

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Director: Quentin Tarantino. *Inglourious Basterds*. Miramax, 2009. Distributed by the Weinstein Company (US) and Universal Pictures (International). Film. Rated R for strong graphic violence, language and brief sexuality. Running time: 153 minutes.

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Published on H-German (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing

Inglorious Vengeance Fantasies

Few films offer the same controversial, radical reinterpretation of the historical-war film as Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, a masterfully entertaining, tragicomic satire on the nature of group hatred and violence. Set in Nazi-occupied France during the Second World War, the film follows a group of Jewish American soldiers, "the basterds," as they rampage throughout the countryside led by Lt. Aldo Raines (Brad Pitt), killing and mutilating German soldiers. Engaged in a secret plot to kill Hitler, the basterds cross paths with Shosanna Dreyfus (Mélanie Laurent), a French-Jewish girl in hiding, who is seeking vengeance on the Nazis after the murder of her family by brutal SS Colonel Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz). When Shosanna strikes up a reluctant acquaintance with Pvt. Fredrick Zoller (Daniel Brühl), a famous German war hero, the latter convinces Josef Goebbels to screen the premiere of his new propaganda film depicting Zoller's adventures in the Paris movie theater she operates. The stage is thus set for the separate machinations of Shosanna and the basterds to come to fruition in a spectacularly violent penultimate scene, in which they murder Adolf Hitler, Josef Goebbels, and a score of other Nazi luminaries during the premiere of the film within the film.

On the surface, the film's blatant historical revisionism serves a dramatic purpose. Historical accuracy would trap the narrative within the confines of a well-known chain of events. The worn plot-line of a covert U.S. mission to assassinate Hitler offers little by way of

tension if we know the assassins fail. After all, we know Hitler shot himself beneath the chancellery in Berlin. Of course, many powerful and successful films that focus on popular historic events avoid this problem by placing a fictional sub-story within the larger narrative of the historical context (one need only consider *Titanic* [dir: James Cameron, 1997] or *The Last of the Mohicans* [dir: Michael Mann, 1992]). That technique allows for audience identification with the characters and their time, as well as the suspense of ignorance as to their eventual fate, while also examining the historical factors at work and their broader moral implications. By posing the question of vengeance through a fantasy of Jews murdering Hitler, Tarantino explicitly avoids both constructs. *Inglourious Basterds* does not explore the Third Reich to draw moral lessons about the character of the period. By doing away with historical reality, the film uses Nazi-occupied Europe as the backdrop for an ahistorical film concerned with the more ageless and universal themes of communal hatred, violence, and revenge, issues explored through the framework of cinema as popular phenomenon.

The very choice to shoot the film at the Babelsberg studios in Potsdam, which saw the production of masterpieces like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) as well as Nazi antisemitic propaganda films like *The Eternal Jew* (dir: Fritz Hippler, 1940), suggests both the themes and referential style Tarantino had in mind. In true postmodern fashion, the application of intertextuality—combining references and elements from a wide-ranging and disparate

spectrum of genres—as well as the use of source music (from Ennio Morricone to David Bowie), each contribute to the film’s ahistorical diegetic world. Tarantino’s analysis, however, comes more from content than form. He establishes the main motif in the opening scene, where Colonel Landa postulates on the nature of group hatred within the vocabulary of Nazi racial ideology while interrogating a French farmer suspected of hiding Jews:

“If one were to determine what attributes the Jews share with a beast, it would be that of the rat.... If a rat were to scamper through your door right now, would you greet it with hostility.... Has a rat ever done anything to create this animosity you feel towards them.... I assume you don’t share the same animosity with squirrels that you do with rats.... Yet, they are both rodents, are they not ... they even rather look alike.... However, interesting as the thought may be, it makes not one bit of difference to how you feel.... You don’t like them. You don’t really know why you don’t like them. All you know is, you find them repulsive.”

From this scene, the film fictionalizes the entire historical sequence of events by having the imaginary sub-stories consume the larger historical narrative. *Inglorious Basterds* consciously eschews identification with the characters, simultaneously utilizing and poking fun at popular culture depictions to subtly highlight the different nationalities’ underlying similarity: the glee with which they pursue ruthless and brutal violence as a means of vengeance. Hence, two British intelligence officers—one of whom is played by Mike Myers, in a sly reference to that actor’s iconic role as stereotypically British secret agent Austin Powers (*Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, dir. Jay Roach, 1997)—discuss assassination in the most trite of English phraseology in the presence of an overdrawn, cigar-smoking Winston Churchill. Similar lampoonish depictions characterize Hitler and Goebbels as vicious, childish, easily enraged buffoons à la Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1940). Or consider noirish German actress-spy Bridget von Hammersmark (Diane Kruger), an obvious allusion to Mata Hari and Marlene Dietrich (both of whom are verbally referenced in the film). Then, of course, there is Colonel Landa, the archetypal, over-the-top Nazi villain. He is urbane and sadistic by turns, menacingly symbolizing the simultaneity of culture and barbarism with his manners and fluency in four languages and proud boastfulness concerning his moniker as “The Jew Hunter.” In fact, the use of multiple tongues within the film by a number of characters (much of the film is in subtitles) underscores the irony that these peo-

ple can speak one another’s language, yet remain disposed towards murdering each other. The comical lack of multilingual ability by the Americans provides a revealing exception: Brad Pitt as Lt. Aldo Raine is a prototypical American hillbilly from Tennessee, utterly unrefined and incapable of pronouncing foreign words let alone languages, and as single-mindedly dedicated to killing as many Nazis as possible as he is myopic about what actually constitutes a Nazi.

The basterds are, in fact, the film’s most shocking metaphor for the cultural universality of violent propensities: Upending the traditional arc of ferocity in the Second World War, it is the Jews in this film who scalp and murder Nazis indiscriminately and with the utmost savagery. The basterds are also Americans who are asked to confront and reify their own nation’s crime of slavery by an SS officer, who compares African American history with the capture and imprisonment of King Kong. In sum, the Jewish American basterds are eerily similar to the Nazis themselves. Their habit of carving swastikas into the foreheads of the rare German prisoners allowed to escape echoes the branding of Jewish inmates at Auschwitz. A related resemblance becomes evident in Raine’s rationalization for this atrocity: to mark the enemy for eternal identification as the enemy regardless of their exterior uniform and physicality. By presenting the possibility of Jewish revenge on Hitler and the Nazis—a hypothetical situation of retribution—Tarantino involves the audience itself in a subliminal process of vigilantism and catharsis. The film thus asks us to consider the possibility that we are capable of considering these forms of brutality acceptable in certain situations.

Even Shosanna and Zoller, the two most humane, non-caricatured characters, are no exception to the pattern of human bloodlust and ability to hate and kill other population groups in large numbers. Again, the thematic explication comes from cinematic references. When the two meet, Shosanna expresses her distaste for German cinema in terms of the propaganda films of Leni Riefenstahl, yet when Zoller (a Chaplin fan) notes her fondness for the less Nazi-oriented director G. W. Pabst (who is referenced throughout the film), she responds with defensive French patriotism: “We respect directors in our country.” Shosanna expresses the emotions of romantic love and of having lost her family, yet conspires to incinerate the premiere’s German audience members, who themselves laugh maniacally at the gratuitous violence of the film within the film minutes before their own fiery doom at the hands of Jews. Zoller’s lethal military exploits, as portrayed onscreen for the enthralled audience,

are juxtaposed with his remorse at having committed them. The farce only extends to the precipice of absolute ridiculousness. Indeed, even those protagonists who are stock pop culture caricatures of their respective nationalities still express all-too-human charm, idiosyncrasy, and pathos.

Due to its lack of authenticity, *Inglourious Basterds* is not of much practical use to historians teaching a straightforward survey course on the actual history of the Third Reich. Nonetheless, the film does offer a cinematic reflection of contemporary assumptions concerning the history of the Nazi era and the Holocaust, as

well as a current look at the influence of cinema on the construction of national-historical stereotypes. More importantly, because Tarantino chose a controversial topic certain to offend sensitivities, *Inglourious Basterds* forces audiences to challenge their assumptions of what constitutes justified vengeance, and to what extent feelings of violation and urges towards retaliatory violence differ from one group of people to the next. Educators focusing on genocide and ethnic hatred could certainly utilize the film's consistent thematic exploration of group violence in a discussion of similarities between different episodes of mass killing.

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Citation: Bradley Nichols. Review of Director: Quentin Tarantino, *Inglourious Basterds*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

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