

Film Review - *12 Years a Slave*



Directed by Steve McQueen / Cinematography by Sean Bobbitt

Summary:

12 Years a Slave is based on the true story of Solomon Northup, a free African-American from New York who was abducted and forced into slavery in the South. The film follows Solomon's 12 years as a slave, the abuse he endured, and his struggle to regain freedom.

Human Rights Abuse:

To my confoundment, this film is based on a memoir of the same title, written by Solomon Northup. After watching the film *12 Years a Slave*, I was astonished by the number of human rights violations existing in the film; and the extent to which they were abused. As one might predict, human rights are at the forefront of this movie:

Article 3 - Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 12 - No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation.

In the film, Solomon Northup, a free and established violinist from the North, is deceived, kidnapped, and sold into slavery against his will. Solomon was taken from his wife, children, and friends, and was stripped of the free life that he rightfully had. Evident in the film, Solomon had all aspects of his life interfered with, and his security of person was ignored. By taking a man away from his family and detaining him in such an unethical manner, you are taking away his dignity and pride, devaluing him as a person. It was not just Solomon who suffered from the abuse of the rights; hundreds, maybe thousands, of



other free men and women had their livelihood abruptly taken away to then be treated like property.

Article 4 - No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5 - No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 24 - Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

From watching the movie, these three human rights are the most obvious of the articles ignored.



In the film, Solomon is taken into slavery and forced to work from the time the sun comes up to the time it gets dark. For this work, he receives no compensation whatsoever. All the while, Solomon is subjected to thrashings and beatings if he fails to obey the plantation owner. As seen in the film, Solomon and the other slaves are never safe from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. For instance, whoever picked the least cotton would be whipped at the end of the day, regardless of fatigue or physical health.

Cinematography

The excellent use of cinematography in *12 Years a Slave* is part of what makes the film provoke great emotion from viewers. Head cinematographer, Sean Bobbitt makes use of many effective techniques to evoke strong feelings of sympathy, anger, and disgust. Some of these techniques are lighting, length of scene, and brutal imagery:



Effect of Catharsis:

Frankly, there was not a lot of catharsis used in the film. This, however, is what made the film so powerful. By having long, uncomfortable scenes, the audience cannot help but watch, creating a strong emotional response among viewers. Since a complete lack of catharsis would have driven the audience to insanity, the cinematography team created short windows of time where the audience could experience relief. In particular, lighting is often one of these methods used. In the film, candle lit scenes, or calm night-time conversations bring the audience to ease. Sometimes, music would be even be used to create catharsis for short periods of time. With an exception to these short windows, the movie brings about a lot of emotion. Even at the end of the movie when Solomon is freed, viewers are left to feel sorry for all the other slaves left behind.

Overall Impression:

Overall, *12 Years a Slave* is a powerful film, filled with numerous human rights abuses, encapsulated by outstanding cinematography.