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War Through the Lens of Tarantino: *Inglourious Basterds*' Overthrowing of the Third Reich and the Classical Hollywood War Film

A loquacious Nazi Colonel, a candid American Lieutenant, and vengeful Jews are the forefront for Quentin Tarantino's pseudo-war film; however, its World War II backdrop is all superficial. Rather than being a film about war, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) is a film that happens to take place during a war. It conveys a prevailing objective to defy the classical Hollywood war film – a classification which establishes the preconceptions of moral comfort and sentimentality for its audience. By coupling the film techniques of diverse genres with the elements of Brechtian theater, Tarantino manipulates traditional practices in film to interfere with the audience's expectations and to implement a stimulating way of viewing cinema. It is in this manner that *Inglourious Basterds* manifests itself as a statement against the predeterminations of classical Hollywood war films and concurrently reinvents the art of filmmaking. The piece is self-aware, acknowledging its own level of absurdity, so that the viewer can examine rather than just feel.

Before understanding Quentin Tarantino films, one must first understand Tarantino himself. As a child born in 1963, he witnessed the television revolution, allowing him to have less-known movies, or B-list movies, readily available on his

television set. He and his mother made frequent excursions to the movie theater and she exposed him to a culture-rich environment by encouraging him to read anything and everything. Furthermore, there was the emergence of videocassette recordings in the 1970s, making film more accessible. As a teenager, Tarantino worked as an usher at a “grindhouse,” a theater dedicated to a particular subset of moviegoers, and in the 1980s, worked at a VCR rental store named Video Archives, before his screenplays for *True Romance* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) gained him recognition. He has always lived in a world with cinema; therefore, one may infer that he is fluent in the language of film. Film is the scope through which Tarantino sees the world, projecting reality to film and film to reality, because “when you love movies, that’s what you gravitate towards” (qtd. in Barlow 31).

Quentin Tarantino’s passion for filmmaking is visible through his “borrowing and recycling” of styles from preceding directors (Magilow 16); a certain homage to those who have influenced and inspired him, but also a path to reflection, by bringing spectators to contemplate where they have been and where they are now. This gravitation to analysis embodies the notions of Brechtian theater, a pedagogical method meant to denaturalize, or remove, what viewers have grown accustomed to so that they can think critically. However, viewers tend to label a Tarantino film as just a “movie about movies” due to their misunderstanding of the purpose for his cinematic style references (Barlow 4). The audience overlooks what is being displayed before them because of their dire need to compartmentalize and categorize the movie into something familiar. Therefore, the farce unraveling on screen is Tarantino’s itch for confrontation to their idealization of war cinema. He uses genre as a starting ground for a concept then driven in the opposite

direction in order to make the audience think for themselves. “I love playing with my viewer’s expectations and, in the end, crossing him up,” admits the director (qtd. in Barlow 18). Certain plot points are covert and others are misunderstood, for Tarantino refuses to hand his viewers the film’s purpose – they must work for it.

By not being provided answers, viewers are left feeling alienated; however, this sense of exclusion allots them the freedom to assign meaning, such as a character’s backstory. One of the main protagonists, Shosanna Dreyfus (Mélodie Laurent), is the sole survivor of a family massacre at the hands of the antagonist, Colonel Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz). Four years after the murder of her family, Shosanna is revisited as a Jewish refugee posing as a Parisian cinema owner. The past four years are unknown to the audience; it is unclear how Shosanna came to own Le Gamaar cinema, leaving a blank page in the storyline for the audience to fill in. Likewise, one may first be oblivious to the mysterious rope burn around Lieutenant Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt)’s neck; however, once it is noticed, one begins to wonder. Tarantino explains: “I don’t want the audience to know...I want you to decide” (Mitchell). By not making impositions, the movie produces an alienation effect – an aspect of Brechtian theater – leaving its viewers deserted in a frightening sea of possibilities. The uncertainty therefore compels them to develop their own interpretation; however, the character backgrounds are only a facet of the film’s mystique.

Perhaps the film’s greatest ambiguity is its title. Is the misspelling of *Inglourious Basterds* a declaration of its work as a satire, or is it a matter of phonetics? Quentin Tarantino states: “It’s just an artistic stroke...to explain it means I might as well not have done it” (Charlie Rose 2009). The film derives its title from *The Inglorious Bastards*

(1978), a World War II film by Italian director Enzo G. Castellari, whose birth name (Enzo Girolami) Raine also uses when posing as an Italian actor. By making a connection between the two works, one may feel gratified at having solved the Tarantino puzzle; however, apart from its war aspect, the two films drastically differ; thus, only adding to the uncertainty. Furthermore, the film situates itself among the likes of “bunch-of-guys-on-mission” movies, such as *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967), *The Devil’s Brigade* (Andrew V. McLaglen, 1968), and *The Guns of Navarone* (J. Lee Thomson, 1961) – all of which the film resembles but tells the audience nothing. Therefore, the title remains a mystery that is open to interpretation just as the rest of movie is. The title is the first piece of text that the viewer sees and is the first indicator of the film’s rebellious nature.

Quentin Tarantino’s oeuvre is lathered in subversion and his choice of inspirational genres attest to this quality. *La nouvelle vague* (New Wave) was a term coined by critics to describe a group of innovative French filmmakers characterized by their experimental film techniques, such as long takes and fragmentation, and rejection of the status quo. The style developed a nature of its own with its break from “clean-cut” production, and was something foreign to film viewers, something raw and thought provoking, much like *Inglourious Basterds*. The film also employs its own use of fragmentation through its division into chapters. After an artistic dry-spell in the 1960s, came the slow revival of Hollywood in 1967, and with it, Americans’ first encounter with *nouvelle vague* through *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967). Not only did Penn introduce this French concept to the American audience (and perhaps a young Tarantino), but he was also the first American filmmaker to establish a method for filming gun

battles. The controversial film sparked a conversation on the use of violence in movies and widened the path for other culturally influential works.

Among the revolutionizing motion pictures was Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Western trilogy, starring Clint Eastwood – one with great impact on Tarantino. Leone was an Italian director producing a Western film with an American actor as the lead. His trilogy not only became the archetype of a Spaghetti Western but also familiarized the American audience with what is now known as a “Mexican stand-off.” The stand-off entails two or more rivals all pointing weapons at each other – a scenario which Quentin Tarantino's fondness for is evident through his own films and also the fact that *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1967) is one of his favorite Westerns. Taking into consideration this keenness, and Tarantino's genre-picking trademark, one can discover traces of the Western genre in *Inglourious Basterds*.

Tarantino once again utilizes his “borrowing and recycling” method in the tavern scene of *Inglourious Basterds*, meanwhile creating a link between film and language. The 20-minute, *nouvelle vague* style shot begins with Bridget von Hammersmark (Diane Kruger), a famous German actress playing double agent for the Allies, meeting Lieutenant Archie Hicox (Michael Fassbender) and his companions, all of whom are disguised as Nazis, at an underground tavern in Paris. To their misfortune, a group of German soldiers are gathered at the tavern in celebration of their Master Sergeant's recent fatherhood. Hicox struggles to conceal his British accent, resulting in a peculiar German accent that is overheard by Major Hellstrom (August Diehl), who claims to have “an acute ear for accents.” He questions Hicox's nationality, to which Hicox replies with

a film comparison. His prewar profession as film critic becomes a survival tactic and film itself becomes a cover for his true identity, just as it is to other characters like Shosanna.

Bridget von Hammersmark, also struggling to maintain character, attempts to banter with the men as the tension between Hicox's party and Hellstrom intensifies. The bursts of laughter appear out of place, and almost satirical, as if to demote the scene's magnitude. The buildup becomes unbearable and the viewer is left in anticipation. Despite von Hammersmark's efforts, Hicox gives himself away when he gives the incorrect hand signal to order three shot glasses. The audience hears a click as Major Hellstrom aims a gun to Hicox under the table, and Hicox and his men return the gesture – the characters now find themselves in a “Mexican stand-off.” The scene's outcome also further removes it from the occasional unrealism of classical war films: the heroes do not always survive. There is again more disparity as the language shifts from German to English and creates an unharmonious beat to the scene. The viewer is catapulted into another realm of Tarantino's world where language strips the scene to bare dialogue, removing any historical context that the audience may have found themselves in earlier.

The juggling of languages represents itself at various focal points throughout the film to denaturalize the intensity of dramatic events. The audience explores the colloquial ways of the English, French, German, and Italian languages, all of which are fluently spoken by Colonel Landa. The interchangeable use of dialect is emotionally disrupting, for a language such as French, which American viewers may find dazzling, comes to a halt and jerks them back to reality to prevent them from being consumed by embellishments and overlooking the situation. The simplicity of Tarantino's single, center-framed, and undisturbed shots transfers the attention to the words being spoken so

that the audience is not distracted by aesthetics. Dialogue is sacred to the film's auteur and according to film scholar David Bordwell: "Talk in Tarantino comes in two main varieties: banter and intimidation," as exhibited in *Inglourious Basterds*. The characters at the tavern prolong the inevitable bloodbath looming over them since the scene's start through card games and sly chitchat, whereas the playful Colonel Landa uses dialogue as an interrogation tactic.

The distinguishable traits of Tarantinian dialogue, often mundane discourse before a vital event, are also present in Landa's vernacular. The film's first scene opens to an establishing shot showing Perrier LaPadite (Denis Ménochet) chopping wood on his dairy farm in France. While his daughter, Julie, hangs a sheet on the clothesline, the faint sound of motor vehicles is heard in the background. The LaPadites' anxiety is met with the cue of a Western-sounding tune, foretelling trouble. Monsieur LaPadite leads Colonel Landa into his home, where the two sit down for a private discussion. After five minutes of French chatter, their discussion transitions into English. Intently following French dialogue kept the audience in suspense; however, English becomes a revealing language and they are now guided into ease as Landa states the purpose for his visit. In search of a local Jewish family, the Dreyfuses, Landa believes that LaPadite may be aware of their whereabouts. Although LaPadite admits to only having knowledge of rumors, Landa responds: "I love rumors! Facts can be so misleading, but rumors, true or false, are often revealing." Landa, a self-proclaimed detective, shares a beguiling smile as he properly prepares his documents for note taking, and waits for LaPadite to fall into a self-made trap.

As LaPadite describes the members of the Dreyfus family, the camera shot moves from a fixed medium close-up of the characters to a 180 degree pan, behind Landa, to the character's left, signifying a change in the scene's rhythm. As LaPadite continues speaking, the camera moves down his leg to the floorboards beneath him, revealing the Dreyfus family. After nerve-laden questioning, Landa drifts to a comparison of the German to the predatory animal, the hawk, and the Jew to a rat. He attributes his success as "The Jew Hunter" to his ability to "think like a Jew," and search in places where a rat would hide, as apposed to merely thinking like a hawk. Landa's meticulous approach mirrors that of the fictional detective C. Auguste Dupin, and his accuracy, like Dupin's, does not fall short. LaPadite's face hardens as he realizes that his secret has been discovered. Landa then pulls out a calabash pipe, also Sherlock Holmes' choice of pipe, as if to say: "game over." In an interview with Charlie Rose, Christoph Waltz claims that it is all an act of theater; Landa is being an entertainer and thus further contributing to the film's humor by the way he handles the situation. After his German officers have machine-gunned the floorboards, Landa stands by as he observes Shosanna running into the distance, perhaps in excitement of another prospective hunt.

When debating the absurdity of *Inglourious Basterds*, one must also address the misconceptions of postmodernism. The movement began with the influence of modernist directors, such as Clint Eastwood, who had to adapt to highly digital film production, and in the process developed a new form of filmmaking that then inspired emerging directors. The term carries negative connotations, as it implies that a director who is a postmodernist is not producing original content and is instead showcasing his or her advanced filmic vocabulary. Cultural studies scholar, Aaron Barlow, therefore defends



*Inglourious Basterds* from being labeled a pastiche, which he argues is a misuse of the word by viewers who cannot understand the film's purpose. However, amateur film viewers are not the only ones who struggle comprehending Tarantino's work.

Film critic J. Hoberman examines *Inglourious Basterds* in contrast to previous World War II movies. His argument expresses a longing for catharsis, which he states is absent in this war film. However, Hoberman's first misconception is his classification of *Inglourious Basterds* as a war film. Secondly, to seek a cathartic experience and compare the film to others, such as *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), is to fully misunderstand the director's intent. Spielberg comforts the audience with the thought of salvation, whereas Tarantino teases them with sentimentality and then abruptly retracts it, leaving behind a jolting sensation. Hoberman calls it "rich in fantasy and blithely amoral," yet by doing so, is forfeiting his opportunity to examine the film from an altered perspective. Tarantino assigns meaning to his characters, although not in respects to the audience's desires. The purpose for doing so is to employ a Brechtian alienation effect, by which viewers are not able to identify with the characters, in order to instruct them to become a "collective of 'thinking human beings'" (Newman). While addressing the morality of his characters, Tarantino stated: "they're refreshingly free of them. The characters are the characters" (*Charlie Rose* 2009). These characters then carry out his alteration of history. However, the fantasy that Hoberman criticizes is an aspect of *Inglourious Basterds* that does not fully neglect realism.

In an interview with David Stratton for *At the Movies* (1982-2011), Quentin Tarantino attested to the content in his film being shadows of reality. The content emerges from the marriage between history and fantasy – the foundation of *Inglourious*

*Basterds*. For example, the film addresses German cinema under the Third Reich through (fictional) Joseph Goebbels (Sylvester Groth)' Nazi propaganda film *Stolz der Nation*, or *Nation's Pride*. The fictitious work praises the heroic actions of Nazi soldier Frederick Zoller (Daniel Brühl), who stars as himself in the movie. Zoller is comparable to Audie Murphy, the most decorated soldier of World War II and the star of his own film, *To Hell and Back* (Jesse Hibbs, 1955). Goebbels' prized creation in *Inglourious Basterds*, can be set parallel to his nonfictional work as the Minister of Propaganda, *Kolberg* (Veit Harlan, 1945), one of the last propaganda films before the fall of the Third Reich. Bridget von Hammersmark's espionage work for Britain is also akin to that of the Swedish actress Zarah Leander, who gained success in Germany and was rumored to have worked for the Soviet Union while affiliated with films and songs in support of the Nazi cause. Fiction and reality connect through an undulating cycle of convergence and divergence, in which Tarantino offers familiar historical subtext and then turns it into a plausible, albeit fictional, situation. An exploration of "what could have happened" subsequently makes way for more cinematic tampering.

The oeuvre of Quentin Tarantino also embodies the filmic aesthetics of "cartoonism," applying the customs of cartoon, such as the fragmentation of comic strips, violence of graphic novels, and hyperbolic scenarios, to live action sequences (Pallant 172). "Cartoonism" bridges the relationship between live action and animation and is most notable in an anime scene on the character O'Ren Ishii in *Kill Bill Volume I* (Quentin Tarantino, 2004) – a bloody scene of revenge. As film scholar Chris Pallant insists, violence, an element of Tarantino's defining idiosyncrasies, is part of his artistic "fingerprint." In the case of *Inglourious Basterds*, "cartoonism" breaks the violence,

lessening its blow. Before the audience can get too distraught by the Basterds' ruthless Nazi head scalping, the scene receives an interruption from a narrator (Samuel L. Jackson). As viewers are familiarizing themselves with the Basterds, the introduction of Hugo Stiglitz is met with a jarring sound effect and his name spelled out in what resembles the title font of a 1970s television show (see fig. 1). The audience learns about Stiglitz's past as a German enlistee who murdered thirteen Gestapo officers and was then imprisoned, en route to Berlin "to be made an example of." Stiglitz sits in his cell, unamused, as the Basterds murder the prison guards and seek to recruit him. The storyline then resumes its course.

Events are once again paused as the audience revisits Shosanna Dreyfus, four years after the murder of her family. She stands at the top of a ladder, rearranging the letters on her cinema's marquee when she is frozen in time and a brief profile appears identifying her as the surviving Dreyfus daughter (see fig. 2). Additionally, as the character's suspenseful plan for retribution begins to unravel, the narrator reappears and the audience is educated on the flammability of 35mm nitrate film. The film's informative interruptions come as a surprise to viewers, and by doing so, perhaps consolidate its other ambiguities by alerting viewers of future deviation of events. Tarantino uses his cartoon-like segments to comment on the comedic and ironic nature of his film, calming the audience's skepticism on whether or not to take it seriously. He distinctly marks the departure from reality. Hugo Stiglitz's introduction, for instance, depicts a merciless, German-killing German, who pauses to laugh at his infamous reputation among Nazis, and then resumes concentration. The "cartoonism" aspects take

the viewer frame-by-frame, from moments of gravity to the comicality of Saturday morning *toons*.

The fragmentation in *Inglourious Basterds* created by its division into five chapters also reflects “cartoonism” and the convergence of plot and fantasy. The chapters succeed each other in a fashion reminiscent of frames in a cartoon strip, where interlinking pieces create a whole—just as Tarantino does with genre references throughout the film. The chapters also illustrate another form of Brechtian theater by making the film episodic. The first title card that appears on screen reads: “once upon a time...in Nazi-occupied France” – an immediate disclaimer to the audience before they are plunged into Tarantino’s Nazi fairytale. Once again, Tarantino pays tribute to Sergio Leone and his film *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968); most importantly, however, the first chapter’s title foreshadows the disconnection between the film’s setting and its rewriting of history. “Once upon a time” indicates a fairytale, whereas the title’s second half signifies a grimmer situation. By creating this disparity, Tarantino forces spectators to contemplate their reality, because they must juxtapose what is known to what is being viewed in order to make sense of the discrepancies.

The contortion of reality further stresses the film’s elasticity, and how Tarantino toys with it to his liking. By intermingling filmic genres and choosing to stray from history, he has the liberty to decide what to include and what to leave out, when to comfort the audience with insight and when to leave them clueless and on their toes. *Inglourious Basterds* relies on subtitles to translate over half of the film into English; however, at times, there are intentional subtitle errors, such as the text reading “oui” instead of “yes,” or no subtitles at all. The unknown is alienating to an audience that does

not speak the language, again exhibiting how Tarantino makes cinematic choices in accordance to flexibility, and therefore justifying the borrowed conventions of styles such as “cartoonism,” for “one of the greatest appeals of cartoon and animation is its absolute freedom” (Pallant 181). The film’s elastic feature is also applicable to its characters – who are constantly shifting identities. Bridget von Hammersmark rotates from the actress for the Germans to the spy for the British, Englishman Archie Hicox poses as a Nazi captain, and Shosanna Dreyfus becomes Emmanuelle Mimieux. The Basterds also do their own form of shape shifting, causing Hitler to throw a childish fit over their ubiquity: “they seem to appear and disappear at will!” The Basterds disappear and reappear, leaving their mark along the way.

Analogous to the Basterds, acknowledgements to cinema are also omnipresent. Tarantino utilizes his film literacy to cache a love letter to cinema within *Inglourious Basterds*. Notably are its references to figures such as director G.W. Pabst, and actresses Pola Negri, Brigitte Horney, and Brigitte Helm, during the tavern scene’s “Who Am I” game. Additionally, there is Tarantino’s “borrowing and recycling” technique, particularly from his favorite director, Sergio Leone (famous for his Spaghetti Westerns), and Macaroni Combat films (war films typically by Italian directors). Within the *Inglourious Basterds* world, there is Bridget von Hammersmark profession as an actress, Shosanna’s Le Gamaar cinema, characters’ roles within their roles, and Joseph Goebbels’ creation, *Stolz der Nation*. Most importantly is “Operation Kino,” the Allies’ plan to target the *Stolz der Nation* premiere at Le Gamaar, which coincides with Shosanna’s plan to burn down the theater with the aid of over 350 nitrate film prints. *Inglourious Basterds*

proclaims the power of cinema by making it the force that will bring down the Third Reich.

The movie's final chapter, "Revenge of the Giant Face," marks the amalgamation of the previous four chapters. The final battle takes place on the night of *Stolz der Nation's* premiere at Shosanna's theater – now a theater of war. Aldo Raine arrives as Bridget von Hammersmark's escort, and Basterds Sergeant Donowitz (Eli Roth) and Private Ulmer (Omar Doom) accompany them, disguised as Italian cameramen, and with explosives strapped to their legs. Unlike the long takes in previous chapters, Tarantino transitions to the use of crosscutting shots to follow the movements of its pivotal characters: the Basterds, Colonel Landa, and Shosanna. Donowitz and Ulmer sit in the theater, while Shosanna manages the film reels, and Raine is captured by German soldiers and taken to Landa. Raine and Private Utivich (B.J. Novak) find themselves face to face with Hans Landa, and to their surprise, a Landa willing to allow the continuation of their plan under the conditions that he is acknowledged for his aid in ending the war. Humor recurrently emerges from an otherwise serious scene, as Landa once again gives his "performance."

"Ooh, that's a bingo!" Landa exclaims, as he extracts information from Raine and Utivich. The scene involves urgent matters; however, they are handled in a playful manner. Landa comments on Utivich's nickname, "The Little Man," confessing that Utivich is not as little as he thought, and often loses himself in additional commentary. As Landa makes his deal, Shosanna sets her plan into motion, and while in the projection room, receives an unexpected visit from Frederick Zoller. In desperation, Shosanna shoots him; however, Zoller manages to shoot her as well. The sound of their gunshots

are ironically masked by the firing of Zoller's gun in his film. Meanwhile, the screening of *Stolz der Nation* is interrupted by Shosanna's face on screen, prophesizing the audience's tragic fate and cueing her assistant to set fire to the nitrate film. Chaos ensues as the cinema goes up in flames and Shosanna's face, visible in the smoke, hovers over her victims as her chilling laughter echoes through the room and immortalizes her as the "giant face" (see fig. 3). The Third Reich is defeated at the hands of Shosanna Dreyfus and at the hands of film itself.

The power of cinema manifests itself in *Inglourious Basterds*. The films of Quentin Tarantino convey a language of their own, and a world produced through the intertwining of filmic genres. By accompanying innovative film techniques with the disruptive Brechtian theater methods of humor, alienation, and denaturalization, Tarantino does not subject himself to the restriction of classical Hollywood preconceptions and audience expectations. Perhaps Tarantino includes the Nazi propaganda film, *Stolz der Nation*, not only as a mockery of the conventional Hollywood war film, but also as a satire of the audience's craving. What is depicted in *Stolz der Nation* is in part what was expected from *Inglourious Basterds*; therefore, the film projects the paradigm's absurdity so that the audience may reevaluate their way of viewing cinema. Tarantino is a cinematic rebel whose film calls upon the need to think for oneself, continuously question what is being presented, and challenge predeterminations. *Inglourious Basterds* denaturalizes the audience by interfering with any sense of comfort or sentimentality, and to leave them pensive, baffled, and mesmerized.

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Appendix



Fig.1. The introduction of Hugo Stiglitz.

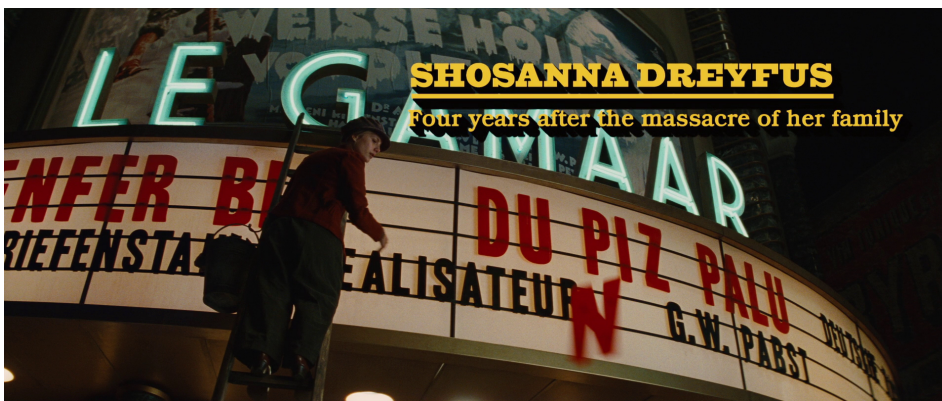


Fig.2. Shosanna frozen in time as she is being reintroduced.



Fig. 3. Shosanna's image immortalized through the demise of her foes.