There's a sensible reason why nobody ever wanted to be an Indian whenever we played Cowboys and Indians as kids. That's because the white man was invariably the hero of the Westerns on which we'd been weaned, while the red man had always been presented as a wild savage dismissed by the dehumanizing affirmation that, "The only good Injun is a dead Injun."

Sure, a few films, such as "Apaches" (1973), "The Sons of Great Bear" (1966) and "Chingachgook: The Great Snake" (1967), flipped the script by portraying Native Americans as the good guys and the European settlers as the bad guys. But those productions were few and far between.

Hollywood has also promoted a set of stereotypes when it comes to the depictions of black-white race relations during slavery, with classics like "The Birth of the Nation" (1915) and "Gone with the Wind" (1939) setting the tone. Consequently, most movies have by-and-large suggested that it was a benign institution under which docile African-Americans were well-treated by kindly masters, at least as long as they remained submissive and knew their place.

Leave it to Quentin Tarantino to put a fresh spin on the genre, much as he did in the World War II flick "Inglourious Basterds" (2009). With "Django Unchained", the iconoclast writer/director again rattles the cinematic cage by virtue of an irreverent adventure that audaciously turns the conventional thinking on its head.

Set in the South in 1858, the picture is visually reminiscent of the Spaghetti Westerns popularized in the Sixties by Italian director Sergio Leone, being replete with both big sky panoramas and cartoonish, one-note villains who are the embodiment of evil. But instead of

cattle rustlers, it's inveterate racists being slowly tortured or blown away to the delight of the audience.

The movie stars Jamie Foxx in the title role as a slave lucky enough to be liberated by a German dentist-turned-bounty hunter (Christoph Waltz). Abolitionist Dr. Schultz altruistically takes Django on as an apprentice, and proceeds to teach him how to ride a horse and handle a gun.

The grisly business of tracking down outlaws "Wanted Dead-or-Alive" conveniently affords the revenge-minded freedman many an opportunity to even the score with folks responsible for his misery, from the scars on his back, to the "R" for "Runaway" branded on his cheek, to being separated from his wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington). As you might guess, the action gets pretty gruesome, as is par for the course for any Tarantino vehicle.

Slavery reimagined as a messy splatterfest where massa gets exactly what he deserves, and then some!

Excellent (4 stars)
Rated R for profanity, nudity, ethnic slurs and graphic violence
Running time: 165 minutes
Distributor: The Weinstein Company

To see a trailer for Django Unchained, visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pKZbJHa17c