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That Is a Tasty Burger: The Violence in Quentin Tarantino Films

When we see Samuel L. Jackson taking a bite of that juicy Big Kahuna Burger in Brett's Los Angeles apartment before he brutally lays his vengeance upon the traitor,¹ we know that we are watching a Tarantino movie. Quentin Tarantino, one of America's most recognizable film directors and screenwriters, promises his audience blood-pumping movie experiences. Despite the movies' huge commercial success, Quentin Tarantino's films are often considered disturbing for their excessively violent content and controversial morality. Violent actions in most cultures and societies are illegal and restricted by law enforcement; however, Tarantino presents a different universe parallel to ours, known as the "Realer than Real" universe according to the director, where violence is highly valued and government regulation does not interfere with the vengeful actions of the protagonists.² In this universe, Tarantino uses violence as what he calls a "color"³ that helps him to create drama and tension with characters; painted with this "color" of blood, compassion, loyalty, and love are amplified through the director's strategic choice of ultraviolence. We often cringe into those soft red chairs when we see graphic violence scenes on

¹ Tarantino, Quentin, dir. *Pulp Fiction*. Screenplay by Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary. 1994. Film.

² Gray, Ali. "The Intricate, Expensive Universe of Quentin Tarantino." *ING US*. N.p., 17 Jan. 2013. Web. 4 Feb. 2016.

³ Hari, Johann. "The Tragedy of Tarantino: He Has Proved His Critics Right." *Independent*. N.p., 5 Aug. 2014. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.

the big screen, but when we cheer on the freed slave Django for blowing up the sadistic slave owner Calvin Candie's mansion,⁴ we ask ourselves: is it wrong to enjoy violence?

As a mainstream media, movies have been shown in studies to have significant psychological impact on the viewers. Psychologist Tannis Williams' study in the late 1970s showed that children in a small Canadian town behaved more aggressively after being exposed to media violence.⁵ This particular experiment eliminated outside factors such as Internet or social media as the sources of their violent behaviors, which would be difficult in modern days. However, no data had proved a significant behavioral change in adults, who would make up the vast majority of the audience of Tarantino's R rated movies. Nancy Signorielli, a communication and media effect expert, concluded that desensitization and fear of a more dangerous environment may have short or long term effects on people after watching violent content,⁶ but many psychologists argue that people can tell movie violence from real violence; such theory is famously known as make-believe. The American Society of Aesthetics defines make-believe as "attributing to a person emotions the objects of which are known by that person to be fictional are to be understood as occurring within the scope of the operator."⁷ In other words, people are capable of telling fiction from reality. Moreover, not only do some scholars believe that media violence does not have the irreversible negative impact on people, some scholars introduce the idea of cathartic violence which can be beneficial to mental health. According to media science Professor Sonja Glaab from Brown University, cathartic theory refers to releasing stress through aggressive behavior; however, traditional cathartic therapy

⁴ Tarantino, Quentin, dir. *Django Unchained*. Weinstein Company/Columbia Pictures, 2012. Film

⁵ Signorielli, Nancy. *Violence in the Media: A Reference Handbook*. ABC-CLIO, 2005. 28-35. Print.

⁶ Signorielli, Nancy.

⁷ Neill, Alex. "Fear, Fiction and Make-believe". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49.1 (1991): 47-56. Web. 4 Feb. 2016.

creates more problems than it solves due to its chain reaction.⁸ Nonetheless, one can release negative emotion by watching violent movies where the characters are in a protected environment. Because this movie method allows people to relieve their stress in a controlled fictional world, it is considered safer and more efficient compare to the traditional cathartic therapy, despite the potential danger of desensitization, which leaves balancing the positive and negative in the directors' hands.

Tarantino makes different aesthetic choices when interpreting various types of conflicts, which suggests the complexity of violence. The major violent scenes in his movies can be separated into two main categories: torture and revenge. The torture scenes refer to those where the stronger character takes pleasure in the pain of the weaker character. The sadistic perspective of violence causes controversies; WatchMojo, the seventh biggest YouTube channel, comments that some of the clips “turn stomachs in theaters,”⁹ and a clip of *Reservoir Dogs* from 1992 is still rated as the most disturbing torture scene in cinema history by them.¹⁰ Revenge scenes, on the other hand, show the weaker character gaining power to pay back the pain that the stronger character once has forced upon them. George Gerbner, the founder of the U.S. Cultural Indicators Project, refers to the “effective [and] painless [violence that] leads to a happy ending” as “happy violence” for the positive reaction it generates among the audience.¹¹ Although both types of scenes deliver their content through violence, they cause polar reactions because of the different moralities they demonstrate. Tarantino strategically distinguishes the two types of violence with cinematic effects. As the director has stated himself, “[o]ne of the things [he does]

⁸ Glaab, Sonja. "Catharsis Theory." *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*. Ed. Wolfgang Donsbach. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 1-12. Blackwell Reference Online. Web. 2 Feb. 2016.

⁹ *Top 10 Quentin Tarantino Scenes*. YouTube. WatchMojo, 3 July 2013. Web. 2 Feb. 2016.

¹⁰ *Top 10 Torture Scenes*. YouTube. WatchMojo, 19 July 2014. Web. 2 Feb. 2016.

¹¹ Gifford, Clive. *Violence on the Screen*. London: Evans Brothers, 2006. 8-10. Print.

is when the bad guys shoot people, the bullet ... makes little holes and they kill them and wound them, but they don't rip them apart."¹² Such interpretation creates a less disturbing visual effect during the torture scenes in contrast to the ultraviolent revenge where the villains are blown apart by shotguns. The difference between violent scenes suggests that the director is aware of the complexity of the reasons that lead to violence, and he presents moral conflicts by juxtaposing torture and revenge; therefore, the two types of violence, negative and positive, should be separated when we discuss the effect of violence on audience.

For the purpose of this thesis, we will focus on three of Quentin Tarantino's films: *Reservoir Dogs*, *Inglourious Basterds*, and *Django Unchained*. These three movies have the most death counts out of all that take place in the "Realer than Real" universe. They all contain examples of both negative and positive violence. Because of the complexity of the relationships between characters, we can see a pattern of extreme emotional shifts in violence. Such distinction between and within the various scenes lead us to wonder the reason behind it. Although some viewers find violent films uncomfortable to watch, Quentin Tarantino cinematically uses violence to communicate moral conclusions in a more memorable and sensational manner. Tarantino compares and contrasts the realistic torture and glorified revenge aspects of violence in order to explore humanity while he entertains his audience with dramatic stories and a unique style.

Tarantino illustrates the negativity of violence directly by showcasing the realistic pain caused by torture. Unlike many other movies that only show the glorified effects, Tarantino movies do not hide the physical and emotional damage caused by violence. The most shocking

¹² Carpio, Glenda R. "I Like the Way You Die, Boy". *Transition* 112 (2013): 1-12. Web. 4 Feb. 2016.

and memorable scene is in Tarantino's debut in 1992, *Reservoir Dogs*, where Mr. Blonde (Michael Madson) dances to classic 70s rock and cuts off an ear of a cop (Kirk Baltz) who was tightly tied down to a chair.¹³ The background music, Stealers Wheel's *Stuck in the Middle with You*, creates a relaxing and humorous atmosphere that contradicts the tension between the characters. Mr. Blonde's callous and aloof attitude toward the victim as he famously says, "Torture you? That's a good idea. I like that one. Sounds fun,"¹⁴ portrays his sadistic personality, which projects the cop's fear onto the audience. Although the camera moved away from the characters in order to avoid overly graphic content, the audience can still empathize with the pain from the cop's screams. The YouTube commentator, WatchMojo, even points out that the combination of the remote camera, horrifying sound, and enharmonic background music leaves more room for imagination.¹⁵ After the ear is cut off, Mr. Blonde yells at it and shows the cop his trophy.¹⁶ In this frame, the audience witnesses Mr. Blonde playing with the ear and jokingly teasing the victim; his smile suggests how much he enjoys watching the cop suffer in pain. The contrast of the evil character and the victim in one shot creates an irony so powerfully disturbing that movie critic Johann Hari calls Tarantino "morally empty" for presenting such scene with a comedic and nonchalant manner.¹⁷ On the other hand, Mr. Blonde's indifferent attitude, proficient knife skill and the pleasure he takes in torturing are made perfectly clear with the cheerful rock tune and the big smile on his face. This ultraviolent scene engages the movie viewers to feel the real torture that the character experiences to create a negative impression on

¹³ Tarantino, Quentin, dir. *Reservoir Dogs*. 1992. Film.

¹⁴ *Reservoir Dogs*.

¹⁵ *Top 10 Torture Scenes*.

¹⁶ See Appendix A.

¹⁷ Hari, Johann.

sadistic violence. Tarantino uses sensual torture scenes and its negative impact to evoke the audience compassion for the victim.

Violence has always been used to emphasize the cruelty of wars; however, instead of directly portraying the deaths on the battle field, Tarantino shows the effect of war protocols on innocent soldiers. Unlike other movies about World War II, Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* focuses on the grand revenge plan of the Jews. Interestingly enough, the director depicts not only the notorious anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, but also the ignorant and pitiful soldiers. German soldier and new father, Wilhelm (Alexander Fehling), celebrates his son's birth with drinks and games in a small bar; suddenly, a gun fight breaks out between Nazi soldiers and British-American spies.¹⁸ After all of his friends' tragic deaths, Wilhelm makes a deal with Jewish American lieutenant Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) that he would be freed if he surrendered, but one of the spies shoots him down after he recognizes her. The viewers can relate to those soldiers through their conversations and sympathize with Wilhelm's soon-to-be fatherless child. When Wilhelm grips the machine gun nervously and points it at the empty spiral staircase, the audience forgets about his identity as a Nazi soldier but sees him as the young father who desperately wants to reunite with his new born son.¹⁹ He is stuck in a small bar, holding on to the only weapon he can find, and standing among the corps of his closest friends; afraid of never seeing his son again, he cannot help but try his best to hide behind the counter and stare at the decent of the stairs with his finger on the trigger at all time. Although the camera shows the view from the staircase in this shot, Wilhelm's body language and trembling voice show total vulnerability as if he is actually the one at gun point. If he did not fight in the war, he would have

¹⁸ Tarantino, Quentin, dir. *Inglourious Basterds*. Band Apart Films/Babelsberg Studio, 2009. Film.

¹⁹ See Appendix B.

gone home after the celebration to raise his son, but instead he dies in the bar. Seemingly, he is killed because he calls Bridget von Hammersmark (Diane Kruger), the German actress who works for the British government, a traitor of the Third Reich, but his position as a soldier determines his pathetic role in this conflict. Meanwhile, Bridget von Hammersmark has no choice but to kill him because she is responsible for protecting the revenge plan. The moral conflict of the situation reflects the negative effect of war on the people involved. The upsetting truth of unnecessary violence between innocent people enhances the antiwar theme.

Tarantino recreates one of the worst parts in our history in order to remind the Americans of the past and challenge their judgment on humanity. Slavery, for example, is one of the darkest times in terms of the violence done by a collective group of people to another. Tarantino's movie from 2012, *Django Unchained*, tells the story of the freed slave Django (Jamie Foxx) rescuing his wife. In spite of the overall positive plot of this movie, it contains uncomfortable scenes showing how the slaves had been treated during that time period. One of the most disturbing scenes takes place in slave owner Calvin Candie's (Leonardo DiCaprio) Cleopatra Club, when the owners watch two slaves in a bare-knuckle Mandingo fight.²⁰ The image of two black slaves strangling each other solely for the pleasure of their masters is juxtaposed with the excitement of the sadistic Monsieur Candie; this contrast creates a cinematic irony so shocking to our contemporary eyes that we cannot help but despise this 19th century plantation owner. On the gorgeous wooden floor, two half naked slaves bathe in the blood of each other from their fight. The apparent winner, D'Artagnan (Ato Essandoh) from Candyland, straddles on the chest of the other slave and is about to drop the hammer on his face. The fancily dressed Monsieur Candie stands slightly farther away on the upper left corner of the frame, holding up a cigar between his

²⁰ *Django Unchained*. See Appendix C, content might be too graphic.

manicured fingers and leaning towards the fight to check on his bloody victory. This one shot closely presents the painful fight between the slaves, and, more disturbingly, the image of the sadistic plantation owner classily cheering on the fight. Later on, the horrifying picture of D'Artagnan being torn apart by dogs because he begs to stop fighting is unbearable to watch due to its historical accuracy.²¹ Glenda R. Carpio, a professor of African American studies confirms the slave culture illustrated in *Django Unchained* by commenting, "Django Unchained is ... a richly allusive cultural text that, though its intertextuality and its arguably excessive use of violence, makes vivid the brutality of American chattel slavery."²² The ultraviolence shown in the movie reminds Americans of those inhuman physical and psychological tortures African slaves suffered once upon the time. Tarantino explains in an interview that he has originally intended to film the torture scenes in South America because he felt uncomfortable casting African American actors as slaves and reminding them of what their ancestors had gone through; however, he ended up shooting all the footage in the U.S. because he felt this piece of history belongs to this country.²³ The dark side of history presented in front of the American audience through intense cinematic violence in *Django Unchained* is so unapologetically blunt that it forces the viewers to accept and judge what the respected pioneers of this glorious country had done to the Africans.

When all the negative violence gives audience a heart-aching experience and keeps everyone on the edge of their seats waiting for a hero, the hero often comes along in a Tarantino film. The heroic act illuminates the darkness brought by the accumulation of negative violence and thus creates moral conflict. As equally violent as the fight may be, the humanity of the mafia

²¹ Carpio, Glenda R.

²² Carpio, Glenda R.

²³ *Django Unchained: Meet the Press (2013) Quentin Tarantino. YouTube.* moviemaniacsDE, 1 Jan. 2013. Web. 4 Feb. 2016.

member amplifies the goodness inside those characters. In the end of *Reservoir Dogs*, Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) points his gun at his boss Joe Cabot (Lawrence Tierney) for suggesting that the seriously injured Mr. Orange (Tim Roth) is the undercover cop.²⁴ Mr. White, the supposedly cold-hearted hitman, trusts Mr. Orange whole-heartedly, despite the fact that they have just met. Considering Mr. Orange's injury was his own fault, Mr. White protects him with his life. Tarantino presents the intense conflict between the opponents with a single long shot from the ground. Mr. White blocks Mr. Orange with his own body from his boss' and fellow hitman's bullets. Although movie critic Gary Groth expresses his dissatisfaction that, "The conflict ... seems almost intentionally shoddy,"²⁵ there is no doubt that the insertion of the gun fight successfully delivers the dramatic moral dilemma. As the camera zooms out from the triangle in the middle, we can find Mr. Orange's arm reaching up on the far right as if he wants to reveal his true identity to save Mr. White. This detail adds irony to Mr. White's heroic act of protecting the innocent who is actually guilty for the death of others; even the undercover policeman is so touched by the righteousness and responsibility this hitman demonstrates that he intends to sacrifice himself to save Mr. White from dying for him. No one expects the experienced killer to care about another man based on the gang stereotype, but Tarantino shows the audience that gangsters share the same emotions as us. The violent culture makes the gangsters seem like cold-blooded monsters, but the warmth of their humane side becomes more valuable and powerful. This tear jerking scene in *Reservoir Dogs* makes the audience ask themselves if they would sacrifice their own lives for a stranger who they believe to be innocent. Although Mr. White works as a hitman in a mafia, his morality tells him that killing an innocent person is

²⁴ *Reservoir Dogs*. See Appendix D.

²⁵ Groth, Gary. "A Dream of Perfect Reception: The Movies of Quentin Tarantino". *The Baffler* 8 (1996): 33–40. Web. 4 Feb. 2016.

wrong, and he feels responsible to stop the tyranny of evil men. In our world, he might go to court to resolve such problem; however, in a violent universe as his, he shepherds the weak and innocent by putting himself in front of them and pointing his gun at the world. The “Realer than Real” universe tests and amplifies humanity of a violent but regular man.

The practice of using violence, an unjustified action in most cultures, as a tool of justice ironically gratifies the audience. Bound by law, many real life conflicts are resolved in a civil manner; however, Tarantino shows us a more simple but cathartic solution. Dangerous as it may sound, the ‘eye for an eye’ method offers more satisfaction when the law fails to do justice. In the end of *Inglourious Basterds*, though Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) burns down the cinema and unexpectedly ends the war, the villain of the movie, the Jew Hunter Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz), not only escapes from the fire, but becomes a war hero by turning to the American side when he sees the fate of Hitler.²⁶ Lieutenant Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) could not scalp him like other Nazis he has encountered since he is given the order to transport Landa to America. As the audience sighs and groans because the deceitful Jew Hunter does not get the punishment he deserves, Aldo Raine performs their version of justice on Landa. The sharp and shiny steel edge engraves a Swastika on Landa’s forehead as the duplicitous Nazi screams bloody murder. After the simple surgery, Aldo Raine and his partner looks down at the notorious Jew Hunter’s permanent badge of shame on the most noticeable location. Blood drips down from of the tip of that sixteen-inch-long Smith & Wesson bowie knife in Aldo Raine’s hand, which draws attention to his classic cynical *inglorious-basterds* face. The camera that angles up from Hans Landa’s point of view gives the Jewish American Lieutenant power and opportunity to take control. One may argue the prisoner of war would eventually go to military court, but in terms of “the power

²⁶ *Inglorious Basterds*. See Appendix E.

of cinema, its ability to lure us into moral quicksand or hold us in suspense,²⁷ as film critic Ben Walter describes it, Tarantino succeeds by giving what the audience really wants. The cathartic satisfaction when Aldo carves his final masterpiece on the Nazi's forehead²⁸ is so rewarding that Tarantino allows the movie to end with a climax; the violence finally does the justice in a world where nothing can assuage the pain of the Jews.

Similarly, the power of revenge acts as a healing power for the violent history that could not be resolved otherwise. The weak stand up to the strong who once dehumanized them and sold them as properties. In *Django Unchained*, Tarantino takes what journalist Sean Czarnecki from Michigan Daily calls “a topic that would normally silences debate”²⁹ and “treats a national wound with pop aesthetics.”³⁰ The glorious revenge of Django (Jamie Foxx) not only reminds Americans of the history of slavery, but also offers an opportunity to recover from it. In the scene where Django whips one of the Brittle Brothers (Cooper Huckabee) in his bright cobalt blue suit, he has flashbacks about his beloved wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington), being whipped by the Brittle Brothers.³¹ The whip freeze-frames in the air, but is ready to fall on the despicable Roger Brittle. Django's facial expression showcases all the anger and loath he has for the man who had tortured his wife and separated them. The bright cobalt blue suit proudly announces his freedom and sanity in front of those who dehumanized him. The juxtaposition of positive and negative violence makes this scene more dramatic and satisfying; Professor Oliver C. Speck of film study describes that the audience “quietly fist pump” after seeing a master

²⁷ Walters, Ben. “Debating inglorious Basterds”. *Film Quarterly* 63.2 (2009): 19–22. Web. 4 Feb. 2016.

²⁸ *Inglorious Basterds*.

²⁹ Czarnecki, Sean. “What I Learned from Quentin Tarantino.” *Michigan Daily* 1 Apr. 2013: n.pag. *Michigan Daily*. Web. 2 Feb. 2016

³⁰ Carpio, Glenda R.

³¹ *Django Unchained*. See Appendix F.

beaten by his slave with his own whip for the first time in cinema history³². Django is not only the freed slave, but also the husband of Broomhilda and assistance of Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz); justified by the bounty and love for his wife, he now has the power of punishing the wrong doing of the dominant class. The notion of correcting the evil and shepherding the weak makes it cathartically rewarding to watch Django paying back the torture Broomhilda has suffered. What has been done to the slaves could not be undone nor forgotten; as a film maker, Tarantino does his best in recreating a historical stage, in which he lets the fantasy of a romantic hero rising to power and slaying the unrighteous come true. Some may argue that it denies and disrespects the slaves' suffering, but Django's successful revenge illuminates the awakening of humanity among the suppressed people. Journalist and educator Jelani Cobb writes about his experience sitting in a theater with a multiracial audience cheering for Django every time he kills a person who stands in the way of his freedom; he recalls, "[i]n my sixteen years of teaching African-American history, one sadly common theme has been the number of black students who shy away from courses dealing with slavery out of shame that slaves never fought back."³³ Django teaches those young students that they should not feel ashamed of what their ancestors had to suffer because there were some of them who bravely fought back for the freedom of the beloved ones and their future descents.

The cinematic difference in positive and negative violence emphasizes the moral essence behind these aggressive actions. The accumulation of painful torture is always paid back by the cathartic revenge that makes the audience smile and cheer by the end of the movie. Tarantino

³² Speck, Oliver C. *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: The Continuation of Metacinema*. Bloomsbury, 2014. 227-242. Print.

³³ Cobb, Jelani. "Tarantino Unchained." *New Yorker* 2 Jan. 2013: n. pag. *The New Yorker*. Web. 2 Feb. 2016.

tells stories through violence for its extremity and abnormality which contrasts what we experience in our daily life. However, like the naming of his “Realer than Real” movie world suggests, the fictional society converges with ours, for the residents that make up that parallel universe are no less human. They bleed when they get shot, scream when it hurts, protect their friends when others point guns at them, and fall in love when it happens. Through them, we see ourselves. The element of violence enhances the similarity and connection between us and the parallel universe by extinguishing the fantasy from reality. The surreal conflict created by the dramatic setting leaves the audience with moral dilemmas that they do not expect to solve.

Meanwhile, the gun shots, samurai sword fights, scalping, and burning scenes that make the audience cringe are too Tarantino to overlook. Should we feel morally criticized for taking pleasure in the violent content in Tarantino films? When we see the yellow and rouge opening credit in Friz Quadrata font, not only do we expect ultraviolence, but also a well-told story that would take us to a fantasy world. Tarantino uses the “color” violence that both deliver content and initiate discussions in his controversial films. Although some people still find Tarantino movies too violent for their taste, there is no doubt that his unique style brought new blood to the American movie industry. We can find the influence of iconic genres in Tarantino films, such as spaghetti western, crime, Hong Kong kung fu, and even Japanese manga; in the meantime, his eight major movies have started a new genre of aestheticized ultraviolence. As a movie lover, Tarantino only writes and directs films that he would like to watch in order to fulfill his childhood dream, and he has been having fun with it. Rather than himself a certain genre and type of story, Tarantino lets the artistic and even poetic beauty of cinema take the audience on an adventure with him. Violence just so happens to be one of the devices that the director finds effective and interesting to communicate and amplify his idea on cinema and humanity. Without

the moral dilemma the films present, Tarantino movies would not have sustained their popularities for over two decades in a caprice consumer-based industry; however, if the violence is taken away from those movies, they might not have been so popular in the first place.

Depending on one's idea of fun, Tarantino movies could be either entertaining or unbearable, but the director and screenwriter only writes stories that interest him. Disliking the violence in his films does not place someone on a higher moral level; similarly, enjoying a Tarantino movie doesn't mean someone is sadistic. Like a juicy but bloody-as-hell Big Kahuna burger,³⁴ only some people would enjoy it; however, it certainly is a tasty burger for those who don't mind some blood. Whether you like it or not, it is a Tarantino movie.

³⁴ Pulp Fiction.

Appendix A: The Ear Torture Scene³⁵

³⁵ *Reservoir Dogs*.

Appendix B: Wilhelm's Death³⁶

³⁶ *Inglourious Basterds*.

Appendix C: Mandingo Fight³⁷

³⁷ *Django Unchained*.

Appendix D: Mr. White Protecting Mr. Orange³⁸

³⁸ *Reservoir Dogs*.

Appendix E: Aldo Raine's Masterpiece³⁹

³⁹ *Inglourious Basterds*.

Appendix F: Django Whipping the Brittle Brothers⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Django Unchained*.

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