Breaking the Ignorance: The Guidance of American Film in the Metahistorical Development of Dutch Film in the Representation of Slavery

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BREAKING THE IGNORANCE: THE GUIDANCE OF AMERICAN FILM IN THE METAHISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DUTCH FILM IN THE REPRESENTATION OF SLAVERY

A Master's Thesis by

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1: Introduction

The 25th of May in 2020 marks the day that the whole world responded in outrage and disgust to the death of African-American George Floyd, who had been unrightfully murdered by police officer Derek Chauvin. Floyd's death marked a pivotal point in the longstanding violent treatment of African-Americans in the criminal justice system in the United States and resulted in many anti-racism protests and social media movements worldwide (Plas 14). In the Netherlands, Floyd's case gave rise the Dutch Black Lives Matter movement. It drew attention to the many people with a migration background in the Netherlands who had fallen victim to the violent treatment of the police in 2020, like Tomy Holten, who died short after a violent arrest at a supermarket in Zwolle and was labeled "our George Floyd" in the Dutch media (Soudagar). These incidents led to the scrutinizing of other forms of institutional racism that ethnic communities were experiencing in the Netherlands, like stricter supervision in the payment of taxes, lesser job opportunities, rejection from rental agents in the housing market, and unequal treatment in medical healthcare (Mulder and Bol).

Two months after Floyd's murder, the chairwoman of the National Institute of the Dutch Slavery Past and Legacy ("Nationaal Monument Slavenijverleden"), Linda Nooitmeer, gave a powerful speech in the Oosterpark of Amsterdam during the annual celebration of the abolishment of slavery in the Dutch colonies: "Stopping and thinking about abolishment also means that you realize that the history of slavery has continued to subsist." She stated that forms of institutional racism in the 21st century could be seen as manifestations of the Dutch slavery past, which had penetrated the social structures of the Netherlands. The country required a Dutch collective conscious on the operating of the institution in the Dutch colonies in order to draw an end to experiences of racial injustice in the 21st century ("Slavernijverleden zie je nu terug"). However, while the institution has always been looked upon with sentiments of ignorance and denial, the growth of a collective conscious on the Dutch slavery past has proven to be difficult, let alone an awareness on the connection of the institution with forms of racial injustice in the years that followed abolition

1.1: The valuable and activist role of film in fighting racial injustice

In the United States, films have proven to fulfill important roles in representing the institution. Like the Netherlands, the States know of a long history of slavery and racial injustice in the years following abolition in 1865. However, instead of disregarding the dark chapter of history, the States have produced a long line of visual representations on the subject, which have progressed in their way of representing the institution as part of the discourse on

race. This thesis will argue that the American films *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Django Unchained* (2012) have evolved from 'clumsy' representations of slavery and their deliberate correlation to an ignorant perspective towards the discourse of race in the time they emerged. The cinematic languages that directors SteveMcQueen and Quentin Tarantino apply, have correlated to more activist sentiments in Black Lives Matter era of the 21st century, by constructing what historian Hayden White calls 'metahistories', dramas of history that operate in order to affect the perception of their recipients, in the case of this thesis, on the discourse of race. The effectiveness of these films in affecting perceptions proved to be extremely valuable in the first decade of the 21st century, as the United States found themselves in the myth of a 'post-racial' state, which I will elaborate on later in this thesis.

In the Dutch cinematic realm, it is not a revelation that until 2013 there had been no films that solely focused on the Dutch slavery past, with regards to the longstanding tradition of ignorance. The first decade of the 21st century had however experienced a growing interest in the institution, as it became part of the heated public debate on Black Pete. Furthermore, Afro-Dutch communities had started to demand an acknowledgement of Keti Koti as a national Holiday and for the Dutch State to make an official apology for the operating of the institution. In 2013, *Tula: The Revolt* and *Hoe duur was de suiker* (*The Price of Sugar*) became the pioneering films in the Netherlands on the subject of slavery, and their premieres were carefully chosen to coincide with the 150th anniversary of abolition. However, while the directors were initially praised for including the subject, they received many critical responses on the superficial and amateurish ways they had chosen to represent it. The negative responses, combined with continuous sentiments of ignorance and denial towards slavery in Dutch society, might have contributed to the fact that after the premiering of the two films in 2013, no other films been produced in the Netherlands that solely focused on the subject of slavery.

However, simply going along with these critical responses and completely dismissing the films as substandard attempts on their representation of slavery is unfair, especially with regards to the fact that there have been no scholarly approaches which have taken a closer look to the filmmakers' cinematic languages in the film. This thesis will examine how these films can form a solid foundation on which future films can build in their representation of slavery as a longstanding discourse on race, by comparing them to the metahistorical development of the American visual representations on the subject, which have resulted in the successes of *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Django Unchained* (2012).

The thesis functions as an advisory body for future Dutch filmmakers and will hopefully empower them to make films on the subject that correlate with activist sentiments

towards racial injustice in the Netherlands. By becoming more metahistorical effective, these films can fulfil important roles in breaking the ignorance towards the idea of slavery that still has a psychic hold on Dutch society today.

1.2: Sub-questions and methodology

The first three chapters of this thesis will consist of the theoretical framework. The first chapter will examine how the most well-known visual representations of slavery in the United States have correlated to perspectives on the existing discourse of race in the times of their emergence, from *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 until *Amistad* in 1977 and how these representations have subsequently been received by a divergence of audiences. The second chapter examines how the visual representation of slavery has evolved in the American films *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Django Unchained* (2012), by giving an overview of scholarly responses on their metahistorical effectiveness. The third chapter will examine how the subject of slavery in the Dutch colonial past has been (visually) represented in the Netherlands, by relating it to continuous sentiments of ignorance towards the discourse on race.

The fourth and fifth chapter of the thesis will present the case study of the thesis. Firstly, there will be an overview of critical responses towards the representation of slavery in *Tula: The Revolt* (2013) and *Hoe duur was de suiker* (2013), followed by a close-reading in order to examine how specific aspects in their representation of slavery compare with the line of American visual representations on the subject. By applying what Gillian Rose calls a compositional interpretation of the films, I will analyse the filmmakers' cinematic language in the film by focusing on design principles like mise-en-scène, montage and narrative structures (34), in order to see how the images in their representation of slavery either correlate with ignorant and racist sentiments comparable to the American films prior to the 21st century, or correlate with more activist sentiments towards the discourse on race in the Netherlands and thus becoming metahistorically effective, like *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained.* In the conclusion, I will answer the main research question on how the metahistorical development of American films *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained* can be of influence in the evolvement of future Dutch films in their representation of slavery as part of a longstanding discourse on race, progressing from pioneering Dutch films *Hoe duur was de suiker* and *Tula: The Revolt.*

1.3: White privilege

I find it of the utmost importance to state that this thesis has made me aware of my own white privileges in the Dutch society I have grown up in. Simply having the opportunity to

declare my opinion on this sensitive matter proves of my privileged position. I sure hope not to sound patronizing when stating that this thesis operates as an advisory body. Instead, I hope to make use of my white privilege in a beneficial way, to share my experience of revelation in being exposed to racially infused structures, present in both society and the films that I examined.

2: Theoretical framework

2.1: Chapter one: visual representations of slavery in the United States

This first chapter will examine how the most well-known visual representations of slavery in the United States have correlated to perspectives on the existing discourse of race in the times of their emergence, from *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 until *Amistad* in 1977 and how these representations have subsequently been received by a divergence of audiences.

2.1.1: A historical contextualization of slavery in the United States

As Wilbur Caldwell claims, the United States of America have always prided themselves on certain values and beliefs, to be summed up in catch phrases such as: individualism, liberty, equality, progression, assertiveness, and a hard work ethic (Caldwell 68). However, the chapter of chattel slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century weighs heavily on the existing feelings of love, devotion and pride directed towards the States. In *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves,* American historian Ira Berlin states that throughout the centuries, the flourishing of the country has depended on the institution: millions of enslaved Africans, retrieved from across the Atlantic Ocean worked day and night on tobacco, cotton, rice and sugar plantations from the eighteenth century onwards, which made slavery America's largest financial asset (Berlin 58).

At the end of the eighteenth century, the American War of Independence in 1775 and the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and its main slogan which stated that all men are equal and have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Caldwell 68) inspired a new way of thinking in the modern and industrial Northern states of America about slavery as an immoral and inhuman institution (Berlin 103). The rise of abolitionist movements inspired many enslaved Africans to escape from the plantations or to stand up and revolt against plantation owners. This eventually led to the 1850's Fugitive Slave Law, which mandated cooperation by state authorities to enforce federal statutes for the capture and return of escaped Africans, which in turn led to protests by abolitionists, among them novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe. In 1852, she published her classic novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* written in combative response to the Fugitive Slave Law. The story of Uncle Tom who stands up against the brutal plantation owner Simon Legree became the most widely read book in antebellum United States. Northern abolitionist readers appreciated the book because of slavery's representation as a moral and political atrocity (O'Loughlin). Readers from the agrarian Southern states however, expressed outrage against the novel as they realized that it had political potential in

the abolition of slavery which meant the end of their wealth and power (Hochman 2). Eventually, the differences in opinion between the modern Northern and the agrarian Southern states formed the basis for the Civil War fought from 1861 until 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment was adopted by President Abraham Lincoln, which was meant to bring an end to slavery once and for all (O'Loughlin).

2.1.2: The plantation genre: *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939)

The war did not bring an end to the Southern sentiment, as Southerners felt the need to nostalgically celebrate the antebellum period in order to heal their wounds and restore their pride. The prevailing of the Lost Cause in the United States, which stemmed from a Southern desire to justify the reason why they had fought so hard to maintain slavery, eventually led Southern states passing the Jim Crow laws just after the Civil War, which were meant to marginalize African-Americans in all kinds of areas. Black Codes prohibited them from going to the same schools, restaurants, pools, hotels, lunch counters and restrooms as white people. It was forbidden to vote and almost impossible to find a job (Conklin 7). Visual representations of slavery in the States responded to these Southern sentiments. Theatre producers in the beginning of the 20th century adapted the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into a script suitable for the stage. However, instead of depicting Tom as the brave character he was in the novel, producers transformed him into a thoroughly subservient individual who willingly betrayed other enslaved Africans in order to please his white master. Folklorist Patricia Turner argues that producers made this deliberate choice in order to diminish the brutality of slavery, as the story had to apply to a Southern white audience that was still recovering from the losses of the War (O'Loughlin).

The focus on the Southern sentiment became applicable for *Birth of a Nation* (1915) as well, which today is still seen as the first blockbuster in American history of cinema, and the first film in the so-called plantation genre, based on the novel *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon and directed by D.W. Griffith. According to Benjamin Hampton in *A History of the Movies,* it was "the first film to be regarded seriously by many intellectuals and sophisticated stage patrons" because of its three-hour length and its aesthetic and technical qualities ("D.W. Griffith's" 5). However, according to Roy E. Aitken who helped financing the film, it was also "the most controversial motion picture of all time" ("D.W. Griffith's*"* 7). While Griffith stated at the time that Birth's film scenes represented the actual truth, Melvyn Stokes, professor of film history, argues that the film denies the malevolence and brutality of slavery by laying the focus on America's desire for the Old South: it is depicted as a romantic, largely benevolent

and benign institution that helped civilize enslaved Africans while they are shown enjoying their time on the plantation and living in harmony with their masters. When they decide to stand up against the plantation owners, they are portrayed as brutish, morally degenerate and dangerous. Members of the Ku Klux Klan are spectacularly represented as the heroes, saving the American community from the enslaved Africans and restoring peace ("D.W. Griffith" 8). Sociologist Bernard Beck claims that these aspects at the time strengthened the racist Southern perspective on the treatment of black Americans, while it inspired a re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. In the years after the film's premiere, members of the white supremacist group began doing everything in their power to limit any educational, economic, and political opportunities for African Americans. They threatened and killed black political leaders, burned down black schools and harassed black citizens who attempted to actively participate in American society (Higginbotham 67).

The film caused an immense uproar and protests from African-American audiences. The National Association for Colored People, which was the country's most important and powerful organization devoted to protecting African-American rights and interests organized a campaign in 1915 to ban the film entirely or at least to censor its most offensive elements (Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's* 7). The boycotting of the film failed eventually but the responses of protest had Hollywood starting to grow cautious in the cinematic representation of African-American themes. Hence miscegenation ranked sixth on the eventual list of 'Don'ts and Be Carefuls', issued by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America in 1927 (Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's* 7).

About twenty years later, the Great Depression that lasted from 1929 until 1939 had strengthened the Southern desire in American society for times of the Old South to return even more, as many American residents longed for an economy like the one that bloomed when the institution was still active (Bailey). This led to the emergence of a film in the plantation genre to become wildly popular in 1939: *Gone With the Wind,* directed by Victor Fleming and based on the 1936 novel by Margaret Mitchell, realized a world in the Old South build around the captivating love story on a cotton plantation in Georgia between Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) and Rhett Butler (Clark Gable). According to John D. Stevens, O'Hara at the time became the personification of Southern romanticism because of her 'heroic struggle' to preserve her family's plantation throughout the Civil War. The romantic representation of the Old South as well as applying themes of grit and survival resonated with the United States, as it was still struggling with the consequences of the Depression. *Gone With the Wind* eventually

became one of the highest grossing films in Hollywood ever, as well as receiving ten Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Actress, and Best Director (Bailey).

During production, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP had already outed their feelings of uncertainty towards the film. They asked the filmmakers to tone down the racial stereotyping that had already been so clearly apparent in Margaret Mitchell's immensely popular novel in 1936. Mitchell had depicted O'Hara's enslaved house servants Mammy (played by Hattie McDaniel in the film) and Pork (played by Oscar Polk in the film) as ignorant and subservient, living a happy life on the peaceful Georgian estate (Stevens 366). The organization was afraid that these depictions of slavery would enhance bigotry even more in American society and incite violence against African-Americans (Schuessler). After the film's release, uncertainties were justified as the film was even more racist than the novel had proven to be, which had African-American audiences respondin outrage. The Chicago Defender, a black newspaper, stated that the film was even more vicious than *Birth* and a "weapon of terror against black America" for its crude propaganda of the Old South and its diminishing of slavery's brutality (Stevens 367).

In the first half of the 20th century, it had become apparent for African-Americans that slavery had ended in name only. The racial injustice that their ancestors had experienced, had manifested itself into the deliberate process of segregation. The detrimental and unjust consequences of the institution however, seemed to be only recognized by African-Americans themselves when looking at the depiction of slavery in *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind,* which offered escapist entertainment for white Southern audiences who were recovering from war and economic losses, instead of doing justice to what enslaved African had to endure and connecting it to forms of racial injustice their descendants were experiencing in the time of the films' premiering. Films on the subject of slavery in the first half of the 20th century had prioritized responding to racist Southern perspectives, contributing to the continuous racial injustice in the beginning of the 20th century.

2.1.3: Slavesploitation films: *Mandingo* (1975)

In the 1950's of the United States, Martin Luther King inspired many American citizens to participate in the peaceful Civil Rights marches for African-Americans' right to vote, for rights relating to labor relations, and the end of segregation. A year after his famous "I have a dream" speech during the March on Washington in 1963, the Congress passed the Civil Rights Act (Conklin 21). The Act outlawed racial discrimination in public accommodations and employment, and was followed in the years after by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which

prohibited discriminatory voting practices, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which barred discrimination in housing sales, rentals, and financing (Conklin 21).

However, in decades following the Civil Rights successes, the murders of Civil Rights workers and leaders, like Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, by white supremacists (often members of the Ku Klux Klan) proved that there still existed a radical opposition towards racial equality that remained deeply rooted in American society. The Watts Rebellion marked a pivotal point in the violence that African-Americans endured in American society, giving birth to the violent rhetoric of the Black Power Movement in 1966 which stood in stark contrast to King's peaceful approaches (Joseph 2-3). Activists of the Black Power Movement fought for community control of schools, Black Studies programs at colleges and universities, welfare rights, prison reform, and jobs and racial justice for the poor, and they carried out black political power through conferences, community organizing, independent schools, and the strategic use for electoral politics (Joseph 3).

During the Black Power era, Hollywood had come to realize that the blooming years of *Birth* and *GWTW* had gone, as the studios experienced economic precarities because of the rise of television. When the Black Power movement began to put pressure on the studios by criticizing their films' lack of progress and their contribution to white ignorance underlying racial problems, and when it became apparent that the African-American population was overrepresented in attendance numbers and underrepresented on the screen, Hollywood saw that the time was right to start producing empowering mainstream films on the subject of slavery with black actors as their main characters (Butters 752). This went hand in hand with the official abandonment of the Production Code, followed by the adopting of the MPAA rating system, which meant that themes of graphic sex, violence and language became prominent in Hollywood's representations of slavery, resulting in the blaxploitation, or rather, slavesploitation genre. Initially, filmmakers in Hollywood claimed to produce these films about slavery in order to present a message of black resistance, which correlated with the rhetoric of the Black Power movement. Instead, these films ended up exploiting themes of interracial sex, crime and violence in order to not only speak to an African-American audience, but also to a white audience that had grown fond of the more entertaining and escapist 'adult' themes after the adoption of the MPAA rating system (Pinkowitz 868).

One of the most well-known films in the list of the slavesploitation genre was *Mandingo* (1975), directed by Richard Fleischer and based on the 1959 novel by Kyle Onstott. The story of the film takes place on the Maxwell's plantation in mid-nineteenth century Louisiana. The enslaved African Mede (Ken Norton) is purchased by Hammond Maxwell

(Perry King) in order to breed him with the enslaved females to produce Mandingo's who they can sell for a higher price than other enslaved African males. The story proved to be attractive enough to make the film visible to a large American audience and do well at the box office. According to professor Andrew DeVos, the film's painting of "a bold picture of the sexual, physical, an emotional abuse" inflicted on the enslaved characters in the film, was enough to make the press respond in outrage (7). Black newspapers lashed out to the film's white producers' dual strategy: they had promised to give an empowering representation of black characters within the institution of slavery. However, the eventual outcome of the film exploited themes of interracial sex and violence, which African-American writers claimed were applied in order to give the film an entertainment value that spoke to white audiences (DeVos 12). DeVos argues that the black press labeled *Mandingo* as "a symptom of a racist power structure" in Hollywood, "eager to capitalize on black audiences' desires to see themselves represented and empowered", for the pleasure of white audiences (12). Vernon Jarrett, the first black journalist at the *Chicago Tribune,* claimed that the film was just "money passing from black hands to white pockets for the degradation of black people" (DeVos 12). Black reporters outed their feelings of disgust towards the film; Ida Peters for the *Baltimore Afro American* stated that the film made her "want to vomit" (DeVos 11), and Althea Fonville for the *New Pittsburgh Courier,* called the film "sickening" (DeVos 11).

The film became part of the raging discourse on the blaxploitation genre. Films of the genre had received an immense amount of backlash from the black press, who criticized filmmakers for their depiction of black characters as criminals, drug dealers, and for the glorification of black working-class life and the sensationalizing and exploitation of slavery (DeVos 12). Eventually, the NAACP joined forces with other influential African-American organizations to form the Coalition Against Blaxploitation and they were successful in calling an end to the genre in 1973 (DeVos 12).

Filmmakers in Hollywood had promised to respond to the Black Power movement's call to stop contributing to white ignorance underlying racial problems in the second half of the 20th century in their representation of slavery as a benign institution. Films in the slavesploitation genre demonstrated that they had moved on from these false depictions by including the brutality of the institution and by casting black actors as the main characters. However, they disregarded the seriousness of the subject, by exploiting themes of interracial sex and violence in order to make the films entertaining for a white audience as well, which correlated with racist perspectives towards African-Americans in the Civil Rights and Black

Power era of the 20th century. The activist African-American perspective in discourse on race had yet to further developed in the visual representation of slavery in the United States.

2.1.4: A turning point in history: *Roots* (1977)

Alex Haley's immensely popular novel *Roots* appeared in 1976. The story is about one of Haley's Gambian ancestors, Kunta Kinte, who was sold into slavery. The novel sold over fifteen million hard cover copies within seven months of its release and won both the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize. In 1977, it was adapted into a series for television, which experienced similar successes as it became the most watched series of all time, reaching a mass audience of over a hundred million Americans and millions more globally (Delmont 156).

Because of its popularity, the series is to this day still seen as a turning point in history of America's visual culture on slavery. Professor Matthew F. Delmont claims that the series as middlebrow entertainment was the reason that it worked in attracting a diverse American audience: it "mixed the emotional pull of a melodrama, the seriousness and scope of a historical drama, and some of the violence, sex, and humor of an exploitation film" (156). It did present scenes of brutality but prioritized scenes of caring among black families living on the plantation, which according to Delmont offered a more "sympathetic viewing experience" for both American and African-American audiences and made them "identify with the lives, emotions, and struggles of enslaved […] people" at the time. (81). According to dr. Monica White Ndounou, the representation of enslaved characters experiencing emotions beyond pain and suffering, made it particularly appealing to many African-American viewers (81). They gathered at bars, community centers, and libraries to watch the show together, and to have discussions afterwards (Delmont 176) and it even encouraged many of them to start looking into their own ancestors' history, as the series finally gave them a sense of the past from which the black race descended (Ndounou 81). Letters that were sent to newspapers expressed the impact the series had on the African-American audience: Civil Rights activist Benjamin Hooks wrote that he was "enthralled at the television's rendering of this emotionally searing drama". A black public relations director from Nashville said that he and his children had "just sat there, crying" and black artist James William Donaldson stated that the appalling scene where Kizzy is taken from her parents made him realize to be thankful for him and his family not having to live in times of slavery (Delmont 176). Instead of providing historical exactitude, the series provided a dramatic sense of what the institution of slavery had done to Haley's ancestors who endured and survived it.

However, scholarly responses on the series were mainly directed to the series' deliberate attempts to make the story of slavery accessible for a white American audience (Butler). Andrew Greider claims that the first half of the series features a more visible and attractive depiction of white characters, in contrast to Haley's novel, creating according to filmmaker Haile Gerima "a false harmony" (Ndounou 80) between these characters and enslaved Africans. One of the American Broadcasting Company's executives even admitted to this favorable depiction of white characters: their concern was "to put a lot white" in the series' promos "as otherwise the program would have been a turnoff" (McCrisken and Pepper 44). Another white-centered strategy was according to Greider the series' exploitation of racial-sexual motifs, like "half-naked women. Black seduction. White-on-black rape", which casted the black story of slavery in the familiar image of the slavesploitation genre that white audiences had become comfortable with. Greiner claims that because of these white-centered strategies the series' producers had followed in the tradition of "the long-familiar moral framework through which [white Americans] had always looked at slavery and other racial questions" (Butler).

The visual representation of slavery in *Roots* proved to have progressed from earlier representations because of their effectiveness in casting enslaved character in a more humanistic light, which responded to demands from African-Americans to move away from earlier depictions of the institution that contributed to racist sentiments in the Civil Rights and Black Power era. However, the effectiveness of this aspect is diminished by deliberate strategies to attract white audiences, which in turn contributes to the subsisting of racist perspectives in the second half of the 20th century. In retrospect, *Roots* already took big steps towards a more honest depiction of the institution, but it still asked for progression in its correlation with the discourse on race in the United States.

2.1.5: Applying the 'white savior' narrative: *Amistad* (1997)

According to sociology professor Lewis M. Killian, in the 80's and 90's of the United States the lack of consciousness in regards to racism had reached a peak. The 'in-your-face' racism in the Civil Rights and Black Power era had, according to Killian, changed its face in the post-Civil Rights era (5). Racism had in fact become institutionalized, and operated on an almost invisible level to white American society. For African-Americans on the other hand, experienced difficulties in finding a job and gathered in the poor ghettos of the States, where subsequently the crack epidemic of the late 1980's and early 1990's hit the hardest. 'Urban renewal' (also referred to as 'negro removal'), made it possible for white Americans to flee to

suburbs in order to avoid integration, which enlarged the gap between black and white American citizens even more (Shervington and Bland 51).

In 1991, the not-guilty verdict of four white police officers after an extremely violent encounter with black motorist Rodney King, became a pivotal point in the longstanding unequal treatment of African-Americans in American society (Hunt 1-2). The Los Angeles Riots that followed in 1992 were described as "the worst riots of the century" by *Los Angeles Times.* The riots were a desperate attempt by African-American communities to wake American society from their ignorant slumber and to open their eyes towards the anti-black racism that was still ever so present. Killian appropriately claims that in the 80's and 90's of the United States African-Americans realized that "Martin Luther King's dreams had dimmed and the nation had returned to business as usual" (1).

After television's success with *Roots,* it had taken decades for Hollywood to produce a film on the subject of slavery. The studios had obviously been rather 'clumsy' in their depictions of the institution and based on the critical responses in the slavesploitation era, they realized that representing the subject had to be handled with extreme care, which in turn had led to a complete disregard in the years following *Mandingo*. The film *Sankofa* (1993) for instance, in which fashion model Mona is spiritually transported back to a plantation in the West Indies where she experiences the horrors of slavery, was pitched to Hollywood executives, but failed to receive financial backing because the studios had labelled it as 'too black' (Ndounou 74). A couple years later however, Hollywood decided to take its chances again when grandmaster in film Steven Spielberg showed an interest in directing the film *Amistad* (1997) (McCrisken and Pepper 40). Based on the events in 1839 aboard the Spanish slave ship *La Amistad,* the film features tribesman Cinque (Djimon Hounsou), who among other Africans on the ship decides to revolt against his captors and gain control of the ship. They arrive in the United States by mistake and are imprisoned by the American Navy. Abolitionist lawyer John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins) decides to take their case and makes a passionate plea in the Supreme Court for Cinque and the other imprisoned Africans to regain their freedom (McCrisken and Pepper 40).

The film's makers stated during production that they believed they were doing something important, something that proved that the history of slavery and Hollywood would finally land in each other's warm embrace (McCrisken and Pepper 47). Spielberg claimed that he wanted *Amistad* to accomplish an experience of slavery in the United States, similar to what "*Schindler's List* had done for the Holocaust" (Jeffrey 77) and script writer David Franzoni claimed that he felt that "right from the start there was a sense that [they] were doing

something that could change the world" (Jeffrey 77). The potential of the film was also recognized by Howard Jones, author of one of the film's historical source materials. He claimed that the makers of *Amistad* had the great opportunity to "expose the evils of the African slave trade and slavery itself" (McCrisken and Pepper 46).

The eventual responses to the film however, proved the contrary: it didn't achieve successes at the box office and received many critical responses. Firstly, according to professor Melvyn Stokes, African-American audiences felt repulsed and distressed by scenes of extreme violence in which the shiny, muscular African body is glorified, which apparently had some African-American audience members run out of theatres. "Only a masochist would want to spend two hours watching themselves be degraded and dehumanized", claimed President of Black Filmmakers foundation, Warrington Hudlinn ("Uncle Tom's Cabin" 9).

Critics also responded to the film's deliberate attraction of a white audience by applying what Matthew W. Hughey calls a 'white saviour' narrative (Kocurek 137). These kinds of narratives feature non-white groups or persons who experience dangerous conflict and struggle. A white saviour enters the narrative and is able to save them before the film's ending. When compared to original historical account of Cinque's story, McCrisken and Pepper claim that Spielberg cinematic narrative had been deliberately transformed into a white saviour narrative, especially by sugar coating the relationship between the American Supreme Court and slavery. The film gives the impression that the Court was convinced by Adam's passionate plea to repudiate slavery in favour of the natural rights of man, and thus at the time taking a major step towards abolition. In reality however, many of the Court members, like Martin van Buren (played by Nigel Hawthorne in the film), had upheld slaveholding interests for a long time (McCrisken and Pepper 54). According to McCrisken and Pepper, these misrepresentations contributed to a deliberate "nation building" which made patriotic sentiments towards America's political achievements overshadow the brutality of slavery.

In the post-Civil Rights era of the 80's and 90's, Spielberg had attempted to represent a powerful story of black resistance, but instead achieved the opposite by glorifying the enslaved body in scenes of violence and by applying a white saviour narrative that correlated with a growing ignorant perspective in the discourse on race, in the years that racism had become invisible to part of the white American residents.

2.1.6: Visual representations of slavery in retrospect

This first chapter examined how the most well-known visual representations of slavery in the United States have correlated to perspectives on the existing discourse of race in the times of their emergence. While in *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind* it is clear as day that the films have prioritized correlating with a Southern racist perspective which contributed to the continuous racial injustice in the beginning of the 20th century, there was already a slight improvement in *Mandingo*'s representation of slavery as it had moved on from romantic depictions of the institution. However, the slavesploitation film still correlated with a racist perspective in the discourse of race in the second half of the 20th century, by exploiting themes of interracial sex and violence. *Roots* in 1977 became a turning point in history while it casted a more humanistic light on enslaved Africans. However, this went hand in hand with the exploitation of slavery to attract a white audience, which in turn made the series just as guilty as earlier representations in its correlation with racist perspectives in the 20th century. In *Amistad,* Spielberg attempted to correlate with a more activist perspective by representing a story of black resistance, but its effect was diminished by the glorifying of the enslaved body in scenes of violence and by applying a white saviour narrative that correlated with a growing ignorant perspective in the discourse on race. These visual representations in that sense have all been guilty of responding to racist or ignorant perspectives, which might in turn have not been beneficial for African-Americans' attempt to bring an end to racial injustice.

The following chapter examines how the American films *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Django Unchained* (2013) have evolved in their representation of slavery, and correlated with activist perspectives in the Black Lives Matter era by applying a metahistorical cinematic language.

2.2: Chapter two: metahistorical cinematic languages

This second chapter examines how the visual representation of slavery has evolved in the American films *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Django Unchained* (2012), by giving an overview of scholarly responses on their metahistorical effectiveness.

2.2.1: The myth of a post-racial state

The election of Barack Obama as the first biracial president in 2008 had strengthened sentiments of ignorance in American society towards anti-black racism that had already been present in the 1980's and 1990's. Obama's presidency had resulted in the idea of a 'post-racial' state, free from racial preference, discrimination, and prejudice. However, the years following the election had proven the complete opposite for African-Americans; instead of unifying, justifying, and strengthening the nation, Nsenga Burton claims that the States had entered a "racist renaissance" (Garrett Izzo), in which racism had become more entrenched, calcified and insidious on political, economic, educational, juridical and social levels (Patterson 21). The release of policeman George Zimmerman after killing 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012, became another pivotal point in the longstanding unequal treatment of African-Americans in the criminal justice system after King's beating twenty years before and sparked the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 (West et al 1138). BLM activists strived for American society to break free from the myth of the post-racial state and open its eyes towards the entrenchment of racial injustice in the United States (Diggs Colbert 22). In the first decade of the 21st century, Obama's desire to turn the country into "one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all" proved to be a deception for African-Americans and radical measures were needed to wake the country from the post-racial dream that contributed to the subsistence of racist structures in American society (Garrett Izzo).

2.2.2: The power of film in combatting racial injustice

In the years following Obama's election, Hollywood had seen a significant increase in filmmakers who featured the subject of slavery in their films, while they supported the idea that in order to become aware of the operation of anti-black domination in the 21st century, there had to be an understanding of the deep investment in capital over black humans and seeing them as a type of expendable capital in the American slavery past (Diggs Colbert 7). Cultural historian Robert McParland compared this idea to what James Baldwin, fierce spokesman for African-American, had already stated in his book *The Fire Next Time* in 1963, on the effectiveness of art in linking the past and the present. Baldwin had at the time shown

little confidence in the Civil Rights Act which was meant to bring an end to legal segregation. The United States had to "be awakened to types of injustices" and had to "systemically rectify" them, and to achieve that the American citizen had to "understand oneself". He claimed that art in particular had the significant task of forcing "our brothers to see themselves as they are; to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it", by diving deep into their ancestors historical past (McParland).

According to McParland, Baldwin's reflection on art continue to speak to the anxieties, the anger, and the suffering in the Black Lives Matter era. He claims that films about slavery in the myth of a post-racial America have the ability to present what historian Hayden White calls 'metahistories', dramas of history that operate in order to affect audiences' perceptions on certain subjects. Metahistories according to McParland "enliven a person by calling that individual to recognize and realize his or her own psyche. They may be allegories, extended metaphors to transmit values or to help people to understand phenomena in nature. […] And so, it pays for us to […] look at these films for what they are telling us about contemporary America, as [they] are expressions of a society's dreams, its hopes and goals, its sense of itself" (McParland). In that sense, films about slavery that are metahistorically effective can bring about an awareness on, what David Garrett Izzo calls, the "tattering of the social fabric" in the myth of a post-racial America (Garrett Izzo), trying to solve the very problem that they represent. Spielberg's *Lincoln* in 2012 for instance was, according to historian Brian Kelly, "intended by screenwriter Tony Kushner as a modern-day parable on the virtue of compromise. With an eye on the divisions that beset Obama's Washington, it [focused] on the legislative machinations and backroom intrigue that formally ended slavery" (Kelly). While the film was praised for its heroic depiction of Lincoln, it received criticism for pushing enslaved Africans and Northern free African-Americans to the margins of the story (Kelly). The films *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Django Unchained* (2012) however, centralize first account narratives of enslaved, and while they received mixed responses on their representation of slavery, scholarly works have claimed that filmmakers Quentin Tarantino and Steve McQueen used a cinematic language that is metahistorically effective in correlating with activist perspectives in the discourse on race in the Black Lives Matter era and in waking American society from a 'post-racial' myth.

2.2.3: The metahistorical effectiveness of *12 Years a Slave* (2012)

The film *12 Years a Slave* (2013), based on Solomon Northup's published autobiographical account from 1853 and directed by Steve McQueen, became the most celebrated film on an African-American subject in the United States. Northup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor in the film) was a free African-American man living with his family in upstate New York, then kidnapped in Washington DC and sold into the domestic slave trade in Louisiana, where he was forced to stay for twelve years before he managed to reclaim his freedom. The film was praised for its beautiful cinematography, talented cast, and moving story and became the focus of the 2014 Oscars. Ellen DeGeneres, host of the Oscars, joked that the award night could end up in one or two ways: "possibility number one: *12 Years a Slave* wins best picture. Possibility number two: you're all racists", pointing to the overwhelmingly white film industry in the States where the stories of slavery had been depicted in dishonest ways (Serwer). Eventually, Steve McQueen won the award for Best Film, actress Lupita Nyongo (who plays Patsey in the film) won Best Supporting Actress, and screenwriter John Ridley won Best Adapted Screenplay (Stevenson 106).

The film was a decided evolution from earlier depictions of the institution in American films, but not because of its first-person account of a free African-American unrightfully thrown into captivity, taking into account the experience of Kunta Kinte in *Roots,* or of Cinque in *Amistad.* Moreover, Solomon Northup's depiction as a brave and intelligent man makes him a worthy protagonist, but that is also to say of Kunta Kinte, Cinque and many others. *12 Years a Slave* is a masterpiece because of McQueen's unflinching cinematic language in the representation of physical, psychological, and sexual violence inflicted on the enslaved characters, which according to Brenda E. Stevenson "leaves no room for excuses, apologies, or miscomprehension" (108).

According to Stephanie Li, McQueen's choices in depicting violence drew "the scrutiny of historians and literary critics as well as other more vocal detractors" who dismissed it as "'torture porn" and presumed that it privileged "sadism over realism" (326). Film critic Armond White even compared it to films like *The Human Centipede* (2010), and the *Saw* franchise, which premiered some years before. He claimed that by "depicting slavery as a horror show, McQueen had made the most unpleasant American movie since William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* in 1973*".* He stated that the film pretended to start "a conversation about race" but instead contained "howls of discomfort" (Ball 176-177). Film critic Dana Stevens as well claimed that she was not sure she was "down with body horror as a directorial

approach for a movie on this subject. After a certain point it seems to serve more to shut out (and gross out) the audience than to make them, think, feel, and engage" (Stevens).

According to Miriam Thaggert, the reason for the film's charged responses was that throughout the years the American audiences had grown mute towards the subject of slavery, which related to earlier sanitized depictions of the institution that applied strategies to appeal to white audiences (333). McQueen realized that in a "sort of perfect storm of events", with "Trayvon Martin, voting rights, the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and a black president", his film had to fulfil a valuable role in progressing from earlier depictions and start making the American audience aware of the type of racial inequality once institutionalized by slavery which was now eradicated in the 21st century (Thaggert 333). During the 'post-racial' era, when African-Americans and their experiences of racial injustice were pushed to the margins of society, McQueen applied a metahistorical cinematic language in order to make the viewer come to terms with the disbelief of a free American male citizen being captured and sold into slavery, which enabled an affecting of ignorant perceptions to racial slights and injustice in the Age of Obama when according to Thaggert "all questions of race [were] subsumed under the mantle of the first mixed-race president" (337).

Historian Erica L. Ball claims that McQueen's cinematic language transfers the audience from 'gentle' depictions of slavery known from *Amistad* and *Gone With the Wind* (Garrett Izzo), towards a more "harrowing realism" (177). He refuses to depict the institution in "expected, comfortable, and reassuring ways"; there are no familiar forms of melodramatic staging, swelling orchestral music, expected gendered configurations, or trappings of sentimentality that audiences have come to expect. Instead, McQueen maintains a cool aesthetic detachment in scenes of violence (Ball 180), which are, according to professor Jasmine Nichole Cobb, presented as "a series of sudden outbursts that are sporadic and entirely unpredictable, yet always lurking underneath the surface of every interracial encounter" (Cobb 341), which compel the viewer to take in the centrality of the black body as it is being subjugated without any traces of fetishization (Paquet-Devris 6).

The metahistorical effectiveness of McQueen's cinematic language comes to the forefront in the film's lynching scene. Northup attacks plantation carpenter Tibets and is punished by being left on his tiptoes, while hanging from a noose for an entire day. The image is captured in a wide shot for three full minutes, which forces the audience to focus on Northup's body suspended between life and death. The disturbing character of the scene is enhanced even more through the peaceful sounds of crickets, while Solomon moans and

groans, and when enslaved are seen in the background continuing their lives as normal, not acknowledging the torture that Northup is experiencing (see fig. 1). The scene forces the audience to open its eyes towards the brutal violence as part of an almost serene and calm environment, which symbolizes the need for American society to break free from their ignorant perspective towards racial injustice in a 'post-racial' state. McQueen's insistent cinematic language in *12 Years a Slave* in that sense becomes metahistorically effective, as it is able to affect ignorant perspectives on the discourse of race by deliberately laying the link between past and present.

Fig. 1: Solomon Northup is nearly lynched

2.2.4: The metahistorical effectiveness of *Django Unchained* (2012)

After its premiering in 2012, *Django Unchained* quickly became one of the most talked about films in history (Dunham 403). The film on the story of Django (Jamie Foxx) and his quest to free his enslaved wife Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) from the ruthless hands of Calvin Candie von Shaft (Leonardo DiCaprio), created by Quentin Tarantino's extravagant hands, had sparked the interest of an incredibly large audience, earning 425 million dollars worldwide.

While *12 Years a Slave* demonstrated that it had moved on from earlier depictions of slavery by applying an insistent and relentless cinematic language, *Django* demonstrated this by choosing the route of a parodic spaghetti Western with elements of the slavesploitaton genre. The film presents over-the-top violence, dark humor, colorful sets and costumes within a brutal world accompanied by swagger undertones and deceitful, self-interested, and heavily armed figures. These generic choices imply that the film's embeddedness in a long historical line of visual representations, and a thus far progression of its discourse in the 21st century, had enabled the filmmaker to wipe the serious cinematic slavery canvas clean, and start over with a more experimental approach, which is similar to the representations of Hitler and the Holocaust in films like *La vita è bella* (1997) or *Der Untergang* (2004).

Tarantino's depiction of the institution had elicited a storm of critical comments. The filmmaker's generic choice for the spaghetti Western was criticized because it had abandoned the seriousness of the subject, and instead had added an entertainment value to the brutal institution, which made mostly African-American viewers respond in outrage. Director Spike Lee for instance declared on Twitter that Tarantino's generic choice was the reason that he wouldn't see the film:

> All I'm going to say is that it's disrespectful to my ancestors. American slavery was not a Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western. It was a holocaust. My ancestors are slaves. Stolen from Africa. I will honor them. (Carr 40)

Novelist Ishmael Reed in the same way declared that the film was an "abomination that distorts history". According to him, it was a typical Tarantino film "with all of the racist licks that appear in his other movies" (Pond). Hillary Crosley, writer for African American-oriented online magazine The Root, stated that after a screening where Tarantino was present a woman interrupted the Q&A by saying that a lot of black people were not going to like the movie and that she was about to have a heart attack, followed by African-American audience members heckling Tarantino from the balcony (Pond). According to professor Jarrod Dunham, the director completely missed its chances of exposing the more subtle operations of the

institution, and more importantly, how it is a constitutive lived experience of African-Americans in the 21st century (419).

After the first UK screening of the film, Tarantino was speaking to an audience at the British Academy Film Awards: "When slave narratives are done on film, they tend to be historical with a capital H, with an arms-length quality to them. I wanted to break that history-under-glass aspect, I wanted to throw a rock through that glass and shatter it for all times, and take you into it" (Pulver). Despite the damage that Tarantino's glass-breaking caused, scholars recognized the value of his choice to subvert historical reality with fantasy elements from the spaghetti Western, especially because the drastic transformation in the institution's representation served a bigger purpose. According to Terri Francis, the tradition in the Western genre was that the west was entirely white. "[…] white people were in control and the only people out there who made sense." Moreover, the genre "depicted Native American in narrow roles limited to clichés such as noble savage, ignoble savage or warrior, and exotic "squaw"" (Francis 41). *Django* enabled a transitioning of the genre by illuminating Django as the Western hero in his fight against slavery's injustice, by giving him the autonomy, authority, newness and absolute power normally embodied by white characters in the genre, which according to Rodney M.D. Fierce, meant a goodbye to inferior black stereotypes in earlier films (Fierce).

Tarantino's choice for the spaghetti Western genre made his cinematic language become metahistorcally effective, as his depiction of Django as the resurrection of the American hero enabled an empowering identification with the American audience. According to Robert McParland, Tarantino broke with familiar inferior black stereotypes, and replaced them with the powerful depiction of the enslaved Django who in his fight against racial injustice in the film forces the American audience to see the powerful role of African-Americans in their fight against racial injustice during the Black Lives Matter era. The very first scene in which Django transforms into the heroic figure of the film demonstrates the operating of Tarantino's metahistorical cinematic language: a chained Django shuffles with other enslaved in the dark night (see fig. 2), all visibly bearing the scars of earlier violent encounters, which is according to Francis reminiscent of the well-known portrait of Gordon, an escaped Mississippi slave and Union soldier. The picture victimizes Gordon by putting the focus on his vulnerable, whip-scarred back (Francis 35). Django's back is likewise scarred, hidden by the blanket he is wearing.

In this first part of the scene, Django still conforms to inferior depictions of African enslaved, shivering under his blanket from fear and anticipation when Dr. King Schultz

(Christopher Waltz) makes his appearance (see fig. 3), deciding that he wants to buy Django. However, this seems to be the deciding moment for Django that he wants to be freed from his shackles, and to start the beginning of his transformation. He throws of his blanket in a slow-motion shot with added sound-effects, which exposes the scars on his glowing, muscular back (see fig. 4). Instead of conforming to inferior black stereotypes similar to the victimized depiction of Gordon, Django's back appears to be larger than his scars and wounds which he had suffered, and conquered. He conveys a sense of physical strength and makes the audience look up at him with admiration and adoration, resulting into anticipation for how he will fight against the racial injustice that is inflicted on him. Tarantino's metahistorical cinematic language operates by placing Django in the role of the hero, which forces the American audience to break from the ignorant perspective on the powerful roles of African-Americans in their fight against racial injustice in the Black Lives Matter era, and open their eyes towards the myth of a post-racial America.

Fig. 2: Django and other enslaved are enchained and led through the woods

Fig. 3: Django waits in fear and anticipation when Dr. King Schultz arrives

Fig. 4: Django throws off the blanket, exposes the scars on his muscular back, and begins his transformation

2.2.5: Guidelines for becoming metahistorically effective

This second chapter examined how the visual representation of slavery had evolved in the American films *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Django Unchained* (2012), by giving an overview of scholarly responses on their metahistorical effectiveness. When looking in retrospect to the films discussed in the first chapter and placing them next to the two American films in the second chapter, it is noticeable that both *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained* had abandoned the romantic depiction of slavery as a benign institution present in *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*, accompanied by racist aspects that correlated with racist perspectives in the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, the films had progressed from the deliberate favourable depictions of white characters in both *Roots* and *Amistad*, which correlated with ignorant perspectives towards the racial injustice taking place in the second half of the 20th century. While *Django* still included tropes from the slavesploitation genre, the film's main purpose was not to attract a white audience, like *Mandingo.* Steve McQueen's relentless and insistent depiction of the institution, and Quentin Tarantino's choice for the spaghetti Western genre to depict Django as the resurrection of the American hero, demonstrated that both filmmakers took revolutionary steps in completely transforming the traditional depictions of the institution by applying a straightforward metahistorical cinematic language that was required in affecting existing ignorant perspectives towards racial injustice in a 'post-racial' state.

The following chapters will demonstrate that the line of Dutch visual representations of slavery have not experienced the same evolving process because of continuous sentiments of ignorance on the subject, which have disregarded it altogether.

2.3: Chapter three: ignorance and denial towards racism in the Netherlands

This third chapter will examine how the subject of slavery in the Dutch colonial past has been (visually) represented in the Netherlands, by relating it to the country's development of the discourse on race.

2.3.1: Dutch colonization and chattel slavery

From the 17th until the 19th century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and West India Company (WIC) became the biggest chartered companies of the Netherlands and established the triangle trade overseas (Adams et al 16): ships would leave Amsterdam with iron, textile and gunpowder, which they would then trade in Africa for gold, ivory and humans. If these enslaved humans would survive the horrendous circumstances on the ships to Surinam and the Antilles, they would be sold to European plantation owners in the colonies in exchange for sugar, coffee, nutmeg, pepper and cotton for the European market (Adams et al 22). The same process took place in Dutch colonized parts of Asia, Africa and America, where the enslaved performed physically demanding work on plantations, often accompanied by the plantation owner's degrading and humiliating treatment, resulting in sexual, physical and emotional abuse (Adams et al 35).

The city council of Amsterdam was at the time not a democracy, but an oligarchy: it consisted of members from the most distinguished families who were all involved with slavery in different ways (Adams et al 56). Many of them were shareholders of the VOC and invested their money in slave ships and plantations, or had interests in the worldwide slavery system via familial connections (Adams et al 64). The institution stood in the service of the wealth and elite of these powerful merchants and regents of Amsterdam (Adams et al 40). However, while this did not conform to the Dutch slogans of freedom and equality at the time, they needed – for themselves and for others – an explanation and justification for their involvement. Racist ideas in the age of Enlightenment encouraged by scientists came in handy. Gerardus Vrolik for instance, who was head of the Hortus Botanicus and the first professor of obstetrics in the Netherlands, collected human remains and examined them for substantiating claims about racial differences. Eventually, he made up a complete hierarchy on the basis of race with white Europeans at the top and black Africans at the bottom (Adams 64). These 'scientific' remarks contributed to building the foundation for current forms of racism in the Netherlands, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter (Adams et al 65).

2.3.2: The absence of an abolitionist movement

According to Kwame Nimako and Glenn Willemsen, the legal abolition of slavery had never been a subject that captured the heart of the Netherlands. There was never a mass movement against slavery and only a small number of people showed interest in becoming active in the public debate (Nimako and Willemsen 87). Legal abolition was forced to become a topic of discussion in the Dutch State Committee after the British Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which had suppressed the transatlantic slave trade. According to Nimako and Willemsen, "given the fact that the legal abolition of the trade in humans had been imposed on the Dutch by Britain […], the question was not why Dutch chattel slavery had to be abolished, but when and how much freedom the liberated enslaved should be given" (97). The Committee thought that "once liberated, the black population would view freedom as idleness and vagrancy, as a deliverance from work and/or a flight to the woods to seek their own interpretation of liberty: mere pleasure" (Nimako and Willemsen 100). Enslaved were regarded as passive and submissive creatures that had to be prepared to become "worthy members of society" (Nimako and Willemsen 98). Which is why, when slavery was abolished in the Dutch colonies in 1863, former enslaved were forced to continue working on the plantations for another ten years under the supervision of the State (Nimako and Willemsen 99).

2.3.3: Sentiments of ignorance and denial in the 20th century

For descendants of enslaved, the 20th and 21st century revolved around the struggle for equality and recognition. During the gradual decolonization from 1975 onwards, growing numbers of Caribbean- and Surinam-Dutch people emigrated to the Netherlands, which in turn increased the country's instances of racism (Henrichs 117). Professor Philomena Essed claims that especially from the start of the 1990's until the first decade of the 21st century, racism had become "discernible as a structural social problem" as there was an explosive range of extremely violent incidents of which immigrants had become victims (12). Essed argues that forms of institutionalized racism as well, like "underestimation in schools, undervaluation of professional competence and false accusation of theft in shops", reminded Afro-Dutch immigrants that finding their place within society in the Netherlands of the 20th century was going to be a dragging process (19).

The Dutch stance towards these issues of racism were characterized by sentiments of ignorance and denial, in contrast to what the country liked to think about itself; a nation built on tolerance, freedom and equality. Sentiments of Dutch tolerance however, in reality meant

that Dutch society was indifferent towards the Afro-Dutch experience of racial injustice. According to Essed, it might have been better understood at the time as "passive tolerance", or rather, "passive intolerance" (16). Especially the increasing demands from Afro-Dutch communities to have Dutch society open up the public debate on racism and its connection to the country's colonial past, were disregarded because of the prevailing Dutch sentiments of indifference and ignorance (Henrichs 117). Instead, American sociologist Melissa Weiner claims, Dutch society prioritized conforming to a 'Dutch Master Narrative', which triggered sentiments of pride for the country's colonial past, and ignored its connection to the brutal institution of slavery (Frank). History textbooks from the 1990's for instance, mostly focused on the operation of the transatlantic trade itself, instead of focusing on the injustices that enslaved had to endure on the ships and plantations (Nimako et al 33). Sentences like "the Dutch had a very hard time on the plantations" or "the Middle Passage was a dangerous undertaking for the Dutch" presented how the Dutch had been unable in coming to terms with the negative side of their colonial past.

2.3.4: The demand for recognition in the 21st century

In the years 2000 until 2013, Afro-Dutch communities had started to take deliberate actions against the lack of recognition for the injustices inflicted on their grandparents and great grandparents during the Dutch colonial period (Nimako and Willemsen 159). This however, was met with some protesting voices from the Dutch community. On the 1st of July in 2002, the day for the National Commemoration Festival of the Slavery Past known as Keti Koti, the slavery monument was revealed in Amsterdam's Oosterpark ("Nationaal Monument Slavernijverleden"). According to Mia Mitchell for Humanity In Action, the responses of protest from some residents of Amsterdam pointed to the "recurring sentiment that commemoration of the slavery past [was] either something that [was] already complete or that [was] exclusively a matter for the black community"; Afro-Dutch descendants of enslaved should "just get over" the black page in history (Mitchell et al).

In 2011, activists Quinsy Gario and Jerry Afriyie had set off the demonstrations against the racially infused depiction of Black Pete. Their protest led to the birth of anti-racist movements like *Zwarte Piet is racisme* (Black Pete is racism) and *Zwarte Piet Niet* (No Black Pete) (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 717). According to those movements, the figure was extremely harmful for Afro-Dutch communities as it was connected to the heydays of the Dutch colonial era. Black Pete, with his huge red lips, curly wig and Moorish dress, represented an enslaved African, which was according to them used to ridicule slavery in the

current Dutch age (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 723). The overall Dutch response however, was one of complete astonishment: how could a feast for children be something to become so upset about? The remarks that the figure's historical roots laid in the colonial past were completely disregarded; this was simply just how Black Pete had always looked and it wasn't an 'outsider's' right to criticize it (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 722). The fact that the racist depiction of the figure carried on for a couple years afterwards, despite upsetting so many opponents, demonstrated how sentiments of ignorance and denial prevailed in the Dutch society of the 21st century.

2.3.5: The absence of Dutch slavery films

A remarkable but unsurprising trend, regarding the continuous ignorant Dutch sentiments towards the subject of slavery, is that it has mostly been disregarded in the visual representations of the Dutch colonial past in the Netherlands. In the second and third decade of the 20th century, the Dutch Government produced a rather large number of non-fictional films about the Dutch East Indies in the period after slavery. The Colonial Institute in Amsterdam saw film at the time as a useful way to persuade civilians in the Netherlands to take pride in development of the Dutch East Indies and to strengthen the Dutch national identity, by portraying colonialism in a more intimate and seamier way than it actually was ("Dutch Colonial Film").

Fiction films like *Max Havelaar* (1976) did take a step towards radically critiquing the Dutch colonial past. However, it mostly left out the subject of Dutch chattel slavery and instead focused on the idea of a good and white Dutchman trying to save the Indonesian victims from the relentless colonial regime (Covino 47), which according to professor Pamela Pattynama, demonstrated that the film prioritized the presentation of a narrative that conformed to sentiments of pride for residents of the Dutch nation (80).

2.3.6: A turning point in 2013: *Tula: The Revolt* and *Hoe duur was de suiker*

In 2013, two Dutch fiction films premiered, which for the first time in the country's historical line of cinematic productions solely focused on the subject of the Dutch slavery past. *Tula: The Revolt,* directed by Jeroen Leijnders and *Hoe duur was de suiker,* directed by Jean van de Velde, were both chosen to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Leijnders stated that he had been surprised that he hadn't known about the true story of Tula before the production of his film. On Curaçao, Tula is still commemorated and celebrated as a freedom fighter, where he led the Slave Revolt in 1795. Despite the fact that

Curaçao is still part of the Dutch Kingdom, a large part of Dutch society hadn't known about Tula's heroic story either. Leijnders hoped that by turning the story into a film, he could offer a public stage for discussion on the Dutch slavery past, which had until been absent (Koek).

Van de Velde on the other hand, admitted to the financial reasons why his film coincided with the anniversary of abolition: "This year, it's 150 years ago that slavery was abolished. VARA", a Dutch public Broadcasting Association, "thought that slavery was an important theme, which was the reason that they wanted to finance a big part of the film" ("Hoe duur"). Nevertheless, *Tula* and *The Price of Sugar* became pivotal points in the Dutch cinematic history on the subject of the Dutch colonial past.

Both of the filmmakers were at the time of the films' productions praised for finally bringing the subject of slavery in the Dutch colonial past to the forefront. The films sold out many cinema rooms in the Netherlands, as well as in the former Dutch colony countries Surinam and Curaçao. The latter country even decided to give children a free pass to see the film, which demonstrated that they were appreciative of the film and saw it as a highly valuable addition to Dutch popular culture. At the San Diego Black Film Festival, *Tula* won the award for Best Film, as well as the award for Best Actor, which was handed out to the main actor Obi Abili, who played Tula ("Nederlandse film Tula"). *Hoe duur was de suiker* was praised for its impressive esthetic and its cinematic qualities and opened the 33d edition of the Dutch Film Festival in 2013, where it was nominated for Best Film and Best Actress for Yootha Wong-Loi-Sing, who played Mini-Mini in the film (Van den Hul).

Both films however had also received a storm of critical comments on their representation of slavery in the Dutch media, which this thesis will elaborate on in the following chapters. Instead of simply complying to labeling the films as substandard in their representation of the institution, the thesis analyses Leijnders' and Van de Velde's cinematic languages and places them in the context of the metahistorical development of the American films discussed in the first chapters, in order to see to what extent they are able to build solid foundations for future Dutch filmmakers on the subject.

3: Analysis: *Hoe duur was de suiker* (2013) and *Tula: The Revolt* (2013)

After the premiering of *Hoe duur was de suiker* in 2013, the film had received a storm of critical responses directed towards the soap-like representation of slavery in the Dutch colonies. Robin Zwaan for Cinemagazine stated at the time that in the film "our colonial past is […] depicted in such an implausible way that it looks more like a dress-up party than a serious attempt to strikingly visualize the 18th century Surinam". The film, according to Dominque for Cine.nl, "seems forced because of the one-sidedness of the dominant female main character, Sarith, and the disproportionate soap-degree of her dialogues" (Dominique). Nico van den Berg for MovieScene as well stated that "the dialogue never transcends the level of a TV soap" (van den Berg). According to him, the script makes use of a language that is too modern which in turn diminishes the believability of the film (Van den Hul). Activist Quinsy Gario went as far to say that he wouldn't even go see the film, while the centralization of Sarith, instead of Mini-Mini, would be a "complete letdown" for him (Gario).

Tula was overall criticized for its simplified and caricatural depiction of the Dutch slavery past. Belinda van de Graaf for the Dutch newspaper Trouw stated that *Tula* had turned out to be a "weak, idealess film". It had gotten "stuck in a bad theatrical play in which one simplistic sentence after the other [was] proclaimed" (van de Graaf). Shelley Eimers for Cinemagazine stated that "the characters" in the film were "too basic" and "constructed by the book". According to her, actor Obi Abili (who plays Tula) "has a powerful appearance but got too little opportunities in making something real out of his character. He always stays at distance and it never becomes clear what really motivates him". The Dutch plantation owners, governor and captain, embodied by Dutch actors Jeroen Willems, Jeroen Krabbé, and Derek de Lint, stay "superficial" for the most part and "play on autopilot", which turns the film into a range of clichés (Eimers). Dutch historian Sandew Hira claimed at the time that the superficial and weak depictions of enslaved characters were a deliberate choice by Leijnders, stating that instead of representing Tula as the hero of the revolution, Leijnders decided to disregard historical facts and instead, represent him as passive and unsure: "The descendants of criminals don't like to depict the crimes of their ancestors. They do want to distort history which transform black heroes in pathetic black figures who want slavery from Monday until Saturday, but not on Sunday" (Van der Burg).

Despite the fact that the films at the time were labeled as substandard in their representation of slavery, it is also important to note that no scholars have attempted to take a closer look at the filmmakers' cinematic languages. Moreover, while after the films' premiering, no other films on the subject have been produced in the Netherlands, it is

important to do so, in order to see to what extent directors Jean van de Velde and Jeroen Leijnders have succeeded in building solid foundations for future Dutch filmmakers to build on.

By applying what Gillian Rose calls a compositional interpretation of the film, focusing on design principles within the cinematic languages like mise-en-scène, montage, and narrative structures (34), the chapters will examine what these principles signify and if they correlate with either ignorant and racist sentiments comparable to the American films prior to the 21st century, or if they correlate with activist sentiments towards the discourse on race in the Netherlands, comparable to *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained*, and thus prove to be metahistorically effective.

3.1: Chapter four: a close-reading of *Hoe duur was de suiker* (2013)

3.1.1: Introduction to the narrative

The film, based on the novel by Cynthia McLeod, begins its story in 1747 on the sugar plantation Berseba, just outside of Paramaribo. Mini-Mini (Yootha Wong-Loi-Sing) is the daughter of the enslaved Kwasiba, who was sexually assaulted and impregnated by one of the Fernandez family members who owns the plantation. He was also the father of Sarith Fernandez (Gaite Jansen), who was born in the same month as Mini-Mini. The girls grow up together and while their positions on the hierarchical ladder differ starkly, they establish a close sisterly bond. After father Fernandez dies, Sarith, her mother Rachael, Mini-Mini and all the other enslaved who worked on the Berseba plantation, moved to another sugar plantation where plantation owner and widower Levi (Bart Klever) lived with his daughter Elza (Anna Raadsveld). Sarith and Elza consider each other sisters, and in the years that follow, Mini-Mini becomes Sarith's enslaved house servant, which is where the story of the film starts.

3.1.2: The resurrection of the romantic plantation life

In an interview with Nu.nl just before the premiering of *Hoe duur was de suiker*, Van de Velde had given some concerning comments on the film's representation of the Dutch slavery subject: he wanted the film to be a statement on the idea that the Dutch had done "horrendous things, but also good things", and that he had applied the romantic melodrama genre to present a story of love affairs that was according to him close to *Gone With the Wind* (Nientied). Van de Velde's remarks proved to be true, regarding the film's romantic and peaceful depiction of the Fernandez plantation in the tropical environment of Surinam. Instead of laying the focus on the actual hard and demanding work on the sugar plantation itself, the story mostly takes place in the beautiful plantation home, where the female enslaved house servants closely resemble the Mammy's and Pork's of the American plantation genre films. They are depicted as motherly figures who fondly take care of their owners, and share their happiness in the family's milestones, exchanging laughs and cheers when there are announcements of marriages and pregnancies.

3.1.3: Mini-Mini's inferiority complex

The peculiar dynamics between the enslaved and the Fernandez family, resemblant for depictions of enslaved characters in the American plantation genre, reaches its peak in the dynamics between Mini-Mini and Sarith. Throughout the examining of following chosen

scenes, it will become apparent that despite Sarith's extremely foul character, Mini-Mini does everything in her power to keep her Misi (the Sranan Tongo pronounce for mrs/misses) cheerful, by contently staying rooted in the subservient and passive position that she knows Sarith likes to see her in, or rather, contently staying put within the confines of her inferior complex, comparable to the inferiority of enslaved character in *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind.*

Through the prioritization of Mini-Mini's first-person narration of telling the film's story, her anchored feelings of loyalty and admiration towards Sarith rise to the surface. In one of the first scenes of the film, Mini-Mini dreamily reminisces her and Sarith's upbringing, and how at the age of eighteen, she "was allowed to become Misi Sarith's personal servant". She only had "one goal in life; to make [her] Misi happy", after which she dreamily sighs, "My Misi Sarith". Mini-Mini's outings lets the audience think that the bond between her and Sarith is based on a close sisterhood. However, the scene in which Mini-Mini prepares Sarith for the festivities on the plantation immediately jeopardizes the sisterly bond. When Mini-Mini cleans Sarith with a towel, the camera captures them in a medium shot while they both stare at their reflections in the mirror. The women's nudity at first glance indicates mutual and sisterly feelings of trust and comfort, but actually symbolizes the stark differences in their hierarchical positions. The shot signifies that their nudity functions in different ways: Sarith's naked body is angled towards the mirror and her skin is brightened up by the daylight coming from the right window, while Mini-Mini's naked body is slightly hidden behind Sarith's body, the scarce clothing she wears blending in with the furniture of the room. This composition of the frame indicates that Sarith's nudity corresponds to her high-rank position while she is being tended to, contrasting to Mini-Mini's nudity, which corresponds to her forced appearance as an enslaved house servant (see fig. 5 at the end of the chapter). The composition of the image signifies the stark difference in their position on the hierarchical ladder. Mini-Mini however, seems to feel comfortable in her inferior role as enslaved house servant, while she proudly looks at Sarith's reflection, disregarding her own. She confirms this by stating that Sarith "is the most beautiful Misi of Surinam".

The rest of scene presents the stark differences in their characters. When Mini-Mini grabs the yellow dress, she is pushed away by Sarith, stating that she wants to wear her pink dress instead. The camera captures Mini-Mini in a medium close-up, lightening up her facial features that clearly show feelings of fear and doubt when she tells Sarith that her pink dress has not been cleaned yet. This leads to the moment where the audience becomes acquainted with Sarith's foul and spoiled character that continues to grow worse throughout the rest of the

film. The unsteadiness of the handheld camera contributes to the anticipation of the situation, as it frames the two women in a close-up: Sarith angrily screams in Mini-Mini's face, asking her the rhetoric question: "don't I have to be my most beautiful self today?", after which the scene ends with Mini-Mini cowering in fear and running out of the room to start cleaning her dress in order to please Sarith again.

As the film progresses, the audience becomes more and more acquainted with Sarith as the embodiment of spoiled evil. She is desperate to find a lover who is both handsome and wealthy. After her sister Elza marries Rutger (Yannick van de Velde), a citizen from Amsterdam who has decided to come and live in Surinam, Sarith decides to follow them to the city of Paramaribo in order to carry out her plan to seduce him. Mini-Mini experiences the unjustness of her plan throughout their stay when Rutger visits Sarith in the night, but instead of acknowledging Sarith's participation in the betrayal of Elza, she defends her in front of Elza's enslaved house servant and lays all the blame on Rutger. After Elza slowly but surely has become aware of Sarith's and Rutger's affaire, she reaches her absolute breaking point at the dinner table. Rutger decides that it's best for Sarith and Mini-Mini to go back to the Fernandez plantation.

The scene that follows is a montage of Sarith and Mini-Mini back in their house on the plantation. Sarith is depressed because of her failed plan to seduce Rutger, while Mini-Mini seems to share her feelings of depression but instead, hers seem to originate from a place of shortcomings. She narrates:

> The whole rainy season Misi speaks less than an enslaved without a tongue. I can't give my Misi what she needs, because what my Misi needs, she's not going to find on the plantation. Here is no man, here is no love, here is only me. Me, who wants my Misi to laugh. Because when she laughs, she's the most beautiful woman.

The montage ends with a medium shot of the women on the bed, which once more symbolizes the stark differences in their hierarchical positions: Sarith occupies the majority of the frame. Her skin tone and clothing stand in stark contrast with Mini-Mini, whose skin tone and clothing blend in with the background of the frame (see fig. 6). The image signifies that even after Sarith has proved herself to be extremely manipulative and selfish, Mini-Mini continues to surrender herself to her inferior role and is happy and desperate to try and fulfill her Misi's needs, desperate for her happiness, approval and love now that she lost another chance of finding a husband.

3.1.4: Julius as the white savior

After Sarith decides to marry the much older plantation owner Julius (Kees Boot), who she looks upon as her last resort, her and Mini-Mini leave to live on the plantation which is (quite cynically) called Little Paradise. When Sarith finds out that life on Little Paradise does not at all align with her high standards, she decides to escape reality by starting an affair with a Dutch soldier, who impregnates her. Sarith lets Julius think that the child is theirs, but after he leaves for business in Paramaribo, she is frequently visited by the Dutch soldier. Mini-Mini is there to experience it all while taking care of her son Jetro. After Julius finds out by coincidence that he is in fact not Jetro's father, he decides to send Sarith away, while making Mini-Mini and Jetro stay with him on the plantation. Julius eventually falls for Mini-Mini's motherly instincts and kind character, and they start a relationship.

This is simultaneously the starting point of the white savior narrative through the favorable and heroic depiction of Julius, resemblant of the white-centered strategies in *Amistad* and *Roots,* with Mini-Mini as Julius' damsel in distress. His favorable depiction was already given a taste of before, during a montage of shots in which he is seen working on his plantation. Mini-Mini narrates that "Masra Julius worked very hard" and that he "wanted to turn his Little Paradise into a Big Paradise", while he is seen treating the enslaved as if they are his colleagues, asking them politely to help him and clapping them on the back in encouragement, which depicts him as the 'good' plantation owner.

After Sarith finds out that Mini-Mini and Julius are together, she decides to take revenge by selling her. Mini-Mini is kidnapped and brought to a slave pen in Paramaribo. When Julius finds out, he sets of his heroic and melodramatic journey to save her. While he runs through the streets of Paramaribo, the shaky handheld camera follows him while the drums of the non-diegetic music pick up their rhythm, which signify Julius' desperateness in trying to find his wife in the maze of the city. When he eventually discovers her amongst the enslaved on the boat in the haven, ready to sail towards the North Atlantic Ocean, his desperateness reaches its peak: he is on the verge of tears and the non-diegetic music swells and, supporting the peak of emotions in the scene. Eventually, after Julius has sold all of his belongings, Mini-Mini sprints towards him and falls into his arms, which brings an end to the scene.

3.1.5: Acts of resistance from Caesar and Ashana

Despite the aspects that conform to the more classic depictions of slavery when comparing it to the American films, the film proves itself to be progressive in portraying some

of the enslaved characters as the embodiments of resistance. Caesar (Negativ), who works on the Fernandez sugar plantation, and Mini-Mini share a liking for each other, but Caesar is forced to leave when his owners sell him to the Government, to join the 'Korps Zwarte Jagers' (or the Army for Black Hunters). The Army was established to fight the Maroons, who had escaped the plantation and fought against colonial troops. Caesar tells Mini-Mini that he doesn't want to fight against his own people, and when the Army sets on a mission with the Dutch colonial troops and they are attacked by the Maroons, Caesar grabs his chance to escape and join them. He proves himself to be very intelligent, as he thinks of a way to steal the weapons of the Dutch soldiers: he carves wooden guns, and swaps them for the real ones when the soldiers are sleeping at the campsite.

The enslaved Ashana however, becomes the most powerful depiction of enslaved resistance in the film. She has been working for the Fernandez family since she was young, and is greatly appreciated by her Masra Levi and his daughter Misi Elza. When Elza has given birth to a son in Paramaribo, she is just as excited to hear the news as Levi is. However, when Levi leaves to go see his grandson, she is forced to stay on the plantation. She has to take care of Sarith, who is bedridden from her depression of being rejected by Rutger.

The scene that follows signifies a pivotal point in Sarith's character development: she is enveloped by feelings of outrage for how she was wronged and rejected by Rutger, and decides to act out her anger on one of the enslaved males on the plantation, whom she forces to have sex with her. Ashana is disgusted by Sarith's action, and when the enslaved male is seen leaving the room traumatized, Ashana spits on the ground right before Sarith's eyes.

The next day, she confronts Ashana, who decides to ignore her. Sarith is astonished and outraged by Ashana's lack of respect for her, and grabs her face violently. The camera captures the conversation between them in close shot-reverse shot, the unsteadiness of it supporting growing tension between the two women, and the light from the window brightening up both of their facial features, Sarith's ridden with resentment, and Ashana's ridden with discomfort (see fig. 7):

Sarith: Did you ever hear of Masra's who sleep with their enslaved females?
Ashana: Yes, Misi.
Sarith: O. Sometimes or often? [pause] Well?
Ashana: Often. Yes, Misi.
Sarith: And do you spit on the ground as well when that happens?

Mini-Mini tries to interfere, but when Sarith pushes her away violently, something changes in Ashana's demeanor, as her face hardens and she mutters something under her breath. She turns away, but Sarith is quick to follow her and roughly grabs her again. This time, the camera has found steady ground, as it captures the women's faces again in a close shot-reverse shot, Sarith's outraged facial features darkened by shadows and Ashana's brightly lightened by the outside daylight, strengthening her brave demeanor despite her lower hierarchical rank (see fig. 8):

Sarith: What did you say. You filthy n*gger.
Ashana: (scoffing) I'm am not a filthy n*gger. My name is Ashana.

The image lends its powerful character to Ashana's firm and steal look, in contrast to Sarith's, who seems to have reached a breaking point when she realizes that Ashana has lost all her respect for Sarith's towering hierarchical rank, and instead dared to prioritize her own feelings of self-worth and pride. In the shots that follow, Sarith has Ashana brutally whipped, in order to punish her and have their hierarchical positions restored. However, the camera's framing of Ashana in a medium close-up captures her face obviously ridden with pain, but she refuses to make any sound and offer Sarith her degrading submission, who furiously watches her punishment on the side. Ashana is continuous in her resistance, and will not succumb from Sarith's extreme disrespect towards her, which signifies that their differences in hierarchical ranks at that moment in time have, to a certain extent, balanced out.

3.1.6: The representation of Dutch slavery in retrospect

Van de Velde's remark on the film's close resemblance with *Gone With the Wind*, is clearly apparent in his choices to depict the Fernandez estate in a romantic manner, to have Mini-Mini's suffer from an inferiority complex in order to loyally serve her Misi Sarith and to jeopardize Julius' unjust position as an owner of enslaved, by portraying him as the white savior. With Van de Velde's choices in softening the institution's harsh features, the film is to a certain extent unable in exposing its Dutch audience to the truth of the injustice, which automatically connects with the continuing of ignorant sentiments towards the Dutch discourse on race in the 21st century.

However, by applying narratives of powerful resistance the film demonstrates its potential for metahistorical effectiveness, as it breaks free from more classic depictions resemblant to the American films in the 20th century. Like Django already demonstrated,

enslaved characters can become vehicles to connect their acts of powerful resistance to African-American resistance in the Black Lives Matter era. Both Caesar and Ashana demonstrate that they operate in the same way as they fight against the powerful white regime and hold on to their own self-respect, whether choosing to join the Marrons, or choosing to confront the white regime directly. These aspects of resistance correlate with activist perspectives in the Dutch discourse on race, and operate against existing sentiments of ignorance.

Fig. 5: Mini-Mini and Sarith look at their reflections in the mirror

Fig. 6: Mini-Mini comforts Sarith

Fig. 7: Sarith confronts Ashana

Fig. 8: Ashana refuses to back down and stands up for herself

3.2: Chapter five: a close-reading of *Tula: The Revolt* (2013)

3.2.1: The cost of ridiculing the enslaved

Tula's (Obi Abili) story begins in 1795. He is an enslaved African man who works on the 'Knip' plantage owned by Casper Lodewijk van Uytrecht in the west of the Dutch colonized island Curaçao. Together with other enslaved males, he has to perform physically demanding work on the plantation. In these first scenes of the film, it becomes clear that Leijnders has chosen to depict Tula's enslaved companions as the operators of comic relief in the midst of the film's serious circumstances. The following scenes demonstrate that these comedic moments come with a cost: they resemble sitcom-like sketches carried out between the enslaved characters, which in turn make them seem simple-minded and child-like, resemblant of the deliberate weak depiction of enslaved characters in *Birth* and *Gone With the Wind.* This nullifies the seriousness of the unjust circumstances.

In one of the first scenes of the film, the enslaved males are performing physically demanding work on the fields of the plantation. But the following comedic shots immediately disregard the reality of their poor working conditions, when the local priest Father Schinck (Aden Gillett) arrives. The enslaved drop their working gear and run to him, crying out exclamations of gratitude; "Hallelujah, thank you Jesus," and "Praise the lord, Bon Hende", more than eager to receive the Father's Holy Communion, and the bread and sweat tea he brought. The first comedic sketch occurs when one of the enslaved comes to a standstill in front of the priest and greets him with an immature comment, "Bon Hende, we sure is glad to see your ass", followed by another enslaved hitting his back for his inappropriateness, which makes him recover quickly and saying "I mean, glad to see you, praise the Jesus", followed by a small laugh from the priest. Jantji (Germain Pardo), one of the former enslaved, is the instigator of the second comedic sketch in the scene. He has become Father Schinks' assistant and is neatly dressed. Two of the enslaved greet him and note on his overdressed demeanor in comparison to their poor working attire: "You sure is clean, man", followed by the other stating with a childlike jealously, "Not too bad for a house n*gger", while Jantji creates the comedic result of the sketch, as he continuous to smile obliviously in their faces.

Tula's spouse Speranza (Natalie Simpson) works in the plantation house as an enslaved house servant and overhears van Uytrecht's conversation on the abolishment of slavery in the French colonized Haïti. She tells Tula, who is ecstatic and the following day he decides to test out his luck by having a conversation with van Uytrecht about their poor working circumstances, hoping that because of the French abolishment, the plantation owner will grant

them their wishes. Van Uytrecht has his suspicions on why Tula suddenly wants to have their conditions improved, and the next day he sends the enslaved Pedro (Hazel Sparen) to bring Tula to him.

Pedro is introduced for the first time in the following, which is simultaneously the starting point for the presentation of his theatrical and childlike character as the embodiment of comic relief, starkly contrasting with the seriousness of the situation. While the oldest of the enslaved group Shinishi (Danny Glover) is explaining the tasks at hand on the plantation, Pedro approaches the group from afar, almost dragging his feet through the dirt and his eyes cast downwards. When Shinishi notices him, he angrily asks where he's been. Pedro immediately gets defensive, lifting his arms in an agitated manner, stating that he had to use the toilet, but Shinishi is quick to respond, arguing that he's been gone for over an hour. A disembodied voice, coming from the onlookers, even takes the ridiculed character of the scene a step further by stating that "well," Pedro "is full of shit".

The sketched conversation seems to slowly but surely get off track of what the film really is about, but then Pedro says in a small and wavering voice that Tula has to go and see the governor. Tula, who immediately suspects Pedro of something, asks him angrily what he did. Pedro facial features turn into a pouty expression, and once more, he throws his arms up the air in agitation: "I didn't say anything!", after which he casts his eyes cowardly downwards again in front of Tula's outraged figure. When Tula turns to walk to the plantation house, Pedro's curious eyes follow him. When he turns his head back, he carelessly exclaims "what?" towards the group, acting like he's not acknowledging the seriousness of Tula having to see van Uytrecht and probably receiving a punishment. With Pedro's childlike behavior in the scene, the scene establishes a comedic situation, one which nullifies the reality danger of the circumstances Tula finds himself in, as he returns to the campsite in the evening with scars of a whipping on his back.

3.2.2: Depicting enslaved driven by basic instincts

The entirety of the enslaved group besides Tula seems to have lost their confidence in ever being able to regain their freedom. Tula however, refuses to work another day on the plantation, which in turn inspires the rest of the group to go up to the plantation house to confront van Uytrecht with the fact that they are now living under French law, which means that they are free. When van Uytrecht sees that he is outnumbered by the large group of rebelling enslaved, he tells Tula that his request for freedom is something that he has to discuss with the Dutch governor on Curaçao. He seems to take his loss and lets Tula and the other

enslaved leave the plantation. However, this gives van Uytrecht the opportunity to head to the city to retrieve soldiers who can kill them all.

Many more escaped enslaved join Tula's revolt, but while Tula thinks the best way to regain their rightful freedom is to "extend their hands and to open their mouths for freedom", and disregarding the possible route of violence, Pedro thinks the opposite. Whereas he operated as the ridiculed enslaved before, in the following scene he becomes the extremely violent enslaved, resemblant of animalistic depictions of enslaved who run amok and seek revenge in *Birth of a Nation,* or in the slavesploitation genre. Instead of complying to Tula's vision on the revolt, Pedro plunders the surrounding plantation houses. He tears down everything in his way, drinks from the bottles of alcohol left behind, and when he finds one of the plantation owners hiding in a closet, he ties him behind his horse and drags him through the fields, back to the estate which the rest of the revolting enslaved reside. Louis however, one of Tula's closest companions, discovers what Pedro did and brings him to Tula.

In the scene that follows, Pedro's outraged behavior reaches its peak, as Tula confronts him with his unjust actions. The camera sways from left to right, capturing Pedro in a medium shot, who folds into himself and anxiously rubs his hands together, refusing to look Tula in the eye. When the camera captures Tula, stating that he will hand Pedro over to the Dutch government, the shot immediately reverses as Pedro smacks his fists on the table in anger, lightening up his facial features ridden with anger. His outings demonstrate that all along he has been driven by his basic instinct; his actions resulted from feelings of a deeply rooted anger, resentment, and jealousy towards Tula:

> I am sick, sick, sick of you. Always acting like you're better than everybody. You make all these fools think that you're some great revolutionary, but you're not. You are a slave, just like me. You came from the same plantation I come from. Who are you to hand me over to anybody. Who are you to lead all these people?

In the midst of a revolt, of a chance to regain freedom, Pedro prioritizes to follow his subconscious feelings of anger and jealousy, while pitying himself for the differences in the power relations between him and Tula.

3.2.3. Tula breaking the myth of the white savior

The beginning of the film, when Father Schinck tends to the enslaved by giving them a Holy Communion, can be regarded as the film's falsified starting point of a white savior narrative, resemblant to the one present in *Amistad.* Tula is the one breaking this white savior myth, which is already hinted at in the beginning scene. When the Father asks Tula if he will join them in the Holy Communion, Tula continuous to resolutely and aggressively chop away at the dry grounds of the field and states that he's no longer interested in anything God has for in store for him, pointing to the unjustness of his enslaved position.

When Tula and the other enslaved Africans are in the midst of the revolt, Father Schinck is sent by the colonial government as a mediator to meet with rebellious enslaved, as he is someone that they seem to trust. Father Schinck at first seems be having their best interests, but in a scene where he talks about the seriousness of the situation with one of the female plantation owners Miss Lesire (Henriëtte Tol), it seems that he only takes his own interests in regard:

> Without the slaves to work the field, the plantation will fail. And the community and the church along with them. No, no, no. Freeing the slaves would be as big of a mistake as killing them is.

When Father Schinck arrives at the estate where the enslaved reside, he is cast in an artificial light that is too bright to come from a natural source in the dark of the night (see fig. 9), signifying the ineffectiveness of his supposed divine arrival, which is confirmed in the conversation between the Father and Tula, who happily greets him at the top of the stairs:

Tula: Father! What are you doing here?
Father Schinck: I regret to say that I'm here in an official capacity.
Tula: Hm.
Father Schinck: The governor has sent me to ask you to return to your plantations. So, I am officially asking you all by governmental decree, kindly and immediately to return to your respected plantations.
Tula: No.
Father Schinck: No, I thought not.
Tula: Would you like a drink?
Father Schinck: Yes.

While Father Schinck thought himself to be the suitable embodiment for a white savior, saving the church, while also the enslaved Africans from a detrimental fate, Tula simply and resolutely turns his approaches down. Father Schinck immediately succumbs to Tula's resistance, and leaves the following day, stating that he will pray for him. The rest of the film, he is no longer presented.

3.2.4: Tula as Martin Luther King

Unlike the childish and simple-minded behavior of enslaved characters, Tula is throughout the film depicted as a strong-headed, brave and intelligent man, who inspires his loyal enslaved followers to join his revolt with his anecdotal claims of the importance of peace and doing what is right by law. His powerful depiction comes to the forefront the most during his speeches, which resemble the future speeches given by Martin Luther King on the importance of a peaceful approach towards racial injustice during the Civil Rights Era. The camera captures Tula standing at the top of the estate in a slight low angle, signifying his grandness and the powerful impression he makes on his listeners, who he addresses: "understand me as I say: if you want to stay and move on with us from here, you do so peaceful and lawful-like".

As the film progresses, the Dutch troops continuously try and convince Tula and other enslaved to step down, as otherwise they will be brutally punished. Tula however, refuses to surrender and his steal and brave demeanor as well as his heroic and anecdotal outings, give him a powerful depiction in comparison to the Dutch soldiers. When they give their last warning to Tula, he in turn states that "life without freedom, is no life at all."

After Tula's decision, the Dutch troops attack the estate where the enslaved Africans are residing, which forces them to use violence in order to protect themselves. But even after having suffered great losses, Tula refuses to give up when commander Baron van Westerholt (Derek de Lint) offers a last opportunity to turn back to their plantations and avoid brutal punishment. The non-diegetic wind music swells and the camera captures Tula from a high angle, forcing him into a vulnerable position (see fig. 10). Which makes Tula's exclaims even more powerful when he bravely states: "Save your breath and turn back. We're not returning to the fields. Not today, not any other day." Van Westerholt states that Tula has to understand that he has lost, and that he has to give the opportunity to his people to retreat. Tula responds: "Would you? Would you return to the dirt, hunger, and the whip? And every day be wondering if you'll be living or dying?" Van Westerholt's facial features seem to hold something of admiration as he turns around and leaves the estate.

That evening, Tula stands fiercely on top of the stairs in front of the estate, addressing his loyal audience. An extremely low angle captures his face which glows in the fiery light of the burning torches, enhancing his grand position as leader (see fig. 11). The swelling of the non-diegetic wind music reaches its peak, as the emotions present in Tula's speech reach their peak as well, as he states:

> We have bled much today. And we have lost many fine brothers, husbands, fathers, sons. This fight was never my meaning. But we have been set upon a path, willing or not, thank God, I will see this through. And know this my brothers. Weather we win this fight or not, every single one of you, every single man, woman and child that stands with me tonight. You are already free.

Tula's audience chants along, as Louis screams in response to Tula's speech: "Equality, freedom, brotherhood!"

While the film's ending signifies the brutal torturing and death of Tula and the other enslaved Africans, he did establish better working conditions for the enslaved who had to endure slavery on the island of Curaçao for another seventy years.

3.2.5: The representation of Dutch slavery in retrospect

Leijnders's choices in depicting the enslaved characters in the film as the embodiments of ridicule, characterized by their simple-minded and childlike character, driven by basic instincts in their revolt against the Dutch troops, are resemblant of the unfavorable depictions of enslaved in the American films *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone With the Wind* and *Mandingo.* In turn, these choices make the film to a certain extent unable in exposing its audience to the truth of the injustice, which connect with the continuing of ignorant sentiments towards the Dutch discourse on race in the 21st century.

However, by depicting Tula as an intelligent and brave enslaved male, resemblant of Martin Luther King, and having Tula break the white savior narrative of Father Schinck, the film demonstrates it potential for metahistorical effectiveness, as it breaks free from the more classic depictions resemblant to the American films in the 20th century. Like in *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained,* the film takes a different route and is able to speak to the more activist perspectives in the Dutch discourse on race, and operate against existing sentiments of ignorance.

Fig. 9: Father Schinck approaches the estate

Fig. 10: Tula speaks to commander Baron van Westerholt

Fig. 11: Tula addresses his loyal audience

4: Conclusion

This thesis has proven that the role of film in the discourse on race is incredibly important. It doesn't offer any direct or physical approaches. Instead, it offers a starting point for a mental process, enabling an opportunity for its audience to open their eyes, to break free from existing myths and to become aware of hidden structures in society. Film about slavery need a formula in order to become antidotal to existing ignorant and racist perspectives, and instead operate as a drug that makes racial injustice visible. By making the visual representation of slavery metahistorical, the public debate on race will evolve, as it is able to present slavery as part of longstanding discourse on race.

The American films discussed in this thesis have demonstrated that they have progressed from a more racist representation of slavery, towards representations that actively lay the link of the institution with the racial injustice experienced in the time of their production, which was valuable to open American society's eyes towards racial injustice in the existing myth of a 'post-racial' state. Both *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained*, despite harsh critical responds they received, broke free from the more classical and racist depictions in American films that premiered in the 20th century. Instead, filmmakers Steve McQueen and Quentin Tarantino applied a metahistorical cinematic language in order to correlate with the more activist perspectives in the discourse on race, by presenting an unflinching depiction of violence, and by lending an African enslaved the role of the typically white Western hero. Placing the Dutch films *Hoe duur was de suiker* and *Tula: The Revolt* in this long evolving line of American visual representations on the subject, the analyses have demonstrated which aspects of Jean van de Velde's and Jeroen Leijnders' cinematic languages still correlated with the more ignorant perspectives present in the Dutch discourse on race, and which aspects already correlated with activist perspectives, and thus prove to be metahistorically effective.

The close-readings demonstrated that both films applied aspects resemblant to the ones present in the American visual representations from the 20th century; van de Velde had chosen to depict the Fernandez estate in a romantic manner, while offering Mini-Mini an inferiority complex in order to loyally serve her Misi Sarith and jeopardizing Julius' unjust position as an owner of enslaved, by portraying him as the white savior. Leijnders chose to depict the enslaved characters in the film as the embodiments of ridicule, characterized by their simple-minded and childlike character, driven by basic instincts in their revolt against the Dutch troops.

In order to answer the main research question on how the metahistorical development of American films *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained* can be of influence in the

evolvement of future Dutch films in their representation of slavery as part of a longstanding discourse on race, is that these films have to let go of the more classical and racist depictions of slavery that correlate with ignorant perspectives, and instead hold on to the metahistorical strategies that they applied. *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained* both dared to break the existing standards, and take a complete different route in their representations. *Hoe duur was de suiker* and *Tula: The Revolt* have, despite the more classical depictions, have demonstrated that they were able to become metahistorically effective, by including narratives of resistance, powerful depictions of revolt leaders, and breaking with the depiction of white heroes. The purpose of future Dutch filmmakers is that they have to hold on to these metahistorical strategies, in order to correlate with activist perspectives in the Dutch discourse on race, and break with sentiments of ignorance and denial towards racial injustice. The long historical line of visual representations on slavery in the United States have served as a compass, with *Hoe duur was de suiker* and *Tula: The Revolt* as solid foundations, towards a more metahistorical future for Dutch visual representations on the subject of slavery.

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