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“Harsh truths” kept artificially alive are no longer truths

by James Bowman

In yesterday’s *Washington Post* Ann Hornaday has a provocative piece on "Why Tarantino is better than Spielberg at portraying slavery." She refers, of course, to the rival nominees as Best Picture at this year’s Oscars, Mr Spielberg’s *Lincoln* and Mr Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*. Readers of my reviews of these two movies might not be surprised if I were to characterize Ms Hornaday’s critical judgment, as expressed in the headline, as disordered to the point of insanity. It would be uncivil of me to do so, though she herself does not scruple to use the word both of Mr Tarantino’s Grand Guignol and of America herself, said to have become "a global power on the backs of chattel" — which is historical nonsense of a Tarantinian degree. But perhaps we can understand her point of view with the help of the thumbnail sub-head of the website’s link: "*Django* and the pain of slavery: How an over-the-top film rings true." She doesn’t actually mention "the pain of slavery" in the article, but perhaps she means to call *Django* "better. . . at portraying slavery" on the grounds that its over-the-topness is a better representation not of slavery as it actually existed in America’s past but of how it was experienced by the slaves — that is, of its *pain*.

Not that, to reiterate, that’s what she says. What she says is this: "It could be that to capture the perversity of a system of kidnapped human beings who were routinely bought, sold, raped, maimed and murdered, it takes genre filmmaking at its most graphic and hyperbolic. How else can movies make proper symbolic sense of America’s bloodiest, most shameful chapter?" Well, being economic assets to their owners, the slaves were surely not *routinely* murdered, but we’ll let that one pass. The two key words here are "perversity" and "symbolic." *Symbolic* as a modifier of "sense" does not enrich but impoverishes. Ms Hornaday has given up on movies’ making *sense* of anything — and, indeed, most of the ones out of Hollywood have done a remarkably poor job of that for at least a generation — but there must be something left of "sense" *tout court* in "symbolic sense." Mustn’t there?

"Perversity" is even more interesting. This is a moral locating word, a concept that is only useful in describing something contrary to the accepted norms of a particular place and time. Not so long ago, for example, the idea of sexual perversity included a great many things that are now regarded

as perfectly normal. Ms Hornaday's use of "perversity," a word now almost always confined to non-moral contexts (its cousin "perversion" does duty for the few remaining sexual meanings), is itself rather perverse. But it is there to help her cover a rhetorical sleight-of-hand. The whole point about slavery and the way she and others think about it now is that it *wasn't* perverse when it actually existed but perfectly normal, if controversial. From today's vantage point we can regard it as perverse, but only at the cost of refusing to see the Peculiar Institution in the context of its times.

That, of course, is precisely what Mr Tarantino intends in *Django Unchained* by a typical bold anachronism of painting antebellum America in the colors of the spaghetti westerns of a century and more later. Critically speaking, therefore, Ms Hornaday's point amounts to a tautology: Quentin Tarantino is better at making a Tarantino movie than Steven Spielberg is. No surprises there then. But her piece is also an apologia for those who have a political interest in propagating the idea of slavery-as-perversity, since it is a way of keeping slavery alive 150 years after its demise — alive, that is, both as pain for the descendants of those who experienced it, though they have never experienced it themselves, and as guilt for the descendants of the slave-owners and, by easy extension, just white people, although neither they nor (in most cases) their ancestors ever owned slaves themselves. But historical distortion is useful in refreshing the potency of "the race card," or racial blackmail, on which so much of contemporary American politics is based.

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