

“Ideology, Socratic *elenchus*, and *Inglourious Basterds*”¹

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1. Introduction

The topic of ideology has dominated discussion of Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*.² Tarantino’s film both uses ideological tropes (about Native Americans, Nazis, and Jewish people, e.g., to mention just three) and ironically distances itself from ideological tropes. Nowhere is this dynamic more obvious than the propaganda-movie-within-a-propaganda-movie device: Tarantino’s film functions as a propaganda war film (anti-Nazi) in which Hitler is undone by his participation in the viewing of a propaganda war film (pro-Nazi). This duality forces us to ask whether the film’s hip irony towards ideology is insightful or vapid. I argue that the key to answering this question is Socratic *elenchus*: our unwitting participation in, and enjoyment of, ideological devices in the film is cross-examined by abhorrent aspects of ideology that the film depicts. The film thus leaves us in a sort of ideological *aporia*, which, I will claim, is progress of a most impressive kind.

2. The pattern

Basterds is modeled on American war films like Robert Aldrich’s *The Dirty Dozen*³ (1967, MGM) and J. Lee Thompson’s *The Guns of Navarone* (1961, Columbia), films which celebrate American (and British) heroism of World War II. All three films depict a band of specially trained Allied forces on a perilous mission against the Germans; in Tarantino’s film,

¹ I would like to thank Paul Loeb and Alan Code.

² See, e.g., Dassanowsky: forthcoming.

³ Whose promotional tagline, “Train them! Excite them! Arm them!...Then turn them loose on the Nazis!”, would function perfectly for Tarantino’s film too.

Lieutenant Aldo Raine trains and leads a group of Jewish-Americans on a revenge mission (akin to fulfilling a revenge fantasy) against the Nazis. While *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Guns of Navarone* are not Allied propaganda films on the level of Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* contributions (1942-1945), they share important features with Capra’s institutionalized, government-funded propaganda: they champion the American military and American values at a time of international conflict (in the case of the 1960s films: tension with East Germany; the Berlin airlift; raising of the Berlin wall; the general Soviet and communist menace).⁴

Unlike *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Guns of Navarone*, however, *Basterds* is a self-aware film that ironically distances itself from its own ideological aspects.⁵ The film celebrates American war heroism and American values (e.g., the “Bear Jew” celebrates the American sport of baseball by using a baseball bat as execution device while spouting a euphoric fantasy of being Ted Williams). At the same time, though, the film both shows the viewer that it realizes that it is ideologically laden (during the Bear Jew-baseball event another character comments: this is “The closest we get to going to the movies”) and invites the viewer to laugh at ideological propaganda (perhaps most clearly evidenced in the self-satisfied-but-feigned-humility of Fredrick Zoller, the German Private who became a war hero and nascent movie star by playing himself in a Nazi propaganda film⁶).

This pattern, that of simultaneously utilizing ideological tropes and ironically distancing itself from those tropes, is evidenced throughout Tarantino’s film in myriad ways. Consider

⁴ Tarantino’s film, of course, was also released during a period of international conflict (the “war on terror” instead of the cold war), but after mentioning it here I will leave this point aside.

⁵ I don’t mean to suggest that those films are simplistic, since they self-consciously employ genre conventions of 1950s war movies like *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Attack* (1956), *Stalag 17* (1953), and *The Steel Helmet* (1951).

⁶ The Nazi film is even titled “Nation’s Pride” and is accompanied by numerous Leni Riefenstahl references.

three other examples. First, the film’s depiction of Hitler is a caricature of a paranoid and self-conscious buffoon, but when the film introduces Hitler he is posing in a lavish kitsch robe for an over-sized (caricatured) wall portrait. Tarantino’s film tells us that it knows it is depicting a funny and ridiculously exaggerated picture of Hitler by having a painter in the film at the very same time depicting a funny and ridiculously exaggerated picture of Hitler.

Second, *Basterds* uses ideologically motivated stereotypes of African and African-Americans and Native Americans⁷, but the film also tells us that it knows that it (thus: ironically) uses such stereotypes. Consider, for example, how blacks are depicted in the cellar tavern scene in which several characters play a card game. In the game one is assigned an identity on a card; the card can be seen by everyone else but not by oneself; the goal is to guess one’s identity by asking questions of the others. A Nazi officer is trying to guess that he is King Kong, and through a series of questions he learns that he is a large black beast taken in chains on a boat from his native jungle in Africa to America, whence he meets misfortune. At this point the officer deduces that he is either King Kong or a black person, and he asks whether he is real or fictional. We are supposed to enjoy the episode, but we are also told implicitly that in the officer’s view the basic difference between a black slave and a large black ape set on ravishing a white woman is that one is real and the other fictional.

Perhaps most complicated and interesting, though, is the film’s use of Native American stereotypes. The Lieutenant Raine character is part Native American, and his goal is to make the *Basterds* into a crew of Apache warriors; each member of his team must take 100 Nazi scalps (their battle is also partly ideological: they plan to instill fear in the German ranks). The film, then, partly portrays Native Americans according to a simple stereotype: as savage and fearful

⁷ To mention just two; in addition we find stereotypes of Nazis and Jewish people, *inter alia*.

beasts. But that simple stereotype is also partly subverted by the film because we are supposed to *sympathize* with the savages (and even to sympathize with, and enjoy, their savagery). The film, furthermore, tells us that it ironically knows that it is using Native American stereotypes. For example, in the same cellar tavern scene with the King Kong card, another German at another table has a card with “Winnetou” on it. Winnetou, a fictional character from German literature (by Karl May from the 1870s onward), and later German film (1960s) and television (1980s), is a Native American Apache. The character of Winnetou also fits another well known stereotype, that of the noble savage (Winnetou is a sort of German version of Tonto, and Winnetou’s European-American companion Old Shatterhand is the counterpart to Lone Ranger). Tarantino’s film, then, uses Native American stereotypes, but it also both partially subverts those stereotypes as well as shows us that it is aware that it is doing so.

Third, and lastly, characters in the film are hyper-concerned with their reputations and how they are depicted in the media; characters are themselves obsessed with how they are stereotyped and ideologically represented. I will just provide two short examples among many: firstly, Lieutenant Raine and the whole crew of Basterds are obsessed with how they are depicted in the media and in the German military (the dramatic flourish of carving a swastika on the foreheads of the Germans he allows to escape is meant to influence his reputation); secondly, Hans Landa is more concerned than anyone with his reputation, viz., as the Jew Hunter, a reputation he attempts to dictate control over at the end of the film by writing, amid the terms of his surrender, how he will be portrayed in the history books.⁸ Thereby the film reinforces the theme of how, and to what purpose and effect, stereotypes are used and controlled.

⁸ Both of these examples (Raine and Landa), as well as many others, could be developed at length, but I will leave the point here for now.

3. *Elenchus* and *aporia*

The film, then, has a complicated relationship to ideology. Is it just a mishmash of popular culture references (Winnetou, e.g., being a solid datum of pop culture for any German) and a rationalization of stereotyping (*stereotyping is okay if you do it ironically*)? Perhaps the film’s double use of ideology is simply vapid. Its nod-and-wink use of stereotypes is just an ironic joke; we are supposed to have fun and participate in the ideology of the film while perhaps recognizing, on some level, that we are doing so.⁹

I will argue otherwise, but before I do so I’ll explain the key features of Socratic *elenchus* that I will rely on. Socrates, according to the familiar story, sought an account or definition of virtues such as piety, courage, and justice.¹⁰ Since he didn’t think that he knew the definition of the virtues, he sought out those who considered themselves to possess such knowledge.¹¹ Hearing their answers (such as Euthyphro’s definition of the pious as that which is loved by the gods), Socrates would engage in a series of questions (*elenchus*, meaning, among other things, cross-examination, as in a legal setting) that would reveal the answers to be unsatisfactory (e.g., an answer conflicts with other things the supposedly knowledgeable interlocutor believes). The result is that the interlocutor has discovered an inconsistency among his beliefs and must (or ought to) admit that he lacks the knowledge and wisdom he claimed to have. Usually the Socratic dialogues end inconclusively: we don’t know which beliefs to give up (the original

⁹ E.g., see Tarantino’s interview with *The Village Voice* (August 18, 2009).

¹⁰ At least, Socrates as we find him in Plato’s early dialogues. Also see Aristotle: “Now Socrates was engaged in the study of ethical matters, but not at all in the study of nature as a whole, yet in ethical matters he sought the universal and was the first to fix his thought on definitions” (987b1-4); “Socrates busied himself with the excellences of character, and concerning them was the first one to inquire after defining the universal ... but it was reasonable that Socrates sought the ‘what is it’ – for he sought to syllogize and the ‘what is it’ is the starting point of syllogisms, or reasonings ... Two things may fairly be attributed to Socrates: inductive accounts and universal definitions, both of which are concerned with the starting points of science” (1078b17-31).

¹¹ See the account of this process in the *Apology*.

definition or the other beliefs with which it conflicts). Instead of making progress, we end in puzzlement or confusion (*aporia*).

The method of *elenchus* is in the first instance negative: it helps demonstrate an inconsistency in someone’s belief set. But this negative phase can have positive benefit: it might help us reexamine our beliefs about piety and eventually come closer to the truth; or it might be an end in itself, an intrinsically good thing to lead an examining and self-examined life practicing *elenchus*; or it might simply help us realize that like Socrates we too are ignorant, and in recognizing our own ignorance thereby come to be wiser (at least wiser in the sense of wisdom that the Delphic oracle attributed to Socrates). After all, if we are all ultimately ignorant, as Socrates seemed to think, then progress isn’t getting the right theory, but coming to terms with our ignorance.

4. Understanding the pattern

Now I can explain my interpretation of how ideology functions in *Basterds*: the film cross-examines our attitudes toward ideology and finds them inconsistent, and this *elenchus* of our attitudes constitutes an important kind of progress. I will focus here on the dramatic climax of the film, but my points can be generalized to fit all of the ideological themes already mentioned. The climax of the film takes place in a movie theater in which the principals are watching the inaugural screening of the Nazi propaganda film, “Nation’s Pride”. Tarantino intercuts close-ups of Hitler and Goebbels—watching the “Nation’s Pride” with wholehearted, almost child-like, enjoyment—with scenes of the film they are watching. What they are watching is an amusingly vapid piece of propaganda: Fredrick Zoller (playing himself) at the top of a tower shooting enemies below. “Nation’s Pride” intercuts that violence with close-ups of

Zoller pausing in faux-dramatic fashion; Zoller then returns to shooting a dozen more enemies below. The formal parallelism is striking: close-ups of Zoller in the film paralleled with close-ups of Hitler and Goebbels, both intercut with lots of shooting.

Since the propaganda film “Nation’s Pride” is so bad, viewers of Tarantino’s film can’t help but find Hitler and Goebbels’s amusement amusing. We laugh *at* them: they are so enraptured with their own ideology and they don’t recognize this piece of propaganda for the garbage that it is. Part of what makes “Nation’s Pride” so bad is that its gratuitous violence is played as dramatically interesting. This is the subversive side of the theme I have been examining in Tarantino’s use of ideology: *Basterds* is showing its awareness of, and amused distance from, propaganda war films at the same time that it partakes in being a propaganda war film.¹²

The deeper meaning to this subversive use of ideology comes a few minutes later, when the two remaining Basterds carry out their plan of assassinating Hitler (and simultaneously Emmanuelle Mimieux carries out her plan of burning down the theater with all the Nazis inside). What is most striking about this dramatic climax is how over-determined its success is. Mimieux has barred the doors to the main theater and lit an enormous pile of highly flammable film which will quite assuredly burn the whole place down; the two Basterds have, independently, rigged the theater with a load of explosives sufficient to obliterate everyone inside. Before either of those feats of total destruction occurs, however, the two Basterds surprise Hitler and Goebbels in their box seats and kill them at close range. After dispatching Hitler and Goebbels, they then train their guns on the panicking crowd below which is trying to flee the fire that has begun (trying futilely, since the doors have been barred). Next we get an unmistakable reference to the scenes

¹² Or, if it does not genuinely present itself as a propaganda war film, it at least presents itself as a film of American ideology and the offspring of propaganda war films (*The Dirty Dozen, et al.*).

of “Nation’s Pride” that we just saw: the two Basterds, from their raised perch, fire their machine guns down into the crowd just as Zoller, in the Nazi film, fired down from his perch at the soldiers below. Interesting is that the Basterds’ violence is even more gratuitous than Zoller’s: the people they are shooting are already going to be burned to death by the fire and blown to pieces by the explosives. Yet Tarantino gives their fierce faces both close-ups and slow motion emphasis, in which we see empty shells popping from their guns like little exclamation points, one for each dead Nazi below.

This moment is the culmination of the revenge fantasy against the Nazis, but it is also an alienating experience. We cannot help but to assent to the aesthetic force of the film and, on some level, enjoy the climax. But we also cannot help but realize that we are enjoying a gratuitously violent propaganda film in just the way that Hitler and Goebbels were.¹³ Our disdain for them has boomeranged as we realize that we should now have disdain for our own enjoyment of the film. We are like Euthyphro, who cannot help but assent to principles that he sees, as he assents to them, generate a contradiction in his attitudes. We are caught in a contradiction in our attitudes toward the ideology of the film: we endorse it, and yet we don’t; we disdain our own endorsement of it as we simultaneously endorse it. In effect we don’t know what to do or say, just as Euthyphro doesn’t. We have reached *aporia*; puzzlement reigns.

5. Conclusion

I have attempted to counter interpretations of *Inglourious Basterds* that see the film as superficially ironic; that see the film as an aesthetic spectacle that we are meant simply to enjoy

¹³ Tarantino’s film is therefore best viewed on a big screen in a theater. The close-ups of Hitler and Goebbels are from the vantage point of the person sitting next to them. One only has to look at one’s neighbor sitting next to one, then, as the Basterds are firing down at the crowd, to have an exactly parallel experience of a close-up of one’s neighbor (and, in a sense, of oneself).

in that contemporary ironic way in which we enjoy any bit of “postmodern” culture (reading a David Foster Wallace story of suicide from *Oblivion*, perhaps). What that interpretation gets right is that we are supposed to enjoy the aesthetic spectacle of *Basterds*, but the ironic role of stereotypes in the film doesn’t simplify that enjoyment; it *problematizes* it. The ironic use of ideology in the film adds depth because it catches us in a contradiction: it functions as an *elenchus* and leaves us in *aporia*. Of course, we can always flee from this sort of aporetic experience, just as Socrates’s interlocutors often flee from his questions by the end of the dialogue. But if we take the time to think about it we realize that we lack the wisdom we so easily thought we possessed: the supposed wisdom possessed by those who can recognize and avoid the pernicious, unjust use of ideologies. That is the wisdom that anyone who condemns the Nazi ideology takes himself to possess. We all condemn that fascist ideology, and thus take ourselves to possess that wisdom. But we also recognize that we cannot help but participate in ideological spectacles ourselves, and enjoy doing so, in the same problematic way in which we see the characters participating in their ideology. *Basterds* reveals to us this tension; it reveals that our attitudes aren’t even consistent, let alone true. Whether we are now able to revise our attitudes towards the truth, or whether we should join company with Socrates and admit our ultimate ignorance, is the question each of us must now attempt to answer.

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