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**This Might Just Be My Masterpiece - The *Basterds*' Power of Fiction to Master
an *Inglorious* Past**

There is no escape. Trapped inside a petite Parisian movie theater the Nazi elite are caught in an inferno. As hundreds of Third Reich supporters are screaming, the shot switches to, Lt. Aldo Raine's 'special team' firing a shower of bullets into the hysterical crowd. They execute those in uniform and their wives. The avengers are filled with joy at the sight of blood stained dresses and green uniforms. To ensure no Nazis survive the hail of bullets and flames, the special team detonates two packs of TNT. The dead, elite members of the occupation should be dismembered beyond recognition. A crowd that just minutes before was bathing in fascist kitsch, convinced of their inherent racial superiority, has now been brought to the death chamber by a group of Jewish-American soldiers. The Nazis have dug their own grave: assembled to praise the newest product of Goebbels's propaganda apparatus, they become victims of their own techniques—what had been used to promote the killing of millions ironically becomes the bait that draws them to their own grave. After the dust has settled and the camera takes a close look at the pile of corpses, we are reminded of the deadly power of movies—a weapon that seduces and deceives.

Set in World War II France and Germany, *Inglorious Basterds* has two parallel story lines. For one, there is a group of Jewish-American soldiers—better described as militias—who are determined to 'scalp' as many Nazis as possible. The *Inglorious*

Basterds are lead by Lt. Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) and operate under the maxim: "Take no prisoners." The second story line involves a young Jewish woman, Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent), owner of a small French cinema, who seeks revenge for the death of her family. And then there is the SS Colonel Hans Lander (Christoph Waltz), nicknamed the 'Jew Hunter', who tries to prevent both actions of revenge from being successful. With time, place and characters set, Tarantino embarks on a gory, humorous cinematic journey of revenge.

Tarantino's version of a Third Reich that collapses and that exercises revenge on Nazi leaders in less than two hours and thirty-two minutes raises a variety of questions, especially for a German audience. Tarantino blends fact with fiction and, in doing so, he uses the greatest German cultural burden, the Third Reich, as his theme. *Inglorious Basterds*, therefore, takes a unique place not only in the history of World War II movies, but also in contemporary German society. By changing the past, it becomes an issue of the present. The movie raises questions of national and cultural identity, historiography and responsibility in a new way: is German society ready to fictionalize their past, and what is the risk in doing so? It inevitably triggers a different set of emotions in a German audience than for any other audience. To understand the movie in its contemporary context, we must look to its production process, distinguish between fact and fiction, register the reactions in Germany and elsewhere, and its role in German film history. *Inglorious Basterds*, against all odds, becomes a way for German society to deal with their past in a way that no other movie has done before: Nazis are fictionalized.

The development and writing of the script sheds light on to the motivation and success of the movie. In an interview with the Herald Sun, Tarantino refers to *Inglorious Basterds* as his finest piece. Although, Tarantino said it was too early to judge whether

this was his masterpiece, critics largely did so for him. The drafting of the script, he admits, took him over a decade. When asked whether he faced writers block, Tarantino replied, “I couldn’t shut my brain off. I kept coming up with more and more new things.” In an interview with Charlie Rose he states, “I became too precious about the page.” The greatest question remains however, why the director, who is know for *Kill Bill*, *Pulp Fiction* or *Reservoir Dogs* would even attempt to make a World War II movie. When asked about the inspiration for the film, he bluntly remarked, “It’s a bunch-of-guys-on-a-mission film.” (Cramer).

Above all, Tarantino is known for his encyclopedic knowledge of film history. His movies are usually packed with references to film history and famous film characters—details only critics would notice. *Inglorious Basterds* is no exception. Film scholar Jaime Weinman asserts that, “Actually, Tarantino's old fashioned approach isn’t that hard to understand when you listen to any of his many interviews: more than any other moviemaker, his influences come from old movies. (...) *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* were about gangster movies, not gangsters; *Kill Bill* mixed martial arts movies with the French New Wave.”¹ *Inglorious Basterds* draws upon earlier World War II movies, most obviously on Enzo Castellari’s 1978 war film, *The Inglorious Bastards*, and other directors, such as G.W. Pabst. In addition, Tarantino confesses that he found American Propaganda movies of the 1940s to be inspiring because they warn people of a Nazi threat, yet they entertain—*Inglorious Basterds* achieves exactly that, but in a the context of the 21st century.

It seems logical to incorporate German actors in a movie that deals with German history and is set in Germany. Yet in Hollywood, where Tom Cruise as Colonel von

Stauffenberg carries out a bomb plot against the Nazi elite, this is not a given. The incorporation of Christoph Waltz, Til Schweiger, Daniel Bruehl and Michael Fassbender give the movie authenticity and make it more than just a Nazi killing spree—Tarantino lets Germans, young Germans, reconstruct their own history. According to an article by Michael Flemming, Tarantino originally envisioned Leonardo di Caprio to take the role of Hans Landa and Adam Sandler that of Donny Donowitz. Only when revising the script, did it occur to Tarantino to have a German actor play the role of Hans Landa—a decision that, according to Tarantino, “gave me my movie back.” (Rose, Charlie min. 48) It is a decision that seems necessary in light of the fact that the subject matter is the Holocaust, and the most serious subject matter Tarantino has dealt with so far.

So, is it fact or fiction? Everything from the costumes to the mannerisms is historically accurate, as is the fact that there were successful resistance movements against the Nazis. The plot, however, is an entirely fictional and the characters are a product of Tarantino’s imagination. The more important question, however, is: What are the causes and consequences of blending historical fact with fiction in the context of this subject matter? More concretely: What happens when Nazis become the victim of a Jewish revenge fantasy? Manohla Dargis writing for The New York Times concludes, “Mr. Tarantino’s Nazis exist in an insistently fictional cinematic space where heroes and villains converge amid a welter of movie allusions. He’s not making a documentary (...) Mr. Tarantino is really only serious about his own films, not history.” Ms. Dargis is not the only one to argue that *Inglorious Basterds* is about Tarantino’s ability to produce entertaining movies. The history of the Third Reich is not Tarantino’s motivation, but a theme he uses for an idea about a revenge story, without anticipating its cultural, political

and social consequences. Dargis proposes, “The problem is that by making the star attraction of his latest film a most delightful Nazi, one whose smooth talk is as lovingly presented as his murderous violence, Mr. Tarantino has polluted that love (his love for cinema).” The argument poses a dichotomy: Dargis realizes that Tarantino’s Nazis exist in an entirely fictional space, yet criticizes Col. Hans Lander for having the power of a fictional character. Her argument does not criticize Tarantino’s skills, but his subject choice. In doing so, she mirrors the common failure to understand Tarantino writing talent and cinematographic abilities as a novel way that depicts the potency of the Nazis and offer a new form of historiography.

The Jewish press, too, condemned the movie for its lack of moral. The Jewish magazine Tikkun criticizes, “ Tarantino, who is not Jewish, may be genuine in his desire to make the un-*Schindler’s List* but there’s absolutely no irony, no pathos, in his game plan. Doesn’t he realize that making a righteous fantasy about the Jewish incineration of the Nazi brass only reinforces the sad reality that, tragically, this never happened?”

Underlying this criticism is the assumption that World War II movies must serve a pedagogical function, or in some way remind us of the horrors of the Holocaust. Both reviews criticize the danger of blending fact and fiction, or mistake the movies for reality. The reviews represent a more conservative view that Nazi Germany is not yet ready to be subjected to storytelling. To Germans then, whose history is always part of their present, the movie theoretically poses a greater threat.

But the opposite is true.

In Germany, the movie has been viewed with particular enthusiasm. The Financial Times Deutschland labeled it “great cinema” (Itzkoff). Der Tagesspiegel applauded the

movie with the likes of: “Catharsis! Oxygen! Wonderful retro-futuristic insanity of the imagination!” The popularity of the movie in Germany can be attributed to two main reasons: One is its ability to entertain via its witty dialogue, its incorporation of German actors, its cinematography and its gory action scenes. All of these make *Inglorious Basterds* a successful movie, regardless of the audience’s origin. Secondly, and more importantly, it breaks away from the tradition of World War II movies that usually claim to be historically accurate. The Nazis in the movie become an accurate representation of the real Nazis, not by trying to be Nazis in the first place, but rather individual characters with a personal dimension. In his review “*Mr. Tarantino’s War Declaration*”, published in Der Spiegel, Seeslen argues that Hans Lander seduces, and by doing so does what no other World War II movie has done: depict the psychological power of the Nazis. Although not explicitly mentioned in the reviews, Christoph Waltz, as the Jew Hunter, seduces the audience and leaves no option other than to be fascinated by his wit, character, intelligence and conviction. The media’s fascination is best understood by analyzing the opening scene, where Col. Hans Lander talks to a French farmer, Monsieur LaPadite, while searching for a family that is hiding in the basement.

Sitting at an old wooden table, Col. Lander begins his interrogation, “What have you heard about The Dreyfusus, Monsieur LaPadite?” Without an answer, Col. Hans Lander politely asks for a glass of milk and grins. “Monsieur LaPadite, are you aware of the nickname the people of France have given me?” The French Farmer replies, “The Jew Hunter.” After Monsieur LaPedit lights his pipe, Col. Hans Lander takes out a pipe that is four times the size of LaPedit’s. Colonel informs LaPedit that he is about to send in his men to execute the hidden family, but decides to take his time and enjoy a smoke

before doing so. Seeing Monsieur LaPeditte shake, sweat and tremble in anxiety, Lander finishes his glass of milk with a perverse sense of joy and deep satisfaction. Thanking LaPeditte for his hospitality and the fresh milk in flawless polite French, and with a big smile, Col Hans Lander signals his men to enter the farmhouse and execute the hidden family. We do not know whether to laugh at the sight of a mass murderer asking for a glass of milk or smoking a ridiculously large pipe, or whether to fear the upcoming execution of six innocent people. Just as Col. Hans Lander uses his wit, perverse humor and language abilities to torture LaPeditte, it questions the audience's belief that Nazis cannot entertain and causes uneasiness. The scene does what the Nazi propaganda successfully did: it offers a sense of humor and entertainment— only few can resist—to deceive and distract from the actual intentions. It turns the audience into a speechless group of followers that is repeatedly seduced and deceived.

In order to fully understand the film's cultural implications, it is important to look at how Germans deal with their past and its role in the present. It is needless to say that Germany's history defines a person's, cultural, social and political identity, sometimes perhaps subconsciously. More so than in any other western culture, being German inevitably requires confronting the past, and having the responsibility to teach and learn about the past. In her book Nation and Identity in the New German Cinema, Inga Scharf discusses what it means to be German. Although historians and politicians have fought over the issue for decades, she provides a sober assessment: “ ‘being German’ has been significantly more about the Holocaust, than about poetry, philosophy, or music (i.e. Goethe, Nietzsche and Bach).” The sociologist and philosopher, Theodor Adorno, once remarked that because of the Holocaust Germans are ‘homeless’. Both Scharf and

Adorno are right. German history prohibits a sense of national identity and pride. Yet this has recently changed.

In 2006, images of millions of German waving the German flag, singing the national anthem and taking pride in their nation (or their soccer team) circled the globe. Sociologists and politicians spoke of a new wave of patriotism. A closer look, however, shows that these people were primarily young people, who all shared the same history that did not prevent them from waving their country's flag. For younger generations, unlike their parents, being German means looking into the future with being aware of the past and its implications, but not getting caught up in retrospective discussions about responsibility and fault.

In addressing German history today, it is important to understand the concept of *Vergangenheitsueberweltigung*— i.e., coming to terms with and mastering the past. In his book, Stranded Objects, Eric L. Santner argues that the German student movements of the late sixties, arguably, had the greatest affect on German *Vergangenheitsueberweltigung*. These students protested against “the generation responsible for Nazism” (xii) i.e., their parents. In Santner’s words, “They were performing a radical act of *Vergangenheitsueberwaeltigung*.” (xii). Sander’s argument is essential in analyzing the impact of *Inglorious Basterds* because the generation that protested against their parents in the 60s are now the critics, reviewing the movie and shaping public opinion. Just as the 60s protests were a form of mastering the past, *Inglorious Basterds* offers a new way of mastering the past for the next generation(s). While the late 60s student protests were a form of resisting and rebelling against the past, Tarantino’s movie offers an artistic possibility of coming to terms with and moving beyond the past. Therefore, it appeals especially to a generation that has struggled to determine define their relationship to the past as other than being the sons and daughters

of 'guilty followers'.

Der Spiegel author Georg Seeslen argues that Germans need this movie because it deals with the past in a way that other post-fascist depictions of history have failed to do. Other attempts to be historically accurate and depict Nazis authentically achieve the opposite; they raise the same questions of "fault, actor, followers, hierarchy, Fuehrer-Kult" (2) over and over again. For Seeslen, the danger of doing so is that the "myth of fascist aesthetic" lives on as the "absolute evil and the demon" (3), yet it fails to go beyond that. *Inglorious Basterds*, for Seeslen, puts an end to the public discourse about historical accuracy and movie morality: "*Pulp Fiction* defeats deathly fascist kitsch." In a society where historiography of the Third Reich mostly has a moralistic undertone—and rightfully so—the destruction of the Nazis and all their symbols comes as a relief. As Seeslen states "It is not enough just to kill Hitler. One has to simultaneously destroy his environment, and his propaganda." (1) The movie offers a what-if scenario that shows the mortality of the Nazis and destructs the historical image of unquestionable power; the impossible becomes possible when the seemingly undefeatable Nazi elite dies once and forever. Although no critic has stated it, Tarantino—with no evident intention to do so—translates German pain, frustration and anger against their historic branding into a story of revenge. He offers an entirely new perspective: What if the Stauffenberg plot or Lt. Aldo Raine really would have succeeded? Would Germans be remembered for Nietzsche or Bach, before being labeled Nazis? Rather than just merely reminding society about horrors of the past, Tarantino deconstructs it. Seeslen's argument is also valid applied to German film history.

Post-war films have either used other genres in an attempt to provide a relief from the reality, or tried to be historically accurate. Pervaded by a general fear of

misrepresenting history, post–World War II films, according to film historian Thomas Elsaesser, strive only to be moralizing. He states, “New German cinema seems to have taken up only one side of the argument, conjuring up the memory of the Nazi regime’s own self–dramatization, its narcissism of power and domination, and the warning of the danger of film reproducing this fascination, without being able to displace it critically.”(295) Comparing Elsaesser’s observation of post-WWII films to *Inglorious Basterds*, it becomes clear why Tarantino has the ability to provide an effective and new way of *Vergangenheitsueberwaeltigung* — his film transcends genre and deconstructs the prevalent WWII film myth that films need to be historically accurate. It ‘displaces’ the Nazis effectively in that it does not make the viewer subject to mourning or a guilty conscience, but uses the power of images to deconstruct WWII movie history itself.

In traditional World War II movies, the past continues to live on because it’s portrayed accurately, and never questioned; the questioning is usually left to the audience. Through the power of images, *Inglorious Basterds* deconstructs the past and directly questions the immortality of the Nazis. In addition to blending fact and fiction, Tarantino has provided another way of mastering the past.

Tarantino has provided German society a new way to deal with their past and it is perhaps not wrong to speak of his “masterpiece” in this context. However, what we cannot know is what effect the movie has on those who were a part of the Third Reich. Would they confuse the movies with reality or would they condemn the movie for failing to depict what it was really like? Because a comparison is not possible, we must assume that *Inglorious Basterds* serves as a way of *Vergangenheitsueberwaeltigung* for only those who did not witness the rise and fall of Nazi Germany. The nature and role of

fiction and cinema itself has changed, becoming more diverse, experimental and daring. Fiction is a potent and powerful messenger of the personal and emotional aspects of otherwise abstract historic events—Christoph Waltz gives a human face to an otherwise abstract Nazi figure and thus helps us to better comprehend the Nazi's psychological power. Quentin Tarantino did not intend the movie to have a cultural, political and historic dimension in German society, yet his effect is indisputable. We are reminded that when evil is staged well, we are easily manipulated.

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Research Essay

When the time came to select a movie for the final research project of my UW20 class, it was clear which one I would choose: *Inglorious Basterds*. Although it had been more than six months since I had last seen the film, it made a lasting impression on me. After watching it again, I began to think about its cultural implications, its drastic approach to the WWII genre and the powerful acting of Oscar-winning Christoph Waltz. There was something about the movie that fascinated me, something I could not clearly point out. I wondered what the effect a movie that alters and disregards the past has on German society, where the past shapes the present perhaps more than in any other country. Would this movie help me understand my country's history, or was it simply subject of an action revenge fantasy? Was the movie something only possible for my generation? Growing up in Germany I had seen endless movies about the Third Reich and World War II, but *Inglorious Basterds* was different—it was more than a factual account, or a reminder of a horrible past.

The assignment asked me to critically research a recent movie in regard to its genre, its place in film history or its Auteur. After talking to my professor, I decided to focus on its depiction of German history, its break from the traditional World War II movie genre and, more importantly, its cultural value. I set forth the thesis that altering the past so radically as Tarantino does threatens correct historiography and dangerously blends fiction with a horrible past for the sake of entertainment. So, I prematurely concluded that German's must hate it and the Americans must love it—only to discover later the opposite was true.

The research posed a unique challenge: How could I find scholarly sources about a recent Hollywood blockbuster? I started my research by reading American, then German and later international reviews. After reading the reviews, my thesis already proved to be wrong. The movie, especially Christoph Waltz as Colonel Hans Lander, had been widely applauded in Germany for presenting an accurate image of the Nazis by portraying the personal dimension and not as abstract historic figures. American and

international reviews criticized the movie for glorifying the Nazi pomp and distracting from historic realities. I proceeded by trying to evaluate the film's place in German film history of WWII movies, which proved to be the most challenging. With the help of librarian Dolsy Smith I searched the sixth floor's large selection of books about German film history and the EBSCO online catalogue. I had trouble finding sources that helped me place the movie in the context of other German WWII movies. Only two of the sources discussed the effects other, older movies had, that too had fictionalized historic facts of WWII but did not further my research. Only after a class discussion about the different types of sources was I able to successfully continue my research. In one of the many sources that dealt with German film history I came across the concept of *Vergangenheitsueberweltigung* – the German word for mastering the past, and a prominent subject in post-war art and film. I borrowed the concept as a method source by using the author's structural approach (not the arguments themselves) to discuss how this movie was an example of mastering the past. The German movie reviews presented arguments that expanded the theories of the method sources, although not explicitly mentioning them, and placed them into a contemporary cultural context. In sum, I used literature that dealt with German society and history and applied them to film. The fact that I had used non-film related sources to determine the movie's role in culture opened up the opportunity to approach one academic subject with resources from another.

The last step of my research was to evaluate the role movies in Germany played in portraying and mastering the past. Here, too, I made use of the resources on German cinema using a book titled *Framing the Past: the Historiography of German Cinema and Television*. However, with the exception of German movie reviews, the sources had all been cultural observations by American scholars. Searching for a German perspective on the topic, I returned to the Aladin Catalogue and searched the list of titles for German authors. The library had two originally German books that were translated into English, such as the *Nation and Identity in the New German Cinema* by Inga Scharf. My sources were now balanced between American and German perspectives, which enabled me to evaluate the cultural value of the film through comparison of different arguments.

The Gelman library system offered an array of sources that dealt with German film history. However, scholastic material about more recent movies was comparatively limited and hard to find. This project showed me to search alternative, but related academic fields when sources about one's subject are limited. Since I was dealing with a relatively new movie, I thought that most of my sources would be electronic, which proved to be wrong. The most useful sources were print sources, published before the age of the Internet. Through my own research process and reading the essays of my peers I came to understand the political and cultural dimensions of a films that are otherwise simply labeled entertainment.