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Mike Kugler

Northwestern College - Orange City, kugler@nwcsiowa.edu

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Abstract

Movies claiming to represent historical events remain popular. Historical films, however, differ from a disciplined study of the past, which is constrained by evidence from the past. Looking for an evidence-based historical argument in historical movies misses what they do best. A case in point is Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*. This film combines two genres—exploitation films and World War II films. With Hitler and Nazis, argues the author, we viewers want justice achieved through vengeance—and Tarantino's film gives us that. Historical movies in general give us the simpler past we want. They seldom, however, help us consider the full costs of gaining justice, especially in light of the Good News.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Kugler primarily teaches European history from the Reformation through the modern era. His research and writing include the Enlightenment era, particularly in Scotland; historical narrative in a variety of forms, including formal history but also film and graphic novels; and more recently, the history of incarnational theology. He has presented papers at a wide variety of conferences and has published reviews and essays in *Fides et Historia*, *The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation*, and *Scotia*.

Historical Movies, Historical Disciplines, and Getting What We Want and Deserve:

Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* and the Satisfactions of Historical Reflection¹

by Mike Kugler, Ph.D.

It takes a lot of work to determine the quality of a narrative film, like the *Vietnam* series by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick.² But this is just as true of a so-called genre piece such as the recent adaptation of Steven King’s *It*.³ Movies are carefully designed, complex devices for

¹ I would like to thank the organizers of the November, 2017 Dordt College conference on Faith and Culture, where I gave a first draft of this paper; Sam Martin and Randy Jensen for helpful early conversations; and Doug Anderson for some later suggestions.

² Some viewers have argued that the Ken Burns and Lynn Novick documentary, *The Vietnam War*, failed to condemn US presidents and their Cabinets for lack of foresight, courage, and integrity before the American people. Yet, as the scholar and Vietnam vet Andrew Bacevich argues, it is one thing to claim that at times the documentary drops an opportunity to drive home the appalling policy failures from 1958 to 1973. It is wholly another to suggest that the documentary suffers from a failure of nerve. See Peter Van Buren, “Ken Burns’s ‘Vietnam War’ is No Profile in Courage: Celebrated Filmmaker Continues Tradition of Avoiding Inconvenient Truths,” *The American Conservative*, Sept. 26, 2017, at: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/ken-burnss-vietnam-war-is-no-profile-in-courage/>; Andrew Bacevich, “Past All Reason,” *The Nation*, Sept. 19, 2017, at:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-vietnam-war-past-all-reason/>. Watching the Burns and Novick series, my outrage at the continued, systematic failures of three successive administrations, *is* my response to the documentary. ³ A recent review of *It* (Andrés Muschietti, 2017) argued that the movie had housebroken Stephen King’s enormous, rich meta-novel into an adolescent buddy movie. In particular, it stripped out King’s powerful reflections on racism, child abuse, and small town political corruption. Joshua Rothman, “What the New Movie Misses about Stephen King’s *It*,” *New Yorker*, September 10, 2017, at: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/what-the-new-movie-misses-about-stephen-kings-it>. See also Hillary Busis, “*It* Review: An Excellent Coming-of-Age Movie, Until That Clown Gets in the Way,” *Vanity Fair*, September 6, 2017, at: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/09/it-movie-review-pennywise-stephen-king>. But sitting in that dark theater, I thought of how plainly each of those “Losers” came from a distressed, broken home or were the victims of racism. The movie’s pacing and editing express how the evil spirit attacking children, incarnated as the clown Pennywise, is nourished and grows stronger by that hatred and abuse. In turn, his presence murdering children somehow provokes even worse abuses of kids. The young black kid, each day he walked through town, risked being beaten by racists. At one point, during a joyful Fourth of July picnic in the town square, he flat out declares that there is a deeply evil past behind the joyous festivities. A.O. Scott, review of *It*, *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 2017, at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/06/movies/it-review-stephen-king.html>. On the careful construction of these modern dreams, what *mastery* can we see in *techniques* of set location and design, lighting, cinematography and framing, and of editing? Casting, script, acting, and costuming? The score’s role? For criticism of journalistic evaluation of movies as so often a sophisticated version of expounding the viewer’s taste in movies, see David

telling stories in a largely affective manner. If the Italian surrealist and absurdist director Federico Fellini is right, that they work so powerfully because they act on us like our own dreams, do these built dreams give us what we want, even if only for 120 minutes?⁴

What of movies claiming to represent historical events? “Based on a True Story” or “Inspired by Actual Events” creates a certain set of expectations. They claim their compelling hold upon our imaginations, largely from their accurate retelling of the past. Of course, a novel or play can be true in the sense that it feels true to us; its characters seem real, behave in believable ways, so that in key moments we find ourselves whispering to ourselves, “That’s what it’s like; that’s really possible; that’s what I would do.” The movie’s primary power as an emotion machine is its capacity to provoke powerful responses, and doing so linking the viewer in sympathy to its characters. Historical movies, like *Gladiator*, *Ten Years a Slave*, and *Schindler’s List*, claim a lot more than the power of their filmed stories to move us. They claim that the past was largely like what you see on the screen. *If we had been there in the way back when, this is what we would have felt.*⁵

Bordwell, “In Critical Condition,” posted May 14, 2008, at: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2008/05/14/in-critical-condition/>. This is Jeanine Basinger’s argument about the movie making of her former student, Michael Bay, and his 1988 *Armageddon*. See her video review on the Criterion Collection copy of the movie. I don’t see how we can evaluate a movie without paying close attention to such elements. A movie can have a clichéd story, acting, and plotting, and yet be remarkably produced, filmed, acted, and scored.

⁴ Fellini, quoted in Matt Levine, “A Ribbon of Dreams: Dreams and Cinema,” *The Walker Reader*, Aug. 3, 2012, at: <https://walkerart.org/magazine/dreams-cinema-history-matt-levine>.

⁵ History as filmed narrative is typically epic—big scale stories using all the resources of recreating the sweeping, enormous and detailed vistas of the grand past. It should be no surprise therefore that stories of national politics, world-changing inventions, and war dominate filmed stories. Occasionally, a small story like Daniel Vigne’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), Bruce Beresford’s *Black Robe* (1991), or Roger Eggers’ *The Witch* (2016) gets made. But even small dramas are given an epic mood, in a setting in which the film’s meaning is clearly universal in application now, today.

These kinds of historical movies often invite us to celebrate our inherited, morally and politically correct convictions and practices. This is surely true of Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad*, in which the heroes include Cinque and John Quincy Adams, but also the US Constitution, Adam’s exposition of which dominates the last fifth of the movie.⁶ Yet historical films, or movies depicting the past with more or less commitment to what we know of the past, are typically distinguished from scholarly, historical arguments.⁷ Most historians don’t find that films depict evidence to support arguments about what happened in the past and why.⁸

Since they don’t offer evidence, historical films, therefore, are not history according to the protocols of the historical discipline. But what if we took movies *on their own terms*?⁹ The historian Robert Rosenstone has argued that, if viewers consider the nature of film and the

⁶ It could be argued that Ridley Scott’s historical movies—*Gladiator*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, *Robin Hood*—celebrate the heroic charismatic leader defending liberty and decency against ruthless, cruel tyrants. In this case they warn us of what might be to come. If freedom is to be protected, courage must be joined to principle. Most working historians immersed in the documents and relics left behind by the dead, who try to make explanatory narratives arguing for what happened and why, don’t consider that movies make arguments.

⁷ Some movies, such as *Braveheart* or *Amistad*, invite the viewer to join in the self-congratulations for having the proper moral outlook. Even movies that narrate a brutal story with little redemptive conclusion, might still lead the viewer to condemn the villains and celebrate how contemporary society has moved beyond tolerating such behavior.

⁸ Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995), is a typical collection of this model. Yet Carnes himself offers a more subtle model for watching historical movies as inaugural discussions of the even more challenging understanding of a likely even stranger past. See “Shooting (Down) the Past: Historians vs. Hollywood,” *Cinéaste* 29, 2 (Spring, 2004), 45-49. Generally thoughtful reviews by historians come in the readings of *Gladiator*, and some accounts of *Braveheart*. Victor David Hansen’s role in *300* still grates at me, but his thoughtful recent evaluation of *Dunkirk* is worth reading, even though it still largely concentrates on what Nolan got right about the event and what he missed or did poorly. See Victor David Hanson, “With Your Shield or On It: Zack Snyder’s *300*: A Spirited Take on a Clash of Civilizations,” *City Journal* (Mar. 7, 2007), at: <https://www.city-journal.org/html/your-shield-or-it-9420.html>; and “Miracle at Dunkirk,” Aug. 3, 2017, at: <http://victorhanson.com/wordpress/miracle-at-dunkirk/>. Even Natalie Zemon Davis’ evaluation of *The Return of Martin Guerre* largely concentrates on the movie’s accurate recreation of the physical world of the past. She continues that the film fails as history in overlooking or ignoring the cultural aspects of village French life she and other historians find compelling, such as the movement of Protestantism. “Movie or Monograph? A Historian/Filmmaker’s Perspective,” *The Public Historian* 25, 3 (Summer 2003), 45-48. Yet does the movie suggest the speculative claims Davis herself offered on the case in her book, not just about Protestantism but shifting the story’s attention to the woman and suggesting her rich, ambitious inner life, as well as the sympathy Coras had with du Tilh?

⁹ Is there a special *kind* of evidence peculiar to movies themselves, built out of their technical film (for lack of better words) vocabulary and grammar?

historical film in particular, they will discover fascinating portraits of the past, arguments and evidence on the terms of movie making itself.¹⁰ Rosenstone’s argument encourages viewers to a more careful evaluation of historical film. But it fails to make the case that film acting, scripts, cinematography, editing, etc., qualify as forms of evidence in the conventional ways historians use that term.¹¹ Historian Samuel Moyn, in discussing the work of fellow historian Carolyn J. Dean, wrote this about Daniel Goldhagen’s controversial *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1996):

Commercialized and spectacularized, with the holocaust as horror film (as LaCapra notes in a related treatment, Goldhagen seemed to have a curious penchant for settling on cases of young girls as victims), *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* invited an easy dismissal as kitsch that avoided true historical empathy with the victims available through hard-won and dispassionate scholarship.¹²

Moyn contrasts the power of film to evoke a gut reaction, against history’s primary duty of winning over a reader whose expectations for conviction are quite different. A historical argument imposes itself upon a rational person who shares the protocols of determining modest truths about the past. Those protocols require referring one’s claims about what happened and why to documents available to any interested party to interrogate.

¹⁰ Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK/New York: Routledge, 2012). Such arguments appeal especially to scholars trained in the field of contemporary rhetoric, in which the film’s power of appeals to emotion to convince seems especially compelling.

¹¹I don’t think Rosenstone’s argument does justice to the very historical discipline in which he works. He depends too uncritically upon the poetics of historical narrative, while conceding too much to the evidentiary character of movies.

¹² Samuel Moyn, “Review: Empathy in History, Empathizing with Humanity,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (October, 2006): 403.

As a kind of emotion machine, movies have limited abilities to evoke this kind of conviction by their audiences. A movie may impose itself on me, but will it compel me as a rational person to adopt a claim about the past as true, on grounds *other* than my emotional response to it? Whatever I might be able to claim about the skill and craft behind the movie’s production, will that require me as a rational person to adopt its claims? I do not believe so. Historical protocols for determining the truth about the past are in fact disciplines to set aside temporarily emotional responses, ideological beliefs, and moral judgments in order to achieve as modestly objective a comprehension or understanding of the past as possible.

But what if we took Rosenstone’s suggestion a bit further and considered how film makers build their movies as particular kinds of art *from the character of other movies*? How do genre movies, for instance, in their various self-conscious imitations of other, earlier genre movies, create the aura of conviction that, for the informed viewer, *functions like evidence*? In particular, how does the provocation of our desire for vengeance seem morally true?

Dramatic portraits of violence, such as war, often dominate historical movies. What could a master of counter-cultural movie violence like Quentin Tarantino tell us about movies as history? I will discuss Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*, part of his recent historical “trilogy” (including *Django Unchained* and *The Hateful Eight*). Tarantino’s movies are largely about movies in the exploitation genre—biker gangs, sexual assault and revenge, small town crime dramas, spaghetti westerns, martial arts movies, and low budget splatter horror films—that emerged in the US and Australia in the 1960s and 1970s.¹³ You know: drive-in movies, fourth-

¹³For Australian exploitation movies and their imitators in the US, see Mark Hartley’s 2008 documentary, *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!* However, Aaron Barlow has argued that this misunderstands Tarantino. In an interview he stated, “In the book, I mention that people have accused Tarantino of making movies

run theaters, or “art” houses. *Inglourious Basterds* is an especially ingenious homage to earlier World War II combat films. I will discuss how this movie offers audiences something particular they want to see: a special kind of moral victory, even clear vengeance, World War II in fact did



Inglourious Basterds movie marquee,
London, 2009.

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

not give us.¹⁴ How might Tarantino’s historical movies show us what we want to see, feel, and cause us to wonder?

*

Tarantino only recently got interested in telling stories about the less than immediate past, but still in the exploitation film genre he loves.¹⁵ His movies are in an important sense about those other movies, with much better writing, casting, and production. The power of

Tarantino’s stories is largely rooted in the viewer’s basic familiarity, of settling into a comforting

about movies. No, he's using the language of movies to talk about life, as I think we all do at times. Watching movies is part of that discussion — of life. It's not removed from life.” Interview with Aaron Barlow, Author of *Quentin Tarantino: Life at the Extremes* (2010), Posted by: FCEtier, June 14, 2010 in Books, at: <https://www.seattlepi.com/lifestyle/blogcritics/article/Interview-with-Aaron-Barlow-Author-of-Quentin-891198.php>.

¹⁴ Historical movies give us what we want to see and feel about the past, in a form that is ideally wedded to substantial *wonder*, among the most powerful experiences movies give us. This is especially true of the big-budget studio movies of Steven Spielberg, Ridley Scott, Christopher Nolan, and Jean-Luc Beeson. But it is true also of Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight*; all of them inspired the wide eyed staring in silent amazement at their movies.

¹⁵ Historical movies in the B-movie, exploitation genre have been around a long time. These include the sexually sadistic Nazi soft-core porn stories like *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975), the art-house politicized version like *The Night Porter* (Lillana Cavani, 1974), the Mandinko-blacksploitation movies Tarantino references in *Django Unchained*, but including more recent straight to DVD movies like *Iron Sky*, *Nazis at the Center of the Earth*, as well as far more serious and well made movies like *The Brotherhood of the Wolf*, and the bigger- budget *Overlord*. In general Tarantino elevates his exploitation genre with better writing, production, and casting. His A-list cast acts in what reminds the viewer of a drive-in movie, though committed to resurrecting the careers of actors like Pam Grier and John Travolta.

world of badasses, of shocking violence, of vengeance and of villains getting what they deserve.¹⁶ Tarantino wins you over with his street wise, inappropriate, and quotable dialogue and drawn out portraits of violence that are more like torture.¹⁷

As I said earlier, the exploitation movie combines violation of taboos with moral outrage, and in the final reel, some kind of payoff to the demand for vengeance. Tarantino walks that strange line between moral outrage and the prurient curiosity about what is forbidden, impure, bizarre, shocking. Exploitation movies emphasize morally ambiguous lowlifes and criminals. They revel in anti-heroes, give a lot of screen time to vengeance fantasies, and make typically insensitive portraits of racism and racial violence, with degrading and stereotypical portraits of women and minorities.¹⁸ But from another angle, the racial and economic conflicts of the late '60s along with the Vietnam War, criticized in Europe as well as in the US, demanded of some movie makers strong moral challenges. The exploitation film (and genre movies like Sci-Fi and

¹⁶ Tarantino is perhaps the white director most successful at recreating a certain kind of black American culture, without the comforts of God or church. He builds on examples of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971), *Shaft*, etc.

¹⁷ It might seem difficult to include Tarantino's recent historical movies as satisfying examples of movie historical arguments. Tarantino's historical trilogy fits Rosenstone's definition of a postmodern movie. *Inglourious Basterds* mixes genre elements and screen typeface associated with '60s movies, rock music obviously not from the WWII era, and Tarantino's typical swooping camera movements and fast cut editing. Tarantino's postmodernist conventions, like mixed film genres, often set their action in vague or indeterminate eras, and purposefully recreate the low-budget, worn out film stock look of movies popularly associated with the drive-in fare of the exploitation genres. The characters talk in an ersatz manner of contemporary profanity and intonations mixed in with period references and intonations. Rosenstone has included postmodern movies, like *Walker* or *JFK*, as interesting and provocative kinds of filmic historical argument; *History on Film/Film on History*.

¹⁸ Tarantino's aesthetic sensibility seems more Futuristic than anything else. The same celebration of outrage, flaunting if not attacking moral and artistic conventions in Filippo Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* (1909) are there in Tarantino's movies. Yet the Italian movie epics of the early 20th century, even when using ancient Rome to celebrate Italian nationalist sentiment in line with Fascism, borrowed its cinematic conventions from the melodramatic stage. Tarantino's conventions are anything but melodramatic, and not fascistic.

horror influenced by them) seemed the shocking, outrageous kind of movie to complement that outrage.¹⁹

Inglourious Basterds borrowed the audacity from exploitation movies, but dressed up as respectable war movies like *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967) and *Where Eagles Dare* (Brian Hutton, 1969). Doing so, Tarantino isn't making an argument about the past as much as encouraging his audience to experience what it might be like to get the kind of history we dream of: that which viscerally satisfies our deep outrage at the mass violence and injustice of the “good war.” The familiarity of one genre recreating images, technical choices, etc. that look like other similar movies could function, could feel like conviction, similar to the effect evidence has on us. Since I've seen this before, felt this before, it could be true? Isn't this what I really want to be true? If the movie gives the audience the moral outcome it really wants, could that further settle the sense that we are watching the truth played out on the screen? That surely is true of the more reverent movies about the past, like *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2015) and *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989). But genre movies, including exploitation films, rarely enjoy such respect. However, with few exceptions no exploitation movie with its shock-purpose portraits of violence, assault, sexuality, or racism has had as talented a writer and director as Tarantino.²⁰

¹⁹ This includes movies like the largely forgotten Vietnam biker film *The Hard Ride* (Burt Topper, 1971). Even Tom Laughlin's *Billy Jack* (a 1974 sequel of sorts to his first movie as the half-Native American Green Beret vet, 1967's *The Born Losers*) borrows its sensibilities from the exploitation genre in order to meet its laundry list of moral and political outrage.

²⁰ An earlier war movie with this exploitation feel is *The Night of the Generals* (Anatole Litvak, 1967). This creepy story of a Jack the Ripper-like killer among the *Wehrmacht* leadership, associated German military violence, loyalty to Hitler, with psychopathology—mass murder was by implication insanity. Yet it contrasted them to the “decent” Germans investigating the killer and plotting to assassinate Hitler. *Inglourious Basterds* at moments uses similar film themes, easily recognizable to anyone watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which by the way borrowed liberally from the exploitation version of the sadistic Nazi.

What historical narratives and historical movies have in common, at their best, is their ability to make an audience feel like they are “there”: in Ancient Sparta; 1930s Japan; medieval Scotland; or the American West. If you walked through a historically recreated landscape, like colonial Jamestown, you know this feeling. I study Enlightenment Scotland, and Edinburgh’s Old Town would probably still be recognizable to Adam Ferguson, David Hume, or Adam Smith. Strolling there is a remarkable privilege for the informed imagination.²¹

Tarantino has few moral conventions he tries to highlight or assuage other than the outraged injustice of the victims who seek brutal, final revenge. The exploitation genre, then, oddly enough is perfectly suited for *Inglourious Basterds*, a movie it is hard to imagine anyone else daring to make.²² What if Jews did fight back against Hitler with the same brutality and cruelty as his SS and *Einsatzgruppen*? This movie satisfies the rather prurient desire to see assaults, cruelty, blatant racism in a thin moral landscape, i.e., with little or no portrait of the real cost for leading the kinds of lives in which such vicious indignation and vengeance is conducted. This rather carefree moral universe joins the more respectable desire to see Jews punish Hitler and his National Socialist princes for their smug, repugnant racism and industrial slaughter. This is in fact what mainstream movies about World War II have in common with the exploitation genre. Tarantino seems to have recognized that what many World War II movies give the

²¹ The nature of conviction and the *experience* of believing the story is “authentic” seem largely the same. Yet the tools of historical conviction—reference to sources outside one’s personal experience or common sense truths, located in a battery of notes and bibliography that can be checked independent of the author’s influence—and the tools of filmic conviction—the compelling sense that the world of the movie is truthful by its own conventions or more importantly, by those of the viewer’s experience—represent different standards of authority.

²² Tarantino seems to have begun his journey as writer and director as a fan, watching the B-movie and exploitation movies in the bargain bin of the video store that employed him. I wonder if the Stalag-porn movies, the “girl in the KL” movies, from *The Night Porter* to *Ilsa the She Wolf*, etc., shaped his sensibilities and can be found in *Inglourious Basterds*.

audience is a surrogate vengeance experience. Hitler committed suicide in the last moments of his shattered regime; so did Goebbels. National Socialist leaders arrested afterwards killed themselves before and during the Nuremberg trials. For those who did stand trial, were the results a satisfying form of justice for their crimes? We all know the morally depraved nature of the regime and its leaders. We can't change history. But we can tell stories of cunning Allies sneaking into Germany or the occupied regions, infiltrating key command posts, and killing the generals as well as many, many Wehrmacht soldiers.

Tarantino recognized, I think, that when we watch *The Secret Invasion*, *The Dirty Dozen*, *Where Eagles Dare*, or *They Who Dare*, we are watching our surrogates kill substitutes for Hitler and his leaders.²³ *Inglourious Basterds* picks up a version of the platoon story, the small unit given an impossible mission behind enemy lines, but if successful will “turn the tide of the war.” We get to watch tough Army killers unhindered by rules of engagement, Hitler shot in the face, and his circle of leaders burned alive in a movie theater.²⁴ They are not only killed like Jewish victims of the Final Solution, but by Tarantino's own weapon, the technology of movies. He's never made a more morally confident movie about how film contributes to the raising of our consciousness of our own humanity.²⁵ Tarantino has said in interviews that he does not write

²³ These kinds of movies typically use the most universal story frame of post-World War II war movies, the small ethnically diverse platoon. See Jeanine Basinger, *World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003). It has come to shape even movies and TV shows from other genres, from *Aliens* to *Gladiator* to *Firefly*.

²⁴ For American troops fighting a savage, take no prisoners war, see Eugene Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Presidio Press, 2007); and Paul Fussell, *The Boys' Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe, 1944-1945* (New York: Modern Library, 2005).

²⁵ He was able to recruit the slasher porn director Eli Roth as a main character, as well as the second-unit director of the film within the film, *Pride of the Nation*, the propaganda movie showing the night of the assassinations. This is so strange, after all. Roth has asserted that his *Hostel* series are quite moral reflections on living in an age of terrorism; Scott Tobias, “Horror Tries to Have it Both Ways in ‘Green Inferno,’” at: <https://www.npr.org/2015/09/24/442801621/horror-tries-to-have-it-both-ways-in-green-inferno>. The outrages the

scripts with any hope of moving a social or political debate forward. But his movies have references to contemporary racial and social controversies, and he is pleased when audiences pick them up.²⁶

Whatever Tarantino’s intentions, a Jewish-American assassination of Hitler and his circle of leaders, ending the war and the Final Solution, highlights serious questions writers and scholars have asked since 1945. How could German resistance leaders fail to kill the Führer? How did the Allies fail to end or limit the Final Solution, by bombing the killing centers in Poland? Why, as the great historian of the Shoah Raul Hilberg asked, did so few of Europe’s Jews actively resist their National Socialist killers? How and why did key Jewish leaders in Europe fail to see what was coming? Why did the *Judenrate* in the occupied areas cooperate with the German authorities to make their “special” tasks run more smoothly?²⁷ *Inglourious Basterds* also addresses another subject of scholarly debate: what did average Germans think of their regime, what did they know of its criminal actions in the East, and what was the Wehrmacht’s

sadistic psychopaths commit on innocent people in those films are supposed to be, in some sense, echoes of the horrible cruelties committed by Da’esh (ISIS).

²⁶ Jeff Labrecque, interview with Tarantino on *The Hateful Eight*, *Entertainment Weekly*, Dec. 21, 2015, at: <https://ew.com/article/2015/12/31/quentin-tarantino-hateful-eight-interview/>; see also Henry Louis Gates Jr, interview with Quentin Tarantino on *Django Unchained*, Parts 1-3, December 23 24, 25, 2012, at: <http://www.theroot.com/multimedia/tarantino-talks-gates-podcast-special>.

²⁷ Burning the theater becomes a kind of Dresden, a fire bombing with film. Yet we associate burning in the Second World War with the murder of Jewish victims, even though they were gassed first. Further, most victims were shot by SS special force murder squads, which Tarantino picks up with the movie theater murder of the Nazis. For the history of resistance in Germany, see Peter Hoffmann, *German Resistance to Hitler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); on Allied rescue, see William D. Rubenstein, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); on the controversy over Jewish complicity and resistance, see Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); Yehuda Bauer, *They Chose Life: Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust* (New York: American Jewish Council, 1973); and Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing The Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997).

complicity in them?²⁸ Tarantino equates Hitler with Germany; “killin’ Nazis” means killing any resisting German soldier.²⁹ The Wehrmacht soldier who wants to live must accept the Basterd’s swastika scar on his forehead, a 20th century secular mark of Cain. In the conclusion we finally get to see the worst Nazi carved up. The scene moves back and forth from the vantage of the Basterds, as if we were one of them, to the victim (and us) looking up at them. Brad Pitt’s character says this is a work of art, perhaps his best; clearly Tarantino’s tongue in cheek confession about his own movie. The Basterds earlier watched the Bear Jew beat a man (with an icon of Americana, a baseball bat) to death, with the same enjoyment as watching a good movie. In a similar way the audience gets to enjoy in this final scene the payoff of tortuous movie vengeance.

Tarantino’s movie therefore dramatizes what we hoped had been true back in the 1940s. An important part of that alternative past has Jewish Americans and American commanders working with cruel efficiency, unlimited by bigotry against one another, against an equally cruel and ruthless enemy. *Inglourious Basterds* is not about Jewish resistance to Nazism—the various Jews from all across Europe from different social, religious and cultural backgrounds—but American Jews, democratic Jews, assimilated Jews. There is one exception: an Austrian Jew who joins the Basterds but did so after escaping Nazi-dominated Europe ““while the getting’ was

²⁸ Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); and Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years*, v.1, 1933-1941, v.2, 1942-1945 (New York: Modern Library, 1999, 2001).

²⁹ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

good.” Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* is remarkably hopeful, again cutting back against the obvious grain of the exploitation genre. The latter usually portrays victims taking justice into their own hands, driven by cynicism about modern government, the police and court systems, who are overwhelmingly corrupt, counting on the servile fear of the average citizen. Instead, it shows an American platoon unified by their moral indignation at Nazi racism and cruel domination of innocent civilians across Europe. Tarantino’s platoon exhibits utter indifference to its own racial divisions, while spiced with the best story we tell ourselves about our own ingenuity, courage, and audacity.

As I suggested earlier, Tarantino’s story doesn’t offer evidence for its claims; it isn’t an argument in the way historians make or recognize them. But it does, in its brutally visceral use of its exploitation film inheritance, make us feel like something morally true is being played out in front of us. Consider the conclusion to “Operation Kino,” the destruction of the movie theater and its Nazi patrons. After the doors are barred and Shoshona ignites the pile of inflammable film stock, Roth’s character shoots wildly into the packed seats. Tarantino films the shooter’s POV in real time, including the shooting of Hitler and Goebbels. Hitler especially, riddled with bullets, jerks spasmodically throughout, a violent mockery of the Fuhrer’s presumed power and invulnerability. But in editing the scene of Roth shooting, Tarantino slows it down, emphasizing Roth’s wide-eyed jerking ecstasy from pouring lead into the crowd. This as you would expect makes it seem as much like a sex scene as a mass killing. Only looking back onto the brutal conduct of the invasion and occupation of much of Europe, of the killing of millions of Russian soldiers and civilians, Poland’s awful theater in which the Final Solution is finalized and conducted, does the full evil of Hitler and his regime take shape. I won’t presume what an

individual might feel watching this scene, but the accolades and success for *Inglourious Basterds* suggests Tarantino knew exactly what many of us really wanted to see.

Conclusion

“My characters don't know they're part of history.”

—Tarantino

Gladiator, *Braveheart*, and *Amistad* tell audiences that their moral suspicions are right and proper. They traveled back in the cinematic time machine to discover that their convictions about liberty, justice, and equality were just as correct then as they are today. Most of the benighted people back then didn't know that, certainly the arrogant and brutal villains who drive the drama in those stories. But the battles for honor and liberty by the movie characters Maximus and William Wallace, for liberation and justice by Cinque, are no less morally true for happening 1800, 900, or 200 years ago. How could people back then have been so morally blind? Such movies succeed because they captivate audiences with the truth of their imitation of our sense of our mythological past.

The audience at an exploitation movie recognizes it as a genre movie with its own film aesthetic. That form has villains whose violence and personalities verge on camp, where weaker people are not treated with respect but are the objects of extraordinary humiliation and violence, and its audience in some interesting way anticipates and wants to watch these episodes of dehumanization. But unlike the typical exploitation movie, *Inglourious Basterds* adds to its genre elements such a bold “what if?” scenario that we get a different kind of historical outcome we in fact want. A movie like *Amistad* gives us a semi-fictionalized past that highlights a hero who validates what we believe is morally admirable about ourselves and our society today.

Tarantino’s movie gives us the moral satisfaction of seeing the worst humans we can imagine, the Nazis, given the blood-soaked and vengeance-fueled justice we wish they had received. I’ve suggested earlier that the classic behind-enemy-lines raid movie gave us a sort of satisfaction for justice, with their portraits of murder and destruction of the moral stand-ins for Hitler and the National Socialist regime’s leadership. Tarantino’s movie avoids these melodramatic middlemen, satisfying our dream of seeing the architects of World War II and the Final Solution riddled with bullets or burned alive. Oddly, I’ve suggested that doing so, he points out the very questions that in fact preoccupy historians of the Nazi regime and their systems of mass murder.

History, in such a dreamlike fulfillment of what we wish was true, might exorcise our boredom with the kind of work and results historians produce—an almost certainly more complex, more circumstantially explained past. Historical narrative clearly meets some reader’s needs; it gives them something specific they want from the past. Does Tarantino’s history as we wished it, remind us grimly of what really happened, so we transfer our frustration with the past we actually have to the present which is still open, for a near future that might actually satisfy our hope for justice and right? History is often discomfiting—America is not simply Christian, there was no gentle Thanksgiving back in Pilgrim times, and slavery and the ethnic cleansing (with genocidal moments) of Native Peoples were deeply woven into American politics and society.

As a historian who really enjoys movies, the tension I experience is not the accuracy of the movie past against what I know about it from scholarship. I think I understand the nature of movie art depicting the past, its tools and tasks of compressing time, synthesizing characters, fitting complex events and multiple causes into genre plots, and the tendency to simplify the

story into one of good vs evil.³⁰ Consider a different movie about violent Jewish resistance, Edward Zwick’s *Defiance* (2008). It concentrates on the Bielski brothers, who led Polish Jews into a Belarus forest from where they operated hit and run attacks on German troops. In *Defiance*, the debate over justice is about killing German soldiers, not Nazis; about killing unarmed POWs and captured people; about continuing their actions even if the Germans carry out retribution attacks on unarmed citizens. The story then asks us to think about the line between resistance and vengeance, about what we now call collateral damage. The debate portrayed in *Defiance*, as typically “based on a true story,” is somber and respectful about its past.

The tension I experience is that the discipline of history requires putting off what I want from the past, the story and people and ideas appealing to me, in order to find the history that is most prevalent in the documents left behind. Unlike the novelist or screenwriter, I am bound by a historical self-denying ordinance. I can say about the past, in the history I teach and write, only what I can defend by pointing beyond myself to sources from that world, convincing my students and colleagues that my case is at least reasonable. People lived centuries ago. They left traces, relics, of their lives. Can I do what I wish with them, to fulfill my dreams and desires about past stories I want to tell? No; at least, not if I am to honor their humanity and that of others back then. Truth telling requires integrity, no less in history than any other discipline of argument.

³⁰ Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and his *Lectures on Rhetoric* (1755) explained the difference between poetry and history. He seemed to draw largely on Aristotle’s *Poetics*. That is a similar issue I must address here. Why are poetics, including film, such poor vehicles for bearing facts and historical arguments? Especially so when historical narrative originated as and perhaps continues as a branch of poetics? (See Hayden White for more insight on historical narrative.)

In contrast, historical movies generally give us the past we want with few boundaries. In Ridley Scott’s historical movies we find the story of courageous defenders of liberty against tyrants. From Steven Spielberg we get the triumph of integrity and principled justice, even at great cost (*Saving Private Ryan*, *Amistad*, *Schindler’s List*). In the post-Korea and -Vietnam war movie (*Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Casualties of War*, *Born on the Fourth of July*) we get the enormous moral ambiguity of combat, the psychological cost to those who fight and survive, and the burden their families bear when they return home.³¹

But that is my point. The historical discipline, history in general as practiced, doesn’t give us what we want in as straightforward a way. I want an ancient history that tells me about the vast majority of people, laborers, slaves, women, who lived and died in that world. But it doesn’t; no one wrote about them and they themselves left little of their lives behind. I want the events of the past to have turned out differently, of any catastrophe we can imagine. I want a community of anti-slave activists to have won over the political elite of Europe and America to the injustice and cruelty of slavery far, far sooner than the 19th century and, in the US, without the bloodiest war in our history. For the 20th century especially, when we are buried under documents, I want the worst of what we’ve done to one another to have been preventable.³² The problem I experience with historical movies is that they feed the part of me that wants a different

³¹ As famous as any movie, Gibson’s *Braveheart* encouraged Scots to imagine themselves independent from England, which they eventually voted to achieve at least as far as devolution. Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* raised the consciousness of an entire generation of American viewers about the Shoah. The American TV series *Holocaust* (1978) was broadcast in West Germany and caused a widespread, unprecedented public conversation about Germany’s anti-Semitic policies and the destruction of Europe’s Jewish population.

³² Christopher Clark’s recent history of the origins of the Great War, with a wealth of diplomatic and archival documents, suggests there is no simple explanation and therefore no way, reasonably, to understand how it could have been prevented. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Harper, 2014).

past, a simpler past, in this way a past far more useful, satisfying my moral outrage and indignation.³³

Ultimately, is there any "good news" to find echoed from these movies? The Good News, in its challenge to revenge and moral righteousness, seems strangely in line with the typically terrible ends of Tarantino's vengeance-driven characters. Hypocrisy and bad faith, targets of neo-Nietzschean thinkers, are oddly confirmed in Tarantino. Contrast this to Mel Gibson's atonement theology represented in *The Passion of the Christ*. Jesus "makes all things new" through his superheroic ability to take unbelievable punishment and death. When human sin has left humanity under Satan's earthly rule, only the unbelievable/though cinematically believable suffering of God in the flesh can redeem humanity.³⁴ As Joe Pantoliano's character Teddy says in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, "Someone has to pay. Someone always has to pay." But two agents of vengeance in *Inglourious Basterds*, and the husband and wife in *Django Unchained*, survive their war against evil. The scale of evil in the Shoah and the America slave system perhaps demanded that they get their violent justice and survive their wars.

³³ One filmmaker suggests how movies can win over the audience through cinematic austerity. Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018) argues that "the holy" is best conveyed by the most stripped down of filmic styles, focused on mundane reality and accompanied by long silent scenes. The more typical "abundance" of modern cinematic magic emphasizes the confidence of the moviemaker. But a humility about the world comes through far more clearly in this ascetic kind of realism, permitting the viewer to experience the transcendent. Oddly, Schrader's own screenplays and movies like *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *Bringing Out the Dead* often feature loners suffering such a moral or existential crisis of rage, violence, and despair, anything but studies in austerity and silence. But Schrader finally tried to follow his own aesthetic argument in the recent *First Reformed*.

³⁴This is closer, perhaps, to the convictions laid out in some of the Hebrew histories, such as Deuteronomy 9 (wicked nation destroyed) and 25 (the vengeful destruction of the Amalekites). Even more fitting, to this point, is the power of Psalm 137's call for the beating to death of the Babylonian children. Some kind of bridge perhaps, or better a revision, of this tradition under the canopy of the Gospel can be seen in Paul's revision in Romans 12:19 of Deuteronomy 32:35.

Our sense of uncompromised, unblinking brutal justice, a kind of vengeance, ratified by these recent Tarantino movies, finds its divine echo in Gibson’s movie and others of his.³⁵ What might this suggest in light of the Good News as narrative and moral reflection? Tarantino’s movies highlight the often paper thin aspirations of their characters, the house of cards they build to realize them. Justice against ruthless evil requires them to indulge in horrific scales of violence and destruction. Such risks, their costs, even in these typically ethically-simplified formats of the action movie, should deeply humble any reflective viewer. Consider the terrible things we might do and the terrible responses we might have to make to restore the world. What these kinds of movies perhaps get right is our deep desire for justice, our pleasure at achieving it with vengeance, and our challenge in imagining the real cost.

The penultimate words belong to Primo Levi:

We are . . . hybrids kneaded from clay and spirit; [this] fever [of] ours, that of our Western civilization which ‘descends to hell with trumpets and drums’ [as Shakespeare wrote in *Measure for Measure*]:

Dress'd in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd—
His glassy essence—like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep

³⁵ For discussions of the theological implications of seeing movies give us what we want to see, by portraying people as desiring creatures, see Josh Larsen, *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings* (Wheaton, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017), and Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

. . . We too are so dazzled by power and money as to forget our essential fragility, forget that all of us are in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that beyond the fence stand the lords of death, and not far away the train is waiting.³⁶

Wherever we end up in this discussion, we must first pass carefully and diligently through the cry of that young Man lifted high between heaven and earth, “My God, My, God; why have You abandoned Me?” (Mark 15:34)

³⁶ *Moments of Reprieve* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).