

Shaun Lien

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Alford and Pranolo

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Cowboys, Disneyland, and *Inglourious Basterds*

The sequence starts with an establishing shot of a rural French farmhouse. We see Colonel Hans Landa with his crew, visiting the farmhouse, in search of a Jewish family. It turns out that the Jewish family is hiding under the floorboards of the farmhouse, and the LaPadites are hiding them from the Nazis. The Colonel initiates a painfully extended conversation with Mr. LaPadite, chitchatting about random things, while smoking with his comically gigantic pipe. Although he is polite and charismatic, there is no doubt that Landa is terrifying at the same time. The scene lingers, and the emotional tension boils underneath. Eventually, Mr. LaPadite gives in and tells Landa where he is hiding the Jewish family. Landa then swiftly orders his men to come in and machine gun the floor. Only the daughter of the family, Shosanna, manages to escape.

This heightened opening sequence is perhaps one of the most memorable scenes in *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino 2009). It is no doubt violent, and yet through the exaggerated and dramatic actions of Landa, such as the milk drinking and the pipe smoking, the scene becomes playful, and even entertaining. This is essentially Tarantino's stylistic hallmark — the blurring of the line between gore, humor, and entertainment. His highly stylized characters present a disconnect between historical reality and fiction. Landa, for example, is nothing but a caricature of a Nazi. He reflects little historical accuracy besides his outfit. Both the opening scene and Colonel Hans Landa demonstrate that the film is full of imitation of style and

historical stereotypes. In this paper, I will argue that *Inglourious Basterds* constructs an alternate universe and a world that is free from the universal narrative of history, transporting the audience to a constructed yet convincing past; the postmodern qualities of the film creates a gravity different from that of the real world, distorting the fabric of reality.

To position *Inglourious Basterds* as a postmodern film, the term must be discussed and defined. Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, calls postmodernism a kind of “aesthetic populism” (Jameson 2), and associates it with a “new kind of flatness or depthlessness” (Jameson 9). He treats postmodernism as a cultural and sociopolitical phenomena, rather than a specific style. If anything, postmodernism is the waning of specific styles and a collage of multiple different ones. It demands to be seen through a larger scope and the consideration of a socioeconomic context. In postmodern debates, there is a “growing suspicion towards ‘universal’ or all embracing systems of thought and explanation (Hill 97). For Jean-François Lyotard, the ‘postmodernist condition’ can be defined by a growing distrust towards the modernism created by the Enlightenment and its system of scientific methods for a unified truth (Hill 97). Postmodernism is defined in many different ways, but these definitions all point to pluralism and vagueness, and a rejection of the universal and singular truth/reality that modernism strives to search.

The search of a singular truth is evidently deterred by the representation of historical figures, specifically Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, as they do not provide access to the actual figures themselves. These characters are stereotyped and molded into caricatures. For instance, the first time Adolf Hitler is revealed, we see him furiously slamming the table, shouting “nein! nein! nein! nein! nein!” He is presented as an emperor, wearing an extravagant

white and red cape. His fury and gestures can be seen as an imitation of the real Hitler passionately giving speeches. The fictional Hitler in *Inglourious Basterds* highly resembles the stereotype of the “angry Hitler” from not only real footages from the 30s, but also scenes from other films, such as *Downfall* (Hirschbiegel 2004). However, in *Downfall*, there is an obvious compliance to reality; Hitler shouts at his generals furiously in only one scene, and his motives are mostly historically accurate (Steiner could not mobilize enough men). The events in *Downfall* are grounded in reality and historical research. In *Inglourious Basterds*, such efforts to accurately represent history largely vanish. The historical figures are transported to an alternate universe; Hitler is now shouting because the “Bear Jew” cannot be caught, instead of anything that remotely reflects real history. From the premise of the film alone, one can assume that Tarantino is more concerned with entertainment, rather than historical accuracy. A similar caricature is also visible when Goebbels is presented. In the film, he is portrayed as a narcissistic fanatic, a psychopath who sees himself as the greatest artist. In both cases, the characters are highly stylized in a similar way. These characters did not carry historical accuracy; instead, they are created based on Tarantino’s stereotype. Moreover, it is hard to find an obvious reason behind representing these characters as caricatures. The way Hitler is portrayed in the film is not the same as an American being portrayed as a gun-loving large person on a Walmart scooter. In *Inglourious Basterds*, it is hard to find a political commentary within those caricatures.

Therefore, it is natural to associate these characters with pastiche, an element central to postmodernism. Jameson defines pastiche as parody without an edge, without “parody’s ulterior motives” (Jameson 17). Pastiche is the copying of past styles without obvious purpose. It is an emotionless copy, or “a statue with blind eyeballs,” as Jameson puts it (Jameson 17). Just like

how Victorian style houses are still being built nowadays, historical figures, and even the historical background, are also being revived — in a fractured way. In *Inglourious Basterds*, the Nazi occupied Paris was not represented as a portal for the viewer to have access to historical reality. Rather, it was simply a backdrop of a film that cannibalized various genres and merged different styles.

The inclusion of different styles can also be seen as pastiche. In a postmodern world, the text itself cannot be seen as singular, but as a component of a larger network of texts. This intertextuality is immediately visible in the title, which is a reference to the 1978 film *Inglorious Bastards* (Castellari 1978). In Tarantino's film, the props work as references to other texts. In the beginning of the film, when Landa is investigating the whereabouts of the Jewish family, he takes out his ridiculously huge pipe. Besides creating a comedic effect, the pipe works as an allusion to Sherlock Holmes, according to Tarantino in an interview. Similarly, the shoe that Landa fits on the German double spy, Bridget Von Hammersmark, and reveals her secret identity, can be seen as a reference to Cinderella. Elements from Spaghetti Westerns, which are Western films made by Italians, are also heavily used in the film. In the tavern scene, when lieutenant Hicox's identity is compromised by Major Hellstrom, things quickly develop into a Mexican standoff, where three men are pointing their guns at each other's testicles. Moreover, music that is often associated with Westerns appear in this film repeatedly, such as "The Surrender" and "Un Amico" by Ennio Morricone. There are many more instances where elements from other genres are used, including revenge film, comedy, and B-movie, but I will not dwell on listing them. Essentially, *Inglourious Basterds* incorporates not just references from other texts, but also style from other genres.

Postmodernism dismisses an uniform and singular meaning, which is demonstrated by the use of pastiche. Robert Kolker differentiates pastiche with allusion, saying that in allusions “references to other works serve as a way to the creation of resonance and the complexity of textual relationships” (Kolker 265). According to Kolker, in modernist films such as Kubrick and Scorsese’s works, allusions create a complex intertextuality that invites a search for meaning (Kolker 265). These allusions point out a separation between appearance and essence. Pastiche, on the contrary, does not have a clear meaning behind it. For example, the incorporation of Spaghetti Western music have no apparent meaning, and is potentially baffling. However, perhaps because of this lack of meaning, the music generates an effect that disconnect reality and the fantasmatic, violent world Tarantino created. This method is not exclusive to *Inglourious Basterds*; Tarantino employs it throughout his earlier films, as noted by Lisa Coulthard. According to her, “throughout Tarantino's use of song is an emphasis on nostalgia and temporal dislocation, which works to frame the violent action as anomalous or somehow outside of the diegetic world of the action” (Coulthard 3). The “anomalous violent action” in Tarantino’s films contributes to a lack of gravity (or at least a gravity that is different from that of the world we live in), creating a detachment from reality and a self-awareness that the film is just fiction and fantasy. The references do not allude to anything significant, nor does it demand the search for meaning. In short, Tarantino’s films have a certain light-hearted quality, and do not take themselves seriously. Jameson says that the modernist depth model collapses into a surface, or multiple surfaces (Jameson 12). Part of the depth model is “the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified,” which according to him is also a casualty of the postmodern world (Jameson 12). In *Inglourious Basterds*, the backdrop is World War II, where millions of

Jews are persecuted and systematically killed. There is a potential for Tarantino to aim at historical evil by choosing this period, but this possibility collapses in “a kind of comic book fantasy of revenge that finally trivializes its subject” (Kolker 265). The trivialization of subjects in *Inglourious Basterds* is evident in the scope of the film, which is centered around a small group of people pursuing Jewish revenge, but does not provide the socioeconomic context of that period, for instance horror of the war.

The disappearance of significance, and the loss of gravity, resonate with the concept of simulacrum, “the identical copy for which no original has ever existed” (Jameson 18). Applying the idea to film, *Inglourious Basterds* can be seen as a simulacrum where the historical era it is referring to is non-existent. Once again this signifies the collapse of the depth model, since the signifier no longer reflects the signified. This is further elaborated by Jean Baudrillard, who takes the idea to the extreme. Baudrillard believes that in a world full of signs and images, there is no way to determine what is reality (Hill 98). In his own words, “it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real” (Baudrillard 21). This collapse of the depth model, where the simulacrum does not contain inherent meaning, creates a flat surface for the subject matter. The weakening of historicity, through the use of pastiche and intertextuality, is manifested through the reduction of historical depth. He argues that as a result, texts are unable to present the “real” past, but only a fraction, or a pre-existing stereotype of it. Baudrillard elaborates on the idea of hyperreality by using Disneyland as an example. To him, Disneyland is a site of simulation, a fantasy world that is supposed to be a reminder that the rest of the world is real. However, in the postmodern era, he stresses, “real” is an idea that is obsolete and we enter an era of the hyperreal. In this case, the “real world” is no more real than Disneyland. Fantasy

and simulations replace reality; there is no more authenticity, only copies of copies. *Inglourious Basterds* should be seen as a filmic Disneyland in this respect. Evidently fantasy, it nonetheless creates a hyperrealism that draws from pieces of other texts (intertextuality) and therefore becomes arguably real. Frida Beckman, elaborating on Baudrillard's idea, says that "we live in an age of simulation, which no longer deals with questions of imitation or reduplication, or even of parody, but rather with 'substituting signs of the real for the real itself'" (Beckman 92). In this respect, *Inglourious Basterds* has constructed a new universe, or an alternate past, which could be seen equally significant as the "real history" itself. To Baudrillard, historical truth is impossible to find, due to the multitude of narratives. *Inglourious Basterds* takes advantage of that ambiguity and creates its own reality.

In that reality, identity is what essentially drives the narrative, and it is incorporated into the style of *Inglourious Basterds*. It is reflected through style, and even the narrative of the film. In *Inglourious Basterds*, a lot of scenes consist of creation of persona, false identity, and stereotypes. Shosanna, the daughter and the sole survivor of the Jewish family, lives under the name of Emmanuelle Mimieux. Lieutenant Hicox pretends to be a Nazi officer at the French tavern. Lieutenant Aldo Raine and his crew pretend to be Italian filmmakers. Besides narrative devices, props are heavily used to portray an interplay between identity and persona. In the tavern scene, for example, we see German soldiers playing the card-on-forehead drinking game, guessing each other's fictional character. The cards humanize the Nazi soldiers, who are often portrayed as evil, cold-blooded monsters. We see people dressed in Nazi uniforms, with game cards on their foreheads, like ordinary people. I doubt if Tarantino is trying to portray a "soft side" within the Nazis and invoke sympathy within the audience; the humanizing of the soldiers

was probably not intended to reflect historical reality, but to merely build a juxtaposition between Nazi soldiers and common men, which creates a comedic effect and adds a brand new layer to the identity of those characters. By showing a different aspect of the soldiers, the cards serve as a convincing tool that creates an authenticity exclusive to the film, not the period the film is supposed to represent.

Of course, one can easily dismiss the importance of historical accuracy and authenticity here. The inclusion of Hitler was used to create a “pastness,” instead of actually reflecting the past. A postmodern phenomenon is the rejection of a universal history narrative. Jameson argues that a “pseudo-historical depth” has replaced real history (Jameson 20). Quite pessimistic, he claims that pop images and simulacra of history have replaced real history, “which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson 25). A perfect embodiment of such notion, the characters of *Inglourious Basterds* signify the waning of historical truth by offering no access to reality.

Although *Inglourious Basterds* is full of historical inaccuracies and stereotypes, authenticity is one of the main themes of the film, especially evident in the use of language. Tarantino insisted to cast native German and French speakers, rejecting to only use a single language throughout the film, like how some of the other directors approached it. Language wise, *Inglourious Basterds* is almost impeccably accurate and authentic. It is an element central to the plot of the film; without the use of diverse languages, a lot of scenes would not work. For example, in the tavern scene, Lieutenant Hicox nearly compromises his identity by having a bizarre german accent that Hellstrom cannot identify. Hellstrom demands Hicox to tell him his origins, and Hicox manages to tell a fully detailed story about how it is an accent exclusive to a village that “rests in the shadow of the Piz Palü.” Replace the language with English, the scene



would lose its tone and dramatic tension. Although it primarily drives the plot, language can be seen as a stylistic choice by Tarantino, which in turn translates into a pursuit of authenticity.

With attention to these minor details, Tarantino does create a convincing world that functions logically. As previously stated, however, *Inglourious Basterds* does not offer to a glimpse to the real past. Therefore, there is a disconnect between historical reality and the world Tarantino created, although it may be nonetheless convincing. Then again, this world is constructed upon the stereotyping of the past. Besides the style of the characters, decor plays a significant role, sending off sub-conscious signals to remind the audience of the era the film is trying to represent. This is especially evident in the premiere scene near the end, where the cinema is redecorated with various signifiers to the Nazis. In the scene, we see gigantic Nazi banners everywhere. The big, flashy red banners generates a heightened style, along with the outfits of the people attending the premiere. Surely, the outfits and the decor of the cinema may be authentic, but they do not serve as a bridge that connects the audience with the real past. They are authentic in their own right, built upon stereotypes, and provide no depth.

This further reduces the Nazis into caricatures, and makes it somehow morally acceptable and bearable for the Nazis to be massacred in the end. They are killed ruthlessly by the Jewish American soldiers and burned alive under Shosanna's plot. Since the Nazis are reduced to caricatures, they function as cardboard cutouts and signifiers that do not point out to any signified from real history besides stereotypes. There are numerous scenes with excessive gore in the film, but I would like to specifically focus on the shot of Hitler getting machine gunned in the end. The shot is as excessive as possible. Tarantino not only shows us Hitler being machine gunned, but also his face being torn apart by bullets. In almost any other context, this would

provoke fear, disgust and shock; however, the shot is geared towards provoking entertainment, not fear nor any sort of sympathy. It is a death of pure spectacle. Without the reduction of historical depth of Hitler, this would have been difficult to achieve. The scene only works because the filmic Hitler is not represented as a human being, but rather a signifier to the stereotyped idea of Hitler, a Hitler that is the synonym of the devil and pure evil. Another death scene full of spectacle is Shosanna's. Perhaps equally excessive, her death scene is nonetheless presented very differently. When she was suddenly shot by the war hero, Fredrick Zoller, the scene switches to slow motion, as bullets penetrate her body and create a firework-like effect consisting bits of her red dress and blood. Ennio Morricone's "Un Amico" is playing in the background; the slow and sensational song is more commonly heard from kiss scenes. Overall, the scene is sensational, artistic, and even beautiful. Since the beginning of the film, we have seen Shosanna's struggles and evolution, and therefore it is easier to be emotionally attached to her. Her glorified death can thus be seen as Tarantino's acknowledgement of this empathy, whereas Hitler's excessive death is "justified" by the connotation he represents. This distortion of reality and moral gravity is a result of the postmodern qualities of the film — because Hitler is an intertextual character commonly associated with evil, there is little discomfort to see him being machine gunned violently.

The film concludes with Colonel Landa having a swastika carved on his forehead. Another spectacle of violence, the shot is followed by Lieutenant Aldo Raine and his comrade staring to the camera, almost breaking the fourth wall, with Raine saying "I think this just might be my masterpiece." Indeed, this may also apply to the film as a whole — Roger Ebert called it the "best film of the year" (Ebert), and the film grossed 120 million dollars domestically, ranking

at 25 in total gross (*Box Office Mojo*). The success of *Inglourious Basterds* suggests that in a postmodern world historical reality is not viewed as significant by the general audience anymore. The film instead created its own universe and its excessive style apparently appealed to the audience. Its popular reception signifies the waning of history, and serves as an evidence that historical truth is perhaps forever out of reach.

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