Despite its unalterable march into past history, the Holocaust remains an object of fascination to contemporary novelists and filmmakers as well as to the public. Along with works that are recognized as enduring masterpieces (Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, David Grossman’s *See Under: Love*, Kertész’s *Fatelessness*), this fascination has produced dozens, if not hundreds, of films and novels that deserve to be forgotten quickly. In the wide terrain between these two extremes, one finds a small number of works that have enjoyed worldwide success even while provoking passionate critical debates: what some viewers or readers consider as an important artistic achievement, others consider as a piece of commercial marketing with no artistic merit, or maybe even as an insult to civilized values. Jonathan Littell’s 2006 novel, *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*), featuring a former Nazi as first-person narrator, was extolled by some extremely distinguished critics and received two major literary prizes in France before becoming an international publishing phenomenon, but it was also trashed by other, equally distinguished readers. Similarly divided opinions greeted Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1994), Roberto Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful* (1997), and most recently Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009).

Such contested works—we could call them *crisis works* or “weathervanes”—point to unresolved ethical and aesthetic issues concerning representations of the Holocaust. What can or should be shown or told in a work of art dealing with a historic event that has been called unrepresentable? Even more importantly, what can or should *not* be shown or told? When *Schindler’s List* first came out, a number of commentators—foremost among them Claude Lanzmann—expressed outrage at the sequence where a group of women deported to Auschwitz are shown naked, entering a room that looks as if it could be a gas chamber. Such a representation is, according to Lanzmann, positively obscene—*not to be shown*.¹ By showing it, Lanzmann contended,

¹. One etymology, although probably an incorrect one, traces “obscene” back to Greek tragedy, where the most violent actions occurred offstage or “off the scene.” Such actions could be told, and were often recounted in great detail, but not shown.
Spielberg had committed both an artistic sin of bad taste and a grave ethical lapse, even if the room in question turned out to be an actual shower room, not a gas chamber.

If the question raised by Schindler’s List was “What can be shown?” then the question raised by Benigni’s Life Is Beautiful was “How should it be shown?” Negative criticisms of that film emphasized its unrealistic way of depicting the concentration camp where Guido and his son are imprisoned: the camp looked too manicured, not at all like the real thing. And whoever heard of a Jewish inmate who succeeded in keeping his young child hidden for weeks or months in a Nazi concentration camp? Such criticisms focused on the criterion of historical authenticity—and once again, the issue was both ethical and aesthetic. Those who criticized this aspect of the film maintained that it is ethically reprehensible to go against historical facts in representing the Holocaust. The other, related theoretical issue concerned humor: Was humor, and the comic in general, an acceptable mode for treating this most serious subject?

Those who defended Benigni’s film declared not only that the artistic imagination must brook no limits, including that of factuality, but that comedy could be a powerful means of expression, even about the Holocaust. The eminent specialist of Holocaust literature Sidra Ezrahi argued that since Benigni presented the film from the start as a “fable,” it should be interpreted as a comic counterfactual story, a kind of Purimspiel that presented a “meliorative” version of history and that should not be interpreted with “dead-minded literalism.” Ezrahi saw in Benigni’s film—as well as in several other comic representations of the Shoah, such as Radu Mihaileanu’s film Train of Life (also from 1997) or Jurek Becker’s novel Jakob the Liar (1969)—a continuation of the tradition of Jewish humor that one finds in the stories of Sholem Aleichem, for example. Such antihistorical versions of history offer, according to Ezrahi, a utopian and messianic promise of history as it might have been, which coexists with the tragic knowledge of history as it was. For that reason, she concluded, they possess genuine ethical value.²

The Critical Debate around Inglourious Basterds

Quentin Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds belongs in this interesting category of “weathervane” films, contested both in the domain of popular discourse and in the academy. First shown at Cannes in May 2009, where it received a

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² Lanzmann has voiced his criticism often, first in a widely read article in the daily Le Monde: “Holocauste, la représentation impossible,” 3 Mar. 1994.
mixed reception, *Inglourious Basterds* was released three months later, after Tarantino had made a few changes. The film enjoyed a huge commercial success on both sides of the Atlantic, taking in twice as much at the box office as Tarantino’s preceding films, *Kill Bill* volumes 1 and 2, and even topping the record of *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the breakthrough film that had made Tarantino into an internationally celebrated auteur. The critical responses to *Inglourious Basterds*, whether by scholars or professional critics (including some Holocaust scholars), or by nonprofessional viewers who posted messages on the Internet, ranged from unqualified admiration to virulent contempt. It is striking that these opinions cannot be classified by age, religion, profession, or other sociological categories. Rather, the determining factor seems to be the viewer’s ethical and aesthetic criteria regarding Holocaust representation.

Consider the criterion of historical authenticity. *Inglourious Basterds* ends with a blatantly antihistorical sequence that one French critic called “jubilatoire”: the spectacular killing of Hitler, Goebbels, and other Nazi leaders, carried out mostly by Jews, in a French art-house movie theater in June 1944. Some viewers waxed quite indignant at this counterfactual ending—one French blogger, for example, wrote: “One can’t even say that he betrays history, the scenario is so off the wall and completely absurd. Hitler with all his buddies, escorted by just a few SS into a small Parisian movie theater owned by a Jewish woman who escaped [when her family was murdered]! What next? Why not put Hitler up in EuroDisney while we’re at it, welcomed by Mickey and Donald?”

An American critic, Frederic Raphael, writing in *Commentary*, adopted a similarly sarcastic tone: “Tarantino’s only use for the past is to make pasta out of it. Inaccuracy is part of his recipe for tasty indie-voiduality.” A more solemn tone was struck by Daniel Mendelsohn, writing in *Newsweek*: “To indulge in [fantasies] at the expense of the truth of history would be the most inglorious bastardization of all.” Alongside such reprimands, however, many viewers expressed admiration for Tarantino’s “off the wall” ending; one French blogger wrote: “I loved the fact that he spins

out his delirium to the end, taking enormous liberties with history. . . . God bless you, Tarantino!” The critic of *Time* magazine was equally enthusiastic, praising Tarantino’s “audaciousness” in inventing an ending that is “pure Hollywood. Hitler will die where? In a movie theater. And who will kill him? Some Jews.” Roger Ebert, for his part, exulted that Tarantino “provides World War II with a much-needed alternative ending. For once the basterds get what’s coming to them.”

Some theorists may see in the weakening of the factuality criterion a possible danger, arguing that any relaxation in the demand for historical accuracy risks undermining the reality of the Holocaust and thus provides ammunition for negationists. However, a more optimistic view is that it’s precisely because the public knows the real history (at least, in its broad outlines) that a filmmaker can allow himself flights of fancy or “delirium”; indeed, that these actually reinforce our sense of the reality of the historical event “as it really happened,” even as they suggest alternative possibilities. To consider history not as a linear course that is unchanging but rather as a process that, *as it unfolds*, is unforeseeable and open to various possibilities at every moment is a philosophical idea that Tarantino expressed in his own way in an interview with Roger Ebert:

> My characters don’t know that they are part of history. They have no pre-recorded future, and they are not aware of anything they can or cannot do. I have never pre-destined my characters, ever. And I felt now wasn’t the time to start. So basically where I’m coming from on this issue is: 1) My characters changed the course of the war. 2) Now that didn’t happen because in real life my characters didn’t exist. 3) But if they had’ve existed (*sic*), [...] everything that happens is quite plausible.

Tarantino’s colloquial formulation, while not expressed in scholarly terms, recalls the well-known argument of the late Michael André Bernstein, who

warned against “backshadowing”—looking back at history in terms of what one knows to have happened later—when it comes to interpreting the Holocaust or any other historical event. In that perspective, imagining alternative possibilities, as they might have been lived by people at the time who could not foresee the future, is not only permissible but may be downright salutary.

The criterion of seriousness, according to which the Holocaust must not be treated in the comic or humorous mode, appears relatively unimportant in discussions of this film—possibly because of the precedents already set by Life Is Beautiful or Train of Life, along with such comic classics as Lubitsch’s To Be or Not to Be or Chaplin’s The Great Dictator. Like his predecessors, Tarantino directs most of his comic barbs at the Nazi characters: the sadistic Colonel Landa, a role for which Christoph Waltz won an Oscar, appears hilarious and pathetic as well as sinister when he pulls out his abnormally huge pipe, a sly but obvious allusion to anxiety about masculinity. Hitler and Goebbels are also played for comic effect, without ever appearing less than the villains of the film. Among the heroes, Brad Pitt plays the American lieutenant Aldo Raine with a good dose of exaggeration and parody (reinforced by his hillbilly accent). While some critics have reproached Tarantino for his “juvenile” attitude and appear disconcerted by what they take to be the “joking” tenor of the film, many others consider the film’s playful aspects as one of its greatest successes.

There is, however, one ethical-aesthetic criterion that still appears to weigh heavily in many viewers’ judgment, especially in the United States (in France it was mentioned much less often). We can call it the axiological criterion, which refers to the moral message or underlying values communicated by the film. Many American viewers expressed profound disapproval of the “sadistic vengeance” theme they found at the heart of Inglourious Basterds. “The movie unproblematically offers up sadistic voyeurism as a satisfying form of payback,” wrote Dana Stevens in Slate. “By making the Americans cruel too, [Tarantino] escapes the customary division of good and evil along national lines, but he escapes any sense of moral accountability as well,” wrote David Denby in the New Yorker. “I was horrified at the message that abusing

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soldiers of your enemy is somehow okay, so long as you’re the good guys and they are bad,” wrote a member of a listserv for teachers specializing in genocide; another member of the same listserv reported that he and his wife decided to boycott this “horrible film” after seeing the coming attractions: “The lack of public outrage over a movie that glorifies crimes against humanity, war crimes and torture was very distressing,” he added.\textsuperscript{14}

Even more distressing, for many critics, was Tarantino’s “message” about Jewish vengeance: “Tarantino may think that he is doing Jews a favor by launching this revenge fantasy,” noted Denby, “but somehow I doubt that the gesture will be appreciated. Tarantino has become an embarrassment.” J. Hoberman, reviewing the film in the \textit{Village Voice}, wrote: “\textit{Inglourious Basterds} basically enables Jews to act like Nazis, engaging in cold-blooded massacres and mass incineration, pushing wish fulfillment to a near-psychotic break with reality.”\textsuperscript{15} Mendelsohn too condemned the “Jewish vengeance” theme and offered what might be called a Levinasian alternative: “An alternative, and morally superior, form of ‘revenge’ for Jews would be to do precisely what Jews have been doing since World War II ended: that is, to preserve and perpetuate the memory of the destruction that was visited upon them, precisely in order to help prevent the recurrence of such mass horrors in the future.” The reviewer in \textit{Commentary} expressed outrage, blaming not only Tarantino but also his Jewish producer Harvey Weinstein, who had allowed that “pretentious, vacuous clown primed with Hollywood gelt to do the Jews a favor by showing that they too, given the chance, coulda/woudla behaved like mindless monsters.”\textsuperscript{16}

Given such condemnations, defenders of the film faced a challenge—they could not, after all, claim there is something ethically uplifting in fantasies of vengeance and torture. In fact, most of the film’s defenders argued that such fantasies are pleasurable precisely because they are recognized as fantasies, not as calls to action; thus, they are not bound by the ethical imperatives of real life. If Roger Ebert, with great satisfaction, declared that “for once, the basterds get what’s coming to them,” he was obviously referring only to events on the screen. The historian Deborah Lipstadt, who is known for her vigorous attacks on every form of negationism, explained that she liked the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14.} Messages sent to iagslistserv, 10 Sept. 2010 and 11 Sept. 2010. I thank Deborah Lipstadt for sharing these with me.
\item \textsuperscript{16.} Raphael.
\end{itemize}
Representing the Holocaust in *Inglourious Basterds*

film “because it satisfies that dream of vengeance we all harbor somewhere inside us, even though we know it’s ‘not nice.’”¹⁷

At least one commentator, however, responded directly to the arguments of the outraged moralists. Charles Taylor (not the Canadian philosopher) argued in a long article in *Dissent* that those who condemn Tarantino’s film on ethical grounds refuse to recognize what it shows us: namely, that war is always terrible and that even a “just” war like the Second World War involved atrocities committed by both sides. Taylor also recalled a historical fact that he said many critics seemed to have forgotten: the dream of bloody vengeance by Jews was not Tarantino’s belated invention, but had been an acknowledged reality in the years following the war. A number of camp guards were murdered by liberated prisoners right after liberation, and many survivors recalled that they had dreamed of vengeance even if they didn’t act on it. Furthermore, Taylor argued that Tarantino’s film did possess a moral vision behind its violence: “Even what’s shocked most critics—Raine’s carving swastikas into the foreheads of his prisoners—has a moral point. Lurking behind that bit of pulp outrage is the reality of the Nazis who disappeared into South America or into American intelligence programs [. . .] it’s the mark of Cain visited upon the entire Third Reich.”¹⁸ In fact, Taylor concluded, the “outlandish” aspect of the film may be altogether appropriate to its subject, for the irrational evil of the Nazis is morally incomprehensible: “That *Inglourious Basterds* has detractors who insist that history, art, and morality should always be rational, ennobling, clear-cut, and nice shows only just how audacious a work of popular movie art Quentin Tarantino has made.”

These, then, were the stakes in the critical debate as it unfolded in the press: Should a popular, often hilariously funny film full of blood and gore, featuring the Holocaust even if not entirely focused on it, be taken seriously—that is, hailed as saying something serious and worth pondering about values, actions, and history? Or was it to be condemned, a clever but potentially harmful piece of commercial exploitation that uses World War II and the Holocaust as “covers” for the filmmaker’s usual obsessions: violence, vengeance, and the one-upmanship of juvenile film buffs? If one turns to scholarly studies rather than on-the-spot criticism, one finds similar questions expressed in more theoretical terms, albeit generally without the dismissive attitude of some journalistic critics. The close attention paid by film scholars to Tarantino in general and to this film in particular indicates that they certainly take him seriously. The most sustained of the scholarly examinations so far is the collective volume edited in 2012 by Robert von Dassanowsky, *Quentin*  

Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds: A Manipulation of Metacinema.19 This book highlights another major issue of Holocaust representation: In what ways does metacinema—that is, a focus on aesthetic self-reflexiveness—help or hinder historical understanding? Tarantino’s preoccupation with film history and his practice of what the editor in his introduction calls “metafilmic mashups” (viii) are well known, but in this film they are carried to new levels. They occur not only on the directorial level, in the form of intertextual allusions and quotations from other films, and the mise en abyme of films within the film, but also on the diegetic level of plot and character. More insistently than any of Tarantino’s other films, Inglourious Basterds is “about” the movies. The question is, does it also tell us something significant about the world outside the movies? Is it about History with a capital H as well as about film history? Where the Holocaust is concerned, how one answers this question ultimately determines, I believe, one’s critical evaluation of a film (or of any work of fiction). Thus Sharon Willis, despite her appreciation for Tarantino’s “gorgeous” filmmaking, here and in his other works, finally comes down quite hard on the way Inglourious Basterds “displaces” or even negates History. In her view, Tarantino reduces History to “a parade of shocks rendered—or administered—as highly aestheticized spectacles [. . .] In this cinephile world, film’s only referent is itself”—indeed, she goes on to say, Tarantino’s only referents are his own previous films!20 Eric Kligerman, on the other hand, considers Tarantino’s approach to “catastrophic history” as similar to Marcel Ophuls’s “Talmudic” (that is, fragmented and layered) approach in his groundbreaking documentary, The Sorrow and the Pity. In Kligerman’s view, Tarantino’s metacinematic devices do not displace or reduce History, but rather incite the spectator to think about questions of representation.21

In what follows, I want to pursue the role of metacinema and its relation to History by offering my own reading—necessarily subjective and incomplete—of Tarantino’s film. I feel obliged to note that while I count myself among this work’s admirers, I am not an unconditional Tarantino fan (I found *Reservoir Dogs* sickening and was unable to watch more than twenty minutes of *Kill Bill*), and I generally avoid violent movies. Like the couple who decided to boycott *Inglourious Basterds* after watching the trailer, I became quite indignant when I saw the trailer for Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games*, in which two young punks invade a home and kill the whole family after torturing them: much too sadistic against the viewer, I thought. In the matter of an ethical and aesthetic compass, everyone has his or her own measure.

**Inglourious Basterds and the Renewal of the War Film Genre**

*Inglourious Basterds* is comparable to Jonathan Littell’s novel *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*), which has also elicited highly conflicting critical responses. Littell’s originality consists in providing a detailed and historically accurate account of the Nazi system of genocide through the voice and vision of a narrator who is totally outrageous and “unbelievable,” an unrepentant Nazi who escaped punishment. Tarantino’s originality lies in his “manipulation of metacinema,” first of all in the way he renews traditional Hollywood genres. He has explained that he begins thinking about most of his films in terms of genre: “You’ve got to make a movie about something, and I’m a film guy, so I think in terms of genres,” he told one interviewer. But he added: “By the time you’re finished, it doesn’t resemble anything of what might have been the inspiration. It’s simply the spark that starts the fire.” The genre that inspired *Inglourious Basterds* is the World War II combat film, which has a long history; the two films that are specifically evoked are James Aldrich’s *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and Enzo Castellari’s *Quel maladetto treno blindato* (1978), whose title in English is *The Inglorious Bastards*—Tarantino changed the spelling to acknowledge both his debt and his difference. In both of those earlier


films, the plot concerns a group of American antiheroes, soldiers who were court-martialed for various crimes and who are recruited for a “mission impossible” against the Nazis. But despite the surface resemblances (in *Inglourious Basterds*, as in its predecessors, American soldiers disguise themselves as Nazis with some burlesque results, and succeed in carrying out a spectacular victory in which most of them die along with their victims), a more careful look reveals just how thoroughly Tarantino revised his models. He reinvents the World War II film just as he reinvented the gangster film in *Pulp Fiction*: here, as there, he does this first of all by means of long, complicated dialogues that one never finds in these genres, whose emphasis is usually on action scenes involving shoot-outs or chases. The characters in *Inglourious Basterds* exchange words more than fire, and the effect of their verbal jousting is often both comic and menacing, as in the opening sequence, where Colonel Landa engages in verbal games of cat and mouse before massacring a family of Jews. Another effect of these highly constructed (and hence marked as “artificial”) dialogues is to create an aesthetic distance that mitigates the effect of violence in the film.

A second, perhaps even more important generic innovation on Tarantino’s part is that he inserts the Holocaust into the genre of the World War II film. This may sound odd, since the Holocaust was very much part of that war; but the fact is that in the classic examples of combat films about World War II (involving mainly soldiers engaged in battle, not stories about civilians), all the way from *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) through the *Guns of Navarone* (1961) or *The Great Escape* (1963) to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), the persecution of Jews is never explicitly mentioned, much less shown. It is as if the two genres, Holocaust film and World War II combat film, were totally separate. This makes obvious sense for a film like *River Kwai*, which deals with the war in Asia, but it’s quite remarkable in the case of films about the war in Europe. Steven Spielberg, whose personal interest in the Holocaust is well known, and who made what may be the most widely viewed Holocaust film in history, left out any explicit mention of Jewish persecution from his World War II film, even though June 1944 (when *Saving Private Ryan* takes place) was still a time when Jews were being deported from France. Tarantino, by contrast, accords a central place to the persecution of Jews in *Inglourious Basterds*, whose final sequence is explicitly marked as taking place after D-Day, hence around the same time as *Saving Private Ryan*.

Even more remarkably, Tarantino assigns the central role in his scenario of Jewish vengeance not to a hero but to a heroine. The Jewish soldiers in

24. The last transport to Auschwitz left Lyon on 17 August 1944. There is one brief, oblique allusion to Jewish persecution in *Saving Private Ryan*, when the Jewish American soldier who later gets killed screams at a German soldier that he is Jewish. I thank Richard J. Golsan for reminding me of this episode in the film.
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Lieutenant Raine’s group of avengers have very little individuality, except perhaps for the “Bear Jew,” who is featured in one sequence; but Shosanna, the only survivor of the massacre of her family in the film’s opening sequence, plays a major role and is seen on screen almost from beginning to end. What’s more, her vengeance is accomplished not by a feat of arms but by means of images and film, Tarantino’s own medium. Shosanna, the owner of a small art-house movie theater in Paris, becomes, briefly, a film director herself, both directing and starring in a short film sequence that serves as prelude to the destruction by fire of Hitler and Goebbels. Goebbels himself, whose job as chief of Nazi propaganda certainly included more than making movies, is portrayed in this film exclusively as the principal producer of the Third Reich’s film industry!

Tarantino has stated in interviews that in *Inglourious Basterds* “it’s 35mm film that destroyed the Third Reich.”25 His detractors find this declaration juvenile and ridiculous, and indeed it seems to have been intended as a provocation; but one can also consider it as an apt reminder about the power of images to determine our perception of reality. As we know, the Nazi regime relied heavily on theatricalized political spectacles, part of what Walter Benjamin called its aestheticization of politics.26 But the regime also accorded a central place to cinema and to the film industry as a purveyor of illusion during the whole period of the Third Reich. Eric Rentschler has shown, in a book that Tarantino has studied carefully and cites often, that the “Ministry of Illusion” run by Goebbels financed not only blatantly anti-Semitic propaganda films like *The Jew Süss* or *The Eternal Jew*, but also—indeed, primarily—entertainment and escape fare in the form of musical comedies, sentimental love stories, and costume dramas that presented a glorious vision of Germany’s past.27

This is one area where film history meets political history: by focusing the spectator’s attention on the role of cinema, notably of Nazi cinema, in public life, Tarantino joins aesthetic self-reflection to historical commentary. Aaron Barlow, in his perceptive analysis of the film, has remarked that *Inglourious Basterds* is not only about movies but also about the “unbreakable bonds between the world and film.”28 In preparing the script of *Inglourious Basterds*,

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Tarantino did research not only on Nazi cinema and the famous filmmakers who worked for the regime (Riefenstahl, Pabst, Harlan), but also on the Nazi occupation of France and on racism in the American army. Paradoxically, the counter-historical impulse that appears to dominate Inglourious Basterds is accompanied by a multifaceted engagement with history, including History with a capital H. Even more paradoxically, it is the emphasis on metacinema that complicates what otherwise would be a far too simple kind of historical engagement: good guys versus bad guys doesn’t take us very far, either as film or as history. Django Unchained, the film that followed Inglourious Basterds, is in my opinion a much less successful work, precisely because it lacks the multiple layers that metacinema brings to the latter. While we can cheer Tarantino’s outrage at slavery, the film falls short of making us think about it in a meaningful way.

**Metacinema and Historical Reality: Four Sequences**

The four sequences I will analyze were chosen from among many in the film that emphasize the relationship between images and reality, which I take to be the principal role of metacinema in this film.

1. “A Film for the Nazis”

Inglourious Basterds is divided into five chapters, each with a title. Chapter 3, “German Night in Paris,” introduces the crucial plot element that will culminate in the death of Hitler and his lieutenants. The idea is first broached in a sequence in which Shosanna reveals her plan to set fire to her theater by igniting her large stock of nitrate films. This sequence, saturated with cinematic allusions, starts with Shosanna escorting Goebbels and his entourage after their inspection of her theater in preparation for the screening of his new film, *Stolz der Nation* (Pride of the Nation), a propaganda film he is very pleased with. As he walks toward the door, Goebbels asks his French translator (who is also his mistress, according to an earlier shot) how she liked *Glückskinder*. She replies that she quite likes Lillian Harvey, a remark that makes Goebbels furious: “Never mention her name in my presence!” he screams. Tarantino doesn’t explain, provoking the curious viewer to do a bit of searching. Lillian Harvey was a film star who left Germany in 1939 after becoming persona non grata with the regime, and *Glückskinder* (*Lucky Kids*, 1936), a romantic comedy, was one of her best-known films. It is unlikely, given his fury at the mention of her name, that Goebbels would actually inquire about this film—Tarantino seems to have inserted this bit of dialogue as a wink to the viewer, or as a sign of his familiarity with both the cinema and the politics of the Third Reich.
Goebbels’s departure is followed by a long dialogue between Shosanna and her film operator Marcel, a handsome black man who is also her lover; the extended conversation during which she informs him of her plan takes place with Marcel at the top of the stairs and Shosanna at the bottom, in alternating point-of-view shots. Behind them, we see recurrent views of two movie posters: behind Shosanna, a poster that is only partly visible advertises *Domino*, a 1943 dramatic comedy by a now-forgotten director, Roger Richebé. The poster behind Marcel is more important and appears more insistently: it refers to Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *L’Assassin habite au 21 (The Assassin Lives at Number 21)*, a detective film from 1942. Clouzot is known above all for his controversial 1943 film, *Le Corbeau (The Raven)*, whose subject is small-town gossip and anonymous poison-pen letters; the film elicited conflicting responses from the start, interpreted either as a denunciation of Vichy France or as a collaborationist film (Clouzot made it for the German-controlled film company Continental, which employed several other well-known French directors as well). Earlier in chapter 3, when Shosanna is shown for the first time after her initial escape from Landa, we see her putting up the title of *Le Corbeau* on the marquis of her theater. This introduces a nice ambiguity, for her screening of this film could be interpreted as a sign of resistance or of collaboration. Her role as a resister becomes clear only in the subsequent sequence with Marcel.

The fact that Marcel is black may be an allusion to Castellari’s *Quel maladetto treno blindato*, which features a black soldier among the film’s heroes and evokes the discrimination against blacks in the American army. Tarantino often mentions that he himself has some Native American ancestry, and draws a parallel between anti-Semitism and racism against blacks and Native Americans in the United States. Making Shosanna’s lover black is a way of emphasizing the bond between persecuted minorities. Despite their minority status, however, both Marcel and Shosanna speak French perfectly, not like “foreigners” but like natives. Tarantino’s insistence that every actor in the film speak his or her native language, even if it required extensive use of subtitles (which Hollywood films abhor), is one of his differences from his predecessors, who didn’t hesitate to use Americans to play German officers, for example. In the case of Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) and Marcel (Jacky Ido), their native French has an additional importance, since it underlines the fact that their persecuted minority status is the result of prejudice, not of any “essential” shortcoming in relation to Frenchness.

As Shosanna outlines her plan to Marcel, Tarantino breaks in with a didactic mini-documentary, lasting less than one minute, about the flammability of nitrate film; and into this mini-documentary (made by him, in color) he inserts a film clip (in black and white) to illustrate the point. The clip is from Hitchcock’s early British film *Sabotage* (1936), showing a young boy boarding
a streetcar with a reel of film under his arm—he will be killed when the reel explodes a few minutes later, though Tarantino does not show that. Here again, one can see an evocation of resistance, for the reel in *Sabotage* (which explodes prematurely) has been rigged by a group of revolutionaries, in a plot inspired by Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*. Shosanna’s plan, we soon learn, will involve a much bigger explosion and will also include a film clip, this time made by her: as she explains to Marcel, she will make a “film for the Nazis” before burning down the theater.

Thus, in a single sequence lasting less than five minutes, Tarantino refers—either by allusion or by an actual “quotation”—to four films of the period, ranging from comedy (*Lucky Kids, Domino*) to thriller (*The Assassin . . ., Sabotage*), from Germany, France, and England; he offers us his own mini-documentary on nitrate film, and he puts into place the central plot element that will lead to *Inglourious Basterds*’ spectacular ending. At the same time, he offers an implicit but astute commentary on minorities in France (both during World War II and presumably in the present) and on their relation to the language of the mainstream.

2. Shosanna Prepares for Battle

The sequence of Shosanna preparing for battle is the opening of the film’s last chapter, chapter 5, whose title appears on the screen in capital letters: REVENGE OF THE GIANT FACE. The opening shot of this sequence may well be the most elaborately designed and most self-reflexive shot in the film. We see Shosanna, dressed as a vamp in a clinging red dress, in profile, leaning with her back against the metal frame of a circular window. In French such an opening is called an “oeil de bœuf” (ox eye), and this one does look like a giant eye, a classic reference to cinema. The glass is transparent, offering a view of the hall below, with a Nazi flag (whose color exactly matches Shosanna’s dress) and part of a big film poster featuring the fictional film star Bridget von Hammersmark. But the window also reflects Shosanna’s image, which thus becomes superimposed on the film poster, as if Shosanna herself were a film star—an impression reinforced by her vampish dress, her sleek blond hair worn loose, and her sexy pose. Multiplying the reflections is the triple mirror of Shosanna’s dressing table on the right, which reflects the round window as well as Shosanna’s image—and bizarrely, her image is seen again but in reverse on screen left, in an impossible “pseudo-mirror” effect that is obviously a montage. Meanwhile, on the sound track we hear David Bowie singing “Cat People,” with its opening verse, “I can stare for a thousand years.” This verse, coinciding with the moment when Shosanna looks through the window at the Nazi banner, symbol of the “thousand year Reich,” produces a parodic effect. Another parodic allusion to Nazi ideology is suggested a few
seconds later, when the camera lingers over Shosanna’s face as she sits at her dressing table and applies her makeup. Until now, she has always been shown without makeup, dressed in dark colors, but here she is a blonde, blue-eyed bombshell dressed in Nazi red, painting her face like a movie star—or like a warrior about to go into battle, for she applies rouge to her cheeks with stylized gestures, like war paint. This new, “Aryan” incarnation of Shosanna is the very opposite of the Nazi stereotype of the Jew. We could take it to signify: “The Nazi stereotype of Jews is a lie,” or more radically: “Every image you see in a film is an illusion.”

At the end of this sequence, Shosanna loads her gun, a small “ladylike” pistol that she slips into her purse. Some commentators have criticized this action, and the whole sequence, for the equation it seems to establish between the Jewish avenger and the Nazis, both of them violent and murderous (a similarity reinforced by Shosanna’s blood-red dress). But I think it makes more sense to put the emphasis on Tarantino’s manipulation of images, his insistence on artifice: if Shosanna resembles the Nazis here, it’s because she chooses to look like them for this occasion. She is a manipulator of images, like any filmmaker, including of course Tarantino himself.

3. Pride of the Nation and Shosanna’s reply

Another sequence in chapter 5—the longest, most complicated sequence in terms of plot and images—features two “films within the film”: the Nazi propaganda film Pride of the Nation (which was actually made by Eli Roth, who plays one of the “Basterds” and has directed several B films in Hollywood) and the film made by Shosanna (that is, Tarantino) that she inserts into the propaganda film as a literal reply to it.

Pride of the Nation, presumably a full-length film that we see in brief fragments intercut with a great deal of action that goes on both inside and outside the theater, is the film produced by Goebbels about the exploits of the war hero Frederick Zoller, who plays himself. (Tarantino alludes here to Audie Murphy, the American war hero who starred in a 1955 film version of his autobiography, To Hell and Back.) This black-and-white film within the film, consisting mainly of Zoller shooting and yelling at American soldiers from the top of a tower, single-handedly killing dozens, is presented as an example/pastiche of Nazi cinema; but, as Eric Rentschler notes, this kind of war film, focusing on battle scenes, was actually not a genre practiced in the Third Reich. Veit Harlan’s Kolberg, released in January 1945, featured some victorious battle scenes—evidently as a way of encouraging Germans to fight

to the death. But Kolberg was a costume drama in color, set in Napoleonic times, not a black-and-white war film like Pride of the Nation. The black-and-white combat film was, however, a genre very much practiced in Hollywood after the war—so we could think of this historically inaccurate insert as Tarantino’s “hijacking” or “Americanization” of Nazi cinema. (The allusion to Audie Murphy could be part of this “hijacking.”) The fact that Hitler laughs delightedly at seeing the German hero triumph over so many enemies suggests that even the Great Illusionist himself could fall prey to cinematische illusion—by June 1944, there were not too many real German victories for him to celebrate. Goebbels’s tears of joy and heartfelt “danke, mein Führer” when Hitler tells him this is his “finest film” are a particularly fine touch.

Almost immediately after this exchange between the Führer and his minister, we see a close-up of Zoller, taunting the enemy: “Who wants to send a message to Germany?” And immediately after that, in reply, Shosanna’s face fills the screen: “I have a message for Germany. That you are all going to die.” This is the film she has made, cutting off the Nazi film, like reality suddenly irrupting into a dream. Indeed, Goebbels’s face expresses the shock of someone who “can’t believe his eyes,” while Hitler screams “Stop the projectors!” Panic and pandemonium ensue, followed by the planned explosion as Marcel throws his lighted cigarette on a pile of film behind the screen. It is important to note that the Shosanna on screen is wearing a black sweater, her hair pulled back, without makeup—this is the Shosanna we met in the earlier chapter. Meanwhile, the other Shosanna, the one who looks like a Nazi vamp, is lying dead in the projection booth, next to the war hero Zoller: one of the plot developments we saw while the Nazi film was playing was an encounter between the two of them that ended in a double murder. Tarantino’s quick cut to a shot of the two dead bodies shortly before Shosanna’s film cuts off Pride of the Nation seems to want to underline the paradox of all photographic and filmic representation: the image captured by the camera remains alive and eternally identical to itself, even after the death of the actual persons who appear in it.

4. “My Masterpiece”?

The final sequence of the film, which culminates in the American lieutenant Raine’s brutally carving a swastika on the forehead of a German war prisoner he is supposed to be guarding, provoked a great deal of negative criticism in the press. Is this ending a sign of Tarantino’s lack of respect for History and for civilized values? Is it a bravura piece of self-congratulation, as Tarantino juxtaposes Lieutenant Raine’s final declaration while he looks at Landa’s maimed forehead (“This just may be my masterpiece”) with his own name: “Written and directed by Quentin Tarantino”? Or is it an instance of the way
Tarantino forces the viewer to confront his or her fantasies by positioning us as both rooting for Raine (he is, after all, one of the “good guys”) and experiencing the agony of Landa (since the final shot is of Raine seen from below by his victim)? By positioning us in Landa’s place in his last shot, Tarantino implicates the viewer both as victim and as perpetrator (Landa is a victim at this moment, but a perpetrator throughout the film). Kligerman sees this as Tarantino’s way of eliciting a “specular affect between pleasure and unease” that disrupts any easy equilibrium in the spectator.\(^{30}\)

If the cutting of the swastika into Landa’s forehead provoked moral outrage on the part of many viewers, it was also (as we saw earlier) defended by at least one critic on the moral grounds that the swastika was a “mark of Cain” that would prevent the Nazi officer from blending into anonymity after the war. But Tarantino makes it difficult to sustain this somewhat “smooth” argument, for he also has Raine commit a totally unmotivated and unjustifiable act of killing in this scene: Raine shoots Landa’s radio operator, who was supposed to get immunity along with Landa in the latter’s “deal” with the American generals. And as if that were not enough, after the radio operator is killed, we see him being scalped by Raine’s Jewish sidekick, Private Utivich. There is not much pleasure here for the viewer, and a great deal of unease. Equally disturbing is Tarantino’s particularly graphic filming of the tattooing scene, which is shot in close-up, forcing most viewers to shut their eyes as blade slices skin. It recalls one of the most famous scenes in the history of film, the opening sequence of Bunuel and Dali’s *Un Chien andalou* (1928), in which a man (played by Bunuel himself) slices a woman’s eye with a razor. Many viewers cannot bear to look at this opening without covering their eyes, even after multiple viewings of the film. Like Bunuel, Tarantino may be reminding us that “cuts” are constitutive of cinema: let the viewer beware.

The German critic George Seesslen, in his book devoted to *Inglourious Basterds*, wrote about its relation to the troubled history it deals with: “We have here a form of representation that is concerned neither with ‘how it was’ [history] nor with ‘how it felt’ [psychology], but rather with how it will be signified [wie es bezeichnet wird].”\(^ {31}\) The question of how it—World War II, the Nazis, the Jews, the Holocaust—will be signified is becoming increasingly important, now that the historical event is receding further and further from living memory. We cannot have access to the historical past except through signs: words, images, and indexical traces—but indexical traces need to be interpreted, which necessitates more words and images.

\(^{30}\) Kligerman 156.

It is in this domain of “how it is signified” that the most passionate critical debates about Holocaust representation take place. *Inglourious Basterds* may not be a masterpiece, as Tarantino (jokingly?) claims; but as a film that foregrounds the problematic relation of images to reality, it’s “damn good,” to quote Lieutenant Raine’s phrase about Landa’s deal with the generals. There is more than one way to represent the Holocaust, and the creation of a popular work that provokes so much thought is not the least.

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