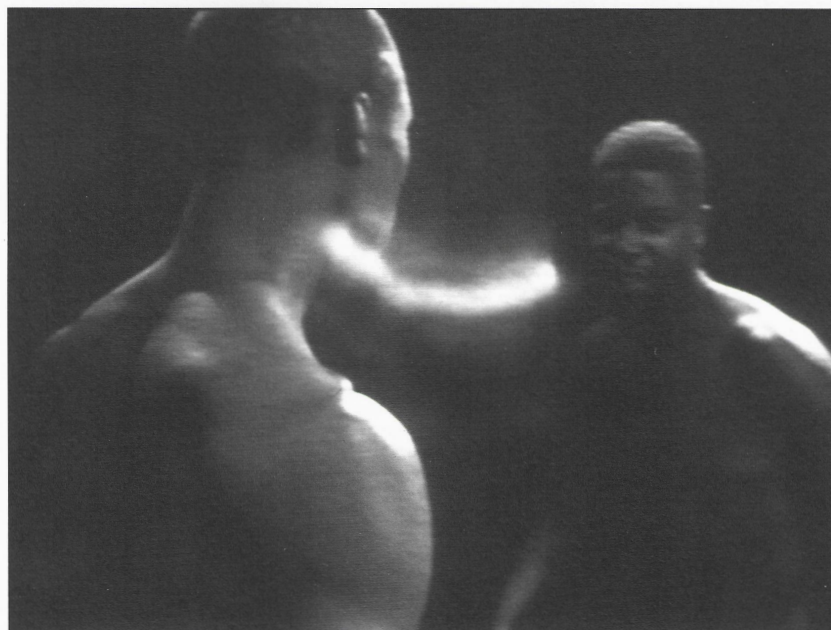


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Alexander, Karen. 'Recasting History: The Transformative Cinema of Steve McQueen and Raoul Peck'. *Afterall*. Autumn/Winter 2018 pp. 138-148

Afterall

Recasting History: The Transformative Cinema of Steve McQueen and Raoul Peck



Above:
Raoul Peck,
Haitian Corner, 1987,
film, 1h 38min.
© Photogrammes
DR. Courtesy the
artist and Institut
Français, Paris

Below:
Steve McQueen, *Bear*,
1993, film, 16mm,
9min 2sec. Courtesy
the artist, Thomas
Dane Gallery, London
and Marian Goodman
Gallery, New York

Recasting History: The Transformative Cinema of Steve McQueen and Raoul Peck

– Karen Alexander

*We are misled here because we think in numbers.
You don't need numbers you need passion.*

– James Baldwin¹

This spring 2018, posters for the latest global tour of Beyoncé and Jay-Z are peppered around London. They depict Mr and Mrs Carter astride a motorbike, and perched between the handlebars is a skull of an ox. The black and white image is a direct restaging of a sequence in the groundbreaking film *Touki Bouki* (1973) by the Senegalese film-maker Djibril Diop Mambéty. The same image was used in the original film poster.² Filmed in vibrant technicolour, Mambéty's story centres on a rebellious, culturally inquisitive young couple who dream of escaping the mundane predictability of their hometown of Dakar for the perceived freedom, glitz and glamour of Paris. Hailed as Africa's first experimental film production, Mambéty's film is a poetic examination of Senegalese modernism. In referencing this iconic image Beyoncé continues her recognition and citing of game-changing black productions and pioneering artists – the *Touki Bouki* soundtrack includes songs from Josephine Baker, a figure she has directly referred to in previous work.³ Mambéty is credited with reconfiguring in both form and content the possibilities of African cinema, by his rejection of social realism in favour of a more exploratory experimental mode of storytelling.

The urge to challenge the past is the preserve of each new generation of film-makers. This desire becomes more urgent when the dominant film-making culture systematically distorts or by omission denies your existence, based on race, gender or

sexual orientation. Striking independent film work from directors such as Shirley Clarke, Ousmane Sembene, Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Katherine Collins, Michael Roemer, Billie Woodberry and Julie Dash alongside many others have challenged the status quo. But few, through

Karen Alexander reflects on Steve McQueen and Raoul Peck's aesthetically distinctive and politically challenging film-making practices.

a lack of investment and interest from a commercially driven film industry, found their way beyond the festival circuit to domestic film theatres in sizable numbers. In contrast, the challenging and unsettling feature films produced by Steve McQueen and Raoul Peck have found appreciative audiences via a direct and immediate route to hundreds of national cinemas around the world. I intend to draw out some of the similarities and differences in these rare triumphs, by reflecting on how their relative outsider status may influence their ways of thinking about cinema, which is both aesthetically distinctive and politically challenging. As descendants of captured Africans transported to the Caribbean to become slaves, they carry with them a sense of a 'diaspora identity', one able to make anywhere home, while also casting a self-critical and quizzical eye at its own hybrid formation. While not directly preparing them for their roles as influential film-makers, there is a sense that as postcolonial subjects with invisible cultural links in multiple locations (Africa, Europe and the Caribbean) they possess the potential to unlock multilayered sensibilities and a focus that is both local and transnational.

¹ *I Am Not Your Negro*, dir. Raoul Peck, United States, Velvet Film, Altitude, 2016 [DVD].

² Jordan Darville, 'Here's the Senegalese film that inspired the *On the Run II* poster', *The Fader* [online magazine], 13 March 2018, available at <http://www.thefader.com/2018/03/13/senegalese-film-touki-bouki-on-the-run-2-posters> (last accessed on 8 April 2018).

³ See Beyoncé's performance of 'Déjà Vu', live at *Fashion Rocks*, London, 2006, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5AF7Beaqz8> (last accessed on 18 April 2018).

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Raoul Peck, *Haitian Corner*, 1987, film, 1h 38min. © Photogrammes DR. Courtesy the artist and Institut Français, Paris

Previous spread: Steve McQueen, *Hunger*, 2008, film, 1h 36min. Courtesy the artist and Blast! Films-Hunger Limited

McQueen and Peck are from different generations, took different routes to film-making and emerge from very different cultural backgrounds. McQueen was born in 1969 and is British with Caribbean heritage. He grew up in the suburbs of west London. Under Thatcherism (1979–90), during McQueen's formative years, unemployment rose to over 2 million, government funding for welfare and public services were cut, workers' rights and trade union power was eroded and a huge emphasis was placed on the free market. Asian communities were subjected to intrusive immigration checks and Black communities, particularly young black men, were systematically criminalised via state-sanctioned stop and search policing policies. In protest against state racism and a serious erosion of democratic rights, people in Brixton, south London took to the streets and sparked city-wide protests that became known as the 1981 and 1983 Uprisings. By the early 1980s when McQueen was a teenager, a cluster of Black Film and Video Workshops were formed

Both strategies result in a dynamic cinema, which extends understanding, rather than mimic or embrace oppressive practices of ethnocentric cultural production.

to develop an oppositional film practice that sat alongside,⁴ but was distinct from, mainstream outputs. The best known were Sankofa Film and Video Collective and Black Audio Film Collective, both of which developed early experimental films often described as having a 'diaspora aesthetic'⁵; mainly art school trained, their progressive approach rejected the closed positive/negative essentialist notions of prior filmmakers in favour of a multilayered, fluid

cinema of sound, images and ideas. McQueen studied art at Chelsea and Goldsmiths' College London, and *Bear* (1990), a study of black masculinity, was his graduation film. As an artist, McQueen is primarily known for his arresting gallery films, which vary in length from the 65 seconds of *Exodus* (1997) to the 13 hours of *End Credits* (2012). His works display a deep curiosity about people and situations, which at first appear minor but then develop into penetrating and often uncomfortable studies. The subjects of his films and artworks are far-reaching, from the claustrophobic exploration of the TauTona Gold Mine in *Western Deep* (2002) to *Deadpan* (1997), the restaging of a famous Buster Keaton stunt from the film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) and also part of his Turner Prize-winning show at the Tate in 1999.

4 The Black Film and Video Workshops were established in the wake of the uprisings of the early 1980s. Through the launch of Channel 4 television a unique relationship was established between independent film-makers, broadcasters, local councils and the trade union for the production of broadcast content aimed at minority communities.

5 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36, 1989, pp. 68–81.

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His feature work for cinema received immediate acclaim, from his multi-award-winning debut feature *Hunger* (2008) through to *12 Years A Slave* (2013), which won the Best Picture Academy Award in 2014.

Raoul Peck was born in 1953 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, into a middle-class family. Due to the increasingly violent and repressive regime run by the dictator François Duvalier, who held power from the late 1950s until 1971, Peck's family was forced into exile and then in the early 1960s moved to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to help develop the newly independent nation. Growing up, Peck was schooled in a variety of places (Kinshasa, New York and Paris) before taking up university study in economics and industrial engineering in Germany. After working for a short spell as a journalist, he started an MFA at the Film and Television Academy in West Berlin where he studied under directors such as Alexander Kluge and Krzysztof Kieslowski. His first feature film, *Haitian Corner* (1987) is about an exiled poet living in New York haunted by his memories of being tortured under the Duvalier regime. This work was followed by *Lumumba Death of the Prophet* (1990) a haunting reflective film-essay in which he combines personal biography with historical fact to revisit the events that led to the brutal assassination in 1961 of the first democratically elected president of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba. Peck, like McQueen, straddles different worlds: his productions range across television and cinema; he has been president of La Femis, the French state film school since 2010; and between 1996–97 he returned to Haiti and spent a year as the minister of culture under a government run by Rosny Smarth. Peck's recent recognition by the film-making mainstream sector – he was elected to the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science in 2013, gained an Academy Award nomination in 2017 and won the Bafta for Best Documentary feature in 2018 – follows a film-making career spanning over 30 years. He is a self-confessed political film-maker for whom cinema is a weapon of liberation as well as an art form.⁶ In 1996, when addressing comments made by film-maker and writer Mark Nash on cinema's problematic relationship to colonialism and neo-colonialism and the role of 'oppositional cinema',⁷ Peck declared: 'As an artist I want to show the complexity of things I don't have the answers to but I am trying to find more questions', adding, 'I am not only trying to find new and original ways to tell my stories... I also want to create new images'.⁸ By positioning his practice as one actively creating new images, which reframe the audience's relationship to history, Peck seeks to reconcile cinematic absences by retelling stories closer to his own subjectivity and experiences, as a political act of production.

In what follows, I will attempt a montage of four films, *Sometimes in April* (2004), *Hunger* (2008), *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), as a way to suggest a dialogue between these film-makers and in particular, why they connect so strongly with audiences. McQueen opens up spaces for questioning and contemplation with visual storytelling and an eye for detail, which sharply punctuates the narrative to evoke deep emotional responses. In contrast, Peck utilises politics and historical facts to construct a vigorous form of cultural resistance to dominant ideas of national identity and collective memory. Both strategies result in a dynamic cinema, which extends understanding, rather than mimicking or embracing oppressive practices of ethnocentric cultural production. Overlaps between the directors can be seen less in their styles or subjects than in a shared aspiration in a realm beyond cinema.

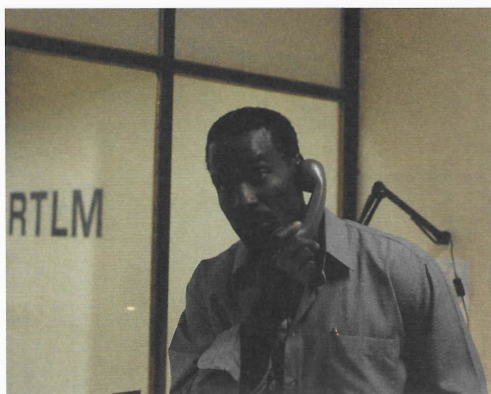
Hunger

Hunger takes us back to uncomfortable and unresolved political struggles, centring on the IRA hunger strikers and the death of political prisoner Bobby Sands in Her Majesty's Prison Maze in Belfast in 1981.⁹ McQueen was too young at the time of the original events to fully understand or to engage with the political debate that surrounded the propaganda

6 Kaleem Aftab "The Future is What We See It to Be": Raoul Peck on James Baldwin, Karl Marx and *The Young Karl Marx*, *Filmmaker Magazine* [online magazine], 5 March 2018, available at <https://filmmakermagazine.com/104889-the-future-is-what-we-see-it-to-be-raoul-peck-on-james-baldwin-karl-marx-and-the-young-karl-marx/#.WuicVcixWCQ> (last accessed on 8 April 2018).

7 Alan Read (ed.), *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1996, p.173. The publication accompanied the 1995/1996 show *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference & Desire* curated by David A. Bailey at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London. Work made by McQueen and Peck was featured. McQueen was represented in the gallery exhibition with his installation work *Five Easy Pieces* (1995) and Peck's feature *L'homme sur les quais* (*The Man By The Shore*, 1993) had a theatrical run in the cinema. In the transcript of the panel, *Film Makers Dialogue*, Peck was joined by Isaac Julien, Martina Attille, Homi Bhabha and Mark Nash.

8 *Ibid.*, p.173



war being played out on British television screens. What we see unfold are the graphic details of the lived experience of Sands and his fellow prisoners as they prepare to pay the ultimate price for their beliefs. Using all the tools at his disposal – actors, set, editing, sound, cinematography – McQueen creates a world of momentary looks, gestures and incidental details that are owned by each set of players in this poetic drama of ritualised violence and human resistance. A prisoner framed against a wall, in a filthy claustrophobic cell or standing at a window trying to catch a fly, recalls films ranging from *Un chant d'amour* (1950) to *Papillon* (1973). Repetition of routines between inmates and wardens reinforces the resentment between the two groups and the tension is palpable, so when violence does erupt, it is extreme. We see the marks left on the actors' naked bodies; there is nowhere for them or us, the audience, to hide. Low-angled tilted camera shots offer a sense of disorientation at regular intervals, while scenes such as the static wide-screen eighteen-minute conversation between Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) and the priest (Liam Cunningham) offers us a space to be still and listen to the competing ideas that inform Sands's decision to take his fate into his own hands.

Raoul Peck,
Sometimes in April,
2005, film, 2h
20min. Courtesy the
artist and HBO

Sometimes in April

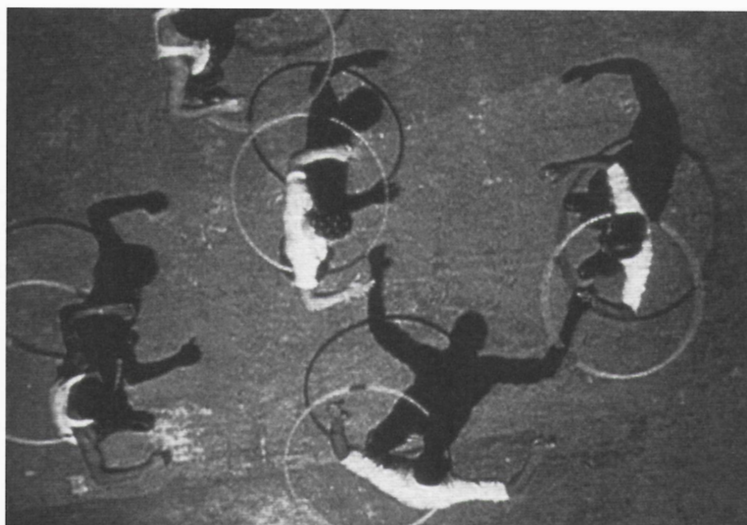
In 2003, barely ten years since the Rwandan genocide, Peck turned his camera on the wounded country. When *Sometimes in April* was commissioned by HBO, the Rwandan story had not yet been told on screen. HBO and the Rwandan government gave Peck complete and unbridled support. It is a chilling depiction of the 100 days of genocide that left almost one million Rwandans dead, set against a background of almost complete silence and inactivity from the wider international community. For Peck, it was crucial that he shot his film in Kigali and the surrounding countryside, in the actual homes, churches, schools and hotels where members of his largely non-professional cast of both Tutsi and Hutu retold, or enacted many of the atrocities they experienced or witnessed at the time. Augustin, played by Idris Elba, fails to come to terms with the full horror of Hutu violence in time to save his own family or to fully realise his brother's partial responsibility for their deaths. All personal intimacy is taken away and his journey of self-understanding is in many ways the film's real story. Using a traditional format, the story is told in a sequence of flashbacks; the brutality and scale of events are peeled back and revealed layer by layer until the horror of the truth becomes almost unbearable. Following the film's opening credits, and prior to setting up the historical context, Peck quotes Martin Luther King, Jr: 'In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.'¹⁰ This is not a cinema of political debate or romantic heroes who save the day, but stories of real events and communities and *how* they coped when faced with impossible situations. Peck creates spaces for the articulation of subjectivities of the marginalised and oppressed whose stories have been

⁹ Bobby Sands was a member of the Irish Republican Army, who led the hunger strikes at Belfast's Maze prison in 1981 in a bid to regain Special Category Status for IRA inmates who considered themselves political prisoners. After refusing food for 66 days he died on 5 May 1981. After his death nine other hunger strikers followed.

¹⁰ Preface to *Sometimes in April*, dir. Raoul Peck, Rwanda, France, and United States, HBO Films, 2005 [DVD].

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Steve McQueen, *Five Easy Pieces*, 1995, single-channel digital video, transferred from 16mm film, 7min 4sec. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York



distorted, or forgotten, in a bid to unsettle, challenge and disrupt mainstream knowledge and expectations. The lack of action from the international community becomes one of the film's main themes and is personified in the figure of Augustin. As a father, a husband and a soldier – a supposed man of action – he fails to read the situation quickly enough and makes the wrong choices despite having all the information in front of him. Peck cleverly plays with narrative and audience expectations; we invest in Augustin, who in a sense is also us – the global audience who looked on and did nothing.

12 Years a Slave

In his most recent production, McQueen manages a subtle mix of the historical and the personal. He quietly reminds us of American cinema's representational histories of slavery, to quote the DVD cover of *Drum* (1976), featuring former boxer Ken Norton: 'The white men wanted a stud to breed slaves... the white women wanted much more.' To counter this populist and race/sex binary, he opts for a true story of slavery – a reversal of that usually told. *12 Years a Slave* is an adaptation of the book of the same name. The film stars Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup, a 32-year-old free man, unwittingly lured from his home and family in New York to Washington by the offer of a job from trickster slave traders who drug him and sell him into slavery in 1841. From the outset, McQueen quickly establishes a connection with the audience and his central character by framing Ejiofor's face, particularly his eyes, which seem to tell much more about his inner thoughts than the words he utters. McQueen insists that the audience witness the violence of slavery, not only on the body, but also on Northup's psyche; once enslaved we see the world through Northup's captured eyes. As in *Hunger*, there are moments of stillness and calm, which offers us space to observe and see. Against the background of the relentless cruelty and inhumanity, McQueen frequently reminds us of the exquisite beauty of the landscape surrounding the slaves. In one scene, as a punishment, Northup is strung up in the burning sun and made to stand on tiptoes in the sliding mud, desperately staving off the possibility of strangling himself. As time passes slaves quietly go about their chores behind him in a changing light – a painting come to life, with Northup's limp figure in the foreground 'spoiling' our idyllic image and invoking thoughts of the classic song about lynching, 'Strange Fruit'.

I Am Not Your Negro

For Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro* marked a return to essay-style film-making, enabling creative mingling of the past with the present. Samuel L. Jackson narrates in the voice of James Baldwin, one of America's most erudite writers and fiercest critics, on whose writings and essays the film is based. In an interview that took place in 1987, seven years

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before his death and when he was 63, Baldwin declared: 'I have an appointment with the twenty-first century... when I will still be under eighty.'¹¹ Happily, Peck helps him make good on his promise in a carefully crafted documentary that brings us Baldwin as soothsayer, commenting from the grave on the state of race relations in America with quotes from an unfinished book, which was never published, intercut with a dazzling array of archival material from the years when Baldwin was a frequent guest on US television talk shows as a political commentator and black and white images of rallies and marches from these violent and volatile times. Jackson manages to deliver Baldwin's words with emotion and conviction; his voice is the glue that binds all the elements together. While never mimicking Baldwin, he strangely 'becomes' him as he delivers one incendiary observation after another. A fan of Baldwin's from his late teens, Peck understood the importance of making a film to entice a new generation and remind an older one of Baldwin's clarity of vision and words of wisdom. Cleverly interwoven throughout the film is what could be described as an informal history of black representation on the big screen, with quotes from Baldwin's writings in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) – accompanied by offending clips from films such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), *Guess Who's coming to Dinner* (1967), *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *Imitation of Life* (1934). These are presented like pieces of evidence to a jury where white America's ignorance and cruelty is on trial. Peck updates Baldwin's messages with more contemporary references – the brutal police beating of Rodney King in LA, the Columbine High School Massacre, Black Lives Matter marches – not only to add relevance and reinforce the underlying thesis but also to shift the focus towards humanitarian discussions that move the audience beyond that of race. At the beginning of the film these words are said, to be repeated again near the end: 'The story of the Negro in America, is the story of America. It is not a pretty story.' The sentence frames the journey of racism, struggle and resistance we embark on with Baldwin as our opinionated guide.

Steve McQueen, *12 Years a Slave*, 2013, film, 2h 14min. Courtesy the artist and Entertainment One UK, London

Opposite: Steve McQueen, *End Credits*, 2012-ongoing, video still. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

¹¹ 'James Baldwin Interview, 1980 Part 3', untitled and uncredited, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emiKF7_4esQ, uploaded 1 August 2009 (last accessed on 8 June 2018).

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In the final chapter of *I Am Not Your Negro*, Baldwin reminds us that 'history is not the past, it is the present', boldly stating: 'not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.'¹² I suggest that this tone of defiance and purpose is what links the work of McQueen and Peck. McQueen's visual originality surprises and often catches us off guard, leaving the audience the space to piece together elements and find their own route to meaning. Peck's poetic cinema of ideas and critical self-reflection condenses complex, colonial and transnational histories into personal stories, which engage us with clarity and encourage us to reimagine the world. He has said that he struggles with history in an attempt to 'keep it alive'.¹³ Both film-makers' work may be viewed as a struggle of memory for us all, against the act of forgetting.

Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*, 2017, film, 1h 35min. Courtesy the artist and Altitude Film Distribution, London

¹² *I Am Not Your Negro*, dir. R. Peck, *op. cit.*

¹³ *Sometimes in April*, dir. R. Peck, *op. cit.* See audio commentary by Peck conducted by Elvis Mitchell.