Many years after queer and queer-of-color theories made such a binary indefensible, art history and film studies remain committed to a distinction between criticality and pleasure. The former remains a desirable activist strategy and the latter is deemed banal, complicit, and expendable. Many have troubled these reductive categories. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for instance, proposes reparative reading and the ongoing necessity for marginalized subjects to connect meaningfully and perhaps unexpectedly with problematic cultural phenomena. In a similar vein, C. Namwali Serpell has suggested the numerous (and pleasurable) critical possibilities in something as debased and thrilling as the cliché. Yet we often continue to relate to culture with a paranoid expectation that there must be more than pleasure, indeed a space that refutes the pleasurable as a mere superficial layer to be peeled back for a truer cross-section of the film’s deconstructive musculature. The excision performed by criticality has deep psychic and material ramifications for minoritarian subjects, especially artists of color, whose cultural output is frequently aligned with a documentary status, that is, some sort of truth about the community allegedly represented by the individual or a truth about that community’s oppositional struggle.

Steve McQueen’s work has been lauded for its realism, criticality, and transcendence of the caricatures of genre, but, as I wonder in a recent essay in Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media, how then might we locate works like...
Widows (UK/USA, 2018) whose relationship to “truth” is entirely different? The truth of Widows and other McQueen films seems to lie in a pleasurable space. With Widows, the pleasure manifests in McQueen’s enjoyment of the original ITV series as a young person, and certainly the pleasure of being able to remake that youthful attachment into something else, something his own. A TV show that in retrospect might seem overwrought and problematic is for McQueen the source of fascination, which, following Sedgwick, could be a deeply queer form of attachment. In works like Shame (UK 2011), it could be the sheer pleasure of bodies, voyeurism, and spectacle, as is also manifest in McQueen’s video works like Illuminer (UK, 2001) and Bear (UK, 1995).

Then there are the pleasures and tragedies of repetition, reformulation, rehearsal, and permutation (to use McQueen’s term suggested below). The protagonist of Shame gets off again and again and hates himself for it again and again, and we watch it—judgmentally, empathetically, and/or pornographically—again and again, just as we self-consciously love watching his beautiful sister sing a song we have all heard before. Widows similarly recuperates and alters the past when McQueen repeats and modifies his enjoyment of the original franchise. Or is it enjoyment that elicits fear or discomfort by looping, cycling, re-building, and rehearsing, as with the homage to Buster Keaton in Deadpan (UK, 1997), the sarcastic preciousness of Queen and Country (UK, 2007–2009), the simultaneously tragic and matter-of-fact Ashes (UK, 1997), or the discomfiting loop of Static (UK, 2009)? 12 Years a Slave (UK/USA, 2013) is likewise part of a discomfiting history of adaptations, each deeply painful in their own way, which tragically mirror the endless permutations of racial violence since the writing of Solomon Northrup’s memoir.

A normative art historical analysis would look to precedents for McQueen’s work—a process that is itself less a generative repetition than a clichéd one in its insistence that critique is the only path history can follow in order to move forward. As Ronald E. Gregg reminded me when reading a draft of this introduction, there is indeed a pleasure in the voyeurism of history, of gazing upon the “long take” of history (for which McQueen, it so happens, has been renowned, especially in 12 Years a Slave). It follows that I initially wanted to see McQueen’s Illuminer as an homage to Warhol’s Sleep (USA, 1965), but with Gregg’s comments in mind, it occurs to me now that Illuminer has less to say about referentiality and more to do with evoking the fashioning of history itself. We see McQueen’s body in the process of becoming, consuming, and making discourse, and we derive some form of pleasure from engaging with that process, if only or necessarily at a distance. So, we might consider how and why art exists at the behest of history over affective attachment, since history is itself a series of affective rehearsals of loved and repugnant events, or even boredom. Equally important is thinking through how emotion can be historicized and how history can be emotionalized, especially when considering how the work of artists of color are read differently in these contexts than those of white artists.

I see McQueen as operating in between these spaces at times, when at others he wishes to remain something other than in-between. I argue for this especially in the context of artists of color, whose capacity to enjoy has often been circumscribed by white critics and historians. At the same time, this is not yet another tired rallying cry for the radicality of pleasure, which has often been mobilized in the whitest of feminisms and queer theories. I simply hope to foreground the importance of desire, love, and attachment, as McQueen has, and suggest that we consider how and why things appear to us as critical or complicit, liminal or fixed, in any given historical moment, and to whom we afford the opportunity to be both and neither.

William J. Simmons: In many readings of your work, there is an insistence on your being critical or deconstructive. There was much discussion with Widows for instance about how you are critiquing or deconstructing film noir or the action film. However, you clearly also loved the original ITV series. I’m interested in the tension between deconstruction and love or appreciation in your films, something beyond critique.
Steve McQueen: What I loved about *Widows* was the idea—these women who were trying to make their way in a world where they were on their own and vulnerable. The only way they could actually exist in their case was to come together. I pushed it a little bit from the original, which was three white women and one black woman. It became two black women, a Latina woman, and a white woman. That was just because of the makeup of Chicago. It was about the fact that regardless of their background or where they’re from, there was a kind of equality, and the heist needed all of them. They have to come together to survive and to thrive in that environment, being that they were targeted not only by the powers that be but also by an underworld. I love the fact that these women, and I use the word *love*, come together—different backgrounds, different classes—and achieved what they had to achieve in order to survive.

William J. Simmons: So, when you were thinking about your relationship to the source material, were you looking to expose its racial and gendered inequities or failings?

Steve McQueen: It’s about taking it further. If the idea is great and you can take it further, that’s interesting. Remaking it has no point. Where do you go with it?
Figure 9. Lupita Nyong’o in the film *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Photo by Jaap Buitendijk. © 2013 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

Figure 10. Chiwetel Ejiofor and Director Steve McQueen on the set of *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Photo by Jaap Buitendijk. © 2013 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. All Rights Reserved.
I wanted to take it to the relationship with Chicago, to race, class, gender, and politics, and not push away what I would have liked to have seen. Using Chicago as a metaphor for what I wanted to do with this film was very rewarding. Gillian Flynn and I did a lot of research, of course, and that was the goal—to push the narrative forward from the original idea, since it was such a great premise.

**WJS:** I wanted to connect this conversation to *12 Years a Slave* as well since it, like *Widows*, is based on something that came before. The original book by Solomon Northrup also existed as a lecture tour, a stage play, and an adaptation by Gordon Parks. It follows that Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote: “No story tells itself on its own: even ‘true’ stories have to be recreated within the confines and various formal possibilities for expression offered by a given medium.” Where do you locate yourself within that series of translations?

**SM:** Solomon wrote the book in 1853, and each version of the story is told differently. It’s a whole tradition, and it’s been passed from generation to generation to generation. Of course, everyone will add their fivepence to the story, and it will become different from how it was told originally, but the source of it will remain. Other than academics, a lot of people didn’t even know about it, even with Gordon Parks’s picture. Again: What could I add to the story? By bringing that story from the past into the present, what would it lose? Of course, it was also translated differently from the book to the stage play as well, because it was directed at abolitionists. You have to look at that story and change it into something else. You can look at that story and detect what was being exploited, look at it in a different way, and interpret it in 2015. Every story has already been told. How we present it is the important thing.

**WJS:** In this process of translation . . .

**SM:** Permutation.

**WJS:** Right, permutation. In this process of permutation, the specter of truth hovers over all of this. Some writers and historians of color, for instance, noted how your depiction of slavery did not have the usual melodramatic edge. Your relationship to truth and documentary, however, is different in *12 Years* than it is in your artworks or *Hunger* (UK, 2008), for instance. How do you relate to documentary as a genre?

**SM:** Every film is a documentary. That’s the only way I can answer that question.
WJS: Maybe that brings us back to race and gender. One could argue that artists of color are tied to documentary in a very different way than white artists are. There is a different expectation for truth, or a problematic notion that one person can speak to the truth of the collective. This process disallows a minoritarian imaginary.

SM: We need more people of color with cameras and more financial means for them to make films. There needs to be balance, another view. We have one side, and we need the other side. If two people are looking at an apple, there will be two different stories. More people of color and LGBTQ people need to make films and to make the films they want to make. One of the biggest influences on me was queer cinema, because I grew up in a time where there was an explosion of it. To see that, to be immersed in that way of looking at things and how things were seen with a different gaze was very important to my development, both as an artist and as a human being.

Steve McQueen is a British Turner Prize winning artist and filmmaker. In 2008, McQueen’s critically acclaimed first feature, Hunger, won the Camera d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and countless other international prizes. His second feature, Shame, starring Michael Fassbender and Carey Mulligan, won two Best Film awards when it premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2011, as well as winning Michael Fassbender the Volpi Cup for Best Actor. It is the second highest grossing NC-17-rated movie in US history. His third film, 12 Years a Slave, was adapted from a memoir by Solomon Northup. The film has received numerous prizes, most notably winning three Academy Awards, including the award for Best Picture. McQueen is the first black director or producer to receive this honor. In 2018 he released his latest feature film Widows starring Viola Davis, who was nominated for a Best Actress BAFTA. He is currently shooting his six-part anthology series set in London’s West Indian community for BBC One. Steve McQueen lives and works in Amsterdam and London.

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