Race and revenge fantasies in *Avatar*, *District 9* and *Inglourious Basterds*

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The climaxes of *Avatar*, *District 9* and *Inglourious Basterds* feature spectacularly violent, racialised revenge fantasies directed against white-male representatives of organised racial injustice. This essay argues that these fantasies draw upon a deep reservoir of popular resentment against the status quo. Yet, while the films express this resentment, they also deflect and redirect it. Comparing the different ways the films manage the spectacle of violence helps map out some of the current ideological and critical horizons of mass cinematic narrative. However, it also points to two overriding similarities: first, the strong degree to which race continues to evoke violence and to demand identification or counter-identification and, second, the films’ shared reliance on the fetishistic identification of scapegoat figures. Although the films follow different strategies in order to mystify, disavow or contradict the revenge fantasies, the racialised scapegoat remains a definite centre of gravity.

Although a good deal of early response to James Cameron’s *Avatar* (US/UK 2009) and Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (US/New Zealand/Canada/South Africa 2009) was devoted to comparative evaluations based on the way the two films differ (see Steinglass), I want to begin by taking notice of something these two high-budget, mass-circulation films share: the privileged position each gives to a spectacularly violent, racialised revenge fantasy. At the conclusion of the major battle scene in *Avatar*, the indigenous princess-heroine, Neytiri (Zoë Saldana), uses a wooden spear to skewer the hyper-masculine white male military commander, Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang), who epitomises the arrogant, racist aggression of the mining corporation invading her planet. At the end of the extended chase sequence in the latter half of *District 9*, an anonymous gang of alien ‘prawns’ literally tears limb from limb the hyper-masculine white male South African soldier, Koobus Venter (David James), whom the film has presented as the embodiment of the corporate and political regime of racist brutality directed against them. The parallels are obvious, and even the stark contrast between the strong identification *Avatar* encourages with Neytiri and the distance *District 9* maintains from the gang of prawns only helps to emphasise another commonality: that the fantasy of retribution is relatively indifferent to the emotions of its on-screen agent and is instead constructed primarily from the point of view of the cinematic apparatus itself. We can triangulate the revenge fantasies in *Avatar* and *District 9* with a third 2009 big-budget blockbuster in which the revenge fantasy holds a more prominent, self-conscious
position. In Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (US/Germany), the climactic sequence culminates with a cinematic audience of Nazi dignitaries, including Hitler, Goebbels and Goering, having their film interrupted by the gigantic close-up face of a white woman, Shosanna Dreyfus (Mélanie Laurent), who gleefully informs them that she is the Jewess about to burn them all to death, even as the promised flames break out from behind the screen.

What should we make of this pattern? First of all, it is a familiar one. Meting out violent retributive ‘justice’ to a criminalised or vilified individual or group has been a typical and enduring feature of much mass cinema, as in the shootouts that have brought closure to so many Westerns and crime and police dramas over the decades. One might be tempted to write off filmmakers’ pandering to the public’s thirst for violent spectacle as merely the debt popular fiction pays to human nature, citing the shootout’s continuity with blood sport or classical gladiatorial contests and so on. True, the moral fervour invested in killing the ‘evil’ antagonists of Westerns or crime dramas distinguishes the killings from mere brute violence, but only tentatively and provisionally, as becomes obvious when the moral lines are blurred in a self-reflexive, meta-fictional piece like Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (US 1992). Yet the current crop of vengeance killings is not only insistently moralistic, at least in *Avatar* and *District 9* (the case of *Inglourious Basterds* will require further discussion below), but also is directed not at the standard lawbreakers of Western or police drama, but at white men in positions of power and authority. The vilification of ‘psycho soldiers’ can be dismissed as Hollywood’s latest fad, as Brian D. Johnson has done in *Maclean’s*, or it can be seen as a symptom of political correctness run amok, as John Podhoretz has done in his review of *Avatar* in *The Weekly Standard*. I want to argue that the revenge fantasies in these three films ought to be taken more seriously, however. The pattern of violence in these fantasies is not directed just at its immediate objects, the ‘psycho soldiers’ Colonel Quaritch in *Avatar*, Koobus Venter in *District 9* and Colonel Landa (Christoph Walz) in *Inglourious Basterds*. It clearly extends beyond them to the institutional power structures that command, support and legitimise their actions. Thus the revenge climax alludes to the fundamental social issue of the distribution of the right to violence, in each case seizing it from the ‘evil’ representatives of the fictional status quo and wielding it against them in the name of justice.

If the revenge fantasies allude to or resonate with some strong thirst for political justice, or rather for vengeance-as-political-justice, their significance exceeds the explanatory power of arguments based on the audience’s ‘natural’ hankering after violent spectacle, and the fantasy’s political weight and specificity likewise militate against trivialising explanations based on Hollywood fads.
or the film industry’s shallow liberalism. I want to advance the hypothesis that the repetitive attraction of these moments draws upon a deep reservoir of popular resentment – whether about the environment, or crime, or the crumbling away of traditional values or the rewards and security society has promised its dutiful workers and citizens but has not delivered to them. However, it must immediately be added that, at the same time as these fantastic moments might testify to and even act out a generalised anger contemporary mass audiences share against the status quo, they certainly divert that anger from the powerful groups the mass audience finds itself unable to hold effectively responsible for the world’s sorry state of affairs, directing it instead at some fictional, demonised object. It is in the turn that Avatar, District 9 and Inglourious Basterds give to this displacement of the revenge fantasy’s object that they become especially interesting. Unlike the more commonplace demonisation of outlaws and criminals, these three films fix upon some of the most notorious examples of organised racial injustice available to them – Nazi anti-Semitism, South African apartheid and, in Avatar, an allegorically simplified version of colonialist resource extraction. All three cinematic representations can qualify as cogent synecdoches of the world-historical catastrophe of modern racism, raising the revenge fantasies themselves into some kind of proximity with what Frantz Fanon prescribed some fifty years ago as the cure for the ubiquitous internecine violence that besets the native populations of colonial regimes: active, violent resistance to the political and economic power structure that excludes its racialised subjects from personhood.1

1. Indeed, Fanon’s language seems almost to anticipate the sf strategies of Avatar and District 9 when he declares in The Wretched of the Earth that ‘decolonization is quite simply the replacement of a certain “species” of men by another “species” of men’ (35). He later adds: ‘After the conflict there is not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man. This new humanity cannot do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and for others’ (246).
Yet this hint of revolutionary content remains no more than a hint. In spite of the identification of these potent racist regimes as the enemy, the revenge fantasies in these films remain vicarious, diversionary and compensatory. According to an economy of representation described by Norman Holland and elaborated by Fredric Jameson in his 1979 essay ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’, the films’ ‘utopian’ anticipation of political justice is contained or neutralised by its ‘reified’ contextualisation. This containment of utopia by reification ensures that the violence stays spectacular rather than effective, and the audience’s role stays passive and receptive, not active or directing. On this view, each of the three films can be expected not only to exploit but also to manage or redirect the violent energies of the revenge fantasies and the volatile content of racial injustice. In the very act of raising and drawing upon the liberatory desires of popular violence and the aggressive demands for an end to racial injustice inherent in their content, the films will find ways to deflect and redirect those desires. That is to say, the films remain mass cultural, mass distributed artefacts of the entertainment industry that draw upon the energy of vengeful, racialised scapegoating not to stir the fires of rebellion or rouse the audience’s political consciousness from its daydreams, but rather to cash in on those daydreams. In the readings that follow I want to ask how the revenge fantasies fit into or disrupt the three narratives, with the further goal that, in mapping out and describing the different ways the films manage the spectacle of violence, we can survey and assess some of the current ideological and critical horizons of mass cinematic narrative.

In order to chart the ideological configuration formed by Avatar, District 9 and Inglourious Basterds I am going to borrow a set of coordinates from Slavoj Žižek’s recent polemic, First As Tragedy, Then As Farce. There Žižek proposes that contemporary ideologies display four main tendencies distributed along two axes. One axis distinguishes symptomatic from fetishistic formations, and the other effects of identification from those of distancing (69). The distinction between the symptom and the fetish that rules the first axis is Žižek’s latest development of a thesis he first proposed in The Sublime Object of Ideology, where he distinguished between what he then called the traditional Marxist notion of ideology as ‘a partial gaze overlooking the totality of social relations’ and the Lacanian notion of ideology as ‘a totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility’ (49). The ‘partial gaze’ in this earlier formulation corresponds to what Žižek now calls the effects of repression that emanate from and potentially expose the symptom, ‘the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other Scene erupts’ (First As Tragedy 65). The most typical example of this type of ideology would be
the false universal which misrepresents class or national interests as those of the world or society as such (Sublime Object 49–50). The binary opposition of identification and distance then sets up naïve identification with or belief in such symptomatic (mis)representation at one pole, and at the other the classic strategy of demystifying the symptom or distancing oneself from it, as in the Communist Manifesto’s unveiling of the limitations of bourgeois freedom, or Freudian unravelling of the effects of displacement and condensation in the interpretation of dreams or neuroses. Žižek calls the pole of identification the ‘liberal’ strategy and that of distance the ‘ideologico-critical’ stance.

What mainly distinguishes fetishistic ideologies from symptomatic ones, according to Žižek, is the intransigence of the fetish in the face of traditional demystifying or rationalist critiques. Žižek glosses the fetish in First As Tragedy, Then As Farce as ‘the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth’ (65). Perhaps the most distinctive quality of these sustaining lies is their incontrovertible functionality: ‘fetishists feel satisfied in their fetishes, they experience no need to be rid of them’ (68). Žižek calls the ideological strategy that combines fetishism with identification ‘fundamentalist’ – although in contemporary terms it would certainly refer not only to Christian and Muslim fundamentalisms but also to populist anti-Wall Street and anti-Big Government ideologies. In sharp contrast to the distinction between identification with and distance from symptoms, the distancing of the fetish, rather than undermining its power, simply ‘pretends to accept argumentation, but ignores its symbolic efficiency’ (68–69). This results in what Žižek calls the ‘cynical’ stance that practices the same logic of disavowal he earlier ascribed to the ‘ideological fantasy’, in the grip of which people ‘know very well how things are, but they [act] as if they did not know’ (Sublime Object 32). Thus the cynic disavows any fetishistic belief in ‘the system’ but continues to draw energy or profit from it. The power of fundamentalist and cynical fetishism is one that Žižek sees steadily gaining importance in contemporary society, with a concomitant weakening of classic liberalism and its counterpart, the critique of ideology.2

The mapping I want to propose here takes fetishistic identification as the common ground shared by all three of these films. In the climactic revenge fantasies they share, fetishism takes the form of scapegoating. Thus, if the fetish is ‘the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth’, the Lie in these cases would be the responsibility transferred onto the revenge object, and the unbearable truth the systemic violence of which this

2. Observing the same set of phenomena from a liberal point of view, Al Gore laments the decline of reason and the increasing prevalence of demagoguery and unyielding partisanship in public discourse.
object becomes both putative source and symbolic recipient. The logic by which hyper-masculine, white representatives of notorious racist regimes occupy the position of the scapegoat for capitalism and colonialism certainly contradicts the patriarchalism and nationalist fervour of other prominent types of fundamentalism, and it is in this contradiction that their ‘utopian’ energy is perhaps most obvious. But this should not distract us from their resolutely fetishistic character. The one-dimensional, exaggerated renditions of Colonel Quaritch and Koobus Venter and the parodic depiction of Adolf Hitler in *Inglourious Basterds* equally testify to the way the symbolic functionality of these characters overrides considerations of realistic or plausible representation. Indeed, given the radically non-mimetic quality of these ‘daemonic’ characters, it would be all too easy to exaggerate the degree to which the fantasy of turning racist violence back against its most notorious practitioners in these films signals any actual decline or weakening of racism (or sexism). The spectacularly violent punishment of racist villains is not only a utopian moment in these high-budget, mass-circulation films, but also a tactically crucial means of achieving the emotional satisfaction demanded in the closure of such films. Thus the strong degree to which race continues to evoke violence and to demand identification or counter-identification would seem to me to be one of the primary conclusions about contemporary ideology to be drawn from the three films.

If the common ideological ground shared by these three films is the fetishism of the revenge fantasy, their divergence concerns the strategies by which

3. I borrow the term ‘daemonic’ in this sentence from Angus Fletcher’s description, in *Allegory, the Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, of the obsessive or possessed quality of allegorical characters (25–69).
each of them exploits the fantasy’s raw energy while simultaneously containing it in a more complex narrative exploration of the issues of race and violence. Here – you will not be surprised to hear – each of the films stakes out one of the other three quadrants of Žižek’s rhetorical compass. Thus, Avatar mystifies race and violence, repressing the heroes’ own participation in the same project as the villains in order to afford these heroes all the rewards of colonialism with none of the guilt. This is what Žižek calls the liberal position, the classic self-congratulatory ideology of the beneficiaries of colonial expropriation who once blithely identified their private profit with the advance of civilisation and now find it happily coincides with salvation of planetary ecology. Inglourious Basterds deploys the logic of cynicism because its marvellously accomplished and elaborately self-reflexive filmmaking disavows its investment in the crude racism and graphic violence it nonetheless continues to unabashedly exploit. Finally, in District 9 we can discern Žižek’s ideologico-critical strategy on the basis of its unmasking the protagonist’s complicity with his ruthless corporate employers, as the plot forces him fully to confront the conditions of the aliens’ shantytown and the consequences of the relocation project that he cheerily represses in the early stages of the story. Working out this diagram is only a way to get started on an analysis of the films, of course – a kind of pre-writing exercise, as we would call it in an English Composition class. Let me now try to add some detail to this initial mapping-out of the films’ rhetoric by laying over it another analysis, this one having to do with a pair of generic sf conventions that the films develop in quite different ways.

The first of these conventions is the sf motif, shared by Avatar and District 9, of the hero’s transformation into the alien other. This is a venerable sf trope rooted in the genre’s always strong proximity to and referencing of colonial history and ideology. In fact, Avatar’s and District 9’s antithetical renderings of the white male protagonist’s achievement of sympathetic identification with the racial other reproduce a pair of polarised possibilities that have been endemic to sf for more than a century. Avatar and District 9 show that this polarisa-

4. It is important to recognise the limitations of this sort of mapping. Its greatest fault is that it might encourage turning these four ideological-rhetorical strategies into identities; that is, the mapping of positions can all too easily fall into the kind of mistake that Lacan points out when he defines a fool as a king who believes he is really a king (Žižek Sublime Object 46). The Lacanian fool mistakes the position he occupies in an institutional, conventional field for a substantial, inherent property of his own being. This kind of foolery is precisely the procedure necessary to the revenge fantasies in these films when they instantiate ‘evil’ in the person of an agent of institutionalised endemic violence. My intention is to expose the pervasiveness of such fetishistic identification in contemporary cinema, and my hope is that these readings encourage resistance to it.

5. For a fuller elaboration see Rieder.
tion, and so too the ongoing referentiality of sf to colonial history and ideology, continues unabated, if updated and revised, in contemporary sf cinema. Thus one classic point of reference, obviously echoed by *District 9*, is the rendering of the Martian invasion of London in H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* (1898) as an allegory for English colonialism – in particular, the genocidal impact of English settlement on the indigenous inhabitants of Tasmania. Wells’s nightmare plot is a perspectival inversion of the more commonplace exploration fantasy, just as obviously echoed in *Avatar*, in which a white male explorer ‘discovers’ a ‘lost race’ who end up welcoming him as their redeemer and king.

*Avatar* thus turns the transformation of its human protagonists into aliens into a fantasy of appropriation, with the young male hero getting the native princess and the older female scientist getting the access to indigenous ways and wisdom that was earlier denied her. For both Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), the colonial explorer-settler’s apparent assimilation of a native identity symptomatically displaces their actual expropriation of power and wealth from the natives. The scientist’s access to Na’vi culture and ecology, for example, professes a desire to learn from the Na’vi but actually aspires to absorb the planet and the Na’vi into her scientific-technological paradigm as ‘specimens’. All of this forms a pattern depressingly familiar to anyone who has dealt to any extent with the imperialist-era adventure fiction of H. Rider Haggard or his many imitators, but one whose durable appeal has been proven repeatedly in the success of mass cultural cinematic franchises such as *Indiana Jones* (1981–2008), *Star Trek* (1966–2009) and *Star Wars* (1977–2005).

The stupendous commercial success of *Avatar* may have been achieved in spite of its ideologically retrograde character, as many of its early reviewers seemed to think, but it seems more likely that its revivification of old-fashioned, reassuring exoticism is one of the principal reasons for its popularity. In a contemporary economy whose financial, political and commercial core continues to rely heavily on resource extraction from peripheral sites, *Avatar* offers a painless adjustment of colonial-era fantasies of appropriation to contemporary ecological and political conditions. Its vision is essentially akin to the widespread contemporary ideology – arguably the dominant corporate and political vision of the present-day US – of a ‘green capitalism’ that keeps the flows of resources and system of profits intact while purging them of corruption and waste. The aspects of the capitalist world system and the US’s dominance within it that *Avatar* repudiates – ecologically damaging resource extraction and arrogant

6. Some examples of early reviews saying *Avatar* succeeds as innovative filmmaking despite its tired plot include Gonsalves, Martinez, Means and Smith.
militarism – are effectively erased, rather than criticised, reconceptualised or reformed, by the protagonists’ whole-body assimilation into the Na’vi, because this transformation is cast as a return to pre-industrial harmony with nature (the strong similarity of the Na’vi to American movie Indians is no coincidence). That this prior state of harmony is just as imaginary as Colonel Quaritch is brutal only confirms the underlying coherence of Avatar’s liberalism with its fetishism. The more Wellsian District 9 pushes the trope of transformation in exactly the opposite direction. Wikus van der Merwe’s (Sharlto Copley) slow and torturous metamorphosis into an alien ‘prawn’ involves the loss of his job, his wife, his voice and his dignity. It submerges him into the disenfranchised, vulnerable, impoverished misery of the alien shantytown. Instead of repressing the historical suffering of colonised and racialised subjects, the transformation pushes it into the foreground.

To some extent District 9’s and Avatar’s antithetical developments of the trope of ‘going native’ are simply typical of the entire sf tradition. Their bifurcation plays out the radical contradiction between the perspectives of settlers and natives, in conformity with the endemic ambivalence of colonial ideology itself. The two films also, clearly, reflect their different national contexts. Avatar testifies to the continuing, apparently indomitable vigour of American exceptionalism, catering to the US audience’s seemingly bottomless thirst for imagining themselves the heroes of world history. District 9, a far more densely allusive and topical film, reflects more bitterly and complexly on South African apartheid and its aftermath, including the horrifying exposures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Not surprisingly, South African commentators are
divided on the film, which has been hugely popular in South Africa (‘District 9: A Roundtable’). Some see Wikus Van der Merwe’s transformation as a positive allegory of the country’s attempt to deal with its racial problems: it ‘evokes the trauma of awakening consciousness and the even more difficult journey toward change and redemption’ (Goodman 171). Others quite decidedly reject any temptation to see Wikus as a hero, and emphasise instead the film’s political shortcomings – for instance, its vicious stereotyping of Nigerians, its indulgence of ‘the usual anthropocentrism of science fiction’ (Gaylard 169), its ‘thinly veiled portrait of post-apartheid South Africa as a political dystopia and its persistent undercurrent of nostalgia for the old days of racial segregation’ (Moses 159).

The division between these two camps of commentators may well have less to do with their political leanings than with their generic expectations. The critics of District 9 are disappointed in its failure to imagine an integrated urban Johannesburg, ‘a politically progressive multiethnic mix of cultures living in harmony’ (Moses 160). Its proponents stress its innovation in bringing the global South to visibility within a set of sf conventions that usually imagine the future as America (Helgesson 172–73), and they maintain that in its splicing together of the social satire in its quasi-documentary first half and the adventure tropes of its second half it delivers ‘all that we can reasonably ask’ of a Hollywood-type film (Goodman 172). However one assesses the tensions between the film’s documentary and adventure elements, they demand interpretation; in fact, they are arguably the film’s most salient feature. I confess to having little patience with complaints (like those of Michael Valdez Moses quoted above) that the film should deliver a more politically correct or uplifting message. But it also seems too easy to say that the film achieves an unproblematic symbiosis between social satire and sf/action (Goodman 170). I would say instead that District 9 strikes a bargain between its contradictory generic impulses, by which the adventure elements procure the film’s access to mass distribution, allowing the documentary elements a hearing they would not otherwise obtain. The complicated balance the film strikes between the visceral and the intellectual – or the incongruity between them – is nowhere more perplexing than in the difficulty of assessing the revenge fantasy itself. What is more impressive about the depiction of Koobus Venter’s demise: the graphic and grotesque violence of the prawns’ attack on the paramilitary corporate cop, or the film’s success in showing how the systematic brutalisation of the prawns makes the cop’s fate at the hands of a random shantytown gang so clearly inevitable? The camera is

7. Helgesson maintains in similar fashion that the film’s lapses, such as its depiction of the Nigerians and its one-dimensional depiction of Koobus, reveal ‘the limits of what can be done in a Hollywood production’ (174).
distant and the action is very quick, but nonetheless the retribution offers an
undiably and disturbingly satisfying climax to the film’s protracted, fetishistic
demonisation of Koobus.

The second sf convention shared but differently developed in these films is
that of altered history – that is, the projection of counter-realist elements into
the past rather than their elaboration in the more usual sf future or otherworld-
ly setting. One of the odd things about District 9, considered as an sf film, is that
it sets the arrival of the alien ship above Johannesburg in the past instead of in
the near future. One could say that, by foreclosing the anticipatory perspective
conventional to sf, this strategy decisively emphasises the analogical function of
the prawns as metaphors for displaced black South Africans. That is, the strat-
egy insists that this is about history as it has already happened, not a fantasy
of what might happen. Or as Blomkamp has said in an interview, ‘It’s not like
I had a story and then I was trying to pick a city. It’s totally the other way around’
(qtd in Gaylard 168). Ultimately this insistence on referentiality runs up against
the generic tension between documentary and adventure – or between critical
distance and fetishistic identification – that emerges so strongly in the second
half of District 9.

Tarantino deploys the strategy of altered history to drastically different effect
in Inglourious Basterds. There the entrance of altered history into the narrative’s
generic mix comes in the form of a surprise ending: the story’s departure from
its apparently realist (if not very realistic or plausible) World War II setting to
an entirely different fictional world where Hitler, Goebbels and Goering died in
a theatre fire in Paris. Viewers too narrowly attuned to the tropes of historical
fiction while watching Inglourious Basterds would ‘know’ that the schemes of
the Jewess theatre owner Shoshanna and of the American guerrilla-terrorist
group, the Bastards, must fail because they would know that Hitler and com-
pany did not die while viewing a movie in Paris in 1944. The move into altered
history is the move that enables the climactic revenge fantasy itself to succeed.
And that is all it does. The tropes of altered history in classic examples such as
Philip K. Dick’s Man in the High Castle (1962) or Kim Stanley Robinson’s ‘The
Lucky Strike’ (1984) involve tracing the complex and profound ramifications
of a localised change in the fabric of history, thereby insisting, as does District
9, on the story’s crucial reference to more conventional historiography. But
in Tarantino’s handling of it, the gratification of seeing the heroes succeed in
burning, bombing and machine-gunning the theatre full of panic-stricken Nazi
dignitaries is the entire point.

This is not to say that Tarantino’s altered history is a cheap trick. Indeed,
I find its self-referential and outrageous artificiality compellingly coherent with
the critical exposition, throughout the film, of an aspect of race that *Avatar* and *District 9* mostly leave unexamined: its sheer contingency and the emptiness and arbitrariness of the distinctions it draws between people. Where *Avatar* and *District 9* concern themselves with the ongoing historical substance of racial oppression, *Inglourious Basterds* chooses the apparently frivolous topic of Nazi evil (as opposed to the quite serious topic of real historical Nazism) as a place to explore the theme of race as masquerade. The choice of European anti-Semitism rather than colonial racism highlights the emptiness of racial categorisation because it heightens the possibility, crucial to the plot of *Inglourious Basterds*, of passing.\(^8\) By means of this emphasis on masquerade and passing, *Inglourious Basterds* sets racism, not in the theoretical and historical context of colonialism, but rather in that of queer theory’s interrogations of how power, desire and violence attend the assignment and performance of social identities.

Thus *Inglourious Basterds*, not surprisingly, performs a more interesting and complex integration of gender dynamics into the revenge fantasy than the other two films. The hyper-masculinity of Quaritch and Koobus is part of their one-dimensionality, identifying them wholly and merely with their military pursuits. Their failure to show any hint of the normal heterosexuality of the protagonists Wikus or Jake makes it all the easier to be sure they will not attract any of the audience’s sympathy. Furthermore, *Avatar* panders to feminism by having the Na’vi princess Neytiri kill Quaritch, thus proving she is not merely the passive object-reward of Sully’s heroic narrative. (Unfortunately Neytiri thereby also conforms even more strongly to the fantasy of the good native who allies herself to the white male explorer hero.) Things are decidedly more queer in *Inglourious Basterds*, and not just because of the hints that Landa’s homosexuality over-determines his professional ardour in the strangling of the traitorous German actress, Bridget von Hammersmark (Diane Kruger), or that Aldo Raine’s (Brad Pitt) sadistic interrogation of von Hammersmark draws him and Landa into disturbing libidinal proximity.

The central focus of the on-screen sexual dynamics of *Inglourious Basterds* is Shosanna Dreyfus, caught in the cat-and-mouse play of Hollywood romance.

\(^8\) Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer observe, in their chapter on anti-Semitism in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the idea that ‘the Jews, free of national or racial features, form a group through religious belief and tradition and nothing else . . . [is] both true and false at the same time’. It is true ‘as an idea’. It is false insofar as ‘by assuming the unity of humanity to have already been realized in principle, the liberal thesis serves as an apology for the existing order. . . . Race is not, as the racial nationalists claim, an immediate, natural peculiarity. Rather, it is a regression to nature as mere violence. . . . Race today is the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual, integrated into the barbarian collective’ (137–8).
by the unwanted advances of the Nazi war hero, Private Fredrick Zoller (Daniel Brühl), which not only casts her into a far more terrifying and dangerous *tête-a-tête* with Landa but also enables her to undertake her revenge against Landa and his superiors. Tarantino manages the climactic moment of the revenge fantasy itself, when Dreyfus appears on screen as a ‘giant face’ to announce the audience’s death to them, as a grotesquely brilliant realisation of what Laura Mulvey calls the anti-diegetic power of femininity-as-spectacle to freeze the narrative progress – literally halting the film-within-a-film, figuratively slaying the fictive audience with her petrifying, Gorgon gaze. Her power to do so is based, from the moment of her meeting Zoller, on her ability to attract and hold the ‘gaze’ of male desire and to subvert it to her own ends. It all amounts to something like a textbook demonstration of the co-dependence of sadistic and scopophilic pleasures in narrative cinema.

That these sexual dynamics also depend on Dreyfus’ ability to pass as a ‘white’ Frenchwoman makes them thoroughly coherent with the film’s examination of race as masquerade. But the theme of masquerade emerges more strongly, perhaps, in the scenes of branding, when Lieutenant Raine carves Nazi swastikas into the foreheads of his victims because, as he says, he cannot abide the thought that after the war they could take off their Nazi uniforms and pass as normal human beings. And in the tremendous opening sequence, when Colonel Landa kills all of Shosanna’s family except for her, Landa plays an elaborate ‘masquerade’ with his one-person on-screen audience, at one point offering him a stark alternative that clearly extends to the film’s spectators: you can be a victim or an accomplice. This grim choice reverberates throughout the film. Raine’s brandings are twice shot from the point of view of their victims, in sharp, self-reflexive

counterpoint to Tarantino’s more obvious and abundant invitations to the audience to become accomplices by enjoying the pleasures of slaughter.9

If the climactic scene, during which the panic-stricken theatre crowd, already trapped in a burning auditorium, also gets strafed with gunfire by vengeful Jewish-American soldiers seems the very epitome of gratuitous violence, *Inglourious Basterds*’ ostentatious abundance of self-referential gestures also aligns that violence with the pleasures of film for film’s sake (see Walters). As Raine says before subjecting a group of prisoners (and his cinematic spectators) to the spectacle of a Jewish-American soldier beating a German prisoner to death with a baseball bat, ‘Watching Donnie beat Nazis to death is the closest we ever get to the movies’. But the critical power yielded by exposing the sadistic-scopophilic joys of cinematic masquerade is anything but clear. Is this a deconstruction of cinematic pleasure, a revelling in technical virtuosity, a cathartic release of Jewish-Americans from the role of passive victims to the Holocaust or merely a riot of historiographic irresponsibility and crass exploitation? On the one hand, Tarantino highlights the sheer contingency of racial identification in ways that neither *Avatar* nor *District 9* begin to open up. On the other, however, he pushes an aestheticist position to the point where it becomes anaesthetic, numbing not just affective but also ethical and political responses to racist violence.

I would suggest that it is more important to ask how deconstruction, virtuosity, catharsis and irresponsibility coexist in *Inglourious Basterds* than to decide which of them will rule our responses to the film. Looking at these three blockbuster films together, one cannot deny that *Inglourious Basterds*’ preoccupation with racially coded violence speaks to a pervasive feature of the contemporary scene. Whether the ‘fundamentalist’ fetishism of the films’ revenge

fantasies corresponds to an endemic irrationalism in contemporary political discourses or to widespread popular resentment of the socio-economic status quo (and I would say it is both), it certainly infects every other variety of ideology represented in these films. We have seen that it is all too easily and coherently integrated with the liberal ideology of Avatar, and that it likewise has no problem flourishing within the deconstructive, aestheticist strategies of Inglourious Basterds. Furthermore, if Inglourious Basterds’s self-reflexive ironies and queering of normative desire fail to effectively distance the film from its investment in the spectacle of racial violence, District 9’s retention of the revenge fantasy is even more flatly self-contradictory and for that reason even more unsettling to those of us committed to the critique of ideology. Although Žižek’s double axes of symptom vs. fetish and distance vs. identification divide contemporary ideologies into what look like equal tendencies, the analysis of the three films offered here suggests a definite centre of gravity. These three films mystify, disavow and contradict the revenge fantasy without sapping a bit of its energy – rather they thrive on it, so that even District 9’s critical impulses have to become its parasites.

Works cited


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