

Negotiating the Mainstreaming of a Long-Silenced Testimony in John Ridley's *12 Years a Slave*



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Abstract: This paper examines the adaptation of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* through the lens of John Ridley's screenplay, arguing that the process of mainstreaming a marginalized narrative is carefully negotiated at the level of writing. Rather than treating the screenplay as a purely technical or descriptive document, the analysis positions it as a key site of mediation, where the conditions of legibility and representation are actively worked through. Drawing on close readings of stage directions, the article shows how Ridley's script translate Northup's testimony into a cinematic form that remains both accessible and critically demanding.

Keywords: Screenplay Studies; Film Studies; Slavery; Mainstreaming; Cultural Memory; Mediation

Résumé : Cet article propose une analyse de l'adaptation de *Twelve Years a Slave* de Solomon Northup à partir du scénario de John Ridley. Il défend l'idée que le passage d'un récit longtemps marginalisé à une œuvre *mainstream* se joue en grande partie au niveau de l'écriture scénaristique. Loin d'être un simple document technique ou descriptif, le scénario apparaît comme un espace de médiation essentiel où se négocient les modalités de représentation d'un témoignage historique. À travers l'étude des didascalies, l'article montre comment Ridley reconfigure le récit de Northup pour l'inscrire dans une forme cinématographique capable d'assurer sa circulation auprès d'un large public tout en préservant sa portée critique.

Mots-clés : études scénaristiques ; études filmiques ; esclavage ; *mainstreaming* ; mémoire culturelle ; médiation



Although widely read upon its publication in 1853, Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* never acquired the canonical status of other slave narratives and remained relatively marginal within public memory until Steve McQueen's 2013 film adaptation brought it to international prominence (Gates & Burke, 2017: xiii). While scholarship has extensively examined the relationship between Northup's narrative and McQueen's film, far less attention has been paid to John Ridley's screenplay, the intermediary text through which this transformation was first negotiated. By focusing on this comparatively overlooked stage of the adaptation process, this article explores how a nineteenth-century slave narrative was reformulated into a mainstream cinematic event.

While screenwriting has long been overlooked in film studies, with the screenplay still frequently regarded as a mere technical document (Nemes, 2010: 3-15), John Ridley's *12 Years a Slave* offers a particularly compelling case for analyzing the process through which Solomon Northup's narrative was reframed and ultimately mainstreamed. Indeed, if academic scholarship often defines the screenplay as a concise and predominantly descriptive text, one that simply organizes characters' actions and therefore appears to offer limited interpretive value (Bordwell & Thompson, 1988: 89), John Ridley's script clearly challenges this assumption. Far from functioning as a purely technical document, it is rich in detail and reveals a precise reading of the events represented on screen. Rather than relying solely on dialogue, Ridley's script offers substantial insight into the mechanics of adaptation through its unusually detailed scene descriptions. These extended passages explicitly frame the thematic purpose of specific scenes and dictate how they are meant to be understood – an aspect I will examine more closely in the following section. At this stage, however, it is important to stress that such expansiveness should not be reduced to a simple stylistic feature of Ridley's writing. Rather, these detailed descriptive passages point to a broader ambition underlying the adaptation itself: the effort to translate Northup's narrative into cinematic form in a way that preserves its political significance. In this respect, the screenplay reveals that the visual dimension of the film was carefully constructed in order to confront the viewer and guide interpretation. The density of these descriptive sections therefore signals the complexity of the adaptation process. Rendering the 1853 narrative on screen required the meticulous organization of visual material capable of mediating the original text for a contemporary audience.

Negotiating a Contested Archive

To understand why John Ridley's scripting of *Twelve Years a Slave* is relevant, it is important to situate the text within the broader history of the slave narrative as a genre. Although slave narratives occupy a foundational place in African American literary and political history, they have long been shaped by unequal conditions of production and reception (Taylor, 1999: 25-21; Crispin, 1988: 48-62). Often published through abolitionist networks and mediated by white editors who were expected to guarantee their authenticity, these texts were never received as transparent testimonies, but as highly framed objects subject to suspicion and ideological negotiation (Gates, 2002: 2-13; Roy, 2018).

Published in the wake of the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852), Solomon Northup's narrative attracted immediate attention, yet its reception was deeply divided: while some readers praised its documentary power, others filtered it through the template of Stowe's fiction or dismissed it as opportunistic abolitionist propaganda (Burke & Gates, 2017: 197). The widespread yet deeply fractured reception underscores the systemic reluctance of a nineteenth-century audience to grant full authority to black testimonies on slavery. *Twelve Years a Slave* thus belongs to a literary corpus that remained insufficiently recognized for much of its history, despite its crucial value as historical evidence and as an archive of enslaved voices (Roy, 2018). Only later historiography fully re-established slave narratives as central sources for understanding slavery from the perspective of the enslaved (Blight, 2004; Gates, 2002). In this way, Northup's text was both disputed and overlooked: challenged at the moment of its publication, and only belatedly acknowledged as a major literary and historical document.

What was at stake in John Ridley's screenplay, then, was the transformation of a disputed and long-marginalized testimony into a form capable of circulating within mainstream cinema without severing it from its archival and ethical force. As Ridley himself explains, the project had to negotiate between several competing demands: remaining faithful to Northup's testimony while rendering it accessible to a broad contemporary audience:

The challenges are: you have 12 years, and what are the moments in those 12 years that stand in the starkest relief? You don't want a film that is all pain and suffering, but at the same time, you don't want a film that turns its head away from those difficult aspects of the storytelling. (*Confluence*, 2013)

In this sense, the screenplay functions as a site of mediation in which the authority of the slave narrative is necessarily reformulated. Its stakes are both historiographical and aesthetic, as Ridley had to restore Northup's account to visibility, grant cinematic centrality to a long-contested black testimonial archive, and do so without reducing slavery to spectacle while ensuring the film's broader cultural circulation. Ridley's work thus participates in a broader process of legitimization, one that positions him as a cultural mediator negotiating between distinct historical moments and competing imperatives.

“A Constant and Continual Canvas”: Violence and Systemic Visibility



Rather than residing solely in dialogue or plot, the force of Ridley's adaptation emerges most clearly in the stage directions, where the violence of the 1853 narrative is carefully rearticulated. Through the precision of its lines, Ridley's screenplay maintains a clear connection to the testimonial project of Northup's narrative, translating the documentary authority of the text into concrete demands of cinematic representation. This logic is already visible in the kidnapping sequence, which functions as a decisive point of rupture: violence is told in a mode that appears designed to refuse any form of narrative comfort:

With no preamble, Burch begins to beat Solomon about the back with the paddle. Burch strikes him wordlessly – no taunting, no sneering. Solomon screaming against each blow. His back immediately SWELLING WITH WELTS AND BRUISES. This beating continues on and on and on until quite literally Burch WEARS HIMSELF OUT with the effort.

[...]

Burch continues to strike, and strike... This time until the paddle SNAPS IN HALF. Burch then GRABS THE WHIP. Hardly missing a stroke, he whips Solomon relentlessly, the flails cutting into Solomon's back. Again, Burch's arm tires before Solomon “breaks.” (Ridley, 2013: 25)

This passage corresponds to the sequence in which Burch subjects Solomon¹ to an act of extreme corporal punishment. What first stands out is the abruptness of the writing. The assault begins “with no preamble,” as if the screenplay refused the gradual escalation that might turn violence into a conventionally dramatic scene. The screenplay moves directly to the

1. In this analysis, I use “Solomon” when discussing the character as constructed in the screenplay and movie, while using “Solomon Northup” to denote the historical person.

blows inflicted on Solomon's body, foregrounding the mechanics of punishment and its effects. The beating unfolds through a succession of physical actions and injuries: the repeated strikes of the paddle, the swelling of Solomon's back, the formation of welts and bruises, the breaking of the weapon itself, and finally the transition to the whip. Violence is thus rendered as a sustained process of bodily degradation, with the stage directions remaining fixed on the material consequences of the assault.

Ridley further heightens the brutality of the sequence by neutralizing the verbal dimension of domination. The stage directions insist on Burch's silence ("no taunting, no sneering") thereby stripping violence of expressivity and reducing it to a punitive mechanism. Here, violence is transformed into procedure. In the absence of speech, the scene no longer belongs to the register of conflict, it shifts instead toward the logic of pure coercion. The screenplay renders this reduction legible through its sustained attention to the immediate physical effects of the beating, described with an almost clinical precision. Indeed, far from a mere typographical convention, the capitalization of "SWELLING WITH WELTS AND BRUISES" underscores the physical consequences of the assault by isolating and amplifying the description of bodily injury. The emphasis falls on Solomon's wounded body, whose swelling flesh, welts, and bruises register the cumulative effects of repeated blows. The screenplay therefore extends the narration of violence beyond the act itself to include its visible traces, inscribing punishment directly onto the body. In this way, Ridley translates Northup's testimony into a detailed record of corporeal suffering, foregrounding the lasting marks it leaves on the flesh.

This logic becomes even more pronounced in the passage's reliance on repetition and duration. Phrases such as "on and on and on" and "continues to strike, and strike" stretch the moment beyond the need of narrative efficiency. The syntax itself mimics the persistence of the assault, extending the action and stressing its relentless character. Equally significant is the detail that Burch repeatedly exhausts himself before Solomon yields, suggesting a violence whose brutality lies in its persistence. The scene thus foregrounds the endurance of punishment, representing slavery as a regime of ongoing physical coercion rather than a succession of isolated acts.

What emerges here is a sustained attempt to find cinematic forms capable of translating the violence of Northup's testimony. Arguably, it shows how the challenge of adaptation lies in rendering the physical realities of enslavement in cinematic form rather than simply selecting episodes from the 1853 narrative. Through its dense and detailed stage directions, the screenplay reveals Ridley's effort to translate Northup's testimony into

a visual representation of bodily suffering and systemic violence. Later in the script, the following line appears:

For the first time Solomon sees true and severe slavery. These are not visiting servants, such as Jasper was back in Saratoga. These are humans held in strict bondage – herded like cattle, chained together as if in a “chain gang.” Slaves are evident not merely by the color of their skin. The residue and accessories of slavery are everywhere. Blacks almost universally display scars – THICK AND HEAVY DEAD TISSUE FROM LACERATIONS LEFT UNTREATED – brands, and are often missing limbs. Blacks are held in all types of shackles, from simple chains to elaborate bindings, to neck collars that are spiked. Some are muzzled or forced to wear bits. One slave is attacked by a dog and the slave owner. The dog pulls and tears at the slave’s clothes. THESE IMAGES SHOULD BE A CONSTANT AND CONTINUAL CANVAS TO THE PIECE. EVER PRESENT, BUT NOT REALLY COMMENTED ON AS THEY ARE THE NORM. They should be a reminder that not only are people being oppressed, but that there is an entire system of oppression in place. (*Ibid.*: 36)

This passage is revealing of the ways in which Northup’s narrative is reconfigured in cinematic terms, as the stage directions foreground Solomon’s first encounter with the realities of enslavement through a dense accumulation of corporeal traces and signs of punishment. Indeed, the script catalogs “scars,” “brands,” “missing limbs,” “shackles,” “neck collars,” “muzzles,” and “bits,” multiplying concrete visual details that transform oppression into a material landscape. Such an enumeration performs an important cinematic function, as it renders slavery into a series of visible signs. In this way, the screenplay bears witness to a close attention to representation. More strikingly, the emphasis on the body is especially pronounced; the phrase “THICK AND HEAVY TISSUE FROM LACERATIONS LEFT UNTREATED” exceeds the economy associated with screenwriting. Just as in the passage describing Burch’s beating of Solomon, the use of capitalization functions as a directive of attention. The text reveals its concern with controlling not only narrative content but visual intensity, as it underscores the corporeal traces most capable of confronting the durability of violence.

At the same time, the script moves beyond the isolated image of suffering to insist on the systematic and normalized character of oppression. This is most evident in this line: “THESE IMAGES SHOULD BE A CONSTANT AND CONTINUAL CANVAS TO THE PIECE. EVER PRESENT, BUT NOT REALLY COMMENTED ON AS THEY ARE THE NORM.” Here, violence is represented as a permanent feature of everyday life. The accumulation of scars, brands, shackles, and physical

punishments situates oppression within the ordinary fabric of the plantation world. Rather than concentrating violence in a few spectacular moments, the screenplay presents it as a continuous condition that shapes social relations and daily existence. Slavery thus emerges as a system sustained through the constant presence of coercion, punishment, and bodily vulnerability.

The final sentence makes the passage's purpose fully explicit: "They should be a reminder that not only are people being oppressed, but that there is an entire system of oppression in place." What matters here is the shift from individual acts of suffering to the broader structures that sustain them. In this way, John Ridley reorders Northup's narrative around recurring signs of coercion, injury, and constraint that connect separate moments into an organized apparatus. In this respect, the script functions as a space of negotiation, determining how a historical testimony centered on lived experience can be reworked into a representation of slavery as an enduring and pervasive system of domination.

Scripting the Collective

Translating these marginal histories into mainstream cinema – and thus into the realm of collective memory – requires confronting the inherently collective stakes of the slave narrative (Gates, 2002: 36). Because the genre is fundamentally defined by this shared dimension, the primary challenge of screen adaptation lies in its structural translation. The core question for the screenwriter is not merely how to dramatize Northup's ordeal, but how to formalize his experience within a broader historical horizon.

A major indication of this lies in the use of generic expressions such as "Blacks," (Ridley, 2013: 45) which immediately group the characters under a shared condition and shift the spectator's gaze toward a systemic rather than anecdotal reality. In a passage already quoted ("Blacks almost universally display scars – THICK AND HEAVY DEAD TISSUE FROM LACERATIONS LEFT UNTREATED – brands, and are often missing limbs. Blacks are held in all types of shackles, from simple chains to elaborate bindings, to neck collars that are spiked"), the accumulation of bodily marks function as an inventory designed to render oppression visible. Although such generalization may appear depersonalizing, it operates here as a structural reminder, insofar as the screenplay makes clear that what is being narrated is not merely the tragic fate of an exceptional individual, but a systematic condition affecting an entire group. In this way, the screenplay constructs a sort of "web" in which individual suffering is

constantly reinscribed within a shared memory. Testimony, then, is reconfigured so as to reveal, through and alongside Solomon's trajectory, the collective dimension of slavery.

Notably, the screenplay pays sustained attention to the sonic dimension as a vehicle for the collectivization of experience. By prescribing a stripped-down acoustic environment ("THE SOUNDTRACK TO THE SCENE IS NOTHING MORE THAN THE RUSTLE OF LABOR, THE MALE CICADAS BUGS 'TYMBALS' IN THE HEAT and a SPIRITUAL SONG BY THE SLAVES" (*Ibid.*: 91)), Ridley refocuses perception on a shared sensory wavelength. The presence of the "spiritual," carried by "the slaves" as a group, shifts attention away from individual destiny and toward a shared experience. The soundtrack, then, materializes a community compelled to labor and survive together in a space where the rhythm of work becomes the very texture of everyday life.

This sonic choice also helps make the continuity of exploitation perceptible by replacing dramatic eventfulness with a collective and repetitive temporality. Ridley emphasizes the extension of labor beyond the ordinary limits of the day: "Evening, but the day is not yet done. Slaves attend their various evening chores; feeding livestock, doing laundry, cooking food. There is no respite from a slave's charge. (*Ibid.*: 92)" The phrasing generalizes the experience and organizes a temporality that exceeds singular trajectories, since the screenplay underscores the structural absence of rest for an entire group. By describing evening tasks as an extension of daytime labor, it presents slavery as a total regime of temporal mobilization, in which collective life is absorbed by the economy of coercion.

This work on banality and repetition becomes legible in the scene where Mistress Epps throws a decanter at Patsey's face while the enslaved are being forced to dance. The stage direction then specifies: "The slaves, however, react as though it is not the first time they've seen as much from the Mistress." (*Ibid.*: 96) Here, what is at stake is not simply the violent act itself, but the collective lack of surprise, which signals a form of violence integrated into everyday life, rendered predictable by its regularity. The text thus stages a form of enforced habituation, whereby the enslaved community appears to be accustomed to arbitrariness and humiliation.

As a final example illustrating this point, the screenplay repeatedly locates oppression in the material organization of everyday life: "SLAVES are crammed into the shack – LITERALLY ON TOP OF EACH OTHER – as they try to sleep. Some lay, some sit up. Packed in like cattle, there is barely room to move let alone draw a deep, clean breath. There is real risk of suffocating in the mass. Some cough and wheeze." (*Idem*) This stage direction makes a shared condition perceptible through spatial saturation

and physiological constraint. The overcrowding (“LITERALLY ON TOP OF EACH OTHER”) and the risk of suffocation show that systemic violence is executed through the coercive spatial regulation of black bodies. The comparison (“packed in like cattle”) functions here as a critical shorthand, exposing a systemic logic that reduces human beings to mere livestock. In doing so, it highlights what the slave narrative seeks precisely to communicate beyond the “I” – not a succession of exceptional episodes, but a regime of dispossession inscribed in the ordinary conditions of existence.

Through lexical generalization, acoustic design, temporal extension, routinized violence, and the spatial organization of bodies, the screenplay underscores the lived structure of enslavement. What emerges, then, is a form of cinematic writing that does not isolate Solomon or make him a singular victim, but situates his experience within a network of shared distress. The collective dimension of the narrative is carefully crafted into the adaptation process itself. Even if this dimension is sometimes less visible in the film, it remains central to the project at the level of the script, which consistently works to situate Northup’s experience within a broader structure of shared suffering and dispossession. The screenplay consequently reframes Northup’s experience in ways that foreground slavery as a collective historical condition rather than as an isolated individual ordeal.

Scripting Discomfort: Reflexivity at Work



Another defining feature of the script – one that contradicts its usual characterization as merely descriptive – is its reflexive quality, which actively guides the interpretation of the events it presents. For example, in the scene depicting the sale of Solomon and Eliza, Ridley explicitly characterizes the situation (“odd,” “ironic” (*Ibid.*: 37)), signaling that the stakes are not merely narrative but also moral and political: what is shown must be understood as a violent paradox of the system, rather than as a simple episode. Likewise, when Eliza’s children are torn from her, the stage direction emphasizes this incident through repetition: “IT IS AN UGLY SCENE, UGLY SCENE.” (*Ibid.*: 40) This repetition constitutes a textual stance. By rejecting a purely informative tone, Ridley inscribes within the screenplay an obligation of interpretation: the scene *must* be read as a denunciation, not as a moment of spectacular drama.

These stage directions can thus be understood as genuine interpretive markers. They indicate to the reader how the event should be framed, what tone should be adopted, and what hierarchy of values should be established. In doing so, the screenplay shows that the depiction of slavery

should not be reduced to a consumable narrative or to a mere dramaturgical mechanism. The text's reflexivity therefore operates as a safeguard, seeking to maintain violence within a regime of critical legibility, but also ensuring that it remains unsettling – refusing ease, disrupting narrative comfort, and compelling the viewer to endure the scene rather than simply process it as spectacle. This reflexive writing sheds light on the privileged observational role attributed to the screenplay. Far from being a secondary document, the script emerges as a site where the conditions of legibility are negotiated – in other words, where decisions are made about what must be highlighted and what must be rendered unbearable. Ridley organizes the reading of Northup's testimony through a form of writing that directly anticipates the effects of staging.

Another example of this reflexivity can be found in the description of forced labor: "There is a GANG OF SLAVES chopping trees into timber. It is hard, laborious work made no more easy by the sweltering heat. [...] As Sam drives the wagon, the other slaves trudge alongside by foot. We should get the sense the travel is long and tedious." (*Ibid.*: 42) Here again, the stage direction prescribes the effect to be produced. The use of a lexicon emphasizing hardship ("hard," "laborious") and the directive to convey a specific sensation ("long and tedious") transform the description into a form of critical commentary, insofar as the labor is directly presented as a mechanism of dehumanization and of the system's appropriation of bodies. Once more, the stage directions function as a tool of assertion, establishing a clear interpretive horizon.

In the film, the sequence of Solomon's hanging is striking for its temporal extension and for its reliance on a mode of staging that refuses any escape, transforming duration into a sort of constraint for the viewer. A reading of the screenplay reveals that this choice is already programmed at the textual level, which explicitly anticipates the conditions of the scene's reception and constructs its critical function. Indeed, the stage direction prescribes a perceptual regime intended to prevent any rapid consumption of the violence:

HOURS HAVE PASSED. The sun is now at its apex. The sight and smell of the red rose bush is more than vivid as Solomon remains tied and dangling exactly where he was left. The scene is both tranquil and horrific. Life on the plantation continues. The OTHER SLAVES work in the field. CHILDREN make their way playfully in the yard. It should all underscore the fact that a black, hanging even partially from a tree, is nothing unusual in this time and space. (*Ibid.*: 58)

In this sequence, the reflexive dimension lies in the fact that the stage direction comments on the effect to be produced and designates the

viewer as its implicit addressee. The passage formulates a meta-statement (“It should all underscore...”) that transforms the description into an interpretive directive. Ridley does not allow the scene to “speak for itself”; rather, he indicates what the viewer is meant to understand from the juxtaposition between the unbearable and the continuity of everyday life.

By explicitly stating that the image must underscore the normalized character of the situation, the screenplay directs reception toward a systemic diagnosis. The horror resides not merely in the act itself, but in its social banalization, made perceptible through the uninterrupted flow of life around it. In this way, the stage direction functions as an operator of reflexivity, as it reveals the mechanism by which slavery produces an order of the visible in which violence ceases to be an event and becomes a norm, while anticipating how the viewer is supposed to experience this contradiction.

A reading of the screenplay also makes it possible to assess the critical scope of certain stage directions, which produce an implicit commentary on what is shown and how it is meant to be received. For example, in the sequence devoted to Celeste – ultimately cut from the final edit – Ridley explicitly highlights the interpretive function of the scene: “This should be a moving part of the film, which stirs the audience and, for a moment, relieves them of the seemingly chastising environment.” (*Ibid.*: 98) Through this indication, the stage direction assumes a metadiscursive dimension: it reflects on the place of the sequence within the economy of the film, describing it as a temporary release within an otherwise harrowing apparatus, and thereby acknowledges that the representation of slavery is also structured through a management of reception.

Another example can be found in the scene in which Solomon and the others are forced to dance for Epps’s satisfaction. After reporting Mistress Epps’s words (“Don’t trouble yer self with it. Same as the rest, Master brought yah to work. Tha’s all. And any more’ll earn a hun’red lashes” (*Ibid.*: 68)), Ridley adds: “Having delivered her cool advice, Mistress heads back into the house.” (*Idem*) The qualification (“cool advice”) constitutes a sharp critical commentary, as it signals the cynical coldness of a statement that naturalizes violence, while underscoring the ease with which the mistress returns to the domestic space after issuing a threat of punishment. In both cases, the stage direction functions as a critical marker, as it guides interpretation, highlights mechanisms of normalization, and shows how the screenplay is built as a site where a moral and political reading of the situations represented is being constructed.

The screenplay’s reflexivity reveals that the mainstreaming of the narrative is not a byproduct of adaptation but is already embedded in the

writing process itself. By guiding interpretation and anticipating reception, Ridley's script organizes how the story can be made accessible without diluting its critical force. The text thus demonstrates the passage into a mass medium is carefully constructed at the level of writing.

Narrative Continuities

The reflexive dimension of the screenplay does not imply the script's complete autonomy from its text. Rather, it is articulated through a structuring tension: on the one hand, the screenplay presents itself as a structure that already anticipates *mise-en-scène*; on the other, it remains constrained by a testimonial source whose authority it seeks to preserve. In other words, Ridley's reflexivity is not constructed against the 1853 text, but from within it: the script draws from the text the moral and memorial legitimacy of its project while reconfiguring that material in specifically screenwriting terms.

This movement can be seen in the recurrent presence of borrowings, paraphrases, and at times direct lexical reprises that function as markers of textual anchoring. The screenplay displays a fidelity to the language itself, as if the adaptation were required to keep its debt to the testimony visible. The stage direction describing the altercation between John Tibeats and Solomon offers a particularly revealing example: "With concentrated vengeance, Tibeats springs for Solomon, seizing him by the throat with one hand and raising the whip with the other." (*Ibid.*: 54) The phrase "concentrated vengeance," directly borrowed from Solomon Northup's account ("I was about to say something further in justification, but with concentrated vengeance, he sprang upon me, seizing me by the throat with one hand, raising the whip with the other, in the act of striking" [Northup, 1853: 85]) materializes an explicit link between the 1853 text and the screenplay. Such reprises produce a form of memorial continuity and serve an implicit guarantee, reminding the reader that the violence being represented does not proceed from novelistic invention but from attested speech. By absorbing the vocabulary and turns of phrase of the text, Ridley thus reinforces the authority – and, by extension, the legitimacy – of his text. It shows how the script's reflexivity described above does not supplant testimony, but relies upon it as a constraining matrix that determines its trajectory.

Shortly after the hanging sequence, the screenplay describes Ford's intervention and the brief respite granted to Solomon. Although the scene is relatively short on screen, Ridley invests it with particular density

through the way he constructs space as a subjective experience and a site of memorial contrast:

As we come into the scene, Solomon lays on a blanket on the floor. Eventually, his eyes flutter, then open. He is in the foyer of the Ford house. As he gets his bearings, he looks around the interior. THE SPACE IS HANDSOME, AND WELL DECORATED. It is sharp contrast to the bleak surroundings, shacks and dungeons Solomon has largely been accustomed to during his time of slavery. It will be the “first and last time such a sumptuous resting place was granted” during his twelve years of bondage. (Ridley, 2013; 59)

The way the stage direction already encodes a particular reading of the scene is reminiscent of the text’s reflexivity described above: the interior of Ford’s house functions as an operator of dissonance. The typographically salient phrase (“THE SPACE IS HANDSOME, AND WELL DECORATED”) imposes a point of emphasis and prepares an effect of contrast that clashes with the underlying logic of the slave system. The exception becomes legible only against the backdrop of the rule, and that rule remains the true horizon of the experience. It is precisely at this level that the screenplay’s critical engagement with the text becomes visible. Ridley explicitly reworks a formulation from the 1853 narrative (“first and last time such a sumptuous resting place was granted” (*Ibid.*: 101)), whose function is twofold. On the one hand, this reprise signals the screenplay’s grounding in the testimonial authority of Northup: the screenwriting does not “romanticize” a moment of respite, but situates itself within the very language of the testimony. On the other hand, it recasts that fidelity as a dramaturgical instruction, insofar as the phrase fixes the value of the scene as both parenthesis and limit. The brief sequence therefore illustrates a recurrent feature of the screenplay: lexical fidelity to the text is a way of making the text function as a matrix of meaning. By reusing Northup’s formulation, Ridley transforms an autobiographical observation into an interpretive cue, inviting the reader to perceive this moment as revelatory of a system in which humanity appears only in the form of a provisional exception, immediately closed off by the ordinary logic of domination.

Likewise, when Solomon is transferred to the Epps plantation and the film introduces the other enslaved individuals, Ridley’s writing manifests a distinct proximity to the 1853 text. The characterization of these figures borrows formulations from Northup, to the point where entire segments of the autobiographical narrative are directly reintegrated into the screenplay’s stage directions. Thus, where Northup writes: “she is the offspring of a ‘Guinea nigger,’ brought over to Cuba in a slave ship,” (Northup: 141) Ridley retains this phrase verbatim in the script. This mode of borrowing belongs to a strategy of tying the script to the primary testimony,

anchoring the scene in an already historicized language and endowing the adaptation with heightened documentary authority. This logic extends to subsequent sequences, in which the script maintains the same textual register, mobilizing the vocabulary and designations of the original account to ground the action in an explicitly referenced historical material.

For instance, further along in the screenplay, the scene of Patsey's punishment by Epps provides further evidence of the project's tight alignment with the 1853 narrative. Here, Ridley reactivates the prose of the testimony and retains certain lexical markers, among which is the expression "ten fold," which functions as a sign of textual filiation. In *Twelve Years a Slave*, Northup writes: "He then seized it himself, and applied it with ten-fold greater force than I had. The painful cries and shrieks of the tortured Patsey, mingling with the loud and angry curses of Epps, loaded the air. She was terribly lacerated – I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed. The lash was wet with blood, which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground." (Northup: 124) The screenplay explicitly reformulates this passage: "Epps takes up the whip and whips Patsey with 'ten fold' greater force than he had. The painfully loud and angry curses of Epps load the air. Patsey by now is terribly lacerated, literally flayed. The lash wet with blood which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground." (*Ibid.*: 109) This excerpt once again reveals an adaptive relationship grounded in phrasal continuity, as Ridley preserves Northup's vocabulary and retains the descriptive segments that emphasize the violence of the testimony. Where the 1853 text organizes the scene through narration and descriptive accumulation, the script reconfigures this material for cinematic legibility, sketching out a sequence of visualizable actions. The screenplay thus translates testimonial density into instructions while preserving the authority of the original account through linguistic anchor points. It also underscores the ethical stakes of the adaptive enterprise: by reinvesting Northup's language at a moment of extreme violence, Ridley signals that the scene is not conceived as an autonomous dramaturgical effect, but rather as the transposition of a firsthand account whose power resides precisely in its precision and its refusal of euphemism. The relationship to the text thereby anchors the film in a written memory.

Arguably, Ridley's screenplay stands at the intersection of two imperatives that reinforce rather than cancel each other out. On the one hand, it acknowledges what the scene is meant to do to the viewer. On the other, it preserves a clear testimonial grounding by reactivating the language and text of the 1853 narrative as a set of limits against the arbitrariness of invention. Taken together with the reflexive dimension analyzed earlier, this dual regime reveals the screenplay as a space in which the conditions of the film's mainstreaming are negotiated: it must render the narrative legible and affectively compelling for a broad audience, while remaining

accountable to the authority of the text and to the written memory it transmits. In this sense, the screenplay organizes the conditions for a critical reading of events, even as it remains indebted to documentary and memorial archive.

Conclusion

John Ridley's screenplay functions as a complex work of mediation and negotiation, in which the passage from a marginalized nineteenth-century testimony to a contemporary mainstream film is carefully organized at the level of writing itself. Far from simply arranging scenes or dialogues, the script actively constructs a form of mainstream legibility by shaping how the narrative is to be perceived and interpreted. Through its dense stage directions, reflexive commentary and strategic use of Northup's language, it organizes the conditions under which the testimony can circulate within a broader cultural field. This process of mainstreaming does not entail a dilution of the source material, but rather a balance between accessibility and critical integrity. In this way, Ridley ensures that Northup's account remains legible as the expression of a systemic and collective history. Ultimately, the screenplay emerges as a decisive intermediary space where competing demands are brought into tension, a space in which the margins are translated into a form compatible with mainstream cinematic legibility.

Margaux Collin is a PhD candidate specializing in American films about slavery released during the Obama presidency. Her research engages with aesthetic and formal analysis, cultural studies, and the intersections between film and politics.

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