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“Silence Louder than Any Noise”: Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* and Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave*

Caryl Phillips and Steve McQueen, inspired respectively by John Newton and Solomon Northup, sound history to conjure up the world that enforced silence to wield absolute power over Black lives. Defamiliarisation and distancing feature among the narrative techniques used to revisit the diasporic past. While Caryl Phillips interweaves fiction and historical sources, the elaborate staging and framing techniques of Steve McQueen expose the roots of racialisation by offering a vision of the experience of enslavement through moments that could be described as filmed performances. What interests both authors are the inner workings of slavery as a repressive institution based upon the silencing of slaves and the tacit acquiescence of all.

In an interview with *Slate Magazine*, African-American historian Vanessa Holden highlights the vital function of art in the representation of the unspoken, as the silence surrounding slavery was forcefully maintained for centuries. This silencing of voices through a system of terror enforced to ensure the exploitation of Black¹ lives now makes the mobilisation of all resources a necessity to come to a better understanding of the inner workings of an institution based on the lawful commodification of human beings:

[...] I think that filmmakers, unlike historians, get to engage the imagination in ways that are really important because there's plenty more to study, and I will spend my whole life in the archives, but there are gaps and silences that as a historian I can't write about definitively. [...] In *12 Years a Slave*, place, you know, Louisiana, cane fields, cotton fields, are very painstakingly depicted because it's so central to really understanding everyday life as an enslaved person. [...] I think it matters [because it's] what people carry with them about slavery and the enslaved experience. (Holden, "Interview by Aisha Harris" n.p.)

Art is here understood as a medium capable of unshackling collective memory by overcoming the reticence of history. Toni Morrison, reflecting on her admiration for William Faulkner, has underlined the vital importance of writing when trying to come to terms with the unspoken:

My reason, I think, for being interested and deeply moved by all his subjects had something to do with my desire to find out something about this country and that artistic articulation of its past that was not available in history, which is what art and fiction can do but sometimes history refuses to do. (25)

Both Caryl Phillips and Steve McQueen work on the “artistic articulation” of the British and North American past when investigating the capitalistic venture of slavery.

The passage from freedom to bondage appears to be the “articulation” under study in *Crossing the River* (1993) by Caryl Phillips and the film *12 Years a Slave* (2003) by Steve McQueen with the aim of approaching the very process of commodification of deported Africans. These moments are recaptured through chronicles written by those direct-

1. Lori L. Tharps, “Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color.” The Case for Black with a Capital B, 18 Nov. 2014 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html?mcubz=1>>. Consulted 25 July 2017.

ly concerned by slavery either as victims or as perpetrators. Both writer and filmmaker chose to work from narratives that focus on the mechanisms that negate freedom to observe at close range the process of enslaving and being enslaved. They approach slavery in the making, and as such are “actively making history” (Joannou 197). While Caryl Phillips recreates the process of “slaving” a boat by adapting John Newton’s *Journal of a Slave Trader*, Steve McQueen follows Solomon Northup’s detailed record of all the steps and techniques used by traders and masters alike to erase his former status of free Black man from his memory. Both artists use simulation to invoke decisive moments at which one can capture what may be called a diasporic consciousness.

Caryl Phillips simulates John Newton’s writing technique and weaves the slave trader’s very words or sentences into his fictional text. The process of commodification is made possible by a cognitive operation of detachment, distancing and silencing of empathy required to accomplish such a mission. This aesthetic manipulation, the “mimicking” of Newton’s text, aims at making the past erupt into the present of the reader’s consciousness. Caryl Phillips’s literary technique seems to invite the reader to an instance of performance art. According to Maud Hagelstein, such an irruption of art in the present is what constitutes the artistic performance: “By proposing through their performance ‘a slice of life’ (in the strong sense of the term), performing artists offer the spectators the possibility of a renewed experience of active perception” (Hagelstein, “Les paradoxes de l’art performance,” n.p., translation ours). We can remark that Phillips’s reader becomes the cognitive beholder/spectator of a written re-enactment and perceives this aesthetic experience as belonging to the present, which is what is accomplished by the discourse of the African father in the epilogue of *Crossing the River*: “For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. To voices in the streets of Charleston. (The slave who mounted this block is now dying young from copping a fix on some rusty needle in an Oakland project.) I have listened” (236). The performance is ongoing, as underlined by the use of the present and present perfect tenses, showing that the bond between John Newton the slave trader and the men and women he took on the Middle Passage was never indeed severed. In Caryl Phillips’s view, each of its far-reaching consequences is still there to be seen:

Water. My life has been determined by a journey across water. Across the Atlantic Ocean. It was the people of the west coast of Africa who, looking out at the vastness of the ocean, first thought of it as a mighty river. Their journey – my journey – our journey, for if some were below, then others were on deck – our journey, back then in seventeen hundred and something, has changed for ever the nature of both British and American society. If I learned anything writing this novel, I certainly learned that. At the beginning, I said that I could not remember the journey across the Atlantic. Any more than I suspect you can. But trust me. It happened. It was not pleasant for anybody, but no matter. The fact is the journey is rooted deeply in my soul. And in your soul too. (*Colour Me English* 165-6)

The present of the traumatic past is a given, fed by the conjuring of voices united in a willingness to bear witness. When working on *Cambridge* (1991), a novel in which Lars Eckstein detected more than twenty historically identified voices, Caryl Phillips wrote to his publisher about the sources used:

The novel is an attempt to dramatically rewrite, using the sources and what skills I possess as a novelist, material which is largely (though by no means totally) inaccessible to the general reading public. I am attempting to make something “new” out of something

“old.” In the process, I hope I have created two characters (and a supply cast) the memory of whom might linger in the minds of those who read this “fiction.” It might even send them back to the original sources to find out more. (72)

This technique is part of a process of listening to voices long dead to weave them into fiction, producing drama that will reactivate a silenced memory and encourage readers to engage with the source narratives. As in *Cambridge*, Caryl Phillips rewrites testimonies as can be seen in his adaptation of this excerpt from *The Journal of a Slave Trader* by John Newton:

Saturday 25th August. [...] All night had a very wild sky, the Aurorae Borealis or Northern Lights flying about with unusual quickness. After daylight came on extream thick, and the gale encreased. [...]

Sunday 26th August. Mostly very thick weather and excessive hard gales about WSW and West. At 2 p.m. let go the starboard anchor under foot. (6)

These sentences are then remodelled into the following: “*Thursday 10th September* All night northern lights flying about the wild sky. Daylight came on thick and the gale increased about WSW and West. At noon let go the starboard anchor under foot [...].” (*Crossing the River* 102). The technique of collage is a trait that links Caryl Phillips’s writing to postmodernism and the art of simulation, to the play with reality and what is supposedly true, since according to Jean Baudrillard, “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth that conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (9, translation ours). When truth remains elusive, only the recorded “movement towards truth” in Baudrillard’s terms, can be held as valid. This movement, in Phillips’s case, can be seen in the overall structure of his novel, which places the “immediacy” of the imitated journal in a different perspective, allowing the reader both to appreciate the authenticity of the imitation and understand its place in a larger whole. In McQueen’s case, the simulacrum is visually convincing. The perception of the truth depends on the way McQueen uses his character’s particular status as a free man recaptured in slavery. Both novel and film function as apparatuses organised to reveal and revive moments of time past, moments of truth, captured in the process of representation.

Rewriting a logbook chronicling the torture of deported Africans into obedience amounts to re-inscribing all these exactions into the present and confronting the contemporary reader with the horrors experienced in the past. Maroula Joannou (197) points out that this use of historical testimony has been questioned by Evelyn O’Callaghan (34) as blurring the frontier between truth and fiction. However, it can be argued that this writing technique leads the reader to consider the historical text from a different point of view than the source material. The resulting palimpsest can be understood as leading to a form of in-text coaching on how to read a historical document that could otherwise anaesthetise the reader to the horrors of the enslavement process through its imitation of an authentic historical document. Although Marcus Wood has dubbed Caryl Phillips’s efforts as being those of “a late twentieth-century consciousness desperate to reclaim the past” that “cannot mimic” the authority of the source material (54), we find that Phillips has discovered ways of dramatising, within *Crossing the River*, John Newton’s subsequent awareness of the functioning of slavery and its corollary imposition of various forms of silence.

After Newton had abandoned the slave trade, he described trading as a war and the captives as soldiers divided between traitors and patriots:

An attempt to rise upon the ship's company brings on instantaneous and horrid war [...]. The traitor to the cause of liberty is caressed, rewarded and deemed an honest fellow. The patriots, who formed and animated the plan, if they can be found out, must be treated as villains, and punished, to intimidate the rest. (*Journal* 103)

The way slave rebellions are shown to be quelled reflects the importance of the revolts and ensuing repression that repeatedly occurred until the abolition of a totalitarian² institution that held power over all in the antebellum society. According to W. E. B. Du Bois (23) and Aimé Césaire (12), it was the same ideological structure that was used as a model in Nazi Germany. The silence surrounding the slaves' preparation for revolt, a silence that weighed very heavily on slave ships during their crisscrossing of the Atlantic Ocean, can also be seen as standing metonymically for the many silences that surround slavery. By placing the imitation of Newton's log within a narrative frame presenting other stories related to slavery and its aftermath, Phillips is attempting to make that silence audible. Reactivating silenced testimonies is then akin to engaging in the voicing of trauma, an objective which should be assessed as more than mimicry. Caryl Phillips uses the term "refraction":

I felt that I had to do historical repair work. It was not on people's radar. People did not understand fully the connections my work was making, and they were not really aware of what I felt was the contemporary resonance of understanding the way the past feeds the present. I was always trying to write about the present, too, but I had no problems refracting it deeply through the past. (in Rabalais 179)

The "silence louder than any noise" is also the very silence that impelled John Newton to comment on his trading days in his *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*: "If I attempt, after what has been done to throw my mite into the public stock of information, it is less from an apprehension that my interference is necessary than from a conviction that silence, at such a time and on such an occasion, would, in me, be criminal" (98). The muteness alluded to here results from the unacknowledged physical or psychological techniques involved in the enforcement of slavery in a slave-holding society. John Newton also wrote in *An Authentic Narrative*: "However, I considered myself a sort of gaoler or turnkey and I was sometimes shocked with an employment that was perpetually conversant with chains, bolts and shackles" (95).³ This admission from a slave ship master, whose legitimate and respected function was to transport commodified Africans, is an example of the reasons why lapses of memory alone are insufficient to explain the imposition of a silence which still has to be acknowledged, denounced and exposed. Phillips did not introduce this text into his novel. The reader is therefore not allowed to put the ship's log into perspective through his discovery of a text written by Newton later in his life, from an anti-slavery perspective. However, the author has chosen the items from the logbook in a way that allows the reader to detect Newton's silences from the way he describes the process of "slaving" the ship. One of the ways in which he does this is through the emphasis on passages describing the preparation of the ship and the containment of the slaves. While the sailors seem to be subjected to the same surveillance and punishment system as the African captives, the ship is being prepared

2. Since the plantation was an autonomous site over which the master and owner held absolute power, we consider it as a model of totalitarianism, as confirmed by the Merriam-Webster definition: "centralized control by an autocratic authority." <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/totalitarianism>>. Consulted 29 November 2017.

3. Portions of this autobiographical text, published in 1763, are also included in Martin and Spurrell's edition of *The Journal of a Slave Trader*.

for the physical confinement of Black bodies: “Carpenter began to raise the gratings of the women’s room” (102). Caryl Phillips also exposes the containment of affects that made the writing of John Newton’s logbook possible by inserting in the text, between brackets, imitations of excerpts from Newton’s letters to his wife, only published separately after her death. This was also the editing choice made by Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell in their 1962 edition of John Newton’s *Journal of a Slave Trader* where the excerpts shed more light on some of Newton’s assertions. (Martin and Spurrell xvii)

Within the narrative logic of Phillips’s novel, the insertion of the trader’s letters to his wife has to be considered in relation to Nash’s letters to Edward Williams – expressing affection but later distress at his former master’s abandonment – to the stream of consciousness technique used in “West” through which Martha’s voice can be heard, and to the diary kept by Joyce, in which the reader discovers her often unconventional reactions to war and all forms of bigotry. Different writing techniques – epistolary, omniscient narration, or diary modes – enable the characters’ voices to be heard, providing a standard against which the conventions surrounding slavery and racism can be measured, then exposed as a form of social and historical silencing. They produce, through the echoes heard from one section to another, the refraction to which Phillips alluded.

While revisiting John Newton’s journal enables the reader to observe the containment process as both a dimension of the experience of the captives themselves and the technical aspects of industrial slavery, Solomon Northup’s narrative is meant to focus interest on the containment of Blackness seen from the perspective of a man struggling to assert his identity and buttress his sense of belonging. The spectator follows the fight of a “free black man” to regain his status as a full-fledged American citizen within the American system from 1841 to 1853.

Visualising the descent into hell and the transformation of Blackness into a currency involves a transfer of affects whose intensity is deeply felt. Actor Michael K. Williams was seized by a fit after shooting a scene in which his character resists being dragged to the paddleboat headed for the Deep South,⁴ while Colson Whitehead⁵ was unable to go through the screening of *12 Years a Slave* when writing *The Underground Railroad* (2017). The potency of these evocations for members of the African diaspora today is a testimony to the psychological price paid at the time, a trauma which, in Caryl Phillips’s words, continues to “refract.”

The impulse to retrieve a past dimly refracted in the present is spurred by the call of the prosthetic memory that is constituted, according to Allison Landsberg, by “privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person’s own archive of experiences” (19) or by what Caryl Phillips calls “intuition” since, when writing about a white American author working on the African-American branch of his family, Phillips stated: “the author has understood something that most African-Americans know intuitively: that history and the past are not irrelevant, and they govern the present” (Ball, “Relations with the Slave Trade” 6). The Middle Passage is the com-

4. Michael Kenneth Williams, “Michael K. Williams’ Emotional Breakdown On *12 Years A Slave* Spills over onto Arsenio’s Stage.” <<http://on.aol.com/video/michael-k-williams-emotional-breakdown-on-12-years-a-slave-spills-over-onto-arsenio-stage-518094663>>. Consulted on February 25, 2016.

5. Colson Whitehead’s talk at The American Library, Paris, June 23, 2017.

mon experience that authorizes Steve McQueen to intervene on American soil: "The only difference between myself and an African-American is that their boat went right and my boat went left" (Lee, "Where It Hurts" n.p.). The Anglo-Caribbean filmmaker referred to the following incident involving his father that took place in the USA, an incident that finds its fictional counterpart in London narrated in Phillips's *In The Falling Snow* (2009):

When McQueen's father was a young man, he'd traveled to Florida to work a season picking oranges. One night, he and two Jamaicans set off for a nearby bar. "And when they entered," McQueen told me, "it was like a Western bar door opened. Everyone looked up." One of the Jamaican men attempted to order some drinks. The bartender replied: "We don't serve niggers." "That's okay," said the Jamaican, reaching for a bottle, "we'll serve ourselves." He struck the bartender with it. McQueen's father and the Jamaicans fled. A chase ensued in which both Jamaicans were shot to death. His father lay alone in a ditch in the dark, waiting for the white men to disperse. McQueen heard about this for the first time seven years ago, when his father was dying. "True story," McQueen told me. "True story." (Lee, "Where It Hurts" n.p.)

Both lynching and segregation appear in the Anglo-Caribbean writer and filmmaker's memory trace.⁶ They find an echo in Solomon Northup's story since this episode is another testimony to the fragility of Black diasporic lives and the containment of their struggle to survive.

Steve McQueen also pointed out that the varying degrees of attention given to historical figures had drawn him to Northup's story: "McQueen invoked Anne Frank, a 'global hero' whose house and museum he lives near, and whose diary was mandatory reading for him in school in England. 'I scratched my head,' he told the audience. Why do I know Anne Frank but I don't know Solomon Northup?" (Lee, "Where It Hurts" n.p.). It was likewise the discovery of Anne Frank's story that enabled Caryl Phillips to put words on his childhood feeling of estrangement from British society. The invisibility of diasporic figures from the past provokes a desire to reclaim "visuality," the ability to exercise the right to observe and question the distribution of power (Mirzoeff, "On Visuality" 53). The intention is to engage in a "countervisuality" process to invest the diasporic gaze with the authority required to question the choices made as to the foregrounding of particular historical figures. This countervisuality can be seen as the equivalent of what Phillips calls refraction. It allows the spectator to process the images he sees within two frames, one of which is the immediate context of the film. The second frame must be provided by visual clues or by instances of dramatic irony included to serve as a commentary on what is seen.

In an early scene in the film, set in Washington, the Capitol is shown towering in the distance, while Solomon Northup, held a prisoner in an open sky slave pen after his abduction, exclaims: "Someone help me!" (16:15) While democracy is visually represented by the Capitol, the voices of Black denizens and the jangling of their chains find no echo in the national representation. They are "almost" heard by the national democratic body politic and it will take a civil war and numerous struggles before their descendants' demands are finally heard, illustrating Homi Bhabha's phrase concerning the way diasporic Africans are considered to be: "almost the same, but not quite" (123).

6. A medical definition of "memory trace" from *The Merriam Webster*: "a transient or long-term change in the brain that represents something (such as an experience) stored as a memory: engram." <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/memory%20trace>> Consulted June 30, 2017.

This vision exposes the exclusion of African-Americans from the democratic process at the time and reflects a form of dramatic irony. If this scene is compared with Solomon Northup’s earlier passivity when he witnessed the intrusion in a shop of an enslaved man in search of a way to escape, without doing more than acknowledging the shopkeeper’s excuses for the incident (27:33), it provides an ironical commentary on the scene. Northup at the time of the earlier scene still belonged to the visualising authority whose ordaining gaze he did not contest. His later comeuppance can be compared to the fate of Nash Williams who, in the first part of *Crossing the River*, encourages his master to punish his servants “should they refuse to attend school, or heed your words” (21) doing nothing more really than echoing his master’s voice before throwing in his lot with the “natives.”

From then on, the focus gradually shifts from the enslaving process to the observation of silence as another tool used within a containment strategy, a silence maintained in the face of the unspeakable as shown in stills 36:47, 39:15, 40:38, and 41:58. Heavily scarred backs or muzzled faces signify the mass-produced tools that satisfied the demands of industrial slavery, as terror alone was insufficient to contain the will to protest. Describing a fellow captive, Solomon Northup in his narrative confirms this view: “Without free papers, he had been seized at Fredericksburg, placed in confinement, and beaten until he had learned, as I had, the necessity and the policy of silence” (61), then observes: “I was too costly a chattel to be lost, and was well aware that I would be taken farther on, into some by-place, over the Texan border, perhaps, and sold; that I would be disposed of as the thief disposes of his stolen horse, if my right to freedom was even whispered” (91). The prostrate men shown display a quality of muteness akin to that of men on death row as they are on the verge of being embarked on a boat to the Deep South, knowing full well that being sold down the Mississippi River is the equivalent of a death warrant. We are clearly made to understand the degree to which enforced silence is the very foundation of slavery.

That silence is a way to make the slaves forget their past identity is first indicated by the well-known system of separating captured Africans from persons of their own ethnic group in forts and on slave ships to make sure they could not communicate and foment revolts. This also meant the forgetting of African languages. The scene following Solomon Northup’s awakening in his cell is the staging of the way he is broken into accepting his new condition of voiceless slave by Burch, a slave breaker:

Burch: Well, boy, how do you feel now?

Solomon Northup: My name... My name is Solomon Northup. I’m a free man. A resident of Saratoga, New York. The residence of my wife and children who are equally free. And you have no right whatsoever to detain me.

Burch: You’re not any free man.

Solomon Northup: And I promise you... I promise you upon my liberation I will have satisfaction for this wrong.

Burch: Resolve this. Produce your papers. You’re no free man. And you ain’t from Saratoga. You’re from Georgia. You ain’t a free man. You’re nothing but a Georgia runaway. You’re just a runaway nigger... from Georgia. (Solomon is sorely beaten by Burch.) You’re a slave! You’re a Georgia slave!

Burch: Are you a slave?

Solomon Northup: No. (The beating resumes.) (13:07-15:54)

The imposition of silence through torture goes along with the negation of manhood through the use of the term “boy” and the renaming under a new status: “a runaway

slave from Georgia.” The emphasis on the distinction between the way in which the two men express themselves also serves to align the spectator’s sympathy with Northup. The slave speaks impeccable English (“I will have satisfaction for this wrong”) while Burch’s English reveals his low origins: “You ain’t from Saratoga.”

Silence used as a mode of management of captive subjects allows permissiveness and downright abuse. While sexual violence against enslaved women is now more openly discussed, the fate of captive men is less often considered. Solomon Northup seems to allude to homoeroticism when he tells of how, as he was to be sold down the river, he begged a fellow captive about to be released from the paddleboat for help. In the same way that Phillips reveals homoeroticism by oblique references, McQueen uses visual imagery to suggest this unspoken manifestation of affect within the context of slavery. The man being addressed by Northup has just been bought back by his master who comes to take him away in a scene based on the description offered by Solomon Northup:

A happy and touching scene was witnessed immediately upon our reaching the levee. Just as Manning left the brig, on his way to the post-office, two men came up and called aloud for Arthur. The latter, as he recognised them, was almost crazy with delight. He could hardly be restrained from leaping over the brig’s side; and when they met soon after, he grasped them by the hand, and clung to them a long, long time. They were men from Norfolk, who had come on to New Orleans to rescue him. (74)

Their embrace on the quay (frames 25:32 to 25:34) can be considered in connection with the suggested relationship between Edward and Nash Williams in *Crossing the River*. In both cases, the nature of the relationship between master and slave is never spelled out. It is left to the reader to guess why Amelia “uncovered” (11) Edward’s first letter to Nash and never sent it, why she would “no doubt have been gravely suspicious of the motives which lay behind his projected expedition” (11), and why she subsequently committed suicide:

Her accusation that in the wake of Nash’s departure he was now making a fool of himself by lavishing an excess of affection upon a new retainer, was this not again met with forgiveness? That she had subsequently chosen to flee his home, then her mind, then this mortal world at the instigation of her own hand, was a tragedy the responsibility for which could not reside at Edward’s doorstep. (10)

It is to be supposed that when the American club in Monrovia decides that “Edward was not welcome, either as a visitor or as a member” (57), it is because his attitude towards his male slaves has been revealed. The imposition of homosexual practices on persons deprived of agency is suggested and shown as another form of sexual violence shrouded in secrecy.

Steve McQueen uses visual effects as in the scene above to allow the viewer to perceive the suppression or manipulation of emotion. In the scene described above, the expression of emotion involving a slave and his master highlights the absence of emotion in other scenes. One of the first tableaux of the film (01:03) stages the unnatural silence coupled with the rigid stillness of the slaves at whom orders are being barked in the cane field. Their silence and immobility are signs of the traumatic burden of abuse. “Y’all fresh niggers” (1:12) is substituted for the calling of their own names, subsumed under their master’s patronym, and inscribed on a medallion around their necks. The silencing of the expression of the slaves’ affects is also illustrated through the music

played by Solomon during his wife’s nervous collapse as her children are being sold separately, or when a group of exhausted slaves is woken up to dance in the ghastly celebration of a mock happiness. In what is akin to mental violation and torture, the deported Africans are forced to demonstrate a behaviour that is jarring and out of tune, to say the least, with their inmost feelings.

A particularly striking visual effect is achieved when Solomon Northup wakes up as a slave after having been drugged and kidnapped by slave hunters. The ensuing emotional upheaval is translated by the sequence from frame 11:02 to frame 11:18 when the inner chaos induced by the imposition of slavery is reproduced under a cold blueish black and white lighting in which Solomon Northup seems to be floating, upside down, decentered, uncentered, flung partly out of the frame by the repressive system he is forbidden to condemn. It is the birth to death-in-life.

In another night scene, a high angle shot shows the zombified bodies of slaves lying in a cart that transports them at night, in an arrangement that fits the frequent description as sardines of the bodies crammed in the hulls of slave ships during the Middle Passage (19:57). The canvas is drawn away laterally, the way a can is opened, revealing bodies slowly coming to life. The “living dead” (Mirzoeff, “In and Out of Slavery” 26) have finally been processed and commodified into luxury goods. The performance of zombification is also staged in the auction scene that is visually rendered as an art exhibit: the potential bidders go from one motionless body to another as though in an art gallery. A couple, then a man, program in hand, assess the value of bodies, some of them naked, to the accompaniment of a lively tune played by Solomon Northup. Steve McQueen’s masterly staging of an installation⁷ within the film relies on the play of gazes between potential bidders and slave trader, the items up for sale all evidencing vacant stares, or averting their eyes, except for Eliza, who is beside herself with grief, and for Solomon Northup, who is urged to go on playing. It could be objected that the re-enactment of such scenes of abjection is tantamount to a desacralisation, as museum curators have come to realise:

When Colonial Williamsburg critically evaluated its interpretation of the eighteenth century, the museum decided to incorporate the story of slavery, in part, by reenacting a slave auction. One interpreter who portrayed a slave “explained that many of his friends and members of his family would not talk to him about his job once they understood what he did.” (Faden 252)

The reaction described explains the necessity of re-interpretative distance when approaching the representation of a system whose ghastly echoes cannot be muted despite the strivings of all parties once involved financially in the trade.

Consequently, Steve McQueen does not merely re-enact a slave auction but encourages the viewer to take part in the “immersive” staging of the auction sale as an exhibition opening. As a plastician artist, he reinterprets the auction scene as the trader’s imposition on the slaves of the performance of themselves. The performers are transfixed like the commodities they have become, as an enslaved man facing a wall in the background turns around, seemingly on his own accord, but at the bidding of a visitor (frames 29:5 and 31:26). As the spectator is invited to follow the performance of the selling of slaves through the camera eye, the auction becomes the enactment of what

7. “Installation art is a term that loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as ‘theatrical,’ ‘immersive’ or ‘experiential’” (Bishop).

could be called one of the first instances of the “performative bondage” (Phillips, *Dancing in the Dark* 6) imposed on Africans of the diaspora. The ensuing separation between the mother and her children (31:59) unleashes the violence that was understated and contained through Caryl Phillips’s technique in *Crossing the River*.

In the film, the defamiliarisation due to the transmutation of the enslaved into automats on display heightens the feeling of horror and revulsion at witnessing a reification obtained through a discourse of hatred and a practice of commodification. Another installation effect based on the fixed camera technique, an influence of experimental cinema, is used at the beginning of the sequence when Solomon Northup is left dangling from a rope between life and death for a whole day (49:35-51:00). It visually exemplifies how the enslaved are denied the possibility to even voice their reaction to acute trauma, as we see them progressively gliding into the background of the scene as they go about their chores, the main noises being the chirping of crickets and Solomon Northup’s stifled breathing.

Later, images of water being churned to the sound of a paddle wheel engine are a cinematographic rendering of the diasporic journey across the seas. “The Sea is History,” writes Derek Walcott (137), but the waters of the Mississippi River are equally heavy with the tales of woe and disappearance of runaway slaves in its meandering course. The camera approaches the paddle wheel and seems to pass through it as well until there is a fade to black, suggesting death and oblivion. It then reveals the wake of the boat on the surface of the river, a visual metaphor for the lives of those who, in the Americas, joined the Africans who disappeared during the Middle Passage, mighty rivers being “rooted deeply” (Phillips, *Colour Me English* 166) in the African diasporic soul.

The desire to scrutinise the African-American past in order to observe and register the inner workings of the process of commodification of Blackness is answered to some extent by the reading of two texts written about slavery as the ultimate containment process. Caryl Phillips’s and Steve McQueen’s works are complementary. Caryl Phillips makes John Newton’s duty to contain coincide with his own approach to writing, which evokes the containment of affects through understatement. His mimicking of the ship master’s style becomes a strategy to coach the reader into reading every move of the enslaved, at the margin (Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*), as a recording of excruciating pain and anguish joined to fierce resistance, by any means necessary.

Conversely, Steve McQueen, by staging the mechanisms of slavery as the actual realisation of the political and economic abuse of Blackness, conjures up a hellish world where the spectator is made to see the ensuing performances of all interested parties for what they are: performances of denial of the abject opposed to performances of acquiescence staged under duress. The viewer is consequently shown how to analyse both the psychological and financial mechanisms of a system based on the abuse of diasporic African lives and the institutionalised complicity with horror. Torture taught Solomon Northup his role and value within the monetary process of the capitalistic venture slavery was, and he was made to measure from within the American democracy the distance between being a “free” Black man and a commodity. Steve McQueen reinscribes Solomon Northup’s path of resistance to the commodification of himself and his refusal to see his vital forces vampirised by a ghoulish and abject totalitarianism in the viewer’s present. By offering new tools for deciphering testimonies from by-gone

days, Caryl Phillips and Steve McQueen aim at opening our eyes to the persistence in the present of traces of a past that has not yet been fully acknowledged.

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