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Movie Stories about Slavery: From Head to Heart to the Good Society

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Plato and Aristotle had very different beliefs about the role of emotions in public life. Plato thought that emotions interfere with proper perception and thus with moral reasoning. He believed that rational civic thought is advanced by the disciplining or elimination of emotional response. Aristotle, by contrast, believed that emotions were a guide: feelings point us to what we value, what matters to us, and by extension, they point us to ideals for creating the good society. They were not inherently to be trusted, but by being aroused and refined through art and through civic processes, they could be indispensable to public life. Unfortunately, in this area of philosophy, the Platonic tradition has prevailed in Western thought, with its emphasis on the value of rationality in the public sphere.

When confronted with the history and legacy of slavery, can we really hope, can we really expect, are we actually able, any of us, to stay dispassionate? Our emotions can run the whole gamut: outrage, despair, numbness, fear, guilt, nervousness, defensiveness, courage, determination to act. But whatever the emotion may be, we are very likely, whether consciously or unconsciously, to be having distinct, probably strong feelings when the topic of slavery is raised.

But many of the institutions in which we work, expect us to be objective and dispassionate: whether as transmitters of history, or recipients, whether as teachers or students. While objective analysis is crucial, it needs to be formed, shaped, molded via diverse subjective emotions, which can then lead to a healthier collective grappling with the lessons of this history of slavery for today.

At the risk of over-simplifying, it seems safe to say that in academia, objectivity and rationality are core values for scholarship. Similarly, the teaching of history in high schools and middle schools is expected to be objective and rational. Museums perhaps have more latitude, but are also shaped by these values. Meanwhile, much of the public interest work towards racial justice today is also guided by the value of rationality. Studies are conducted, reports are written, statistics are presented, in order to try to inspire public awareness and legislative action.

What is missing from these approaches is the cathartic power of art, of story-telling, of what Aristotle called the mimetic arts. Here is the definition of catharsis from Webster's dictionary:

***Catharsis.* Greek: fr. Kathairein, to cleanse, fr. Katharos, pure.**

1. *Aesthetic.* Purification or purgation of the emotions by art; – variously interpreted term used by Aristotle in his description of the effect of tragedy as "through pity and fear effecting a catharsis of these emotions." ...Purification of the emotions, especially pity and fear, by cleansing them of that which is selfish, morbid, irrational, etc. through inducing imaginative participation in the sufferings of others artistically presented, especially in tragedy; hence, a mood in which the feelings excited are refined, exalted, and universalized by being given an impersonal or ideal direction by art.

2. *Psychoanalysis.* Elimination of a complex by bringing it to consciousness and affording it complete expression.

As classics scholar Martha Nussbaum explains, "epic and tragic poets were widely assumed to be the central ethical thinkers and teachers of Greece; nobody thought of their

work as less serious, less aimed at truth, than the speculative prose treatises of historians and philosophers." Greek tragedies were in fact "performed at the most solemn civic religious festivals of the year."

Through the basic elements of tragic theater—characters with whom to identify, an unfolding story that imitates life, and specifically a tragic story—audience members are brought to empathize and thus to reflect on human vulnerabilities. Nussbaum puts it simply: "morality [becomes] a response to the fact of suffering." For in pity and fear we acknowledge human vulnerability and human need, and we see what should be valued. This acknowledgment becomes "a cause of generosity, and a cement that binds people to one another." An example from within Homer's *Iliad* provided by Nussbaum demonstrates the point:

Through his pity, Achilles arrives at a new understanding of the shared vulnerabilities of human beings, and becomes able to think of his enemy as a human being like himself. The consequences for social life are enormous: the return of the corpse, the truce, the dignity of the public funeral.

As public history professionals in 2006, how can we bring this wisdom to bear? We can use story-telling, art, powerful exhibits, and the most popular mimetic art form of today—movies—in order to help us confront the tragic history of slavery in the Americas. We can thereby draw out emotion, and with guidance from teachers and facilitators, help individuals of all ages grapple with what their emotions have to teach them and all of us.

I've been working for several years on a documentary, *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, about my slave-trading ancestors from Rhode Island. They represent an extreme: by virtue of their success at conducting the trans-Atlantic slave trade for three generations, they were the family responsible for bringing more Africans to the Americas than any other U.S. family. I decided to make a documentary about them in order to uncover the larger hidden history of New England's role in slavery. I had written a *Masters*

thesis on Aristotle's theories in graduate school, so I had reason to suspect that if I was going to make a film, I should make it a personal documentary, about my ancestors, but also about me and my family today, and how we are dealing with learning this about our roots. I filmed as 10 of us retraced the Triangle Trade: traveling to Rhode Island, Ghana and Cuba, where the DeWolfs owned plantations. But I embarked on the project with great fear—fear that we would be main characters with whom no one could identify, because we are such an extreme case, and because we'd be so seemingly suspect.

To my enormous relief, Aristotle's theories hold true. Viewers become emotionally engaged with our journey, which includes both empathy and frustration with different characters, and they quickly connect the story to themselves. I have been told countless stories from countless people's own family histories, be they African-American or European-American, and many others as well. And the conversation also quickly turns to the questions that they see us grappling with on-screen: What, concretely, is the legacy of slavery—for diverse whites, for diverse blacks, for diverse others? Who owes who what for the sins of the fathers of this country? What history do we inherit as individuals and as citizens? What would repair—spiritual and material—really look like and what would it take?

Viewers hearts are engaged by these questions, because they have followed an emotional journey, and because they naturally bring so many emotions to the subject. The conversation about how to create the good and just society today, hard as it is, is then grounded in humanity and heart.