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History as Blockbuster

(The Influence of Art and Media Discourse on the Formation of Cultural Memory)

Abstract: The decision of director Quentin Tarantino to kill Adolf Hitler in his film *Inglorious Basterds* has sparked criticism for alleged forgery of history. However, when studying the archives of the Jewish ghetto in Poland, Swedish writer Steve Sem- Sendberg noted that fiction has started with the preservation of the first document. Had the Boston bomber not appeared on the cover of the Rolling Stone magazine, we could, in fact, ask the question formulated by Jean Baudrillard: Did it even happen?

Keywords: Terrorism, fictionalization of history, falsification of history, iconicity, the Other

Introduction: Tarantino's sin

When the director Quentin Tarantino was making a film about a fictional alternate history episode from World War II, *Inglourious Basterds*, he included the scenes in which American soldiers kill Adolf Hitler. This "intervention" made on historical reality and excessive author's liberties have sparked a rather violent reaction, even judgement in one portion of the audience. If we were to summarize Tarantino's response to the criticism directed at him, then that response would simply be: "Why not?" As he further explained in his media statements, he simply liked the idea, often pointing out that it would just be "great" if Hitler really had been killed. No matter how much the audiences' provocation by Tarantino's radical alteration of historical truth seemed reasonable and justified, especially in the context of the increasing objections to the overwhelming Hollywood industry for its continuous adaptations of stories with a World War II theme and often less than subtle exaggeration of the United States' role, the complaints aimed at the director who was said to have rudely and harshly disregarded the historical facts, viewed from a certain perspective seem surprising, even more so considering the fact that we are talking about an artist such as Tarantino.

For the sole purpose of comparison, let us be reminded that the more critical part of the audience did not seem to mind the fact that in *Pulp Fiction* the already "deceased" characters still appear in a continuing scene of the plot, and remain functioning as if nothing had happened.

Here we are not talking about the narrative manipulation created by using analepsis and prolepsis, here we are simply talking about ignoring the logic of fictional creation and a rough violation of the fictional illusion. However, in the case of *Pulp Fiction*, such an "outburst" was considered to be cool.

So, why is it cool to kill and then revive Vincent Vega, and playing with historical facts about Hitler's suicide is a taboo?

Hollow history

Someone might have at this point concluded the discussion by pointing to the fact that we are talking about two incomparable levels of author's ludism: in *Pulp Fiction* everything is possible because the film's world is entirely fictitious. Therefore, all possible inconsistencies and absurdities are either consequences of the author's lack of talent, or they are legitimate due to being author's decisions made according to the established principles of genre conventions in a particular work of art. Whatever they are, they are entirely permissible because of the autonomy of characters in the fictional world. The film *Inglorious Basterds*, however, since the theme refers to the verifiable facts of reality, has a responsibility towards the historical truth and should therefore not treat it arbitrarily, even ignorantly, even more so considering the fact that it is such a traumatic part of world history and collective memory, the part that, in its character and according to the civilization standards and humanitarian consensus, calls for respect and dignity.

Nonetheless, even when it comes to such a "sacred theme" as the anti-fascist struggle is, even when it comes to Tarantino's questionable treatment of such a satanic character as Hitler, adverse reactions are still somewhat unfounded, partially even fervent.

Similarly, Tarantino's provocative gesture is more of a welcome illuminating signal of the climate of our times than it is a damage apparently done to the historical truth, yet it contributes to the cultural memory in a seemingly negative manner, in the form of increasing the alleged confusion.

Author's Legitimacy and Credibility

"Tarantino is not interested in actual events. (...) He creates his own world that is often based on the films he enjoyed..." writes the Croatian film critic Nenad Polimac[1] and this quote shows just one more author who repeats what is self- evident: Tarantino's movies are an orchestrated accumulation of quotes, paraphrases and recycled fragments of hundreds of previously made films. Tarantino is a typical child of postmodern art, only for him the universe is not the Alexandrian Library in the Borgesian sense, but a video library. Tarantino's work does not refer to non- fiction: all of his films are based solely on layers of prototext in the world film heritage. Finally, even *Inglorious Basterds* does not refer to the historical World War II, but to the film version of the event (The film *Inglorious Basterds* is directly inspired by the Italian film *Quel maledetto treno blindato* from 1978). The postmodern antiquarian relationship to the past, the destruction of the hierarchy of values and categories, levelling and the postmodern slogan *anything goes*, even if they were sophisticated in the postmodern literature, in Tarantino's opus they have reached their radical obviousness (some would even say: banality).

It can be worrying when such postmodern playfulness touches serious and complex issues such as Fascism, but we are the ones who raised the child in Tarantino. The possibility of Tarantino being the first among many others in the future generations, who will have a completely distorted perception of historical reality, mediated and falsified, can appear alarming. Yet, Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* are too transparent of an example, and the real deleterious effects operate largely "under the radar".

Poetic Strongholds

Therefore, if the thesis of postmodern art is that it fell into exhaustion because of which innovation is no longer possible and the attempts to achieve it are futile, moreover, if, in a certain historical perspective, it turns out that every innovation is just a paraphrase and a rewriting of earlier works of art, then it is not surprising that Tarantino only "overwrites" and compiles. "In the cultural sense, and especially in the artistic terms, a substantial portion of the modern world is increasingly turning into a vast museum, into a storage of symbolic creation that not only allows, but even imposes universal communication and establishes correlations between all available objects",[2] summarizes the literary scholar Viktor Žmegač, comparing the post-modern creativity with the "activity in the infinite imaginary museum".[3]

If we were to simplify the notion, it could be said that the postmodern art is just a melancholic or a ludic game with ready-made cultural artefacts and a completed history. Before the Internet utopia of postmodern worldview became possible thanks to the digitalization and the ability to reduce everything to the binary information, there was an epochal exit out of the matrix with a realization that everything was a sign. We are moving exclusively in the Barthesian realm of signs, the products of our signifying practices are performed by using discursive tools, while in reality, Derrida's unattainable primacy is lost forever and now present only in traces of difference. There is always a sign instead.

That which we conventionally consider to be real, empirical and genuine is actually also a discursive construct. In mastering the so- called reality, the empiricism, a human being cannot avoid using signs any more than it can jump over its own shadow.

"In general, literature conveys the world of ideas (constative function), at the same time creating worlds and ideas, creating its own

reference",[4] that is "a referent (is) a part of the cultural discourse in advance, a weak link between the text and the world whose stability relies on shaky fictional constructs".[5]

Tarantino does not strive to convey a provocative message that Hitler, Fascism and World War II are merely a questionable story, but he lives and works in a world that the postmodernism interpreted in a previously described and quoted way. He leaves the "reality" of the themes to other genres, and to him, the imagined space of the film industry and the attraction potential of the World War II story is sufficient. However, do the historians not speak of other materials as well?

When the critics accuse Tarantino of being unfaithful to the historical truth, they do not accuse him of actually having failed the historical truth, but of having failed the dominant and official historical discourse, the disciplinary discourse, the discourse immune to a variety of bizarre and exotic theories of alternative history, of how Hitler actually ended up. It appears that the problem lies in the fact that Tarantino has demonstrated the extent to which we can be nonchalant towards the authority of historiography and create our own version of history. With the logistics of the media and the cultural industry there are no obstacles for *Inglorious Basterds* to be promoted into the official interpretation of history. After all, the already shaken Church got scared of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* most likely for the same reasons. The institutions are not as good at propagating ideology and myths in such an effective and influential way as the popular culture is. Obviously.

To illustrate, Krešimir Purgar in his work *Surviving an Image* writes: "The iconographic figure of the crucified Christ is only the most spectacular picture- sign of the Christian strategy of physical and spiritual exchange and due to its almost pictogram character it is empty of all actual content of physical pain… (…) The return to the realism of physical pain in Gibson's film was to restore the faith…".[6]

The Legacy of Deconstruction

A Swedish writer Steve Sem-Sandberg wrote a monumental work of fiction titled *The Poor People of Łódź*, which was based on the so-called ghetto chronicle and the ghetto encyclopaedia on 3000 pages. The ghettoized Jews in the Polish Łódź archived every document, but also, every other type of written and photographic records of their everyday lives during that period, including meticulous statistics, diaries, commentaries, letters… Based on this material, Sem- Sandberg has not only attempted to reconstruct the daily life in the ghetto and the phenomenon of day- to- day survival in such grave conditions, but he also focused on an enigmatic portrait of the ghetto leader, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski.

The official history remembers him as a controversial figure, for whom it is not clear whether he collaborated with the Nazis, or was ready for any compromise that would lead to the prolonging of his compatriots' lives; whether he was an opportunist who gained profit by being a ghetto leader, or a resourceful and a practical politician who achieved the most he could in such circumstances, often even seemingly impossible for his compatriots in the heart of Nazism.

Given the complexity of Sem- Sandberg's reconstruction, I was rather surprised by a comment of a literary critic on TV, who noted that the novel *The Poor People of Łódź* is a "dangerous fictionalization of history".

It is surprising, not only because Sem- Sandberg himself wrote that the surviving materials show that "the fiction, or rather, editing of the ghetto fiction, started during the German occupation",[7] even though the entire project has started with the instruction that read, quotes Sem- Sandberg: "that in complete silence (…) they gather materials for the future image (= history) of the ghettos, and record the data that could be used for that purpose themselves".[8]

It is surprising also because, with his allegations, Sem- Sandberg only confirms the notorious idea about the production of the historiography discourse.

By deconstructing the mechanisms of textual and discourse formations, postmodernism did not only illuminate the hidden places of the rhetorical manipulation of text and speech with the purpose of creating the impression of truth, authenticity and a truthful transcription of reality, but also, along the trail of those discoveries, it detected a regularly present ideological background for such practices.

"It turns out that history is a collection of signifiers, and not- just like its literary counterpart- only a particular combination and organization of meanings, designed to achieve "the effect of reality". This effect is achieved through ideological operation …",[9] says literary theoretician Vladimir Biti, concluding: "The concept of historiography as a strict, objective science is seriously shaken, and its figurative, fictional side appeared in the foreground".[10]

Linda Hutcheon will point out that in the matter of the alleged display of reality, the postmodernist theory and the postmodern literary product point to the fact that every representation that is mediated- or- to better phrase it- delayed by some mediation. Derrida is even more resolute in his claim that nobody can refer to reality, except in terms of interpretation. Tvrtko Vuković further clarifies it: "… the historical 'truth' is being shown and denied at the same time. Its 'authenticity' is being shown as a belated/ delayed story…".[11]

Recognizing this fact enables us to read the same historical material under the scrutiny of entirely different paradigms (colonialist, imperialist, feminist, new historicist …), and now more than ever, we should have a high level of consciousness that a particular historical material

is not, and cannot- be objective, but is always written with a certain interest- even if that interest is objectivity and the truth. A new reading of historiography no longer takes into account only what is written, but captures- as they say- a bigger picture: who wrote it, how and why.

However, if the historiography traces of the occurrences are no longer to be trusted, is the soothing belief that Hitler killed himself, moreover, that he was one of the worst criminals against humanity in the entire history, taken away from us?

Even if Tarantino is not correct in his assertion considering Hitler's end, he is correct in his right to oppose a dominant discursive consensus and to attempt such "loutish" undermining of the official truth. Are we, however, allowed to play with such controversies when it comes to Hitler, Nazism, the Holocaust...? And why do we, on one hand, "expose" the production of history, illusionist tricks of historiography and its pseudo- credibility, and on the other hand we "lower the ramp" and become the authoritarian traditionalists when questions of World War II are raised, fearing the relativisation of anarchy, and putting all of the theoretical luggage of deconstruction aside?

Burn after Reading?

The deconstruction reading of historiography for this type of literature is not trying to suggest that in this type of reading the instruction "burn after reading" is valid, nor that the historiography materials should be a priori rejected as now completely compromised. Yet the deconstructive optics used when getting in contact with the historiography discourse makes us more sensitive, more susceptible to seemingly benign terms and formulations which are actually inadvertently expressed by "the unmentioned things" and "the unmentioned ones": the Others, the disenfranchised, the excluded, the defeated...

The legacy of deconstruction was not given to us with the purpose of further manipulation and irresponsible playing with causal relationships in history, but in order for us to be able to detect manipulation.

Cultural memory practices

Those who- to put it so- continue the anti-fascist struggle by promptly responding to sabotage coming from various discursive fronts in the postmodern multiplicity of perspectives, latent relativising, and rough falsification of historical facts, should technically not feel threatened by Tarantino's seemingly scandalous escapades, because his radical action builds its effect precisely on the presupposition of the general knowledge of Hitler's death. Tarantino is not to be trusted, Tarantino is to amuse us. We react to the scene precisely because we know how different from the truth it is.

It should be noted that Tarantino owes his planetary fame to the wide receptivity of his works, which he owes to the fact that some aspects of his work perfectly reflect the spirit of the times and affect the feelings. What kind of (unintended) mirroring and intuitive artistic recognizing of images reflecting the contemporary world it is, perhaps best says a bizarre example of a newspaper article, published a couple of years ago in the Croatian daily paper "Jutarnji List": a group of British and German veterans from World War II traditionally gathers every year in order to celebrate the memory of a naval battle between them. The historical and ideological antagonism has been overcome, and once ordinary people brought to opposite sides with mutual deadly intentions are now celebrating their rescued heads by sharing one of the most intense experiences in their biographies. However, this time, the British wanted to be cordial hosts so they welcomed the German delegation in Nazi uniforms.

According to the text, the Germans have immediately left the scene of the event.

The British have become, it seems, a bit imprudent (even their prince is, if the tabloids are to be trusted, prone to orgy in a Nazi uniform), so they have neglected the fraught and infamous historical context of the uniforms they got into. Once probably their least favourite fabric, the Nazi uniform has suddenly, in their microcontext, become a nice idea to raise the atmosphere at the outset of the anniversary meeting.

In a way, this event should not be surprising in any way, except for the fact that its anecdotal character was derived from our knowledge of the historical background and such a gesture seemed- to put it mildly- usurping, twisted.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed the Nazi ideology producing- as Justin J. Lorentzen calls it- "the bad aesthetics", [12] which fluctuates between the subcultures and the popular culture.

In one part, we are talking about a conscious reaching for this iconographic repertoire in order to be able to explicitly express the identifiable followers of the fascist ideas who are fully aware of what the ideology propagated (and precisely because of that, they have chosen it as a target point of view, no matter how anachronistic or condemned, because the supporters become fascinated with pseudo- values of Fascism as a renewable historical response to the present day problems). In another part, it is a tool of subvert to official socio- cultural order and consensus of (the odious) community. Knowing what kind of proscribed relationship with artefacts and ideas of Fascism they have, and how their appearance alarms the public, this kind of a "neo- Nazis" is just reaching for the most effective means of provocation, they are parasites relying on the fact that it is a taboo, be it an event or a relic of the fascist past. And finally, the third group favours the iconic symbols of the Nazi imagery for purely decorative- aesthetic reasons, without any ideological commitment in the background of their choices, without any intention of non- conformist opposing the community using such alarming destabilization of the general attitude about proper behaviour and acceptable forms of

integration into the society.

Again, we are moving in the world of signs.

According to the poststructuralist theories, a sign can be given a new meaning, and its meaning is fluid, that is, its signifier is floating. The illusion is to fix and forever to cement the connection between the signified and the signifier. Let us just look at the path that the portrait of Anonymous has crossed: from the rather trivial and ordinary hero of Alan Moore's comic book to an icon of the anti- global movement.

Perhaps the most recent and the most controversial example of such processes is the portrait of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the Boston bomber, on the cover of the glamorous Rolling Stone magazine right after he had performed an act of terrorism. Such decision of the Rolling Stone's editorial board has enraged the public to the extent that in some stores, the contentions issue of the magazine was withdrawn from sale.

In some ways, the editorial board's decision to put Dzhokhar Tsarnaev on the cover was more of a terrorist act than what Tsarnaev had done. Even though the consequences of Tsarnaev's terrorism have been physical and tangible, the editorial board's act was far more effective on a symbolic level: not only did it prolong Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's presence in the media and deepen the debate about his act, but it also incorporated him in the value system by a manoeuvre confusing to the revolted public. If Tsarnaev is the Other, the one attacking the American way of life, how did he posthumously manage to fulfil the American dream and appear as a star on a prestigious cover? Maybe it is even more acceptable what Bin Laden was- with an emphasis on "was"- the foreign policy U. S. confidant who apostatized, but Tsarnaev, the boy with an anonymous past, became- with an emphasis on "becoming"- an integrated part of the American culture and the spectacle of the society's everyday life. Unlike Bin Laden, whom the system has rejected, Tsarnaev was posthumously accepted by the system.

What is it actually about?

Excluding of the Other and the traumatic

A scene from the Spiderman trailer in which he spreads a net between the towers of WTC was omitted due to the memories of 9/11 being too fresh, which was a sneak peek into a symbolic order of things (which is, in the American culture, excessively embellished). Judging by recent examples, one could say that America is also prone to physical liquidation of everything that awakens its traumatic core. Therefore, not only does it throw out the shots of towers in a rather Orwellian manner, but by lobbying for different countries around the world to deny refuge to Julian Assange because of the Wikileaks affair and the same to Edward Snowden for claiming that the Internet is under supervision, they are trying to annihilate this "satanic" pair. Where they will be wiped out, in which cell under the US domain they will be, is irrelevant- as long as the two of them are not able to destabilize the system and undermine the official discourse anymore.

What is sought to be achieved with Assange and Snowden was not achieved in the case of the unfortunate Dzokhar. Instead of being deleted, annihilated, he jumped out of the cover, and through debate, he continues his (terrorist) influence.

"The truly unbearable fact is (...) the Other who truly becomes like us",[13] states the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, which is something very significant in this region and in the everyday public discourse: by wanting to distance oneself from the Balkans, the Croatian public finds itself scared of everything akin to the Balkans.

In this sense, the Rolling Stone sends a message that Dzokhar Tsarnaev is "one of us" or "just like us", while on the other hand, the entire public wants to throw out, discard, remove and erase Dzokhar as an alien body, as an absolute Other, to eradicate him from the discourse, exclude him and condemn him to oblivion.

It would be interesting to see, in some alternative timeline, what the extent of public reaction to the Rolling Stone's report on the human side of Dzokhar Tsarnaev would be, had there not been a visual support in the form of a cover (in David Fincher's film *Zodiac* there is a great deal of wondering about the implicit messages and the severity of the question whether the letters of the eponymous killer should be published on the front page or on the inside pages!), but there is no doubt that there would be a reaction. Given the attempt of a plastic portrayal of Dzokhar Tsarnaev in the said text, it would have been in complete opposition to the tendency of the American public discourse in presentation of the Other, who is recently most often a terrorist character. In his book, *The Discourse of Terrorism*, Srećko Horvat notes that it is necessary to have, all in all, one- dimensional representations of people that fit "our", "Western standards".[14] He shows it by analysing how the terrorist character is presented in pop culture products such as *Die Hard*, Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*, and even, regarding propaganda, the seemingly more sophisticated *United 93*.

Why one- dimensional?

If it is not possible to completely eradicate, to delete the presence of a villain and a usurper of order from our discourse, then he should at least be made one- dimensional, uncomplicated, even to the point where we could no longer identify with such a character, make a closer connection with it. However, it would be ideal if the bad guy (who is the Real in our symbolic order according to the Lacan structure) would not even be one- dimensional (yet, at least as a sign, it needs to be added to the order) because- says Terry Eagleton- "the less sense it makes, the more evil it is".[15]

Conclusion: History as a blockbuster

"The images are always only what we do with them or what we see in them",[16] writes Hans Belting, but Tsarnaev was published on the cover of Rolling Stone for at least two or three reasons: the iconic is an "encrypted modification of something that was primarily said",[17] and "images are read as substitutes, which means they are read as testimonies of some sense that is reflected in them".[18] In complete opposition to Eagleton's thesis that the evil is greater the less it is explained, an antagonistic motivation to penetrate the meaning of this useless act led to the report on Tsarnaev and him being placed on the cover because:

causal lack of transparency and inscrutability are what leads to the search of meaning. When faced with a threat of disaster that will destabilize the framework of our everyday existence, we have a spontaneous urge to seek hidden meanings: there must be some reason why this is happening. (…). Every meaning is better than no meaning: if there is a hidden meaning, then there is some kind of a dialogue with the universe.[19]

Specifically, Eagleton says, in a terrorist bombing attack or in a concentration camp, where the human bodies are faceless and a material of a far greater mass of opponents, "it does not grant you even the thin dignity of a suicide bomber decapitating you, because you are- you".[20]

Without realizing it, but having realized the deviant reception of our time, a policeman reacted to the glamorous cover of the Rolling Stone by releasing the photos of the humiliated and miserable Tsarnaev.

Quite legitimately, so we enter- according to Stuart Hall's interpretation- the battle over meaning in the culture that becomes a field of production and exchange. Who will win, the Rolling Stone or the police officer, is completely irrelevant in relation to the fact that they both entered the media, the cultural and discursive tangle that is only meant to cloud the original.

We come to the point that Jean Baudrillard forms in the question: "But, in fact, did it really exist?", as a result of a process that he defines as the "confusion regarding the identity of things caused by excessive questioning".[21]

Tarantino does not question, but criticizes an entire genre on satellite and cable television. By trying to compete with each other and in the desire to make a step forward in the circle of explaining Hitler's life, Nazism or the Holocaust, or simply because of their desire to achieve a higher level of appeal compared to what was already shown, a documentary cycle titled "The Second World War in Colour" happens. According to the author, the archive footages in black- and- white have been digitally processed, coloured, and the sounds of howling planes and crackling guns were added later to the silent footage to make the "anachronistic" shots more appealing to the 21st century viewer.

We are looking at World War II redesigned.

We are looking at history processed into a spectacle.

We are looking at the archive customized to fit the blockbuster standards.

Real, authentic origin is merely a spice of fictionalization.

They stopped where Tarantino was brave to continue: at killing Hitler.

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