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# *The Birth of a Nation* (Nate Parker, 2016): The Tale of Nat Turner's Rebellion

Delphine Letort

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- 1 The historiography of slavery long focused on the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery as an economic system that produced a dehumanizing view of the enslaved people.<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth-century proslavery historians such as James Schouler described the enslaved Africans as “a black servile race, sensuous, stupid, brutish, obedient to the whip, children in imagination” (Schouler 239), giving ground to racist stereotypes that have plagued American literary and visual culture—the Uncle Tom, the Sambo, the coon, the mammy, and the pickaninny among others (Guerrero 15-17). In *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), Herbert Aptheker provided a corrective to this perception by bringing to light “records of approximately two hundred and fifty [slave] revolts and conspiracies in the history of American Negro slavery.” Aptheker pointed out the causal relation between acts of rebellion and the “degradation, exploitation, oppression, and brutality” of slavery, thus emphasizing the political awareness of the enslaved and their capacity to resist (Aptheker 162, 139). In *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959), Stanley Elkins stressed the devastating effects of forced servitude (which he compared to a totalitarian institution) on the black personality. Elkins’s thesis of black victimization was at odds with the ideological shifts of the 1960s and 1970s, which foregrounded the creative resistance of blacks in the context of the Black Power movement. Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976) revealed the persistence of a specific African American cultural heritage despite uprootedness, whereas Richard Price’s *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (1973) and Eugene D. Genovese’s *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (1979) “laid to rest the myth of slave docility and quiescence” (Genovese xxiii) and documented instances of *marronage*—“the living proof of the existence of a slave consciousness that refused to be limited by the whites’ conception or manipulation of [authority]” (Price 2). More recently, Robert L. Paquette has remarked that “slaves resisted wherever

slavery existed. They resisted as individuals and in groups. They resisted passively and violently. They organized acts of collective resistance that were essentially their own” (Paquette 272).

- 2 These historiographical developments in the study of slavery seem to have had little influence on filmmaking. From *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) to *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938) and *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), Hollywood cinema has contributed to the circulation of racial stereotypes: racist characterization has thrived in the Hollywood plantation genre in particular (Bogle). In the 1960s and 1970s the civil rights movement ushered in a new range of representations, including the rebellious Kunta Kinte (LeVar Burton/John Amos) in the TV miniseries *Roots* (1977) and the boxer Mede (Ken Norton) in the blaxploitation film *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975). The depiction of the idealized virility of the Mandingo slave resonates with the racist portrayal of black sexuality as animalistic desire in Griffith's film. Tavia Nyong'o nonetheless argues that *Mandingo* represents “an astonishing effort to capture and destroy, within the cinematic apparatus, the homoerotic, hypersexualized image of the rebellious black slave” (Nyong'o 175). *Sankofa* (Haile Gerima, 1993) is the only film that daringly broaches slave revolt as insurrection through characters who continually talk about escape, with Shango (Mutabaruka) voicing the doctrine of the Haitian Revolution and its discourse of universal liberty.<sup>2</sup> While *Amistad* (Stephen Spielberg, 1997) may stand out as “an attempt to revise the codes surrounding the notion of black armed revolt” in Hollywood cinema (Stokes, 2013 47), some critics question the ideological slant of a film that fails to challenge the “mainstream American image of the black male body as violent” (Osagie 127).
- 3 Representing slavery on screen is an arduous task considering the discriminatory power of race-laden images: it entails the risk of reactivating the visually racist discourse that insidiously pervades American cinema. Darieck Scott observes that a “surfeit of signification attends the *image* of black bodies in the visual field” (Scott 337). Referring to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, he argues:
 

[The black image] is enmeshed within the various overdeterminations which produce it as replete with readable meanings—it is always bearing a story, an explanation, always flaunting its valence as *different/difference*, evoking the familiar but largely inescapable assumptions of hypersexuality, hyperphysicality, monstrosity, and criminality that shape visual representations of blackness in Western culture. (Scott 341)

In *The Birth of a Nation*, Nate Parker self-consciously engages with the visual legacy of slavery and revisionist literatures about slavery. *The Birth of a Nation* is a film conceived in reference to Griffith's own movie of the same title, aiming both to revise its historical discourse and to counter a racist imagery that has endured through the dissemination of stereotypes across various genres.
- 4 Following the trend of slave narrative films that has recently flourished, and which the box office success of *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013) epitomized, Parker provides a self-reflexive approach to a text—the 1831 *Confessions of Nat Turner*—that has sparked many controversies. The filmmaker attempts to retrieve the voice of the enslaved man from the words couched in the pamphlet published by Thomas R. Gray, a white lawyer who recorded Nat Turner's confession before he was hanged for leading a slave insurrection that caused between 55 to 60 deaths among the white population of Southampton County, Virginia, and even more among the enslaved who were killed in retaliation. Forty black men joined the rebellion, which started with the murder of

Turner's own master and his family on August 21, 1831. Genovese extols the "extraordinary heroism" of slaves who "took the insurrectionary road," which he understands as "part of the most radical wing of the struggle for [...] democracy" (Genovese 1-2). Turner's struggle was first and foremost inspired by religious beliefs and ideas of the revolution; but it may also have been motivated by the maroons' stories which the filmmaker includes as part of Turner's childhood environment.

- 5 Nat Turner is celebrated as a hero whom many textbooks call "deeply religious" or "a gifted preacher" (Loewen 181)—although historians have also warned against Thomas Gray's intrusive intervention in a narrative that cannot be taken at face value. African American literature scholar Mary Kemp Davis calls into question the accuracy of Gray's transcription when she declares "I don't believe for a moment that Nat Turner spoke that way" in Charles Burnett's documentary *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (2003). Burnett examines the resonance of Turner's name in collective memory by interviewing writer William Styron, whose own fictional account of the slave rebellion (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1967) precipitated a wave of critiques in 1967-1968. The novelist was blamed for falsifying history by expanding on the sexual fantasies Turner allegedly nurtured about Margaret Whitehead, a white woman who was killed during the revolt. Harlem writer William Strickland viewed Styron's *Confessions* as "a racist book designed to titillate the fantasies of white America," while Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown refused to engage discussion on what they called "the distorted contents of Styron's book." "Lies, deception, and distortion," they added, "is the only thing we can expect from hunkies" (quoted in French 252, 256). Styron responds to these accusations in Burnett's film by suggesting that Turner "fits into the role each creator wants to make him fit into" because so little is known about him. Turner is a floating signifier whose character can be fleshed out with different traits and qualities. Cartoonist Kyle Baker, for example, explored the subtext of the *Confessions* in his graphic novel *Nat Turner* (2008) and imagined the story which Turner supposedly recalled as a child—an unspecified event that had happened before his birth and caused him to be seen as a prophet.<sup>3</sup> Baker situates the mysterious event during the Middle Passage, where an African mother throws her baby overboard to save it from a life of misery. Born in Virginia, Turner never experienced the horrors of the Middle Passage; but the episode is constructed as an act of empowerment connecting Turner's rebellion to repressed collective memories. The embedded story evokes a diasporic culture which has slipped into oblivion.
- 6 Parker exploits similar gaps in Gray's narrative to re-appropriate memories of black experience. *The Birth of a Nation* traces Turner's life trajectory from childhood to death, filling in the gaps in the character's life story through fiction. Using the biopic format to elevate Turner to heroic status, Parker creates narrative and *mise-en-scène* effects that allow him to describe the slave rebel as the driving force behind historical events that have all too often objectified the enslaved. Parker looks at *Sankofa* for aural inspiration and at *12 Years a Slave* for visuals that exploit the shocking contrast between picturesque sceneries and staged violence, and emphasize the sadistic nature of the white gaze (Wilderson). The film's carefully constructed visuals show that it fits an ideological project that does not strive for historical accuracy; it is a revisionist slavery film that produces a new image of the enslaved people by highlighting dreams of freedom that prompt some to rebellion. *The Birth of a Nation* spotlights the exceptional character of Nat Turner, played by Parker himself and portrayed as a messianic

prophet and revolutionary leader. As director, Parker attempts to circumvent preexisting imagery of slavery to avoid turning the black body into an object of abjection that might elicit horror and disgust (Chapman 182; Kristeva 4).

## Turner: the making of a hero

- 7 *The Birth of a Nation* is devoted to the creation of a screen hero, whom the narrative visually singles out amid various crowds. Whether as a child or an adult, Nat Turner stands out in the middle foreground of the screen running toward the camera with a determination that animates every nerve of his body. The similitude between two screen shots, portraying him first as a child and then as an adult, enhances the exceptional character of an individual whose rebellious streak is an ingrained personality trait. In *Toward the Visualization of History: The Past as Image*, Mark Moss discusses the influence of visual culture on the study of history in the following terms: “Since the advent of film, one of the most common ways of dealing with historical subject matter on film has been to resuscitate the Great Man/Person version of history” (Moss 126). Nate Parker’s biographical film intersects with slave narrative in order to put a new spin on black history: the narrative portrays Turner as an exceptionally talented child who is taught to read by his white owner’s wife Elizabeth (Penelope Ann Miller). The script deviates from Turner’s *Confessions*, which mention no such experience, suggesting that Parker bases the figure of Turner on a variety of sources that include other slave narratives. Sophia Auld’s reading lessons in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) immediately come to mind.
- 8 Genovese describes Turner as a man who “projected an interpretation of Christianity that stressed the God-given right to freedom as the fundamental doctrine of obligation underlying a political vision that itself reflected the new ideologies of the Age of Revolution” (Genovese 45-46). Parker characterizes his hero as a preacher whose eloquence is rooted in his reading of the Bible. Although treated as an object whose sermons are commodities to be sold and purchased, Turner is obviously empowered by his literacy, which he uses to articulate a collective sentiment of injustice. Turner’s religious discourse underpins his growing political awareness; the more plantations he visits, the more radical his sermons become. The Christian references add to the subversive tone of the film, pointing out the hypocrisy of a system that abuses religious rhetoric to deprive black men and women of their humanity. Turner’s religious sermon is imbued with the rhetoric of equality that permeates the Declaration of Independence when he addresses a group of enslaved people he invites to pray and sing with him:
- Brethren—I pray you sing to the Lord a new song. Sing praise in the assembly of the righteous. Let the saints be joyful in glory. Let them sing aloud on their beds. Let the high praises of God be in the mouths of the saints, and a two-edged sword in their hand, to execute vengeance on the demonic nations, and punishments on those peoples! To bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron! To execute on them this written judgment!
- 9 *The Birth of a Nation* is pervaded by a religious iconography that inscribes Turner’s rebellion within the Christian master narrative of love, suffering, and redemptive resurrection. Taina Tuhkunen argues that “the three-fold theological plot has left its embedded imprints on a long series of ‘leader biopics’ which repeatedly mingle the secular and the ‘real’ with the sacred and the legendary” (Tuhkunen 159). Steven Spielberg used such religious allegories in *Lincoln* (2012), a biopic which portrays the

American president as saint, for instance in the deathbed scene where a Christlike light haloes Lincoln's dead body. *The Birth of a Nation* is a work of hagiography that aims to elevate Turner to the pantheon of national heroes by showing his rebellion as an act of sacrifice for the collective good. The visuals consistently emphasize this interpretation: one thinks, for instance, of the support Turner receives from the other enslaved who display candles on their doorsteps on the night after he is publicly whipped, or of the solar eclipse that Turner interprets as a sign from God to start his rebellion. Turner's revelations are inspired from the Old Testament, including a passage from the Book of Samuel in which the prophet announces the destruction of the Amalek people, which in the *Confessions* he recalls as follows:

And on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first. (Turner 11)

- 10 Turner embodies the rebellious spirit that runs in the slave community and the film portrays solidarity among the slaves who join the insurrection. The final scene shows a group of rebels outnumbered by armed soldiers in Jerusalem—a city that they never reached according to historical accounts. Parker eschews claims made by historian William Sidney Drewry, who ascribed the failure of the insurrection to “the refusal of the slaves in general to participate,” thereby reactivating the myth of the faithful slave (quoted in French 167). While Parker includes this stereotypical character as the house slave Isaiah (Roger Guenveur Smith)—another addition to the source text—he also points out his isolated status by showing that the enslaved men on the same plantation would rather join the resistance than continue living in bondage. Isaiah's refusal to join the insurrection does not weaken the solidarity around Turner, although it anticipates the betrayal of the rebellion by a young boy.
- 11 For *New Yorker* film critic Richard Brody, Parker's film is gender-biased because it conveys the men's perspective only and thereby avoids debates on the possible outcomes of the uprising:

Isaiah [...] gets wind of Nat's plot and, confronting him the next morning, tells Nat that it means death, certain death, for Nat and many other black people. Isaiah speaks brilliantly and incisively to Nat; the preacher, a religious visionary, claims to be acting according to the will of God, and Isaiah warns that Nat may be acting, rather, on his own will, not God's. Isaiah, whose position makes him privy to much in white society, accurately understands the dangers that Nat and his cohorts face—and the dangers to which they're exposing the entire population of slaves. Here, too, Parker keeps the perspective on men; he doesn't visit the cabins where Hark talks with Esther, where the other trusted friends talk with their wives or parents, doesn't suggest at all that the others have any awareness of the dangers or give any heed to their plot's effect on their families. (Brody)

Turner's *Confessions* do not include political reflections on the aftermath of the revolt. While he recalls the visions that inspired him, Turner quotes from another rebel (Will) to suggest that dreams of liberty moved the men to action: “I saluted them on coming up, and asked Will how came he there, he answered, his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him. I asked him if he thought to obtain it? He said he would, or loose [*sic*] his life” (Turner 12).

- 12 Caroline V. Schroeter objects to the biopic structure of the film which, she contends,

seems to adhere to a model of presenting the historical figure in personalised terms that will “speak to” the audience, but the method he [Nate Parker] employs, which favours evocative close-ups, visual symbolism, directive music etc., threatens to overshadow the political message of black power that, ostensibly, is the film’s *raison d’être*. Parker’s imperative to present Turner as the focal point, and to conceive of him in Christ-like terms (visually and narratively) results, too, in the diminution of the supporting characters. (Schroeter 147)

As Genovese notes, large uprisings rarely happened without strong leaders who might prevent internal dissension and betrayal (Genovese 8). Among other rebels, Gabriel Prosser in Richmond (1800) and Denmark Vesey in Charleston (1822) planned strategies for their uprisings and provided political and military leadership. Parker uses elaborate visuals and music to legitimize Turner’s fight, which remains a cinematographic taboo topic as suggested by the dearth of films dealing with slave rebellion. In other words, Parker uses the typical biopic techniques—including the Christian narrative of sacrifice—in order to celebrate the memory of Turner. The biopic visually underlines the rebel’s exceptional insight and judgment to transcend the meaning of an insurrection into an act of liberation. The speech he delivers in front of the enslaved men and women who have been made free by the killing of their masters positions him as a guide to freedom. The upward shot and dramatic music heighten the power of his words at a pivotal moment—when men and women have to decide whether they will continue the fight for freedom:

Your earthly master is gone. You are now free men and woman, servants of only the Lord.

Are we dead? No. I say we are now alive, seeing through eyes that have been denied us since being born into the darkness of bondage. Stand with us—that your other captive brothers and sisters may also know freedom. Stand, that our children, for generations to come will know that with the supernatural power of God, we straightened our backs against the works of the evil one.

## The enslaved as agents of subversion and resistance

- 13 Parker calls attention to acts of subversion and resistance among the enslaved. The opening sequence of *The Birth of a Nation* portrays a community of maroons meeting in the woods to celebrate Nat Turner’s African ancestry in a ceremony where the elders acknowledge the special status of a child bearing the three marks of wisdom, courage, and vision on his chest, which designate him as a leader and a prophet. This inaugural scene challenges Eurocentric readings of slavery by introducing ethnicity in the lives of the enslaved as an emancipation path. Few fiction films actually mention the maroons who “settled in the wilderness, lived there in secret, and were not under any form of direct control by outsiders” (Diouf 1). Historian Sylviane A. Diouf explains that “autonomy was at the heart of their project and exile the means to realize it” (Diouf 2). The reference to *marronage* accounts for Turner’s filmic dreams of liberty. The same sequence filmed in the woods at night appears in a dream and in a flashback later in the film, both suggesting the existence of an alternative world and pointing out the compelling power of the African imagination over the bleak reality of slavery. *Marronage* also conveys an ideal of freedom that cannot be compromised by running away to the North while other people remain enslaved in the South. It helps convey the radical understanding of freedom which the film espouses through the portrayal of Turner’s rebellion—a vision also inherited from Turner’s father, who is forced to flee after accidentally killing a slave hunter in a fight for his own life. Young Nat witnesses



the scene when his father catches the man's gun and runs for his life; the scene portrays his father as a slave rebel rather than an Uncle Tom. The sequence that follows shows patrollers visiting Turner's mother and grandmother to question them about the boy's father's escape, but all remain silent and claim ignorance. Survival is bound to deceit, which is one of the first lessons the child learns about slavery as he himself shares in the secrecy.

- 14 The film delves into slavery as a racial system of labor exploitation which the enslaved make every attempt to subvert. Close-ups on Nat's hands as he is forced to pick cotton after his master's death convey the objectification of the boy; a long shot of the cotton fields suggests the life of labor awaiting him whereas an aerial tracking shot over the cotton flowers conveys his lack of prospects. An imperceptible cut turns his bleeding child's hands into an adult's, embedding the time lapse of his teenage years into an ellipsis. The camera captures the expert adult hand as it picks cotton quickly without shedding a drop of blood; Turner may have become a model slave, but he is also shown preaching in front of the other enslaved, thereby appearing as representative of a community that bonds together through praying and singing. "Let us bow our heads," he says in an invitation to collectively pray for the Lord, a message which, by the end of the film, he subsequently revises and transforms into a call for rebellion. The sequence serves to highlight Turner's sense of leadership and his authority over the enslaved. *The Birth of a Nation* follows a causal narrative that allows Nate Parker to emphasize enslaved men's ability to generate action; Turner's vision of blood oozing out of a corn cob may be an illumination but it leads him to rebellion. The film shows that Turner's religious consciousness develops into a rebellious instinct as he visits more and more plantations, witnessing the horrors of a slave system that produces misery among his fellow enslaved.
- 15 Parker uses intertextuality to add significance to images that have become clichés through overmediatization. Images of victimization are used to enhance resistance. The scene where a white dog attacks Turner is reminiscent of an iconic photograph by Bill Hudson showing a police dog attacking an African American civil rights demonstrator in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Whereas civil rights photography conveyed, in the words of Martin A. Berger, "the determined efforts of the white press to frame the civil rights movement as nonthreatening" by showing (active) white agents exercising power over (passive) blacks, Parker reframes the photograph in close-ups that emphasize protective gestures to signify resistance on Turner's part (Berger 7). The re-appropriation of such visuals not only testifies to the enduring legacies of the past over the present, suggesting that contemporary police brutality is rooted in the racial (if not racist) history of the nation, but it also relates images of antebellum victimization to the civil rights narrative, connecting individual and invisible acts of slave resistance to the long collective struggle. The close-up on the swollen face of Turner's wife Cherry (Aja Naomi King) lying in bed after she has been brutalized and raped is also reminiscent of press photographs of Emmett Till in his coffin that were used to display the racist motivations behind segregation and support the civil rights struggle. Likewise, Turner's scarred back after he is whipped for baptizing a white man evokes the lacerated back of Gordon, an enslaved man who joined the Union Army in 1863 after he ran away. The Army surgeon made a photo of his back that became part of abolitionist visual culture. The intertextual nature of the visuals in the film reveals that *The Birth of a Nation* is a deliberate attempt to challenge

the standard patterns in slavery-themed Hollywood films—including Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) which, Karen A. Johnson contends, “reinscribes past ideological myths about slavery” by presenting Django (Jamie Foxx) as “the exceptional black” in counterpoint to the “docile and content enslaved individuals” (Johnson 213). *The Birth of a Nation* challenges stereotypes by highlighting the agency of the enslaved. While the biopic underscores Turner's exceptional abilities as a leader, the film does not endorse a hierarchy opposing house and field servants. The only racial hierarchy that stands out entrenches the color line as a barrier between the slave quarters and the “big house” of the plantation.

## Revising the Hollywood slave narrative

- 16 While *The Birth of a Nation* follows a classical Hollywood narrative structure, it reverses the racial order in cinematic terms by foregrounding white stereotypes of the redneck. Rather than assigning black people to a position of “otherness,” Nate Parker turns *white* people into the “other” by filming from the point of view of the enslaved. The camera is positioned on the side of the black characters and the composition of shots delineates space along racial lines. Camera movements are fluid in the slave quarters when following young Nat Turner as he runs through the alleys where the women do their chores, whereas still long shots convey the rigidity of the plantation system. The plantation mansions loom in the distance, making the enslaved the estranged spectators of a life of comfort lived indoors. The same distance, however, allows for some autonomy on the part of the slaves, whose dreams cannot be controlled, as suggested by the dreams of flight entertained by Turner as a child. Historian John M. Vlach argues that the enslaved “were under control but they were not totally coerced by that control because, while they were being held down, they were also being held out and away from the center of authority” (Vlach 222). *The Birth of a Nation* explores the interstices in the slave system, the liminal spaces where the enslaved can carve out pockets of resistance. *Mise-en-scène* captures those spaces in the woods and around the plantations, where the enslaved escape surveillance and carry out ancestral traditions and ceremonies. The intimate sequences between the newlywed Nat and Cherry contribute to the film's melodramatic tone while depicting feelings of love that humanize the characters.
- 17 The film is a slave narrative that aims to undercut the “melodrama of black and white” which historian John Blassingame defines as “miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtues, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness” characterizing most abolitionist literature (Blassingame 373). Borrowing from Henry James, literary scholar Robin Bernstein refers to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) as a book that created a “state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness”—that is to say, subjectivation” about slavery by exploiting the innocence of childhood (Bernstein 14). “The violence of slavery,” Bernstein argues, “constituted an attack on Topsy's natural innocence, which could be partially restored—transmitted—through the loving touch of a white child” (16). Parker refuses to indulge in the melodramatic tropes of slave narratives by proleptically positioning young Samuel Turner as a potential threat in the opening sequence. The hide-and-seek game the black and white children play creates tension as the camera focuses on the white boy's two feet when he opens the door of the shack where Nat is hiding, foreshadowing the menace that the white man

(Armie Hammer) later comes to embody. Long shots further convey an unbridgeable distance between the boys, exhibiting the race and class differences through sets and clothes. Filmed from young Nat's point of view, the mansion where the white boy lives stands in forbidden territory in the distance. Subjective shots undermine the representation of an idealized antebellum Southern life, conveying the boy's estrangement from white culture as symbolized by the mansion which he approaches when there is no chance to be seen—as implied by the cut showing that a book has disappeared on the front porch and is now in the hands of the audacious boy.

18 The director eschews an overly intimate portrayal of his characters to avoid excessive sentimentality. Parker neither plays up intense emotionalism to arouse sympathy with the wretched characters—be they raped and whipped black women and men, or terrorized Southern belles—nor does he visually or narratively linger on the melodramatic elements of the genre. Contrary to *12 Years a Slave*, in which Steve McQueen highlights the misfortunes of enslaved life through aural and visual elements that make sadism visible (Wilderson 146), including a musical score that “brings terrible, frightening splendor” and long shots that put labor on display (Redmond 157), Parker tones down the spectacle of slavery by using cuts that leave rape unseen.

19 Parker downplays melodrama by avoiding round characterization and using such stereotypes as the redneck who, Williamson writes,

drinks hard liquor—and not at cocktail parties. He's theatrically lazy but remains virile. He nearly always possesses the wherewithal for physical violence—especially involving dogs and guns. He's gullible when skepticism would be wiser, and he's stupid when smart would be safer. He reminds us symbolically of filth, of disgusting bodily functions. (Williamson 2-3)

The film captures the leering gazes of the men during an auction where an African American woman is put on display for all to visually and imaginarily consume. The woman is explicitly sold as a sexual object in a scene which the film does not sentimentalize; she does not have a name or a voice. There is no heart-wrenching scene of separation between a mother and her children. The crude scene depicts a blunt system that turns human beings into commodities to be bought and sold. However, the close-ups on the white men's smiling faces and ogling eyes emphasize their rugged and rough facial features; the actors chosen to embody the white men express no emotion but lust. Their vicious gaze betrays the evils of the “peculiar institution.”

20 The biographical narrative focus on Nat Turner is expressed by the many close-ups on his face, a self-conscious strategy to avoid lingering, voyeuristic gazes at the violence perpetrated against black bodies—including Turner's when he is publicly whipped. The close-up may even be read as resistance to the white objectifying gaze in that case, isolating Turner's Christian words from his listeners through camera movements that undermine the power of the Bible (or the Gospel of Luke), which he reads out in order to ensure the submission of the enslaved to their masters and to promote solidarity among them by nurturing a sense of bonding when all of them join in collective prayer, thereby overturning the expected effect of his preaching. The camera also focalizes on Turner's face when he is hanged after he turns himself in, a technique used by Parker to avoid reactivating the spectacle involved in many lynching photographs. Leigh Raiford examines these photographs and draws on Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* to observe that punishment must mark the victim's body: “Through a macabre exhibition of torture,” she writes, “lynching simultaneously retraced the always already inscribed mark of infamy, the victim's blackness, while celebrating the triumph

of mob law” (Raiford 39). By excluding the crowd from the scene, which is cropped from the frame in the close-up, Parker undermines the spectacle of lynching and retains Turner’s humanity. The extreme close-up undercuts objectification by capturing signs of life in opposition to the cruelty of a jeering crowd. Interestingly, pioneering filmmaker D.W. Griffith had aptly explored an innovative use of close-ups to deepen characterization and support narrative development by making the emotional reactions of his characters visible at dramatic moments (Stokes, 2007 76). In counterpoint, Parker uses close-ups of Turner as a recurring means to restrain the drama when the spectacle of horror becomes too painful to bear. In the *New Yorker*, Richard Brody is more critical of the close-up as it appears in Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation*:

In a scene that’s another pivot of the film, another pivot that relentlessly personalizes Nat’s story, Sam orders him to be whipped; Nat is lashed to a post with his arms outstretched like Christ on the cross, and Parker shows Nat’s agony with extreme closeups on Nat’s—on Parker’s own—face. Similarly, when Nat is hanged—after passing through his own Via Dolorosa, assailed by the braying crowd of whites—Parker puts the camera, absurdly and pompously, in extreme closeup on Nat’s face. Though, early in the film, Parker’s intense identification with Nat Turner leads to remarkable moments of psychological complexity, it also leads, later in the film, to a self-aggrandizement that distorts the drama, the image, and, for that matter, the spirit of the film.

With Parker casting himself in the role of Nat Turner following a script that the director also authored, Brody contends, the film’s directorial choices reveal the filmmaker’s own “traits of character—arrogance, vanity, and self-importance” (Brody). As suggested in this essay, however, the close-up may have another purpose when considered as part of a filmic strategy devised to challenge conventional framing.

- 21 Some of the final sequences of *The Birth of a Nation* depict the aftermath of the rebellion, in particular the lynching of several black men and women. Once again, the camera pans on their faces before they are hanged; rather than voyeuristically filming dead black bodies, Parker focuses on the image of a rope tightening with the weight of a humanized person being hanged. Another sequence reveals corpses dangling from the branches of trees, just like the “strange fruit” Nina Simone sings about on the extradiegetic score, creating an atmosphere of mourning. The camera tracks backward and movement once again counters objectification while offering a moment of contemplation. The sheer number of bodies indicates the massacre that followed the rebellion.

## Conclusion

- 22 Adopting a transnational approach that analyzes and compares how the past of slavery impacts memorializing processes, Elisa Bordin and Anna Scacchi observe that the United States seems to deal reluctantly with the memories of slave rebellions:

Differently from the Caribbean, where rebels and freedom fighters have traditionally been celebrated both in the public and the private sphere, although not always in the service of progressive politics, in the US public memory slave rebels are still considered racially divisive and problematic. (Bordin and Scacchi 13)

The memory of Nat Turner certainly arouses ambiguous feelings among some Americans who question the sense of a rebellion which is sometimes reduced to a “carnage.” Scot French examines how the tale of Nat Turner was translated into a

painting series by Lawrence Jacobs, a mural by Charles White, and other works by African American artists; French also notes that “a far less flattering picture of Turner and his followers emerged from the other side of the color line” (French 201, 207). A commemorative plaque was set up in Virginia, insisting on the deadly consequences of the uprising by mentioning the number of white casualties and black rebels punished by law. Yet, these facts fail to convey the spirit of the revolt, which Nate Parker aimed to capture in *The Birth of a Nation*. The film stands out as an attempt to revise the slavery narrative by highlighting the heroic struggle of the enslaved as rebels whose desire for freedom will not be subdued by constraint.

- 23 Although the tale of Turner's rebellion is also one of defeat leading to increased repression, the hanging of the rebel leader at the end of *The Birth of a Nation* is followed by a cut to an image of a black soldier fighting for the Union in the Civil War, which serves to demonstrate the impossibility of crushing the slave's rebellious spirit. The film's perspective differs from that of the normative narratives about emancipation, which often promote the actions of leading white abolitionists at a political level as illustrated in Spielberg's *Lincoln*. Parker's film portrays Turner as an enlightened slave rebel and hero whose fight provides a corrective to the representation of slaves as passive or content. Celeste Marie-Bernier contends that Turner's memory has served differing political agendas—“from his demonic appearances in proslavery atrocity literatures to his circulation as a divine symbol in hagiographic texts written to inculcate race pride and endorse black fights for civil rights” (Bernier 72). *The Birth of a Nation* puts another spin on the tale of Nat Turner, turning him into a martyr whose fight for freedom the director aims to have acknowledged in the nation's racial narrative.

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## NOTES

1. The author wishes to express her gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful critical feedback.
2. See Claire Dutriaux's essay in the same issue of *Transatlantica*.
3. "Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it had happened before I was born—I stuck to my story, however, and related somethings which went, in her opinion, to confirm it—others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet" (Turner 7).

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## ABSTRACTS

This essay examines the memories of slavery shaped by Nate Parker in *The Birth of a Nation*. It shows how Parker uses the biopic as a narrative frame to turn the slave rebel into a hero and

analyzes the impact of the visuals over the construction of a historically controversial figure. Parker, the essay argues, has devised an aesthetic of slavery that aims to counter the visual legacy of the plantation genre and other existing representations of blackness.

Cet article est consacré aux mémoires de l'esclavage dans *The Birth of a Nation* de Nate Parker. À travers une étude narrative qui examine la manière dont le réalisateur utilise le genre du film biographique (ou biopic) pour faire de l'esclave rebelle un héros, cet article analyse l'impact des images sur la construction d'une figure historique controversée. Les films de plantation et autres représentations cinématographiques des Noirs ont laissé une empreinte visuelle dont le réalisateur conteste la légitimité en développant une esthétique de l'esclavage qui prend le contrepied des représentations existantes.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** The Birth of a Nation, Nate Parker, Nat Turner, slavery, race, rebellion

**Mots-clés:** The Birth of a Nation, Nate Parker, Nat Turner, esclavage, questions raciales, révolte

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