Chains of Reaction: Racism and Resistance in the Movie DjangoUnchained

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the complexities of racism and resistance in Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained, exploring how the film portrays the intricate relationships between individual, institutional, and systemic forms of racism. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, this researchanalyzes key scenes in the film, examining how characters' reactions to racism contribute to the broader theme of resistance. The study reveals that racism in the film manifests predominantly in institutional, interpersonal, and structural forms, with resistance taking various forms, including psychological defiance, rational resistance, and sociological resistance. The analysis highlights the interconnected nature of racism and resistance, demonstrating how individual acts of defiance can disrupt and challenge systemic oppression. This research contributes to ongoing conversations aboutthe portrayal of race in media and the role of film in addressing systemic racism, offering insights into how cinematic representations of racism and resistance can shape public discourse on these issues.

Keywords: Racism; Resistance; Reaction; Scene

INTRODUCTION

Linguistics, the scientific study of language structure and function, provides a valuable framework for examining how language reflects and shapes complex social issues. By analyzing syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, linguistics reveals how language is used to communicate ideas, construct identities, and convey power dynamics within various social contexts (KORNIEVSKAYA, 2015). Modern linguistics has expanded its focus to include specialized lexis in different fields, highlighting the role of terminology in scientific communication (KORNIEVSKAYA, 2015). Additionally, the discipline has adopted an anthropological orientation, where concepts like "linguistic personality" explore how language shapes individual identity and worldview. As the field has evolved, theories like Systemic Functional Linguistics have emerged, viewing language as a tool for creating meaning within specific contexts. This expansion has positioned

linguistics as a crucial element for understanding human communication, with applications across fields, including translation and language teaching.

Sociolinguistics extends this perspective by examining the intricate relationship between language and society, investigating how social dynamics influence language use and vice versa (Gumperz, 2006). The field encompasses both micro and macro approaches, with micro-sociolinguistics focusing on language in societal contexts, while macro-sociolinguistics explores society's impact on language (Sangia, 2018). New approaches, such as Interactional Sociolinguistics, utilize discourse analysis to gain insights into social interactions and communicative issues (Gumperz, 2006). In recent years, perspectives like "Sociolinguistics of the South" have challenged the universality of traditional northern views, promoting a sensitivity to diverse linguistic contexts (Heugh et al., 2021). Methodologies in the field also include corpus linguistics, which analyzes language variation across social settings (Friginal & Bristow, 2017).

These linguistic perspectives offer a useful framework for analyzing Django Unchained, a film that uses language to foreground themes of racial tension, resistance, and identity. The film's dialogue, dialects, and interactions not only depict historical realities of racial hierarchy but also explore the social and psychological impact of systemic oppression. By examining the linguistic dynamics within Django Unchained, this journal will analyze how language contributes to its complex portrayal of racism and resistance. Through key scenes where these themes are most pronounced, this research will investigate characters' linguistic expressions—be they silent, confrontational, or rebellious—and consider how these moments reinforce or subvert the film's power structures, offering a lens to explore identity, resilience, and resistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racism is broadly understood as an ideology of racial group supremacy that justifies or rationalizes dominance and exploitation, influencing both individual attitudes and institutional structures (Gupta, 2021). This complex and pervasive phenomenon manifests in various forms across cultures, countries, and historical periods (Dulitzky, 2005; Rüdiger, 2019). Scholars debate its origins, with some viewing it as a relatively modern development rooted in pseudo-scientific beliefs about biological inequality, while others argue that racial prejudice existed long before these formal frameworks. Social scientists increasingly conflate three interrelated concepts—racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racism—a blending that can shape both academic perspectives and public understanding (Carson Byrd, 2011). Modern studies also note distinctions between overt historical forms of racism, like those observed during the Jim Crow era in the United States, and contemporary manifestations, which often appear more subtle or "symbolic," such as resistance to social policies designed to redress racial injustice. Although there is no universally accepted definition of racism, it is generally recognized as a systemic issue that transcends individual biases and encompasses structural,

institutional, and cultural elements perpetuating racial inequalities (Goldstein & Goldstein, 2024; Gupta, 2021).

Internationally, efforts such as United Nations resolutions and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination underscore the global significance of addressing racism and racial discrimination, even as it continues to present challenges for researchers, policymakers, and society (Rüdiger, 2019). The intertwined nature of racism and resistance spans centuries, particularly for African Americans, who have long fought against systemic discrimination and oppression in legal, educational, social, and political spheres (Soelistyarini et al., 2020). These efforts against institutionalized racism underscore the resilience of marginalized communities in combating the structures that perpetuate racial inequality. Historical and contemporary resistance movements provide a framework for understanding key concepts like social construction, intersectionality, institutional structures, privilege, and the scaffolding of oppressive systems (Tourse et al., 2018).

One significant area of study within the literature is "symbolic racism," a form of racism where individuals may condemn racial injustice in principle while resisting policies aimed at addressing it. This paradox reflects the complex and often subtle forms that racism can take, even as overt expressions of prejudice decline. Such studies point to the persistence of racial bias within broader societal attitudes and behaviors, complicating efforts to foster equity and inclusion. Intersectionality also plays a crucial role in the conversation about racism and resistance, as it explores how various forms of discrimination and privilege overlap, shaping diverse experiences within marginalized communities (Wijeyesinghe, 2021). However, while intersectional perspectives provide a deeper understanding of social dynamics, they sometimes face resistance in educational and activist contexts, revealing a challenge in coalition-building efforts.

Resistance against racism manifests in many forms, from organized student activism and grassroots movements to solidarity efforts across racial and ethnic groups (Demanarig et al., 2024; Lund & Nabavi, 2008). For example, the experiences of Black male high school students highlight how racial oppression can affect academic lives, fostering a need for initiatives that address both internalized and external racial challenges (Bailey et al., 2022). Recent global events have brought new urgency to conversations around systemic racism, prompting initiatives like Unity Rounds in healthcare settings to raise awareness and cultivate sustainable change (Faiteau et al., 2023). This chapter will explore these dynamics and the evolving responses to racism, providing a foundation for understanding the broader social impact of resistance efforts and the ongoing journey towards racial justice.

Racism presents itself in multifaceted ways, each with unique characteristics and impacts that extend across individuals, institutions, and society at large. Internalized racism arises when individuals internalize negative stereotypes about their own

racial group, which can lead to diminished self-worth, self-doubt, and long-term effects on mental health and well-being (G. Feroe, 2021; Schouler-Ocak & Moran, 2023). This form of racism can be particularly insidious, as it may go unnoticed by others but has a profound impact on an individual's mental health across their life span, fostering feelings of inadequacy and shame tied to racial identity (Schouler-Ocak & Moran, 2023).

Interpersonal racism involves direct acts of discrimination, prejudice, or microaggressions between individuals. In healthcare, for example, interpersonal racism can strain patient-provider relationships and reduce the quality of care, especially if patients feel mistrusted or undervalued (G. Feroe, 2021; Hedges et al., 2021). Chronic exposure to interpersonal racism also contributes to elevated stress levels and negative health outcomes, making it a critical factor in understanding the broader health impacts of racism on individuals (Hedges et al., 2021; Schouler-Ocak & Moran, 2023). Institutional racism refers to the discriminatory policies, practices, and norms embedded within organizations and institutions that systematically disadvantage specific racial groups. Manifesting through disparate access to services like education and healthcare, institutional racism reinforces social inequities that impact marginalized groups (G. Feroe, 2021; Hedges et al., 2021). Often subtle and deeply embedded in societal structures, institutional racism can be challenging to detect and address, especially given its normalization within organizational culture and policy (Rattansi, 2020; Tourse et al., 2018).

Structural racism is the broadest and most pervasive form of racism, reflecting the interwoven systems and institutions that perpetuate racial inequalities across all areas of society. It encompasses the cumulative effects of historical injustices—such as colonialism, slavery, and segregation—that continue to shape modern disparities in wealth, health, education, and criminal justice (Lukachko et al., 2014; Rattansi, 2020). Structural racism illustrates how individual, institutional, and cultural factors combine to maintain systemic inequalities (Hedges et al., 2021; Tourse et al., 2018). Recent research suggests that recognizing structural racism is essential for fostering a willingness to address these inequalities, potentially motivating individuals and groups to actively work toward dismantling these pervasive systems of oppression (Fourie & Moore-Berg, 2022).

Resistance to change is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that can be categorized into three main types: rational, psychological, and sociological resistance. Each type is shaped by different factors and displays unique manifestations, making it essential to explore these variations for effective management and resolution of resistance. Rational resistance is grounded in logical reasoning and practical considerations, typically arising from concerns about the feasibility, costs, or potential adverse outcomes of a proposed change. For instance, individuals might resist changes due to perceived threats to their autonomy or a lack of clear understanding of the benefits (Lv et al., 2022). Rational resistance is often addressed through strategies such as transparent communication, education, and

demonstrating the tangible value of the change, as these efforts help alleviate fears rooted in practical concerns.

Psychological resistance is rooted in emotional and cognitive factors, stemming from personal defense mechanisms, emotional stability, and individual psychological characteristics (Gromova, 2020). Psychological responses to change can involve defense mechanisms like regression, displacement, compensation, and rationalization, all of which may cause individuals to resist change subconsciously. Additionally, personal traits such as extraversion and emotional stability can impact one's openness to change (Gromova, 2020). In some contexts, such as fan behavior, psychological resistance may manifest as cognitive dissonance, strong emotional attachments, and behavioral dependency (He & Sun, 2022). This type of resistance requires strategies that address both cognitive and emotional concerns, potentially through counseling, feedback, and gradual implementation approaches that reduce psychological stress.

Sociological resistance is influenced by social and cultural dynamics, encompassing group norms, peer influence, and institutional structures. This form of resistance highlights how social circumstances and cultural influences shape collective responses to change (Horwitz, 2009). For example, adolescents' resistance to algorithmic recommendations can be heavily shaped by peer influences and social pressures (Lv et al., 2022). Additionally, sociological resistance often reflects broader social conditions, such as stressful life events, negative experiences, and varying levels of social support, which all contribute to shaping individuals' attitudes toward change (Horwitz, 2009). Addressing sociological resistance often requires engaging with group dynamics, fostering community support, and creating an environment where collective concerns can be openly discussed and managed.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to explore the representation of racism, character reactions, and resistance in *Django Unchained*. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth, idiographic examination of specific scenes and character interactions within a single narrative work (Crowther & Lauesen, 2017). The sample consists of selected scenes from *Django Unchained* that are purposefully chosen for their relevance to the central themes of the study. These include moments of explicit or implicit racism, scenes illustrating character responses, and instances of resistance. The film is treated as a cultural text, and the sampling is focused on extracting the most thematically rich and illustrative moments to support a nuanced analysis.

Instrument and Procedures

The primary instrument in this research is the researcher, who serves as an interpreter and analyst of the film's content. The analysis follows a multi-step procedure. First, *Django Unchained* is viewed multiple times to develop familiarity with the narrative and identify key moments that align with the research focus. This repeated viewing enhances the depth and accuracy of interpretation. Second, theoretical frameworks and scholarly literature related to racism, resistance, and character analysis are collected from academic books, peer-reviewed journals, and credible online sources. These references are used to inform the analysis and provide a theoretical lens through which the film can be understood. Third, selected scenes are closely examined for their dialogue, character behavior, setting, and narrative context. These elements are then categorized thematically according to how they reflect different forms of racism and resistance. This systematic approach ensures that both visual and verbal elements are considered in the interpretive process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is conducted through qualitative content analysis and close reading techniques. The scenes selected for analysis are dissected to uncover how racism and resistance are portrayed through language, character actions, and cinematic techniques. Dialogues are analyzed not only for their literal meaning but also for their symbolic and thematic implications. Non-verbal elements, such as body language, facial expressions, and camera work, are also considered to understand how meaning is conveyed visually. The researcher connects these observations with relevant theories from the supporting literature to interpret the social and cultural implications of the characters' responses and resistance strategies. This analytical process allows for a comprehensive and theoretically grounded understanding of how *Django Unchained* represents the complexities of racism and resistance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Interpersonal Racism and Psychological Resistance

In a pivotal scene following Django's liberation by Dr. Schultz, the interaction between Django and Dicky Speck provides a striking illustration of interpersonal racism and psychological resistance. After Schultz suggests Django take a coat from the deceased Ace Speck, the injured Dicky Speck unleashes a tirade of racial slurs, attempting to forbid Django from claiming the coat despite his own helpless state. This moment encapsulates the immediate, person-to-person hostility of interpersonal racism and highlights Django's defiant response as an act of psychological resistance.

Dicky Speck's use of racial slurs and his attempt to assert control over Django reflect the deeply ingrained entitlement and prejudice that defined many interactions between white and Black individuals during this historical period. Interpersonal racism in this context manifests as overt and direct hostility, rooted in a belief system that seeks to reinforce racial hierarchies even in moments of vulnerability. Dicky's insults and resistance epitomize the societal norms of the time, where Black individuals were expected to remain subservient and passive, regardless of the circumstances. This behavior underscores the personal dimension of racism, as Dicky clings to his perceived superiority even when his power is stripped away.

Django's response, stepping on Dicky's injured leg before calmly retrieving the coat, transcends mere physical retaliation. It serves as an act of psychological resistance—a deliberate rejection of the racist dynamic imposed by Dicky. By confronting Dicky's hostility with composed yet assertive action, Django symbolically breaks free from the expectation of submission. His measured response demonstrates emotional resilience and an emerging sense of agency, marking a critical moment in his transformation from a subjugated individual to one who actively challenges the racist structures around him.

The interplay between interpersonal racism and psychological resistance in this scene is profound. Dicky's racist outburst represents an attempt to reinforce a social hierarchy where Django is demeaned and powerless. However, Django's act of stepping on Dicky's leg disrupts this dynamic, rejecting the imposed inferiority and signaling his refusal to internalize such treatment. This defiance not only neutralizes the immediate instance of interpersonal racism but also sets the stage for Django's broader journey of empowerment and rebellion against systemic oppression. The scene effectively portrays how resistance, even in its subtle forms, can serve as a powerful mechanism to confront and dismantle interpersonal expressions of racism.

Structural Racism and Sociological Resistance

In a critical scene following Django's liberation, Dr. Schultz shifts his focus to the enslaved individuals accompanying Ace and Dicky Speck. After killing Ace, Schultz offers the remaining slaves a pivotal choice: either carry the injured Dicky Speck to the nearest town, perpetuating their subjugation within the institution of slavery, or unshackle themselves, take the rifle, kill Dicky, and claim their freedom. The scene culminates in the slaves choosing the latter, shooting Dicky Speck and symbolizing their first act of defiance against the oppressive system that has controlled their lives.
The scenario poignantly illustrates the omnipresence of structural racism. The institution of slavery, an embodiment of structural oppression, has stripped the enslaved individuals of autonomy and humanity, reducing their existence to servitude and survival. Even in a moment of potential liberation, the weight of structural racism imposes a morally fraught choice: they can either preserve the system that has dehumanized them by sparing Dicky or break free by taking a

violent stand. This stark binary underscores the entrenched nature of structural racism, which not only dictates their lives but also forces decisions that test their moral and emotional limits.

The act of killing Dicky Speck, however, transcends mere survival; it signifies a powerful moment of sociological resistance. By collectively choosing to reject their roles as slaves, the group dismantles the societal and institutional norms that have kept them subservient. This act is more than a practical escape—it is a deliberate rejection of the systemic forces that have defined their existence. In uniting to end Dicky's life, they disrupt the established social order, marking the beginning of their journey toward autonomy and reclaiming their humanity. Their shared act of rebellion demonstrates the profound role of collective agency in challenging and overturning oppressive systems. The interplay between structural racism and sociological resistance in this scene is both poignant and transformative. The oppressive framework of slavery creates the circumstances that necessitate such a desperate choice, while the slaves' decision to defy and destroy their oppressor directly challenges the systemic inequalities that have dictated their lives. The moment highlights the power of unity and resistance in the face of structural oppression, capturing the shift from victimization to agency. This turning point encapsulates the tension between systemic constraints and the human will to overcome them, offering a profound commentary on the interconnected nature of oppression and liberation.

Institutional Racism and Rational Resistance

As Django and Dr. Schultz enter the town of Daughtrey, the townspeople's shocked and confused reactions highlight the entrenched racial hierarchies of the era. The sight of Django, a Black man, riding a horse—a symbol of power, autonomy, and status—disrupts their expectations, revealing the pervasive institutional racism embedded in societal norms. This scene subtly but powerfully examines the intersection of systemic oppression and personal resistance, showcasing how even small acts can challenge deeply rooted prejudices. The townspeople's discomfort exemplifies institutional racism, a system of social norms and practices designed to uphold racial inequality. In this historical context, Black individuals were relegated to subservient roles and denied privileges like riding a horse unless they were freemen, and even then, such privileges were rare and often contested. The townsfolk's reaction reflects the societal enforcement of these norms, where any deviation from the established racial order is met with unease or hostility. Django's presence on horseback is not just a visual anomaly but a direct challenge to the institutionally enforced hierarchy that sought to visibly and symbolically keep Black individuals subordinate.

Django's act of riding a horse can be understood as rational resistance—a calculated and deliberate challenge to institutional norms. By riding alongside Schultz, Django asserts his equality and defies the expectations imposed on him by the social order. His resistance is quiet yet impactful, rooted in the assertion of his dignity and

autonomy without the need for overt confrontation. Schultz's casual attitude toward the townsfolk's reactions further amplifies Django's defiance, as it underscores their shared rejection of the racist standards dictating public behavior. This moment of solidarity demonstrates how resistance can take the form of quiet subversion rather than loud rebellion, allowing for a powerful, understated rejection of systemic oppression. The interplay between institutional racism and rational resistance in this scene underscores a central theme of the film: how systemic oppression is both reflected in and challenged by everyday actions. The social norms dictating who can or cannot ride a horse are deeply embedded in the institution of slavery, and Django's calm defiance disrupts these expectations. This simple act forces the townspeople to confront the visual and symbolic erosion of their racial biases, even if only subconsciously. By turning an ordinary act into a moment of resistance, Django highlights the power of small, deliberate challenges in undermining systemic oppression and reclaiming dignity within an unjust society.

Interpersonal Racism and Rational Resistance

In the saloon scene, Dr. Schultz and Django encounter an overt display of interpersonal racism when the saloon keeper reacts with hostility upon realizing Django, a Black man, is present in an establishment typically reserved for white patrons. This interaction exemplifies the tension between entrenched racial biases and the deliberate, calculated defiance of those norms, showcasing how resistance can unfold even in seemingly mundane settings.The saloon keeper's immediate aggression toward Django is a manifestation of interpersonal racism, which operates at the individual level through direct acts of prejudice and discrimination. His hostility is not only a reflection of his personal biases but also an expression of the socially sanctioned racial hierarchies of the time. The keeper's actions underscore the normalized dehumanization of Black individuals, as he feels empowered to enforce segregationist practices with impunity. This moment serves as a microcosm of broader societal dynamics, where individual prejudices were reinforced by institutional systems that upheld racial inequality.

In contrast, rational resistance is evident in Dr. Schultz's measured response to the saloon keeper's outburst. Rather than reacting emotionally or resorting to violence, Schultz uses logic and the legal framework to assert Django's right to remain in the saloon. His calm demeanor and deliberate suggestion to summon the sheriff (as opposed to the marshal) subtly shift the power dynamic, forcing the saloon keeper to consider the legal and social implications of his actions. Schultz's rational approach not only avoids escalation but also highlights the saloon keeper's baseless prejudice, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the discriminatory act. Through this strategy, Schultz affirms Django's dignity and begins to normalize his equal standing in social interactions. The interplay between interpersonal racism and rational resistance in this scene illustrates the broader societal structure that perpetuates and enforces racial inequality. While the saloon keeper's behavior reflects the entrenched interpersonal prejudices of the era, Schultz's resistance represents a deliberate effort to dismantle these biases, one interaction at a time.

This moment also reflects Django's evolving confidence, as Schultz's mentorship provides him with a model of quiet defiance and dignity in the face of racism.

Ultimately, the saloon interaction demonstrates how individual acts of resistance can disrupt oppressive social norms. Schultz's calm yet firm assertion of Django's rights highlights the power of rational resistance in challenging systemic oppression. It also underscores the importance of allies in confronting racial bias, as Schultz's actions pave the way for Django's journey toward empowerment and liberation. This nuanced portrayal of resistance emphasizes the complexities of navigating a deeply unequal society, where even small acts of defiance carry significant symbolic weight.

Institutional Racism and Sociological Resistance

The standoff at the plantation stables between Django and the Brittle Brothers vividly portrays the intersection of institutional racism and sociological resistance. This pivotal scene highlights the dehumanizing mechanisms of systemic oppression while illustrating the transformative power of defiance in challenging entrenched social norms. Institutional racism is embedded in the physical and symbolic elements of the plantation. The use of the stump as a site for punishment and the Brittle Brothers' unquestioned authority to enforce brutal discipline reflect the plantation's role as an institution designed to sustain racial hierarchy through violence and fear. The act of whipping Little Jody is not simply an expression of individual cruelty but a systemic tool used to reinforce the subjugation of enslaved individuals. The normalization of such punishments illustrates how institutional racism operates to maintain control and legitimize inhumane treatment, erasing the humanity of those subjected to it.

In this oppressive environment, sociological resistance emerges powerfully through Django's actions. By intervening in the Brittle Brothers' punishment of Little Jody, Django directly challenges the institutional norms that demand absolute obedience from enslaved individuals. His act of killing Big John and Little Raj is not only personal vengeance but also a rejection of the plantation's authority and the societal order it represents. Importantly, Django's defiance takes place in full view of other enslaved individuals, transforming the scene into a collective moment of resistance. His boldness disrupts the passive acceptance of oppression and plants the idea of empowerment within a system designed to suppress it.

The interconnection between institutional racism and sociological resistance is evident in the broader implications of Django's defiance. The authority of the Brittle Brothers and the punishment they administer are products of a systemic structure that enforces submission. Django's rebellion against these norms does more than eliminate his immediate oppressors—it calls into question the legitimacy of the institutional power that upholds them. For the enslaved witnesses, Django's actions provide a tangible example of resistance, challenging the deeply ingrained belief in the invincibility of their oppressors and sparking a potential shift in collective

consciousness. This moment underscores the dual nature of Django's journey: as a personal quest for revenge and as a broader commentary on resistance against systemic oppression. By dismantling the immediate tools of institutional racism and inspiring sociological resistance among the enslaved, Django's defiance becomes a symbol of empowerment and the possibility of liberation, even in the face of deeply entrenched systems of control.

CONCLUSION

In Django Unchained, racism manifests predominantly in institutional, interpersonal, and structural forms, with little to no depiction of internalized racism. Institutional racism is deeply entrenched in the systemic framework of slavery, dictating societal norms and legitimizing violence and control, as seen in plantation punishments and the unquestioned authority of figures like Sheriff Bill Sharp. Interpersonal racism surfaces in direct interactions, such as Dicky Speck's slurs or the saloon keeper's hostility, reflecting how societal prejudices are internalized and enacted on a personal level. Structural racism, while less explicit, underpins the entire social order, influencing behaviors and expectations, such as the townsfolk's discomfort with Django's autonomy. These intertwined systems collectively create an environment of oppression that the characters navigate and confront.

Resistance in the film takes various forms, from Django's psychological defiance and rational resistance to acts of sociological resistance by enslaved individuals reclaiming their agency. These moments of defiance challenge not only the immediate oppressors but also the larger systems of racism that sustain their power. The lack of internalized racism in the narrative highlights the characters' refusal to accept the inferiority imposed upon them, focusing instead on external systems of oppression. Through calculated and symbolic acts, resistance in the film is portrayed as a powerful force capable of disrupting entrenched structures and inspiring change, emphasizing the enduring struggle for justice and liberation.

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