' means for survival. The film offers one sensational sequence after another, all set around these two intriguing characters (Django and Stephen), who seem to be opposites, but share pragmatic, financial and personal issues.

Keywords: Anthropophagy; negro; race; slavery

SYNOPSIS

Set in the South two years before the American Civil War, *Django Unchained* (2012) stars Academy Award winner, Jamie Foxx, as Django, a slave whose brutal history with his former owners lands him face-to-face with German-born bounty hunter, Dr. King Schultz (Academy Award-winner, Christoph Waltz). Schultz is on the trail of the murderous Brittle brothers and only Django can lead him to his bounty. The unorthodox Schultz acquires Django with a promise to free him upon the capture of the Brittles – dead or alive. Success leads Schultz to free Django, though the two men choose not to go their separate ways. Instead, Schultz seeks out the South's most wanted criminals with Django by his side. Honing vital hunting skills, Django remains focused on one goal: finding and rescuing Broomhilda (Kerry Washington), the wife he lost to the slave trade long ago. Django and Schultz's search ultimately leads them to Calvin Candie (Academy Award-nominee, Leonardo DiCaprio), the proprietor of 'Candyland', an infamous plantation. Exploring the compound under false pretences, Django and Schultz arouse the suspicion of Stephen (Academy Award-nominee, Samuel L. Jackson), Candie's trusted house slave. Their moves are marked and a treacherous organisation closes in on them. If Django and Schultz are to escape with Broomhilda, they must choose between independence and solidarity, between sacrifice and survival.

ANTHROPOPHAGY

Anthropophagy is understood to be a modernist process formulated in Brazil, in which artists and writers attempted to understand the configuration of Brazilian identity among its forming cultures (African, Indian and Portuguese), which cultivated a symbolic practice of incorporating the Other's value to construct its own (Artthrob 1998). Not only values, but also techniques and information of the developed countries are devoured (Stam 2008, 307) and negotiated and adjusted for the sake of survival (Budasz 2005, 14). Anthropophagy points at the learning from the oppressors and the mastering of their ways and weapons, which reflects the consciousness of the relation between knowledge and power (Budasz 2005, 14).

As a discourse, 'Anthropophagic Reason' is defined by Andrade as 'the philosophy of technicised primitive' (Stam 2008, 309), and by Haroldo de Campos (quoted in Budasz 2005, 14) as the 'mastication, digesting, and rewriting of the outsider'. Budasz (2005, 2) describes it as 'recycling and incorporating otherness', while Stam (2008, 307) explains it as swallowing, carnivalising and recycling foreign presence from a position of cultural self-confidence. The chewing and processing of the desired parts of the 'other' is very distinct from identification (De Hollanda 1998). On the contrary, the need for absorbing the other is not mimicry, but a strategy to renovate and revitalise one's own society and to rework its cultural products (Budasz 2005, 12). According to De Castro (quoted in Budasz 2005, 13), 'Gods,

enemies, Europeans were figures of potential affinity, modalities of an otherness that attracted and should be attracted; an otherness without which the world would sink into indifference and paralysis'. The cultural practice of anthropophagy in which difference is swallowed (De Hollanda 1998) aims at displacing frontiers (Bellei 1998; Budasz 2005) and assumes 'the impossibility of any nostalgic return to an originary purity' (Stam 2008, 307).

As this article will illustrate, an anthropophagic understanding of *Django Unchained*, recognises that it is exactly the distance, or what we call incongruity, which allows looking at the self. The intercultural distance can be made intelligible by reformulating Husserl's fifth Cartesian meditation on the ego in anthropophagic terms. In the appropriation of difference to express the self, otherness is not totally digested, since the swallowing of difference does not neutralise the difference, but reveals it. And since this difference is necessarily incorporated to reinvent the self, the distance is the constitutive element of the self.

Django and Dr Schultz

In a 2012 interview with Charlie Rose, Tarantino suggests that crucial elements of the narrative project that drives *Django Unchained* were hatched during his first time viewing the famed television miniseries *Roots* (Ralph 2014, 7):

Dismayed by the scene when Kunte Kinte (LeVarBurton) passes up the opportunity to whip his former slave master, a young Tarantino promised himself that he would someday remedy this injustice in film.

Tarantino makes it clear that, from the beginning, *Django Unchained* is a sort of a 'writing back' to previous filmmakers, who could have overlooked the potential of the black man to fight back. In anthropophagic terms, *Django Unchained* is a story about revenge and resistance. Revenge and resistance is not alien, but constructed from within, using familiar means acquired from the 'superior' race. In this regard, the dominant social group (slave masters) ceases to be totally dominant, but has to incorporate dissident values from subordinate social groups (slaves) into its hegemony. It allows the dimension of struggle and opposition between differing cultures, where hegemony has to be negotiated and won. As Tony Bennet (1996, 351) rightly points out, the dominant social group becomes 'a hegemonic, leading (group) only to the degree that (its) ideology is able to accommodate, to find some space for, opposing (groups') cultures and values'.

Freeing the slave from his shackles, the impeccably mannered Schultz is polite and businesslike with the bedraggled Django in a way the latter certainly has never experienced, putting him on a horse, offering him \$25 per Brittle brother, if they find them, and brazenly marching him into a saloon in the next town they hit, to the gaping astonishment of the locals. Django counters King Schultz with a proposition

of his own. In exchange for assisting him with the Brittle brothers and various other assignments, he persuades King Schultz to help him free his wife, Broomhilda, from bondage. So begins an unlikely partnership of white German and black American, whose appearance, mounted and armed, draws astonished comment from local townsfolk who 'ain't never seen a negro on a horse' ('Negro', by the way, is not the word they use, instead they use *Nigga*).

These initial passages serve to communicate how alarming it is in this context for whites to see 'a nigga on a horse'. But this is just an appetiser for what white folks will end up encountering at Django's hands, before he is done serving up his just deserts using the man-hunting skills taught him by Schultz. In a heart-to-heart conversation, Django reveals that his wife was sold away to another master. But, of particular interest to Schultz, is the news that her name is Broomhilda (or so the reliably idiosyncratic speller Tarantino presents it) and that she speaks German, as she was raised by people from the old country. After Schultz explains the significance of her name, Django resolves to become his wife's Siegfried – to slay the dragon that is her evil master and rescue his bride.

In a scene crucial to his anthropophagic transformation from chattel to a human being, Django visits a tailor shop, where King Schultz lets him pick out his own clothes. He selects an ostentatious royal blue suit and pairs it with a ruffled lily-white shirt. Thus, Django carefully observes the behaviour of his enemy and slowly adapts his means. The 'new' clothes somehow transform him from a mere slave to a potential slave master. Although he cannot change his skin colour, he transforms himself through costume. This transformation shocks onlookers, who follow keenly the 'nigga' on a horse, travelling confidently through their sacred streets.

Anthropophagy is a long ritualistic process where the enemy is devoured over a period of time. It involves careful selectivity of the enemy's character. Accordingly, Django does not fully come alive until about the last 25 minutes of this almost 3-hour script/movie. And there are circumstances that accommodate that transition – circumstances that felt all too convenient. Suffice it to say that, just as it takes the assistance of a white man to set Django free and on course towards saving his 'damsel in distress', it also takes the assistance (however unintentional) of a white man to finally allow Django his moment to really shine and get out of the white man's shadow.

The apprenticeship narrative contrasts cultural and racial realms: Django learns to read and shoot under Schultz's tutelage and he also receives training in cultural myths when Schultz tells him a truncated version of the Siegfried myth. Django identifies with the Germanic hero and walks through the ring of fire for his Brünhilde/Hildi. What is more, Schultz teaches him the practice of mimicry, explaining to him what it means to put up an act, to masquerade as someone else and 'not to break character' (00:27:32). Django indulges in the masquerading in what Schultz calls a 'Hang zum Dramatischen' (01:40:15; an 'inclination towards the dramatic'). Django

gets to pick his costume, and thus his first disguise as Schultz's European-style valet culminates in an outrageous bright blue culotte's courtier outfit that leaves mouths gaping left and right. In anthropophagy, the natives had to show their difference to the very end to deserve to be eaten. Otherwise they were killed, but not 'savoured' (De Hollanda 1998; Budasz 2005, 11). Andrade proclaimed anthropofagia as a process of absorption and blending of other cultures (Artthrob 1998). He argued for a critical ingestion of European culture and the 'reworking of that tradition in Brazilian terms' (De Campos 1986, 38-45 in Budasz 2005: 2).

Django's expertise at putting up an act improves as the film progresses, as he poses as a cowboy, but he eventually comes into his own when impersonating a black slaver. When the duo leaves the symbolic West to travel South, their relationship is inverted. Thanks to his knowledge, Django now towers over Schultz. Despite appearances, however, Django is not a hero of white making: both his teacher, Schultz, and his auteur, Tarantino, die. The latter has a cameo appearance towards the end as white slave trader with an Australian accent. Like the Big House of the white establishment, Tarantino-as-auteur gets blown up by Django in a brief scene that symbolically points to the self-education of Django and his liberation from white supervision and control. Django survives by adapting Western culture and myths and, in a second step, he excels because of his slave experience and his ability to talk himself out of tricky situations. Perhaps the most significant moment is when Django is trained by Schultz as a gunfighter. From any distance, on any occasion, Django can shoot with ruthless accuracy and verve, and afterwards permits himself a grin of pleasure. In Tarantino's words (Schafer 2014):

Django is an exceptional human being. As a consequence, neither blacks nor whites know what to call him. He is granted access to the white world of Candieland and the inner sanctum of the master's dinner table only on the pretext of business. Candie is suspicious of him from the beginning, inquiring repeatedly about his interest and subjecting Django to various tests.

Django is also tested by the Mandingo fighters, whose disgust he keeps at bay by threatening them ('I'm worse than any of these white men here.' 1:16:49). Thus, throughout the movie, Django maintains his masquerading and enigma.

Django and Schultz find their way to the plantation of Calvin Candie, a spoilt Southern aristocrat, played with a devil's twinkle by Leonardo DiCaprio. Candie's thin veneer of affability hides a sadist who allows a man to be torn limb from limb by rabid dogs and who revels in 'Mandingo' wrestling – a fight to the death between slave combatants. The obscene degradation of this is plain, yet its impact is dulled by the atmosphere of moustache-twirling campiness surrounding it.

The film's greatest weakness, especially in the second half, is that the Django character somehow gets a bit lost in the shuffle; he does not pop from the screen the way Schultz, Candie and Stephen do. Django is all about being resolute and determined, but more details could have filled out the character's transformation from

downtrodden slave to steely master gunfighter. Schultz teaches him about Siegfried and firearms, but the long-journey format could have nicely accommodated a fuller, more gradual account of the expansion of Django's mind and horizons; as it is, he lurches from impotent nonperson to 'cocky dude' too abruptly. It's true that cowboy and genre characters must not be deep, but because the other characters get most of the good lines, Django could have used something they did not have: an extra dimension. Django does not project the sort of charisma that the lucky few have to rivet the audience's attention even when they are doing nothing. So when he is not the centre of attention, he seems withdrawn and not that interesting.

Stephen and Calvin Candie

The relationship between Stephen and Calvin Candie can be conversely understood in anthropophagic terms as well. Interestingly, Calvin Candie is not even the worst of the villains. That would be Stephen, the 'house slave', played by Samuel L. Jackson, in an unsettling compound of obsequiousness towards his master and viciousness towards his fellow Negroes. His outrage at the idea of Django staying 'in the big house' is both a comical skit on below-stairs uppityness and a corrective to the cinematic ideal of the black man as martyr/saint. Stephen masters Calvin's cruelty and takes it to greater heights against his fellow black men. Throughout the years, Stephen becomes the most favoured and privileged slave. He acts as butler and chief of staff at Candyland. He is well-dressed, treated with (relative) respect by Candie and seen by the other slaves as no better than a racist, because he betrays his race. This revitalising force of learning, incorporating, and recycling is, paradoxically, a way to preserve cultural individuality (Budasz 2005, 14) that is only possible by self-transfiguration (De Castro in Budasz 2005, 14) or a 'transcendence of self through the commingling of self and other' (Stam 2008, 308).

There's a telling scene where Stephen and Calvin relax behind closed doors at the end of the day, sharing snifters of brandy. In these closed quarters, they might be equals. No doubt Stephen leads the most comfortable life possible for a slave at that time, but what a price he pays! No one has glowering eyes that threaten more than Stephen's, and we can all but read his mind as he regards Django, Broomhilda and Schultz and sees through Schutz's story that he wants to pay a preposterous price just for someone to speak German with. He confronts Calvin with the obvious: 'It is *Django* who loves Broomhilda and desires her.'

Stephen sins not only against the others, but against himself. He confirms that in some putrid sinkhole of his soul, he regards himself as white. How Tarantino deals with the consequences of his betrayal sets the whole ending of the film into motion, with its satisfactory Quentonian celebration of violence. Stephen is also, if you will, a *deus*, cranked down onto the stage so his realisations can cut through revelation of the secret the others share. He works for that purpose, but also, in a

film that condemns white racism, is also capable of seeing black racism. Stephen is a crucial character because he forces African-American viewers to acknowledge the role some of their forebears played at the time. Jackson's performance requires not only his gift as an actor, but his courage as a man who understands the utility of an obvious role and is willing to play it.

CONCLUSION

This article has analysed the relationships of the main characters in the film from an anthropophagic point of view. What is apparent is that Tarantino attempts to give a radical dimension on the possibility of revenge or 'fighting back'. The film attempts to give a voice to oppressed black slaves at a time when it was not possible. This timely intervention requires proactive characters. This we find in Django and Stephen, although the later fights against this cause. These relationships can be understood in anthropophagic terms, where anthropophagy acknowledges the active participation of the oppressed in liberating themselves through the learning of the oppressor's means. The article has also offered another dimension to anthropophagy, found in the character of Stephen, who acquires the enemy's means in order to oppress his own. Consequently, anthropophagy can also be a dangerous process if mastered by a few individuals like Stephen.

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