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Nazisploitation and the Problem of Violence in

Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*

Jared Cook

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Nazisploitation and the Problem of Violence in  
Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*

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In this thesis, I explore the representation of Nazis and violence in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), including how the film proposes justification for violence and murder, and how the film participates in cultural fantasies. The film presents an alternate outcome of World War II in which the Allies achieve victory by assassinating Hitler and the High Command of the Third Reich in a movie theater. The Nazis in the film, far from being a complex enemy, are used for their token villain status. Using the Nazis in this way both participates in and reinterprets the Nazisploitation genre. The protagonists, the clandestine military force known as the "Basterds," which attacks German troops using guerrilla warfare tactics, help make this victory possible. Aldo, their leader, encourages his men to brutalize the Nazis they come in contact with, and Aldo shows the way by carving swastikas in the foreheads of Nazis he allows to live. Tarantino creates an aesthetic surrounding his violence in an attempt to create a paradigm in which murder is imagined to be morally acceptable. Yet the film also supports this paradigm by setting the Nazi up in much the same way cinema uses the zombie, as a killable being, a blank body on which violence can be justifiably enacted. As a blank body, cultural imagination can also be inscribed on the Nazi, using them as a meditation on Jewish revenge fantasy and a fantasy of American revenge against terrorists. In the end, the Basterds become more like Nazi villains than heroes due to their participation in Nazi-like violence. The audience, as well, faces the problem of becoming like Nazis by viewing the film.

Keywords: Violence, Nazisploitation, Quentin Tarantino, World War II, Jewish Revenge Fantasy, Terrorism

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## Introduction

By the time SS Colonel Hans Landa surrenders to Lieutenant Aldo Raine at the end of Quentin Tarantino's 2009 *Inglourious Basterds*, his fate is sealed: he will get a swastika carved into his forehead. Not even surrendering can convince Aldo not to torture him; Landa was, and always will be, a Nazi. Landa's road to surrender began at the start of the film where he fulfilled his task from the *Führer* to hunt down and kill Jews in French farm country (for which he earned the nickname "Jew Hunter"). Landa also uses his detective skills to uncover a plot to assassinate Hitler and his high command in a movie theater, which is to be carried out by the Aldo's team, the Basterds. Working with British agents and German defectors, the Basterds plan to blow up the theater during a premier of Goebbels' film. When Landa captures Aldo and his fellow "Basterd" Pfc. Utivich, Landa reveals that he has known about the plot all along. With the men at his disposal, he makes a deal to let the assassination take place in return for immunity from the U.S. government. He officially surrenders to Aldo in a deserted forest, giggling, "We're your prisoners," as if it were all a game (*Inglourious Basterds* 02:26:52). But Aldo "can't abide" Landa taking off his uniform and everything that it has represented (02:28:20). For Aldo, the adage "once a Nazi, always a Nazi" is law. So, Aldo does what he has done to all the other Nazis he has let live: he carves a swastika into Landa's forehead, and the punishment seems fitting for a man known as the Jew Hunter. Interestingly enough, after focusing on Landa squirm, the shot reverses and we see Aldo and Private Utivich looking admiringly down on the bloody mess, declaring it Aldo's "masterpiece" (02:28:10). The whole film seems to have wound down to this point: Aldo, like the man whose body he defaces, is a master of brutalization and torture.

How can *Inglourious Basterds* justify using brutality and torture to punish those whose crime is brutal torture? Aldo's carving of the swastika into Landa's forehead reveals a dual purpose of violence in the film – first, to code violence in a way that distracts from its brutal

nature, and second, to mark the Nazi body as a morally acceptable space for the practice of this aestheticized violence. In Tarantino's film, violence becomes a form of art, a craft to be practiced and perfected. However, viewing violence in this way only brings up further issues. First, Landa's finely groomed Nazi body is portrayed as an artistic canvas, upon which to "create," or inflict harm. Second, Landa is portrayed as a human body that can be tortured and defaced without any moral qualms. Finally, an even larger question arises of how the film creates a paradigm in which this kind of violence is acceptable. In this thesis, I will argue that Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* creates a person that is morally justifiable to kill by portraying the Nazi in a way that makes violence and murder seem acceptable. I will also argue that the film's portrayal of violence and the paradigm of justifiable killing produce moral problems, making the Basterds and the film's audience participants in Nazi-like violence. I will begin my discussion by addressing the genre that has come to be known as Nazisploitation, the exploitation of Nazis in media, and will assert that Tarantino's aestheticized violence is best understood in the context of post-World War II representations of Nazis in films and other visual media. From there, I will address how Nazis are specifically exploited within the *Inglourious Basterds*, showing how the film defines and codes Nazis to support the notion that Nazis are nothing more than pure evil. I will then discuss how the paradigm of justifiable killing is created in two ways. First, I will address the aesthetic of violence in the film and show how this aesthetic creates a body on which violence is justified. Second, using multicultural theory, I will show how an "Other"<sup>1</sup> is created in the Nazis, and how this Other is portrayed in two types of revenge fantasy. Finally, I will show how the film's paradigm of justifiable murder makes Nazis out of the Basterds by inadvertently portraying them as perpetrators of Nazi-like violence.

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<sup>1</sup> A more complete and detailed discussion of the "Other" will be given later in the paper.

Although my argument focuses on the ways that Nazis are placed into the role of victims, it is not the purpose of this thesis to lessen the atrocities and guilt of the Nazis for the unspeakable, morally repugnant violence that they visited upon so many of their victims, especially the Jews of Europe, the Roma/Sinti population, homosexuals, the disabled, and other specific groups that were targets of Nazi violence. Soldiers under National Socialism perpetrated some of the worst crimes ever known to modern man, and they deserve to be demonized and vilified. My point is not to drum up sympathy for history's most notorious and nefarious criminals. Nor I do wish to imply that they deserve a second, compassionate look; nor are they deserving of any kind of sympathy. Instead, I will argue that by creating easily killable, unambiguously evil Nazis and then using them as the object of cathartic violence, the film makes its protagonists and viewers into participants in the fascist project.<sup>2</sup> *The Inglourious Basterds*, and those who watch their actions and sympathize with them, promote the fascist idea that some humans are ideologically marked as legal and fair objects of murder and violence.

### **The Film**

*Inglourious Basterds* imagines a different World War II. The key player in the film is Aldo "the Apache" Raine, commander of the *Inglourious Basterds* (a Jewish-American guerilla unit, which hunts and murders Nazis), who carves swastikas in Nazis he lets live (Aldo and the Jewish protagonist, Shosanna, will be referred to by their first names, as is consistent with the film). Aldo's fellow Basterd, Donny "The Bear Jew" Donowitz is well-known for beating Nazis to death with a baseball bat. Their team contains one German member, Hugo Stiglitz, who murdered several Gestapo officers while he was an enlisted German soldier. And SS Colonel Hans Landa is known as the "Jew Hunter" for his uncanny ability to find any Jew anywhere. In

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the fascist project see Alfred Roseberg, *Mythus des XX. Jahrhunderts* and James Glass, *Life Unworthy of Life: Racial Phobia and Mass Murder in Hitler's Germany*.

make-believe 1941 Nazi-occupied France, Hans Landa hunts down and murders Shosanna Dreyfus's Jewish family, but allows her to escape. Aldo and his men succeed in achieving legendary status among the infuriated *Führer's* men. Having escaped from Landa in the beginning of the film, Shosanna is now managing a movie theater in Paris. Her good looks attract the German war hero, Private Frederick Zoller, a sniper who has starred in a propaganda film supervised by Joseph Goebbels. Using his powers of persuasion, Zoller convinces Goebbels to premiere the film in her cinema. Meanwhile, the British Lieutenant, Archie Hicox, a film critic, is detailed by Winston Churchill to help the Basterds enact a clandestine operation to blow up the theater with the Nazis inside, including Hitler. In a twist of lucky fate, Shosanna also plans to kill the Nazi command at the premiere by setting fire to the cinema. A few of the Allied team meet to plan the operation in a cellar bar and find themselves with a group of off-duty German soldiers. After accidentally revealing the plot, the small group finds itself in a shootout. Raine and the surviving Basterds opt to continue the mission. Learning of the plot, Landa captures Aldo and Utivich, but offers Aldo a deal to end the war by letting two of the Basterds continue with the assassination in return for amnesty for Landa. Shosanna and Zoller shoot each other while Shosanna's friend locks the auditorium and sets the cinema ablaze. Basterds Donowitz and Ulmer trigger their dynamite while machine-gunning the panicked audience, killing Goebbels, Hitler and the rest. Before turning Landa over to his superiors, Aldo cuts a swastika into his forehead.

### **Inglourious Basterds and Nazisploitation**

The issues of revenge fantasy and violence that I wish to address have all been hinted at in reviews about *Inglourious Basterds*, but I wish to highlight some of the other receptions of the film. *Inglourious Basterds* opened to mixed reviews at the Cannes Film Festival, but was

generally well received at the American box office (Newman, Hoberman, Doherty, Frederic). The most obvious interpretation of Tarantino's film is that the film itself is cinematic, quoting film history and literally using the power of cinema to bring down the Third Reich (Walters, Raphael). *Inglourious Basterds* also fits tidily into Tarantino's tradition<sup>3</sup> of violent cinema. It is this tradition that helps us understand Tarantino as a master of violent cinema, and helps *Inglourious Basterds* find its place among other films of similar nature (Hoberman). That *Inglourious Basterds* continues Tarantino's pattern may be expected, but that does not mean that Tarantino has run out of things to say about violence. This has been briefly addressed in reviews for the film. The film's strong Jewish/Nazi discourse implies a Jewish revenge fantasy that places violence within the discourse of Jewish imagination of retribution (Cohen-Dicker, Doherty). Yet, it is disputed whether the film is justifiable as a legitimate Jewish fantasy (Rosenblatt & Kanin). I will examine these issues of violence and Jewish revenge fantasy in more detail than has previously been done, but I will also address further issues that have not found a place within the reviews of the film, such as the aesthetics of violence, American revenge fantasy, and the problems of viewing for the film's audience.

### **The Fascist Aesthetic**

American cinema has long had a fascination with the Fascist aesthetic of Adolf Hitler and fascist project in general. This project comes accompanied by its own aesthetic, and it is this fascist aesthetic that helps us understand how Nazis are used in *Inglourious Basterds*. But moreover, we can see how Tarantino's protagonists participate in the fascism. There are many elements to the Fascist aesthetic, including a glorification of a national self, the idealistic portrayal of the absolute power of a single leader over the unified body of the population, the

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<sup>3</sup> See *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and the *Kill Bill* films (2003, 2004) for examples of Tarantino's violent tradition.

militarization of the masses, and the vilification of an extra-national Other (Benjamin 27). In terms of the Fascist aesthetic, the message is more important than the art; art serves politics. The main form of art used in the fascist project is ideological realism. The fascist aesthetic glorifies the national self, visualizes the mobility of the masses, and reinforces the role of the all-powerful leader (Mosse 245). Nowhere is this aesthetic more apparent than in the films Leni Riefenstahl made for Hitler, *Olympia* and *Triumph des Willens*. Both films provide a look at the representation of the perfect body, both political and physical, and in *Triumph des Willens*, Riefenstahl's art serves to perpetuate the political message of national solidarity and military might. Art Historian George L. Mosse describes the foundations of the aesthetic as the need for "power to express itself visually," or it is the need for political power to be made clear (Mosse 245). More than just the need to exert control over the masses, the fascist aesthetic was also "the means through which most people grasped the fascist message, transforming politics into a civic religion (246). This included the submission of the individual to the state and the *Führer* (249). With the symbol of the Aryan male body, the fascist aesthetic also became an ideal of perfection, order, and harmony (248). And thus with Riefenstahl, the idea of a visual aesthetic supporting the fascist ideology is born.

The deeper, hidden message of the fascist aesthetic has been the topic of some scholarship. For one, it has been brushed aside as a mere tool of propaganda (Mosse 245). Yet, in this representation of order and patriarchy some scholars, including Susan Sontag, Joan Mellen, Sabine Hake, and Klaus Theweleit find hidden messages of repressed homosexuality, sadomasochistic relationships, patriarchal dominance, and submission to the leader, meaning

either the father or the state.<sup>4</sup> Film Scholar Karl J. Trybus examines the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Pedro Almodóvar to define the developments in the representation of the male body after fascism. For Trybus, the male body has taken on more liberal representations of the body and sexuality (Trybus 138). Even Riefenstahl, in her book of photographs of East African warriors, *The Last of Nuba*, has tried to redefine the fascist aesthetic, attempting to tear it away from its politics (Sontag 73). But Susan Sontag, in her essay “Fascinating Fascism” has explained how this is in actuality just a reinforcement of the fascist message of the perfect body (Sontag 79).

Even though decades have passed since World War II, the fascist aesthetic is still portrayed as a symbol of the tyrannical state and pure evil. This is very apparent in how Nazis have been portrayed in certain films that have been made since World War II. In films from many different genres, from action (*Indiana Jones*), to horror (*Dead Snow*), to historical fiction (*Saving Private Ryan*), to musicals (*The Producers*), Nazis have become cinema’s stereotypical bad guys, the “master paradigms of evil” (Magilow). In this tradition Nazis are not sexualized, not overly violent beings. In a review of *Inglourious Basterds*, Thomas Doherty addresses the status of the Nazi in popular cinema,

The Nazis have been the not-so-secret weapon in Hollywood's World War II arsenal.

Reeking with sinister charisma and sleek elegance, all oily solicitude and coiled menace, enunciating clipped witticisms and veiled threats, decked out in those natty uniforms and way cool insignia--God, what would we do without them? (Doherty 59)

The tradition of using Nazis in Hollywood has been neither part of the true fascist aesthetic, nor part of the Nazisploitation genre, but rather the use of the Nazi as a prototypical villain. Nazis are

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<sup>4</sup> See the following: Joan Mellen’s “Fascism in Contemporary Film,” Jeffery T. Schnapp’s “Fascinating Fascism,” Klaus Theweleit’s *Männerphantasien* volumes, and Sabine Hake’s “Art and Exploitation: On the Fascist Imaginary in 1970s Italian Cinema.”

faceless, generic evil in several Hollywood films. They have to come to represent the token enemy against whom the protagonists fight. In the *Star Wars* films from George Lucas, the Empire is represented as a fascist state, in which the mobilization of the masses of storm troopers is vital (the title Storm Troopers is even a borrowed expression from Hitler's elite WWII soldiers comprising the *Sturmabteilung*). Mobilization of the masses is even a key factor in the more recent *Tron: Legacy* (2010). The neo-classic representation of the male form also holds as a standard for militaristic strength and political dominance in the 2006 film *300*, by Zack Snyder. The evil racism of the fascist aesthetic was recently quoted in the 2010 film *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*, where jack-booted soldiers and evil administrators hunt down mixed-race wizards and subject them to cruel mock trials (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* 00:45:34). In Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, the fascist aesthetic is applicable because the Nazi body represents Hitler's tyrannical evil. But moreover, *Inglourious Basterds* alludes to the fascist project by creating an extra-national Other in the Nazi, one who is justifiably detestable and killable. Thus, the film creates its own version of the fascist message and invites the audience to participate. Another useful reinvention of the fascist aesthetic has come to be known as Nazisploitation, the exploitation of Nazis in media.

### **Nazisploitation**

*Inglourious Basterds*, I would argue, is best approached in the context of Nazisploitation. Beginning with the first works of Nazisploitation, I will work chronologically to place Tarantino's film in its proper place within the genre. Historically, Nazisploitation is neologism that means a sub-genre of the 1970s exploitation cinema, such as "Blacksploitation" or "Sexploitation." Each of these sub-genres zeroes in on a specific topic and exaggerates certain of its aspects. Nazisploitation exploits Nazis by portraying them, in their finely uniformed, fascist bodies, as sexual deviants, abusing their power by terrorizing prisoners in concentration

camps. The sub-genre has its most significant roots in the 1960s in Israel with so-called *Stalag* fiction (*Stalag* being short for *Stammlager*, a term for German work and prison camps during WWII). These works of fiction usually center on a downed allied pilot as the protagonist, who is imprisoned in a *Stalag*. From there, the story follows variations on scenarios of torture and sexual abuse inflicted upon the prisoner by the Nazi guards or officers (Pinchevski & Brand 390). *Stalag* fiction made sexual abuse of prisoners a basic motif in the genre. Penned by Israeli authors in Hebrew, these fictional works rose in popularity (particularly among Israeli adolescent boys, the sons of Holocaust survivors) during the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann (388-390). With *Stalag* fiction, the Nazisploitation genre was officially born, and additionally, the attributes of the genre codified.

Separate from *Stalag* fiction in the 1960s, Hollywood churned out several Nazisploitation films in the 1970s. The most well-known of these is the 1975 film *Ilsa: Shewolf<sup>5</sup> of the SS* by Don Edmonds. *Ilsa* brings all the traditional parts of the Nazisploitation genre together: the concentration camp setting, the sadomasochistic relationship between guard and prisoner, and an exploitative look at hyper-sexualized violence. These elements, following *Stalag* literature, form the basic, traditional model for a Nazisploitation film. *Ilsa*'s relative success and subsequent icon status are evidenced by the fact that the original prompted three sequels with similar titles and the same lead actress: *Ilsa, Harem Keeper of the Oil Sheiks* (1976), *Ilsa, the Tigress of Siberia* (1977), and *Ilsa, the Wicked Warden* (1977). At the same time, several other films followed the same Nazisploitation pattern as *Ilsa*, including *Salon Kitty* (1976), *The last Orgy of*

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<sup>5</sup> As to the question of why there are relatively few depictions of female fascists, George L. Mosse has this to say about the fascist aesthetic: "The beautiful male body was an important symbol in all European fascist movements...the beautiful male body as the eighteenth-century Greek paradigm had it, projected both self-control in its posture and virility in the play of its muscles; it symbolized both the dynamic and the discipline which society wanted and needed" (Mosse 248). The male body of the fascist aesthetic was then twisted by the 1970s Nazisploitation films like *Ilsa: Shewolf of the SS*. These films moved from the idealized male form, to the sexualized female body, thus departing from the fascist aesthetic.

*the Third Reich* (1977), *Fräulein Devil* (1977). Nazisploitation cinema in America continued the sexualized, violent tradition started in Israel.

In the same decade as Hollywood's heyday of Nazisploitation, Italian cinema contributed to the Nazisploitation genre with a series of films that formed a sub-genre called *Sadiconazista*. Compared to Nazisploitation cinema in American, *Sadiconazista* is recognized as a more artistic expression of the sadomasochistic, concentration camp model. In a paper presented at the Freie Universität Berlin in 2007, Marcus Stiglegger drew a clear line between Italian *Sadiconazista* and American Nazi-sexploitation, stating that the Italian versions of "connections between sexuality, politics and history" are done "on an artistically higher level" than *Ilsa* (Stiglegger). As the best example of the artistic sub-genre, he cites Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere di notte* (1974). For Stiglegger, *Il portiere* represents something more than a "a trivial structure" or "a voyeuristic look into the concentration camp brothel and a pseudo-medical experimentation centre" (Stiglegger). Instead, *Il portiere* "further develops some realisations from [Cavani's] previous documentary series on the third Reich, and tells the story of the fatal reunion of a SS man and his former victim in the form of an amour fou" (Stiglegger). On the other hand, Stiglegger compares this to what he calls the "repulsively adolescent and racist torture-camp movies of Don Edmonds" (Stiglegger). The clear line between Italian *Sadiconazista* and *Ilsa* lies in the fact that Italian filmmakers tend to use the sex, torture, and prison motifs as canvases on which to paint a bigger intellectual picture of troubling, abusive relationships as well as the play of power and submission in both the private and political sector. In all cases, Nazisploitation has been defined by its sexualization of Nazis. The more recent Nazisploitation developments, however, have varied from this tradition.

With the rise of video games (specifically war video games) in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nazisploitation underwent two interesting developments. First, starting with the popular 1992 title *Wolfenstein 3D*, we see a desexualized version of Nazisploitation. Nazis are still recognizable as the master paradigms of evil, but the sex has been dropped from the Nazisploitation model of the 1970s. The sadism, however, remains, although it is not the Nazis who perpetrate the violence against the protagonist, but the protagonist, played by the gamer, against the Nazi. In fact, in most of these games, the Nazis' evil deeds are never seen, but simply assumed. This is a common characteristic of these video games. There is no prologue showing horrific crimes against humanity performed by the Nazis. Instead, other than resisting the protagonist, these Nazis do little visible harm to anybody. In this new Nazisploitation model, then, violence is not committed *by* the Nazi, but *against* him. (see other games like the *Call of Duty* series, in which the gamer fights Nazis, including Nazi Zombies in the 2010 *Call of Duty: Black Ops*). Thus the biggest change to the Nazisploitation genre was that the violence was turned against the Nazi in a desexualized, violent story.

The second change is in the realm of how the Nazi is more than just a token "bad guy." Instead of enacting sexual violence on a prisoner of war in a concentration camp, the Nazi is portrayed as the incurable megalomaniac criminal, hell-bent on the purest and most diabolical destruction of the world. He is disconnected from the historically accurate fascist machine, and does not usually follow conventional or historical models of warfare. For example, in Guillermo del Toro's 2004 *Hellboy*, the evil genius behind the release of demonic forces in the world was a Nazi, and in the 2011 film *Captain America: The First Avenger* by Joe Johnston, an evil Nazi commander, the Red Skull, fights against America with advanced technology in hopes of world domination. In the case of *Wolfenstein*, insane and imaginary Nazi commanders are trying to

raise a mutant army to fight for their cause. It is against this enemy that a gamer fights in order to win certain video games. These two changes, desexualized violence and the portrayal of the Nazi as a mega criminal, represent a new era in Nazisploitation. This is important for Tarantino's film, since the Nazis in his film, especially Landa, follow the model of desexualized violence, and are also a seemingly renegade part of Hitler's fascist machine against which American protagonists must fight.

### **Fitting *Inglourious Basterds* into Nazisploitation**

There is, then, a difference between traditional Nazisploitation films and non-exploitation films that use Nazis as the evil trope to be overcome. Nazisploitation is more than just using the Nazi as a token "bad guy." In an attempt to understand Nazisploitation, I argue that Nazisploitation is something more than just the portrayal of Nazis as token evil. I would also argue that Nazisploitation does not necessarily need to be defined in terms of sexuality. In the Nazi sexploitation of America and Italy, Nazis are not only exploited as an evil fascist trope, but as something more, as sexualized deviants. Nazisploitation, therefore, could be more broadly defined by what I call the "bad guy plus" rule: that is, Nazis are used as villains plus something else. In the case of *Ilsa* and *Sadiconazista*, Nazis are bad guys plus sexual deviants.

In terms of the genre of Nazisploitation, *Inglourious Basterds* varies from the sexual tradition, following the more recent video game variation on Nazisploitation. For one, the Nazis in *Inglourious Basterds* follow the rule of being the token evil, plus something more. Simply put, they are the antagonist, but they also represent a kind of blank body used for violence, much like the *Call of Duty: Black Ops* video game. In fact, instead of viewing the atrocities committed by Nazis, in *Inglourious Basterds* the audience watches as the evil Nazis get their comeuppance, following the *Wolfenstein* model closely. In this way, the film ignores what the Nazis have done against humanity, stripping them of their position as war criminals. Additionally, the Nazis in

*Inglourious Basterds* tend to be on the delusional side, especially Goebbels and Hitler. Sadist violence in the film toward Nazis is the way Tarantino exploits Nazis. Their bodies become the playground of violent fantasies. The Nazis play a victim's role. They are brutalized and tortured for the viewers' sake. So, instead of the punisher, they become the punished in the violent revenge fantasy.

## **Creating the Paradigm of Justifiable Violence and Murder**

### **The Semiotics of Violence**

Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* creates a semiotics of violence that attempts to justify violent killing, if not only attempting to portray violence in a positive light. I will show how the film does this in three ways. When torture and murder are presented from the murderer's perspective, the film claims that violence is justifiable because it is equated with artistic creation. The perpetrator becomes an artist, and his murderous work art. Further, by having one of his characters kill Germans with a baseball bat, Tarantino uses baseball to connect violence with play, thus asserting that violence is acceptable because it is fun. Finally, referring to Michel Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish*, I will show how Tarantino portrays violence as spectacle, creating a voyeuristic paradigm within his violence. Through this paradigm, the viewer is not directly involved in the torture, but instead watches as violence is returned on the body of the Nazi perpetrator, and all from the detached comfort of a movie theater seat.

With its violent aesthetic, *Inglourious Basterds* participates in a tradition of the so-called "splatter film." The splatter genre is defined by graphic depictions of violence and gore, often presented within a fragmented narrative, underscoring the theme of psychological discord in the film (Arznen 178). *Inglourious Basterds* partially supposes that violence can be seen as art, but other splatter films show violence as a more technical skill. For example, in the *Saw* films, often

seen as the best example of splatter films, the perpetrator enacts little of his sadism personally. Instead, he participates vicariously through a plethora of intricate devices designed to gruesomely eliminate the loser of a demonic competition (*Saw* 00:10:23). He is a technician. Moreover, an artist could be considered a technician. A painter uses his brushes with the utmost skill to create a work of art. The murderer may do the same, creating his art on the body of his victim. In this way, the murderer is closely related to an artist, or technician. Further, the aesthetic in the Showtime cable television network series *Dexter* approaches the realm of hobby. Much like building a model airplane, Dexter works as a police investigator during the day and moonlights as a serial murderer at night. In this way, violence is supposed to be a mere hobby, a leisure activity. (*Dexter* 00:11:14). *Inglourious Basterds* moves from the portrayal of violence as either technical skill or a hobby, into the realm of violence as artistic creation and expression.

In *Inglourious Basterds*, violence as art separates itself from the splatter film aesthetic. This is a different type of art than is used in splatter film. According to English Professor Michael Arznen, art in splatter film often refers to generation of effects (Arznen 178). Yet more than just the generation of effects in a film, *Inglourious Basterds* makes the violence itself an art form. In *The Aesthetics of Murder*, Joel Black describes this very idea of violence as art by saying, “murder... can be considered a cognitive, and even creative, act” (Black 123). By making murder creative, violence becomes artistic, and the Basterds definitely kill in creative ways. That murder can have an artistic aesthetic is further described by Jean-Paul Sartre. He states in *Saint Genet*, “The criminal kills; he *is* a poem; the poet *writes* the crime” (*Saint Genet* 485). That is to say, when the desire to murder comes to pass through action, that act of violence becomes a work of art. For Sartre, murder can be art when we come to understand what happens in the mind, or eyes, of the murderer. Sartre helps us further understand that aesthetic quality of

sadist violence in his book *Being and Nothingness*, in which he describes the sadist. He states, “The sadist posits himself as ‘having all the time in the world.’ He is calm, he does not hurry. He uses his instruments like a technician” (*Being and Nothingness* 523). How sadist violence becomes art is specifically tied up in the amount of time and dedication the perpetrator takes to create his work. It is comparable to the time an artist or technician would take in his work.

*Inglourious Basterds* uses the ideas of the aestheticization of murder to code its violence as artistic. We often view the act from the perspective of the perpetrator, watching as he uses his tool of choice to create his violent work of art. The first specific way the film creates a violent aesthetic is by describing violence with terms from the world of art. To begin with, in the sequence in which a young German private gets a swastika carved in his forehead by Aldo, the camera shots cut back and forth from the ravine in which Aldo and his men have overtaken a small troop of German soldiers to Hitler’s office, where the young private recounts the experience. Just after the private has revealed his comrades’ position to the Basterds, the camera shot cuts to Hitler asking the young German about his mark (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:35:50). After the private reveals his branded forehead to Hitler, the shot cuts back to the ravine, looking from a low angle up at Donowitz and Aldo, who peer down at us as the private (00:37:25). We look up at Donowitz and Aldo as if we were work of art, gazing up at our artists as they create. Donowitz simply states that Aldo has become quite skilled at carving people, to which Aldo blandly responds, “You know how you get to Carnegie Hall, don’tcha? Practice” (00:37:30). Aldo’s practice then culminates at the end of the film while carving Landa. Utivich attests to this by stating that Aldo has created his “masterpiece” in Landa (02:28:10). All of the swastikas we see Aldo carve have come to be known as artwork in one way or another. Additionally, Aldo refers to Hugo’s murders of Gestapo officers as his work, saying “we just wanted to say we’re a

big fan of your work. When it comes to killing Nazis, I think you show great talent” (00:29:40). Aldo speaks of Hugo’s deeds as if he were admiring a painting Hugo had painted, and implies that killing takes talent. Through these expressions and verbal references, the violence in *Inglourious Basterds* is associated with art.

*Inglourious Basterds* exemplifies the way to create an artistic aesthetic out of murder by showing it from the murderer’s perspective. In other words, the creation of art (the murder) is viewed through the eyes of the artist. The way murder can become artistically appealing is explained by Joel Black, “Descriptions of murder, in other words, achieve artistic merit – that is, they become aesthetically interesting – when the reader’s focus is shifted from the point of view of the victim to that of the murderer” (Black 60). By viewing the creation in the eyes of the creator, the audience is placed in the same space as the artist, directly involving them in the process. The audience gains a sense of appreciation, almost as if they were participating with the murderer to create his art. There is a second connection between murder and art when the nature of art is considered. By seeing the act through the eyes of the artist, the viewer sees the violence in a way that is meant to be viewed, just as art is meant to be viewed. In this way murder becomes artistic when it is shown through the eyes of the perpetrator.

Tarantino’s film creates an artistic aesthetic by showing murders from the perspective of the murderer. The film has at least three different examples of viewing violence from the perspective of the murderer/artist. When Hugo Stiglitz is first introduced, there is a montage of his misdeeds among the Gestapo officers. Two separate murders take place in the officers’ beds, and each sequence begins from Hugo’s perspective looking down on the sleeping man (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:28:31, 00:38:42). In the first sequence, the shot reverses on Hugo, as if from the perspective of the victim, or canvas, and we see Hugo holding a knife. Cut back to

Hugo's perspective as a pillow covers the face of the victim and Hugo stabs through the pillow with his knife (00:28:35). We watch as if from his eyes as he viciously murders the man. The second example is when Donny "the Bear Jew" Donowitz is mowing down Nazis in the theater at the end after bursting into Hitler's box and killing him (02:25:02). The shot cuts from the crowd to Donny's face as he shoots. From there it cuts to Hitler's body on the floor as bullets rip his flesh apart. Cutting back to Donny's vengeful face and then back again to Hitler, the body of Hitler is portrayed as the canvas on which Donny, the artist, is creating his violent work. Finally, as Landa receives his forehead mark, we get a close-up of the blade in Landa's forehead. Since nothing else occupies space in the frame besides Landa's forehead and the tip of the knife, it is impossible to continue watching and not watch the swastika being carved. This helps us pay as much careful attention to detail as Aldo is in creating his masterpiece (00:28:10). The film forces the viewer to see the violence from the perspective of the perpetrator. By doing so, the audience experiences the artist's gaze as he creates his work of violence.

The violent aesthetic helps to create the paradigm of justifiable killing by making a statement that killing is acceptable because it is creation, it is art. The Nazis get what they deserve, but the film codes violent creation as positive, declaring that killing can be justified if it is considered artistic creation. When murder is art, the violent act is diminished and we forget the moral implications of taking another life (Black 29). The violent aesthetic in *Inglourious Basterds* distracts the viewer from the fact that murder is bad by creating the illusion that watching someone be killed is akin to watching artists paint or going to the theater. Using the violent aesthetic in this way, the film attempts to make killing justifiable and acceptable. More than the fact that most Nazis are killed by inflicting damage to the head in some way, the forehead swastika is physical evidence that violence is a form of unique creation. Aldo has found

a way to identify Nazis even after the war and after they take off their uniforms. His violence has turned into a work of art, displayed on the forehead of every survivor of the Basterds. The connection becomes clear in the scene where Hitler interviews the young private about his encounter. Between the two men, who are framed on both sides of the shot, a large mural of Hitler is being painted in the background (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:36:14). Seconds later, the young man reveals his swastika. Both he and the mural have one thing in common: they were blank canvases at one point, and have been filled with works of art. The Nazi body is now a blank canvas for creating violent art.

*Inglourious Basterds* also uses its camera work, dialog, props and acting to show how violence can be exactly like a game. In the film, portraying violence in this way attempts to create a world where violence is acceptable because it is fun. Moreover, violence as play assumes that the victim is simply participating in the play, rather than being tortured or killed. Kim Newman addresses this idea in her review of *Inglourious Basterds*. She states, "For all its gore, [*Inglourious Basterds*] sticks to the long-running movie double standard that killing Nazis is basically harmless fun" (Newman 73). The Nazi in *Inglourious Basterds* becomes a kind of enemy that is acceptable to kill, but only because he is part of a game. Aldo's man Donowitz, for example, is notorious for beating men to death with his baseball bat. Moreover, the Basterds are often portrayed as taking pleasure from their acts of violence, as if they were enjoying it as a game. Within this aesthetic paradigm, the Nazi body becomes a literal playground for violence, the place where hate and murder are fun.

One scene in particular introduces us to the idea of violence as play. Aldo has just overtaken a group of German soldiers, and bodies of dead German soldiers litter a ravine as the camera pans slowly to the right while Aldo's men strip the Nazis of their boots, socks, and scalps

(*Inglourious Basterds* 00:26:03). Aldo questions one of the German prisoners they have taken, a sergeant named Werner Rachtman. When Rachtman refuses to divulge any further information, the sound of wood hitting against stone comes from the tunnel behind Aldo (00:31:37). Aldo goes on to explain that a man named Donny Donowitz, or “the Bear Jew,” is in the tunnel, and he asks Rachtman if he has heard of the “Bear Jew” (00:31:45). Rachtman responds he has heard that the “Bear Jew” beats German soldiers with a club. Aldo then gives Rachtman one more chance to divulge information about the Germans, or the Bear Jew will beat him to death with his bat. When Rachtman again refuses, Donowitz exits the tunnel and makes good on his reputation (00:33:55). This is where we first see violence as play in the film.

As Donowitz beats Rachtman to death, the film alludes strongly to baseball. When Rachtman called Donowitz’s tool a club Aldo had to correct him by saying that Donowitz does Germans in with a baseball bat (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:31:59). The correction makes for a strong introduction to the following sequence, bringing the game of baseball into the mix, and forcefully drawing attention to both the bat and the game. The reference to play is obvious with the baseball bat, but the allusion goes further. When the Bear Jew actually finishes killing Rachtman with his bat, he cries, “Teddy Williams knocks it outta the park! Fenway Park’s on their feet for Teddy! Ball game!” (*Inglourious* 00:34:45). With his cries of victory, it is as if Donowitz is celebrating the victory of a championship game. He even imagines himself to be a famous member of the Boston Red Sox. The allusion to the game does not stop with him, however. After the first strike, the camera cuts from a close angle to a high, wide angle looking down on the scene. The subtle hint is that the audience, in the movie theater seats, is now watching a ball game from the stands (00:34:52). The camera becomes the crowd at the game

and we watch the game of killing below. Violence has become spectacle (Foucault 32). In the aesthetic of violence as play, the Bear Jew exemplifies the place where murder meets fun.

The place where violence as art and violence as play come together in *Inglourious Basterds* is violence as spectacle, in the same way sporting events and theater are spectacles. Violence as spectacle has been addressed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Within his discussion of how the Western penal system changed from public torture and execution to regimented prisons, Foucault describes the scaffold of the public execution and the spectacle of torture and execution (Foucault 32). Among the many consequences of this method of punishing criminals was the fact that the original crime of the victim should be represented on his body. Foucault states, “The tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime” (Foucault 35). By re-presenting the original crime on the body of the criminal, the act of violence suggests that those who watch are to learn from the spectacle of torture. It is, then, no coincidence that Nazis are used in the violent spectacle in Tarantino’s film. The ultimate perpetrators of violence and crimes against humanity, the violence revisited upon their bodies serves as the audience’s reminder to their violent deeds. This becomes apparent in the symbol of the swastika on the Nazis’ foreheads. In this way, violence as spectacle creates a supposed paradigm justifiable killing, just as the public torture was supposedly justifiable for public education.

The film also gives the viewer a different perspective than the murderer or the victim. As Joel Black points out, sometimes “murder is presented neither from ... the victim’s, nor from the killer’s point of view, but from the perspective of a[nother] party – the bystander, who is at once vulnerable and immune to the murderer whose devastation he or she witnesses.” (Black 66). By showing the acts of art from an involved, but safe, distance, the film directly codes the sequence

as voyeuristic, instead of the simple indirect viewer position inherent to all film. This calls attention to the theatrical nature of the violence. More than just viewing the film, the audience is allowed to see the act of creation for what it is: a drama on stage to be seen for pleasure. In this way the film opens up and reveals itself as a spectacle. With this voyeuristic perspective, the aesthetic of violence in the film is cinematic in nature. The viewer may be watching the film, but as the camera takes a viewer's perspective to the murder, it is placed at a viewer's distance, interacting with its creation in the same way an audience interacts with a play or movie.

Two specific examples help to illustrate the spectacle aesthetic in *Inglourious Basterds*. The more obvious example is when Donny "the Bear Jew" beats Rachtman to death with his bat. As Rachtman decides to die rather than divulge the information, Aldo chuckles, stands up, and says "Actually, Werner, we're all tickled to hear you say that. Quite frankly, watching Donny beat Nazis to death is the closest we ever come to going to the movies" (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:32:27). For the Basterds, at least, watching violence is equivalent to going to the movies, and violence is equated with cinema or the production and showing of a movie. But this does not stop with the Basterds. I have already addressed how the shot widens to a medium, high-angle long-shot when Donny is finished with Rachtman (00:34:50). This can be read as the grand-stands at the ball park, or cinematically. Viewing from the wide, high angle gives the sequence the feel of a movie theater, some of which even contain "stadium seating." It is as though the camera now takes the point of view of one of the Basterds in a position that places him in a movie theater looking down toward where the screen is and seeing Donny murdering Rachtman. The whole shot is like being at the movies, further creating the feel of spectacle.

The other example of the spectacle of violence is the setting for Shosanna's revenge. As the theater bursts into flames, the perspective the camera takes to capture the moment reveals this

particular violent act as spectacle. As if from Hitler's private box in the upper back right of the theater the camera takes a spectator perspective of the mass murder that is unfolding (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:24:16). In the right of the frame the right wall of the theater runs in the shot all the way to the burning screen, occupying the high left-center of the frame. Below the screen hundreds of Nazi bodies scramble away from the inferno. As the camera pauses here for a moment, it is as if we are watching the destruction from our own private box. But this feeling is reinforced as the sequence cuts from the box perspective down into the cheap seats and we watch as silhouettes of Nazis flee for their lives in front of a blazing fire (00:24:20). The camera pauses here for a couple of seconds as well so that the entire nature of the spectacle can be taken in from "down in the action." The audience of *Inglourious Basterds* becomes the audience to the spectacle of violence.

In Tarantino's film, art, baseball, and the spectacle come into play to codify the violence in a way that serves the purpose of trying to justify violence. Since murder is equated with artistic creation it is posited as morally acceptable. The allusions to baseball create the illusion that violence is fine because it is fun, and Foucault's idea of the spectacle of torture explains the voyeuristic element in Tarantino's film. In each way the aesthetic tries to convey an idea that violence is justified. In each instance the aesthetic draws attention away from the problematic nature of treating Nazis in the same manner that Nazis treated Jews. The aesthetic ignores the moral implications of returning violence for equal violence. It is important, however, to understand what happens when the victim of Nazi violence turns to the same methods to exact revenge or make Nazis pay for their atrocities. Yet these portrayals of violence make the *Basterds* strikingly similar to Nazis.

### **Nazis and Basterds: Two Sides of the Same Coin**

My main point of this endeavor is to show that the Basterds in Tarantino's film have become Nazis by inflicting brutality and torture upon their enemy, just like Nazis did to their enemies. In other words, I have wanted to show how participating in Nazi-like violence turns the perpetrator into nothing more than a Nazi himself, even though he imagines himself a hero. The film is full of evidence that, I feel, inadvertently contradicts its own pretend justification, suggesting that the Basterds are no better than Nazis. Initially, the Basterds may seem the heroes, secretly exacting justice on the heads of evil Nazi soldiers, but this discourse breaks down when the Basterds are visually tied to Nazism through the use of the swastika.

The carving of a swastika connects the Basterds to Nazis, visually matching their atrocities and Nazifying Aldo. For example, in two separate instances we find swastikas being carved into things other than people. One example comes at the premier of one of the fictitious films by Goebbels, *Nation's Pride*. The fake film stars the character Frederick Zoller as a war hero who sat in a bell tower and picked off hundreds of American soldiers over the course of a few days (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:44:25). Though we never see the whole film, we do see snippets of it throughout *Inglourious Basterds*. One particular shot we see shows Zoller carving a swastika with his knife into the floor of the tower (02:23:26). This, of course, is directly connected the shot we see later in the film of Aldo carving a swastika in to Landa's forehead (02:29:48). Throughout most of the film the act of carving a swastika belonged to the Americans, but as soon as Zoller carves his swastika in the floor, the act of carving belongs to both sides, making them equals. It represents an act of domination and violence, Aldo subdues Landa and Zoller is depicted killing hundreds of Americans with little time to rest. In this matching way, Zoller's carving vicariously claims ownership of the Basterds' violence toward Nazis in general,

sending a message that Nazis carve swastikas as a sign of victory. The audience in the theater supports this notion with a roar of cheers when they see his swastika. Another scene shows Zoller in the tower with a bullet-hole swastika in the wall next to him, further connecting him to the act of carving swastikas (02:23:26). The final point that draws the Basterds into the realm of Nazis is the meaning of the swastika symbol. With the rise of Hitler, National Socialism took unofficial permanent ownership of the symbol of the swastika for modern generations. Aldo using that symbol to permanently identify Nazis seems straightforward enough until the image of Zoller appears. At that point, he becomes a partial owner of the symbol with the Nazis, and his use of the symbol draws him to the realm of Nazism. He uses Nazi symbols in the same way Nazis would; he has become a Nazi himself.

The connection the carved swastikas make is the same connection found in other places in the film: that Aldo's group is just as bad as the Nazis they kill. We have already seen that Aldo's band of men perpetrates violent acts of torture and murder, and their violence makes them just as evil as the Nazis they hate. J. Hoberman writes about the Basterds as Nazis in his review of the film, saying the film "basically enables Jews [the Basterds and Shosanna] to act like Nazis, engaging in cold-blooded massacres and mass incineration" (Hoberman). Hoberman is referring to the final moments in the theater, just after Shosanna has ignited the blaze that will kill all the Nazis, where Donowitz and Ulmer fire willy-nilly into the crowd of Nazis (*Inglourious Basterds* 02:24:57). This kind of demonic mass murder conjures up thoughts of gas chambers, cremation ovens, and concentration camp firing squads, which are the exact crimes that Nazis perpetrated against Jews in the Holocaust. That the victims of this violence are evil Nazis does not excuse the fact that the Basterds (and Shosanna) initiate the kind of genocide only Nazis would be capable of. This violence and murder does ennoble the Basterds into war heroes, it only makes

them as demonic as the Nazis. Additionally, it should be noted that by acting like Nazis, the Basterds have created the same kind of enemy in the Nazi that the Nazis created in the Jew. The Nazi in Tarantino's film has become a vilified Other, against whom violent killing can be justified.

### **Otherness: The Nazi as a Blank-slate Body, or as a Guiltless Kill**

In this section, I will explore the realm of the representation of the Nazi as a blank body Other, on which violence and hate can be inscribed. I will outline the tradition of Self and Other found in these different traditions of thought, and attempt to show how Tarantino's film portrays Nazis in a different way from the dominant tradition. I will examine the ethics of zombie cinema and show how Nazis in Tarantino's film are similar to zombies; both are blank, justifiably killable people. I will demonstrate the specific ways in which the *Inglourious Basterds* broadens and deepens a paradigm in which it is acceptable to kill human beings.

### ***The Self and the "Other"***

In order to understand how Tarantino uses an Other in *Inglourious Basterds*, I must explain my usage of the terms "Self" and "Other." In basic terms, I use the idea of Self as the "I," the personal consciousness, and the Other as the "not-me," the being outside and apart from the personal consciousness. In the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Paul Sartre, the categories of the Self and the Other are discussed in a moral philosophy that describes the relationship of both and between the two. For both men, being of Self is defined within the relationship of Self and Other. For Sartre, the Other is a force the Self must oppose in order to control the Self's being (Sartre 494). Since people are caught in "Bad Faith," a belief that being as a human is connected to doing, and life is full of "Negation," or not being, the Self realizes that in "Negation" it can be anything (Sartre 37, 86, 112). The only being opposing this potential

is the Other. The Other limits the potential of the Self through “the Look” of the Other, in which the Self sees itself as an object to the Other (301). This is the Other’s control over the Self.

For Levinas, the Other necessarily defines the Self; that is subjectivity means being subjected to the Other (Levinas 251). Levinas also proposes that the Other is not knowable by the Self, yet the two interact through the “face-to-face” (Levinas 80). In a way, the Other is a teacher for the Self, a way for the Self to have the idea of Infinity, rather than Totality (Levinas 80, 213). With Levinas, the Self is bound by a moral responsibility to the Other (Levinas 254). Though both thinkers define the relationship between the Self and the Other differently, the relationship between the two is basic to their philosophy. Levinas’s idea of the “face-to-face” interaction between Self and Other is quite interesting considering the way Aldo interacts “face-to-face” with his victims. His carving the swastika is a perfect illustration of the kind of dominance and subjection that can happen between the Self and Other and it gives a sort of twisted new meaning to the idea of the “face-to-face,” since Aldo literally does violence to the Other’s face.

Post-colonial theory addresses the problems with traditional representation of the Other in terms of Imperialism and domination. In the book *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin discuss the issues of language, hegemony and how the marginalized colonial Other can “write back” against the dominant stereotypes of an empire by discussing the colonized text as a tool in wresting power back from the oppressor (Ashcroft et al.). In this model the creation of the Other by the empire is discussed less than is the theory of how the Other might again gain a voice. In Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* the Other has no voice, he is represented in reductive stereotypes yet has no power to dispute them as false or simplified. No Nazi character in the film is anything but devoted to the cause. Even Zoller, who

seems aloof from National Socialism, gives in to hateful Nazi violence in the end. Even the Basterds' German defectors are portrayed as always being opposed to National Socialism, even if they were at one point Nazi soldiers. There is, then, a clear distinction between good and bad, and the Other always falls on the side of the bad.

However, David Spurr addresses issues of Otherness in a more contemporary setting in his book *The Rhetoric of Empire*. In this work, Spurr describes the various ways in which dominant cultures marginalize and create an Other in less-dominant cultures through intellectual colonization. Spurr focuses on the rhetoric of journalism, travel writing and imperial administration as he asserts that instead of physically colonizing cultures, modern colonization happens through intellectual rhetoric in these three forms of writing (Spurr). In each case the dominant culture creates a model of the Other that is inaccurate and degrading in various ways. The Other is marginalized and misrepresented in the dominant culture. In addition to these models, Edward Said also addresses the construction of the Other in his discussion of representing the works of literature considered canonically to be the "great" works of literature and those works traditionally marginalized by mainstream literary canonical tradition. In his view, both the mainstream works and the marginalized ones are equally important (Said 198). Each of these books addresses colonial theory and the relationship of the Other to the "empire." Moreover, each of these theories helps us understand how Tarantino's film creates an Other in the Nazi. The Other in *Inglourious Basterds* draws on all of these different theories, but also brings something different to the discussion of Self and Other that is reminiscent of Nazi ideology.

### **The Nazi, the Zombie, and Revenge Fantasy**

To better understand how Tarantino's film creates an Other in the Nazi it is important to understand the cinematic anomaly of the zombie. As an example of the confluence of the zombie and the Nazi, the video game *Call of Duty: Black Ops* combines the killable Nazi body with the second ultimate killable Other – the zombie. A zombie, a dead body reanimated and hungry for human flesh, represents the embodiment of the culture out of which he came. Zombie film scholar David Flint describes this more specifically in his book on zombie cinema entitled *Zombie Holocaust*: “The zombie rose to prominence during [the] turbulent [1960s and 1970s] because zombies...represented modern fears. A truly 20<sup>th</sup> century horror figure, the zombie...spoke directly to audiences who felt that civilization was collapsing around them.” (Flint 7). Or as Jamie Russell states about monsters and culture, “The monsters that dominate any particular culture or period offer unusual insight into specific fears and anxieties that characterize that historical moment” (Russell 8). Zombies have dominated the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America, and in that time they have come to represent a variety of cultural anxieties. Most importantly, the zombie as Other means that the zombie's body is a blank slate, the husk of a person, without the traits of humanity. Sartre addresses the Other as a mere body in *Being and Nothingness*, saying, “it remains always possible that the Other is only a body. If animals are machines, why shouldn't the man whom I see in the street be one?” (*Being and Nothingness* 303). Only by using the zombie as an empty body can a culture inscribe hatred and fear onto the zombie Other. The zombie, then, is the justifiably killable representation of another human being. A culture can vicariously enact violence upon the human form of the cinematic zombie. The zombie body in cinema is similar to the way *Inglourious Basterds* portrays Nazis, as an, empty, killable Other. On the one hand, zombies first became popular in the 1960s and '70s with George A. Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) as a meditation on the death

that surrounded the anti-establishment culture in America opposing the Vietnam War. Since then there have been scores of zombie films.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, different decades exhibit different fears, which mean different types of zombies. For example, the 2007 film *28 Weeks Later*, zombies represent the kind of indistinguishable enemy seen on 9/11. Additionally, the *Resident Evil* franchise of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century creates a zombie that is the product of an evil corporation. As was the case in 1960s and '70s, the blank body of the zombie Other is filled with whatever cultural paranoia grips the population.

The most basic assumption in terms of the zombie kill is very similar to the fascist assumption of the extra-national Other: the zombie is an evil Other who has to be eliminated. Flint begins his book with this bit of common knowledge, calling zombies “flesh eating ghouls that must be destroyed” (Flint 7). The zombie must die; it is the only answer to the threat he poses. This is no different than Hitler’s answer his problem with Jews. The zombie is an empty husk of a person, and one cannot reason with an empty husk, nor peacefully resolve the chaos that follows the zombie. The only solution to the zombie monster is annihilation. But in his death, the population finds meaning. When the zombie is destroyed the threat is destroyed. Most importantly, the zombie kill is guiltless. It is a morally acceptable murder, a way of ritualistically cleansing stress about the cultural moment. The death of the zombie Other is about finding catharsis in the death a monster, and peace in the subsequent calm. Through the process of creating an empty Other in zombie, there is no guilt in killing him. Basically, the zombie can be seen as a blank Other, which a culture can vilify and justifiably kill. In this way, the zombie becomes a canvas of collective cultural fear. If there is a body which is the quintessential representation of hatred, evil, and fear, then it becomes morally justified to kill that body. In both

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<sup>6</sup> For a complete list of zombie cinema see Jamie Russell’s *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema* and David Flint’s *Zombie Holocaust: How the Living Dead Devoured Pop Culture*.

instances of *Inglourious Basterds* and zombie films, the main desire at play is the fantasy of inflicting harm on another person without repercussion. It is the human body as a playground for violence.

To understand Tarantino's Nazis as a killable body, we need to examine how zombies become killable humans. The realm in which humans become killable monsters is addressed in the 2009 film *Zombieland*. When introducing the audience to the world after the zombie-apocalypse, the protagonist mentions that once zombies outnumber humans, that is when you have to cut all emotional ties (*Zombieland* 00:02:40). As a woman scrambles into her van to flee a girl's birthday party, we see out the window that several bloody little zombie-girls bang hungrily on her car window, looking for the next meal of human flesh. Considering what the girls have become, the woman has no problem in speeding to safety, dragging a couple of the "little monsters" down the street as they are holding on to her van (00:02:55). The little girls are zombies and are now after human flesh. They can no longer be seen as human; they have become something else, something other. This assumed paradigm is the justification for dragging little girls behind a car: they are no longer little girls, they are monsters. Another encounter with a little girl further explores the realm where human becomes monster. The scene is grim: in the back of a grocery store two men have found that the little sister of a "marriageable hotty" has been bitten, and, sweet and innocent as she is now, the discussion quickly turns to how long she has before becoming a monster (*Zombieland* 00:24:25). When it is decided that the girl must die, one of the men remarks, "No, no, no, she's just a little girl" (00:24:50). The moment contrasts sharply with the beginning scene of the party: this little girl is not a monster yet, therefore killing her seems impossible. She has not yet become the Other, her body has not turned into that despicable monster, and killing her does not seem justified.

These two scenes explore the question of where exactly that point lies when killing another person becomes justified. For zombies in cinema, that is an easy answer: when the no-longer-a-person starts biting hungrily at your neck, it has become a monster. For Nazis in cinema, the answer is not as easy; there is no standard turning where a Nazi officially loses his humanity. Once people become Nazis, they are still a person, whereas a zombie is just the husk of a person. Without the uniform, there is no clear distinction between a non-Nazi and a Nazi. A Nazi sans uniform is just a person. The individual German soldier does not have to be associated with a specific crime – all he needs is a visual connection to the Nazis to inherit their killable status. The challenge, then, in *Inglourious Basterds* is to create the Nazi as a distinguishable and clearly demarcated Other, just like the zombie.

Combining the Nazi with the zombie as the villain in a movie means that both can be seen as a blank-slate Other, killable and evil. As it differs from each of the previous models of Otherness, I wish to present a model of Otherness based on zombie cinema. This idea is based in the assumption of the zombie as a blank Other, a meditation of cultural anxiety. The Nazi and the zombie became one again in the 2009 Norwegian film *Død Snø*, where Nazi zombies rise from the snow and terrorize a group of teenagers. Using the Nazi as a zombie supports the connection between zombies as blank bodies and Nazis as blank bodies. Jim Gourley, a video game reviewer, alludes to this when he addresses the kinds of enemies that are justifiably killable in video games, “It’s a running gag in the ‘gamer’ community that there are exactly five things you can shoot on sight in a video game and maintain a clear conscience; aliens, robots, zombies, Nazis, and terrorists” (Gourley). The Nazi kill is synonymous with the zombie kill; both are morally acceptable. Additionally, both bodies represent a place for justifiable violence and murder. That Nazis, like zombies, can be pure, killable monsters comes to light in a review of

*Inglourious Basterds* by Kim Newman, “The fact that Nazis are so obviously the baddies in World War II excuses any tactics used against them” (Newman 73). Just as zombies are considered only partial people, having the form, but not the function of a person, so too are Nazis a partial person, that they have the form of a person, but serve an evil function. Therefore any violence perpetrated against either is justifiable, and it is perfectly acceptable to terminate them with extreme prejudice.

Connecting the Nazi with the ultimate killable Other of the zombie provides that Nazis, as blank Others, can also be inscribed with cultural fears and fantasies. When we understand that Tarantino uses Nazis in the same way a zombie flick uses zombies, the question remains as to what type of cultural fears are played out on the Nazi body in Tarantino’s film. By examining two types of fantasies, we can better understand how the Nazi is painted as an Other in *Inglourious Basterds*. I will first argue that Tarantino’s film functions as a type of Jewish revenge fantasy. I will show how the film is the projection of Jewish desire for vengeance against those who perpetrated heinous crimes against the Jews. I will also show how this fantasy breaks down and how the Jews in the film become no better than the Nazis they punish. Second, I will argue that the film is a meditation on the American war on terror. I will show connections between the Nazis in the film and terrorists, but I will also show how the film represents a type of American revenge fantasy, in which American soldiers are allowed to physically punish their enemies, Nazis or terrorists. In doing this I will also show that, like the Jewish revenge fantasy, this American revenge fantasy Nazifies Americans, making them just as morally deplorable as Nazis were.

### ***Jewish Revenge Fantasy***

The Jewish revenge fantasy has its foundation in actual Jewish revenge after World War II. Historical events are discussed in detail by the journalist Jim G. Tobias and historicist Peter Zinke in *NAKAM: Jüdische Rache an NS-Tätern*. The book offers a detailed account of actual Jewish Revenge in the first years following the end of World War II. Tobias and Zinke describe both the rise of two specific revenge groups, the Jewish Brigade and *Nakam*, which was partially consisted of survivors of concentration camps (Tobias, Zinke 7). According to Tobias and Zinke, the groups used various methods to avenge the fallen Jews of the Shoah, including guerilla warfare and poisoning food and water (Tobias, Zinke 37). For these few dozen men, the goal was not only to take revenge, but to prevent something like the Holocaust from ever happening again (Tobias, Zinke 7). Their hatred for Nazis, however, was still well intact, as part of their statute reads, “Hasse die Schlächter deines Volkes – bis in alle Ewigkeit” (Tobias, Zinke 60). Tobias and Zinke show that Jewish revenge was an historical occurrence, but the question remains how revenge turned from fact to fantasy.

Philosopher Berel Lang addresses the absence of revenge discourse among Jews, which gives us a clue as to how revenge became more fantasy than fact. Though Lang refers to the same historical facts that Tobias and Zinke address, he addresses, more specifically, revenge as a theme in Jewish culture. He first notes how revenge as a topic is absent, but then points out that addressing this absence implies that revenge was *expected* to be more of an issue in Jewish culture (Lang 1). He goes on to speculate that people were deliberately silent about revenge, and that in this paradigm, revenge has had “a more substantial influence in shaping collective memory of the Shoah” (Lang 3). This is exemplified in a poem for the Nazi Adolf Eichmann from Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish writer and chemist. It reads partially:

Oh son of death, we do not wish you death.  
 May you live longer than anyone ever lived.  
 May you live sleepless five million nights,  
 And may you be visited each night by the suffering of everyone who saw,  
 Shutting behind him, the door that blocked the way back,  
 Saw it grow dark around him, the air fill with death (Levi).

Rather than describing revenge in terms of concrete vengeance prominent in the years directly following World War II, Levi's poem brings the idea of revenge into another, more abstract realm, where revenge is carried out not through death, but through the agony of remorse. Instead of suffering an eye for an eye, Levi wished Eichmann a prolonged and tormented life, countering the given notion that revenge on Nazis ought to be carried out by killing them. By entering this realm of imagined vengeance, Jewish revenge also took a more imaginative form in general.

Tarantino explores this realm of Jewish revenge fantasy, claiming, at least partially, to be an imagined vengeance. His film does call to mind the Jewish Brigade and their creed, but whether or not the film is, indeed, a Jewish revenge fantasy, or more particularly a good one, is addressed in the reviews of *Inglourious Basterds*. On the one side, J. Hoberman offers a positive spin on the revenge fantasy, "Here is an alternate World War II, in which Jews terrorize and slaughter Nazis—a just Holocaust" (*Hoberman*). In other words, this is not only an alternate history, but a fantasized history, one where the Jews can take revenge by turning the Holocaust on the Nazis. In the face of criticism about Tarantino's version of a Jewish revenge, Frederic Raphael said it is "undemocratic to go calling [*Inglourious Basterds*] the antihuman dirty dream of a pretentious, vacuous clown primed with Hollywood gelt to do the Jews a favor by showing that they too, given the chance, coulda/woulda behaved like mindless monsters" (*Raphael*). This

seems true for the actor who plays Donowitz, Eli Roth, a Jew who considered this film just the opportunity he had been looking for. Of working on the film he said, “I’ve been waiting for a project like this since I was a kid. Of course, it is a Jewish fantasy, but there is a real wishful feeling that we could go back in history and sacrifice ourselves to kill Nazis” (*Cohen-Dicker*). The film does not only come across as a Jewish revenge fantasy, but for one Jewish actor in the film, and a few reviewers, this film fulfilled a fantasy about taking revenge on Nazis.

Regardless of what positive affirmations have been made about the film as revenge fantasy, some reviewers found it less than satisfactory. For Thomas Doherty, the revenge fantasy seemed comical, at best. Quoting Shosanna’s vengeance, he calls the film not necessarily vengeance, but “maybe an Italian-American geek’s notion of Jewish vengeance” (*Doherty 60*). Tarantino, as an Italian-American, potentially cannot properly imagine what Jewish vengeance would be like. Reviewers for the *Unfit Times* Josh Rosenblatt and Mike Kanin found the a similar problem with the film; it did not live up to their highest hopes of Jewish revenge, and in “UNFIT for the Ultimate Revenge Flick” they provide several reasons why this film falls short. Though they thought that the film’s premise seemed to fit their fantasies about Jewish revenge, when they finally saw the film, they were dissatisfied. Further problems they found included the fact that Aldo was not a Jewish leader: “what self-respecting Jew ever had a dream about killing Nazis that involved taking orders from a Gentile” (*Rosenblatt and Kanin*). Another problem they had was that vengeance against Nazis in the film is different from the Jewish revenge fantasy that involves liberating the oppressed and redemption as opposed to simply treating the Nazis with their own violence (*Rosenblatt and Kanin*). Critics were divided about the film’s revenge capabilities, and for some, the film did not quite live up to the truest nature of the Jewish revenge fantasy.

By using Jewish soldiers and addressing the issue of Jewish vengeance, on the whole the film itself claims to be a Jewish revenge fantasy in several places. Essentially, the blank-body Nazi in *Inglourious Basterds* is filled with a meditation on Jewish vengeance against Nazis. The question arises, then, as to how the film accomplishes this. I would like to talk about why the film approaches and achieves its own Jewish revenge fantasy. In the end, the film is about retribution against Nazis for both general and specific atrocities committed against Jews. Allusions are made to these atrocities in general, where historical fact is assumed. Yet, the second part of the fantasy in the film is about Jewish characters finding retribution for specific acts committed by Nazis *in* the film. In both instances the film achieves its own revenge fantasy as the Jewish characters find catharsis through violence.

The film starts the fantasy by making Aldo's elite squad all Jewish men. In fact, the film emphasizes the fact that all the recruits are all Jewish soldiers. When Aldo first meets his men, he walks back and forth in front of them, and points out that he needs "eight soldiers, eight *Jewish-American* soldiers" for a special mission (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:21:25). The emphasis on Jewish-American makes a clear statement that the film is less about American soldiers fighting against Hitler, and more about Jewish soldiers fighting against Hitler. This is about a Jewish fight, a vendetta against Hitler himself and his whole anti-Semitic ideology. This becomes even clearer when Aldo defines Hitler as a "Jew-hatin,' mass-murderin' maniac" (00:22:25). Aldo's speech is not about American freedom, or even the freedom of a nation oppressed by a tyrant. Instead it is about the relationship between Hitler, the Nazis, and Jews. Specifically recruiting Jewish men and pointing out Hitler's anti-Semitism makes the *Basterds'* mission about Jewish revenge, with the History of Hitler and the Jews implied. By choosing a Jewish squad, the film alludes to the general nature of Hitler's ideology and its consequences.

The film is then about the general offenses of Nazis committed against Jews. It is about finding retribution and payment for these atrocities.

Another moment in the film points strongly to Jewish vengeance as a whole. In the moment just before the theater ignites and kills the trapped Nazis, Shosanna's face appears in a close-up on the screen with a message that the moviegoers will all die (*Inglourious Basterds* 02:23:35). As the theater bursts into flames, her picture fades from the screen and swirls on the smoke of the fire, and her voice echoes from the inferno, "You are all going to die. And I want you to look deep into the face of the *Jew* who is going to do it. My name's Shosanna Dreyfuss and this is the face of Jewish vengeance" (02:23:18). As if hell itself is calling to the Nazis, Shosanna's voice rings through the blazing theater as the Nazis frantically try to escape. With her message, Shosanna makes an appeal to Jews in general, broadening her personal hate to all Jews. Combining the disconnected anonymity of film (Shosanna is dead by this point) with the gathering of the entire Nazi command, the scene becomes a face-to-face confrontation between the symbols of the entire Nazi ideology and its army and the personification of the Jewish people. Shosanna stands in for her entire people, while the Nazi officers stand in for their men. The criminal meets the victim in a cinematic vigilante court. The general leadership of National Socialism will now account and pay for what has been done to Jews at the hands of thousands of Nazis.

Yet, the film moves from addressing general atrocities to finding retribution for specific offenses. Firstly, Shosanna's assassination plot is a response to Landa's brutal murder of her family (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:19:30). She has finally been given the opportunity to get back at the man who took her family from her. For her, killing Nazis was not necessarily about making them atone for their general crimes, but about the crime committed against her personally. The

film lays out her plot to kill the Nazis directly after her tense confrontation in the café with Colonel Landa (01:00:05). This makes a clear connection between her experience with Landa and her decision to burn down the theater. With a huge sigh of relief from Shosanna, Landa leaves her alone in the café (01:00:15). Her fear is strongly connected to her hatred of Nazis; that is, the traumatic experience of losing her family is both strongly connected to her fear of Landa and her decision to burn down the theater with the Nazis inside. Shosanna is the perfect example of melding both specific and general revenge on the Nazis. She has a personal vendetta with them, yet the execution of her vengeance allows both her and all Jews to find catharsis in the death of the Nazis.

Returning to Sargent Rachtman, we find that his death sentence came for an offensive slander against Jews as well as for refusing pointing out a German position to the Basterds (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:32:50). In fact, in this scene, the film presents the moment of his slander as the deciding factor in his death. Aldo asks Rachtman one last time to reveal his comrades' location, to which Rachtman vehemently refuses with a vulgar and slanderous remark about Aldo and his "Jew dogs" (00:32:03). Aldo moves from kneeling with Rachtman to standing, gathering up his map with a smile on his face. At this moment Rachtman has no more choices; he has chosen to die for his beliefs. For Rachtman, the choice was to die for country from the beginning. Yet for the Basterds, the turning point was not his commitment to Hitler and his countrymen, but when he finally broke down and gave in to anti-Semitism. When he finally cursed their people and their religion, the Basterds sought retribution for the offence. And so he officially meets his doom for his specific atrocity against Jews. In this case, and in the case of Shosanna, retribution is founded not only on a general, historical level, but within the concrete examples of specific atrocities in the film itself.

The film's version of Jewish revenge fantasy seems to allude to a certain aspect of Jewish law found in the Old Testament of the Bible. That is, the two final examples of vengeance for specific offences seem to allude to Deuteronomy chapter 19, verse 21. In this book, the Law of Moses is laid out for the Israelites. In this particular verse, Jehovah tells his people what to do in the face of offence, "and thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (*King James Bible*, Deut. 19.21). The Jewish characters in the film seem to fulfill this commandment to the letter. Especially in Shosanna's case, life goes for life; her family died at the Nazis hands, and so the Nazis should die. Even Aldo's comment that each man in his unit takes on debt when they join him alludes to the fact that they owe somebody for some past atrocity (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:23:45). This final connection between scripture and revenge against the Nazis is the philosophical law on which Tarantino's Jews commit violence against his Nazis. In Tarantino's film, Nazis have offended and even killed Jews; therefore, the Jews in the film seem perfectly justified in retaliating based on Jewish law explained in this particular Bible excerpt. The Nazi becomes the deserving victim in self-justified revenge fantasy.

### ***Sadism and the Breakdown of the Jewish Revenge Fantasy***

Yet, the Jewish revenge fantasy seems to inadvertently connect the protagonists to Nazism. This becomes apparent when we understand that the protagonists delight in killing Nazis. This kind of pleasure in the pain of others only serves to map the Basterds onto Nazis in the film. As the blaze in the theater roars over the heads of hundreds of Nazis, Shosanna takes postmortem delight in their suffering (*Inglourious Basterds* 02:25:53). At this point she has already been killed, but the image of her face waves as it is projected onto the smoke from the fire (02:25:57). Her voice is heard over the roar of the blaze as she laughs diabolically into the backs of the panicking Nazis. She delights in their suffering, and laughs at their pain. In another

scene we see, from above, another man sleeping on his pillow (0028:30). A disembodied hand reaches up and slaps his face to wake him up. As he wakes, the shot reverses, and we see Hugo Stiglitz sitting on top of the man (00:28:40). As Stiglitz reaches down to kill the man, his face flashes briefly with excitement, showing his delight in the pain he is about to inflict. The protagonists take pleasure in killing their Nazi victims, but this only proves that they are just like, and just as bad as their enemy, the Nazis.

The delight in violence is closely tied to the breakdown of the Jewish revenge fantasy in the film. In fact, the point where the Jewish revenge fantasy is deconstructed, I would argue, is the point where the Basterds begin to delight in their violence. As I have already pointed out, the film affirms itself as a Jewish revenge fantasy, but some reviewers disagree with this notion. Their insight is particularly valuable in understanding why the failed Jewish revenge fantasy turns the Basterds into Nazis. In their review of the film entitled “UNFIT for the Ultimate Revenge Flick,” Josh Rosenblatt and Mike Kanin make several points as to why Tarantino’s version of revenge fails to live up the Jewish standard. One reason they give is this, “The [Jewish] heroes shouldn’t simply treat their prey with the relative abandon of, well, Nazis; they have to be violent with a better eye trained toward the virtue of saving innocent people” (Rosenblatt and Kanin). In their eyes, Jewish revenge fantasy ought to be made up of violence with the purpose of saving oppressed and victimized lives; nowhere in the film do we see the Basterds saving innocent lives with their fighting. They only torture and kill for sport.

Rosenblatt and Kanin go on to explain what happens if the Jewish revenge fantasy lacks the aspect of saving lives, “If your fantasy doesn’t involve saving the persecuted, if it lacks humanity as a motivator, if it celebrates violence for violence’s sake, you run the risk of becoming no better than the monsters you’re out to destroy” (Rosenblatt and Kanin). This is a

very important point for showing how the Basterds become Nazis in the film. Though the film posits itself as a violent Jewish revenge fantasy, it breaks down because the violence has no apparent higher purpose. It is merely violence for revenge's sake, not for the sake of the innocent who suffer. As soon as the violent Jewish revenge fantasy loses the purpose of saving lives, it becomes no better than a violent Nazi fantasy.

### ***Terrorism and the American Revenge Fantasy***

While *Inglourious Basterds* functions on some level as a historical Jewish revenge narrative, even a flawed one, it also serves as a revenge fantasy on another level. It resonates strongly with the historical moment in which it was produced. The cultural moment that is projected onto the Nazi's blank body in *Inglourious Basterds* is that of America's war on terror. I would argue that in the film Nazis come to represent a fantasy about the more current enemy the United States faces in the form of the terrorist. The Nazis in Tarantino's film are clear-cut, distinguishable and the battle is ideologically unambiguous. Whereas the terrorist is difficult to identify, the Nazi is easy to spot. Whereas the war on terror is complex and public opinion of it divided, World War II represents a time in which America was united in a straightforward fight against evil. The use of Nazis and World War II represent a longing for the war on terror to be more clear-cut and less ambiguous. This is evidenced by how the film changes historical fact and wins the war in a different way, and by how the Aldo carves Nazi foreheads to create a purely identifiable enemy. Further, the way Aldo's men treat the Nazis bears striking similarity to the way prisoners in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison were treated, creating a connection between the Nazi and the terrorist in the hands of renegade American soldiers. Finally, the group of American soldiers in *Inglourious Basterds* bears a striking resemblance to a terrorist group. At the heart of these examples lies a desire in Americans for things they cannot have: in the 21<sup>st</sup> they cannot easily demarcate the enemy or the war in general, they are not allowed to violently degrade and

humiliate the enemy, nor are they allowed to participate in the terrorist tactics of the enemy. Since so many collective desires are off limits, *Inglourious Basterds* plays out these fantasies for the American viewer.

*Inglourious Basterds* achieves the fantasy of the simple war by reinventing a World War II where America succeeds in assassinating Hitler, and ending the war earlier than in reality. The film makes this move into fantasy when Landa confesses to Aldo that he is prepared to make a deal to allow Hitler's assassination and the end of the war in return for immunity (*Inglourious Basterds* 02:08:45). Landa sits across a table from the prisoners Aldo and Utivich as he explains that the power to help the Basterds win the war is in his hands. He even fashions an elaborate story for the history books to explain his actions, including calling the toppling of the Third Reich an "imagined end" (02:14:25). Truthfully, the power ends up in Aldo's hands and the American command when Aldo concedes to make the deal (02:15:50). By shifting power to the Americans, the film plays with the fantasy of controlling the outcome of war, or changing history to make it align more advantageously with American interests. This desire to change the past is essentially the desire for control. By controlling the past in *Inglourious Basterds*, the film exposes a belief that the past, present, and future can be controlled. By taking control of the past, *Inglourious Basterds* gives the audience a sense of control over the present war on terror and the future of its outcome. *Inglourious Basterds* helps the viewer escape the complex reality of the present into an altered, simpler reality.

Tarantino's film uses Nazis in a way that shows they are a defined, identifiable, and clear-cut enemy. The film, written and produced from 2002 until 2009 when it was released, is a product of its cultural moment. The obvious discourse defining the decade following the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001 is that of the war on terror and homeland security. Tarantino worked on

writing this film during the invasion of Afghanistan, the conquest of Iraq, and the years of war following, all in search for terrorists, who hide and attack covertly. The American public was consumed by terrorist talk and war. Not surprisingly then Tarantino writes a story about brutalizing an enemy that is not hard to find and not hard to understand and hate. This is how the film meditates on terrorists, who are nothing like Tarantino's brazen Nazis. The problematic objective aside, the definition of the enemy in the war on terror is far more difficult to pinpoint, and World War II differed greatly from the war on terror. The war on terror has its unique problems concerning the enemy. Public Policy scholar Hal Brands describes how terrorism was the official enemy in the war on terror, as opposed to any specific nation, and that meant that the United States might end up fighting a single war in multiple countries (Brands 273). Brands also addresses logistics of the terrorist enemy, "from a practical standpoint, however, 'terrorism' seemed an amorphous enemy. Most experts thought of terrorism as a tool, not an enemy. How did one target a tool?" (Brands 272). In other words, the enemy was to be terrorists the world over. As simple as the idea sounded on paper, the actual feat of wiping out all terrorists who pose a threat to the United States seemed impossible. The enemy America now faced was one that was almost completely different from the Nazis of World War II. Political Historian Ronny Lipschutz describes the enemy of World War II, "Enemies' appearance or language clearly marked them as being from the 'other side'" (Lipschutz 50). The major difference, then, was whereas the enemy of World War II fought with uniform and insignia on delineated battle field, the terrorist enemy of the war on terror adhered to no such rules. Instead, a terrorist would fight unseen, unknown, and un-characterized by uniform, language, or nationality.

*Inglourious Basterds* creates an unambiguous enemy. In an era of the tough-to-find and tough-to-fight terrorist enemy, a person like Hans Landa is comforting. Standing above the lobby

of her theater, Shosanna looks down on the many Nazis that fill it up. Each appears distinguished and elite; each wears his uniform as part of his distinguished look (*Inglourious Basterds* 01:48:50). Even though he also wears a uniform, Landa stands out in a crowd as he moves in and out of the masses, the camera tracking him (01:50:24). Important to this idea of the easily identifiable enemy is the fact that all Nazis in *Inglourious Basterds* are only ever shown in uniform. Moreover, the fact that the Basterds carve swastikas into the foreheads of survivors appeals to the fantasy of being able to always spot an enemy. When Aldo interrogates the young private after Rachtman's death, he explains to him why they carve the swastikas. Aldo, casually sitting and taking a couple of snorts of snuff, asks if the young man will take off his uniform, to which the man says yes (00:36:38). Aldo then stands, and moves toward the young man. Aldo stops, and briefly and says the defining line in the fantasy of the identifiable enemy, "We like our Nazis in uniforms, that way you can spot 'em, just like that," adding a snap of his fingers for emphasis (00:36:50). He then states that if the young man takes off his Nazi uniform, then no one will know he was a Nazi, adding that would not be good. Moving right up into the young man's face, aggressively invading his space, Aldo draws his blade and points it in the young man's face, saying "So I'mma give you a little somthin' you can't take off" (00:37:09). With terrorists ducking and hiding in every country of the world, perhaps the viewer sits in his theater chair and imagines them all having a large T-shaped scar on their foreheads so they would be as easily identifiable as Aldo's Nazis.

Interestingly enough, the connection between Nazis in *Inglourious Basterds* and terrorists has already been made. In an interview on the film Eli Roth, who plays the Donny "the Bear Jew" Donowitz in the film, addresses the idea of the Nazis in *Inglourious Basterds* standing in for terrorists, specifically the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington D.C. He

talks about how this film fulfills an American fantasy of revenge on those terrorists by proxy of Tarantino's Nazis, "Many Americans and people all over the world have fantasies to have had a role on September 11, and would have just grabbed the hijackers and beat them to death. This movie gives you this satisfaction" (Cohen-Dicker). For Roth, the film serves the very specific purpose of helping Americans fantasize about the easily identifiable enemy in a world filled with enemies who are difficult to spot. The interviewer, Karine Cohen-Dicker, acknowledged Roth's comment and made the more general connection to the war on terror and terrorists, saying, "The movie conjures all kinds of political analogies, including the ongoing conflict in the Middle East" (Cohen-Dicker). The film not only brings to mind the identifiable enemy problem, but the war on terror in general. Clean-cut, dressed-up Nazis are our stand-in for the elusive terrorist.

That Nazis act as proxies for terrorists is further evidenced by comparing the images of prison torture in the Abu Ghraib facility in Iraq with the imagery in *Inglourious Basterds*. Roth's comment about Americans fantasizing about getting their hands on terrorists and beating them is forcibly illustrated by these striking images of torture and abuse. After the conquest of Baghdad, Abu Ghraib, the former death prison of Saddam Hussein, was overtaken by the American military and set up as a prison for enemies of the state and suspected terrorists. Within the confines of the prison and under the command of Janis Karpinski, many prisoners were tortured, brutalized, and degraded (Hersh, Doyle). The incidents of sadistic torture occurred during the summer and fall of 2003, with an ensuing media frenzy in the following years (Hersh). During this time, Tarantino was constantly developing the screenplay for *Inglourious Basterds* (Jones, Taylor). Comparing the film with the images from Abu Ghraib connects the *Basterds* to the U.S. soldiers perpetrating the violence, showing how Nazis serve as stand-ins for a terrorist enemy. Interestingly enough, the images from the abhorrent incident resonate menacingly the imagery in

*Inglourious Basterds*. In both the film and the prison the goal is to dominate, humiliate, and brutalize the enemy into shame and death. In each example an image from the prison matches the effect of *Inglourious Basterds*. I do not wish to address the moral implications of Abu Ghraib, but compare the imagery of Abu Ghraib and *Inglourious Basterds*.

Both Abu Ghraib images and imagery from *Inglourious Basterds* contain scenes of domination that reflect each other visually. One infamous image often connected to accounts from Abu Ghraib prison shows a corridor in the Abu Ghraib facility. Centered high in the frame, Sgt. Ivan Frederick sits cross-legged on a stretcher. Mashed in between the stretcher he is on and another below it is an Iraqi prisoner, face down, head looking up, mouth wide open, trying to breathe. Frederickson's face is static and comfortable. In *Inglourious Basterds* there is a brief camera pan in the burning theater. It starts with a medium view of the burning screen, from the back of the room, as if we are sitting in the very last row of the theater. Low in the shot, masses of people are scrambling toward the right and rear over each other to reach the exit (*Inglourious Basterds* 02:24:53). The camera pans right and up, diagonally to the box on the upper right side of the theater, where we zoom in on Donny Donowitz and Omar Ulmer fire machine guns toward the camera at the crowd below (02:24:57). The shot reverses and we see Nazis being shot in the back as if we were a person on the floor (02:25:00). Both of these images convey a similar feeling of domination. In the Abu Ghraib picture, Frederick is trapping the prisoner below him between himself and the floor. Donowitz and Ulmer trap the Nazis below them between their gunfire and the floor; they are prisoners of the theater. In both cases the dominating American soldier occupies the space directly above the prisoner, the special placement representing the physical domination. In each case the eye is drawn up to the face of the dominating soldiers,

through a triangle shape in the photo, and the camera's pan in *Inglourious Basterds*. Each image represents the way the prisoners are shown to be dominated.

In another image we see signs of humiliation of prisoners. The film mirrors this. From a low, medium shot, we see Rachtman, having just received his first blow to the head, lying on his back across the bottom of the shot in the bottom of the ravine, arms bent awkwardly in front of him, hands and face in spasms from the concussion he has just received (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:34:29). He receives two more hits before the shot cuts to Donowitz, and then to a high wide angle, showing the entire ravine and several Basterds scattered around the top edges, cheering as Donowitz continues to hit Rachtman's head; it bounces around like a doll (00:34:33). There is a very similar image of Abu Ghraib circulated on the internet. Taken from eye level in a corridor, a large pile of naked male bodies occupies the foreground and lower half of the picture, with two American soldiers, Spc. England and Spc. Graner, standing behind the pile, arms around each other, smiling and giving copious thumbs-up signs. In each instance we have a shot of the human body in a humiliating position at the bottom of the shot, Rachtman and the naked inmates. Both are shown in positions the human body does not naturally make. Each shot, the film's high, wide angle, and the eye level shot of the corridor in the prison, provide a sense of viewing down onto the prisoners, as if the viewer stands over them as well, participating in the degradation. The final note is that the American soldiers in each shot are celebrating the degradation of the human body, taking pleasure from the humiliation of the prisoners.

The final images are those of brutalization. From the Abu Ghraib facility there is an image that looks down on a few clothed prisoners lying on the floor, hands tied behind their backs, and empty sand bags covering their heads. In the left center of the frame, Spc. Graner has one prisoner in a choke-hold, posed to strike, with one arm high in the air, fist balled, aiming at

the covered head of the prisoner. In a scene about Hugo Stiglitz from Tarantino's film, there is a shot that is very similar to the image from Abu Ghraib. We first see the head and shoulders of a man lying on his pillow in bed (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:28:32). From the bottom of the frame, a pillow enters and comes down on the man's head, covering him completely. As if we are looking from the victim's point of view, the shot reverses and we see the head and shoulders of Hugo Stiglitz as he sits on the bed (00:28:33). He raises his right arm, and for a moment, his hand and arm hover in the air before he strikes. Both victims of Stiglitz and Graner have their heads covered, not able to see the violence that is about to strike. Since Stiglitz appears to be sitting on the man while he is in bed, both prisoners are confined, bound by their assailant. The final element is that, for a brief moment, Graner and Stiglitz have matching figures with their balled-up fists ready to strike. The imagery of brutalization is almost identical in these two examples.

These three instances create a clear connection between the violence perpetrated by soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison and by the Basterds in *Inglourious Basterds*. The imagery in each of the prison examples is compellingly similar to images from the film. Seeing how prisoners in the Abu Ghraib facility were treated and comparing those images with the film create a strong sense that the Basterds in the film are connected to the perpetrators in the prison. With the chance to lay hands on Iraqi prisoners that may, or may not, be terrorists, these American soldiers seem to make Roth's point about Americans wanting to grab a terrorist and beat him up for what terrorists did on September 11, 2001. What the film does for the public is make it acceptable to participate in similar violence without being held responsible for actually committing acts of domination, degradation, and brutalization on other human bodies.

Yet the revenge fantasy goes one step further in *Inglourious Basterds* and the fantasy is not only revenge against terrorists, but the fantasy of being a terrorist to the Nazis, just like

terrorists are to the United States. In the film, an informal, clandestine band of U.S. operatives infiltrates enemy territory and wreaks physical and psychological havoc on a nation and its soldiers. In fact, Aldo describes how his men will operate behind enemy lines and terrorize the Nazis. As he paces back and forth in front of his little “bush wackin’ guerrilla army” he says:

We will be cruel to the Germans. And through our cruelty they will know who we are, and they will find the evidence of our cruelty in the disemboweled, dismembered and disfigured bodies of their brothers we leave behind us. And the German won’t be able to help themselves, but imagine the cruelty their brothers endured at our hands, and our boot heels, and the edge of our knives. And the German will be sickened by us and the German will talk about us, and the German will fear us. And when the German closes their eyes at night, and they’re tortured by their subconscious for the evil they have done, it will be with thoughts of us that they are tortured with. (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:22:45).

This is the film’s way of exploring what it would be like to be a terrorist. When Aldo and his men fantasize about torturing and terrorizing the Nazis, it is with the American imagination that they do so. In another interview about *Inglourious Basterds*, Eli Roth describes the act of watching the Basterds torment Nazis, “That’s the fun, seeing these guys terrorize Hitler. They’re passing for French peasants, and the psychological warfare they’re engaging in is so effective that it gets back to Hitler and [Nazi higher-ups]” (Stephenson). That this is “fun” indicates that the audience ought to have some kind of pleasure in seeing these Americans engage in guerrilla warfare. This plays to the revenge fantasy, but also to the fantasy of what would happen if Americans engaged in terrorism. Not only do Americans get satisfying revenge on terrorists via Nazis, they do it in a way that America officially does not conduct warfare. In *Inglourious Basterds*, Americans get to fantasize about taking their revenge on terrorists through terrorism.

The American revenge fantasy in *Inglourious Basterds* represents a few things that Americans perhaps wish they could do to terrorists, but cannot achieve for various reasons. The war on terror seems so ambiguous that *Inglourious Basterds* has to serve as a meditation about a time when the world seemed more black and white. And since the terrorist is such a subtle enemy that evades capture and punishment, the film is used to fantasize about a more identifiable enemy, one who can be hurt, humiliated and punished for the evil he has done. Seemingly, terrorists may be too elusive for the American government to quickly and satisfactorily eliminate, but they are not too elusive for the Basterds guerrilla tactics. They can slip in and out of sight behind enemy lines, undetected, violently wreaking havoc on the enemy. By allowing the Basterds to do this, the film provides a sort of catharsis for the American public to watch and feel better about the complicated situation they live in.

*Inglourious Basterds* goes to great lengths to create a simplistic, killable Other in the Nazi. If the Nazi is reduced to pure evil, there can be no other explanation than the Nazi must be killed. By portraying the Nazi as a simplistic devotee of evil, it becomes acceptable to kill him. But more than just a devotion to evil, the Nazi in *Inglourious Basterds* delights in evil. They are psychological sadists, who delight in torture and the suffering of others. As the film explains it, these kinds of evil people must die. Yet it is not only the Nazi as an evil Other that creates the paradigm of justifiable killing; it is the aesthetic of violence as well. Reducing violence to simplistic terms also helps form the kill paradigm. And since violence is art, the body of the Nazi becomes the canvas, the blank slate on which to inscribe cultural hate and discrimination. This comes to fruition in the Jewish revenge fantasy and the American terrorist revenge fantasy, in which the blank canvas Nazi in *Inglourious Basterds* can be imprinted with two separate cultural

fantasies. All of this works together to create an Other who is justifiable to torture and kill within the body of the Nazi. Yet the film inadvertently creates Nazis out of protagonists.

### **The Problem of Violence: Nazifying the “Good Guys”**

#### **The Pure American: Nazi Ideology in American Form**

The film makes the Basterds Nazis by making a strong appeal to the idea of a pure national identity. This idea in the film is closely tied to German eugenics under the Nazis. The two ideas function in the same way, making an appeal to a race imagined to be the purest form of themselves, and excluding another race due to their inferiority (Glass). For example, Nazi eugenics strongly opposed the mixing of races, and non-Aryans generally, labeling them as “life unworthy to be lived” (Traverso 91). Their ideal was the Aryan race, a pure Nordic racial ideal that had influenced the world for positive (Rosenberg). Similar in function as the American ideal of a pure national may be, it differs in that it is based on American ideals, not Germanic. The Americans in *Inglourious Basterds* are made out to be the purest ideal of an American in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, appealing to the notion from *The Great Melting-Pot* by Israel Zangwill that “America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!” (Zangwill 39). They are Jewish-Italian-Americans, all of them. Even as Aldo speaks to them he informs them that he needs more than just American soldiers, he needs “*Jewish-American*” soldiers (*Inglourious Basterds* 00:22:00). Yet they can also pass as an Italian film crew at the premier of *Stolz der Nation* (01:53:40). But in case appealing the pure “melting-pot” ideal breaks down, Aldo is nicknamed the Apache, due to his mountain-man, Apache ancestors (00:22:27). The film reaches way back in proto-American history to find support for Aldo’s pure blood, saying that he is the kind of American that was American before the United States was even a country: a mountain-man, American Indian. This is ironic due the harsh

treatment that Europeans dealt out on the heads of Native Americans. Yet, this kind of proto-country affirmation of one's pure racial lineage sounds strikingly similar to the Aryan racial ideology of Nazi Germany (Rosenberg). This appeal to a country's racially pure ideal serves to align the Basterds with Nazis, making them one and the same.

### **Viewing Violence is Participation in Violence**

The viewer of *Inglourious Basterds* also finds himself in a problematic position of participating in the violence of the film simply because he is viewing the film. Viewing the violence in the film is vicariously participating in the violence. In Karine Cohen-Dicker's interview with Eli Roth, she explains the interaction between audience and what happens on screen. She calls this kind of passive participation the greatest reward for the audience, saying they have "the vicarious thrill of watching underdogs slaughter one of history's most sinister enemies. No mercy. No remorse. And all from the comfort of a cushy seat with a cup holder" (Cohen-Dicker). Essentially, the audience has the involuntary privilege of participating without actually perpetrating any of the violence. Simply by viewing the audience is part of the action. In his review of the film, Ben Walters brings up the problem that arises from this vicarious thrill:

*Inglourious Basterds* both salutes and problematizes the power of film, appreciating that bad guys as well as good can adore and exploit this potency and recognizing that to be a spectator is not without moral consequence: only a thoughtless viewer will not see him or herself reflected in shots of Hitler cackling as he watches Americans being slaughtered in *Nations Pride* (Walters).

For Walters the audience watching *Inglourious Basterds* is the same as the audience in the theater watching Goebbels's fictitious *Nation's Pride*: they both get a certain pleasure from watching as Nazis die at the hands of Americans. Just as the Nazis in the theater have been conditioned to hate Americans, so too, have American audiences watching *Inglourious Basterds*

been conditioned to hate Nazis. The audience in *Inglourious Basterds* and the audience watching *Inglourious Basterds* are joined as one as each takes its pleasure in watching a vilified enemy die. By viewing *Inglourious Basterds* the audience is directly participating in the Basterds Nazi-like violence, so that the viewer somehow connected to the Basterds who ruthlessly kill Nazis, and who are no better than Nazis who ruthlessly kill Jews. In the end, after the Basterds have been Nazified, the audience, too, is Nazified.

### **Conclusion**

What does it mean to be an iconic face of evil? In day following Osama bin Laden's death in Pakistan, the American people learned that his body had been dumped into the ocean. The leader of Al Qaeda, the mastermind of the September 11, 2001 attacks, was finally dead. The man who had been pursued unsuccessfully by the United States for almost ten full years was finally condemned to the deepest reaches of Earth, reducing the probability that his body would be used as a shrine to evil (Karl). It is no surprise that Hitler's remains were burned, crushed, and dumped into a river for the same reason (Tkachenko). In both cases the body of the evil man had to be handled in extreme ways because they had come to represent the face of pure evil. Nazis have since taken Hitler's place as the icons of evil. Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* explores the realm portraying Nazis as the ultimate evil, but it is also a meditation on how to try and justify dealing with evil in evil ways. It explores how an enemy must be created a certain way in the minds of people before it becomes acceptable to kill without guilt. To be able to guiltlessly and brutally murder someone, that person must be sufficiently simplified and vilified. The act of killing must take on an acceptable semiotics, such as art or play, because without glorifying violence, actually murdering someone might come off as too shocking or repulsive. And when the Other becomes a meditation on cultural revenge, then the murder has cultural

justification. Yet all this violence against a pure evil creates problems. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, and so by perpetrating this type of violence, the murderers become just as evil as their enemy. But the most unsettling problem with the violence against Nazis in *Inglourious Basterds* is that by viewing it, the audience watching the film participates in the violence as well, and even the simple act of viewing the cinematic experience of violence can create a Nazi in any person.

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