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## Post-Holocaust Revenge Fantasies: Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*

**Note:** This talk is a revised version of a portion of the essay, "Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* and the Gender of Revenge." Robert Dassinovsky (ed). *Quentin Tarantino's Inglourious Basterds: A Manipulation of Metacinema*. London and New York: Continuum, 2012: 113-33.

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In his 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds*, Quentin Tarantino presents the ultimate revenge scenario – the murder of Adolf Hitler by a motley group made up primarily of Jewish-American soldiers and by a French-Jewish woman whose family perishes at the hands of the Nazis. Tarantino retells history through film history, citing wildly and offering, in *Inglourious Basterds*, a highly complex reflection on temporalities, on the ways in which we access historical narratives. The multiple temporalities within Tarantino's film point to the temporal "problem," so to speak, of the film's revenge fantasy of imposing punishment upon those most responsible for the Nazi crimes against humanity. The film begins in 1941, yet the script "1941" appears immediately after the opening frame of the movie, in which the intertitle reads first "Chapter One" and then, after a short pause, "Once Upon a Time, in Nazi Occupied France..." The temporal marker of 1941 is, hence, not a firm one, as the film is framed as a novel or fairy tale ("once upon a time") taking place at some time in the past. Already in the first two frames of the film, Tarantino has revealed his engagement with history as screen memories (Freud's "Deckerinnerungen" – memories informed by previous memories, creating the web of memory based on visual and narrative cues). In "Chapter Two," the *Inglourious Basterds* are introduced, a powerful bunch of Jewish American soldiers led by Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) who are on a mission to kill and torture Nazis. **Slide 1** The "inglourious basterds" of Tarantino's film are likely

modeled in part after the famous “Richie Boys,” a group of German-Jewish American GIs who had escaped Nazi Europe and were sent back to help undermine the efforts of the Nazis. Here, screen memory is revealed as both wish fulfillment and temporal displacement, as the dramatic revenge fantasies of these soldiers (fulfilled to a large degree in brutal killings, torture and tattooing of German soldiers) seem to reveal a historical knowledge on their part of the crimes of the Nazis that could only have been gained after the war. The revenge fantasies played out in the film precede the full knowledge of Auschwitz and the other camps, yet the actions of the “basterds” seem to be informed by contemporary knowledge about the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

The film’s non-linear representation of time and history is particularly interesting as the story of Shosanna Dreyfus, the film’s heroine, unfolds. In the figure of the Jewish woman Shosanna, Tarantino gives us a model for revenge that deviates in interesting ways from familiar models. We first see Shosanna in the first “Chapter” of the film as she hides with her family under the floorboards of a French farmer’s house and then escapes while Nazi SS officers murder members of her family. As Shosanna runs toward the camera and away from the Nazis, the camera records the waving blades of grass from the perspective of a small child, inserting the spectator in a visceral manner into the environment of the scene. **Slide 2** Here, the presumed linearity of a represented history is cut through by the cinematic pause, the momentary reflection on the waving blades of grass that remind us that we are engaging with at least three temporalities: our own present, the present of each movement of the grass recorded during the filming of the scene, and the present of the story itself, as Shosanna escapes her fate. Via Shosanna’s escape and the various screen memories layered within this scene and the subsequent revenge narratives, we are reminded not only of cinema’s ability to complicate traditional

notions of history and temporality. I also want to suggest that Tarantino's film tells us something about the non-linear nature of revenge fantasies. In particular, Shosanna's narrative highlights the lack of equivalence between even imagined revenge scenarios and the crimes that inspired the fantasies to begin with. The camera's complex relationship with the fetishized female figure highlights the temporal ruptures that undermine Tarantino's task: to re-write the most infamous narrative of the twentieth century. Via the projections and representations of Shosanna, the only Jewish figure in the film with an ax to grind based on her own experiences of persecution, Tarantino explores the impossible temporality of revenge. And when the gender of revenge is feminine, it is simultaneously mythic, self-destructive and revolutionary. Shosanna's success and failure in Inglourious Basterds ultimately point to the radical disjuncture between revenge and its source and to the impossibility of a "just" equilibrium in modern narratives.

The temporal complexity reflected in the film is already apparent in the beginning as the credits roll and as the title for Chapter One is presented on the screen. The film begins with a black screen, and the film's title and the main actors are listed in sequence with each name being represented for an equal amount of time. The list of main actors is followed, then, by the text "And Melanie Laurent as Shosanna." Whereas none of the names of the main actors (including Brad Pitt, Christoph Waltz, and Daniel Brühl) are listed along with their characters, Melanie Laurent must, it seems, be linked explicitly to the character she plays. What is more, her name appears on the screen slightly (about one second) longer than the other names: Melanie Laurent and Shosanna represent an anomaly, a pause in the film. Already in the opening credits, Shosanna disrupts the flow of the narrative. Tarantino subtly nudges us to pay attention to this character (and the actress who plays her). The figure who claims "This is the face of Jewish

vengeance” as the cinema holding Hitler, Goebbels, and other Nazi leaders burns down both drives the action of the film and slows it, embodying both a problem and a solution.

The enigma of Shosanna, however, does not seem to have captured the attention of critics and reviewers up to this point. Cultural discussions have focused largely on the film’s violence, on the question of revenge fantasies and of whether those who were victims of Hitler could be re-imagined as righteous persecutors. But what of Shosanna, the single Jewish figure in the film who has sustained profound trauma at the hands of the Nazis and who, ultimately, is the true heroine of “Operation Kino,” burning down Hitler, the cinema, and herself? Tarantino invites us to focus on this figure from the very first moment her name appears on the screen, yet the conventions of looking at the female body seem to complicate the ability of the spectator to see the anomaly embodied by Shosanna.

In their traditionally masculine enactments of revenge, the “basterds” inflict physical pain and torture on their victims in a manner that literally symbolizes their backgrounds and the crimes of those they are punishing: the “basterds” scalp their victims, symbolically reenacting the righteous revenge of “the Apache” Aldo Raine, and they carve swastika tattoos into their victims’ foreheads, marking them as victims of their own system. **Slides 2, 3, 4, 5** These modes of punishment invite a sense that violence can be just and, in some sense, rational. The swastika tattoos are reminiscent of the torture machine in Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony.” In Kafka’s narrative, the prisoner’s crime is written out and cut into his body as a tattoo, suggesting that the punishment reflects the crime. Of course, the illegibility of the words and the gruesome result of this “rational” form of murder (the bloody corpse of the criminal) remind us that there is no equilibrium possible between crime and punishment: the attempt to introduce reason into the act

of vengeance is futile. Yet this is precisely the mode in which male acts of revenge such as war are usually narrated.

Whereas the male-dominated revenge scenario of war preserves the pretense of a just equilibrium, female vengeance understands that there is no equivalence when it comes to pain and suffering. Revenge heroines are keenly aware of the ultimately futile nature of their vengeance plans, and the enactments of these plans often involve self-destruction, a turn inward, reflecting the realization that the revenge act itself has very little to do with the original crime and much to do with an open wound that cannot be healed. The great female vengeance figures of the Western tradition perform their revenge acts knowing no equilibrium is possible and that the end result will also produce great loss to them.

**Examples: Medea, Ophelia (revenge suicide), *Kill Bill* (Beatrix), Margaret Garner (slave narrative – link to family – almost all mothers.**

How does Shosanna's revenge narrative figure in to the discussion of female revenge as internal, self-destructive, and aware of the impossibility of exacting a just revenge and avoiding pain?

Tarantino alerts us already in his presentation of the film's opening credits that Shosanna is special, and his representation, via Shosanna, of Jewish female vengeance deviates both from familiar narratives of female revenge and from the cinematic conventions of the visual representation of femininity. Shosanna is, unlike her venging foremothers, not a mother herself. Her vengeance is not inspired by maternal instincts; nor does she kill her children in a kind of self-destructive orgy in order to protect them from worse fates. Indeed, she has no children. We see her escaping from Landa, embodying his screen memories and fantasies, and the next scene in which she appears pictures her at the cinema she has taken over from her aunt and uncle. As in much of the film, she is dressed not as a femme fatale but as an androgynous girl, in slacks and a

hat. **Slide 6** She has one friend, who is also her lover, the black projectionist, Marcel (Jacky Ido). And her act of revenge, in which Marcel burns down the cinema containing Hitler and his cronies while the projection of her face speaks “Jewish vengeance” on the screen, is both self-destructive and historically more significant than even the crimes committed against her family by the Nazis.

That Shosanna’s revenge scenario exceeds the logic of equilibrium is emphasized by the title of Chapter 5: “Revenge of the Giant Face.” This chapter begins with Shosanna putting on her “war paint” (literally, in the form of red rouge lines drawn on her cheeks) while the soundtrack plays David Bowie’s “Cat People: Putting out Fire,” the theme song for the 1982 remake of Cat People. **Slide 7** The wild nature of the heroine in Cat People, a woman who stems from a community of wildcats and who ultimately returns to these cats, reminds us of the “wild justice” (how Frances Bacon described revenge) that Shosanna is planning to execute by burning down the cinema she treasures (along with herself and the only human being whom she loves, Marcel). Shosanna’s “war paint” scene finishes as she positions a black veil over her face, a kind of widow’s veil that seems oddly juxtaposed with her fire-red dress and lips. **Slide 8** The lyrics of the song, “Putting out fire with gasoline,” remind us of the lesson only Shosanna teaches us in this film: that there is no equivalence; revenge is like putting out fire with gasoline, producing excess violence and pain beyond anything originally imagined. Pasolini called film itself a “monstrum” (Kerrigan 108), and the nitrate film used to burn down the theater recreates a hellish nightmare, as the monsters of history burn together with their victims.

Excess is the name of the game in this chapter, and Georg Seeßlen rightly notes the double murder plans enacted entirely independently of one another (152). Shosanna’s plan, however, is the only one that succeeds without anyone’s knowledge beyond that of Marcel. The

“basterds” kill a number of Nazis, but they succeed, in the end, in large part due to the Nazi Colonel Landa’s indulgence for his own purposes (he wants to move to America and so he cuts a deal). In this sense, only Shosanna’s revenge is truly subversive. The result, however, is excess: double murder and destruction, so to speak. Shosanna dies at the hands of the German war hero, Frederick Zoller (who is also the star of the film being screened) who interrupts her in the projection room. She shoots him, and he subsequently kills her. The reciprocal murders of Shosanna and Frederick Zoller are, however, redundant, as both would likely have died in the fire or explosions, had they not shot one another. It is, of course, Shosanna’s sudden compassion for Frederick that causes her death (as he takes this opportunity to shoot her). She is temporarily caught in the identificatory web of the cinema, likely responding empathetically both to Zoller’s physical pain and to his character’s loneliness in the film that screens in the background. But we should not oversimplify Shosanna’s character as a compassionate female figure. She is also tough as nails, threatening a professional film developer and his family if he refuses to develop the film she has created for the Nazi bloodbath. In this sense, Shosanna defies simple categorizations as a female vengeance figure.

The “Revenge of the Giant Face” is enacted on multiple fronts. Shosanna splices her own film (“the giant face”) into the German film being screened at the moment when Marcel lights the nitrate film rolls. **Slide 9** The black and white close-up of Shosanna’s face recalls a similar shot of Anna Karina’s face in Jean-Luc Godard’s Vivre sa vie (1962) as she sits in the cinema watching Carl Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928). **Slides 10 and 11** Karina cries as she views the intense pain revealed in Joan of Arc’s face (Renee Jeanna Falconetti), also pictured in close-up. Tarantino’s script calls for French New Wave black-and-white in Chapter Three, the chapter in which Shosanna and Marcel make the film they splice onto the Nazi film screening on



the night of the fire. Hence, the close-up of Shosanna's face in the burning theater invites us to remember New Wave heroine Anna Karina's emotional response to the cinematic representation of pain. However, while Shosanna is shown in black-and-white close-up, she is neither crying nor expressing pain. Rather, she laughs. Georg Seeßlen connects the "giant face" of the chapter title and the film that Shosanna plays while the cinema burns to Charlie Chaplin's "big face" in The Great Dictator. For Seeßlen, Shosanna's appearance on the screen undermines the fascist aesthetic of Stolz der Nation (the film being screened) in a manner reminiscent of Chaplin in the Hitler/Nazi-parody: "the individual behind the mask becomes visible" (155).<sup>i</sup> This is precisely what fascist aesthetics wish to avoid at all costs: revealing the truth behind the spectacle. **Slide 12** Shosanna's laughter defies the film history of masochistic martyrs and self-destructive vengeance goddesses. Here is her subversion of gender roles, a performance that marries self-destruction with epic, excessive violence.

Laughter is a mode of expression outside of logic and reason. There is no controlling it, and there is no ending it. It exceeds any rational comprehension and hence mirrors the excess of the triple destruction (if we include the mutual murders of Shosanna and Frederick) of the final chapter of the film. What is more, Shosanna's laughter on the projection screen as she cries "This is the face of Jewish vengeance" represents a temporal ghostliness, an arresting fetish within the narrative of the film. Recalling on the one hand the close-ups of beautiful actresses that precede her (and succeed, if we momentarily consider the presumed year of the scene to be 1944), Shosanna's face resembles on the other hand those of the victims of the Nazis in images that became available to the world after the war: her hair is pulled back as if it were shorn, and she wears no makeup. **Slide 14 (simultaneously citing Holocaust victim and the cinematic female face as fetish)**

**Slide 15? – Judith (1901) (deuterocanonical – widow – Holofernes – unmarried)**

Shosanna's close-up transfixes time in a manner that transcends linearity. As in the scene from Chapter One, she is the fetish that stops time, the pause that reminds us of the fallacy of linearity and equivalence. In her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey taught us that the female body as fetish arrests film time, inviting pleasures that have nothing to do with narrative. Tarantino consciously cites the cinema's use of the female body, nevertheless offering us something new here: a fetish as historical pause, the androgynous female face in close-up laughing incomprehensibly. **Back to Slide 12** As in earlier scenes, Shosanna represents the pause that reminds us of the impossibility of equilibrium. As the movie theater burns down, so does the projection screen. The final shots of the scene show Shosanna's face improbably reappears in projection form despite the burning of the screen, as a ghostly specter. Impossibly, the female face as fetish exceeds even the laws of physics within the film narrative. As an ultimately impossible figure in the annals of film history, Shosanna resists her entrapment within the screen memories of the film's characters and its cinephile spectators, utilizing the conventions of gendered representation to reveal the impossibility of rationally measured revenge. **Slide 14 (clip) and 15.**

**Back to Slide 12** Why didn't Tarantino end the film here with the ghost of Shosanna exceeding the time/space continuum of the film world? Why does the film end with the comical scene in which Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) carves a swastika tattoo into Colonel Landa's forehead? Perhaps the radical nature of the previous scene needed to be contained in some manner? After carving the swastika into Landa's forehead, Raines speaks the final line of the film: "I think this just might be my masterpiece." The grotesque humor of this scene aside, the line is clearly an allusion to the director's own satisfaction with his film project. Yet Tarantino's genius may

rather be located in his radically new representation of female vengeance as laughing fetish, as a ghostly pause that reminds us of the impossibility of balancing the books of history.

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<sup>i</sup> Georg Seeßlen, Quentin Tarantino gegen die Nazis: Alles über *Inglourious Basterds* (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2009): “das Einzelne hinter der Maske wird sichtbar” (155).