Introduction

Havana, Hollywood, and the Politics of Slave Resistance in the Cinematic Imaginary

Reflecting on his involvement the previous year in a failed film project about American race relations, in 1933 Langston Hughes wrote: "O, Movies. Temperaments. Artists. Ambitions. Scenarios. Directors, producers, advisers, actors, censors, changes, revisions, conferences. It's a complicated art—the cinema. I'm glad I write poems."[1] Hughes was right, of course, about the fraught nature of moviemaking in general, but even he could not have known how, years later, his words would appear prophetic, impeccably summing up the entire troubled endeavour of making films about Black history.[2] This book concentrates on one element of this historically problematic relationship between filmmaking and race: the presence or absence of Black resistance to slavery in the cinematic imaginary. By means of the examination of a corpus of cinematic feature films produced in either Havana or Hollywood, I argue that with only some very rare exceptions the representation of Black agency in Hollywood has always been, and very much remains, taboo. Contrastingly, I argue that Cuban cinema should be recognized for its foregrounding of Black agency. I then show how the impact of this foregrounding we encounter only rarely in Hollywood films but frequently in Cuban cinema challenges the ways in which slavery has been fundamentally *misremembered* and *misunderstood* in North America and Europe. Finally, I argue that the widespread absence of representation of Black agency in Hollywood slavery films should be understood in systemic terms and as an instance of a longstanding aversion to the recognition of historical Black achievement.

The task of responding to the principal problem that arises from this racialized representational imbalance in the history of cinema provides this study with its impetus. It is an inescapable fact that Hollywood slavery films have established a popular historiography of slavery for a global audience and have therefore played a major role in the generation of public knowledge and opinion about slavery and its inheritance. However, from the earliest days of cinema, Hollywood has promoted, at best, a very partial view of slavery. Moreover, the prevailing attitudes about slavery that Hollywood's reductionism has helped to shape have become hegemonic; or, to put it in Raymond Williams's terms, Hollywood slavery films have played a role in the transmission and incorporation of a transnational dominant and effective culture in which Black subjectivity, Black points of view, Black voices and stories, and Black historical achievement are all routinely marginalized or overlooked.[3] Of course, a highly acclaimed Hollywood movie about a major historical slave insurrection does exist, but its setting is not in the Americas but in Ancient Rome and its heroic slave protagonist is not of African descent but is a Roman gladiator played by Kirk Douglas. While Stanley Kubrik's acclaimed 1960 film adaptation of Howard Fast's *Spartacus* novel is widely regarded as an iconic celebration of humankind's eternal struggle for freedom, both its actuality and its enduring cultural impact make the extreme rarity of Hollywood films telling the story of a "Black Spartacus" all the more striking.[4] As we know from the rich historiographical bibliography on slave resistance in the Atlantic world, from W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*; to C. L. R. James's *A History of Negro Revolt* and his classic account of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*; to Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, this lack is not for want of historical source material.[5] As James Walvin succinctly puts it, "the history of black slavery in the Americas can be interpreted in terms of the slaves' persistent efforts to resist their bondage."[6] Yet the ideas presented in this rich vein of historical inquiry have rarely registered within Hollywood. Moreover, while Hollywood's imperviousness to historically documented Black resistance to slavery is easy to demonstrate, the pressing need for critical redress is not widely appreciated. The extent of the problem is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that a flurry of Hollywood slavery films released in the twenty-first century that on the surface appear to present progressive, anti-racist points of view have in fact all variously silenced, disavowed, or diminished Black agency, and yet for the most part this erasure has not been considered problematic nor even noted in the first place.[7] Michael Apted's *Amazing Grace* (2006), Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), and Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), among others, all serve as examples of films that have effaced the historically documented worldmaking actions of enslaved populations of African descent. *Amazing Grace*, which is a biopic of the abolitionist leader William Wilberforce, even goes so far as to make its subject the inspiration for the Haitian Revolution, thereby, as Charles Forsdick has observed, contributing to a "wider denial of the agency of enslaved people."[8] It appears that the failure to recognize Black agency as a historical force that has brought about progressive social transformation is so ingrained that much of the time it is a problem that flies under the radar. Consequently, contemporary debates over slavery, race, and racism are taking place in a public and cultural sphere that has been shaped in part by a cinematic tradition that has always served to perpetuate potent fantasies and misunderstandings about slavery that have long since been debunked by historians. Moreover, such debates are not without significant material consequences. Consider, for example, the fact that as Kenneth Mohammed notes, *reparations* "seems a dirty word whenever Caribbean leaders utter it," even though in 2021 the United Nations formally called for reparations "as one element of accountability and redress" that are required to end discrimination, violence, and systemic racism against people of African descent.[9]

In response to this problem, this study considers a corpus of cinematic feature-length films produced in either Havana or Hollywood between 1969 and 2013 that challenge, and in one case exemplifies, the longstanding cultural tradition of eliding Black resistance to slavery. The examples drawn from Havana comprise *La última cena* (*The Last Supper*) of 1976 by Cuba's most feted filmmaker, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and a trilogy of films by one of Cuba's most underappreciated filmmakers, Sergio Giral—*El otro Francisco* (*The Other Francisco*) of 1974, *Rancheador* (*The Slave Hunter*) of 1976, and *Maluala* of 1979. These four Cuban films make Black resistance to slavery their explicit theme, and consequently each one represents a challenge to the discourses of apprehending slavery and abolition that predominate in North America and Europe. The two examples drawn from Hollywood are binary opposites when it comes to the representation of Black agency: one makes it a focal point, whereas the other closes its eyes to it. Gillo Pontecorvo's *Burn!* from 1969 is that rare and radical bird—a film that strived to break free of the constraints imposed by its genesis in a Hollywood studio environment to communicate a stunning and radical message of Black insurrection as a liberatory historical force and a praxis of what Massimiliano Tomba terms "insurgent universalism."[10] Additionally, not only does *Burn!* make Black resistance to slavery and neocolonial oppression central to its narrative and ideological thrust, but it also takes on other tenacious myths intimately connected to slavery, including the myth that British abolitionism was fundamentally driven by the motives of philanthropism, moral virtue, and humanitarian sentiment. This myth is roundly debunked in *Burn!*, which instead identifies British abolitionism's strategic function as a tactic for the realization of greater profits and imperialist hegemony. On the other hand, the second Hollywood film considered in these pages, Steve McQueen's 2013 triple Oscar-winner *12 Years a Slave*, systematically omits the accounts and references to Black resistance that are present in the source material on which the film was based: Solomon Northup's slave narrative of 1853, *Twelve Years a Slave*. Furthermore, as the analysis will show, the effacement of Black agency we encounter in *12 Years a Slave* functions as a crucial element of the film's disablement of the critique of slavery as a social structure.

Therefore, this project considers, in a comparative framework, a corpus of slavery films produced in either Havana or Hollywood that challenge or exemplify the longstanding cultural pattern of silencing or disavowing Black resistance. I consider whether the films under examination offer perspectives that might disrupt racialized social orders as well as whether and how they reveal, critique, or fall victim to a plethora of tenacious, vital, and resilient myths that impede the development of informed discussions about slavery and its legacies. One of the striking features of this corpus of films is that except for McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, all the films considered in these pages are, to a greater or lesser extent, neglected films despite their considerable merits. *Burn!* boasts one of the greatest performances by one of Hollywood's greatest actors, Marlon Brando, yet cinephiles rightly lament its status as an "overlooked gem."[11] Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's films are regarded as jewels of what is now referred to as "world cinema" (on which more later), and Sergio Giral's trilogy has been recognized for its striking originality. Yet Cuban cinema has a history of being viewed tardily and unevenly, especially in North America.[12] For political, economic, and ideological reasons, all have fallen into varying degrees of "neglect and secondariness," to borrow Edward Said's turn of phrase. Therefore, following Said's argument for a *worldly* approach to comparative cultural criticism, this study sets its sights on restoring these unjustly neglected cultural works to "their place in the global setting" such that we can better understand their forms and values and so that they might shape the discourses informing struggles for racial and social justice today.[13]

Some detailed consideration of Said's argument for *worldliness* as a critical-ethical imperative is warranted since it provides this book's argument with a crucial component of its modus operandi. As Neil Lazarus has noted, *worldliness* is very much a keyword when it comes to Said's work, and consequently readers of Said encounter it throughout his corpus.[14] For example, in his 1983 monograph *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said wrote of the urgent need for literature to be studied in "worldly" and "historical . . . but no less theoretically self-conscious" ways.[15] In *The World, the Text, and the Critic* the reader will also encounter Said writing in admiration of "Lukács' ideas about theory" as being "completely committed to worldliness and change."[16] A decade later, in 1993's *Culture and Imperialism*, the term *worldliness* first appears early in the book's introduction as part of the argument for reading works with attention to "their complex affiliations with their real setting."[17] And in one of *Culture and Imperialism*'s most celebrated passages, the now canonical counter-reading of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Said again mobilizes *worldliness* as an interpretative tool that enables the identification of the novel's global perspective and its entanglement in empire and slavery despite the sparse explicit references in the novel to the Bertram family's slave plantation in Antigua.[18] One further striking example from *Culture and Imperialism* that casts light on the importance Said attached to the term comes when we read his lament for the loss of a critical appreciation for culture's "rich worldliness."[19] This loss, Said contended, arose from a "hypertrophy of vision" that he attributed not only to academic specialization, relentless commodification, and the rise of identity politics, but also to the historical period of post–Cold War American ascendency that unleashed a heady mixture of "patriotism, relative solipsism, social authority, unchecked aggressiveness, and defensiveness toward others."[20] However, the clearest definition that Said provided in his writings of worldliness as a *critical project* is to be found in his 1991 essay "The Politics of Knowledge."[21]

"The Politics of Knowledge," Said's biographer Timothy Brennan writes, should be understood as one of Said's boldest statements on the culture wars in which academia had become immersed, and its argument makes the Fanonian point that "affirming the existence of a nonwhite 'other' is not itself an argument and certainly not a progressive one."[22] Turning to the essay itself, consider the following lines: "[T]o be an independent postcolonial Arab, or black, or Indonesian is not a program, nor a process, nor a vision. It is no more than a convenient starting point from which the real work, the hard work, might begin."[23] The impetus for the essay was provided by Said's experience in a hostile Q and A following his presentation of a draft of the introduction to *Culture and Imperialism* at a historical studies seminar on the theme of imperialism, hosted by Rutgers University in the fall of 1990. In the seminar's Q and A session, Said was assailed for not having mentioned "living non-European non-males" in his draft or presentation.[24] Said's eloquent response struck a passionate tone of intellectual urgency, and it made the point that a great deal of his work was concerned precisely with "just the kind of omission" with which he had been charged and that *Culture and Imperialism* would indeed include a focus on the works of non-Europeans. However, it also made the point—and this is the crux of the argument—that "it does not finally matter *who* wrote what, but rather *how* a work is written and *how* it is read."[25] That is to say, as Brennan puts it in his gloss of Said's essay, "it is perfectly imaginable, in other words, that anticolonial sentiments can be expressed by reading Yeats or Shelley critically."[26] For Said, the goal of the "great revisionary" projects of feminism, subaltern studies, Black studies, and anti-imperial resistance had never been the mere substitution of "one center for another."[27] On the contrary, "it was always a matter of opening and participating in a central strand of intellectual and cultural effort and of showing what had always been, though indiscernibly, a part of it, like the work of women, or of blacks and servants—but which had been either denied or derogated."[28]

The goal of "The Politics of Knowledge" was thus nothing less than the rescuing of the politics of an integrationist, emancipatory, universalist humanism from the rising tide of a "flat-minded" politics of identity and separatism that Said admonished as "an impoverishing politics of knowledge based only upon the assertion and reassertion of identity, an ultimately uninteresting alternation of presence and absence."[29] The point he was trying to make, Said wrote, could be "summed up in the useful notion of worldliness," an instructive concept that brings into vision the project of a comparative cultural criticism demanding to think seriously about the relationship between cultural works and the world, an intellectual project that for Said we simply cannot do without:

> By linking works to each other we bring them out of the neglect and secondariness to which for all kinds of political and ideological reasons they had previously been condemned. . . . *Worldliness* is therefore the restoration to such works and interpretations of their place in the global setting,

> a restoration that can only be accomplished by an appreciation not of some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world, but of the large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole.[30]

Worldliness in this sense provides one of the political and theoretical foundations of this book's argument and the rationale for its corpus. Aiming to retrieve neglected representations of Black resistance to slavery and Black historical achievement and to bring them into scholarly discussion and the broader public sphere of knowledge, I maintain that a critical understanding of the slavery films of Gillo Pontecorvo, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and Sergio Giral should not remain in the domain of the area specialist but rather should be brought out of "the neglect and secondariness" to which they have been consigned and into conversation with more widely appreciated and commented upon films in a great contest over forms, values, and the telling of history. I also proceed from the conviction that a necessary companion to the work of retrieval and recuperation that a project of worldliness entails is the critical reconsideration of works that have been lavished with critical praise—and so do not require "recuperation" or "bringing out of neglect"—in order that we can rethink their situation, ideology, and politics, as well as their acquiring of hallowed or canonical status. This then, I suggest, is an appropriate theoretical rationale for approaching McQueen's *12 Years A Slave*, a film that has been considered an instant classic, and for doing so comparatively in relation to films that have been unjustly neglected.

One of this book's primary critical tasks is thus a *recuperative* one that aims to restore films addressing slavery by Gillo Pontecorvo, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and Sergio Giral to "their place in the global setting" and to consider them as contributions to a radical and alternative anticolonial filmmaking tradition that developed for the most part in the Third World, as it was then called, from the late 1960s onward. The broad brushstrokes of the history of this radical filmmaking tradition reveal that its fortunes dovetailed with the fate of the politics of "revolution." Third World political cinema, or "Third Cinema" as it was dubbed in contradistinction to First (commercial) and Second (art or auteur) cinema, met with a hostile environment for its reception in the West almost from its inception.[31] As Neil Lazarus has put it, globally the 1970s were marked by "the reassertion of imperial dominance," and after 1975 "the prevailing political sentiment in the West turned sharply against anticolonial nationalist insurgency and revolutionary anti-imperialism."[32] Furthermore, conditions in the West for the reception of the project of a Third Cinema were made more unfavourable still as the world transitioned from the post–World War II era of embedded liberalism to the post-1979 era of disembedded neoliberalism.[33] And certainly after the collapse of historical communism in 1989, the category of Third Cinema came increasingly to be regarded as outmoded, the cinema of a chimeric political vision that had lost its lustre. As such, Third Cinema went the way of both "nation" and "socialism," which David Scott, breathing the air of postrevolutionary defeat, has argued can no longer inspire "visionary horizons of new beginnings any of us can look toward as though they were fresh thresholds of aspiration and achievement to be fought for and progressively arrived at."[34] Further, symptomatic of Third Cinema's declining fortunes has been the remarketing and repackaging of some of its most acclaimed films under the banner of a politically defanged "world cinema."[35]

This demise of Third World political cinema was mapped against the rising tide of neoliberalism by Fredric Jameson, who, in a 1992 essay based on one of his spring 1990 lectures at the British Film Institute, remarked that:

> Third-World cinema itself is rarely today defended as a space in which models for alternate cinema are to be sought. Indeed the very term Third World seems to have become an embarrassment in a period in which the realities of the economic have seemed to supplant the possibilities of collective struggle, in which human agency and politics seem to have been dissolved by the global corporate institutions we call late capitalism. The promise of alternate forms in the cinema of that now distant period we call the 60s (but which covered the 70s as well, in chronological retrospect), included the promise of alternate ways of life, alternate collective and communal structures, that were expected to emerge from a variety of struggles against economic, military, and cultural imperialism (and in some cases, those of China, Cuba, and Vietnam, for example, this promise overlapped with the Second-World project of the constructions of socialism) . . . the autarchy of the socialist countries and the cultural and social possibilities of Third-World or post-colonial areas have seemed to evaporate under the dreary requirements of modernization and the balanced

> budget (or the Debt). Third-World "culture" however, in the narrow sense, has been gratefully absorbed by the international entertainment industry, and has seemed to furnish vibrant but politically acceptable images of social pluralism for the late capitalist big city.[36]

In response to the historically specific situation of living in the faint afterglow of the project of Third World political cinema, Jameson argued that "we need to invent some new questions to ask of Third-World cinema [and] of the Third World generally, as the last surviving social space from which alternatives to corporate capitalist daily life and social relations are to be sought."[37] Thus, following Jameson, I seek in this project to pose some new questions of films that we can align with or juxtapose against the project of Third World political cinema and that provoke discussion vis-à-vis the representation of Black resistance to slavery: How does the corpus of films under consideration here challenge the dominant modes of remembering slavery and abolition? And how might the emancipatory visions they present rebuke the bleakness of our contemporary political imaginary, which, since the disappointments of the 1960s, has gripped so much work undertaken in the academy in the humanities and social sciences?[38] Part of the critical and *worldly* task undertaken in this book, then, is the recovery of examples of alternate cinematic practices that aspired to speak of alternate politics, alternate ways of life, and alternate communal structures, and to do so not as part of an antiquarian project, but as part of a project aiming to reveal the historical and contingent (and therefore changeable) truth of our present reality. This project thus strives to rebuke the critique that attachment to universal, emancipatory political programs are in our times anachronistic and to embrace and "to take pleasure in the possibility of change in all things."[39] So, far from their perception as naïve, utopian, misguided, or outmoded, the political aspirations of Third Cinema are treated here as a resource to draw on in the attempt to conceive of radical futures and radical alternatives to the hegemony of global capitalism.

This emphasis on and valuation of Cuban and Third Cinema distinguishes this study from existing scholarship on slavery and film that has been a field of considerable activity for some years now and especially since the turn of the twenty-first century. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* by Donald Bogle, an eminent African American film and television historian, constitutes a useful starting point for a synoptic overview of this field of scholarship. First published in 1973 and now into an updated and expanded fifth edition that appeared in 2016, Bogle's book is a landmark study that documents the deplorably restricted and stereotyped range of roles that have been available to Black actors throughout the history of American film. However, this is only the starting point for Bogle's thesis, which advances the argument that "the essence of black film history" is to be found in how Black actors have subverted these stereotypes.[40] Following in Bogle's footsteps came two pioneering book-length studies whose focus is specifically on the representation of slavery and slave revolt on screen: Natalie Zemon Davis's *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* and Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall's *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games*.[41] Davis's *Slaves on Screen* is notable for its attention to the ways in which the historical slavery film could function as a "thought experiment," and it seeks to measure the potential of "fiction films" for "telling about the past in a meaningful and accurate way."[42] While Davis's book considers two of the films that I consider in these pages (*Burn!* and *La última cena*), it does not consider the ways in which the Haitian Revolution haunts, informs, and structures these works. Nor, despite its inclusion of Alea's *La última cena*, does it offer consideration of whether and why Cuban and Third Cinema has done a better job of representing slavery than has Hollywood.

Sepinwall's *Slave Revolt on Screen* provides an overview of the Haitian Revolution's cultural currency in film and video games and offers welcome analysis of Haitian cinematic perspectives as well as foreign views of the revolution. Sepinwall also analyzes North American, European, and French Caribbean video games about the revolution, noting that the market reach of video games is now greater than that of independent film.[43] Sepinwall also discusses *Burn!* but dismisses it as a "benevolent banalization"—a claim I investigate in these pages and argue does not hold up to scrutiny.[44] In addition, on the basis of her analysis of Alea's *La última cena* and a French-Cuban adaptation of Alejo Carpentier's 1962 novel *El siglo de las luces* (*Explosion in a Cathedral*), Sepinwall considers that Cuban cinema has downplayed the agency of enslaved people.[45] This view is diametrically opposed to the argument I elaborate in these pages. The originality of the argument I pursue here is also made apparent by attending to the underlying structural and theoretical differences that divide Sepinwall's approach from my own. Whereas Sepinwall maps her analysis onto a Haitian/non-Haitian binary (and argues that non-Haitian visions of the Haitian Revolution and slave revolt in general have overall been unsatisfactory), my reading of Cuban and Third Cinema (in opposition to Hollywood productions) suggests that a dialectics of core and periphery provides a more compelling explanatory schema for interpreting cinematic production engaged with the subject of Black resistance to slavery (and, by implication, cultural production in the era of capitalist modernity more generally).[46]

One further comment is warranted to elaborate the theoretical approach I have employed in this study. My approach has drawn—implicitly, if not explicitly—on Said's twin concepts of "*strategic location*" and "*strategic formation*" as outlined in *Orientalism.* While "strategic location" is, Said explains, "a way of describing the author's position in a text," "strategic formation" is "a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large."[47] This methodology has the advantage of drawing attention to how representational forms are constituted by, and constitutive of, reality. Attention to this relationship between representational forms and the world logically asserts the integration of representations into reality, revealing that representations are indeed part of reality and not just its rendering. While in *Orientalism* this method enabled Said to reveal how "the field of Oriental studies had managed to create a fantastical projection about Arabs and Islam" that satisfied and aligned with the expectations and biases of its Western audience, the method is generative also for the purposes of this present study.[48] Hence, *From Havana to Hollywood: Slave Resistance in the Cinematic Imaginary* takes as its starting point the "fantastical projections" about enslaved Black people in the Americas that we can identify in Hollywood films from its earliest days to the present. Like the Orientalist tradition that Said indicted, this filmic cultural tradition both cultivated and satisfied the prejudices of its intended audience. This filmic tradition, the general contours of which will be sketched in brief in this introduction's next section, gave license to a host of racist or racialized themes, tropes, and characterizations, including, inter alia: the erasure of Black agency, the construction of racist character archetypes, and the representation of Black culture en masse as crude and primitive. Against the hegemony of these representations that have acquired a "density" and "referential power among themselves and . . . in the culture at large," *From Havana to Hollywood* considers a corpus of films that sought to contest the stories about Black enslaved peoples that had been and were continuing to be told in Hollywood.

Black Agency Gone Missing: Slavery on Screen in Hollywood

While this introduction is not the place for a comprehensive survey of the history of the representation of slavery on screen in Hollywood, a thematic sketch of the general contours, predominant characteristics, and trajectory of Hollywood slavery films over the years is necessary since it provides the background against which the chapters to follow should be read. Therefore, the sketch that follows provides, in the Althusserian tradition of symptomatic reading, a critical summary that notes selected tropes, themes, and patterns but also silences, gaps, and contradictions. By this strategy, the ideological history of slavery on screen in Hollywood is sketched as a problem to which, in different ways, the films by Pontecorvo, Alea, Giral, and McQueen studied here should be considered responses or interventions.

Film historians widely consider the Lumiere brothers' 1895 film *La Sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière* ("Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory") to be the world's first motion picture. The world's first slavery film was not far behind: on August 3, 1903, a film adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* premiered at Hubert's Museum and Theatre, a New York City dime museum and nickelodeon, making it the earliest American feature film.[49] The fourteen-minute film (which was considered full-length at the time) was made by Edwin S. Porter for Thomas Edison's film company, and it was one of at least nine film adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made in the silent-movie era of 1903 to 1927. The history of slavery on screen in Hollywood had begun in earnest: no other story was filmed as often in the silent era as was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and to this day it remains probably the most-filmed American novel.[50] While the 1903 Edison-Porter adaptation is notable for various technical filmmaking accomplishments including the use of intertitles, of more significance is the cultural-ideological template it established for future slavery films. Far from following in the footsteps of the antislavery movement to which Stowe's novel was a sacred text, Stephen Railton has observed that the Edison-Porter adaptation offers an essentially "eulogistic account of slavery" in which Stowe's protest novel is transformed into a minstrel show complete with happy, dancing slaves.[51] So, while the representation of slavery on screen is nearly as old as cinema itself, the filmography of slavery, as Brenda Stevenson has noted, "began with all of the ugly, stereotyped characterizations and storylines one would expect of the racial nadir of the early twentieth century."[52]

"The racial nadir of the early twentieth century" found its most complete filmic expression in D. W. Griffiths's notorious 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, a three-hour long film adaptation of *The Clansman*, a novel and stage play authored by the white supremacist Thomas Dixon Jr.[53] It is not an exaggeration to state that *The Birth of a Nation* brought about a revolution in American filmmaking. The astounding novelty of *The Birth of a Nation* at the time, as well as the unprecedented enormity of its impact and success, is hard to fathom more than 100 years later. It was the first film of its kind in any number of respects and a pseudohistorical epic Civil War drama of extraordinary—and chilling—ambition. On February 18, 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* became the first film to be screened in the White House; President Woodrow Wilson, a college acquaintance of Dixon's, was among the many millions duped by the film's delusions, and on viewing the film he remarked, "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."[54] *The Birth of a Nation* was also the first film to be projected for the justices of the US Supreme Court and the members of the United States Congress. It became the first cinematic blockbuster and the most profitable film of its time, and perhaps of all time once profits are adjusted for inflation. Melvyn Stokes estimates that it may have been seen by more than 200,000,000 viewers worldwide.[55] It was also, as Stevenson notes, "voted by more than two hundred movie critics as the most important contribution to the first fifty years of cinema," and as recently as the 1970s eminent critics continued to praise *The Birth of the Nation* as perhaps the most important film of all time.[56] It was however grotesquely racist: it lauded the Ku Klux Klan while ridiculing, insulting, and humiliating southern freed Blacks. Committed to separatism—the coda recommends the deportation of all African Americans—and producing a genuinely "impoverishing politics of knowledge," the film's transparent racism was clear to those committed to racial justice. The NAACP and America's Black community at large voiced their disapproval, but their protests met with little success.[57]

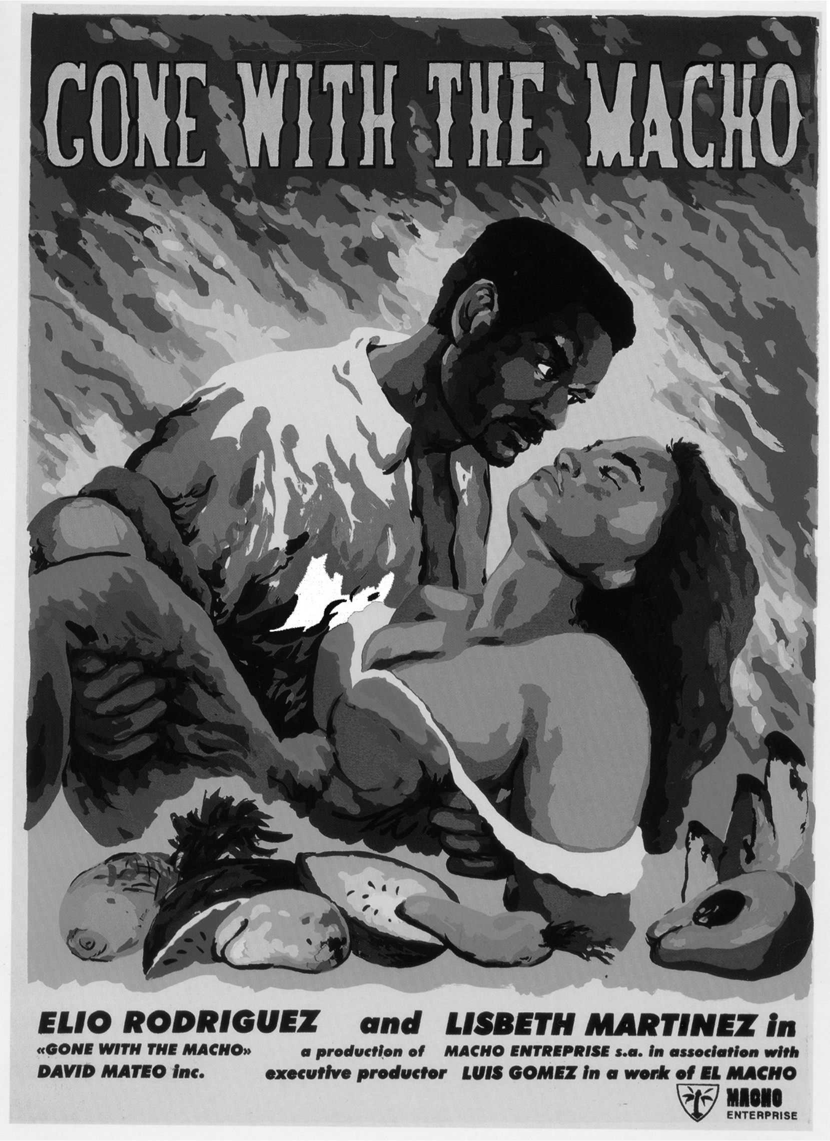
Of course, *The Birth of a Nation* did not singlehandedly construct the discourse of disparaging and belittling Black people, Black history, and Black culture, though it clearly contributed to the popularity and endurance of racist sentiments. *The Birth of a Nation* should be situated in a genealogy of deep-seated racism stretching back centuries. At the time of the film's release, longstanding arguments for racial hierarchies, including Aryanism, Anglo-Saxonism, and Social Darwinism, had been invigorated by the popularity of eugenics and scientific racism, which were at the time leading movements in medicine, politics, and public discourse in Europe and North America. Only after 1942, when information about Nazi Germany's Holocaust death camps became public knowledge, would the pseudoscience of eugenics be disgraced. Further, the reactionary myth of the "Lost Cause," which had grown rapidly in popularity throughout the 1890s—the decade to which we can trace the genesis of cinema—also played a critical role in the success of *The Birth of a Nation* that should not be underestimated. The Lost Cause, as the legal scholar Michel Paradis has remarked, should be understood as a revisionist history in which the Confederacy's motivation to fight a treasonous war to defend slavery is recast as the embodiment of the true vision of the Founding Fathers of the United States.[58] But, as the scholars Connelly and Bellows have observed, the Lost Cause is more nebulous than any ordinary revisionist history. Its "spirit," they write, "has slipped blithely through the time and space of generations of southerners."[59] From its inception, Lost Cause mythology tapped into an appetite for romanticizing the antebellum "Old South." According to Lost Cause sentiments, the slaveholding Confederacy was "a glorious organic civilization" that the avaricious, industrial "Yankee North" had attempted to destroy.[60] The mythological Old South was thus projected as a rural idyll in which a distinctive Southern culture—noble, chivalrous, and pious—had flourished as a genteel way of life. This way of thinking enabled the South to portray itself as the Civil War's victimized, tragic hero and the virtuous counterpoint to the wicked North. The aftermath of the South's defeat on the battlefield—with its attendant ruins and devastation, psychological trauma, and a public discourse flooded with self-pity and sorrow—provided fertile ground for this sentimental and romantic mythology to take root. At its heart lay white supremacy, but, ever shifting and malleable like all the best mythologies, the Lost Cause held that the South had fought for liberty and freedom and that slavery was incidental rather than fundamental to the outbreak of the Civil War. While proponents of Lost Cause ideology have differed on the question of precisely how slavery should be remembered, one of its essential, scandalous tenets was that slavery in the antebellum South had been a paternalistic institution and that the enslaved themselves had been generally contented with their lot. The success of Lost Cause mythology can be measured by the fact that by dint of "sheer sentimentalism, political argument, and by recurrent celebrations and rituals," Lost Cause values became an "integral part of national reconciliation" in the postbellum United States.[61] Lost Cause acolytes could be found in the North as well as the South and even as far away as in Britain. There, the Southern States had always enjoyed a degree of political sympathy for various reasons, including the historical dependence of the British cotton industry on the production of raw cotton by enslaved labor in the antebellum American South. Cultural reasons should also not be underestimated, not least Southern culture's aping of British aristocratic manners and values.[62] The wide transmission of Lost Cause mythology was effected in print—consider, for example, the popularity of Southern plantation genre writing that was published in mass-circulation magazines for a mainly Northern readership, and of course in film.[63] While *The Birth of a Nation* should be recognized as the filmic apotheosis of Lost Cause mythology and an exemplar of widely held racist views of the early twentieth century, it should be noted that Lost Cause values are inscribed throughout the history of Hollywood film, explicitly so up to the era of Civil Rights and implicitly thereafter. Crucially for this book's argument, within the discourse of the Lost Cause, Black resistance to slavery was unthinkable other than as the actions of a savage, dangerous, and ungrateful race.

Extraordinarily successful but also deeply controversial, one of the legacies of *The Birth of a Nation* was that for the most part Hollywood turned its back on slavery as a subject for feature films until the late 1920s. "The baleful influence" of *The Birth of a Nation*, Melvyn Stokes has argued, resulted in the narrowing of "the range of Black characters shown in American films in general and its influence led to the movie industry itself banning the showing of miscegenation on screen."[64] However, *The Birth of a Nation*'s defense of the antebellum Lost Cause and its scandalous racism was contested by Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* of 1920, which is thought to be the oldest-surviving film by an African American director. Micheaux had "read avidly" the widespread and intensely negative response to *The Birth of a Nation* in the Black press, which called "for a champion to counter the slander of Griffith and Hollywood."[65] Rising to the challenge, Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* depicts diverse forms of Black agency in the Jim Crow South, shows the reality of Dixieland racism, and generally throws Griffith's "phobic white supremacism" and "Manichean historicism" back in his face.[66]

The arrival of sound films in 1927 opened new worlds of cinematic possibility, including the incorporation of what was thought to be "Black" music. Further, the Great Depression of 1929, which extended throughout the 1930s, generated conditions that encouraged a renewed and powerful nostalgia for the Old South: "Hard times and high industrial unemployment made the supposed stability and seemingly timeless rural way of life in the antebellum South appear especially appealing. To those suffering economic instability or threatened by unemployment in cities, the romantic myth of the Old South was a highly seductive one."[67]

Consequently, Hollywood's "Golden Age," the beginnings of which we can date to the mid-1930s, saw the emergence of two popular new genres: the plantation musical and the plantation melodrama. These films, Stevenson writes, characterized enslaved people as "happy, devoted, passive black simpletons."[68] Without doubt, the most popular and influential film of the plantation genres was Victor Fleming's 1939 *Gone with the Wind*, which remains the highest-grossing film of all time at the global box office.[69] Based on Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer Prize–winning and bestselling novel of the same title, *Gone with the Wind* won eight Oscars, one of which was awarded to Hattie McDaniel in the category of best supporting actress for her performance as the Black house servant "Mammy." McDaniel thereby became the first African American to win an Oscar. Moreover, in the opinion of Donald Bogle, by the sheer "force of her own personality" McDaniel's Mammy "became free of the greatest burden that slavery—on screen and off—inflicted on blacks: a sense of innate inferiority."[70] However, Bogle's positive assessment of the significance of McDaniel's performance should be countered with Stevenson's view that "the Mammy character was consistent with stereotypical depictions of black female house slaves" and her observation that it erased "the reality of the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of domestic slaves."[71] As we will see, Sergio Giral's trilogy in particular will contest this hackneyed mode of representing enslaved Black women who were forced to labor in domestic settings. *Gone with the Wind* also relegated its Black characters in general into the background. The picture's undisputed stars were Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, who played the lovers Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler who were immortalized in the film's movie poster, which became arguably the most iconic image of Hollywood's "Golden Age." The poster's enduring iconicity is attested to by the wide set of parodies it generated, including its humorous and subversive reworking by the Cuban artist Elio Rodriguez Valdes[72] (cover and fig. I.1). Rodriguez Valdes's fictitious movie poster of 1995, "Gone with the Macho," cunningly draws attention

Figure I.1 Elio Rodriguez Valdes, "Gone with the Macho," Las Perlas de tu boca, silkscreen on paper, 27.5″ × 19.5″, edition of 8. 1995. © Elio Rodriguez and 532 Gallery, Thomas Jaeckel, New York City.


GONE WITH THE MACHO
ELIO RODRIGUEZ and LISBETH MARTINEZ in
«GONE WITH THE MACHO» a production of MACHO ENTREPRISE s.a. in association with
DAVID MATEO inc. executive productor LUIS GOMEZ in a work of EL MACHO
MACHO
ENTERPRISE

to the routine marginalization of Black characters in the era of "Golden Age" cinema in general and in *Gone with Wind* in particular. Additionally, via the poster's title, the Black male figure's intense and desiring gaze—as well as the tropical, phallic fruit—"Gone with the Macho" parodies and confronts the "all too common stereotype of the virile, sexy, powerful black male."[73] Thus, notwithstanding the qualified breakthrough represented by McDaniel's success, *Gone with the Wind* must ultimately be understood as a romantic memorial to the Lost Cause and as a canonical example of Hollywood's anxieties about race in the early to mid-twentieth century. Rendering Black resistance *illogical* and *unthinkable*, *Gone with the Wind* played a remarkable role in the embedding of a conservative mythologization of slavery.[74]

After 1945, mainstream American films began to emerge that offered a more nuanced representation of slavery than had the earlier films of the plantation musical and the plantation melodrama genres.[75] There was something of a shift away from some of the stock stereotypical character types such as the "Jezebel," the "Mammy," and the "Uncle Tom," and with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, American television documentaries addressing the history of the abolitionist movement began to appear.[76] One highly unusual slavery film that appeared in this period is *Lydia Bailey*, a 1952 swashbuckler directed by the Romanian Jean Negulesco and released by 20th Century Fox. Somewhat extraordinarily, *Lydia Bailey* presents a sympathetic view of the Haitian Revolution—an event Hollywood has not touched with a bargepole since. *Lydia Bailey*'s plot centers on an idealistic white American lawyer, Albion Hamlin—an unexpected personification of worldliness and change and a fictional representation of the falsity of "the supremely stubborn thesis that everyone is principally and irreducibly a member of some race or category."[77] Hamlin becomes entangled in the events of the Revolution while visiting Haiti to secure the signature of a white American heiress, the eponymous Lydia Bailey, on various legal documents. Hamlin and Bailey soon fall in love and Hamlin enthusiastically sides with the rebel slaves, strikingly declaring that he "would kill every white man" he "could lay his hands on" if he were to find himself in the same position as the enslaved population of Saint Domingue. Bailey initially sides with the French, but she is soon persuaded by her lover to switch her allegiance to the Black rebels who are shown exerting a degree of military and political agency unusual for both 1952 and a Hollywood production. The French are represented unambiguously as villainous, and

Toussaint Louverture (played by Ken Renard) is depicted in a positive light. Also extremely unusually, Haitian culture is not presented as demonic. In her analysis, Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall has noted that the film's depiction of a vodou ceremony "appeared not as one of pig-blood drinking, but of deeply spiritual singing and dancing." While this still "reflected a 1940s tourist view of Vodou dance, it is still remarkable that the filmmakers did not imagine the religion in an entirely savage way."[78] However, although the film's overall atypical sympathy for the revolution should be stressed, it should also be noted that at various junctures the film portrays Haitian Blacks as irrational and hysterical, it equates Blackness with a highly charged sexuality, and it represents the land of Haiti itself as exotic and a place of eerie primal power. At the box office, the film was a failure: 20th Century Fox let it "quietly fall into obscurity" and it rapidly became "an obscure memory" in both the Unites States and Haiti.[79]

In 1969—the year of the release of Gillo Pontecorvo's *Burn!*, which is the subject of analysis in this book's first chapter—another American film that depicted Black resistance to slavery would materialize: Herbert Biberman's *Slaves*.[80] Biberman was a Communist and a member of the "Hollywood Ten," the group who in 1947 had been called before an investigative committee of the United States House of Representatives (the House Un-American Activities Committee). The Hollywood Ten refused, on First Amendment grounds, to answer the committee's question: "Are, you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist party?" For their refusal, all ten members of the group were found in contempt of Congress, jailed, and barred from working in Hollywood. Produced outside the major Hollywood studios more than twenty years after his release from jail, Biberman's *Slaves* completely upended the view of slavery as a benevolent institution and of the enslaved themselves as passive and contented. Instead, Biberman's *Slaves* depicted slavery as an exploitative and abusive system and portrayed its rebellious Black slave protagonist in heroic terms. Also significantly, *Slaves* treated white plantation women empathetically, linking their subjugation to "the control planters exerted over enslaved people."[81] However, like the film's representation of Black agency, its sensitive depiction of the situation of white plantation women is unfortunately anomalous; regrettably, it set no precedent and did not lead to similar examples. Instead, as the chapter on Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* will demonstrate, the trope of the wicked plantation mistress has become hegemonic.[82]

Why, then, did *Slaves* fail to usher in a whole-scale transformation in the representation of slavery on the big screen? The answer is uncomplicated: "*Slaves* failed completely at the box office." As Melvyn Stokes explained:

> Its only audience of reasonable size was African American residents of big cities. As long as films covering slavery did so within the context of the nostalgia for the Old South, it was possible to make films that appealed to the dominant white audience in the United States. When Old South films were no longer produced—in large part because of the shift in racial attitudes as a result of the growing effectiveness of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s—it was harder and harder to see how slavery could be featured in a commercially successful film.[83]

Therefore, after the commercial failure of Biberman's *Slaves*, film producers recognized that a different strategy would be required to solve the conundrum of how to make a slavery film with mass appeal in the second half of the twentieth century. The longstanding tradition of plantation pornography appeared to offer one potential solution. As Marcus Wood's work has demonstrated, plantation pornography has become a huge international business, and its roots can be traced to at least the eighteenth century.[84] *Mandingo*, a 1975 slavery film directed by Richard Fleischer based on Kyle Ostoot's 1957 bestselling soft-core pornographic novel, is the most well-known and significant filmic example of the genre.[85] Set on a "slave-breeding" plantation in Alabama and starring world heavyweight champion boxer Ken Norton, *Mandingo* combined erotic themes and violence while drawing on elements of the "blaxploitation" genre. Ghastly, exploitative, and prurient, *Mandingo* nevertheless did undercut earlier representations of slavery as benign by focusing on practices including the sexual violence of forced reproduction, sexual cruelty, domination, and exploitation, thereby revealing their endemic relationship to slavery and offering a memorable indictment of the antebellum South's white male enslaving class. Significantly, *Mandingo* also depicts Black resistance in the form of a failed slave revolt. On its release, the film met with near-universal hostility from critics. White critics tended to consider it immoral and obscene, while Black critics tended to consider the film "a racist insult fabricated by an uncaring and money-hungry white entertainment