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Hon 202: The Art of War

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Respect For the Slaughtered and the Butcher: Degenerate Artistic License in Laurent Binet's *HHhH*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds*.

As well noted in the early chapters of Laurent Binet's *HHhH*, accurately portraying real characters in historical retellings can be difficult, if not impossible. The end result of such meddling usually bears a different character with overexaggerated traits and well-defined motive to fit the story. This establishes the basis on which the comparison of *Maus*, by Art Spiegelmann, and *Inglorious Basterds*, by Quentin Tarantino can be formed.

The first comparison comes from both works and their effort to completely abandon realism for the sake of storytelling, neither piece of commentary sacrifices message for accurate characters. Tarantino's work is pure fiction, full of created characters and fictional events. And while Spiegelman is working from his father's stories, he still must fill in the more intricate details to serve the story. In fact, Spiegelman undertakes a similar strategy to Binet as he narrates his journey to collect information and write the graphic novel, in the graphic novel.

Tropes for certain races based on their perceived attributes are on full display in both media. In the first scene of *Inglorious Basterds*, when interrogating Perrier LaPadite (Dennis M  nochet) on the whereabouts of the Dreyfuses, a Jewish family that had not been accounted for, SS Officer and monikered "Jew Hunter" Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz) describes his personal philosophy, "Now if one were to determine what attribute the German people share with a beast, it would be the cunning and the predatory instinct of a hawk. But if one were to

determine what attributes the Jews share with a beast, it would be that of the rat” (Tarantino).

Landa shows admiration for the ability and will of the rat to survive and even goes out of his way to ask for a glass of milk, adding further depth to his predator of rodent persona. Similarly, Spiegelman decides to draw Jewish people as mice in his retelling of his father’s story of surviving the holocaust. The Germans are depicted as cats, with big teeth and the propensity for random acts of violence.

Similarly, in *Inglorious Basterds* every German soldier is also a Nazi, irredeemable martyrs for their own horrible nation, not seen as people but vermin for Lieutenant Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) and his men to hunt down and scalp, leading to a satisfying catharsis for the team of mostly Jewish soldiers (Tarantino). The Polish are pictured as pigs, with some being prisoners in the camps and others being concentration brutal camp guards (Spiegelman 12). Sergeant Hugo Stiglitz (Til Schweiger) appears to be the only exception the Basterds have found to this rule. Stiglitz is a former German soldier responsible for the murder of 13 Gestapo Officers (Tarantino). He recruited for his Nazi killing prowess and immediately accepted onto the team, but every other soldier the Basterds come across is either killed or scarred with a swastika so that they will never be able to hide from what they were a part of (Tarantino). Though British Lieutenant Archie Hicox, seems uncomfortable with the massive Bavarian figure of Stiglitz being a part of the mission (Tarantino). In the scene that follows they are playing a name game in a bar where the objective is to say the name of the character on their head while everyone else gives them clues, an interesting predicament for a Nazi to not know their identity and they are well traveled in their answers, with characters ranging from Indian movies to American Literature, perhaps a sign that they were not of the same cloth as the more extreme German high command that would have been outraged that German art didn’t come first (Tarantino). They are then

found out by an astute Nazi officer after a few slip ups from the British officer and almost the entire bar dies in the ensuing gunfight (Tarantino). The only survivors are the informant, Bridget Von Hammersmark (Diane Kruger) and a final German soldier who was celebrating the birth of his child in Munich (Tarantino). He is not fighting for Nazism but instead for his country and child and he is killed anyway, it is nowhere near as satisfying as the other Nazi deaths, but it must be done because the Basterds are unflinching in their resolution that all Germans are Nazis (Tarantino).

Something that cannot be overlooked in an analysis of these two bodies of work is the role of the American soldier. In *Maus*, the American soldiers are dogs, fittingly showing up to chase the feline oppressors away. Mutts even, to show the diversity and mixing of nationalities, although limited, among the U.S. troops, contrasting that with the similarity among the feline ranks of the Germans (Loman 15). Aldo Raine is also known as “Aldo the Apache”, because of his Native American heritage and the tradition of scalping that he inspired among his special operations unit (Tarantino). In both works the American is seen as the anti-German in his racial makeup and disfavor for the high-class swagger that the German officers would exude. A rough and tumble animal, that’s often unclean against a nimble, self-cleansing, litterbox using animal. This dichotomy does also bring Spiegelmann’s understanding of the politics of America at that time under question, as America was still in the swing of segregation (Loman 18). And the use of Zyklon B at the U.S.- Mexico border that was picked up by the Germans for their gas chambers, but nonetheless Spiegelman needed his good guys to be a complete change from the trauma inflicted by the Nazis (Loman 4). Although they do still make racial remarks toward Vladek, a point is made that they won’t kill him just for being Jewish unlike the German or the Polish, as

few of the holocaust survivors are lynched when they try to return to their homes and businesses after the camps have been closed (Spiegelmann 193).

The next comparison is both works as degenerate Jewish art and their contemplation of degenerate Jewish art. *Inglorious Bastards* leans into the battle between Jewish and German art especially. In Hitler's introduction, he is mid rant about the "Jew Swine" and "The Bear Jew", one of Lieutenant Aldo Raine's men, that bashes in the heads of German soldiers with a baseball bat, while juxtaposed with the ordered uniforms and romantic portraits that would have been considered acceptable romantic art (Tarantino). At Joseph Goebbels (Sylvester Groth) introduction there is a quick cut to him engaging in an affair with Francesca Mondino (Julie Dreyfus), his French translator (Tarantino). This is easily comparable to an analysis Binet does of Fritz Lang and Bertholdt Brecht's depiction of Nazi Reinhardt Heydrich in *Hangmen also Die!*, as a quivering pervert, in direct opposition of the buttoned up, uncorrupted Nazi ideal (Binet 11). Lieutenant Archie Hicox (Michael Fassbender) states that, "Goebbels considers the films he's making to be the beginning of a new era in German cinema, an alternative to what he considers the Jewish-German intellectual cinema of the '20s and the Jewish controlled dogma of Hollywood" (Tarantino). This plot is brought to a close in the climax of the film when Shoshanna Dreyfus (Mélanie Laurent) interrupts Goebbels film on the heroism of German sniper Fredrick Zoller (Daniel Brühl), with a clip of her promising Jewish vengeance on all attendees. Shoshanna's cut is shot up close in harsh lighting, creating a ghastly face similar to that of the gaunt emerald head of the Wizard of Oz in *The Wizard of Oz*. This is in complete defiance of the realistic, almost documentary style of the Nazi's propaganda film. Marcel (Jacky Ido) then lights a pile of film on fire, in a gesture similar to a nazi book burning, the destruction of media instead serves a purpose other than restriction and repression.

Maus does not obtain such levels of media critique against the Nazis, the characters are far too concerned with their survival to care about the art. With that being said it does have a few meta-references to previous work of Spiegelmann, which showcases a deep vulnerability and unpacking of mental illness stemming from the trauma his mother and father faced during the Holocaust, all of which go against the clean and digestible content of the conservative Third Reich. The embedded work, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History* is an incredibly Avant Garde story of his mother's suicide and the stress his family was under after surviving the Holocaust and the posttraumatic stress disorder within both of his parents, as well as his strained relationship with them because of this and the guilt he felt for his mother's death (Spiegelmann 100).

HHhH however, with its post-modern approach to writing and convoluted narrative timeline, would undoubtedly be seen as a form of degenerate art, subverting the cultural norms and attempting to challenge the reader. Binet references Lang and Brecht's work to undermine the authority of Heydrich, as previously mentioned. Lang and Brecht with works *Metropolis* and *Galileo* respectively were relics of the expressionism of pre-Nazi Germany, and as such were despised by the Third Reich, for being a threat to traditional values (Goggin 6). This form of art was actually thought to be a symptom of inferior races and their ploys to trick the general public into siding with them against more conservative values and identities (Goggin 6). Goebbels and Hitler even disapproved and barred Nazi party members from producing expressionist work (Goggin 5).

These works together form a spectrum of attitudes in covering traumatic material, each artist deciding on what level of historical accuracy and reverence to the victims as well as to the character of the oppressive force. *Maus* takes a more solemn approach focusing on the victims of

the holocaust, while the anthropomorphism provides a simple way to keep track of what race a person is as well as reiterate how helpless the situation was. *Inglorious Basterds* focuses on revenge for the victims of the holocaust, not looking at the horrors and trauma of that time, but instead delighting in the brutal deaths of those who caused the suffering.

A scholar's approach to history, as pondered in *HHhH*, would be to represent everything accurately or to not include it at all, but this does not consider the great amount of emotional catharsis and empathetic connection gained from artistic portrayal. Simply put, these stories bring more value to the collective consciousness as inauthentic telling's of history than a textbook ever could. They are powerful in their defiance, to not be like any other war media the audience has consumed before, striving to invite the public into uncomfortable and cathartic worlds and experience the emotions of someone else for a change. And unlike *Anthropoid* (2016), with its more run-of-the-mill Christian symbolism, *Maus*, *Inglorious Basterds* and *HHhH*, all use art styles that are subversive to the traditional styles of their media.

By analyzing how each work represents the oppressive and oppressed population of 1940's Germany as well as how they communicate with their audience, it can be observed that art is a protest, a tool of therapy and a voice for oppressed populations during or after their struggle. Wars are a product of humanity and cannot be fully understood until seen through the lens of the oppressed populations art. Conflict is full of personality, which is removed when viewed from a reverent, memorial point. Obfuscation of emotions and a favor for more generalized impressionism art are a tactic of controlling the public. These works celebrate standing against fascist imperialism and impressionism all in one great effort.

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