From Havana to Hollywood: Slave Resistance in the Cinematic Imaginary

Abstract

From Havana to Hollywood: Slave Resistance in the Cinematic Imaginary examines the presence or absence of Black resistance to slavery in feature films produced in either Havana or Hollywood—including Gillo Pontecorvo’s Burn!, neglected masterpieces by Cuban auteurs Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Sergio Giral, and Steve McQueen’s Oscar-winning 12 Years a Slave. Drawing on Edward Said’s argument for worldliness as a critical-ethical imperative, I argue that, with rare exceptions, the representation of Black agency in Hollywood has always been, and remains, taboo. Contrastingly, Cuban cinema foregrounds Black agency, challenging the ways in which slavery has been misremembered and misunderstood in North America and Europe. Implicit throughout this study of the productive capacities and limitations of this corpus of films that have reckoned with slavery’s inheritance is the question: how might the medium of film contribute to a renewal of emancipatory politics today?

Short bio:
Philip Kaisary is the author of The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints (University of Virginia Press, 2014) and From Havana to Hollywood: Slave Resistance in the Cinematic Imaginary (forthcoming SUNY Press, July 2024). His writing has also appeared in Atlantic Studies, Law & Humanities, MELUS (Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States), and Slavery & Abolition, among other publications. He is the 2023–25 Ruth and Mark Phillips Professor in Cultural Mediations and an Associate Professor in the Department of Law & Legal Studies, the Department of English Language and Literature, and the Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.