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*12 Years a Slave* and the Twenty First Century Filmic Slavery Experience

فيلم 12 عاماً من العبودية والتجربة السينمائية للعبودية في القرن الواحد والعشرين  
*12 Years a Slave* et l'expérience cinématographique de l'esclavage au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle

Randa Sellali - University of Algiers2

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### *12 Years a Slave* et l'expérience cinématographique de l'esclavage au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle

RANDA SELLALI

UNIVERSITY OF ALGIERS<sup>2</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Entering the twenty-first century, American attitudes towards slavery were still inconsistent, and many preferred to avoid the subject of slavery and race. A 2011 CNN poll showed that when asked about the Civil War, around one in four Americans sympathized more with the Confederacy than with the Union. And 42 per cent believed slavery was not the main reason the Confederacy seceded. These statistics were made during a time when the first black American president was in office, and many believed America was entering a post-racial period. Yet, several scholars argued that Obama's presidency only made things worse for people of color. Historian Michelle Alexander affirmed that "the popular narrative that emphasizes the death of slavery and Jim Crow and celebrates the nation's triumph over race with the election of Barack Obama, is dangerously misguided." (Alexander 12). Yet, even if Obama's presidency did not advance the situation of black Americans, it influenced reflections on racial progress since the days of the Civil Rights Movement as well as questions on the legacies of slavery. Inspired by the contemporary racial situation in the United States and motivated by his interest in black history, McQueen began looking into making a film that tells the story of a free black man kidnapped into slavery. McQueen focused on aspects of Northup's story that spoke to contemporary racial issues in America and emphasized injustice, brutality, and despair. McQueen noted in an interview with NPR that evidence of slavery is present in everyday life, "all you've got to do is walk in the streets." He highlighted the black prison population, poverty, poor education, and mental health problems in the black community which all "goes down to what happened in slavery." –"12 Years A Slave" Was A Film That 'No One Was Making, NPR Magazine – In the film, the South, or the plantation, stands for America today, a beautiful place where horrible things happen. McQueen hoped that contemporary viewers could resonate with the story of a black man whose freedom is taken away from

him while living in a time when the largest portion of the prison population is black. The film served as a reminder that similar to the past, black Americans can still lose their freedom anytime, even if such freedom is protected by the law. The film's content echoed popular interests and academic trends, with a timely schedule, being released a few weeks after the anti-racist organization Black Lives Matter was founded.

## **1. Film in Historical Research**

Scholarly research into the use of film in historical research, cinematic representations of slavery, and Hollywood's handling of race is wide-ranging because film can provide an important source of historical knowledge. Historical films can embody historical thinking and, by so doing, contribute to the understanding of the past. They "reflect and respond to the marketplace and thus audience," noted historians Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, which makes them a suitable tool to discover and investigate societies. (7) Historian Gianluca Fantoni perfectly described the relationship between cinema and the world it emerges from, stating that "cinema, rather, is like a piece of blotting paper, absorbing ideas, cultural influences, and controversies emanating from the world in which it was produced." (27) This latter makes the film an instrument at the historian's disposal that enables them to yield valuable insights into cultural, social, and political history.

Using film as a primary source in historical research consists of analyzing the historical and cultural context in which it was produced and consumed, as well as textual analysis of the film's content. Investigating the institutional and cultural contexts of the production of films provides "a glimpse into the social and cultural underpinnings of a time and of place." (Dolski 3) As Sian Barber explains, "Films can reveal a myriad of attitudes, not simply of those who are in the film, but also those of directors, scriptwriters, producers, and financiers." She argued that films are also most useful to understand how past audiences respond to "issues, characters, and ideals." (1)

Using film as a primary source is an approach that was further advanced in recent years by many film historians such as James Chapman, Sue Harper, Jeffrey Richards, and others. The significance of this approach for historians using feature film is that it enables them to unveil "evidence of values and attitudes from the time the film was made, the explication in story from the contemporary ideas about the social and sexual roles of men and women, the concepts of work and leisure, class and race, peace and war." (Aldgate and Richards 61-62)

The examination of the reception of the film will employ the historical materialist approach to media reception proposed by Janet Staiger in *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. This approach “attempts to illuminate the cultural meanings of texts in specific times and social circumstances to specific viewers, and it attempts to contribute to discussions about the spectatorial effects of films by moving beyond text-centered analyses.” (162–74) The film’s reception is conceived as an event that is reconstructed through locating its historical traces.

## 2. The Northup Narrative

From its first screening, “12 Years a Slave” was unanimously well-received by both critics and viewers, ultimately winning three Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and many others. Consequently, the film had a significant influence on popular perceptions of slavery. Critics credited it with revising older myths of the Southern plantation and ending the dominance of characters like Scarlett O’Hara over the popular imagination of Southern slavery. The film’s significance lies in Northup’s memoir and its detailed description of everyday life in slavery. McQueen recreated these descriptions with texture and sweep, emphasizing scenes of slavery’s extreme privations and cruelties, but also its work rhythms and routines, from sunup to sundown, along with the unsettling intimacies it produced among the owners and the owned.

The film is adapted from Solomon Northup’s 1853 autobiography, originally titled “Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853.” Northup, a free-born black family man from Saratoga, New York, was abducted by two white men who lured him with a work opportunity in a Washington circus before selling him into slavery. Throughout his 12 years in captivity, Northup never relinquished hope of regaining his freedom. He utilized his skills and intelligence to serve kind masters and endure the cruelties of more violent ones, enduring multiple sales during his enslavement. (Solomon Northup)

Compared to other slave narratives, Northup’s account of slavery is exceptional because he was able to interact with various people in the South, from the slaves he lived with to the different slave masters he worked for. Additionally, his skill as a fiddler granted him access to the region’s Great Houses, allowing him to familiarize himself with many important details of the white social structure. As an intellectual with diverse life experiences,

Northup provided detailed descriptions and reflections on slavery in the deep South that were unparalleled in other slave narratives, particularly since most others were set in the upper South. His background in farming and artisanal work is reflected in the meticulous descriptions he provided in his narrative.

Another significance of Northup's narrative is that, unlike other antebellum narratives that depicted the slave's journey to freedom, his story was one of freedom to slavery and then back to freedom. This journey completely changed his perspective on slavery and the life of a free black man. (Fiske et al., 81-114)

During his time in the South, Northup attempted to regain his freedom by writing to his family and friends several times. In the narrative, he mentions three attempts to communicate with his family, which were successful, but only the last one resulted in his rescue by attorney Henry B. Northup. The story of his rescue created a national sensation. On January 20, 1853, *The New York Daily Times* ran a huge front-page story summarizing Northup's kidnapping and recovery from slavery. Following such a sensation and to expose the struggles of slavery to the public, advancing the abolitionist cause, as well as condemning his kidnappers, Northup soon wrote and published his story. The narrative became part of the antislavery movement, especially after Northup began giving talks throughout the country and Canada and eventually became involved in the Underground Railroad, helping slaves make their way to freedom.

Despite its initial popularity, Northup's narrative soon went out of print and disappeared from public consumption until 1969, when historians Joseph Logsdon and Sue Eakin republished it with the Louisiana State University Press. Since then, the book has been used in classrooms and was known mostly among those interested in slave narratives. It was not until McQueen made his film that most Americans became aware of the Northup story. However, McQueen was not the first filmmaker to turn the story into moving images. (Ibid. 123, 145).

### **3. Solomon Northup's Odyssey**

The first film adaptation of Northup's story, "Solomon Northup's Odyssey," which aired on PBS in 1984, was directed by Gordon Parks. In an interview with *The New York Times* on February 11, 1985, he justified some of the omissions he made to the story, such as Northup's lynching attempt, by his intention "to make [the film] bearable for people to look at it... I wanted to minimize the violence in it if I could, and still tell the truth." Nonetheless,

Parks complained of the pressure he was under from the producers and the historical consultants who were, in his words, always “breathing over your shoulder.”

Parks’ adaptation avoided the violence and brutality of slavery depicted in the narrative but focused on the lives of the slaves in their quarters. The slave community is shown as united and supportive of one another. Rather than focusing on Northup’s story individually, the film tracked his attitude changes and integration into the community. Northup’s integration into the slave community turns him into a leader, as he shares his knowledge and skill with his fellow slaves. Even when he is rescued, the film shows him continuing the mission. He does not leave without a word, as in the McQueen version. Rather, he takes his time saying goodbye to all his companions on the Epps plantation and tells them, “I wish I could take everybody.” As Northup and an old slave say their goodbyes, the old man tells him, “These folks are in your hands now, you tell somebody about us, you tell them to send help.” Northup responds, “I promise you as long as I’m alive,” in a clear reference by the director to Northup’s abolitionist and underground railway activities once back North.

The film had several other instances where the director took creative liberty and departed from the original story. These changes were a result of the contemporary social and political context of the film’s making. For example, a heavy influence of the Blaxploitation films could be observed and is demonstrated in the fact that the actor playing Solomon, Avery Brooks, is often shown with his shirt off, exposing his muscular body. The emphasis on Solomon’s romantic relationship with Jenny (Patsy in the narrative) and her sexual relationship with her master, Epps, are other influences of the Blaxploitation films which were extremely popular in the 1970s.

The violent nature of slavery is toned down significantly when compared to both the original narrative and McQueen’s adaptation, as will be shown in the following sections. The filmmakers aimed to reflect the works of contemporary historians by keeping the focus of the story on the slave community and eliminating the violence of slavery described in the narrative whenever possible, making slavery and Northup’s experience appear far removed from historical reality but reflecting the comfort levels of American audiences at the time.

#### **4. The Obama Presidency as a Historical Context**

The Obama presidency was marked by extensive scholarship that questioned the notion of a racially egalitarian society. In “Racism without Racists,” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argued that throughout his presidency, “Obama always tried to avoid seeming too black.” Such political choices prevented him from having a clear and strong response to racist events. Throughout his first term, “the president said less about race than any president since 1961.” As far as race relations are concerned, what happened in the United States, argued Michelle Alexander in “The New Jim Crow,” is that since the collapse of Jim Crow what changed “has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language, we use to justify it.” She elaborates that America entered an era of color-blindness, where direct discrimination based on race was no longer permissible but was substituted with the use of the criminal justice system to categorize people of color as “criminals” and discriminate against them with a legal pretext.

From 2010 to 2015, the United States witnessed its highest rates of incarceration, mainly of black Americans. These rates and the ongoing police brutality against black Americans have given rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. A social media hashtag went viral following the death of Trayvon Martin, who was shot and killed in February 2012 by a white man, George Zimmerman, while walking back to his home. The incident demonstrated that the dispensability of black lives is not exclusive to law enforcement. The incident was unfortunately followed by many others in the following years.

In this heated political and social environment, historian Edward Baptist released his book, “The Half Has Never Been Told,” which explored the expansion of slavery in the United States following independence and used source materials ranging from slave narratives, plantation records, newspapers, and politicians’ statements. The book offered a new understanding of American history as it probes the evolution and moderation of America and the exploitation of slaves to build the American economy. It told the story of slavery and the slave economy through the eyes of the enslaved people and explored their connections to the political, economic, cultural, and demographic development as the central story. Chapter five of the book explores how “the punishing system” increased cotton production in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana between 1800 and 1860, following the invention of the cotton gin. As the planters needed to increase their productivity to meet the demands of the market, “the whip drove men and women to turn all of their minds to the task of picking faster and faster.”



McQueen's portrayal of the labor system on the Epps plantation, including working from sunrise to sundown with minimum breaks, the daily weighing of cotton picked by slaves, and the whipping of those who do not pick enough cotton compared to the previous day are validated by the testimonies that Baptist records in his book.

With these scholarly revelations, calls for reparations for slaves' families rose back to the surface. An article written by Ta-Nehisi Coates, for *The Atlantic* magazine in its June 2014 issue, was credited for rekindling a national discussion on the reparation of American slavery and institutional racism. The essay exposes how slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and federally backed housing policies systematically robbed African Americans of their possessions and prevented them from accruing intergenerational wealth. He argued that the idea of reparations is frightening to many, not because of the financial aspect, but because it "threatens something much deeper – America's heritage, history, and standing in the world." A vision that McQueen adopted while promoting his movie, asserting that facing the history of slavery is the only way that America can move forward. He even suggested that it is time for the United States and other countries involved in Atlantic slavery to apologize, as did several African presidents, so nations can go forward. (Gates 189)

## **5. Solomon Northup through McQueen's Lens**

### **5.1. McQueen's Reflection on Slavery's Impact**

In his film, McQueen chose to portray a sharp contrast between Northup's life before and after his kidnapping to emphasize the effect of slavery on black life, both in the 1850s and in contemporary times. What McQueen wanted viewers to remember was not Northup's struggle to make a living in the North, but rather his survival from slavery in the South and his ability to hold on to hope despite the violence and despair. Northup's unjustified captivity symbolizes all the African Americans wrongly convicted and incarcerated due to racialized policies. From the beginning, McQueen has his black viewers relating to the struggles of the film's protagonist with their own in contemporary America.

One of the strongest moments in the film is a silent scene near the end of the film where Ejiófor stands on the Epps plantation with his body facing the camera, glances away from the horizon and then looks directly into the camera with a look in his deep eyes filled with sorrow and agony. A look that conveys the struggle of generations of slaves and their will to survive, feelings which again many black viewers can easily relate to. Actress Alfre

Woodard, Mrs. Shaw in the film, declared in an interview that the scene was McQueen's way of relating the historical treatment of his film to all contemporary concerns and making his audiences wonder where they stand on all those issues.

## **5.2. Too Brutal or Just Real?**

The magnitude of violence and brutality that enslaved African Americans experienced are the main focus of the film's depiction of slavery. Whipping is part of the slave's daily routine on the Epps plantation. Yet, such violence is introduced earlier in the film in the slave pen, where a confused Northup wakes up in shackles, to be whipped by a slave trader. The latter insists that Northup is a Georgia runaway and beats him with a paddle until it breaks and then continues with a whip, as Northup insists that he is a free man. The scene ends with Northup crying for help while looking from his cell window as the State Capitol building looms on the horizon. A view that captured the helplessness of a state and a legal system that existed hand in hand with a slave pen and is unable to protect the life of black citizens.

One of the most memorable images, and most brutal scenes in the film, is Northup's lynching attempt after he beats an overseer, in self-defence. Northup hangs from a tree holding on to dear life with only his toes barely reaching the muddy ground keeping the noose around his neck from choking him, his arms and legs tied and his eyes almost popping out. The viewers are exposed to such horrors for three minutes consisting of a mix of long and medium shots edited to appear to circle Northup's hanging body. The way McQueen chose to depict this scene is slightly different from how Northup described it in his narrative. McQueen deliberately exaggerated it to express the dispensability of black life under slavery and even in modern times.

The cinematography and editing of the scene added to its intensity, especially when combined with the absence of music. The only sound viewers can hear is that of Northup's difficult breathing, his toes as they touch the mud, the sound of the wind, crickets, and children playing in the background. While Northup is on the verge of death, life continues as usual in the background with slaves doing their daily chores and children playing. The only person who intervenes is a female slave who quickly enters the scene, gives Northup a sip of water, wipes his face and quickly retrieves back. The length of the scene, although extremely uncomfortable for viewers, reflects the central metaphor of the film. Throughout his 12 years as a slave, Northup's life hangs between life and death.

The other overwhelmingly violent scenes in the film involve not Northup but Patsy, a female slave that we meet on the Epps plantation. Unfortunately for her, Patsy catches the interest of her white master and falls victim to his sexual desires and his wife's rage and jealousy. The wife violently assaults Patsy several times in the movie. But the most brutal violence occurs in a scene where Epps, the plantation owner and slave master, suspects that Patsy is having an affair with another plantation owner. Although Patsy begs for mercy explaining that she only went to Mr. Shaw's plantation to ask Mrs. Shaw for some soap, which she brings out of her pocket after Mrs. Epps has refused to give her any, Epps still orders her whipping and has her stripped and tied to a pole to be whipped. After her beating, Patsy blames Northup for not having taken her life, as she has asked him in an earlier scene.

In his focus on exposing the violence and horror of slavery through Northup's eyes, McQueen stayed away from any signs of benevolence. The slaves are only shown working in the fields all day or doing different chores on the plantation. Everything in the film represented violence, "even dancing. It represented violence because it perpetuated black subjugation," noted historian Kellie Jackson in a review of the film.

Speaking of the brutality and the graphic violence in the film, McQueen noted that it is minor compared to the book with only five acts of violence in total, out of a film which is two hours and eleven minutes. Replying to a question in an interview with his historical consultant, on whether he thinks the Patsy whipping scene might have been too much and too brutal to see, McQueen affirmed, "Either I was making a movie about slavery or I wasn't, and I decided I wanted to make a movie about slavery."

Yet, McQueen's focus on exposing the brutalities and violence of slavery made him neglect to portray the slave community. The film also lacks any portrayal of slave resistance, especially when compared to the original text, which the filmmakers confirmed they stayed very close to, and the Gordon Parks film where Northup never stops thinking and talking about running away. This might be a result of McQueen's choice of exposing the horrors of slavery and showing Americans aspects they did not know about or at least had not seen in a movie before. He might also have taken into consideration contemporary circumstances. Aware his film was going to be released in a racially intense moment, he focused his attention on gaining audiences' sympathies with Northup and having them relate to their own but avoided the possibility of inciting violence by portraying resistance.

## 6. Reception and Influence

Reception and Influence 12 Years a Slave was generally very well received by scholars, critics, and the general public. The film received much attention from academics who used their expertise in their reviews and discussions. When asked about the impact the film would have on people, historian Eric Foner thought the film was “much more real, to choose a word like that, than most of the history you see in the cinema.” The historian highlighted some touches which were added to the film making it close to “the real world of slavery.” The critical reception of the film was also almost unanimously positive. Metacritic, a review aggregator, assigned the film an average score of 96 out of 100 based on 57 reviews from mainstream critics. A score that is considered “universal acclaim,” making it one of the best-reviewed films of 2013. 12 Years a Slave was widely compared to other slavery films made since the 1970s. It was considered “an artist’s rebuke to Quentin Tarantino’s high-pitched, luridly extravagant Django Unchained,” and “a necessary corrective” to its antics by Variety magazine.

The brutality and the violence of the film were received and interpreted differently by critics. For some, it was a way to revise older idyllic representations and expose slavery as a system that “destroyed everyone’s humanity, from the hand that wielded the whip to the back that was scarred by it,” but for others, it was an unnecessary exaggeration that made the film uncomfortable to watch. (David Fear, Time Out, October 14, 2013) Despite such criticism, McQueen’s film had a strong influence on the popular imagination of slavery. The film’s near-unanimous acclaim was a first in the history of films on slavery. Critics’ labeling of the film as a complete revision of the plantation myth was also a first.

## Conclusion

12 Years a Slave by Steve McQueen served as a reminder and a wake-up call for American racial consciousness. McQueen exposed his film’s viewers to the horrors of slavery and the struggles of enslaved people, leaving them to reflect on their contemporary race problem. The film was, by both viewers and critics’ accounts, a success in reversing older representations of plantation slavery and replacing the oversimplified and romanticized vision of the Old South with a more realistic and closer-to-the-truth representation. On December 2023, the film was among the twenty-five films added by the Library of Congress to the National Film Registry. The films are chosen each year for their cultural, aesthetic, and historic significance.

As Northup's story in slavery ends with his rescue, McQueen chose an open end to his film, without telling viewers what happens after Northup is reunited with his family, what happens to the slaves he left on the Epps plantation, and all the others he met while in the South. Viewers are left to think of all the slaves who could not make their way to freedom. McQueen also left the way open for other filmmakers to continue making films on true accounts of slavery which reveal the struggles of the millions of men and women enslaved. The influence of the film was shortly seen in other slave biography films being made, such as *Birth of a Nation* (2016) which examined the famous 1831 revolt led by Nat Turner in Virginia, and *Harriet* (2019), a biography of Harriet Tubman and her escape from slavery.

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## Abstract

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The 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first black president in American history was described as a historic moment and a “quantum leap in the racial progress of the United States” (Los Angeles Times, November 5, 2008). Obama’s victory influenced reflections on race relations, questions on the legacies of slavery, and calls for social and political movements to advance the lives of black Americans. The latter marked a return of slavery to popular culture. Filmmakers went back to the days of slavery and emphasized its cruelty, violence, and exploitative nature. Among these films was Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013). McQueen noted that traces of slavery are still present in America and are evidenced by the black prison population, poverty, poor education, and mental health problems in the black community. These issues needed a platform “and that platform for me as an artist was cinema,” declared McQueen (“12 Years A Slave” Was A Film That “No One Was Making,” NPR magazine). This paper will discuss the film’s direct ties to the contemporary political and social circumstances of African Americans, arguing that *12 Years a Slave* portrayed the complexities of the institution of slavery and, in doing so, defined the complexity of contemporary race relations in the Obama era.

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## Keywords

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Black Americans, Cinema, Race relations, Reception, Slavery

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### مستخلص

انتخاب باراك أوباما سنة 2008 كأول رئيس أسود فالتاريخ الأمريكي وصف بأنه لحظة تاريخية و “قفزة نوعية في تاريخ العلاقات العرقية فالولايات المتحدة”. كما أترفوز أوباما على العلاقات العرقية وأثار عدة تساؤلات حول إرث العبودية، وأدى إلى مناداة لحركات سياسية واجتماعية لتطویر وضعیة الأفارقة السود. هذا الأخير أدى إلى عودة موضوع العبودية إلى الشاشة. عاد صانعو الأفلام إلى أيام العبودية وركزوا على طبيعتها العنيفة والاستغلالية. من بين هذه الأفلام هناك فيلم 12 عاماً من العبودية لستيف ماكوين (2013).

وأشار ماكوين أن آثار العبودية مزلت موجودة في أمريكا وتتجلى في: النسبة العالية للمساكين السود، الفقر، سوء التعليم ومشاكل الصحة النفسية في مجتمع السود بأمريكا. كانت هذه القضايا بحاجة إلى منصة “وهذه المنصة بالنسبة لي كفنّان، كانت السينما” قال ماكوين. سيناقش هذا المقال الروابط المباشرة للفيلم مع الظروف السياسية والاجتماعية المعاصرة للأمريكيين من أصل إفريقي مبرّزاً الحجة أن الفيلم صور تعقيدات تاريخ العبودية وبهذا يحدد درجة تعقيد العلاقات العرقية المعاصرة في عهد الرئيس أوباما.

## كلمات مفتاحية

الأمريكيون السود، السينما، العلاقات العرقية، الاستقبال، العبودية

**Résumé**

L'élection de Barack Obama en 2008 en tant que premier président noir de l'histoire américaine a été décrite comme un moment historique et un «saut quantique dans le progrès racial des États-Unis» (Los Angeles Times, 5 novembre 2008). La victoire d'Obama a influencé les réflexions sur les relations raciales, les questions sur les héritages de l'esclavage et les appels à des mouvements sociaux et politiques pour faire avancer la vie des Noirs américains. Ce dernier a marqué le retour de l'esclavage dans la culture populaire. Les cinéastes sont retournés à l'époque de l'esclavage et ont souligné sa cruauté, sa violence et sa nature d'exploitation. Parmi ces films figurait «12 Years a Slave» (2013) de Steve McQueen. McQueen a noté que les traces de l'esclavage sont toujours présentes en Amérique et sont mises en évidence par la population carcérale noire, la pauvreté, le manque d'éducation et les problèmes de santé mentale dans la communauté noire. Ces questions avaient besoin d'une plate-forme «et cette plate-forme pour moi en tant qu'artiste était le cinéma», a déclaré McQueen. Cet article discutera des liens directs du film avec les circonstances politiques et sociales contemporaines des Afro-Américains, en faisant valoir que «12 Years a Slave» dépeint les complexités de l'institution de l'esclavage.

**Mots-clés**

Noirs américains, Cinéma, Relations raciale, réception, réception