

The Nazi Fetish: Ritual Violence and the Power of Cinema in *Inglourious Basterds*

TEXT / NOAH SIMBLIST

Hollywood has had a long, tortuous, and often contradictory relationship with Nazi imagery in feature films. In the lead up to WWII, before the U.S. got involved, Hollywood treated the rise of the Third Reich with kid gloves. But after WWII and especially in the last fifteen years, America has increasingly used Nazis, and in particular, their role as perpetrators of the Holocaust, as a signifier of absolute evil. One aspect of these representations of Nazis focuses on Jewish victimhood and weakness. But increasingly Jews are shown in film as participants in active and aggressive resistance.

Edward Zwick's *Defiance*, 2008, and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, 2009, present two recent examples of this kind of Jewish revenge narrative. Sited in WWII Poland, *Defiance* tells the story of two Jewish brothers who draw on their past as brutal criminals to fight back against German soldiers. *Inglourious Basterds* focuses on a band of Jewish American soldiers who rampage through occupied France, scalping and killing Nazis.

While it took a long time for studio executives and the American government to feel comfortable with frank filmic depictions of the Holocaust, these newer films are unique in their unabashed glorification of violence and retribution. Furthermore, they use violence in a way that is meant to be both pleasurable and entertaining.

The Reader, 2008, created something of a controversy in the recent wave of Holocaust films. In this film, Kate Winslet played a for-

mer Nazi who seduces a young teenager in post-war Germany. Critics claimed that the movie asked us to sympathize with Winslet's illiterate character too much and that it used sex as a diversion from the blood on her hands. Critics of *Inglourious Basterds* have claimed that even though Nazis aren't depicted in any way that elicits sympathy, its use of gratuitous violence is itself a moral deficiency.

The use of sex and violence that has shrouded *The Reader* and *Inglourious Basterds* controversy can be traced back to the more overt fetishization of the Nazi in films such as *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, 1974—the story of a buxom commander of a prisoner of war camp endowed with a voracious sexual appetite. Each night, she rapes a male prisoner and then castrates him. *The Night Porter*, 1974, in which a Jewish concentration camp survivor has a sexual relationship with a former SS officer thirteen years after the Holocaust, also follows sadomasochistic dynamics. By contrast, *Inglourious Basterds* focuses more on violence than sex as a means of humiliation. Yet, power and sadism function similarly in relation to Nazism.

Sex and violence, the two main targets of censorship in film, both call on the body as a vehicle for power. Both use violation, penetration, and humiliation to construct positions of authority and coercion. In turn, film produces a secondary set of power relations through representation, forcing the viewer to take a position in the relationship depicted on screen through transference and identifi-

cation. Indeed, the ubiquity of censorship is about the fear that we might become too complicit with what we are watching.

Based on sacrifice of the body, Christian culture has long been adept at depicting ritual violence. However, many other cultures believe that violence and sex are uniquely conducive to ecstasy, combining the sacred and the profane. This idea fascinated the Surrealists as well as philosophers such as Georges Bataille.

In many ways, *Inglourious Basterds* is unique in its brazen embraces of violence as fantasy toward an ecstatic end. In some ways, this is deeply problematic. Ultimately, however, *Inglourious Basterds* puts forth a crucial question: can a film enact political and personal change by eliciting emotions?

Film can bear witness and record unspeakable crimes with the hope that truth itself can have some redemptive function. Film also promises that the pain of this documented loss can be supplanted by the pleasures of catharsis. We like to think of this model of film as something between education and entertainment. But film also can act against truth, creating a fictive construction that passes for the real and thereby supplants it. We call this propaganda even though it passes for education and acts like entertainment.

Theodor Adorno famously declared that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." For him, the problem was precisely that beauty creates pleasure whereas we should only experience pain and grief in relation to

the Holocaust. He was worried about the exploitation of Jewish suffering by the culture industry. The dilemma here is that, in its extreme form, this position could lead to silence and forgetting.

In her 1977 collection of essays *On Photography*, Susan Sontag also dealt with this problem in the wake of the Vietnam War, warning against the aestheticization of horror. She worried that the proliferation of photographic images of violence threatened to deaden their effect. Indeed, the use of Nazism, swastikas, and cries of fascism have been so widespread and unfurled against such disparate ideological positions that it has become difficult to assign any specific meaning to these verbal and visual labels. George W. Bush railed against "Islamofascism" while his detractors on the left referred to his draconian policies as fascist. Even in Israel/Palestine, it is difficult to have a firm grasp on who is a Nazi. Israelis on the right compared Yasser Arafat to Hitler. They even called the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin a Nazi collaborator for his heretical negotiation of a peace settlement. Ironically, many Pales-

tinian groups have compared Israeli policies to those of the Third Reich. What does the metaphor mean if everyone is a Nazi? Can the label still maintain any allusion to the depths of absolute evil if it is spread so thin?

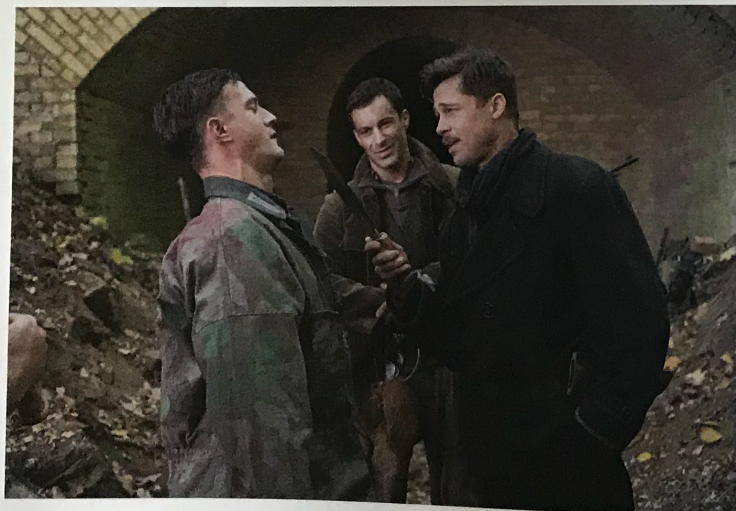
The mechanical reproduction of images, Sontag explained, leveled all images, thus making them all equal. However, in her 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, published as the Iraq war was ramping up, she reversed this position, allowing that images of violence could—and perhaps should—sometimes mobilize activism.

Tarantino's work is about the flood of images that Sontag described. With his unique brand of postmodern pastiche, he weaves allusions to countless examples of film history. In particular, he has made a career out of a deep love of exploitation movies. He has also shown a predilection for films that portray extreme forms of gore and violence. The crucial question is: are his films actually exploitive insofar as they efface the sanctity of victims of violence or foreclose the possibility of documenting their suffering. Does *Inglourious Basterds* exploit the real suf-

fering of Holocaust victims or the American soldiers who died in WWII? The answer is rather complicated.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, let's go over some crucial parts of the plot. *Inglourious Basterds* is divided into five chapters. The first sets the stage with a scene where an SS Officer, Colonel Hans Landa, interrogates a French dairy farmer to see if his family is hiding Jews in their house. Once he finds that they are, all members of the family are killed—except teenage Shoshanna. Three years later, she is living in Paris where, having assumed the identity of Emmanuelle Mimieux, she runs a movie theater in Montmartre.

One day, a Nazi war hero approaches Shoshanna about hosting the premiere of a German propaganda film based on his experiences as a sniper. Joseph Goebbels, the German minister of propaganda, and top-ranking officers in the Third Reich, including Adolf Hitler, will be attending this film. Shoshanna hatches a plot to burn down the theater in order to kill all of the Nazis in attendance as revenge for the deaths of her family and the Jewish people.



Meanwhile, we are introduced to an elite squad of Jewish American soldiers. Their charge is clear: Lieutenant Aldo Raine, who is not Jewish but part-Cherokee, requires each of them to kill and scalp one hundred Nazis. These Jews relish their mission with vengeful zeal. Strategically, they always leave one Nazi alive to tell the story of these *Inglourious Basterds*, carving a swastika into his forehead.

Eventually, the Allies find out about the Nazi elite gathering at Shoshanna's movie theater and, led by the Basterds, they scheme to blow up the theater and end the war. The film ends in the pyric display of an alternate history in which guns, explosives, and a fire set by flammable filmstrips destroy the theater and the Nazi high command along with it. Shoshanna and two of the Basterds are martyred in the process.

There are two sets of catharses at play in the image of Jews killing Nazis. There is Bataille's brand of ecstasy in the simple display of bodies being ravaged. But there is also transcendence, implied by the transformation of the imagined Jewish body from weakness to strength. This change is intimately

connected with the role that Zionism played in the perception and performance of the Jewish body since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Until the Holocaust, Jews were perceived in Western society to be pale, bookish, small, and averse to violence. The emergence of the new Jew in the state of Israel created another possibility—a body and a people that were strong, tanned, and self-reliant, feared and even hated as oppressors. This tipping point is evident when we compare Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, 1993, to his 2005 film *Munich*, which told the story of an Israeli assassination squad in the 1970s charged with hunting down the members of the Palestinian group Black September. In *Munich*, as with the recent Israeli animated documentary, *Waltz With Bashir*, 2008, this transformation ushers in the troubling moral dilemmas associated with unbridled Jewish revenge.

But *Inglourious Basterds* harbors no moral qualms. The Jewish vigilantes in Tarantino's film relish the gruesome task of taking an eye for an eye. It is this lack of ethical questioning that relegates the film to the category of rep-

resentation that Sontag warned us against. In the end, we feel numb to the power and consequences of violence, basking instead in the glow of aesthetic spectacle.

This may be a consequence of the film's setting in the culture industry. While the plot and filmic allusions are complex, the moral drive of the film is quite simple. *Inglourious Basterds* assumes that the war is reduced to good guys and bad guys and that the pleasures of revenge are simple and self-evident.

One of the first films to deal with Nazism was Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, 1940, which used humor to reveal that horror often takes the form of the ridiculous and the irrational. In the art world, the work of Tamy Ben-Tor and Artur Zmijewski provide an alternative to Tarantino's approach with a similar emphasis on the absurd.

Like Tarantino, Tamy Ben-Tor, an Israeli artist currently based in New York, uses low-tech short videos that weave together disparate sources. But she lets the disjunctions remain apparent, creating oblique scenarios that barely make sense. In *Baby Eichmann*, 2008, Ben-Tor is dressed as a male character in

OPPOSITE + ABOVE: Quentin Tarantino, stills from *Inglourious Basterds*, 2009



a blonde wig playing the recorder in front of 1930s German propaganda imagery of bucolic Bavarian landscapes. A voiceover says, "We didn't know that the man with the mustache was evil.... We thought that our neighbors went on vacation and left us their clothes.... We didn't know that our leader was an idiot. We were told that he was a genius." Like Chaplin playing both a Jewish barber and Hitler, Ben-Tor passes as an Aryan, speaking in German and other Central European languages to reveal the absurd positions of Germans who turned a blind eye to the final solution. Then we hear a male voice in Hebrew, "all anyone cares about is themselves.... although this is what the devil says.... it's all a kind of pornography that people embrace the disasters of others.... it makes them feel good." Next, we see an old-age home in Israel, where Jewish grandmothers sing songs in Hebrew. What does this mean? Is she implying, like Sontag, that representations of the Holocaust run the risk of becoming entertainment? Or worse, does the fetishization of these images make them pornography? Is her playing of these opposite positions herself warning us that no one is exempt of the sadism practiced by Nazis, that the potential for such power play is in all of us?

In *Gewald*, 2007, Ben-Tor plays an orthodox Jewish woman. Hunched and bucktoothed, she wears a traditional head covering and speaks in a thick Brooklyn accent, going back and forth between English, Hebrew, and Yiddish, in front of a wooded backdrop. She says, "Why should we leave Egypt? Why go to a desert surrounded by all these hostile hateful Arabs—what are you crazy? Here, we are surrounded by civilized enlightened people. They would never do anything to us. They know how we have contributed to culture and enlightenment.... Yeah, there are self-hating Jews in Hollywood just like everywhere else—but, without the Jews, America would not be a superpower today." The next scene begins with images of pigs. We then see Ben-Tor dressed up as a German folk dancer in front of a kitschy Bavarian backdrop.

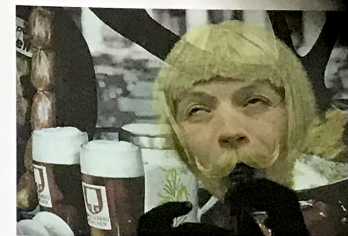
As these messages equate the willful ignorance of Germans in WWII and American

Jews, the strange, smiling sadism at play implies that there is no safe place. The Brooklyn woman repeats the words of assimilated German Jews before the Holocaust who believed that they were more German than Jewish and as a result were safe from anti-Semitism.

Language in Ben-Tor's work is both hallucinatory and off-putting. She moves back and forth so quickly between German, Hebrew, English, Gibberish, and Yiddish—with and without subtitles—that it is difficult to keep track of what's going on. However, even if we did speak all of these languages fluently, we wouldn't understand what they were saying. These cultural mashups put on display the fearful, hateful, and paranoid delusions of her characters. The point here is that the histories of the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflicts are absurd exercises in contradiction and insanity. By focusing on irrational and disjointed narratives, these short videos represent the psychology quite accurately. It is this abstraction from the real as a means to approach a more accurate representation of the unspeakable crimes of the Holocaust that led the Romanian Holocaust survivor Paul Celan to write cryptic and oblique poems littered with invented words bearing impossible witness to his past.

Polish artist Artur Zmijewski similarly delights in revealing what Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil." In his 1999 project *A Game of Tag*, Zmijewski filmed a group of people in two rooms—a neutral space and a gas chamber from a former Nazi concentration camp. He asked the participants to take off their clothes and play a game of tag. As we watch them slowly begin to run after one another, we can see that some are reluctant and ashamed of both their nakedness and the implicit tastelessness of playing a game in a space with such a horrific history.

This bold and possibly sacrilegious scenario dared both the participants and us as viewers to confront the horrors of the Holocaust in a new way. The game's lightheartedness underlines the ugly truth that stains the space where they play. In this, it is much more effective than a predictably solemn narrative of the



events that took place within those walls. While still denied by some, the Holocaust and the ubiquity of related stories allow us to share the history that haunts the space of the gas chambers. Behind the simple act of playing tag, the performance sets the stage for us to grasp the waves of implication.

The problem with the use of violent revenge in *Inglorious Basterds* is that it follows very predictable patterns of desire. When Shoshanna and the Basterds strike fear into the hearts of their oppressors, destroying them and even martyring themselves in the process, we are meant to feel some sense of resolution. There is no acknowledgement of the survivors' guilt nor is there any nod to what happens to one's murderous nature after vengeance is served.

One could write this off as irrelevant to Tarantino's interest in film as a formal exercise, were it not for the fact that he clearly believes in the power of cinema. *Inglorious Basterds* doesn't just contain countless allusions to film history. It uses both a movie theater and film itself as weapons against the

evil of Nazism. Shoshanna starts the fire in her theater with spools of film as a voiceover explains that it is an incredibly incendiary material. The problem with this acknowledgement of film's power is that it bolsters the argument for censorship. When Sontag revised her initial position on the powerlessness of photography, she was left with ambivalence about this power. Film can change minds and reveal truth. It can take the form of propaganda and entertainment but the representation of violence can be most powerful if it is paired with its complicated ramifications.

Right before Raine carves the swastika on his Nazi survivors, he asks them if they will ever take off their uniforms. Someday they will, he tells them. And he wants to make sure that they are forever marked for what they are. One of the final scenes in the film, the carving of the swastika onto Landa's forehead is the main gesture that implicitly lives into the future. Like the mark of circumcision that acts as a testament to man's covenant with God, the scar left on Landa does not only bear

witness to his identity, it also acts as a mark of the ritual itself. This ritual marks both Landa and the Jewish Basterds insofar as the scar acts as a testament to their brutality, marking these Jews' covenant with their oppressors-turned-victims. So what is the nature of this covenant? One day, the Basterds will also shed their uniforms. This ritual serves as a reminder that the power has shifted. They are no longer victims. While Landa will have to live a life in shame, they are now the ones with power. The question is: how will they, these new Jews, use it?

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OPPOSITE: Artur Zmijewski, stills from *The Game of Tag*, 1999, single-channel video, 4.25 minutes, color, sound (courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kötchmann, Zürich). ABOVE, TOP, LEFT: Tamy Ben-Tor, still from *Gewald*, 2007, ABOVE, TOP, RIGHT: Tamy Ben-Tor, still from *Baby Eichmann*, 2008, DVD, 3.42 minutes, ed. of 5 (courtesy of the artist and Zach Feuer Gallery, New York); ABOVE, BOTTOM: Tamy Ben-Tor, stills from *Gewald*, 2007