Identification of Self: The Oppositional Gaze and Black Female Spectatorship in 12 Years a Slave

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Abstract
This essay applies bell hooks’ theory of the oppositional gaze to the 2013 film, 12 Year’s a Slave. I argue that the film subverts traditional power dynamics linked to the experience of visual pleasure through film by shifting responsibilities between black and white audiences. Whereas previously black audiences had to confront degrading depictions of self as a “way in” to film, white audiences instead had the privilege of critiquing film if whiteness was negated, or else not depicted at all. After a brief overview of hooks’ theory of film, it examines the character of Patsey for the ways in which violence imposed on her body necessitate a confrontation with self and identity for audiences of all races, and for the ways it supports the films subversion of traditional ways of looking.

Keywords
12 Years A Slave, oppositional gaze, bell hooks, spectatorship

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In her article “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” bell hooks argues that there is power and agency in what she terms the oppositional gaze. hooks’ article chronicles the transition from “…white representations of blackness…” (116) to more critical forms of looking, in which “…moments of ‘rupture’ [occur when] the [black] spectator resists ‘complete identification with [a] film’s discourse’”. These ruptures define the relation between black spectators and dominant cinema prior to racial integration” (117). Whereas traditional cinematic representations of black women saw them reduced to props for white female protagonists and exoticized by the white male gaze, “…representations of blackness… [can co-exist] with a critical practice that restore[s] presence where it is negated” (117). After briefly discussing hooks’ account of black female spectatorship, this essay will argue that in its genuine portrayal of slavery that sees multiple forms of violence reconciled in the character of Patsey, the film *12 Years a Slave* causes the roles between black and white audiences searching for a place in film to be reversed, thus employing the oppositional gaze through a process of subversion.

hooks accounts several black women producers whose content is more readily accessible for a black female audience. She writes, “[c]ertainly when I watch the work of black women filmmakers…I do not need to ‘resist’ the images even as I still choose to watch their work with a critical eye” (128). While hooks’ statement may lead one to question whether the images of consumption are wholly identifiable to a black female audience (a major claim, supposing infallibility in the image as rejecting prior Hollywood aesthetic in their reduction of black women), she also argues that: “…[V]iewers who are not black females find it hard to empathize with the central characters in… [black] movie[s]. They are adrift without a white presence in the
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film” (130). Her point identifies a form of privilege once allocated to white audiences alone, especially white male film critics who, in taking issue with what they saw on film could have their opinions voiced and heard. This contrasts with the cinematic experiences of visual minorities, especially black female spectators, who have typically had to search to find a place in film, or else abstract themselves from degrading depictions of blackness in order experience pleasure in their spectatorship. Contrarily, a lack of whiteness, particularly male whiteness, is threatening. The ability to write and publish negative film reviews is symbolic of their power to influence the industry as the most powerful demographic in this context. As hooks notes, their power was often used against black female producers, whose films were criticized not on their cinematic accomplishments but on their refusal to acknowledge white men.

The highly acclaimed 2013 film 12 Years a Slave saw the debut of Mexican-Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong’O in the role of Patsey. In the film, Patsey, is a female slave who has gained favor with her master not because of her ability to pick more than her quota of cotton, but because of her beauty. Patsey is regularly the victim of sexual assault by her master and, as a result, endures the wrath of his jealous wife. The character is in an impossible situation, either prized for the work she does as a slave or for the sexual acts forced upon her. In every interpretation, Patsey is a victim, and yet it is possible to subvert this image of her through critical observation and interpretation.

The image and representation of Patsey in 12 Years a Slave is true to history. As a character she is not embellished, and the need for white characters requiring a space in the film need not be contested—not only is there space for them, but their space is one whereby they hold the most power. This too, is not untrue either to history or the history of film that hooks accounts. Slavery as the subject of cinematic production cannot be contested. Whereas hooks
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describes white spectators taking issue with their lack of representation in film and black spectators having to resist derogatory representations of themselves, the roles are reversed in *12 Years a Slave*. Rather, it is white spectators who are now confronted with a very uncomfortable depiction of self. This depiction is one wherein race and class positions are exacerbated to portray the horrid arbitrariness of the master-slave, white-black power structure. While white persons as slave owners, abusers, and sexual predators is an uncomfortable truth to see depicted in film, especially by white audiences, it is nonetheless true to history. In portraying this truth, the film demands critical spectatorship by white audiences and allows hooks’ oppositional gaze to function as a means not to resist the negative portrayal of self, but confront it and acknowledge its implications for black women.

Similarly, Nyong’o’s role as Patsey is powerful in that it furthers another kind of self-identification for viewers of all races. For white spectators, she is the victim of multiple forms of abuse that force them to confront traditional race relations and power dynamics, many of which, though less extreme, still exist today. For black spectators, she authentically dramatizes the precarious nature of black female existence of the past, in that her experiences can be historically accounted for. While “…the desiring [,] objectifying [and] sexualized white male gaze… threatens… her” (129), and while she is a victim of physical, sexual and verbal abuse, Patsey’s character is refreshing in her authenticity and true-to-history representation of blackness.

The vivid and explicit nature of *12 Years a Slave*, which sees the pain of slavery borne down upon Patsey, represents a shift in responsibility from black spectators searching for a place in film to call their own to white spectators knowing that the film’s depiction of slavery would affect black audiences deeply while also forcing them to confront truths of their own history. Thus, with respect to the film and with particular regard for the character of Patsey, a new
critical form of black female spectatorship emerges, one where “…black female spectatorship… is a site of resistance [despite] the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking”. Such impositions are corrupted by the reversed roles between black and white audiences of them film which, regardless of race, audiences everywhere saw as an acknowledgement of truth.

Works Cited