

A Rhetorical Film Analysis

12 Years a Slave

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Abstract

The film adaptation of the 19th-century memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup is worthy of critical analysis. It is a story of a kidnapped free Negro from New York sold into slavery. Northup endures physical, psychological and emotional torture throughout his twelve years of captivity. Screenwriter John Ridley and director Steve McQueen incorporate many aspects of rhetoric in the presentation of this story including Aristotle's appeals of ethos, logos, and pathos. In addition, concepts of mind images that are analogous to the spoken word as described by Gorgias, and the weight and impact of visualizations, as professed by Longinus, become exposed. The combination of these rhetorical concepts and the application of the rhetoric of display that *12 Years A Slave* illustrates how the brutality of slavery was the underlying cancer of the country in the 19th century.

Introduction

12 Years a Slave is the film adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave*, the 1853 memoir of Solomon Northup. The story is about a free Negro from Saratoga New York, the grandson of a slave, and the son of a free man, who takes on a high paying job as a violinist for a traveling show. During his transit to Washington DC, for the show, Northup is drugged, kidnapped, and then sold into slavery. During the twelve years of the story, Northup undergoes transformation from an educated free man to a physically and emotionally abused slave. It is director, Steve McQueen's intent to present this real-life memoir in a visual and graphical manner as a discussion of human dignity, a fight for soul, and a war for spirit. Released in 2013, *12 Years a Slave* reaches an American audience that is ripe for the discussions of the social, moral, ethical, and political issues that surrounded slavery. Earlier film adaptations, such as Alvin Haley's *Roots*, which aired as a television mini-series in 1977, romanticized slavery in a manner in which Americans accepted it as part of the nation's history. It is with the rhetoric of display that director Steve McQueen exposes the cruelty and brutality of American slavery. The specific dialogue and its delivery open the conversation of how repugnant human slavery is and why the American society today is capable of having an open conversation on the topic.

Northup had all the trappings of a fine American family. He had a wife, two children, and was a successful musician and carpenter. However, most significant, is Northup and his family, were free Negroes in the antebellum. While Northup's grandfather was a slave, his father was not and thus neither was Northup himself. He was a second generation American not only familiar with freedom; he expected it (Northup, 1853). New York and much of the North Eastern region of the United States at the time had released Negroes from the bondages of slavery as far

back at 1799 when the state passed a law for gradual abolition. By mid 1827, all slaves in New York had attained freeman status.

Kidnapping healthy Negroes and reselling them into slavery for the growing cotton industry was a lucrative business in the South. It was common in the decades before the Civil War for kidnappers to use a variety of methods in pursuit of their prey. For Northup, his abductors employed most every means of rhetoric for advancing their goal. They engaged in arrangement and persuasion, including flattery, credibility, situation, language, the arts, and music (Herrick, 2013) to encourage Northup to travel with them to a place where they could ultimately betray him. A slave trader transported Northup to Louisiana, had his name stripped from him and replaced with that of Platt, a runaway slave. Northup then proceeded to endure physical, psychological and emotional torture throughout his twelve years of captivity. During that time, two masters owned him. The first was Ford a mild mannered Baptist preacher and then Epps a conflicted alcoholic who used scripture to justify his abject brutality towards all his slaves.

It was not until 1853 with the help of a Canadian abolitionist that Northup regained his freedom and reunited with his family. Within six months of his freedom, he completed the original book as told to and edited by David Wilson. Thereafter, Northup made appearances in courts in an attempt to prosecute his kidnappers though he was not successful. There were laws that prohibited Negroes from filing lawsuits in Washington DC at the time. For two years following his liberation, Northup lectured throughout the North East in support of the abolitionist movements. Solomon Northup went missing sometime after 1857 and presumed dead by 1863. He never lived to see the Civil War end and persons of color set free.

Audience

One of the challenges of presenting a powerful social and politically moving story as *12 Years a Slave* is verifying the story's authenticity. To do this it is important to revisit the original book. While this essay does not examine the book in a critical manner, it does require some discussion as to why this important story remained quiet for so long. *Twelve Years a Slave* became an obscure book after the civil war. It circulated around the South for a while. At best, the publisher sold approximately 30,000 copies. The book became a ghost record after Northup's disappearance, until 1968 when Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, Professors at Louisiana State University, resurrected it. Their extensive research confirmed the details, time-line, and events described in the original book as accurate. Eakin and Logsdon re-published the book with the original illustrations through the LSU Press. The book went on to have renewed critical acclaim.

In 1976 Shep Morgan, a television producer for the Public Broadcasting System, obtained a planning grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to include *Twelve Years a Slave* into a series on American history. Coincidentally Alex Haley's novel *Roots* aired in 1977 and usurped the need to produce *Twelve Years*. However, by 1982, the novelty and sanitization of *Roots* had passed and PBS contracted with Gordon Parks to direct Avery Brooks in the PBS American Playhouse television film titled *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*. Gordon Parks was the first African American hired for Life Magazine. Parks was also the first black man to direct a major studio feature film *The Learning Tree*. In addition to being a celebrated filmmaker, photographer, and writer, he was known for his activism and campaigning for civil rights. In an interview for the New York Times, Parks said of his directing of *Odyssey*,

Solomon [Northup] was very tolerant in a terrible situation, and very fair in his reporting.

I tried to remain fair in my reporting and not go overboard, although it's very

difficult not to when you know so much happened that was so bad to so many people. But there were things I had to change (Bennetts, 1985).

Parks went on to share with Bennett that the production had five historical advisors assisting on the film but that he felt pressured by the network executives to keep the violence and abuse of slaves toned down. This attitude was a common problem during the later part of the 20th century in attempting to keep the atrocities of slavery in the dark and to keep white people as a viable audience.

The earlier discussion of the book, its author, the questions of credibility of the story, and the challenges of the first film are critical to understanding the importance of the story and the social impact of this film, *12 Years A Slave*. In a time where black men did not possess the complete luxury of free expression Solomon Northup truly went out on a limb to tell his story. One could suspect there was considerable hate towards him as he exposed the sadism and cruelties of slavery of the time. For more than one hundred and sixty years, Northup's message never reached a significantly sized audience. While many historians suggest that *Twelve Years A Slave* is the true account of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Twelve Years A Slave* did not have the same literary success. Tucked away for so many years one can only speculate why this powerful story took so long to make it to the big screen. It took a few influential people who understood rights, justice, and the importance of telling a true story to have a profound effect on a worldwide audience. This story could not stay hidden in a university environment; it needed to reach large audiences via the big screen.

The purpose of a film is to tell a story. Films achieve this by using structured narratives. The narrative is not the storyline but it is the method used to tell the story on the screen. A screenwriter has to transform Northup's written words into dialogue and visual representations.

Along the way, each segment requires arrangement, organization, and presentation. Creating a screenplay includes most every aspect of persuasion available. This particular screenplay would need to affect and change attitudes of millions of people who have been the recipient of a syllogism fallacy regarding slavery. The effect would have to be as profound with this film as it was for Stephen Spielberg's narrative, *Shindler's List*, which brought the psychotic cruelty of Nazi officers onto the big screen.

Before a single sprocket of film rolls past the camera gate, a story becomes a screenplay, a blueprint as to the way the printed word becomes a motion picture. Rarely will the original author create the screenplay, it is usually in the hands of a screenwriter who can interpret the story and convert it to a working plan to manufacture the final picture. Screenwriters in many respects see the process as one of debating issues in a dialectic methodology. Most stories require the examination of both sides of an argument or question. It is here where the screenwriter employs many aspects of the dialectic and rhetoric (Herrick, 2013). Screenwriters also need to take into consideration the occasion and setting in which a film will be viewed. We are not talking about a theater, but about a social, political, and religious climate. The script needs to convince an audience that the message is strong and worthy of their attention.

Transforming Northup's original book into viable screenplay required a writer who, as Aristotle suggested, could construct the arguments and appeals with beliefs shared by speaker and audience as well. For this screenplay to be successful, it would have to employ enthymemes so it could connect with the audience's convictions and engage their emotions (Herrick, 2013). In some respects each of the creative parties involved in making a film with a powerful message are co-rhetors setting up a democratic argument. If we apply Aristotle's rule of placing the enthymeme at the center of the argument, (Herrick, 2013) then the final release of *12 Years a*

Slave requires Northup, the author, John Ridley, the screenwriter, Steven McQueen, the director and Chiwetel Ejiofor the principal actor, and other supporting actors to consider the beliefs, values, and experiences of the audience.

John Ridley, a highly acclaimed screenwriter, reduced Northup's original book to about 130 pages of interpretive material. Within the pages of the script, he identifies all the main characters that are essential to the central theme at the time. Each of the parts are written for a specific actor whom he believed would portray and deliver the message strongest and with greatest emotional appeal. In cooperation with the director, Ridley set the action and movements within the film so they become visual descriptions of what is actually happening. Some scenes are without dialogue or narration. These scenes rely on the audience's prior knowledge to have understanding of importance. However, dialogue is a driving force in *12 Years A Slave*.

Carefully crafted words and prose are adapted to the period of the story. Specific lines spoken and acted by characters at a pivotal moment may become iconic symbol for years to come. One such line is in 1983 Clint Eastwood film *Sudden Impact*, where writer Charles B. Pierce constructs the message "Go ahead, make my day." *12 Years a Slave* has lines that have become symbols of Northup's challenges. The words dig deep into the soul of the audience and effect emotion. Early in the film after Northup is kidnapped, he pleads with his captors explaining that he is a free man, Burch, his captor says with a Southern drawl, "Yah a runaway nigger from Georgia" (Ridley, 2012, p.25). The combination of the hard words and the look on Northup's face lets the audience know that Northup's future is grim. Modern audiences have heard the word nigger before, but in this context, it helps them understand that the word nigger is not only a derogatory term, it is a symbol of what whites understood black slaves to be. Much later on in the film, Epps, the sadistic slave owner, who had whipped the flesh off the back of the

slave girl Eliza, tells Northup, “No Sin! There is no sin! A man does as he pleases with his property” (Ridley, 2012, p. 110). Epps justifies his brutality by reducing the lives of his slaves to that of property.

The screenplay moves on to the hands of a director who interprets the script and begins to plan shots, pacing, and styles of acting. In addition to overseeing technical aspects of the film, the director’s primary task is to coach actors and direct them to powerful performances. Employing each of the artistic proofs- logos, pathos, and ethos, the director will manage the delivery, style, and arrangement of dialogue. The director may also bring in speech and dialect coaches to help the actor develop a certain style of speech so that its linguistic manner is appropriate for the period or occasion within the film (Herrick, 2013). While the director is responsible for a myriad of other duties here, he employs rhetoric as Aristotle did by employing “the faculty of discovering the available means of persuasion” (Herrick, p. 84). As just discussed, the Epps character considers his slaves as property. In a script or book, the word property may have a simple meaning, but when a director adds visuals and directs the delivery of the words, they have a new more powerful meaning. The audience having just seen the blood spray and the flesh splatter as the whip ripped into the young slave girl, may never visualize the word property in the same way again. Words have meaning but when attached to a powerful visual representation evoke emotion. This concept is known as the picture superiority effect. A dual-coding theory developed by Allan Pavio that suggests that concrete concepts presented as images become coded in memory both verbally and “imaginally” (McBride & Doshier, 2002).

Structure of the Film

The structure of the film is in a quasi flashback-chronology. In addition to the screenplay being in chronological order, McQueen structured the production and shooting of the film in

chronological order. The final edit moved certain scenes into the flashback position but the entire film was shot in sequence. Shooting in sequence allows actors to develop their characters emotionally enhancing the performance and impact of each scene (Blakesley & Ebrary, 2003). Because of the highly emotional aspects of this story allowing the actors to develop in this way helps bring greater credibility to the performance.

The film opens with a man in a field reflecting upon an almost magical time where white and black men engaged in discourse with each other as equals. Northup, is in a half-sleep in a slave bunkhouse on a plantation. The deep look of despair on his face contrasts the images in his mind. It is with these types of visualizations that McQueen portrays Northup almost like a spectator in his own life, rather than a participant. In addition, while Northup endures the savage beatings, his memory of a time when he was free is the only thing that keeps the amputation of his spirit from overtaking him.

Embedded within this story are some severe handicaps that a story can have. First, the hero (Northup) is a victim who appears to have no psychological or moral flaws. He is a kind, considerate, intelligent though gullible man who is the object of other's depravity. He is not a complex character, though those around him are. Second, the hero is very passive; he is a slave and is not in control of steps he can take to reach his freedom. He must find intermediaries who will not betray him in the quest for his goal. Third, all of the other non-slave characters have choices. This allows them to move the story along and have more complexity in their character makeup.

The principal issue with the plot is that story's title concludes the outcome. The audience is aware from the beginning of the film that the principle character will be free in twelve years. Ridley and McQueen use the simplicity of the story to their advantage. They bring

the conversation about the horrors of slavery to the forefront. They turn this disadvantage into a persuasive argument against slavery by teasing out the details of Northup's enslavement. They include the process of how plantation owners purchased slaves. The religious climate of the time is also exposed; showing how even those believed to be righteous could not escape being slavers. They also take advantage of the knowledge the modern audience has regarding violence in the cinema. Yet they portray this violence in an intimate manner using the high definition camera to display the blood and flesh in a way that is not animated, but so real the audience can imagine they are the victim.

The first man to purchase Northup was a Baptist Preacher named Ford. His appearance is kind and educated, yet morally challenged by his position as both a preacher and a plantation owner. He takes a liking to Northup who helps him make significant money by restructuring the transportation of his cotton along the rivers. While he can see that Northup is educated and talented he cannot bring himself to believe, that Northup is anything more than a curious and smart slave. On Sundays, Ford preaches to all of his slaves. Reading from the bible, he extols how all men are children of God. Yet, come Monday they become slaves again (Ridley, 2013).

However, the story is not just about Northup becoming a slave, it is a story about all Americans on both sides of the whip. It is only after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, that both the slave and the slave master become free. Unfortunately, the only way for Ridley and McQueen to get the emotional impact necessary to move the conversation forward is to use abject violence and depravity in the film. They include beatings, whippings, starvation, evangelical preaching, rape, hanging, adultery, interracial relations, and implications of child molestation to illustrate the horrors of slavery. Moreover, at all times throughout the film both the hero and the audience feel pressures of the moral issues surrounding these images. These

pressures build to the point where the audience becomes repulsed, yet they cannot look away. It becomes a mixture of sadism and empathy for the audience.

From a production standpoint, this film is low budget. The principal photography took 35 days with one camera on eleven locations in Louisiana and one in Washington DC. Keeping the shooting in sequence as discussed earlier requires the entire cast to be available during the entire production. This helps create the trust relationships the actors need to work highly emotional scenes. It also allows for a certain level of improvising by actors to help enhance performance.

Many scenes are graphically illustrated that one can begin to feel as if they are a character in the film. This is where Ridley and McQueen excel at bringing emotion to the forefront. They construct characters in such a way that each exposes their moral conflicts with their actions. Despite the entire acceptance of slavery during the beginnings of the nation, instinctively everyone involved in it knew slavery to be morally wrong, yet they continued to embrace it. This is a key conversation that Ridley and McQueen open up with Solomon Northup's story. They expose the original sin of the nation. The nation founded upon the principle that all men are created equal and could govern themselves with independent thought. It is because of this treatment that *12 Years a Slave* is a more successful film in delivering its message than the original book did.

There are a number of logical fallacies imposed upon the cinematic audience during the last 120 years regarding slavery in America. Going back to the earliest of films in 1903, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, features happy and affectionate black people who were servants to whites. While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* written in 1852, just a year earlier than *Twelve Years a Slave*, was a fictional slave narrative, it was also a propaganda piece devised for the anti-slavery movement (Gates & Appiah, 2005). However, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* conditioned white American viewers to see slaves

primarily as servants, not as a beaten people. *Gone With the Wind* released in 1939 is a romance novel film with a backdrop on a plantation during the Civil War. This film glorified slavery by portraying “Mammy” as a black servant to a wealthy white woman on a plantation. This portrayal completely negates Mammy’s true position of property. More than a dozen films throughout the 20th century had similar themes of slaves being happy servants to white people.

It was not until Alex Haley’s *Roots* mini-series in 1977 that the horrors of slavery started to see the light. However, as discussed earlier, television executives sanitized *Roots* for popular television audiences. The nation having just gotten through the civil rights era of the 1960s was not ready, or so the television networks believed, to see the full truth of slavery. It is not until 1997 when Steven Spielberg releases *Amistad* that truths about slavery are taken seriously by the public. *Amistad* is the story of a Cuban slave ship on way to Rhode Island that goes adrift and lands in Connecticut after its slave cargo revolts. It takes a director like Steven Spielberg, who wields power in the cinema, to expose a story like *Amistad* the way he did with *Shindler’s List*. *Amistad* paved the way for *Django Unchained* released in 2012 where the graphic issues of slavery are fully exposed. For as long as slavery existed in America, that is how long it had taken the American cinema to bring the truths of slavery to the big screen. It is now that the audience was ready to listen to the raw and horrifying story of Solomon Northup’s *12 Years A Slave*.

Summary

Throughout this essay, we have discussed the impact transforming an obscure book into a blockbuster film. Yet this film is only successful because the filmmakers adapted the story to take into consideration an audience that was prepared socially and intellectually to understand its meaning. Yet one can only wonder what long-term affect *12 Years A Slave* will have. According

to the Internet Movie Data Base, the film has grossed almost \$180 million in box office sales, reaching more than 20 million people. We could speculate that this film will open the conversation wide enough to discuss modern slavery. Research estimates there are more than 36 million people in the world today that work without pay and traded as slaves (Middleberg, 2014). While becoming aware of modern slavery is important, the film maker's goal was to expose the atrocities of slavery in America prior to the Civil War.

Individual character analysis helps understand more of the complexities and issues surrounding slave owners, plantation managers, the slaves, as well as Solomon Northup himself, that are beyond the scope of this essay. Yet it is worth entertaining that exercise. We know that Northup disappeared approximately three years after he told his story. No historical record traces him, his wife, or surviving family. This story is powerful; it evokes emotion, and challenges the audience to question the morals and ethics of all people involved in slavery. It also challenges the relationship American Protestant religion played in supporting the actions of slave owners.

Screenwriter John Ridley and director Steve McQueen incorporated many aspects of rhetoric in the presentation of this story including Aristotle's appeals of ethos, logos, and pathos. In addition, concepts of mind images that are analogous to the spoken word as described by Gorgias, and the weight and impact of visualizations, as professed by Longinus, became exposed throughout the film. The combination of these rhetorical concepts and the application of the rhetoric of display succinctly allow *12 Years A Slave* to illustrate how the hypocrisy and brutality of slavery was the underlying cancer of the country in the 19th century. The efforts to tell this story and the medium used support that film, is one of the most powerful tools available for delivering a message to large audiences.

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