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**Representing race on screen: The concept of African-American pain through the lens of European-American filmmakers**

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of European-American filmmakers**

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Afro-Američané, film, stereotypy, americký film, rasa, Julian Schnabel, Basquiat, Quentin Tarantino, Nespoutaný Django, Tate Taylor, Černobílý svět, Hollywood

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**Key words**

African-American, film, stereotypes, american film, race, Julian Schnabel, Basquiat, Quentin Tarantino, Django Unchained, Tate Taylor, The Help, Hollywood

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## Abstrakt

Při tvorbě filmu nebo jakéhokoliv jiného uměleckého díla jsou za zásadní považovány způsoby zobrazení věcí, vnímavost a režisérská vize. Pro většinu režisérů a scénáristů začíná proces vyprávění osobním zážitkem, pozorným sledováním nebo podrobným studiem dané látky. Speciálně v případě historických filmů bývají filmaři podrobováni přísným zkoumáním jejich děl ze strany publika - především z toho důvodu, že jsou často posuzovány na základě míry autenticity. Ke zvláště tvrdému a nemilosrdnému rozboru jsou pak předurčeny filmy natočené bělošskými režiséry, které se věnují afro-americkým tématům, a to především z důvodu krutosti, které museli historicky Afro-Američané ve Spojených státech čelit. Tři filmy, kterým se věnuje tato práce - *Basquiat* (rež. Julian Schnabel, 1996), *Nespoutaný Django* (rež. Quentin Tarantino, 2012) a *Černobílý svět* (rež. Tate Taylor, 2011) přesně zapadají do této kategorie, jelikož režiséři těchto filmů jsou právě běloši a jejich filmy byly označeny jako kontroverzní. Základem této kontroverze je totiž schopnost jmenovaných režisérů nakládat s tématy otroctví, boje za lidská práva nebo segregace, jelikož jsou některými lidmi považováni za "nevhodné" na to, aby mohli vyprávět své vizuální příběhy z afro-amerického pohledu.

Současná produkce hollywoodských studií je závislá primárně na výdělcích filmů: čím více diváků film přitáhne, tím více je považován za úspěšný. Jsme tedy často svědky zjednodušování, či vynechání některých událostí, či dokonce užívání stereotypů ve vztahu k afro-americkým postavám, jako by se filmy snažily divákům naservírovat co nejstravitelnější zážitek s cílem především je pobavit. Hollywoodská studia jsou za tento postup často kritizována, s důrazem na nedostatek příležitostí pro afro-americké herce a filmaře, kterým je nabízeno malé množství rolí a projektů. Zatímco toto je nesporný fakt převažující i v dnešním filmovém průmyslu (i přes viditelnou tendenci, která má opačný přístup), jsou afro-americká témata stále považována za citlivá, pokud se ocitnou v rukou bělošských autorů. Hlavní otázkou ovšem zůstává původ takovýchto pocitů, jelikož se může zdát, že negativní přístup afro-americké komunity k afro-americkým tématům v rukou bělošských režisérů pouze umocňuje dojem "nevhodnosti" a obrací tedy celou kontroverzi proti jejím vlastním obětem.

## Abstract

When creating a film or any other form of art, ideas of representation, perception and directorial vision are crucial. For most directors and screenwriters, the process of storytelling begins with a personal experience, a close observation, or a profound study of a given matter. In the case of historical films especially, filmmakers are subjected to strict examinations of their oeuvres on the side of the viewers - mainly since they are often judged based on the level of their authenticity. Moreover, if such films are directed by European-American directors and depict African-Americans in the United States in regards to numerous atrocities their community was subjected to throughout the history, these examinations tend to be far more rigorous and less forgiving. Three films examined in this thesis, Julian Schnabel's *Basquiat* (1996), Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) and Tate Taylor's *The Help* (2011) could be labeled as fulfilling all criteria of this category, as they are all directed by Caucasian directors and all were by various film end-users considered in the least as controversial. The crucial argument then lies in the questioned ability of these directors of tackling themes of slavery, civil rights era, or segregation - as they are by some viewed as "not appropriate" to tell their visual stories from an African-American perspective.

The current Hollywood studios production relies heavily on box office results: the more viewers a film attracts, the more successful it is considered. Therefore, we often witness film plots that simplify, or omit certain occurrences, and even apply stereotypes to African-American characters, as if the intention of such films was to cater to the audience with the most digestible narratives, always adhering to the strategy of entertaining the viewers. Hollywood studios are often targeted for such approach, pinpointing the uneven opportunities for African-American actors and filmmakers who are being offered a significantly smaller number of roles and projects. Whilst this is an indisputable fact that is prevalent even in today's film industry (despite the visible tendency that proves otherwise), African-American themes are still considered sensitive in hands of non-African-American filmmakers. Nevertheless, the major question lies in the source of such feelings, as it seems that the negative response from African-American community to African-

American narratives being told from white perspective only strengthens the notion of “inappropriateness” and renders the entire controversy to be blamed on its very proclaimed victims.

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## 1 / Introduction

In American cinema, as it is discussed, reviewed and analyzed nowadays, the category of African-American, or simply “black” cinema, filmmakers and plot subjects is prevalent. A film made by an African-American filmmaker - regardless of its genre, be it a documentary, a feature, or a short - will from at least one perspective be regarded and labeled as being “special”, or rather “specific” based on the racial presupposition of its maker and therefore it will unquestionably be treated as “different”. Seldom we encounter a film director being referred to as “white”, unless it is done so in order to stress the juxtaposition of the subject matter that he or she employs in their on-screen presence. Specifically, this is the case of the African-American story-lines that are made into moving pictures by non-African-American filmmakers. Given by the historical context, as well as by the current socio-political situation in the United States, the above mentioned crossing seems to provoke the most visible emotions, subject of which is not only a constant calling for a comparison between the “white” and the “non-white” approach to various issues captured on film, but also a severe criticism and protests against the sole inappropriateness of working with themes that are seen as non-experienced by the author.

The primary focus of the thesis lies in its analysis of various approaches of European-American film directors to topics that are often understood as “owned” by the African-American community of the United States. This “ownership” that numerous members of the community proclaim then evokes expected anti-reactions to the mostly Hollywood-produced films, calling such method of telling visual stories unjustifiable. In the thesis, the criticism of such films should create a counterpart to the depiction of diverse manners, in which the directors approach their subjects and thus also become a vital component of the overall analysis. Also, aside from discussing the directors’ input and their motivations for authoring audiovisual stories told from the perspective of African-American characters, the motivations of African-American actors who portray them should be addressed, as they

automatically become the key representatives of the given films in the eyes of the African-American viewers. To them, the actors represent allies - or in some cases betrayers - since they are presupposed to share common experiences, or at least feel the responsibility to create veritable images of their own figures in the light of the previous diminishing imitations.

Overall, three different viewpoints will be analyzed in the thesis - all as seen through the lens of a different film. Whilst they all focus on the issue of capturing the African-American pain on the big screen - as seen by a different European-American director in every case; each is specific for its treatment of the subject, as well as for the critical reception that accompanied the given film's making. Besides encapsulating different historical periods and locales, they also vary in the aims that the directors classified for themselves as crucial when deciding to create a film centering on individual moments of African-American history. The analysis of the three films and the filmmakers involved in the process of transforming the stories from their written version to the on-screen version is carried out mainly through direct interviews with the directors as the key representatives of each motion picture, as well as through countless critiques, reviews and comments made by both members of African-American and European-American communities, mainly in the United States.

It should be noted that for the purposes of this thesis, a film director is understood as the primary figure responsible for a film, meaning the final result of the process of transforming a written script into a series of moving images. Naturally, there are other factors that should be taken into consideration when analyzing a moving picture - in the end, films have been from their beginnings seen as products of collective artistic creation, tying together various professions that could hardly exist without each other. Yet, a film director should still function as a unifying element, being the head of the orchestra that was provided to him or her by a film studio, a producer, or a financier based on the unique vision he or she is expected to encapsulate the entire project with. A director is the one who is by general public treated as the key maker of an oeuvre and therefore should be capable of bearing both praise and criticism and should accept the role of the film's

defender in public's eye, disregarding the fact whether the film originated in his or her mind or not. Besides the ensemble of filmmakers that stand behind the complex and unified authorship, there are also other factors that dramatically shape the final product audiences purchase tickets for. In the United States specifically, the system of Hollywood studios as film producers supports a certain kind of dictatorship that is generated as a side product of the financial base the studios provide. Nevertheless, whilst the studios are capable of forcing the attachment of actor "stars", positioning the film towards a specific target audience group, or choosing a the date of premiere with the view of generating profit, the director is always provided with a choice of accepting of or withdrawing from the initial stimulus to cooperate on the making of a film on a given subject. Therefore, even if certain more or less minor elements that are inseparable from the presented film become center points of discussions afterwards, directors should always be expectant to face the critical response. Therefore, throughout this thesis, a director will be treated as the sole representative of the views that are depicted and portrayed in a given film because it is presupposed that he or she is either fully or partially responsible for their presence.

The basic argument of this thesis stems from three particular approaches of three different American film directors. The films that each of them are linked to all employ specific historical issues of the African-American community in the United States. First and historically the most distant one is slavery, as it is captured in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, a 2012 film that combines elements of western and comedy and yet tackles a number of accurate and very painful occurrences of the slave trade in antebellum American South. The second primary resource of the thesis is the 2011 film *The Help*, written and directed by Tate Taylor and set in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement era, revolving around the characters of African-American housemaids and their white employers. The final one of the three key researched films is Julian Schnabel's 1996 biopic *Basquiat*, which is based on the life and professional career of the painter who became one of the iconic artists of the 1980s. Besides concentrating on dissimilar historical periods, each mentioned piece of filmmaking also originated in a contrasting method of transforming written words into moving images. As will be examined throughout the thesis, these methods are often also responsible for generating a particular critical response, as they shape films from the

very beginning. Whilst both *Django Unchained* (Tarantino) and *Basquiat* (Schnabel) are based on original screenplays, they diverge in the sources for the plot-lines: Tarantino's script emerged from his own knowledge, research and pure storytelling and Schnabel's screenplay was based on his very own experience - as he was a contemporary of Basquiat and on certain occasions even proclaimed himself to be the artist's friend. *The Help*, on the other hand, is an adaptation of a 2009 novel written by Kathryn Stockett, which provided the director Tate Taylor with a substantial basis for his directorial work. Nevertheless, both the novel and Taylor's film were inspired by the two authors' shared experiences of growing up in the South with an African-American house maid. Overall, what all three films share is the race-based criticism that followed the films' presentations to public and which should serve as the departure point for each of the analyses.

Besides being professionally acclaimed by various institutions (Academy Awards for *Django Unchained* and *The Help* and nomination at Venice Film Festival for *Basquiat*), the films waved red flags for members of African-American community: the sole fact that a topic involving issues that resonate profoundly in African-Americans is tackled by a non-African-American film director presents a significant obstacle where an unbiased review is expected. This is where terms such as "whitewashing" or "racial ventriloquism" appear, calling for attention in regards to the amount of power over artistic expression, which tends to be distributed to masses on a large scale and in some instances even turns into accepted and veritable factuality. Moreover - and possibly more importantly - such trend favors non-African-American authors as opinion-makers and diminishes the authors of color and their work to a "niche" and specific category, one which requires a separate set of criteria in order to be understood and reviewed. This is also where one of the key questions of this thesis arises, which aims to uncover the origins of the argument between members of African-American community and European-American filmmakers and also to test the actual base of the notion of "difference" between the two groups that we are constantly being confronted with as both film consumers and society representatives. In the end, the notion itself becomes more substantial with each counter-argument made at the expense of the treatment of the elements of African-American culture, strengthening the already evident concept of "otherness".

“White-authored narratives are consistently used to structure perceptions of American race relations, particularly black racial experiences,”<sup>1</sup> states probably the most recent book on the given theme; it is a compilation of collected essays called *From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life*. In this opening sequence, the authors of the collection uncover the primary intention of their research: to draw attention to the lack of African-American penetration of the mainstream media. Whilst, as they note, African-Americans were given opportunity to showcase both their African-American and white-oriented narratives, they are even nowadays not capable of reaching a similar level of scale, on which white-authored narratives are accepted and financially merited by audiences. The background of such phenomenon should also be one of the issues that will be dealt with in this thesis, as it is closely linked to the notion of “otherness”, which until these days engulfs the African-American community in the United States and is strengthened with each racial-based separation of any category not only in the field of arts, but in society in general.

The portrayal of African-Americans on screen reaches far back into the history of American cinema itself. Cinema, as it is known, analyzed and studied today tends to capture the current social situation of the given region where films originate. Shaped by either contemporary trends, thematic circles, or even rules and laws imposed on filmmakers by governments, the moving pictures usually succeed in providing historical evidence of the times when a given film was made. In the United States, the mocking, the omission, and nowadays the still slightly hesitant re-inclusion of African-Americans as onscreen hero characters is adequately documented in feature films throughout the course of the cinematic history. Indeed, it is precisely in the very first films that worked with these characters that we can trace origins of the representation of African-Americans in the audiovisual sphere - or rather of the origins of the pain and anger that prevail until today, providing the African-American community with the ammunition for their argument. On

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Oberon Garcia, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Charise Pimentel, ed., *From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 2.

the other hand, in the end, there is probably no other race in American-made films that would be as mocked, as laughed at, as humiliated, as omitted, or as stereotyped, as African-Americans. The stereotypical characters that were incorporated in films but originated in other forms of art, and even in advertisement - such as the Mammy, the tragic mulatto, or the pickaninny - all have their own history and attract various readings, as well as theoretical approaches. There are countless books that have been written and concentrate on deciphering the roots of the above mentioned figures, whilst paying special attention to the fact that they were constructed by non-African-Americans with the aim of simplifying and pigeon-holing characters based on their racial background. Nonetheless, the question remains, whether - from today's perspective - non-African-Americans are truly those who are responsible for the significantly and obviously lower status the American film industry entitled African-American heroes with.

The seemingly endless struggle for equality between races in terms of actors being offered roles, opportunities for directors to direct, or for producers to finance films and to find distributors appears to be less and less intense with time. With the election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president to lead the nation, many were persuaded that the United States are facing a new historical era. In their eyes, the constant battle suddenly started to weaken, as they predicted that this new era would provide all American citizens with the common vision of equality and therefore identical starting point, from which anyone could achieve what they desired. Whilst - on one hand - there are no longer specific fictional character categories devoted solely to one given group of actors based on their race, there are - on the other - still glimpses of a dissimilar treatment of white and black onscreen presence. This treatment can be, of course, facilely described as intentional, and yet there are cases when the protests of African-American community against their own depiction in films are invalid and seem overly exaggerated. It is exactly these cases that are then responsible for turning the entire struggle for equal opportunities backwards on its victims, with them being significantly more exposed and therefore automatically more vulnerable in the eyes of the cinema going public. The core statement of this thesis, as well as the central motive of the current situation in the American film industry, should then be the necessity to reinvent the manner, in which we approach such

race-based clashes, for their sole presence and their tendency to strengthen is only underlined by the constant repetitive calls for attention from the African-American community. As it will be shown on three recent American Hollywood-produced films, *Basquiat* (1996), *Django Unchained* (2012), and *The Help* (2011) that were authored by Caucasian-American directors, there are, in fact, questionable strategies that current filmmakers employ when telling stories of African-American past. However, it is the response from the audience that either supports or contradicts their approaches, and thus should be considered as one of the primary - if not the primary - factor that constructs the films' presence in the eyes of the public and in a larger perspective, helps to formulate the vision of the film industry in general.

## 2 / *Basquiat* (dir. Julian Schnabel, 1996): A Self-Proclaimed Biopic

The first film to be analyzed through the optics of this thesis seems to be a classic “American dream come true” Hollywood story: an African-American painter struggling in New York of 1980s becomes an art-world superstar almost over night. Based on a real life story, Julian Schnabel’s 1996 film *Basquiat* promises this and more in the film’s trailer: “Miramax invites you to enter the world where dreams become realities,”<sup>2</sup> states a male voice in an enticing manner viewers are vastly familiar with from all the Hollywood studios trailers. Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat’s friend, contemporary and also a painter was expected to capture the artist’s life story as authentically as possible, including the drug and racial issues. Whilst these play a substantial role in the film, they seem to be simplified for the sake of Hollywood films audiences, with the dark side of 1980s New York being completely obsolete. Automatically, many would facilely denounce *Basquiat* as one of the numerous white-authored biographical stories of an African-American artist. Nevertheless, as Julian Schnabel was Basquiat’s contemporary and lived through the same historical period, being a member of the same New York community, it is expected that his account of the given specific moment and era should be accurate. Besides the two-sided racial perspective that finds its meeting point in Schnabel’s film, viewers can also trace a clash between the original nature of Basquiat’s art and the codified structure of a Hollywood picture that *Basquiat* - the film represents. Nonetheless, whist the original intentions of the two authors collide, they are reunited in their final struggle for what they both - as those were the impressions of Basquiat in his time at least - desired: profitability.

Schnabel’s film opens with “Fairytale of New York” song, a Christmas song written and performed by a band called Pogues. The use of this song is quite literal, considering the lyrics that could labeled as applicable to Basquiat’s life story. “You were handsome / You

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<sup>2</sup> “Basquiat trailer”, *YouTube.com*, YouTube, LLC, 4 May 2008, 10 July 2014 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeTT9XYesnw>>.

were pretty / Queen of New York City”<sup>3</sup> appears in the first part of the song, possibly pointing to the peak of Basquiat’s career when he was considered a new star of the art world. In the second half of the song - which does not appear in the opening sequence of the film - the lyrics switch into “You’re a bum / You’re a punk / You’re an old slut on junk”<sup>4</sup> and disregarding the fact that they are more probably dedicated to a female, once again, they could be facetiously applied to Basquiat towards the end of his life, as his path took a bitter turn after his drug consumption took over. The song accompanies a scene where Basquiat, as a child, roams an art gallery alongside his mother, the hallway being lit very dimly in blue, suggesting that we, as viewers, are in fact a part of Basquiat’s dream. The two approach Picasso’s *Guernica*, upon which the mother breaks into tears, whilst the young Basquiat places a glowing gold crown on top of his head. This dream sequence could not be more self-explanatory: Basquiat is in his child-like naivety crowned the king of the art world, during which the mother weeps, realizing that her son is entering the world not dissimilar to the one portrayed in *Guernica* where innocent are pictured as suffering under the Nazi bombardment. The painting here could in a larger context of the film - but also Basquiat’s journey - simulate what comes together with a career in art where trends appear and fade faster than in any other industry. Whilst on one day, an artist might be celebrated for his or her uniqueness, on the next one, he might be crushed to the ground by the immense power of finances that rule far above aesthetic qualities and intellectual stimulation that art is supposed to provide its end-users with.

Schnabel’s film then continues on in depicting what he imagined Basquiat’s regular life preceding the art world boom to be: he uses a visual effect of a surfer in the clouds (possibly to introduce Basquiat’s imagination as something that only an artist could possess - see Appendix 1, pg. 66), employs a close-up of ragged shoes that are on the verge of falling apart (to stress Basquiat’s poverty and carelessness), or has his character draw a painting using a spoon in a pool of maple syrup on a diner table. Whilst we must consider the fact that Julian Schnabel was supposedly familiar enough with Basquiat in order to

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<sup>3</sup> “Fairytale of New York 25th Anniversary Re-Release for 2012”, *Pogues.com*, 18 July 2014 <<http://www.pogues.com/Releases/Lyrics/LPs/IfIShould/Fairytale.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

know his habits and perks, the above mentioned scenes seem to be too literal, or simply too obvious for the sense that they should convey and for the viewers to be able to create a realistic image of the painter in their minds. On the other hand, we must once again stress that *Basquiat* is a Hollywood studio Miramax-released film and therefore it should be expected that the film would restrain from anything that would be too obscure or not “popular-demand” enough. The way, in which Schnabel unveils the story is therefore very much based on the Hollywood standards, including - amongst others - a slow motion shot of the first encounter of Basquiat with Gina (a waitress and Basquiat’s future love interest played by Claire Forlani) at the diner where Basquiat creates his maple syrup art piece.

The mixture of Schnabel and Basquiat in a Hollywood-quality film is indeed very unexpected. One would never anticipate Julian Schnabel, an artist himself, to possibly be an author of a film that complies with all the expected cinematic clichés introduced by commercially-oriented side of the industry. When an artist, and moreover a painter stands behind a camera, the viewers are prone to envisage what is by general public considered to be an artistic film - visually strong, intellectually stimulating, sometimes even puzzling but mostly provoking and innovative. It is therefore rather surprising and also disappointing that Schnabel’s film lacks these qualities, rather professing qualities of a box-office hit than a critically acclaimed piece. On the other side of the story of the film’s creation stands a film studio as a producer, possibly foreseeing the potentiality of success in transferring the artist’s life onscreen and treating it as a source for a piece of entertainment, since spectators tend to be fascinated with the notion of tragedy. Jean-Michel Basquiat’s swift rise to the top of the New York art scene and his premature decline whilst being considerably young naturally presents itself as a viable material likely to appeal to studio executives. Moreover, the unmistakable factor of authenticity and the generally sought-after “based on a real-life story” tagline strengthen the expectations that a responsible script reader could be attracted by pondering over a presented written version of the film. In the end, the choice of Julian Schnabel as a director is an obvious one, since he would only underline the notion of authenticity in the eyes of general public, based on the fact that he, in fact, knew Basquiat in person. Moreover, the liaison would expectedly be utilized as a bottomless source for promotional purposes, with the aim to attract attention to the film

prior to its premiere. Schnabel's personal encounters from the times when both him and Basquiat were prominent amidst the art-seeking enthusiasts here serve as an unparalleled benefit that very few European-American film directors can use in their defense against the accusations of inadequate racial ventriloquism.

When considering the fact that *Basquiat* was shot by the artist's contemporary, the viewpoints regarding the film's authenticity vary. Schnabel himself explained that his intention to make the film stemmed from his closeness to Basquiat and from his conviction that the two shared similar life experiences. Schnabel comments on the background of his decision:

I made this movie because I cared about and knew this man. We were in a similar situation - "I'm the only painter in America" that was. The amount of attention that we had. We showed in the same galleries. Stuff about our personal lives. People were always writing attacks. Even though he was black and I was white, we went through a lot of the same stuff. This is about an area that I live in. I know all the participants and have a close proximity to Jean-Michel's life. I didn't want to have a tourist come along and make this film.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to Schnabel's belief, a number of reviewers considered him to be the pronounced "tourist", incapable of depicting Basquiat's life story accordingly. Amongst them was, for example, Jim Jarmusch, also a contemporary of both Schnabel and Basquiat, and moreover - a renowned film director who could therefore be viewed as an expert in the field. Jarmusch shared his opinion on the film only recently with *The Hollywood Reporter*; according to him, Basquiat was not friends with Schnabel and what is more, "[he] was not a fan of Schnabel as a person back then"<sup>6</sup>. Based on this perception, Jarmusch refused to see *Basquiat*, or to even consult the film with Schnabel during its production, as he further on noted. Therefore

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<sup>5</sup> Pauline Adamek, "Interview with Julian Schnabel", *Ozemail.com.au*, 21 Oct 1996, 18 July 2014 <<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~catman/pop/film/ci/interviews/basquiat.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Roy Trakin, "Jim Jarmusch: From Vampires to Stooges (Q&A)", *The Hollywood Reporter*, 7 May 2014, 18 July 2014 <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/q-a-jim-jarmusch-vampires-701996>>.

- faced with this testimony - we could come to an assumption that a “tourist” might, in the end, prove as a more viable creator of the biographical account of the artist on film - if not for the profit of general viewers who came to see the film, then surely for Jarmusch.

Schnabel’s film was also discussed in terms of the relation between a European-American director authoring an African-American character’s narrative. In a *Frieze Magazine* review, Okwui Enwezor, also an African-American, labels Schnabel’s treatment of Basquiat’s character in the film as “whitewash”,<sup>7</sup> calling for attention especially in terms of the way the film was made, promoted and also received after its premiere. Enwezor compares the relationship of Schnabel towards Basquiat to the one of Salieri and Mozart, stating that the film was created with the aim to “vanquish Basquiat’s ghost”<sup>8</sup> and describing the original intention of Schnabel’s as being fueled by sheer envy of Basquiat’s enormous success. To support his argument, Enwezor lists a number of observations he compiled whilst analyzing the film: apart from stressing the presence of artworks made solely by Schnabel (including what Enwezor calls “sloppily repainted Basquiats”<sup>9</sup>), he also pinpoints that all the characters in the film were portraying the actual personae they originally were in real life, except for a non-existent character of Albert Milo. This character, Enwezor argues, was included by Schnabel in the script to portray the director himself - being the only invented character and yet one of the key ones in Basquiat’s cinematic depiction. What is more, Albert Milo - played by Gary Oldman - seems to profess qualities of a trustworthy friend and supporter of Basquiat, which are some of the attributes that had been argued against in regards to Schnabel’s personality.

In another rather critical review, David Bonetti mentions the fact that the Basquiat estate refused to lend the original paintings for the shoot.<sup>10</sup> Whilst by some this decision might be

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<sup>7</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Basquiat”, *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 32, January-February 1997, 18 July 2014 <<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/basquiat/>>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> David Bonetti, “*Basquiat* trivializes talented painter’s life”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 Aug 1996, 18 July <<http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Basquiat-trivializes-talented-painter-s-life-3128604.php>>.

considered an act of a sheer precaution, others could facilely decipher it as a sign of protest against Julian Schnabel's involvement in the process of producing the self-proclaimed "biopic". The director himself contradicted such allegations: "He [Basquiat's son] never read the script. He never saw the film. I've known his father for years and he knew that Jean-Michel admired my work."<sup>11</sup>

In light of the above mentioned negative criticism of Schnabel's approach to Jean-Michel Basquiat's biographical narrative, one might be prone to regard the film as an unsuccessful attempt of creating an authentic account of the artist's life, whilst also achieving a significantly elevated standard of directorial cinematic profession. However, the opposite proved to be the case: "a stylish and interesting look at a moment in New York City's art world", "there isn't a boring shot anywhere", or "[Schnabel] made something of a work of art in its own right"<sup>12</sup> are only a few excerpts of the critical reviews that engulfed Schnabel's piece with praise, especially pinpointing his writing and directing skills. Returning back to Enwezor's criticism of *Basquiat*, the author was himself aware of the approving voices the film generated post premiere and he noted that to his own surprise, these originated in the sphere of art professionals and thus those who were expected to be well acquainted with the relationship between the two artists. Nevertheless, in relation to such response, Enwezor calls for a comparison to the original "controversy" that encompassed Basquiat's entrance into the "crème de la crème" of artists. According to Enwezor, the above-mentioned reviews could serve as a metaphor to the way African-Americans artists were (or rather were not) accepted by the white-dominated art industry and business.<sup>13</sup> In the end, Basquiat's status as an artist and an art-selling individual was also elevated only after he was labeled as a suitable and controversial enough author by those who were considered decision makers of the time.

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<sup>11</sup> Pauline Adamek, "Interview with Julian Schnabel", *Ozemail.com.au*, 21 Oct 1996, 18 July 2014 <<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~catman/pop/film/ci/interviews/basquiat.html>>.

<sup>12</sup> "Basquiat reviews", *Vudu.com*, 18 July 2014 <<http://www.vudu.com/movies/#reviews/27150/Basquiat>>.

<sup>13</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "Basquiat", *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 32, January-February 1997, 18 July 2014 <<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/basquiat/>>.

Returning to the discussion of notion of race in *Basquiat*, in the earlier mentioned quote by Schabel, the director explained: "Even though [Basquiat] was black and I was white, we went through a lot of the same stuff".<sup>14</sup> The sole fact that Schnabel employed the juxtaposition of their racial backgrounds in order to comment on the level of authenticity in his film, serves as a significant factor in examining the historical moment, which created a setting for *Basquiat's* storyline. Exploring the atmosphere of New York of the 1980s as it is depicted in the film, race relations should be pointed to, as for Basquiat - as an African-American artist - to become such a groundbreaking success was an unprecedented occurrence. At the same time, it can be read as something emblematic for the era - an African-American being considered a celebrity at a fairly young age and what is more, actually being capable of monetizing his art creations was something that haunted the society of the time in regards to his persona, calling for the predicted "black versus white" comparisons. *Basquiat*, the film, manages to provide audiences with certain glimpses of this notion. However, as it is customary in Hollywood production, the storyline never delves more profoundly into this phenomenon, staying on the harmless surface of the very much rooted and historically painful issue.

Naturally, there are moments in the film when the racial provenance of Basquiat is pointed to. One of such scenes introduces an African-American limousine chauffeur driving Jean-Michel Basquiat through New York City. There are obvious parallels between the scene and the 1989 film *Driving Miss Daisy*, which tells a story of an African-American driver and an old Jewish lady who also happens to be his employer for twenty five years, most of which takes place during the Civil Right Movement era. Only in *Basquiat*, both the employer and the employee are African-American, which is now supposedly suggesting that the racial presuppositions are being erased and African-Americans are no longer supposed to be all regarded as of the same social provenance. This notion is strengthened by a line pronounced by the chauffeur in the scene: "You made it," he says as a sign of admiration, since - as the film attempts to emphasize - for an African-American artist to acquire such a social status would be rather rare at the time. Another scene that is used in

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<sup>14</sup> Pauline Adamek, "Interview with Julian Schnabel", *Ozemail.com.au*, 21 Oct 1996, 18 July 2014 <<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~catman/pop/film/ci/interviews/basquiat.html>>.

order to illustrate the atmosphere as non-approving of African-Americans is when Basquiat seeks to catch a taxi in the street and is unsuccessful, as none would stop for him. Unaware of his approaching triumph, taxi drivers regard him as an “anonymous” individual, moreover of color. Finally, Basquiat is faced with another sign of disapproval, or rather disbelief with his accomplishment - this is in the scene where he intends to pay with a hundred dollar bill for a jar of caviar he is about to purchase. As he hands the bill over to the shop clerk, she suspiciously checks the note to examine its authenticity.<sup>15</sup> Each of the three above described scenes is decipherable for its atmosphere of tension, created by either sound, editing or camera framing. By employing these cinematic devices, the viewer is almost forced to focus his attention on the given moment, being positioned into a mindset created in order to identify the society of the time as doubtful towards African-Americans being prosperous. Overall, Schnabel's *Basquiat* induces an impression of operating with the notion of being unaccepted as an African-American in the 1980s New York on a rather flat basis, without any analysis, criticism, or stimuli for discussion. It almost seems as if the “African-American factor” was once again used solely as an attraction booster, which was supposed to draw the audiences in but rarely revealed any elements that could possibly wave a flag of controversy, or even point to a larger society-related problems that prevail in the United States even nowadays.

It should be addressed here that - in regards to Hollywood-produced films in general - such treatment of race is, in fact, very much prominent amongst the box-office oriented American cinema. From the historical perspective, African-American characters always had a “specific” place in cinematic depictions; by “specific” here, it is meant other than the non-black characters. Firstly, they were played by white actors whose faces were painted black and portrayed thieves or malevolent aggressors, presenting threat to white characters. Later, they became obsolete, erased from the pictures in general, or at least not cast as the principal characters and usually occupying the parts of non-heroes. Taking into account the historical moments when the power of cinema became obvious as a viable tool of propaganda, it is crucial to note that the sole exclusion of African-American characters as

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<sup>15</sup> *Basquiat*, dir. Julian Schnabel, Miramax, 1996.

main heroes proved as harmful, since it depicted reality as being void of these individuals and therefore evoked a sense of “otherness” on the side of the viewers, as African-Americans were in a larger sense presented as unworthy of being cast in films and thus also of being a stable part of the society.

Hollywood-made studio films have been especially active in this treatment, always complying with the non-controversial aura of their productions, not bearing to cross the line of what was generally considered taboo. Besides largely omitting the deeper racial-related issues present in the art industry of the time in *Basquiat*, Schnabel also refrains from any detailed depiction of the drug use of Basquiat. Whilst there are scenes where Basquiat abuses heroin, the entire drug-related side of his life is presented very superficially. As an example of this approach, we could point out a scene where Basquiat - already struggling with drugs, which is visually strengthened by his skin problems - sees an image of a surfer in the sky - a recurring image that Schnabel employs in the film - only this time the surfer falls into the waves, metaphorically foretelling Basquiat’s own bitter fall. Schnabel’s simplistic cinematic depiction of the drug use could remind us of a way in which children are taught that “drugs are bad”, here made seemingly more striking by the juxtaposition with Basquiat’s artistic triumph and a promising career ahead that he now slowly destroys by his behavior.

An overall impression of the character of Basquiat played by Jeffrey Wright is rather dissatisfying - he seems to be lacking qualities of a complex character. Judging from the original nature of Basquiat’s primitivist art, his presence in media and numerous accounts of his persona by his contemporaries, he must have been someone with a striking charisma, yet with a very complicated and intellectually stimulating character. Disregarding Wright’s acting skills that could be, in fact, seen as quite exceptional, his Basquiat still misses an aura of a superstar that he turned into. Taking a look back at Enwezor’s critical review, the critic also felt as if he were robbed of the Basquiat he considered his real-life predecessor to be: “I waited excruciatingly for Basquiat to utter one full, intelligible sentence, but was

rewarded with only grunts,”<sup>16</sup> Enwezor adds to his account of Schnabel’s misinterpretation of the character. Examining the other characters in the film, it is apparent that Schnabel and Miramax studio that produced the film relied on the “star power” of the picture. Apart from the already mentioned Gary Oldman, they also cast Benicio del Toro, Dennis Hopper, Willem Dafoe, or most notably David Bowie as Andy Warhol himself. Whilst it is to be expected that any actor chosen to play the part of Andy Warhol would be subjected to a profound wave of criticism, it seems to be a very wise decision in the case of Bowie. He, similarly to Warhol, is considered an icon of the popular culture and only very few people would choose to denote him as inappropriate. Nevertheless, his portrayal of Warhol in *Basquiat* balances on the verge of a clown-like performance that Schnabel probably directed him into, with the Warholian wig placed on his head and the constant repetition of the word “gee” that he seems to open each of his lines with.

Female characters in the film, on the other hand, tend to play a crucial part, if not the central one. In fact, the structure of the plot of the film seems to follow the love affair of Basquiat and Gina, rather than an depiction of him as an artist. Of course, the film is still presented as an “American dream come true” story, telling an account of a rise and fall of Basquiat, yet, the relationship between the two is far too prevalent and seems to be the spine of the film with all the other events and happenings creating a mere background and gradually also becoming the destroying agents of the liaison. Once again, this is something quite synonymous for the Hollywood film production, which is known to employ romance as one of the major story-making elements. The reason for such approach is mainly the attraction factor that it generates, especially on the side of female viewers. In the end, *Basquiat*, as a commercial product, is something that was carefully planned, cast, shot, promoted and distributed in order to earn profit and not to create as authentic account of an artist’s life and legacy as possible. Therefore, the inclusion of a romantic relationship in the film - which would without it be quite complicated to target at a larger group of filmgoers - is, indeed, very understandable from the movie marketers’ perspective.

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<sup>16</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Basquiat”, *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 32, January-February 1997, 18 July 2014 <<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/basquiat/>>.

The visual style of Schnabel's film was already touched upon earlier, yet it deserves a slightly deeper analysis, since it creates quite a significant part of the impression from the entire picture. Apart from the already mentioned effects of a surfer in the skies who is most probably used to illustrate Basquiat's thought process, there are other stylistic tools that tend to visually disrupt the otherwise linear storyline. One of the examples could be the scene where Basquiat uses Gina's red dress as a part of his painting and they are fighting, which is juxtaposed with shots from a black and white puppet animation film that seems to have no connotations with what is happening on screen. Again, these could be representations of his thoughts, especially since in the previous scene, Basquiat lit up what seems to be a marijuana joint and therefore these could suggest that he is, indeed, high. In other cases, Schnabel uses especially the tool editing and montage - either to mold the notion of the linearity of time, or to consciously demonstrate the possibilities of an audiovisual medium. There are two possible interpretations of the visual approach that Schnabel incorporated in the film: either the specially inserted elements are a part of the character-picture of Basquiat, employed in order to stress the notion of his artistry; or they are art "installations" representing Schnabel himself as a painter-director. The sole issue with this style of filmmaking is that it for a Hollywood-made film, they are too ambitious and on the other hand, for a film that would by public be considered artistic, they are not numerous enough - meaning that the entire picture would have to be shot this way. Therefore in visual terms, *Basquiat* oscillates somewhere in between the two, not employing enough of either of them and so rendering itself complicated to decipher, despite the fact that the general structure of the film is rather Hollywood-oriented.

The music that Schnabel used as a storytelling device also operates with quite a profound presence in the film. The film opens with the already noted "Fairytale of New York" song, which is significant mainly for its lyrics that are likely to underline Basquiat himself as a character that starts as a sensation and finishes as a "junkie". Already the title of the song denotes the often cited double-sidedness of the city that never sleeps and where Basquiat's story takes place, both in real life and in the film. Whilst at a first glance, it is a place where dreams actually come true (and especially the Hollywood-like American dreams), it can very swiftly cross the path of happiness, ruthlessly crush the dreamer and

consume him together with all the other unsuccessful ones. Later in the film, on numerous occasions, a “classically” Hollywood-like usage of the score is employed: one of them is a slow romantic “The Nearness of You” by Keith Richards that plays as Basquiat and Gina’s relationship comes into a full bloom after their first date, accompanied by a montage of shots where the couple is asleep in different positions together in bed. Another example of an “artistic” employment of the musical score can be found towards the end of the film where Basquiat, already heavily involved in the drug use, is attacked by a couple of men who try to steal a piece of his art work. With the fight’s outbreak starts an opera theme, here used possibly to strengthen the notion of deterioration and decay that Basquiat faces at this point of his life. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of the violence and the dramatic and yet majestic music seems to be too obvious, generously pushing the viewers towards the feelings of pity and compassion with the main character. What is more, the scene is succeeded by quite a short clip of the already mentioned image of blue waves that with each appearance signify a deeper and deeper state of drowning of Basquiat in the waters of the once-promising art world.

In the end, probably the most striking clash of two worlds can be seen in the very nature of Basquiat’s art and the final result of Schnabel’s directorial debut. Basquiat’s art has always been seen as primitivistic, based on graffiti and street culture of New York City, with elements of anti-system and anti-commercial values. Whilst he was by some later considered a profit-oriented individual, it has to be remembered that money-making was hardly his initial intention when he was spraying the walls with the words that were later turned into significant and critically examined statements. On the other hand, Schnabel’s film - disregarding his own original motives that are disputable - is in the end a Hollywood studio-made picture and therefore a commercial commodity that needs to be marketed and sold. Thus the integration of the originally “pure” artistic creation into a commercially valuable product can come across as unexpected in the least. Michael Wilmington, the author of a 1996 review of *Basquiat* in Chicago Tribune points out another connection between the two: according to him, it is the theme of fame that was key in both Basquiat’s

art pieces and the film itself.<sup>17</sup> Whilst at first, fame was solely something that seemed unachievable for Basquiat and later became what we might even see as the key element in his downfall, Schnabel possessed a similar amount of it and translated it into his film, casting a portfolio of very prominent actors to play their contemporaries.

It has to be agreed that Julian Schnabel, a painter, artist and finally, also a film director took quite a complicated task upon himself. As he presents it, his intentions were entirely honorable, as his aim was to capture the life of his contemporary in a manner that he considered authentic. This is mainly because he was present in the same community at the time when Basquiat lived through the most groundbreaking moments in his life, first reaching the peak of fame and public attention in both art world and amongst general public, and later being crushed to the very bottom because of his heroin addiction, from which he, in the end, tragically deceased. Even if Schnabel's *connaissance* of Basquiat is a verifiable fact, there have been some significant voices protesting against his version of what they considered a mocking picture of an artist that would deserve a more profound and respectable depiction. Nevertheless, creating a story based on someone's life always seems to present a task hard to fulfill, since it can never reach expectation level of the central figure's family, friends, but also of fans, critics and general viewers.

At the other side, we have the Hollywood film studio, which obviously saw an opportunity in the biographical depiction of life of an artist whose story borders on the verge of being controversial but could be treated in a manner that would secure a significant amount of filmgoers - in the end, controversy attracts spectators if applied in the seducing-enough way. With the cast filled with movie stars, including the pop icon David Bowie disguised as Andy Warhol, all these elements together create a mix that only an ignorant studio executive could overlook. Overall, in the eyes of a film studio, the entire "package" proved to be exactly what they look for in films: "based on a true story" tagline, entertainment, love story and - if handled properly - the right amount of edginess.

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Wilmington, "*Basquiat: A Dubious Deification of A Bad-Boy Artist*", *Chicago Tribune*, 16 Aug 1996, 18 July 2014 <[http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1996-08-16/entertainment/9608160232\\_1\\_art-dealer-bruno-bischofberger-jean-michel-basquiat-julian-schnabel](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1996-08-16/entertainment/9608160232_1_art-dealer-bruno-bischofberger-jean-michel-basquiat-julian-schnabel)>.

Nevertheless, in the end, it has to be pointed out that Hollywood pictures rarely take a moment to ponder over the very nature of the original - in this case a truly inspiring and talented, yet doomed - sources of inspiration.

### 3 / *Django Unchained* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2012): An Unlikely Slavery Narrative

Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained* encompasses multiple genres under one theme that African-Americans in the United States are until these days rather reluctant to see on screen (especially if presented to them by non-African-American filmmakers): enslavement of Africans and their descendants by American settlers in the antebellum United States. Previous Tarantino's films - on the other hand - are rarely reluctant to provoke and stir passions amongst their viewers and reviewers, not being short of violence, strong language and stylistic choices that could by some be analyzed in the least as bold, but more often as exaggerated. The question that arises here - and specifically in liaison with *Django Unchained* - is whether Tarantino employs the above mentioned tools primarily for their shock value or if they are necessary in terms of the narrative they support. In the case of *Django Unchained*, such a question becomes dominant in response to the film's depiction of slavery, as this historical period still strongly resonates amongst members of African-American community. Once again, we are faced with a white-authored narrative that is examined as controversial based on the fact that "slavery" as a source for a love story-induced, western-inspired, violence-filled *Django* would presumably be denounced as utterly inappropriate and selfishly-handled in such a film.

Tarantino's film is based on a screenplay the director himself penned and which is invented in its entirety. It would be vital to note that the film does not state that it should resemble reality or that it was based on a true story - in contrast to the previously examined *Basquiat* that had its predecessor in a real-life character. Nevertheless, there are elements of slave trade and plantation system used in the film that were adopted from the author's own knowledge and study, as he demonstrates throughout a notable interview lead by Henry Louis Gates Jr., a professor at Harvard, an African-American and one of the leading personae in the field of African-American studies.<sup>18</sup> In the interview, Gates poses a

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<sup>18</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Tarantino 'Unchained' ", *The Root*, 23 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <[http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django\\_unchained\\_trilogy\\_and\\_more\\_tarantino\\_talks\\_to\\_gates.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django_unchained_trilogy_and_more_tarantino_talks_to_gates.html)>.

number of questions that are concerned with the criticism of *Django Unchained* that appeared after the film's premiere. These are attached mainly to the amount of violence and strong language (the use of the word "nigger") that are synonymous not only for *Django Unchained* but also for Tarantino's previous films. The latest film is, indeed, keen on showing a significant amount of blood, as well as realistically-depicted graphic scenes of "Mandingo" fights, punishment of slaves and - in the final battle scene - brutal exaggerated shootout, in which Django fights against an entire group of gunmen. In the interview, when asked to respond to Spike Lee's criticism of the overuse of violent moments in the film, Tarantino presents a reasonable response:

If you're going to make a movie about slavery and are taking a 21st-century viewer and putting them in that time period, you're going to hear some things that are going to be ugly, and you're going to see some things that are going to be ugly. That's just part and parcel of dealing truthfully with this story, with this environment, with this land.<sup>19</sup>

As he further on explains, he intended to show the violence and cruelty in order for people to realize that slavery, in fact, functioned in this manner. Gates approves Tarantino's viewpoints, proclaiming that "people have distanced themselves from slavery"<sup>20</sup> and that Tarantino truly manages to force them to face it once again, even if through a slightly exaggerated perspective. The question that arises here is whether this could be taken as an acceptable way of attracting attention to the past happenings, as *Django Unchained* is not a serious film per se, with its excessive amount of gore, its comedic elements and sometimes even mockery of both African-American and non-African-American characters. From an opposite point of view, this could be interpreted as precisely the correct approach, since through its entertainment potential, the film manages to engage audiences and therefore

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Tarantino 'Unchained' ", *The Root*, 23 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <[http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django\\_unchained\\_trilogy\\_and\\_more\\_tarantino\\_talks\\_to\\_gates.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django_unchained_trilogy_and_more_tarantino_talks_to_gates.html)>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

presents the crucial moments of American history in an enticing package - rendering them facily understandable.

Both *Django Unchained* and the previously discussed *Basquiat* rely on central male African-American characters and their progress to triumph, which is documented throughout each of the films. Whilst *Basquiat* ends on a bitter note with the artist's death, Django, on the other hand celebrates his success over his oppressors, with a view of brighter future endeavors ahead. Nevertheless, the two share a similar path to become accomplished and accepted as equals to non-African-Americans. Similarly, the two films are both set in times that were unfavorable to minorities - which is of course rather a mild term used in relation to slavery, especially when being compared to New York City in the eighties. Yet, both Django and Basquiat are employed in the two Hollywood-made films in a classical manner - as unlikely heroes, opposed by their surroundings and faced with numerous obstacles they have to overcome to achieve recognition. In both of the films, there are scenes where other African-American characters applaud the main hero for "making it", which they express either verbally (as in the already mentioned scene with the limousine chauffeur in *Basquiat*), or silently - as is the case on numerous occasions in *Django Unchained* where the main character is constantly being confronted with fellow African-Americans - predominantly slaves - who look up to him as to someone who managed to escape the oppression. Be it a silent nod of approval (as in the scene towards the end of the film where Django manages to trick his capturers and escape from a trip to a stone quarry for labor and his former co-prisoners are shown nodding with respect to congratulate him on his success), or astonished facial expressions (as in the scenes where Django is seen riding on a horse, wearing fancy clothes and many others) - Tarantino manages to persuade the viewers that Django was - as a film character - indeed quite exceptional in the times when the story takes place. In fact, if we would juxtapose Django's character with his actual historical predecessors, it would most probably prove unsuccessful to find a similar character in a real-life antebellum South - mostly because he would probably be hanged for even attempting to confront the slave owners. This can be taken, once again, as a demonstration of the true nature of Tarantino's film, which is that of

a fictional film with elements of western and comedy only set in a historically accurate period.

In regards to the other African-American characters in *Django Unchained*, it is crucial to address the character of Stephen, played by Samuel L. Jackson who portrays the head house slave at Calvin Candie's (Leonardo DiCaprio) mansion. Opposite to what would be the expected storyline (that he would naturally become Django's ally), he becomes one of the key enemies of Django, uncovering Django's and Dr. Schultz's trickery the two play on Candie in order to save Django's wife Broomhilda from her enslavement at Candieland (the Candie estate). Tarantino, as he himself admits, realized the issue he was facing when casting such a character: as he described in the above mentioned interview with H. L. Gates Jr., he directly asked Samuel L. Jackson if he would have a problem playing the part. To his question, Jackson replied: "Do I have any problem playing the most despicable black motherf--ker in the history of the world?" [Pause.] "No, I ain't got no problem with that. No, man, I'm already in it. I'm working with my makeup guy now about the hair, the skin tone. I want this man to be fresh off the boat."<sup>21</sup> We could argue here that to play such a character, especially in a film of a Hollywood-settled film director with a large film audience and reasonable profit guaranteed, is an offer that an actor of Jackson's status could hardly reject. He confirms this in another interview with *Vanity Fair* where he specifically applauds the way, in which the character was written by Tarantino and points it out as the main decision making factor.<sup>22</sup> In *Django Unchained*, Stephen truly encapsulates everything that the viewers would not expect him to be - whilst characters of "loyal" slaves and African-American servants were common in both literary and cinematic depictions, we would hardly ever expect them to stand opposite one of their community - especially in times of slavery-ruled United States. The fact that his character is portrayed as an advisor to Calvin Candie, that he is the one who almost triumphs over our main hero and that he

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Tarantino 'Unchained' ", *The Root*, 23 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <[http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django\\_unchained\\_trilogy\\_and\\_more\\_tarantino\\_talks\\_to\\_gates.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django_unchained_trilogy_and_more_tarantino_talks_to_gates.html)>.

<sup>22</sup> Jason Guerrasio, "Samuel L. Jackson on Finding the Right Skin Tone for *Django Unchained* and Making Leonardo DiCaprio Become Comfortable with the N-word", *Vanity Fair*, 20 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://www.vanityfair.com/online/oscar/2012/12/samuel-l-jackson-skin-tone-django>>.

refuses to escape even after Candie's death applies yet another layer to Tarantino's vision of a fictional story set in the era of slavery, providing an additional piece of unrealistic evidence to the film's non-documentary strategy.

Yet, there is an interesting diversity in regards to the character of Stephen to be analyzed, similarly as it was examined amongst various reviewers who perceived Stephen as both a masterfully written character and a shameful and mocking caricature of an African-American slave. Jelani Cobb, a professor of history and a writer for *The New Yorker* sees Stephen as a product of a non-African-American approach to black history:

Samuel L. Jackson plays Stephen's overblown insouciance and anachronistic mf-bombs to great comedic effect. There are moments, however, when ironies cancel each other out, and we're left with a stark truth—at its most basic, this is an instance in which a white director holds an obsequious black slave up for ridicule. The use of this character as a comic foil seems essentially disrespectful to the history of slavery.<sup>23</sup>

Aisha Harris, a reviewer at *Slate* opposes this idea with her comment, saying instead of provoking laughter, the character of Stephen emits evil and malice and leaves the feelings of ridicule rather for the character of Candie, since he is - unlike Stephen - unable to see through Django and Schultz's deceptions, as the two hope to liberate Broomhilda.<sup>24</sup> In terms of the African-American male characters in the film, we can consider Stephen the second main hero of the film: he is, similarly to Django occupying an elevated position, a rather unusual one to what we would expect of a house slave. In the very first scene where he makes his initial appearance, he jokes with his master - Candie - and he even opposes him, doubting Candie's order to accommodate both Dr. Schultz and Django in the house with the family. Already this verbal exchange signals that Stephen is being treated dissimilarly to the other numerous slaves that belong to the property. In the previously

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<sup>23</sup> Jelani Cobb, "Tarantino Unchained", *The New Yorker*, 2 Jan 2013, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/tarantino-unchained?mobify=0>>.

<sup>24</sup> Aisha Harris, "Why Samuel L. Jackson in *Django Unchained* Deserves an Oscar as Stephen, Quentin Tarantino's Best Character Yet", *Slate*, 8 Jan 2013, 21 Nov 2014 <[http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/01/08/samuel\\_l\\_jackson\\_in\\_django\\_unchained\\_deserves\\_an\\_oscar\\_as\\_stephen\\_quentin.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/01/08/samuel_l_jackson_in_django_unchained_deserves_an_oscar_as_stephen_quentin.html)>.

mentioned interview, Samuel L. Jackson noted that he worked with his make-up team on adjusting his skin color to fit the image he had of the character. Indeed, his skin color seems to be darker than the one of the other African-American characters on screen, as if signaling the malicious intentions he has, as if it was intended for the audience not be mistaken that he is, in fact, “different” - in the sense of his status in Candieland, as well as in relation to his upcoming behavior towards other slaves. What is important to stress here is that his malice is not directed solely towards Django but - as we are informed shortly after his opening lines - towards other house slaves as well, and namely towards Broomhilda. As the audience later finds out, whilst Candie was traveling, Stephen took the liberty to put Broomhilda in a box in the ground as a punishment for attempting to flee Candieland. This, once again, is an unexpected plot twist, which adds a stronger notion of power to his character, since it is rather improbable that a house slave would be allowed to act in a similar manner without his master’s permission. Once again, Tarantino uses this moment in the script to provide an additional layer to Stephen’s character, making him the ultimate enemy of the main hero and therefore an antihero for the audience.

In terms of the art department, in *Django Unchained*, an essential accent is placed on the wardrobe - especially in relation to the character of Django, as he undergoes the most striking transformation throughout the course of the film. At the very beginning, after he is liberated from a slave march by Dr. Schultz, we see him throwing off a piece of cloth he previously wore. This shot is done in slow motion, in order to intensify the moment of sudden victory he has just been able to acquire: we see Django from therefore back as he triumphantly and slightly exaggeratedly rids himself of the piece of clothing. Shortly after, he is advised by Dr. Schultz to take a coat that was previously owned by one of his capturers and who is now lying on the ground as he was shot dead by Dr. Schultz. Once again, a piece of clothing becomes symbolic: this time, it is a metaphor of power and superiority, as in the cold weather that the scene is set in, only the superior ones (meaning not the enslaved African-Americans) possess right to proper clothing. By acquiring the coat, Django’s status rises, as it will continuously rise onwards with the following wardrobe exchanges. Shortly after, Django is taken to a clothes shop where Dr. Schultz proposes - to

Django's utter astonishment ("You's gonna let me pick up my own clothes?")<sup>25</sup> - that he chooses his own clothes. This is the moment where the notion of sartorial display is fully elaborated - in the next shot, Django is portrayed as he rides on a horse in a bright blue velour ensemble with a bold white bow under his chin (see Appendix 2, pg. 67). Moreover, the scene is - once again - stressed with the help of slow motion and musical score. Sartorial display is a term keyed by experts on African-American studies (e.g. Ed Guerrero), for example in relation to films of Blaxploitation era where eye-catching wardrobe was one of the essential tools. African-American filmmakers used oversized wigs, bright colors, wild patterns and unexpected combinations in costumes in order to state their power over set traditions, as well as over the uniformity in costume departments of Hollywood-made and white audience-oriented moving pictures. For the African-American characters onscreen, the creative freedom meant embracing the category of "different" and finding liberation not only through wardrobe but also through expressing oneself with a specific language, or through music.

Returning once again to the striking blue velour suit that was used in the scene where Django is suddenly allowed to wear clothes he personally selects - it almost seems as if there was a sense of mockery at this point. While we can sense an obvious nod to the blaxploitation film genre that Tarantino is notoriously fascinated with, the moment also has a certain comedic air, as the costume is visually impossible to miss and feels overly exaggerated on the character of Django who is expected to become the main hero of the narrative. It is therefore unavoidable that such treatment of wardrobe on the main character would invite critical readings of representation of an African-American, especially in a film, which uses slavery as its central motif. Of course, the screenplay strategy was probably at this point directed on depicting the sudden transformation of Django, with accent on his previous non-existent experience with appropriate clothing, yet it forces the audience to question his personal taste and therefore renders him as an unlikely hero (as by the "usual" and mostly Hollywood-rooted standard, the hero should always profess admirable qualities, even if his route to triumph is an unexpected one).

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<sup>25</sup> *Django Unchained*, dir. Quentin Tarantino, *The Weinstein Company*, *Columbia Pictures*, 2012.

The next costume exchange that the character of Django played by Jamie Fox undergoes is fully demonstrated in the scene where Django and Dr. Schultz follow Calvin Candie to his mansion. This is where Django elevates himself into a higher social level by talking down to a group of African-American slaves that are a part of Candie's entourage. As he repeatedly proclaims, he is a free man and - unlike them - is allowed to dress in a self-desired manner. At this point, he is clothed in more western film-like fashion: with the typical hat and a pair of sunglasses that are replicas of those worn by actor Charles Bronson in *White Buffalo*, a 1977 western film.<sup>26</sup> As Sharen Davis, a costume designer on *Django Unchained* explains in an interview, Tarantino relied heavily on such references when briefing her on his concept of wardrobe for the film. In addition, Davis notes that she was not forced to adhere strictly to historical period the film is set in (year of 1859), as her understanding of Tarantino's approach was that they were creating a story and not a historical documentary.<sup>27</sup> This is an essential note in relation to the previously discussed controversy regarding the depiction of slavery in Tarantino's film. Whilst the historical period of the antebellum South plays a key role in the narrative, it is supposed to serve solely as a background for a fabricated narrative that mélanges various film genres with the aim to create an unexpected and possibly provoking piece of entertainment.

The above mentioned claim is further supported by Sharen Davis, as she continues to discuss Tarantino's approach to the audience-provoking issues:

That's really why I think, even though I wish we saw more costume, he pivots right out when it's starting to get intense. He changes the subject matter so fast that you can't get drawn into the darkness of slavery or the bloodiness of the gunfights. He's so amazing like that.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "Sharen Davis Costume Interview: Django Unchained", *Clothes on Film*, 1 Jan 2013, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://clothesonfilm.com/sharen-davis-costume-interview-django-unchained/28947/>>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Davis here clearly addresses one of the essential points that served as centerpieces of the film's criticism and that was already mentioned in the chapter devoted to Julian Schnabel's *Basquiat*. The very "changing of the subject before getting drawn into the darkness of slavery" is what renders the film being "Hollywood-like", simplifying the horrors of the period into a harmless form that would remain inoffensive to audiences and on the surface of the deeply rooted racist mindset that treated African-Americans as unequals. What Davis here describes as "amazing" is precisely the omitting of the more profound analysis and not providing an impulse for a discussion, or at least for a reflection on the issue that is from one perspective historical but from another very current, with stereotypical conclusions and race-oriented behavior still being prevalent in today's society. Whilst this is an obvious reaction that *Django Unchained* would spark on the side of the film's critics, at the same time, Tarantino objects with his intention of the film not being a historical survey but rather a cinematic experiment - with history being but a setting and a source of inspiration. The question remains whether slavery is an appropriate theme used for a film whose primary aim is not to address slavery in a more sophisticated - meaning a more profound - manner. The sensitivity on the side of the viewers is one of the major decision factors here of course, as a portion of audiences would naturally remain indifferent to this question. Nevertheless, keeping in mind that film is a powerful visual tool capable of encapsulating all human senses, it should be noted that *Django Unchained* is not precisely an ideal depiction of the antebellum South in terms of its historical and social accuracy.

Tarantino himself comments:

On one hand I'm telling a historical story, and when it comes to nuts and bolts of the slave trade, I had to be real and had to tell it the right way. But when it comes to more thematic things and operatic view, I could actually have fun with stylization - because it is taking parts from a spaghetti Western. And I am taking the story of a slave narrative and blowing it up to folkloric proportions and to operatic proportions that are worthy of high opera.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Tarantino 'Unchained' ", *The Root*, 23 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <[http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django\\_unchained\\_trilogy\\_and\\_more\\_tarantino\\_talks\\_to\\_gates.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django_unchained_trilogy_and_more_tarantino_talks_to_gates.html)>.

What most of the reviewers emphasized as the key problematic issue with Tarantino's *Django Unchained* was their feeling of a lack of respect for their ancestors (those who actually suffered through slavery) and their impression that African-Americans are being ridiculed in the film. Whilst - as was addressed in the previous passages - there are certain moments and scenes in the script that could be perceived as diminishing (namely the factor of ridiculousness in Django's initial wardrobe choices or Stephen's first presentation on the screen), the overall impression Tarantino's film evokes is the one of an audiovisual piece that was produced to entertain, attract filmgoers and possibly generate profit. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Tarantino's films in general contain humor and references that are not oriented towards a "general" public, meaning that oftentimes his films contain elements that require certain previous knowledge, or at least a significant level of intellect: on many occasions, his comedic scenes are built on references to actual historical events or figures. The point of this argument is that his films, including his latest are not geared towards the "usual" Hollywood comedy target group comprised of viewers looking for a relaxing cinema experience. As Tarantino continually demonstrates - and namely as he demonstrated in the interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr. - his knowledge of the topic he tackles in his film is very profound, be it the tactics of slave holders (Mandingo fights, punishment of slaves, slave hierarchy dividing them into house and field slaves), or cinema and film genre history (since he mentions numerous examples of western films and western directors that inspired him during the making of *Django Unchained*).<sup>30</sup>

Spike Lee, one of the primary critics of African-American issues being tackled in film by white film directors spoke against Tarantino in relations to *Django Unchained* primarily because - as he noted and as was listed amongst the main points of controversy in relations to the film - "it would be disrespectful to [his] ancestors to see that film".<sup>31</sup> To this

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Tarantino 'Unchained' ", *The Root*, 23 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <[http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django\\_unchained\\_trilogy\\_and\\_more\\_tarantino\\_talks\\_to\\_gates.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django_unchained_trilogy_and_more_tarantino_talks_to_gates.html)>.

<sup>31</sup> Adelle Platon, "Spike Lee Slams *Django Unchained*: 'I'm Not Gonna See It'", *Vibe*, 21 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://www.vibe.com/article/spike-lee-slams-django-unchained-im-not-gonna-see-it>>.

comment, he later added on his Twitter account: “American Slavery Was Not a Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western. It Was a Holocaust.”<sup>32</sup> The question that arises here is how should themes, or rather, historical occurrences such as slavery be treated - in cases that they are to be expressed through art. Tarantino, together with H. L. Gates in the already cited interview agree on the following statement: Americans should face the image of slavery (and together with slavery also other mistakes their predecessors committed) in its horrendous and non-denying form in order to be faced with its actuality and not solely the term and all the connotations it suggests. Tarantino addresses the notion of “intellectuality” that is linked with the history of slavery, as people distance themselves from the violence, the pain and the reality in general of what those times were synonymous for: the director calls this approach “treating slavery as information”<sup>33</sup>, since “they want to keep slavery intellectual”.<sup>34</sup> This, as he suggests, is the key reason why viewers and reviewers are appalled by the amount and rawness of violence in his film. There are scenes in *Django Unchained* that specifically became target of criticism, such as the scene where one of the slaves is caught running away from Candieland, as he no longer wishes to participate in “Mandingo” fights, which Candie and other slave owners organize purely out of their desire for entertainment, and which are limitless in terms of rules and end in one of the fighters dying on the spot. The runaway slave is confronted with Candie together with Django, Dr. Schultz and the entire entourage as they make their way to Candie’s mansion. For punishment, the slave is to be attacked by enraged dogs, which Candie in the end approves as an adequate punishment and has his entourage witness the event, while paying special attention to Django - to test his alliance with fellow African-American slaves, as Django is attempting to trick Candie into thinking that he is a Mandingo fighters expert with intention to purchase one from Candie together with Dr. Schultz. The scene - being rather graphic - seems to be crucial to Tarantino in terms of the storyline: his intention is to show

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<sup>32</sup> Adelle Platon, “Spike Lee Slams *Django Unchained*: ‘I’m Not Gonna See It’”, *Vibe*, 21 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://www.vibe.com/article/spike-lee-slams-django-unchained-im-not-gonna-see-it>>.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Tarantino ‘Unchained’ “, *The Root*, 23 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <[http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django\\_unchained\\_trilogy\\_and\\_more\\_tarantino\\_talks\\_to\\_gates.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django_unchained_trilogy_and_more_tarantino_talks_to_gates.html)>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Candie's initial doubts about Django's credibility. This is the point where Django's character is being inspected, where his trickery could be uncovered and therefore the point of cinematic tension enhanced with the violent scene into which it transforms. Probably a more crucial intention of this scene - besides being a plot-making and character-forming point in the screenplay - is the already mentioned shock factor employed with the aim to address the actuality of violence in times of slavery. In this case, Tarantino's explanation is understandable and should be appreciated by the critics of *Django Unchained* for its directness, as the director manages to provide a powerful tool that is capable of attacking our conscience at an appropriate level. Whilst we are more and more often witnessing violence in films being used for its entertainment factor, with viewers becoming gradually immune to seeing characters dying on screen, in the case of the discussed film, it simply imitates the violence that African-American slaves were subjected to and that today's viewers - as both the ancestors and members of American society - should acknowledge and confront whilst applying it to the current situation in regards to people of color in the United States.

Besides the violent content of *Django Unchained*, Spike Lee - amongst others - heavily criticized Tarantino for his overuse of the word "nigger" not only in his latest film but also in his previous films - *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jackie Brown* (1997). The use of the word in Tarantino's films has acquired such notoriety that it has become one of the elementary basics of Tarantino fandom - with each of his films, there are viewers counting how many times he used the word; in *Django Unchained*, he apparently "broke the record" with hundred and nine utterances.<sup>35</sup> To attacks that criticize his overuse of the word, which is nowadays referred to as "n-word" and if pronounced by a non-African-American is considered a strong verbal abuse, Tarantino responds with the already mentioned answer: in his films, he solely mimics reality. Naturally, in relation to his latest film, this explanation is perfectly applicable, however, with his earlier films, a certain "wow effect" linked to his

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<sup>35</sup> "Quentin Tarantino Responds to the Criticism of Using the N-Word in "Django Unchained", *Sway's Universe*, *Youtube.com*, 17 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R\\_Du\\_wF9wUw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_Du_wF9wUw)>.

directorial style is in question. In the *New Yorker* article, Jelani Cobb offers the following comment:

At some point, it becomes difficult not to wonder how much of this is about the film and how much is about the filmmaker. Given the prominence of the word in *Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown* - neither of which remotely touch on slavery - its usage in *Django* starts to seem like racial ventriloquism, a kind of camouflage that allows Tarantino to use the word without recrimination.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, in numerous interviews, Tarantino stated that his usage of the word was fueled purely by his intention to sustain a certain level of authenticity. On one hand, its presence in *Django Unchained* is applicable and goes hand in hand with Tarantino's explanation. On the other, given his previous controversial overuse of the term, one could agree with Professor Cobb that Tarantino simply finds pleasure in overloading his scripts with the n-word. However, not all talent was comfortable with pronouncing the word on such a number of occasions in the film. Leonardo DiCaprio who played the part of the slave-owner Calvin Candie, for instance, expressed a certain level of uncomfortableness with his lines, feeling the inappropriateness of using the word towards African-Americans in present-time United States. As Samuel L. Jackson described in an interview for *Vanity Fair*, him and Tarantino had to ensure DiCaprio that it was necessary to be "all in" and therefore engage in the script in the manner that it was written.<sup>37</sup> It is notable that that DiCaprio seemed to be persuaded only after he received a "permission", or rather after he was obliged to use the word by Jackson that he felt an adequate level of appropriateness to pronounce it.

There are also other terms that the director used in his screenplay in regards to the African-American characters playing slaves in the film. At the very beginning, upon the first

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<sup>36</sup> Jelani Cobb, "Tarantino Unchained", *The New Yorker*, 2 Jan 2013, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/tarantino-unchained?mobify=0>>.

<sup>37</sup> Jason Guerassion, "Samuel L. Jackson on Finding the Right Skin Tone for *Django Unchained* and Making Leonardo DiCaprio Become Comfortable with the N-word", *Vanity Fair*, 20 Dec 2012, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://www.vanityfair.com/online/oscars/2012/12/samuel-l-jackson-skin-tone-django>>.

encounter between Django and Dr. Schultz, Dr. Schultz refers to a group of enslaved men in chains as “you little devils”.<sup>38</sup> The term “devil” used in relation to an African-American is not an unusual one - meaning that it has been used in the past by non-African-Americans with the aim to stress the “malice” that black people were often being linked to. Of course, the first impulse for this linkage is the dark color of skin that an image of a devil would automatically be associated with. Second, and probably more important, is the already mentioned presupposition of the devil being connected to all vicious and unearthly, which served as an ideal tool for differentiating the African-American community even more profoundly - and with stress on the “otherness” and “deviance” from what is generally considered as “normal”. An interesting factor to be considered here is the part of Dr. Schultz’s reference to the slaves as “little”. In fact, the notion of “smallness” in reference to African-American characters appears in the film on numerous occasions. Another scene, in which Dr. Schultz uses this term is when he speaks to one of the African-American ladies in Candie’s mansion and calls her “ma petite femme noire” - translated from French as “my little black lady”.<sup>39</sup> This “belittling” of the African-American characters could be interpreted from two dissimilar perspectives. The automatic one and the one we would expect from Tarantino to support his sense of the often repeated authenticity would be that Dr. Schultz was, in fact, simply following the “trend” of the time, treating the slaves as below equals in his speech. However, his relationship to Django contrasts with this theory, and in result calls for a different explanation. The second perspective that his lines could be approached from is, on the contrary to the previous one, his sympathy with the African-American race and his desire to express it through a childlike manner of speaking. The idea of the “childlike” approach should be concentrated on here, since whilst at the first sight, the form of reference might seem as harmless and adorable, at a second glance, it once again places African-Americans on a lower social level - this time into the category of children and therefore individuals that are to be taught and commanded by the white ruling class. In a different scene in the film, Dr. Schultz calls one of the slaves a “pickaninny” when he

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<sup>38</sup> *Django Unchained*, dir. Quentin Tarantino, *The Weinstein Company*, *Columbia Pictures*, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> own translation from French from *Django Unchained*, dir. Quentin Tarantino, *The Weinstein Company*, *Columbia Pictures*, 2012.

proclaims “We are not paying a dime for that pickaninny!”<sup>40</sup> - while he is referring to a middle-aged man, it should be noted that the term was originally used to address small African-American boys - once again, there is a subtext of childlike qualities that are subconsciously linked to the slave’s character. When it comes to comparing the African-American slaves to children, there are certain qualities that were, in fact, similar. Firstly, it is the lack of education that they both profess. On one side, we have children - who are yet to study the world around them and are expected to misunderstand complicated words, issues and laws. On the other, there stand African-Americans - and specifically slaves in that time - who are deprived of the possibility to educate themselves - mainly for the reason of security of the slave owners, as this is one of the ways how to reduce one’s freedom. Without proper education, or even ability to read, slaves, indeed, turn into children: dependent on their owners and unable to escape and live proper lives on their own.

Another peculiar juxtaposition (besides the above discussed slaves vs. children example) is the notion of candy - present both metaphorically and physically - in Calvie Candie’s Candieland - versus the presence of African-American slaves. Catherine Keyser explores the notion of slavery and sweets in her article “The Sweet Tooth of Slavery: *Django Unchained* and Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety*”, in which she compares Tarantino’s film and an art piece of the New York based artist. *A Subtlety* is a statue of an oversized sphinx shaped as an African-American-looking woman with emphasized lips and hips made from sugar along with thirteen African-American molasses children approaching to the sphinx with buckets of more sugar. Walker comments: “Both works insist upon the centrality of sweetness and sugar to the exploitation of black bodies in the pursuit of white pleasure. The slave body becomes a kind of candy.”<sup>41</sup> As was mentioned above, candy is present in Tarantino’s film in both physical and metaphorical state. In “Candieland” already, named after Calvin Candie - a “seeker of candy” and also a slaveholder, the sweetness of actual lollipops and hard

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<sup>40</sup> *Django Unchained*, dir. Quentin Tarantino, *The Weinstein Company, Columbia Pictures*, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Keyser, “The Sweet Tooth of Slavery: *Django Unchained* and Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety*”, *Transition*, Issue 115, 2014, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/transition/v115/115.keyser.html>>.

candy that appear in various scenes taking place in Candieland is contrasted with the pain and blood of slaves being punished, killed, or simply held at the property. The juxtaposition is most palpable in the scene where viewers witness a Mandingo fight organized by Candie and held in his salon in his mansion - right by a fireplace. As the fight becomes more and more violent, with blood splashing on the wooden floor and horrendous sounds of human flesh being teared and ripped becoming more and more frequent, we see Coco - an African-American female house slave dressed in a playful and slightly raunchy maid costume - as she plays with small candy balls in her hands. Once the final blow from one of the fighters is landed on the body of the other slave and he finds his death in his opponent's hands, the room becomes silent for a brief moment, which is confronted with the sound and shot of candy balls being dropped on the ground and rolling all over the floor. The two shots - being edited so that they directly follow each other - automatically evoke the comparison between the lightness of candy and the uncompromising bitterness of death. In this case and in this period especially, however, the death of the slave is so insignificant that it resembles the minimal importance of candy. Moreover, the death of one of the slaves is a piece of entertainment to Candie and his company, resembling the connotations that enjoying a piece of candy evokes. As Walker was quoted above - the two are joined as symbols of white pleasure.<sup>42</sup> There is also a sense of ownership and powerlessness of slaves towards their owners - a slave (a human being) can be bought as easily as sweets, and as Tarantino underlines in his film - for a significantly low price.

Similarly to the way that Tarantino employs the contrast between sweets and slaves, he also juxtaposes two different worlds of slaves being owned by white men. Already at the first mansion that Dr. Schultz and Django, as bounty hunters, visit on their quest to kill a wanted trio of brothers, we become witnesses of two different atmospheres attached to the lives of slaves at Big Daddy's - as they call their owner - property. Django, along with Bettina - Big Daddy's slave who was asked to escort Django on the grounds - pass a number of slaves who are swinging on swings amongst trees: there is a feeling of ease in the air,

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<sup>42</sup> Catherine Keyser, "The Sweet Tooth of Slavery: *Django Unchained* and Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*", *Transition*, Issue 115, 2014, 21 Nov 2014 <<http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/transition/v115/115.keyser.html>>.

almost as if everyone was enjoying themselves, living a peaceful life being oblivious and grateful to their “daddy”. However, the mood abruptly transforms, as we are faced with a scene of a slave about to be whipped by one of the brothers that Django and Dr. Schultz are in search for. Such sudden atmosphere changes occur also later in the film, when the plot takes place at Candieland. Here, also, the viewers are presented with scenes where African-American slaves dine at one table with Candie (namely Coco, the already mentioned house slave dressed in a maid costume), or are simply in his presence, dressed in luxurious gowns, serving as some sort of an “eye-candy” for the master, being a part of the lavish setting and almost melting into the background, together with expensive furniture (as Sheba - an African-American lady that is always somewhere close to Candie, yet almost never utters a single word). The characters of the ladies present at Candieland are on numerous occasions contrasted with images of brutality of slavery and the above discussed Mandingo fights. While they remain motionless, graceful and luxury-evoking, their “co-prisoners” are subjected to violence ordered by the master - from a certain point of view, they are suddenly standing on opposite sides, the ladies being part of the master’s inventory and yet being treated as somehow equal. There is one additional shot where the notion of violence and peace are placed - rather forcefully - into contrast. This occurs in the scene where Django kills the three brothers he and Dr. Schultz came to seek for at Big Daddy’s land. Right after one of them is seen as being shot, there is a slow motion shot of cotton plants being splashed with droplets of blood. The white, tender and soft cotton - on one hand a symbol of peace, on the other a symbol of oppression - is confronted with violence and death. Repetitiously, Tarantino uses the technique of slow motion to stress the importance of the shot, to attract the viewer’s attention and, indeed, invite him or her to create explanations of such an obviously pinpointed scene. As was already addressed - the cotton here functions as a metaphor for slavery and Django’s triumph over the brothers-oppressors therefore demonstrates his victory over his slave status; and it is all captured in this one particular shot.

Pondering over the notion of violence, it should be pointed out that films such as *Django Unchained* tend to resurface in times when countries witness actual violent occurrences

being demonstrated on their own citizens in the current era. In relations to Tarantino's film, such tendencies are specifically valid when the violence is present between people of two different racial provenances. It was in recent months that United States have once again felt the racial tension between African-Americans and non-African-Americans, as another case of a white police officer who shot an African-American young male and was not indicted by grand jury sparked protests marches and riots in major American cities. Since it was an incident that had appeared previously on numerous occasions, it had ignited debates about African-Americans in American society and about the value of their lives, as a phrase "Black lives matter" developed into a slogan of protests, public speeches and other proclamations. In light of these events, we should once again revisit the field of entertainment - and films specifically - as they have an indisputable power on viewers' perception of different events, behavioral patterns, as well as certain types of characters and historical issues. At the moment, we are witnessing a continuous process of African-American actors and filmmakers establishing themselves in the Hollywood system. Nevertheless, they are still being categorized as "African-American", "black", or "ethnic", with accent on their race. Even nowadays, journalists and reviewers proudly announce award winners as "the first African-American female or male to receive" a given prize, proclaiming the fact as it would be an unexpected occurrence, professing sings of self-satisfaction with the state of the American society and the amount of liberty they are provided with. Yet, there are occasions that call for dissimilar thoughts, such as those mentioned above that make everyone question the level of the proclaimed freedom and actual relations between people of different racial background. In films, there is still a sense of "disruption" of certain codes of filmmaking - especially in Hollywood-made films - this is the case especially if, for example, a character of a successful businessman is played by an African-American, since an automatic image that clouds the minds of the filmgoers is the one of a grey-haired white male in a made-to-order suit. It is exactly these "codes" - a set of images, typical characters and repeated storylines that are responsible for the feeling of violation, or disruption in moments when these codes are broken and not adhered to. In *Django Unchained*, Tarantino mitigates these codes, with the character of an African-American "cowboy", dressed in a costume typical for a western film, breaking the rules of slavery and society of the time that we have written historical evidence of. Django, for once,

is the main hero and regardless of the few moments in the film where his character is subjected to mockery and maltreatment, he overcomes all obstacles with a sense of great pride and no questioning of his newly acquired status. Similarly to his onscreen presence, there is no hesitation in person of Jamie Fox, no second guessing in what his role might represent for the viewers.

#### 4 / *The Help* (dir. Tate Taylor, 2011): A White-Authored Tale Told Twice

The third and final moving picture to be examined in this thesis is a 2011 novel-to-screen adaptation called *The Help*, directed by a Mississippi native - and Caucasian - director Tate Taylor. The film's script, written by Taylor himself, originated in a book of the same title written by Kathryn Stockett in 2009. The two authors were childhood friends, both growing up in the same area, experiencing what it was like to be brought up by an African-American house maid, or "the help", which is the central plot point both the book and the film revolve around. Stockett and Taylor agree that the original impulse to even consider sharing their encounters was the quest for a realistic image of African-American nannies and house maids they gained their knowledge of during the Civil Rights era and shortly after in the Southern United States.

We just wanted to tell the truth, tell the real story and get it right. So many times for Southerners, our stories have been handled and taken by hands that were outside the South and it is not always the way we know it to be so we just wanted to tell the truth - the good and the bad.<sup>43</sup>

The question arising here, however, is whether they succeeded in capturing the given era from both the perspective of a white child growing up with the help and the help herself. The chapter on *The Help* closes the thesis with one final controversial Hollywood-produced picture that stirred heated discussions on whether an European-American filmmaker is capable of truly encapsulating the nature of an African-American experience in the American culture and society. After the two previous films - *Basquiat* stemming from a personal experience and *Django Unchained* originating in a thorough research and personal knowledge of the author - *The Help* is a tale that was told twice: in a written and in an audiovisual form, both headed by a non-African-American claiming to be righteous in depicting lives of African-American characters as they were living through oppression

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<sup>43</sup> "Director Tate Taylor & Writer Kathryn Stockett Talk *The Help*", *Clevver Movies*, *Youtube.com*, 11 Aug 2011, 2 Dec 2014 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUI\\_MsqCpgk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUI_MsqCpgk)>.

imposed on them by the white supremacy. At the first glance, *The Help* is yet another product of Hollywood system, promoted with the benefit of the list of significant members of cast attached to it, at the second, it is presented as a historical document, with the two authors claiming to “have been there” and therefore asking to be considered as veritable. The power of visual media is once again in question, demonstrating how facily can certain fables be marketed as facts and how these then shape the viewers’ perception of the given historical periods in American history.

The level of truthfulness is tested also through the sole gender juxtaposition of the director and his main heroines. The film is told from a perspective - or rather revolves around personal lives - of three principal characters: Eugenia nicknamed “Skeeter” - a young unmarried lady who intends to write a book filled with encounters told from the point of view of the help, and Minny and Aibileen - two house maids that help Skeeter achieve her goal. Already from the beginning of the film, we as viewers realize that the female characters will be the leading ones, with the male characters constantly disappearing, or being absent altogether. This approach attracts a second wave of doubtfulness towards the finished film product - is a male director capable of capturing the reality of female relationships, or of strictly female issues, such as abortion? We might say that since Taylor had a benefit of the pre-existing material in Stockett’s novel, his interpretation of the female world would be translated onto the big screen without any hesitation. Nevertheless, it is the relationship between the director and his actors on set that create new characters that are possibly dissimilar to those in the written form, as they adjust to the director’s own perception of them through the novel. This notion of double-telling a story presents us with a peculiar resumé: what the book was criticized for now becomes significantly more palpable, as the film version broadens the reach of marketing strategies, attracting more viewers and therefore more critics. At the same time, the film turns the attention backwards to the book once again and Stockett is therefore targeted for the original novel for the second time, being asked to defend herself for diminishing the racial tension of the Civil Rights era to the form of a domestic “feel-good” narrative and omitting the issues of rape, rioting, or other grave occurrences of the time.

Similarly to the book, Taylor's film also professes qualities of the already mentioned notion of a "feel good" narrative - in film industry, this could be considered even a genre, which is not unfamiliar to Hollywood films audiences: the basic strategy of these films is to attract viewers across generations, claiming that "you can take your entire family to see this film", as the film is expected to appeal to your children (for the morals presented in the film), to your husband (for the historical aspects) and you (meaning a mid-twenties to mid-fifties woman visiting cinema screenings with the simple aim to "be entertained" and leave the venue with an uplifted spirit, hoping for more inspiring stories such as *The Help*; as it could truly be classified as one by the film's marketing team). In *From "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to "The Help"*, a series of critical essays on white-authored narratives of African-American lives that was published in August 2014, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan offers her own definition of a feel-good film and proposes *The Help* as an ideal example:

It's a classic American feel-good plot - a narrative of white-faced altruism and silenced black salvation so familiar that American audiences have come to crave it. "Feeling good" on the backs of caricatured black bodies is one of America's greatest compulsions and *The Help* is poised to deliver American audiences their fix.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, both the book and the film operate with the "white-faced altruism" in the character of Skeeter who embarks on a journey to provide the African-American female domestic workers with their own voices through the book of confession stories she intends to write. Despite the fact that Minny and Aibileen are from the cinematic perspective portrayed as the central characters (Aibileen's voice is the primary voice-over sound narrating the story etc.), they are largely dependent on the non-African-American female characters, which is recognizable not only in the very plot of the film but also in the narrative strategy. The stories of Minny and Aibileen are directly linked to their white employers, as they revolve around the everyday duties of the help. Whilst the audience is provided with a number of glimpses into the personal lives of the house maids, they seem to serve solely as character

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<sup>44</sup> Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, "Second (and Third, and Fourth...) Helpings", Claire Oberon Garcia, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Charise Pimentel, ed., *From "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to "The Help": Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 96.

background “fillers” that cease to penetrate into the more intimate spheres of the maids’ lives. The characters also operate in pairs, meaning that each of the white female characters in the film have their own African-American counterpart - in this case each housewife has her own nanny or maid - which serves as the key plot-making tool. The various relationships - from a loving, respectful and slightly melodramatic one between Skeeter and her childhood nanny Constantine to a hatred-filled one of Miss Hilly and Minny, which escalates into Minny being fired - cover the range of emotions and varieties of relationships, granting a fully rounded cinema experience that Hollywood films tend to provide. Amidst the ignorant, racist, or sheepish white female characters, Skeeter shines as the only progressive one, becoming almost a certain savior figure that the African-American house maids gradually begin to gravitate towards. Using Skeeter as the primary positive character, the heroine and the one responsible for bonding between the two “camps” despite the racial differences and the anti-African-American atmosphere in the South of the time becomes one of the elementary points of criticism against the book and later the film. This seems to be based on the sole fact that - once again - a non-African-American character is placed on a pedestal in a narrative, which is set in a period of African-American struggle.

Most of such narratives are also oftentimes criticized for their stereotypical or simplified depictions of African-Americans. *The Help* is, unfortunately, not an exception, as both Stockett and Taylor employ various devices - both visual and metaphorical - that we could label as classic examples of such treatment. It should be stressed that Stockett’s literary predecessor to the film had laid the foundation of the stereotypical approach, namely by clearly dividing her characters based on their race. The manner, in which she represents their speech is characterized by the use of a more colloquial language with signs typical for “black vernacular”: the use of a singular verb form with the pronoun “you” (for example the mantra that Aibileen keeps repeating to the little girl she is taking care of: “You is smart, you is kind, you is important”<sup>45</sup>), or the negative form of the verb “to be” - “ain’t” being the two most significant examples. The paradoxical nature of a white author writing in a “black

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<sup>45</sup> *The Help*, dir. Tate Taylor, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011.

voice” steadily turned into one of the vital points of criticism that Stockett was showered with after her debut novel was released. Granted that her book turned into a national and later international bestseller, Stockett professed signs of regret over the use of the specific - and we might say “coded” - language she was familiar with only through her personal experience with her nanny in 1970s. In an interview for *Time* magazine, she noted: “Had I known it was going to be so widely disseminated I probably wouldn't have written it in the type of language that I did.”<sup>46</sup> Ebony Lumumba, the author of one of the chapters in the above-mentioned collection of essays on white-authored narratives of black life, understands this hesitation as a sign of author’s weakness and a certain form of a lack of confidence in regards to the veritableness of Stockett’s own story. In her chapter titled “Must the Novelist Ask Permission?”, Lumumba compares the writing style of Stockett and Eudora Welty, also a Caucasian female writer who positioned her narratives into the South of the United States, often employing African-American characters. According to Lumumba, by expressing hesitation over the use of the “colored” language, Stockett “diminishes the value of an element vital to the portrayal of the community she writes in so much of her text”<sup>47</sup>. This approach is therefore contrasting with Eudora Welty’s writing, as Welty appeared to never question or undermine her own representation of “the other race”.

Whilst the aspect of language was one of the major elements that we could label as stereotypical in Stockett’s novel, in Taylor’s film version of the story, these elements are significantly more palpable - mainly as a result of a condensed format of a film, as well as of simplification of the plot given by the very nature of an audiovisual medium. Film, in general, has limited options in regards to its relationship with a viewer: if we consider the more direct viewing experience of a cinema house (and omit the other, more user-friendly formats such as DVDs and other video-on-demand services), we find ourselves realizing the need of a film director to create as many attractions for the viewers in order to keep him entertained, or simply engaged in the on-screen reality. This automatically calls for

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<sup>46</sup> Claire Suddath, “Kathryn Stockett, Author of *The Help*”, *Time.com*, 11 Nov 2009, 2 Dec 2014 <<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1937562,00.html>>.

<sup>47</sup> Ebony Lumumba, “Must the Novelist Ask Permission?”, Claire Oberon Garcia, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Charise Pimentel, ed., *From “Uncle Tom’s Cabin to “The Help”: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life*” (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 28.

simplification, especially in the case of a film adapted from its literary version: one could not simply encapsulate a totality of all the elements the literary form is benefiting from. With *The Help* - which is furthermore a case of a Hollywood film - this simplification then renders certain characteristics, scenes, or occurrences as stereotypical, which makes us as viewers question the level of authenticity and artistic quality of the final result. One of the initial signs of a stereotypical approach appear at the very beginning of the film, which opens on Aibileen Clark caring for a white baby girl. Aibileen's voice-over narrates her personal story, informing the viewers of her background and how the profession of a "help" ran in her family. Shortly after, the historical narrative shifts into the present time, as Aibileen's voice claims that "babies like big fat legs",<sup>48</sup> by which she justifies her role in the white family and the role of the help in general - as if non-African-American mothers were unable to take care of their own children based on their physical proportions. The notion of the "black body", especially a female body of a significant size is a strong image that resonates throughout various artistic forms historically, as well as in the present times. It is at the very beginning of the film version of *The Help* that we are faced with this image and are immediately reminded of the "Mammy" stereotype that permeated narratives - both visual and literary - of African-American lives since their origin. The voluptuous full figure, the perfected cooking skills and the ever-comforting smile with a hint of sassiness are only some of the features of the Mammy and yet, they are all captured in Taylor's film.

In *The Help*, the character that reminds us of the overused Mammy stereotype the most significantly is the one of Minny, played by Octavia Spencer. Already her bodily shapes are reminiscent of the antebellum South illustrations that accompanied various objects - from literary pieces to food packaging. The way she composes herself, especially in her speech patterns, is symptomatic of the already discussed vernacular, yet in the film, this tendency is pushed to its limits, with the attention to the simplified grammar and exaggerated intonation. Moreover, Minny represents the notion of resistance and "talking back", which is a quality oftentimes employed with the aim to portray the inability to conform with the rules and regulations imposed on African-Americans during several historical eras. This is

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<sup>48</sup> *The Help*, dir. Tate Taylor, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011.

exemplified in the scene where Minny sends her oldest daughter Sugar (who is of similarly voluptuous bodily features as Minny of course) to work as a house maid for the first time, reminding her that she should restrain from “sass-talking”.<sup>49</sup> In addition, besides the speaking patterns and the attitude her character expresses, the film also accentuates Minny’s cooking skills, paying special attention to praising products such as Crisco, or fried chicken. “I love me some fried chicken,”<sup>50</sup> proclaims Minny, as she takes a generous bite of a deep fried chicken leg, a line and a gesture that obviously call for racial-based generalizations. The scene, in which Minny utters this line is one of the key scenes that revolve around her relationship with Celia, her new employer after the previous one, Hilly, fired her for using her house bathroom - a happening Hilly attempts to fight by trying to pass a bill she calls “The Home Help Sanitation Initiative”.<sup>51</sup> In the above-mentioned scene, Minny teaches Celia how to cook and offers to show her how to prepare her favorite meal - fried chicken. This meal would - under other circumstances, for example, if Minny was not of African-American descent - not be regarded as significant in any regard; nevertheless, this specific meal is attached tightly to such an extensive number of stories that were used to mock and ridicule members of the African-American community that it cannot be regarded as anything else but a depiction of a stereotype in its purest form. In the past, African-Americans were often portrayed as chicken thieves in popular narratives, expressing their hunger for poultry to be so ferocious that it would drive them into criminal behavior. In other cases, small African-American children, also sometimes called “pickaninnies” were shown enjoying pieces of fried chicken in advertisement that would be for products of a different category altogether (e.g. the General Electric print advert for an automatic range - see Appendix 3, pg. 68). In the United States, fried chicken is understood as a meal typical for the Southern states (with Kentucky Fried Chicken being the leading fast food chain in this category), yet it is still - in connotation with African-Americans - regarded as a form of a stereotypical generalization. Especially if used in advertisement or other audiovisual form of media with the aim to pinpoint it as a “favorite meal”, fried

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<sup>49</sup> *The Help*, dir. Tate Taylor, *Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures*, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

chicken is considered a gravely inappropriate pairing when consumed by African-Americans. In 2012, Burger King faced severe public criticism after it aired what was considered a controversial video advert, in which Mary J. Blige, a famous rhythm and blues singer, sings an ode to a fried chicken wrap. Whilst online commentators labeled the spot as taking advantage of the historically inappropriate stereotype, the singer herself - instead of defending her presence in the advert she agreed to shoot - only supported the online anti-campaign by issuing an apology, claiming that the advert was an unfinished product and that she wanted to apologize "to everyone that was offended or thought that [she] would do something so disrespectful to *our* culture."<sup>52</sup> Had she not apologized, pinpointing "our" culture as being the one she was acting disrespectfully towards, the advert might have passed through its online presence only with an insignificant number of enraged internet commentators. On the other hand, her standpoint supported the claim that the use of fried chicken in connection with an African-American singer was, indeed, stereotypical and therefore strengthened the notion that African-Americans in general should rather not be portrayed with fried chicken altogether. Therefore, as we watch Minny in *The Help* proclaiming that she loves fried chicken, knowing that in Stockett's book, her cooking skills were not demonstrated solely on this particular meal,<sup>53</sup> we automatically regard the scene as making use of a what is widely considered an improper stereotype. By emphasizing Minny's ability for preparing comfort food, Taylor only underlines the perception of her character as a new-age Mammy figure, combining all the elements previously known as attached to the image of ever-warm "Aunt Jemima". Given the fact that the director himself is a non-African-American furthermore attracts readings of his film to be regarded as a current era Hollywood "minstrel show", in which African-American characters perform actions and behave according to the manner of their presentation to public before the Civil Rights era in the United States.

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<sup>52</sup> "Mary J. Blige: Burger King Chicken Ad Fallout 'Crushed Me' ", *RollingStone.com*, 28 June 2012, 2 Dec 2014 <<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/mary-j-blige-burger-king-chicken-ad-fallout-crushed-me-20120628>>.

<sup>53</sup> In "Black Girlhood and *The Help*" chapter in *From "Uncle Tom's Cabin to "The Help"*, author Julia S. Jordan-Zachery quotes passages from Kathryn Stockett's novel where she delves into descriptions of meals the character of Minny prepared for her children in her home; Claire Oberon Garcia, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Charise Pimentel, ed., *From "Uncle Tom's Cabin to "The Help": Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 86-87.

Besides the specific dialect, “sass-talking” and indulging in fried chicken, in Taylor’s film, viewers can find themselves witnessing also other scenes that would be expected to appear in a film featuring caricature images of African-Americans, rather than authentic figures. The director places them in a church, singing gospels and attentively listening to a preaching local priest. In her chapter on *The Help* in the critical essays collection, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan calls this “a greatest hits of America’s black woman iconography”,<sup>54</sup> referring to the character of Minny as combining all of the above-mentioned qualities and occurrences in a “single package”;<sup>55</sup> she is the mammy of the film, offering comic relief and comfort food:

There is something about the image of capacious flesh and generous smile of big black women that America cannot get enough of. This is one of our country’s many compulsions: a relentless belief in the availability of the big black other to define and pacify the “regular” white self. And no one serves a pacifying comfort like mammy. [...] Her indefatigable mirth and tirelessly open arms usher in white emotional complexity, offering a haven for white vulnerability, a receptacle for white anger, and an antidote to white pain. And like any addicted body in search of easy salve, America keeps going back for more...<sup>56</sup>

It seems that in *The Help*, Taylor opted for simply that: an admirable character of Minny that would be appealing to both white and African-American audiences: to white for the comfort her character eludes, and to African-American for her attitude she refuses to abandon. Her relationship to the white ladies in the film is also conforming to this strategy: firstly, she takes a revenge on Hilly for treating her in a diminishing manner by baking and making her eat a pie with her own feces. Secondly, she is hesitant at first when asked by

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<sup>54</sup> Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, “Second (and Third, and Fourth...) Helpings”, Claire Oberon Garcia, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Charise Pimentel, ed., *From “Uncle Tom’s Cabin to “The Help””: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 96.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

Skeeter to contribute with her experiences to Skeeter's book, professing her distrust towards those whom she is accustomed to be placed on an inferior level by. Later, even after she finally agrees to share her stories with Skeeter, Minny still treats the writer with signs of superiority, as the roles switch in this relationship. The fact that Minny retains her strength and restrains from any signals of amicability towards Skeeter supports her image of a forceful African-American female, one that the African-American female filmgoers could possibly identify with and therefore perceive her as a character worth cheering for. For the film's authors, this is a strategy that automatically guarantees that *The Help* finds its supporters on both sides of the racial spectrum.

Examining the creation of the film's principal characters on a more profound scale, it has to be noted that the profiling of each of the characters in the film is - in a true Hollywood fashion - quite unified. As viewers, we are capable of clearly discerning the "good" and the "bad" characters, as the visibly identifiable qualities are largely beneficial in pigeonholing each of them into the two given possible categories. Whilst the character of Hilly, for example, is one-dimensionally malicious and unforgiving towards the African-American characters, Skeeter, on the other hand, is portrayed as an outsider sympathizing with those of a similar fate - even if this status is granted by dissimilar conditions. Skeeter, at her age still a single woman, is perceived by the other ladies of the society as ill-fitting, which is only supporting the sense of her closeness to those considered as the "other". In the film, Taylor ensures that the viewer is unmistakably persuaded of her positive relation towards the members of the African-American community in Jackson, Mississippi. On every possible occasion, we witness Skeeter being focused on in the given frames, as she thanks an African-American waiter for her meal at a diner (which he knows how to prepare exactly according to her liking - the film here stressing that the sympathies are mutual), as she frowns when overhearing her friends addressing the help in an unflattering fashion, or as she compliments Aibileen on her dress when we see her in an outfit different than a maid uniform for the first time.<sup>57</sup> Such treatment of Skeeter leaves no space for questioning the positive nature of her character, emphasizing her genuine qualities and classifying her

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<sup>57</sup> *The Help*, dir. Tate Taylor, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011.

flaws as charming and human-like. This approach once again proves that Taylor's directorial style adheres to the Hollywood nature of the film, with characters that are facilely discernible and therefore approachable by the audience. Without leaving the viewers with a puzzling image of "complicated" personae, Taylor provides them with a film worth seeing in order to "be entertained", not to pose questions, disturb their settled opinions, or ask them to analyze the onscreen characters as they are crafted in his directorial style.

As for the male characters in *The Help*, it has already been noted that they are almost obsolete throughout the entire length of the film. The husbands of the white ladies are mostly ignorant of their significant others' whereabouts, including their relations with the help. In case that there is a possibility of an approaching confrontation, they tend to flee the scene, leaving the solution-making to their wives. This is exemplified in the scene where a new house maid of Hilly's comes to ask her employers for a loan for her son's studies.<sup>58</sup> In a rather exaggerated manner - and possibly also in order to evoke a sense of comedy - Hilly's husband fires his wrist towards his eyes to check his watch and proclaims that it was high time he left for work. In other scenes, the husbands pass through the frame, only for the purpose of asking for a meal, or otherwise state their presence, which is never examined in depth. Similarly to the clear differentiation between "good" and "bad" female characters in the film, also the men are divided into two categories, with the white ladies' husbands occupying a category that resides somewhere in between the two - as they are rather ignorant, or harmless, unlike their partners. On the contrary, the husbands of the African-American house maids are portrayed as completely absent, or - as is the case of Minny's husband - abusive and fear-inducing. The omission of the African-American father and husband figures is reminiscent of the earlier cinematic depictions of black characters who were erased from film plots in order to underline their insignificance. The only "present" African-American husband is the one of Minny, despite the fact that he is never physically shown on screen and only appears in form of sounds or shadows over his wife. As the plot unveils, we understand that Leroy (as he is called) is abusive towards Minny, which

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<sup>58</sup> *The Help*, dir. Tate Taylor, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011.

renders her otherwise powerful character helpless and somehow weak in her own domestic space. Leroy's aggressive behavior seems to fulfill yet another stereotypical expectation we could classify as historical, especially in regards to the representations of African-American males in audiovisual culture in the past (one of the most striking examples being the character of Gus in J. W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of A Nation* who lusts after a white young lady and races her to her own suicide). Nevertheless, in the case of *The Help*, the abusive African-American husband returns to the screen, contributing to the generalized "African-American male" category with another inappropriate addition.

In terms of the actors who portrayed the above discussed characters, we should also concentrate on the reactions the leading cast presented to media outlets in regards to the criticism that surrounded the distribution of *The Help*. Similarly to the African-American actors in the previously analyzed *Basquiat* and *Django Unchained*, the leading actresses of Tate Taylor's picture received both applauding and disapproving reactions to their portrayal of characters that were scripted, or directed by non-African-American directors. In the case of *The Help*, both leading actresses for the roles of Aibileen and Minny were nominated for Academy Awards, with Octavia Spencer winning the award for the Best Supporting Actress for the role of Minny. Nonetheless, their success was questioned by numerous film critics and film enthusiasts of both African-American and non-African-American background mainly for the ambiguity of being praised for playing the roles of oppressed women. In the opening chapter of *From "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to "The Help"*, a collective of authors poses the same question,<sup>59</sup> wondering about the paradoxical nature of the trend of African-American actors who are until this day in the majority of cases - and in Hollywood films especially - cast to play slaves, nannies, sidekicks, or physically abusive, and emotionally distressed individuals. What is more, they are afterwards congratulated for their performances of such characters, almost as if they were to be reassured that this is exactly their sole category of artistic existence. One of the very few and often cited

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<sup>59</sup> Claire Oberon Garcia, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Charise Pimentel, ed., "Introduction: What's At Stake When White Writes Black?", *From "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to "The Help": Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 5-7.

interviews with the two leading actresses in *The Help* that addressed this issue aired on PBS channel and was conducted by Tavis Smiley, an African-American TV presenter. Smiley, presenting himself rather as a critic of Taylor's film, expressed his concern with Hollywood's "failure to recognize strong black heroes"<sup>60</sup> and asked Davis and Spencer to justify their co-operation on the film on African-American house maids directed by a Caucasian Southern director. The primary point he made addressed the predominantly white-dominated film industry in the United States that fails to create enough sufficiently heroic roles for African-American actors. He listed *The Help* as exemplary in terms of this approach, claiming that the two actresses are pigeonholed as fit exclusively for roles such as those they were cast for in Taylor's film. Viola Davis responded to his opinion with the following statement:

The mindset that you have is absolutely destroying the black artist. The black artist cannot live in a revisionist place. The black artist can only tell the truth about humanity and humanity is messy, people are messy. Caucasian actors know that, they understand that. [...] If you came to me and felt that the writing was not balanced, that you feel there were not a lot of colors to the character, that their humanity was not explored, that you just saw a blank flat unrealistic stereotype, then I would go with you. I think that that is a fair criticism.<sup>61</sup>

Whilst Davis here opposes Smiley's feeling of ambivalence over the casting of the two actresses as maids, she also expresses her understanding of the criticism that targeted the non-complexity of the scripted personae. Further on in the interview, she also reveals her initial doubts about being part of the film, while bearing in mind that she would be confronted with the stereotypical readings of her characters. At the same time, her feeling was that the character of Aibileen went against the presuppositions and expectations of the audience who often presume African-American characters to be loud and "in-your-face"<sup>62</sup>,

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<sup>60</sup> Tavis Smiley, "Actresses Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer", *PBS.org*, 9 Feb 2012, 2 Dec 2014 <<http://video.pbs.org/video/2194955259/>>.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

which was the opposite of how Aibileen presented herself on screen. Nevertheless, both Davis and Spencer expressed their sympathy for Tate Taylor as a director and Kathryn Stockett as a writer, claiming that the two provided them with well-rounded and human-like characters, rather than approaching them with the “urban unattractive looking mother”<sup>63</sup> type - as those were the kinds of roles they have been offered by African-American filmmakers in the past.

Finally, both Octavia Spencer and Viola Davis concluded the interview with the idea of African-American filmmakers and artists being the sole possible saviors in the field of the white-dominated film industry in the United States. As they added, the only solution of the current situation, which the African-American community seems to be displeased with, is exactly through films like *The Help*, since the authors were sufficiently brave to face the painful history of racism. Whilst their statement is truthful in terms of the necessity to act instead of criticizing the involvement and acceptance of African-American talent in the film industry, the question remains whether *The Help* should be perceived as an ideal tool of such approach. If we take into consideration the Hollywood style, in which the film was created, with the primary weight being placed on the entertainment factor, we should come to a realization that its form is not precisely ideal. It should be noted that the film could be praised for the sole employment of the sensitive period of the American history and for providing African-American actors with the opportunity to confront their own past by portraying the roles of maids in the predominantly white-ruled society. Nevertheless, the film as a final product should, in the end, intend to appeal to the audience, and what is more, to serve as a source of inspiration for the everyday lives, both in the very industry which created it, as well as in the sphere on the other side of the screen.

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<sup>63</sup> Tavis Smiley, “Actresses Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer”, *PBS.org*, 9 Feb 2012, 2 Dec 2014 <<http://video.pbs.org/video/2194955259/>>.

## 5 / Conclusion

What serves as the initial stimulus for a film director to create a piece of cinematic artistry? For some, it is a powerful story, for others, a need to materialize their opinions in an audiovisual form. In some cases, their desire can be fueled by an aspiration for an artistic expression and in other cases, by fascination with an onscreen world that is limitless in terms of its fictionality. There are also times when a need for a subject to be filmed is expressed by viewers themselves, or by fans and film enthusiasts who yearn to be transported into unknown universes simply by watching a compilation of light streams being projected on a big screen. Overall, films are created with the vision of entertainment on the side of the viewer. "Going to the movies" proves to be one of the most coveted pastime activities; and specifically in the United States where the film industry is amongst some of the highest grossing branches of entertainment. Despite the fact that there is an undeniably large amount of American independent films being produced each year, the Hollywood studio system is still prevalent, attracting millions of filmgoers. With the more or less stable, yet extensive number of studios, production companies and distributors who reside on the North American continent, the variety of genres and types of films being dedicated to specific audience groups rises exponentially. Nevertheless, it is the Hollywood-made films that tend to acquire most interest, predominantly as a result of multi-million marketing campaigns and the notion of stardom American citizens appear to be obsessed with. This is something that all three previously analyzed films have in common - they are all regarded as products of Hollywood studio system and they all proudly present their star-embellished cast in their credits. For a film to be viewed as a product of the Hollywood system, its first and foremost quality is the level of visibility it maintains. This visibility is obviously attached to the budgetary restrictions of a given project and their limits dictate the range of public presence that a given film can achieve. Once a film reaches a certain level of exposure, it automatically accumulates reactions from the public: professional reviewers, film connoisseurs, or simply film fans and regular

screening attendees. The equation is obvious - the more noticeable a film becomes, the more opinions it attracts - both positive and negative. The amount of reactions is only strengthened in case that a film revolves around an event that viewers are familiar with, or is set in a historical period in an existing place, such that was inhabited and documented by actual people. This is precisely the case of the three films that created the primary sources for this thesis, as they are all set in a historical period of the United States and what is more, each of them depicts a different period representative of various stages of racial tension between African-American and non-African-American communities.

The fact that African-Americans were throughout history of their existence in the United States manipulated into thinking that they are “the others” drew a bold line between their community and the rest of American citizens. With the history of slavery, racial segregation, hate crimes and most recently the “Black Lives Matter” initiative that responds to killings of African-American youngsters by Caucasian police officers - sensitivity, anger, and bitterness on the side of those of color are inevitable. For African-Americans, the Caucasian Americans are the former oppressors and therefore with every appropriation of their traditions, narratives, or with every representation of their people, there is a sense of precaution that is omnipresent. This is specifically valid for the field of filmmaking, as film has been previously used as a tool of propaganda of racist campaigns. What is more, the three films that were discussed in this thesis not only employ African-American characters but also relate to specific historical periods of African-American history in the United States: slavery (Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*), racial segregation and the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement (Tate Taylor’s *The Help*), and post-Civil Rights era of persisting antipathies towards African-Americans (Julian Schnabel’s *Basquiat*). All three films rely on central African-American characters, yet are directed by Caucasian American directors and therefore immediately invite merciless analysis of their own interpretation of the African-American experience. The border between what would be considered an acceptable depiction and mockery, degrading, or stereotypical approach is considerably thin and can be facilely penetrated even without the author’s knowledge. The rightfulness of such judgments stems from the call for justice and equality on the side of African-

Americans but at the same time, also from the apologetic position that Americans are being constantly reminded of repositioning into - primarily by media.

The already mentioned authenticity then represents a fundamental factor for a film's reading: the proximity of a narrative to reality is measured based on personal experiences of people directly or indirectly related to certain events, or historical occurrences. The problem of film, however, is that it presents its creator with infinite possibilities of creation of worlds that are unknown to men, as well as of adjusting history to one's liking - disregarding the facts, which we are taught nowadays. Especially with historical films that feature actual events (exemplary of such events could be the television news reports of riots that Skeeter is watching in *The Help*<sup>64</sup>), viewers are inclined to regard these as factual, without revisiting them after their screening. As we witnessed with the three above analyzed films, all of the directors proclaimed that their intention was to provide the audience with truthful depictions of what they perceived as both visually and narratively strong stories. In the case of *Basquiat*, Julian Schnabel claimed that his vision was to capture the historical moment of the New York art scene that he himself was a part of. According to him, his friendship with Basquiat was a vital enough component of the script-to-screen process. Contrary to his statements, there were voices who claimed that Schnabel's depiction of Basquiat's life was inauthentic and was fueled by his envy of his colleague's successful career. In the case of *Django Unchained*, Quentin Tarantino was repetitively attacked for mocking the African-American characters on the screen, which was only underlined by the director's overuse of the "n-word" he is notorious for throughout the years of his cinematic creation. Similarly to Schnabel, Tarantino contradicted these attacks with the response of his striving for authenticity, claiming that he simply mimicked the reality, which - to him - appeared far more horrendous than as it was shown in his film. Finally, there was the case of *The Help*, which collected critical remarks for its Hollywood-like approach to its characters that were in some cases bordering on being stereotypical. In response to these, both Tate Taylor and Kathryn Stockett, the author of the novel that served as inspiration for the film, professed their quest for telling their personal stories "the right way", disregarding the fact that they were

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<sup>64</sup> *The Help*, dir. Tate Taylor, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011.

actually residing on the other side of the racial spectrum in their encounters with the African-American nannies and house maids. Overall, the notion of authenticity seems to present a crucial point where the two groups - the African-American filmmakers and viewers and the Caucasian filmmakers - clash. The bottom line of this argument, however, lies in the core nature of film as medium, and not in the question of authenticity and factuality. Disregarding the fact whether a film claims to be “based on a true story”, or is solely a product of a creative mind, it resides over these claims with its initial aim: to entertain. Once a film contains actors, costumes, artificial sets and scripted dialogues, it is a mere representation of reality and as such should be treated by its audience.

Whilst many of the claims that were discussed in this thesis and served to describe the controversial nature of all the three mentioned films in regards to the African-American community in the United States are very relevant, at the same time, they all should be entitled to the following term: bravery. In view of the previous filmmakers who took upon themselves a task of employing African-American characters, or, what is more, decided to tell stories from an African-American perspective and failed, or were subjected to severe criticism and dissatisfaction on the side of the viewers and critics, Schnabel, Tarantino and Taylor all had to consider the possibility of a defeat. At this point, disregarding the fact if they succeeded in their authentic portrayals of actual, or fictional African-American characters, bravery is the precise term each of them deserves in the very least. As it was mouthed by the lead actresses of *The Help*, or Henry Louis Gates in the case of *Django Unchained*, the three directors had found the courage to author three different narratives of black experience in the United States, knowingly subjecting themselves to the refusals, denials and critiques of those whom their audiovisual oeuvres are primarily dedicated to: members of the audience, and African-Americans especially. Naturally, we could raise an objection of the notion of failure being an automatic and inseparable part of being an artist and presenting one’s own creative work in public. Nevertheless, the recent years of the constant and slowly becoming fruitful struggle of African-Americans for equal opportunities - especially in the art world - have proved that such bravery is, indeed, applicable and very much sought after. Moreover, if we take into account the events towards the end of the year 2014, which saw American citizens marching in major cities in

support of the cause that was self-labeled as “Black lives matter”, the above repeated bravery on the side of non-African-American storytellers will in the upcoming years become significantly more justified.

As was already mentioned in the opening sequence of this thesis, the cause of the hesitant approach towards white-authored narratives of black lives has firm roots in the history of the American nation. African-Americans were objectified, diminished to a subhuman level and films served as malicious tools in the nation-wide propaganda. There is no doubt then that film as a medium, in general, is considered a powerful instrument, yet it can turn into an uncontrollable force once overtaken by a dominant ruler. In history, film has been responsible for portraying African-Americans as vicious creatures, later as criminals, then as inexistent characters and finally as those who are present, yet are incapable of achieving the status of a hero or a heroine. For film here, of course, were and always will be responsible its makers and in the case of the Hollywood and commercially-oriented films also its financiers. For what we call “Hollywood films” (which the three previously discussed films are), meaning those that were produced, or financed by a major studio, or company active in the California region, profit is the ultimate driving force that influences the majority of decisions made before a moving picture appears on a cinema screen. The sole selection of a theme, or a script that would later turn into a series of carefully edited shots, is key in sometimes years-long projects, being subject to numerous factors that vary in each era and are decided upon by the undebatable force of the audience. Whilst in some periods, the viewers might be hungry for historical dramas, in others, animated comedies might acquire most prominence and therefore reign over the box office results. In recent years, there has been an undeniably increasing number of films centering upon African-American characters. Some of them depicted lives of unforgettable legends, such as the 2004 *Ray* (dir. Taylor Hackford), or the biopic the first chapter of this thesis was devoted to - *Basquiat* (dir. Julian Schnabel, 1996). Others set their narratives in times of slavery, probably the most painful part of the history of African-Americans in the United States: such as the 2014 Academy Award winner *12 Years A Slave* (dir. Steve McQueen), or the 2012 Quentin Tarantino’s controversial *Django Unchained* that was discussed in the second chapter. The recent history also saw a number of films that

portrayed African-Americans as maids and butlers, be it *The Butler* (dir. Lee Daniels, 2013), or the analyzed *The Help* (dir. Tate Taylor, 2011). There were also films that dealt with more recent events, such as *The Fruitvale Station*, a 2013 Ryan Coogler film that depicted the killing of Oscar Grant - an African-American man - by a police officer that occurred on the new year's day in Oakland in 2009. All these films were beneficiary in elevating African-American characters to the state of heroes, providing African-American actors with leading roles and helping to create a sense of equality in the American film industry that would mirror the ideal atmosphere the American society seems to slowly move forward to. Some of the authors of the above mentioned films are African-American and therefore were praised for their contribution towards the legacy of the African-American filmmaking that finally triumphed in - what is understood as - predominantly white-ruled Hollywood scene. On the other hand, the non-African-American directors faced criticism for their lack of respect for the topics that are not inherently "theirs" and therefore should not be tackled by them. Whilst there were of course other voices who provided their sympathy with the pictures, even awarding them with prizes for their achievements, there is still a sense of "inappropriateness" that encompasses all the films that are authored by filmmakers of a different race.

The question that arises here is the one asking for the purpose of such opinion that disallows other than African-American directors to provide written stories with their onscreen presence. Of course, the historical factor has to be taken into account, since it allows the African-American community a certain level of revengefulness, or bitterness in the least, as its members are nowadays finally free to voice their own perceptions of how their characters should be treated in an artistic form. This freedom then also grants them the right to criticize and disagree with the way they are presented to the public. Whilst there are cases when portrayals of African-American personae are generally perceived as harmful, disrespectful, or stereotypical even by the non-African-American public, there are also, on the other hand, times when the criticism of such could be viewed as far-fetched, or exaggerated. One of those cases was discussed in the course of this thesis and it concerned the advertisement for Burger King that featured a rap singer Mary J. Blige, as she sings an ode to fried chicken. This case could serve as exemplary for the purpose of the core

argument of this thesis: despite the fact that the connection between African-Americans and fried chicken has been in the past inadequately misused in advertisement, or, as it was shown in the chapter on *The Help*, in a simplified and stereotypical manner by a Caucasian film director, the Burger King controversy reached its peak only after the singer herself identified it as harmful in relation to her racial background. The primary element of this debate find its core in the sole fact that the occurrence of the fried chicken together with the African-American female was pointed to and therefore labeled as inappropriate by the very member of the community it was allegedly targeted against. Had she not acknowledged her presence in the spot as disrespectful towards her ancestors (which presumably happened only after the spot accumulated negative responses from internet commentators), the advert would most probably not acquire the status of being “controversial” and would serve its time in its online presence before spiraling down in the vortex of the short-lived cases that sparkle the front pages of internet magazines on a daily basis.

In the case of films, a similar theory applies: of course, there are cinematic depictions of African-Americans that are deemed to be viewed as stereotypical, even despite the fact that their intention was the opposite, or at least not with the aim to convey a message of the characters being in any way less significant than the non-African-American ones. Nonetheless, it is the constant discussions these depictions stir, the limitless forums and debates held where both sides of the argument have to be equally heard that only stress such occurrences, providing them with oxygen for their breathing masks they would otherwise be ridden of due to the lack of attention. It is exactly the critical nature of reviews that follow films such as *Basquiat*, *Django Unchained* or *The Help* that underline the issue these films are apparently attempting to combat, strengthening it by stressing it in the public’s eyes. It would be imperative to note here that none of the previously discussed films should be considered as beneficiary towards creating a precisely fulfilling image of African-Americans on film, as well as they should not be viewed as exceptional in terms of cinematic achievements that could acquire the level of mastership of Fellini, Bergman, or Tarkovsky. Nevertheless, they are all responsible for narrowing the gap between what

should be considered as exclusively African-American and for inverting the presupposed notion that only an African-American author can narrate an African-American story.

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*The Help*. Dir. Tate Taylor. *Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures*, 2011.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1

Montage of a surfer in the New York sky in *Basquiat* (dir. Julian Schnabel, 1996)

Sveinung Walengen, "*Basquiat* (1996)", *Montages.no*, 25 Feb 2013, 18 July 2014 <<http://montages.no/2013/02/basquiat-1996/>>.



## Appendix 2

Django (Jamie Foxx) in *Django Unchained* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2012) riding a horse in a blue velour suit

Micky Fernandez, "Film Review of *Django Unchained*", 29 March 2013, 21 Nov 2014  
<<http://mickyandrani.blogspot.cz/2013/03/film-review-of-django-unchained.html>>.



