

Tarantino's "Django Unchained" Is Bold Vision of What a Black Hero Can Be

By Eric Deggans

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Django Unchained: I Laughed, I Was Bored. I Pumped My First, I Felt Nauseated

By Dana Stevens

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(Adapted from the original text.)

- ¹ Before we go any further, let's get one thing straight: Quentin Tarantino's latest masterpiece, *Django Unchained*, has an astounding amount of lines featuring the n-word.
- ² According to the trade magazine *Variety*, it is used 109 times.
- ³ And while that makes Tarantino's tribute to his beloved spaghetti Westerns one of his most provocative and politically incorrect films ever, it doesn't make it racist or even racially insensitive to this African-American critic.
- ⁴ Mostly, such language obliterates the tentative attitude of too many other Westerns, which either refuse to feature black characters or pretend they were treated as equals to white people.
- ⁵ It is the perfect environment for the perfect revenge fantasy, and Tarantino deploys a glorious mashup of genres in *Django Unchained* to achieve it. Long known as a film geek who wears his influences on his sleeve, the antic mind behind the kung fu homage *Kill Bill* and the war movie homage *Inglourious Basterds* has now created his own genre. Let's call it the blaxploitation spaghetti Western love story.
- ⁶ *Ray* star Jamie Foxx is Django, a slave freed by bounty hunter Dr. King Schultz (*Basterds* Oscar winner Christoph Waltz) to find a trio of wanted men who brutalized Django and his wife after a failed escape attempt. The two hit on a bargain; the former slave points out the men, the bounty hunter kills them, and Django gets his freedom. But the ex-slave, who must pretend to be Schultz's valet to reach his targets, proves a quick study in the killing-villainous-white-folks-for-profit game.
- ⁷ Before long, Schultz and Django have a new bargain: They'll team up to rescue the ex-slave's German-speaking wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington, moonlighting from ABC's *Scandal*), at a plantation deep in Mississippi. Thus black and German culture is united to smash American slavery in another delicious, Tarantino-bred irony.
- ⁸ The filmmaker's influences are obvious. He whips the camera around for crucial close-ups — including Leonardo DiCaprio's introduction as villainous plantation owner Calvin Candie — just like *Django*, the classic 1966 Italian ("spaghetti") Western that inspired this film.
- ⁹ I also wonder if Tarantino found inspiration in an

- ¹ *Django Unchained*, Quentin Tarantino's blaxploitation spaghetti western about a freed slave turned bounty hunter, provoked a lot of contradictory feelings in me, including some that don't usually come in pairs: Hilarity and boredom. Aesthetic delight and physical nausea. Fist-pumping righteousness and vague moral unease.
- ² Of course, provoking intense feelings is what Tarantino's cinema is all about. The 49-year-old has always been a provocateur, a creator of over-the-top spectacles that are as cinematically sophisticated as they can be ideologically crude. But with his last two films—*Inglourious Basterds*, which rewrote the ending of World War II as a Jewish revenge fantasy, and *Django Unchained*, which performs an analogous sleight of hand on the institution of American slavery—Tarantino ups the ante. Now he's drawing his inspiration not only from movie history—the mob dramas, martial-arts films, and grade-B exploitation flicks he's always drawn on for his ingenious style pastiches—but from history itself.
- ³ That shift in source material seems, in itself, worthy of note. Does his choice to plumb the past for painful, ideologically loaded stories of racial and ethnic violence suggest that Tarantino is maturing as a filmmaker, opening out from the self-referentiality of his early films onto a broader historical perspective? And if it doesn't—if Tarantino really is just appropriating historical atrocities for no other reason than their power to make audiences squirm and root for the long-suffering good guys to finally for the love of God kick the bad guys' Nazi/slave-trading asses—should that matter? Does *Django Unchained* need to have anything more on its mind than the unleashing of gleefully gory racial retribution?
- ⁴ The film opens in Texas in 1858, two years before the beginning of the Civil War. A band of slaves shackled at the ankle makes its way through the night, driven by two white traders. Suddenly a curious sight comes into view: A horse-drawn-carriage driven by a German émigré, King Schultz (Christoph Waltz, jovially stealing every scene he's in), who's posing as an itinerant dentist. In fact, King is a bounty hunter on business for the U.S. government. He's looking for a particular slave, Django (a steely Jamie Foxx), to help him identify his next targets, the notoriously pitiless slave overseers the Brittle brothers.
- ⁵ In no time, Schultz has bought Django his liberty, and made short work of the unlucky traders. With Django

unlikely place: the TV miniseries *Roots*. Not only has he created a bold depiction of black empowerment, Tarantino may have borrowed a sly casting trick from ABC's miniseries about a black family's journey from Africa to slavery in America. Just as in *Roots*, Tarantino casts well-known and -liked white actors in the most villainous parts, keeping white audiences engaged. So *Dukes of Hazzard* star Tom Wopat pops up as a sheriff, Bruce Dern is Django's brutal onetime owner, *Miami Vice* alum Don Johnson plays a blithely racist plantation owner, and *Titanic* heartthrob DiCaprio's Candie is the oily, entitled organizer of to-the-death fights among slaves, known here as "Mandingo fights."

¹⁰ (Kudos, too, to Samuel L. Jackson's crafty turn as Stephen, Candie's head slave and feisty confidant.)

¹¹ But Foxx's Django is the movie's laconic, quick-thinking center, overcoming his limited slave education to outwit the few white men he can't outfight. He is 2012's first black movie superhero at a time when most big-budget action films relegate people of color to cool sidekick or tough boss archetypes.

¹² Some will blanch at such extensive use of the n-word by a white filmmaker; others will question the avalanche of bloody violence amid a cascade of real-life mass shootings. And they will all have a point.

¹³ But Tarantino has pushed those buttons to create something unique: a bold vision of what a black hero can be in a period piece developed with a modern film geek's eyes.

¹⁴ Thanks, QT, for the best Christmas present this fan of racially conscious films and blockbuster action movies could ever imagine.

posing as his valet, Schultz locates the Brittles, who, it turns out, are the same bastards who earlier separated Django from his wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington). Schultz strikes a deal with Django: If he's willing to ride north and bounty-hunt by Schultz's side through the winter, in the spring they'll head south together to find and rescue Broomhilda.

⁶ They track Broomhilda to Candieland, a plantation belonging to the decadent, sadistic Calvin J. Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio in an enjoyably florid, mustache-twirling performance). Candie's hobby is "mandingo fighting," the practice of siccing two unarmed black men on one another and forcing them to fight to the death. (There's one horrifying scene in which we witness the sport in action; I can't say how gory it got, because I watched through a latticework of fingers.)

⁷ Django and Schultz pose as mandingo traders to infiltrate the plantation and help Broomhilda escape—but it's not easy to get past Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), Candieland's eagle-eyed "house nigger" (if that description makes you uncomfortable, get used to it; in *Django Unchained* the n-word is ubiquitous). I wish the complex enmity between Django and Stephen—the fiercely self-reliant freed slave and the self-loathing Uncle Tom—had been the focus of this middle section. Instead, the movie founders into theatricality with a too-long dinner scene replete with double-crosses and impromptu phrenology lectures.

⁸ The last hour and a half of *Django Unchained* sometimes seems like Tarantino's extended experiment in blood-splatter painting. How would a burst of arterial blood look spraying across a horse's flank? Over a field of unpicked cotton? Onto the white carnation in a dandy's buttonhole? If you unproblematically loved *Inglourious Basterds*, with its multiple endings that nested one gory act of take-that-you-Nazis! retribution inside another, you will probably dig the final stretch of *Django Unchained*. I won't spoil who does what to whom, save to say that lots of bad fates are visited upon lots of bodies. The rhythm begins to stagger as Tarantino can't resist topping his first bloodbath shootout with a second, more comic, more virtuosic bloodbath shootout, or flashing back to that earlier dog-mauling scene just in case we'd forgotten.

⁹ Tarantino's intent may have been to showcase the horrors of slavery, but there's something about his directorial delectation in all these acts of racial violence that left me not just physically but morally queasy. His fascination with repeated acts of graphic retribution puts the viewer in the position of Calvin J. Candie, watching with a cigarette holder and a coconut drink in hand as the mandingoes fight it out.