

Inglourious Basterds: Quentin Tarantino goes to war

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Quentin Tarantino's latest film *Inglourious Basterds* has been hailed by critics and has hovered at or near the top of the box office rankings since its release August 21. It is a thoroughly repugnant work in which Tarantino once again inflicts a series of confused and sadistic images onto a mass audience.

The film is a macabre fairy tale, opening with a title card that reads, "Once upon a time in Nazi-occupied France." The story concerns a group of eight elite fighting men called the Inglourious Basterds. Led by Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt), the team is an undercover guerrilla assassination squad made up of Jewish-American Nazi hunters.

Raine tells his men they owe him only one debt: Each of the Basterds is to bring him the scalps of 100 dead Nazis. There are graphic and brutal sequences in which his men work towards fulfilling their obligation.

The fate of the Basterds soon becomes intertwined with the story of Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent), a young Jewish woman whose family has been killed by the Nazis in 1941 during an attack from which she herself only narrowly escaped. Now the owner of a cinema in Paris, Shosanna becomes the object of affection for Fredrick Zoller (the talented Daniel Brühl), a German war hero and star of a propaganda film depicting one of his battles. She despises the young soldier.

Much to Shosanna's horror, Zoller arranges with Joseph Goebbels to have their propaganda film *Nation's Pride* shown in her theater. But when Shosanna learns the Nazi leadership will be in attendance, including Hitler himself, she suddenly realizes she has the opportunity to avenge her family's murder. Shoshanna plots to burn down her theater, killing the Nazi hierarchy in the process.

British military intelligence has also heard news of the event and has made its own plans to intervene. They send a British agent to meet up with the Basterds, infiltrate the gala premiere and destroy the building along with the fascist leaders inside. Neither Shosanna nor the Basterds are aware of the other's plans.

Not surprisingly, *Inglourious Basterds* is a dreadful film. In spite of the ostensibly more serious setting of the Second World War,

one finds in this work the same elements one has come to expect from Tarantino's films: gratuitous and psychopathic violence, endless pop culture references, the glorification of revenge, drawn-out and tedious scenes of incidental dialogue, a self-conscious use of camera movement and editing, and pervasive cynicism. All of this is delivered with a sly wink toward the audience. The pyrotechnics, as usual, cover up for the film's lack of depth and essential tediousness.

Tarantino has an encyclopedic knowledge of film history, or portions of it, but it doesn't do him much good. He takes the path of least resistance at every point. The writer-director favors low-budget "grindhouse" material: martial arts films, "blaxploitation" works from the 1970s, "midnight movies" and spaghetti westerns. Treated entirely uncritically, these have been the primary influence on Tarantino, and not works that would have provided a richer understanding of life. Anti-intellectualism and laziness are here made into a program.

Tarantino's obsessive, unfocused interest in all things cinematic and his lack of concern with real life is a fatal weakness and leaves the director open to the influence of definite social processes that he hasn't even begun to understand. This is not to say that Tarantino is simply an innocent who stumbles blindly into the foul territory in which he so often finds himself. He is drawn to it, delights in it, and actively promotes it.

The "heroes" of *Inglourious Basterds* are sadistic killers who relish their mission of torturing, killing and even scalping their enemy. Fighting fascism with fascism. Precisely what is one to make of this?

As always, Tarantino's defenders will claim his ultra-stylized celebrations of violence aren't to be taken seriously. "It's only a movie," is the refrain heard again and again.

But Tarantino's films do mean something, no matter how much he and his admirers insist they do not, and certain social moods find expression in them. Can the director's increasing fascination with revenge be understood outside the context of a crisis-ridden, declining, post-9/11 America?

Inglourious Basterds was released the same week that an internal

CIA report was made public detailing the horrific torture of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the use of guns and power tools to threaten the lives of detainees, and the film comes along well after the exposure of the horrific acts of torture carried out at Abu Ghraib and the prison compound at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Masses of people have been killed in the bloody colonial-style wars pursued by the US since 2001.

To produce a film in this context in which American soldiers torture and execute their enemies on the battlefield, in which the audience is invited to laugh at such atrocities and, in fact, to cheer them on, is utterly reprehensible. Tarantino is appealing to the worst instincts of his viewers. This is surely among the least healthy works to have emerged in the years since the attacks of September 11.

The performance by Eli Roth, best known as the director of *Hostel* and other films in the so-called "torture porn" genre of horror movies, is particularly disturbing. Nicknamed the "Bear Jew," Roth's character is known for beating captured Nazis to death with a baseball bat.

In one of the film's more gruesome sequences, Roth's "Bear Jew" graphically beats a Nazi officer to death while rapturously spouting off baseball metaphors. This is one of the film's heroes! The *Basterds* exhibit the very kind of sadistic impulses that were the Nazis' stock in trade, particularly in the film's fiery conclusion at Shosanna's theater. Here a mass slaughter is depicted as the ultimate catharsis for both Shosanna and the *Basterds*.

Compare all of this to Steven Spielberg's recent *Munich*, in many ways a remarkable film, telling the true story of a team of Israeli assassins whose mission is to murder Palestinian leaders in retaliation for the killing of members of the Israeli Olympic team at the 1972 games in Munich. Their mission has devastating moral and social consequences, including for the perpetrators themselves. Tarantino is moving in the opposite direction and coming to opposite conclusions, and not by accident. His *Inglourious Basterds* is, in its own way, the reactionary answer to that work.

That so many critics despised *Munich* and are now praising Tarantino's latest film is a testament to the crisis in intellectual and cultural life at present. With *Inglourious Basterds*, one finds the official tastemakers singing a familiar song.

Rex Reed of the *New York Observer* had no problem at all with Tarantino's backwardness, writing that "Like all Quentin Tarantino movies, *Inglourious Basterds* is exasperating, absurd, cruel, cynical, sneeringly arrogant, racist, elitist, naïvely derivative and viciously funny. It is also one whale of a rigorous entertainment."

David Edelstein of *New York* magazine writes, "It's an unabashed wet dream of vengeance. Yet watching Raine grill a kneeling commandant astride scalped Nazis while a nearby Jew (filmmaker Eli Roth) with a baseball bat takes scary practice

swings, you *so* wish it had [happened]. What's not to love?"

In a review headlined, "Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* Makes Holocaust Revisionism Fun," J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice* said of the film, "Here is an alternate World War II, in which Jews terrorize and slaughter Nazis—a just Holocaust. "

In *Inglourious Basterds*, the Americans are simply the good guys, and any level of terror they inflict on their enemy is entirely justified. While Tarantino's enemies are the Nazis, the implications of this for present day events should not be lost on anyone.

As it is, Tarantino's use of World War II and the Nazis in his latest work is entirely false and gratuitous. Tarantino's motivation for setting his film during the Second World War had nothing to do with making sense of that period, the history of which he rewrites at virtually every step of the way. Rather, as Tarantino told the *Los Angeles Times*, he thought "It'd be really cool to do a spaghetti Western using World War II iconography." In other words, the war is simply another setting Tarantino can exploit and use as his own playground for self-indulgence.

The director may also be making an attempt to answer those who thought his last film, the horrible "double feature" *Grindhouse*, was too trivial. If this time he makes his sadistic killers into Nazi-hunters, who can complain? Certainly not the film "critics."

Tarantino's work winds its way to a brutal conclusion after a very long two-and-a-half hours. In that time, one has seen a number of people killed and history rewritten. One is already eager to head for the door, but Tarantino manages to give viewers one more push in that direction.

In the film's final moments, Aldo Raine carves a swastika into the forehead of a prominent Nazi. This, like the rest of the film's violence, is shown in graphic detail. The camera angle then changes so that we see Aldo from the tortured Nazi's point of view. Raine looks at his carving (and into the camera) and says proudly to a comrade and to the viewers in the audience, "I think this might just be my masterpiece." The film ends with this comment. It is a moment that deserves to go down as one of the most cynical in recent film history.

Quentin Tarantino will next produce a film to be directed by Robert Rodriguez entitled *Machete*. The new film's tag line is: "Yesterday he was a decent man living a decent life, now he is a brutal savage who must slaughter to stay alive."



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