

## Dramatizing Solomon Northup's Narrative Through the 12 Years Slave Movie (2013)

تحويل مذكرات سليمان نورثوب إلى دراما من خلال فيلم 12 سنة من العبودية (2013)

Ouldyeou Saadia\*<sup>1</sup>, Yahiaoui Habib<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Mustapha Stambouli Mascara, Algeria. [Sadia.ouldyarou@univ-mascara.dz](mailto:Sadia.ouldyarou@univ-mascara.dz)

<sup>2</sup> University of Mustapha Stambouli Mascara, Algeria. [h.yahiaoui@univ-mascara.dz](mailto:h.yahiaoui@univ-mascara.dz)

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### Abstract:

Calling upon the content analysis method, this paper argues that the *12 Years Slave Movie* (2013) which is based on the *Twelve Years Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup* (1853) has been dramatized through the focus on violence. After a close examination, the severity and amount of violence that the movie exhibits were pointed up. It has been revealed, thus, that the British filmmaker Steve McQueen dramatized Northup's Narrative visually through an intensive projection of emotional and physical violence by inflicting them upon the characters of Solomon and Patsey. By doing so, he triggers the audience to not only sympathize with the slaves but also to empathize with them.

**Keywords:** McQueen; slave narrative; slavery; Solomon Northup; violence.

### ملخص:

تجادل الدراسة الحالية من خلال الاعتماد على منهجية تحليل المضمون بأن فيلم 12 سنة من العبودية (2013) والمقتبس من مذكرات سولمون نورثوب "12 سنة عبدا" قد تم تحويله إلى دراما من خلال التركيز المكثف على العنف بشتى أنواعه. وبعد فحص دقيق و شامل للفيلم، تم تسليط الضوء على شدة العنف و مقدار تواجده في الفيلم، إذ كشفت النتائج أن المخرج البريطاني ستيف مكوين قد حول المذكرات إلى دراما مرئية و مؤثرة عن طريق العنف الجسدي والنفسي اللذان تعرضا لهما شخصا سولومون وباتسي في الفيلم مما أجبر المشاهد على التعاطف مع الشخصيات المعنية و التعايش مع الأحداث المختلفة.

كلمات مفتاحية: باتسي، سولومون نورثوب، العبودية، العنف، مكوين

\* Ouldyeou Saadia

[sadia.ouldyarou@univ-mascara.dz](mailto:sadia.ouldyarou@univ-mascara.dz)

## ***Introduction :***

For more than 300 years, Blacks in America had to endure being unwillingly shipped from their homeland in Africa to embark on a novel journey far from being enjoyable. When the European colonies discovered the luxurious tobacco in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in America, their greed grew intensively along with their need for cheap and effective labor to perform the plantation work. At the beginning, they relied on native Indians for they were the ones who knew the land better. However, since “[the Native Indians] showed no interest in tedious chores even when they were nearby” (Edwin, Edwin S., Foreman Griffith, Miller, & Woods, 2005), the colonists looked for another source of labor. Hence, the Indentured Servitude system seemed a much safer solution to provide workers. Under a written contract, impoverished and unemployed individuals from England accepted to work in the New World for a specific period of time in exchange for “passage to the Chesapeake ...such as tools livestock, and land.” (Edwin, Edwin S., Foreman Griffith, Miller, & Woods, 2005). Yet, most of the indentured servants did not survive their terms of service; “disease, poor diet and cruel treatment claimed thousands of servants’ lives.” (Arnesen, 2007). Consequently, fear of labor shortage permeated the situation, and the need for workers became a necessary exigency. It was at that moment that black Africans turned to be the sought after workers; not only they could perform intensive work under harsh climate, but also, in case of escaping, they could be easily recognized due to the color of their skin. Thus, from 1619 till 1865, Blacks were coerced into slavery and spent a remarkable period of time being transported from Africa to America as slaves in exchange for other commodities in what is known as the Atlantic Slave Trade.

The long period that Blacks underwent as slaves was dreadful and unbearable. From the harrowing journey while being shipped to the ruthless masters’ treatment in America, slaves barely could survive. Subsequently, the appearance of slave narratives as a literary genre seemed a matter out of the question. Fugitives or former slaves decided to share their stories with readers, making the regime of slavery visible to the whole world with every aspect of it as Solomon Northup did. In his *Twelve Years Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and rescued in 1853*, he provided us with a detailed account of his life in New York as a free man, and in Louisiana as a slave. His narrative caught the attention of many as it was not only a mere narration but also a historical source to the atrocities of slavery in America. Having read the narrative, the British filmmaker Steve McQueen admitted, “Every turn of the page was a revelation, because you think you know what slavery is, and you’re opening this book and thinking, my God. Every page was just, wow, really?” (Bernier, 2018). Thus, as he was highly interested in making a film about slavery, he adapted Solomon’s memoir. Accordingly, the question that underlies the present work arose. It inquires into the strategy McQueen adopted to dramatize Solomon’s experience. The hypothesis, therefore, is as follows: McQueen relied on picturing violence in a great deal to grab the attention of the audience and to get them exposed to the harsh reality of the American history.

### ***1. The Representation of Slavery in Hollywood***

Being an American film industry, Hollywood has long eschewed from treating slavery or representing African Americans on screen. Not only this, but also the presence of black characters was scarce, if not eliminated. It was only through the blackface technique of darkening a white

actor's skin through makeup in the early 1900s that black characters were portrayed as being "uncivilized, uneducated and uncultured" (Michaels, 2018) in the minstrel shows that encompassed groups of travelling actors. Only recently, Blacks have got their status in films either as characters or actors or members of the whole cast been altered positively, though as asserted by Michaels, "The history of African American in film as actors and as filmmakers has seen movement from one extreme of stereotype to another." (Michaels, 2018).

With the advent of technology and the motion picture, the Blaxploitation appeared instead, reinforcing racial prejudice. Blacks' roles in films did not exceed being illiterate servants under Whites' control or incompetent and bad people. Film historian Donald Bogle subsumed Blacks' roles under the following categories: The "tom" character who was "socially accepted good Negro character... submissive, stoic, generous, selfless and oh-so-very kind," (Larson, 2006; Michaels, 2018); the "coon" character who was typically funny, lazy and unreliable, the big and fat "mammy" character; and the "tragic mulatto" character that referred to people of mixed black and white ancestry which was regarded as "deregatory feature". (Lawson & Lawson, 2019; Michaels, 2018). It was because of that, this technique was named Blaxploitation since Blacks were exploited to fill the need of the aforementioned characters.

However, going in tandem with the achievements that the Civil Rights Movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century attained, Blacks' presence on screen changed whether as actors or filmmakers. Furthermore, the depiction of slavery became more apparent, and many films were released tackling the matter, including *the Littlest Rebel* (1935), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Band of Angels* (1957), *the Defiant Ones* (1958), *Jefferson in Paris* (1994), *Amistad* (1997), *Beloved* (1998), *Django Unchained* (2012), *12 Years Slave* (2013), and *Birth of a Nation* (2016), to cite but few. It is worth mentioning, though, that even the portrayal of slavery itself went through changes from sentimentalizing it to condemning it by depicting Blacks as troublemakers or victims, respectively.

## 2. *Solomon Northup's Narrative from the Literary Work to the Movie*

Narrating stories through the motion picture enticed a wide range of filmmakers to adapt existing literary works to movies, i.e., transferring a written work to a feature film creating visual experiences wherein the non-avid readers can have their own share of amusement. However, as both movies and literary works have their own distinct characteristics, the process of adaptation poses its own difficulties and rules to be respected and followed depending on the filmmaker's objective. For instance, though every director has his own perspective that certainly affects the way the film is produced, faithfulness to the original text must not be overlooked. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the author of the text, the degree of fidelity during the adaptation changes from a filmmaker to another according to the sought-after outcomes. In their book *Films with Legs: Crossing Borders with Foreign Language Films* Rosemary A. Peter and Véronique Maisier (2011) highlight that from the 1990s' onwards, film directors started interpreting literary works differently and freely by focusing on specific passages and characters, eliminating some sections, or changing the ending to suit the audience's visions; therefore, the relationship between the original text and the adapted version is in constant negotiation.

Subsequently, fidelity became no longer the only criterion for a good film adaptation. In *Understanding Movies*, Louis Giannetti (2013) provides three different types of a good and accepted adaptation: literal, faithful and loose adaptation. He explains that film directors can (1) rely heavily on the original text to re-create the same tone by implementing the same plot and

characters, (2) try to maintain closeness to the original text, or (3) lightly rely on the original text (2013).

In this regard, Solomon Northup's narrative was among the works to be adapted into a movie. Kidnapped from the North to be enslaved in the South, Solomon Northup experienced dreadful moments, because being free then bound by the shackles of slavery is not like being born slave. In other words, testing freedom and then getting stripped of it is more horrific than living your whole life as a slave aspiring for something you still cannot witness. That is exactly what suddenly struck Solomon who was born free in the town of Minerva, Essex County, New York in July, 1808 (Northup, 1855). He was a black laborer, an educated person and a talented fiddler. By 1841, he was married and had three children (Northup, 1855).

In March, 1841, two men of "respectable appearance" (Northup, 1855) Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton approached him claiming that they were circus performers and they needed his services. They offered to pay him one dollar for each day and three dollars for every night (Northup, 1855). Tempted by the offer, and convinced that he found a decent job; Solomon accompanied them to Washington DC just to find himself trapped and dragged into a forceful slavery for twelve years on a cotton plantation near the Red River in Louisiana. In 1853, he was rescued and freed. Upon his freedom, he filed a lawsuit and published his narrative in collaboration with David Wilson who edited it, and recently, a remarkable number of electronic versions can be freely accessed by everyone.

Solomon stated, "My object is, to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, leaving it for others to determine." (Northup, 1855). What made his narrative salient, thereby, was the fact that his account was not fictional, but a real gateway into getting acquainted with the real nature of the institution of slavery in America. The associate professor of English language and literature Eric Ashley Hairston from the University of Virginia confirms, "[Solomon's] elegant detail... of bondage and deep ... costs of slavery make his narrative a valuable addition to our ... heritage as Americans and a much-needed, unabashed truthfulness about horrors wrought in its creation." (Northup, 2018)

Nevertheless, Solomon's narrative nature was debated as whether it can be regarded as a literary genre or a mere story. The English professor Sam Worley, for instance, claimed that Solomon's narrative has been biased because it was edited by a white man; therefore, it cannot be subsumed under the genre of slave narratives (Letzel, 2015). Author John Sekora backed up the same opinion as well. He argued that slave narratives should be studied as "black and collective species of autobiography and as a unique genre with a distinctive history." (Letzel, 2015). Accordingly, he believed that if the account was edited by a white man, this would shake the authenticity of the narrative. Notwithstanding, Solomon's narratives became popular and unique in its nature as it sold 27000 copies in just two years (Marsh, 2003).

Though it was later neglected for many years, it could tempt the British filmmaker McQueen who upon discovering it, did not hesitate to make it a successful motion picture as it is among the films that bluntly dared to treat the horrors of American slavery, winning three Oscars. When McQueen was asked about the reason that triggered his desire to adapt the narrative into a movie, he responded, "I want to make a movie about slavery because and for me there was a hole in the Canon of cinema about this political subject" (Bernier, 2018). For him, the true story of Solomon Northup is a reliable source and a very crucial portal to the institution of slavery that permeated the lives of the Americans mainly the southern part for more than two centuries, yet it was "one of the subjects

that have been swept under the carpet” (Bernier, 2018). Therbey, it was necessary for him to expose what have been overlooked for years because as he emphasized, “There is a kind of amnesia...or not wanting to focus on this...because of it being so painful...this side of history...was so hideous, people... do not want to see.” (Bernier, 2018).

In her article, “Comparative Study between Northup's Narrative Slave ‘Twelve Years a Slave’ and its Adapted Movie” Susi Astiantih questioned the type of adaptation implemented by Steve McQueen (2018). She concluded that though the original text was respected, many changes occurred during the process of adaptation and attributed them the nature of the medium, alluding that McQueen adopted the faithful type of adaptation (2018). In the same vein, in her “Confronting Race Head-on in *12 Years a Slave* Steve McQueen, 2013): Redefining the Contours of the Classic Biopic?”, Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris states, “ McQueen circumvents the “great white narrative” by addressing race “head-on” instead of metaphorically, writing every character within their own racial background”(2018). She, hence, reveals that though the director tried to maintain closeness to the original narrative, he altered some aspects to share a deeper message which orbits around the racial evil acts that the American history endeavors to hide or reluctantly exhibits. Linda Williams shares the same view and confirms that McQueen's faithful adaptation positions *12 Years a Slave* in a melodramatic thematics of race (cited in Loren, 2014). This means that although the movie is not a literal adaptation of the narrative, it faithfully strives to capture the events but with a touch that drives the audience's attention to the issue of racism.

Hence, McQueen not only needed to unveil what has been thinky veiled, but also attempted to ensure that the audience is being actively engaged and why not being propelled to fetch for more about the matter in historical books. Thereofre, the present papers quesntions the process of dramatization through the projection of violence because it is by dint of dramatization that the audience's interest can be triggered and ignited.

### 3. *Dramatization*

Drama is that genre of either writing or film that strives to impact the audience emotionally as it uses different techniques to demonstrate situations with credible aspects. In an attempt to meticulously define drama, author Charlyn Wessels in her book *Drama* illustrates its significance by pointing that if a learner questions the meaning of the word ‘blind’, it is better to ask him to shut his eyes and to try to find his pen then to provide him with the explicit definition of the word (Wessels, 1987). While in the former, the learner gets compelled to inhabit the situation, in the latter he does not. Similarly, a compelling drama triggers the audience's emotions and appeals to their feelings. In the same vein, Sharon Packer states, “Dramatization means exactly the incorporation of abstract ideas or feelings into a plot...with actors and a set design to produce drama” (Packer, 2002). Susbequently, an endeavor to porpel the reader/ viewer to empathize and relate with the chacacters' lives necessitates the portrayal of their hardships and the struggle they udergo to overcome them. Nevertheless, Richard Gill explains, “ the conventions [of drama] need not mirror actual life in every detail...their function is to be representative, so that the audience can accept what they see as real” (Gill, 1995). Accordingly, regarding movies, it is up to the director's decision to select the appropriate way that best sends the message. Gill proceeds, “For instance, in cowboy films, fights are accompanied by loud cracking noises. Punches don't actually sound like this, but the noises are accepted as a convention indicating that the fighting is tough” (Gill, 1995).

#### 4. *The Content Analysis Method*

As its name implies, content analysis is a systematic technique of analyzing content of any material that aims to communicate a message. It enables researchers, as highlighted by Fraenkel and Wallen, “to study human behaviors in an indirect way through an analysis of their communication” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Based on prior knowledge or a specific theory, content analysis starts by determining a number of categories that are relevant to the objective of the study. Then, codes, either words or phrases or sentences, are to be extracted under the set categories. A researcher can code either or both the explicit and the implicit content of a communication; however, for valid and reliable results, it is preferable if one uses both of them (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). As for the analysis of data, it is accomplished through counting the frequency of each code while all along taking into consideration the record of the base which differs from one sample to another.

With respect to the current study, we tried to probe the existence of violence in *12 Years Slave* movie to test the hypothesis that McQueen drew attention to the history of American slavery in general; and to Solomon Northup’s narrative, in particular, by resorting to the portrayal of violence. To this aim, the process of categorization depended on the typology of violence that was created by the World Health Organization that divided violence into three categories according to the one who commits violence, and then into four further categories according to the nature of violence (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, n.d.).

On the one hand, the three categories include self-directed violence which refers to violent acts one inflicts upon him/herself such as suicidal behaviors; interpersonal violence signifies the perpetration of violence by an individual or group of people against others who can be member of family, partners or strangers; and the collective violence which is the one applied by a specific community or country against another for economic, political or social reasons.

On the other hand, the other four categories cover the physical violence which is the intentional use of physical force such as punching, hitting, shoving...etc; sexual violence, forcing victims to engage in sexual acts; psychological or emotional violence, using verbal and non-verbal communication to inflict emotional or mental harm on the victim; and neglect or deprivation which is the failure at providing sufficient care to those who mightily need it.

Adopting this division, therefore; we sustained the validity of the current work and endeavored to refrain ourselves from being biased by using the three first types as themes, and the four, as categories. Codes, however, were extracted accordingly. Moreover, we were able to watch the movie with a determined objective by coding relevant data to the categories. Then, we counted the frequency of the occurrences of each code in the movie and compared them later with the duration of the movie itself and with the instances in which Blacks were not ill-treated by Whites. In the same vein, to ensure reliability, we coded the material separately— five times— and then compared the degree of agreement. The consistency of the results, hence, helped secure the extent to which this research is reliable.

#### 5. *Result and Discussion*

The content analysis was conducted while watching the film five times for more credible findings. Therefore, the following table represents the obtained results:

*Table N°1. Instances and Types of Violence in 12 Years Slave Movie*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Fr</b>	<b>Min/Sec</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Physical Violence	Chaining	2	1/13	Interpersonal Violence
	Beating	89	11/50	
	Hanging	2	00/06	
	Stabbing	1	0/23	
Sexual Violence	Forced Sexual Act	3	3/58	Interpersonal Violence Self-directed Violence
Psychological Violence	Insulting	19	00/39	Interpersonal Violence
	Humiliation	19	3/59	
	Division of family	2	1/12	
	Threatening	2	1/06	Self-directed Violence
	Suicidal Thoughts	1	00/59	
Neglect	Lack of Help	1	4/09	Interpersonal Violence
Benevolent Treatment	Appraisal	5	00/16	No Violence
	Good Intentions	3	3/30	

As table 1 indicates, all the four types of violence are present in the movie through the treatment that befalls both characters Solomon and Patsey. Physical violence tops all the other types with 89 instances of severe beating only, including whipping, punching and scratching with any material that comes along white masters' way. Albeit the rest of the codes in the same category are scarce, their depiction is extremely intensive. Stabbing for instance happens when a slave tries to protect a black female from being raped. The scene shows the white man with a malicious look and a mocking smile while enjoyably stabbing the victim in front of the other slaves who remain silent bearing a very sad and frightened gaze. This scene alone can tell a lot about the slave/master relationship that accentuates the authority of the latter over the former.

Sexual violence is portrayed when Patsey is obliged to endure forced penetration which is the longest cruel sexual scene. Though Patsey occupies a peripheral position, her character that appears at the end of the first hour of the movie plays a crucial role in depicting the brutality of slavery. She

undergoes different kinds of violence from being sexually harassed, falling prey to the jealousy of her master's wife, to being harshly beaten, whipped, scratched, insulted and humiliated. Her role endows the viewer with a clear idea about the authority of white male patriarchy to subjugate black female bodies and to consider them as properties.

Psychological violence is apparent in the movie as well. From the first scene till the moment Solomon goes back to his home, Blacks get insulted and humiliated. Words and expressions like "Negro", "liar", "dogs", "black bitch", "rags and tatters", "you are a slave", to name but few, permeate the speech of ruthless white masters. Furthermore, the filmmaker projected humiliation through different scenes of either Blacks being naked and scoffed at or by being forced to dance to please their masters. Besides, emotional violence would undoubtedly shake viewers' feelings through the character of Eliza whose role is minor but not trivial as she represents the painful agony over family separation, chiefly when she is shown weeping loudly for one minute

Unlike the other categories, the neglect category covers only one code; however, it is projected in the longest scene in the movie. Solomon is punished by being hung for four straight minutes and six seconds with his feet barely touching the ground. The scene shows many people around him with everyone busy doing something or playing but not helping. Solomon, thus, is neglected and left to his fate.

Dissimilar to all the categories, the last one embraces two codes. On the one hand, Solomon is praised five times but only when he is still free living in the north where slavery is not prevalent. Good intentions, on the other hand, are depicted through two characters: Ford and Bass. The former is the first master that Solomon is sold to. Albeit he owns slaves, he still has the decency to treat them as humans. The latter is the only one who expresses his refusal to the system of slavery as a whole and he agrees, though hesitantly, to help him by sending letter to the north informing his family about his situation. Despite of that, there is a sharp difference regarding both characters' appearance when compared to the racists'.

As shown in the table, three themes have been engendered. The interpersonal violence refers to the kind of violence inflicted upon individuals by others which is the case in the whole movie. Solomon, Patsey, Eliza and the other slaves suffer from dehumanization and ill-treatment by others. Self-directed violence is represented when Patsey has suicidal thoughts and begs Solomon to throw her body in the river, but he refuses for he believes it is an act not accepted by God. The 'no violence' theme is portrayed in the north when Solomon is still free and through two characters only.

In the same vein, it is worth mentioning that the duration of the movie is 127 minutes and 27 seconds. It is divided into five parts: (1) when Solomon is free living in the north, (2) when he is kidnapped and sold into slavery, (3) when he is in Fords' plantation (4), when he moves to Epps' plantation, and (5) when he returns back home. The first scenes depicts Solomon as a slave, with others being humiliated and instructed to do the plantation work, and then forced into a sexual act. Then directly after, Solomon reminisces about his luxurious past life when he is held in high esteem by everyone. McQueen, hence, creates an empathy/sympathy strategy. We, as viewers, not only empathize with Solomon, but also sympathize with him and lament his 'free' life when the ruthless violence that takes 37 minutes and 25 seconds is depicted. This length as compared with the rest demonstrates the aim of the filmmaker to take the audience into the real journey of slaves' lives.



## Conclusion:

To conclude, the present work aims at examining the way McQueen dramatized Solomon Northup's narrative into a movie. The long period between publishing the narrative in 1855 and the release of the movie in 2013 makes it difficult for the current audience to be acquainted with a regime they were not part of mainly with the scarcity of its representation in the motion picture. Subsequently, McQueen wanted to expose what has been neglected for years. Therefore, he used violence in the extreme. The amount of the implemented violence and the severity of its graphic representation made *12 Years Slave* one of its kind. All the varied types of violence are palpable in the movie. Characters are ruthlessly whipped, raped, humiliated, traumatized and deprived of all their basic rights as human beings. Images of naked bodies with many bloody scars have their own implications that do not only dramatize the story but also help entrench what should not be forgotten.

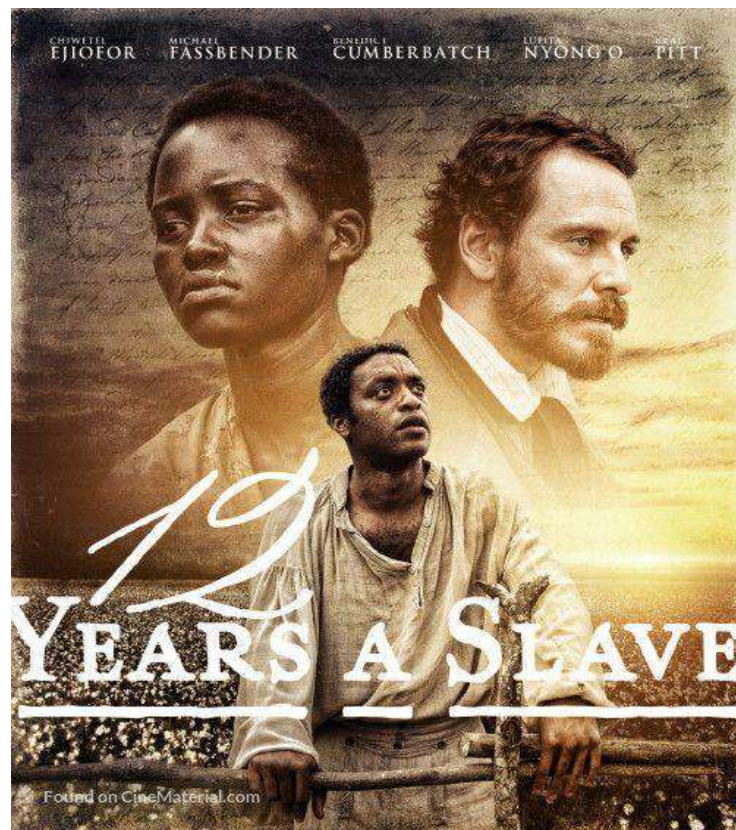
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## 7. Appendices:

Figure N° 1. 12 Years a Slave Movie Poster



Source: Steve McQueen, 2013

*Figure N° 2. Patsey Enduring Violence*



*Source: Steve McQueen, 2013*

*Figure N° 3. Solomon Enduring Violence*



*Source: Steve McQueen, 2013*