7) 12 Years A slave (2013):

After "Django Unchained" and [Lee Daniels (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/lee-daniels)' "The Butler," both informed by the shameful legacy of slavery and institutionalized injustice in America, you might think you have satisfied your quota of viewing incidents of racial hatred, sexual abuse and ugly brutality in the past year.

You would be wrong. While both of those box-office and critical successes offered compensation for their heavy subject matter with outbreaks of humor and a hip attitude, "12 Years a Slave" is a somber, meditative, almost poetic film that delivers the horrors of bondage stripped down and head-on.

For once, history is presented as personal and immediate, not a saga relying on scholarly works and court records à la "[Amistad (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/amistad-1997)." The source is a rare first-hand account based on the best-selling 19th-century memoir written by Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York who suddenly had his liberty torn away after being kidnapped and sold for slave labor in Louisiana.

While "Django" and "The Butler" were slaps in the face of inequality, this is a punch to the gut. Don't let those pastoral passages of Southern skies framed by gnarled tree limbs adorned in lacy Spanish moss fool you: they seem to exist merely as a placeholder, so that viewers can catch their breath from what they've just witnessed. Even [Mel Gibson (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/mel-gibson), whose unbearable 5-minute whipping scene in "[The Passion of the Christ (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-passion-of-the-christ-2004)" set the standard for such graphic cinematic punishment, would be aghast if not envious of how British director [Steve McQueen (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/steve-mcqueen) ensures that the audience palpably feels the flesh-ripping agony of every lashing and beating on screen.

Underscoring the cruelty—so commonplace that, in one disturbing scene, workers go about their daily routine as our hero struggles for hours dangling on his tippy-toes while trying not to succumb to the noose around his neck—is the aptly unsettling and sometimes discordant soundtrack by [Hans Zimmer (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/hans-zimmer), reminiscent of his own strong work on "[Inception (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/inception-2010)" but to much different effect.

As in "Precious," where the miraculous [Gabourey Sidibe (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/gabourey-sidibe) kept us watching what we didn't want to see, so, too, the solemnly powerful Chiwetel Eijofor provides us with a reason for not averting our eyes. The British stage veteran born to Nigerian parents first caught the public's attention in 2002's "[Dirty Pretty Things (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dirty-pretty-things-2003)" and has been quietly simmering in primarily supporting roles until now. One can't imagine "12 Years a Slave" without him in the lead. His expressions as his character is forced to sublimate his very nature in order to survive say more than whole script's worth of dialogue.

With three features under his belt, McQueen has established his auteurship as a unflinching tackler of difficult subjects with a humanistic edge: discomfort cinema, if you will. His debut, "[Hunger (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hunger-2009)," plunged into the depths of dedication and despair among IRA prisoners engaged in the 1981 Irish hunger strike.