Enrico Botta

The Truth in the Script and the Untruth in the Movie

Tarantino's Rewriting of American History

Abstract

*In his historical movies, Quentin Tarantino rereads and rewrites three critical moments of the American past. An interesting strategy he uses is that of introducing different imaginary artifacts into the narration: a film-within-the-film (*The Pride of a Nation*) in* Inglorious Basterds *(2009), KKK hoods in* Django Unchained *(2012), and the Viking crucifix in* The Hateful Eight *(2015). This article aims at investigating how such a transmedia adaptation of these fictitious elements, from the scripts into the movies, defines three ekphrastic sections that overturn the relationship between truth and falsehood. This process can be analyzed in light of Michele Cometa's theory about the connection between literature and visuality; in the critic's understanding, the ekphrasis of a real artifact represents a falsification of the work itself, due to the fact that during the adaptation it is in some way altered. Conversely, the ekphrasis of a fictional artifact can be interpreted as a validation of the given object because it is created during the transition process. From this perspective, the artifacts inserted by Tarantino in the mentioned screenplays can be considered 'true' since their mental images are brought to life thanks to verbal language. However, once they are inserted into the movies they become 'false' because the cinematographic language alters their 'written form,' depriving them of their claimed truthfulness. Thus, Tarantino deliberately intermingles facts and fiction to produce a national post-truth narration which is, in Lee McIntyre's words, "a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not" (2018, 13).*

Keywords: *screenplay studies, Quentin Tarantino, historical movies, post-truth*

> *I'd like to see more art put into screenwriting. One of the things about writing a novel is you can do it any way you want. It's your voice that's important and I see absolutely no reason why a screenplay can't be the same. Now it makes it a hell of a lot easier when you're the writer and the director.*
>
> (Quentin Tarantino, "Method Writing")

In his historical movies, Quentin Tarantino rereads and rewrites three critical moments of the American past. An interesting strategy he uses is that of introducing different imaginary artifacts into the narration: a film-within-the-film (*The Pride of a Nation*) in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), KKK hoods in *Django Unchained* (2012), and the Viking crucifix in *The Hateful Eight* (2015). This article aims to show how, through these three items, Tarantino plays not only with history but also with cinema's legitimacy to represent it: when the ekphrastic sections which describe the artifacts are translated from the pages of the script into the screen of the movie, they manipulate the relationship between truth and fiction, and turn it upside down.[1]

In the adaptation process, Tarantino's script hybridizes with audiovisual elements and performing forms, thus producing a multilayer work in which screenplay and movie interact to widen and deepen the original narrative structure (Rajewsky 2005, 51-53). Within such a regime of intermediality, Tarantino exploits the two-way interaction of adaptation and intermingles the "telling mode" and the "showing mode," in other words, the two modalities that, according to Linda Hutcheon, are at the basis of the process: through the former, he provides the reader with the words that first construct the diegesis; through the latter, he defines the pictorial and auditive elements of the diegesis itself (2006, 22-27).[2] However, the interchange is neither one-to-one nor consequential, as Tarantino handles it by adding or subtracting features in the screenplay compared to the movie or the other way around. In particular, adapting the ekphrastic sections of the texts into the films complicates the dynamics of the interplay between

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[1] If Tarantino's first irreverent relationship with the past dates back to *Pulp Fiction* (1994)—where Butch Coolidge's gold watch embeds his family's history with the American involvement in the two World Wars and the Vietnam War (Fusco 2015, 70)—his latest work *Once Upon a Time in…Hollywood* (2019) cannot be properly considered a historical movie. It revolves around real-life events of 1960s Hollywood, particularly TV series, spaghetti western movies, actors and stuntmen, as well as the hippy underground culture and the Charles Manson family. Notwithstanding, it does not have the ambition to portray a key phase of American nation-building history within an international context, nor does it aim at investigating how this specific period reverberates in the present. While *Inglourious Basterds* provides an alternate ending to World War II, *Django Unchained* describes the new condition of a freed slave before the Civil War outbreak, and *The Hateful Eight* represents the social and political ambiguity of the Reconstruction Era, *Once Upon a Time in…Hollywood* presents characters and events in a "Tarantino's fairy-tale Hollywood [that] looks like an unlikely American utopia" (Hassenger 2019). Tarantino himself does not consider it a historical movie: "Well, there is a fairy-tale aspect, so the title fits pretty good. But this is a memory piece also. So it's not historical fact per se" (quoted in Hainey 2019).

[2] Together with "telling" and "showing," the third mode of engagement is the "interactive/participatory" one. According to Hutcheon, this modality involves the physical participation of the audience in the story being presented—as in videogames or role-playing games (2006, 23).

history and fiction. Through ekphrasis, Tarantino stops the narrative flow of the events and focuses on specific objects that make the construction of meaning more complex and confusing.[3] In fact, in his works he does not introduce real historical items but fictional elements that challenge the accuracy of the storytelling.

The reinterpretation of history in the three movies considered in this article is thus deeply engrained in the writing process of the scripts, an activity which Tarantino seems to consider as even more important than directing. When Lane Brown asked him during an interview: "You've won two Oscars for writing [*Pulp Fiction* and *Django Unchained*]. Does it bug you that you've never won for directing?", Tarantino replied: "No. I would have liked to have won Best Director for *Inglourious Basterds*, but I've got time. And I'm very, very happy with my writing Oscars" (quoted in Brown 2015). In another interview, Tarantino discusses his rank as a writer by comparing himself with the greatest Hollywood screenwriters:

> I will brag about this: I'm one of five people who have won two Original Screenplay Oscars. The other four are Woody Allen, Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, and Paddy Chayefsky […]. Those are the greatest writers in the history of Hollywood. Now, Woody Allen has us all beat. He's won three, so if I win three, I'll tie with Woody. (Brown 2015)

1. Adapting movies and readapting novels: Tarantino and screenplay

As asserted by David Roche, the importance of writing for Tarantino stems from his education: "[He] learned how to make films from watching movies […] but he also learned from reading books. Lots of books. And not just those of Elmore Leonard, whose dialogues he cited early on as a major influence, or James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and Dashiell Hammatt" (2018, 3). Tarantino himself has confessed that his first film was a failure because its story didn't work: "I failed, but learned how to make a movie" (quoted in Woods 2018). From that moment on, writing became increasingly important for his work and within a few months he finished his first two screenplays: *True Romance*—directed by Tony Scott in 1993—and *Natural Born Killers*—adapted and directed by Oliver Stone in 1994.

In that early phase of his career, Tarantino used to define his identity as a director in relation to writers, in particular novelists, and tried to introduce specific narrative patterns into his movies: "What I always try to do is use the structures I see in novels and apply them to cinema" (quoted in Fuller 2013, 37-38). It becomes clear that he has always been captivated by the range of characters and plots that the novelistic form offers (Razi 2019), and twenty years later he emphasized the relationship between cinema and writing during *The Hateful Eight* premiere:

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[3] On this specific function of ekphrasis see Cunningham 2007, 57-61.

"I think it's my best script. And I think it's my best directing of my own material. Does that make it my best movie? Well that's up for the people who like my movies to decide. I think I got everything I wanted to get out of it in a really classy way" (quoted in Chagollan 2015).

Tarantino splits writing and filming thus keeping the roles of screenwriter and director distinct; moreover, he recognizes a specific literary status to the screenplay and supports its artistic autonomy as a literary genre: "I'm a writer […]. I want [the script] to work on the page, first and foremost. When I'm writing the script, I'm not thinking about the viewer watching the movie. I'm thinking about the reader reading the script" (quoted in Gross 2009).[4] In considering "novelists" and "screenwriters" as belonging to the same category of "real writers," Tarantino argues: "I do write them [screenplays] like novels" (Tarantino 2016b). He seems to share the widespread idea that "The Great American Novel has been replaced by the Great American Screenplay as the Great Goal of the aspiring young writer" (Deemer 2002).[5] His intention to devote himself to writing novels after making his tenth film confirms this idea of literature over cinema (Chitwood 2019): "When I write a movie, I want to write a piece of literature. I want to write a novel. I want to say, if I just stopped right here, and did not make a movie, that would be good enough" (quoted in Woods 2018).[6]

By underlining the value of screenwriting as an autonomous cultural activity, Tarantino redefines the screenplay, direction, and film, not as elements of a linear and logical follow-on relationship but as interdependent components of the artistic production of meaning. In this, Tarantino seems to relate to Pier Paolo Pasolini's statement whereby "[t]he concrete element in the relationship between film and literature is the screenplay" (2005, 187). According to

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[4] Tarantino thus opposes the thesis according to which a screenplay is not a literary work of art because it is not written to be read but to be produced. J. Gideon Sarantinos sums up this widespread idea: "a screenplay is a highly stylized, intermediary document that is a precursor to a film. It is not a completed novel, novella, short story, poem, play or other final literary form" (2013). In the first number of *Scenario*—a magazine entirely dedicated to the screenplay—Tod Lippy criticizes the negative notion concerning the artistic value of script in these terms: "Too often, it seems, screenplays are regarded as having an almost utilitarian function: they serve as the raw material from which the real players of the cinema—directors, actors, producers—make films" (Deemer 2002). On screenplay as a literary genre, see in particular Maras 2009 and Price 2013.

[5] It would be interesting to contextualize Tarantino's idea of literature and screenwriting in light of the American authors who have written scripts for Hollywood: Chandler, Fitzgerald, McCoy, Faulkner, but also Hemingway, Capote, and McCarthy, just to mention a few. An interesting starting point could be Masters 2014.

[6] Unlike novelists, Tarantino affirms screenwriters have to control their artistic process more rigidly: "Screenwriting conceivably could be harder because of how you have to deliver within a certain page count in a way that a novelist doesn't have to some degree or another as a more freedom as far as that's concerned" (Tarantino 2016b).

Pasolini, the screenplay is an "autonomous technique," that is "a work complete and finished in itself": the script completely belongs to the "type of writing" and "must be judged in the usual way in which literary products are judged, and precisely as a new literary 'genre,' with its particular prosody and its own metrics, etc., etc." (2005, 187). Nevertheless, the screenplay necessarily refers to "a developing cinematographic work, thus turning itself into a literary form that moves towards a cinematographic form" (2005, 187).[7] Unlike Pasolini, however, Tarantino does not consider the screenplay as a dynamic literary shape aspiring to convert itself into the movie's cinematographic structure. He overturns the traditional relationship between the two modalities and denies their consequentiality: in other words, while he recognizes the literary dignity of the script, he proves that it is often impossible to transfer its artistic status into a code that is so different, such as the cinematographic one:

> There is a commitment to the prose and there is a literary narrator talking to the audience who is reading it and these scripts are meant to be read: I mean to such a degree, to almost crazy degree in the case of something like *Inglourious Basterds* or *Django* or even *Kill Bill,* to such a degree that basically I've written a movie that really can't be done. (Tarantino 2016b)

The linear logic of Pasolini's dynamic process is questioned: Tarantino withdraws the script from its subordination to the film-making process and provides it with a specific identity that is not only cinematographic but also literary: "It's not, it's so not a blueprint," he points out in reference to the screenplay of *The Hateful Eight*. "It is so a novel with the exception of the dialogue broken down the way and it is in the screenplay format. I am stuck on set everyday adapting my novel into a movie, everyday" (Tarantino 2016b). What he writes is a novel, and not a draft, whose format is that of a screenplay: "I write this novel in script form and then every day on set, I adapt that novel into a movie," Tarantino confirms during an interview for BBC (Tarantino 2016a). If writing prescinds from the cinematographic translation, making a film means transcoding a narrative form that often seems to resist the procedure. As Stacey Sher claims: "Once he [Tarantino]'s finished the writing he looks at the (filming) process as sort of an adaptation; that directing is almost like adapting his screenplay to the screen" (Chagollan 2015).

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[7] It is worth distinguishing between a screenplay that has become a film and a screenplay that has not. According to Pasolini, the former is a stronger narrative form, as the source text can rely on the visuality of images that reinforces and completes its literary expression with references, parallels, and contrasts; in the latter case, the text is a weaker work because it constitutes "simply a barebones exhibition of dialogue, which informs the motion of the narrative" ("The Literary Merit of Film Scripts" 2016).

The film is thus the result of the adaptation activity of a text whose dialogues are performed by the actors and whose descriptive elements are carried out by the troupe. In other words, the screenplay is the translation, still in words, of the images that will be transposed into the film images (Nuvoli 2004, 25). But the most characterizing literary aspects of the script are the ekphrastic sections which, in James Heffernan's well-known definition, are the "verbal representation[s] of visual representation[s]" (2004, 3). During the transition, the writer's initial mental image is first objectified when it is written down in the script; then the verbal description is objectified again when it is transcoded into the film, filtered through the "imaginicity" of all those who contribute to making it.[8]

This activity of verbalization and visualization of thought and material experience is different depending on whether it concerns a real element or a fictional one. In contrast to "mimetic ekphrasis," "notional ekphrasis" doesn't allow for the comparison and contrast of the represented object with something real; instead, the description reveals how the artist has imagined and created something in the very act of describing it, thus purposely generating an ambiguous intermingling of fiction and reality (Heffernan 2015, 4).[9] According to Michele Cometa, the ekphrasis of a real artifact is a falsification of the work itself in that, during the adaptation, it is in some way altered. Conversely, the ekphrasis of a fictional artifact can be interpreted as a validation of the object because it is created during the transition process (Cometa 2012, 53).

Combining Heffernan's and Cometa's theories, one can assert that the three different artifacts that Tarantino introduces into his historical movies—*The Pride of a Nation*, the KKK hoods, and the Viking crucifix—can be considered 'true' in the screenplays since their mental images are brought to life thanks to the verbal language. However, once they are inserted into the movies, they undergo a transmedia ekphrastic passage that makes them 'false,' as the cinematographic language alters their 'written form,' depriving them of their claimed truthfulness. This oscillation does not only unveil specific connections between the verbal nature of Tarantino's writing and the audiovisual feature of his directing, but also discloses issues concerning the limits of representation of history. Tarantino produces alternate narratives that tackle the historical imaginary by outlining new strategies to handle the past and redefining viewers' function as historical interpreters. "The historical imaginary"—Caroline

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[8] On the concept of "imaginicity" see Eisenstein 1991, 11-58.
[9] John Hollander defines as "mimetic ekphrasis" the description of a real painting, photo, or image and as "notional ekphrasis" the description of an invented work (1988). Unlike Cometa, Hollander does not consider a connection between the two modalities.

Guthrie states—"is a culturally shared popular understanding of the past created by discourses of entertainment, politics, and education, and its narratives are highly resistant to challenges from traditional methods of history" (2019, 339). Tarantino contributes to deconstruct and reconstruct the historical imaginary by providing viewers with "fictionalized representations of the past" that "challenge, 'pervert,' critique, and queer a normative, straightforward, linear, self-proscribing History […] while suggesting instead a set of very strange templates for a type of understanding that does not neatly fit with perceived notions of the 'historical'" (De Groot 2015, 2). By keeping distinct the concepts of 'past' and 'history,'[10] Tarantino utilizes the interplay between screenplays and movies to renegotiate the interaction of fiction with truth. He thus redefines a historical imaginary that, on the one hand, is deeply entangled with dominant ideologies and a sense of national belonging, and, on the other hand, allows for rereading the past from the present and rewriting the present through the past.

2. The movie-within-the-movie about an even more inglourious basterd

If "[e]ven before its Cannes premiere"—Ben Walters writes—"*Inglourious Basterds* attracted controversy for its rewriting of history, its blending of fantasy and fact" (2009, 19), *The Pride of a Nation* plays an important role in manipulating the telling of the Third Reich's fall (Holmes 2011).[11] The movie-within-the-movie is a 6.11-minute fake black and white movie directed by Eli Roth and inserted toward the end of *Inglourious Basterds*.[12] In the film's fictive world, *Stolz der Nation* is a Nazi propaganda movie directed by Alois von Eichberg and commissioned by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, and shown for the first time to Hitler and other leading hierarchs in Paris.[13]

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[10] In *Narrative and History*, Alun Munslow states that 'past' is "what once was, is no more and has gone for good," while 'history' is "a corpus of narrative discourses about the once reality of the past produced and fashioned by historians" (2007, 9).

[11] On the relationship between cinema and history in *Inglourious Basterds* see Dassanowsky 2012 and Herzog 2012.

[12] Eli Roth—who stars in the film as Sergeant Donny Donowitz, the "Bear Jew"—affirms that one of the reasons Tarantino chose him to direct *The Pride of a Nation* was because of his Jewish origins: "It was perfect that he had the Jewish guy do it," Roth explains in an interview, "because I knew that the more authentic [*The Pride of a Nation*] was, the more ridiculous it would make Hitler and Goebbels look" (quoted in Leibovitz 2009). On his part, Roth's character is deeply linked with an artifact whose characterization is not revealed in the movie but is well defined in the original script. Just before leaving Boston and his father's barbershop for the front, Donny buys the heaviest baseball bat available in the city and writes on it the names of his Jewish relatives and friends living in Europe.

[13] To widen *Stolz der Nation*'s metacinematographic function, Tarantino and Roth have also produced fake extra materials: a typical German propaganda promotion, a trailer, and

The plot is simple: barricaded in a church steeple in an unknown Sicilian village, the soldier Frederick Zoller kills more than 250 American soldiers in three days, thus becoming a war celebrity in Germany.[14] This is the sequence in the script:

> BACK TO THE PREMIERE–WE CUT TO THE B/W FILM ON SCREEN.
> Fredrick Zoller, playing himself, is in an ornamental tower in a Russian village, picking off RUSSIAN SOLDIERS below.
> A RUSSIAN GENERAL KCHOVLANSKEY peering at the German private through binoculars. He lowers the long-range glasses and confers with one of his OFFICERS.
> […] OFFICER (RUSSIAN)
> General, I implore you, we must destroy that tower![15]
> GEN. KCHOVLANSKEY (RUSSIAN)
> That tower is one of the oldest and most beautiful structures in Russia. I won't be responsible for turning a thousand years of history into dust!
> A BRAVE RUSSIAN SOLDIER tries to run between two buildings. Zoller gets him. Then proceeds to pick him apart, one bullet at a time.
> […] The battle onscreen continues.
> […] FILM ONSCREEN Private Zoller FIRING away from his perch.
> […] ONSCREEN SERGIO LEONE CU FREDRICK. He SCREAMS to the Russians below:
> MOVIE ZOLLER Who wants to send a message to Germany? (Tarantino 2009, 148-59)

The Pride of a Nation constitutes the central hub of *Inglourious Basterds*. In terms of the plot, its screening allows the bastards' mission, code-named Operation Kino, to overlap with Shosanna Dreyfus's revenge; from an ideological perspective, it defines Tarantino's reinterpretation of the past as a mix of truth and fiction. If Zoller is directly responsible for Hitler's fall and death by convincing Goebbels to move the film's premiere to Shosanna's theater, the fictional movie contributes to rewriting history through a specific cinematographic lens.

Starting with the title, Roth's work recalls *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).[16] In Griffith's film, the nation is officially born with (the sequence of) the murder of President Abraham Lincoln: the new national identity begins—in Greg M. Colón Semenza's words—"not with the triumph of the

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interviews with the 'pretend director' Alois von Eichberg, the actors, and producer Goebbels ("Stolz der Nation" 2009).

[14] Instead of comparing *The Pride of a Nation* to typical Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda movies, Kristen Coates suggests considering Roth's work in the light of *To Hell and Back*. In this 1955 American film, the war hero Audie Murphy, just like Zoller, stars as himself in his account of World War II (2010).

[15] The general is played by Bo Svenson, who starred in Enzo Castellari's *Inglorious Bastards* (1978, *Quel maledetto treno blindato*).

[16] Roth also introduces references to Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) with the reproduction of the famous scene of the mother pushing an infant in a baby carriage and the image of the soldier shot in an eye. On the relationship between *The Pride of a Nation* and *Battleship Potemkin* see Bordwell and Thompson 2011, 241 and Hake 2012, 180.

North in the war but with the founding of the Ku Klux Klan as a response to the social disorder unleashed by Union victory" (2014, 75). In Roth's movie, the Teutonic nation's pride distracts the Nazi hierarchs during the film premiere, putting an end to the Regime through Hitler's assassination. In an interview, Tarantino explains how *Inglourious Basterds* is a reaction to Hollywood's representation of the Shoah: "Holocaust movies always have Jews as victims" and "We've seen that story before." Here however he aims at creating something different: "Let's see Germans that are scared of Jews. Let's not have everything build up to a big misery, let's actually take the fun of action-movie cinema and apply it to this situation" (quoted in Goldberg 2009).[17]

Revenge changes the course of history and when in the second-level plot of the movie-within-the-movie Zoller rhetorically asks "Who wants to send a message to Germany?", Shosanna returns to the first-level plot and replies: "I have a message for Germany" (Tarantino 2009, 159). Through a metacinematographic interpolation, she explains why she has stopped the screening and anticipates what is going to happen: "I'm interrupting your Nazi propaganda horseshit to inform you despicable German swine that you're all going to die." While "Hitler and Goebbels react" (Tarantino 2009, 159), Zoller, the soldier who has become an actor thanks to the war, is literally and symbolically killed by Shosanna, the Jewish projectionist who gives him life on the screen. Cinema actually becomes a political weapon and Tarantino emphasizes this idea in the film's production notes: "I like that it's the power of the cinema that fights the Nazis, and not just as a metaphor, as a literal reality" (quoted in Leibovitz 2009).

If cinema can manipulate the past, a substantial change from script to movie complicates Tarantino's historical project: while in the film the action is set in Italy, in the script Zoller's enterprise takes place in a Russian village.[18] The change of setting is particularly functional to the ideology of the film: it restricts the war to two enemy lines—keeping the Russians out—and justifies the American reaction against Germans in the first-level plot of *Inglourious Basterds* as a reply to Nazi violence, epitomized by the sniper's carnage in the second-level plot of *The Pride of a Nation*.

This 'eye-for-an-eye' principle seems to be the only chance to restore justice in such a Manichean context. In terms of the film's ethics, Joseph Natoli asserts: "I think that the American Jewish

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[17] Spike Lee's critique of Tarantino's right to tell the story of African Americans comes to mind. On the dispute between the two directors see, among others, Bordin 2013.

[18] Compared to the Italian setting, the Russian location is more verisimilar: Matthias Hetzenauer—the young Austrian sniper who has inspired Tarantino's Zoller—operated on the Russian front and not in Italy. On the differences between the script and the film see "'Inglourious Bastards' – The Script vs. The Film" 2015.

Nazi hunters are barbarians of the good, by which I mean that everything is morally permitted—stupidity, ignorance, savagery [...]—because goodness can never commit an evil in its battle with evil" (2009). If in *Inglourious Basterds* "everyone commits atrocities," thus escaping "the customary division of good and evil along national lines" (Denby 2009), the superimposition of revenge on the historical truth reactivates the exceptionalistic formula by which God is always on America's side.

3. And the flour sacks became the hoods for the KKK

Inglourious Basterds and *Django Unchained* are tightly connected by a historical parallel which Tarantino defines in political and ideological terms during an interview: "I actually consider the Confederacy the equivalent of the Nazi party and I've felt that way for a very long time, and America is finally catching up with how I have always felt about the rebel flag" (quoted in Morgan 2018).[19] Although *Django Unchained* is set in 1858, before the Civil War outbreak, a group of white slave owners called the Regulators embodies the forthcoming Confederate rebels. When the gang's members attack Django and Dr. Schultz, they stage a typical Ku Klux Klan's raid, thus anticipating the foundation of the real supremacist group during the postwar Reconstruction ("Is *Django Unchained* Historically Accurate and Does It Matter?" 2015).

Just like in *Inglourious Basterds*, the history of cinema contributes to the rewriting of history as Tarantino admits to writing "*Django Unchained* as something of a response to *Birth of a Nation*" (quoted in Brody 2013). In an interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr., the director explains the origin of the KKK scene: "I'm obsessed with *The Birth of a Nation* and its making. […] I think it gave rebirth to the Klan and all the blood that was spilled throughout" (quoted in Gates 2013, 51).[20] It has already been argued that *The Pride of a Nation* recalls the ideological structure of *The Birth of a Nation* given its title, and that the sequence of Hitler's death inside Shosanna's cinema echoes Lincoln's murder inside the Ford Theater in Griffith's depiction. In *Django Unchained*, the Regulators' raid against the two main characters cannot but call to mind the final assault of the Ku Klux Klan in *The Birth of a Nation*. After Django and Dr. Schultz kill the Brittle brothers, Spencer "Big Daddy" Bennett and his fellows chase the two bounty hunters on horses covered with sheets, wearing white hoods, and wielding burning sticks. However, if Griffith connotes the incursion as a heroic mission in the name of white supremacy and uses

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[19] A useful introduction to *Django Unchained* is Speck 2014.
[20] See also "Creating the Klan: Quentin Tarantino's Creation of the KKK in *Django Unchained*" 2013 and Carr 2016. On the "highly stylized, ritualized and hypercoded" typical western violence in *Django Unchained* see Rosso 2013.

Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" to make the scene grand and epic, Tarantino mocks the proto-Klan's attempt to be impressive and utilizes Verdi's "Dies Irae" as merely an ironic counterpoint to the punitive expedition (Salazar 2018): the slaveholders' revenge plan miserably fails and their effort to disguise themselves with white sheets is merely grotesque and ridiculous. The overall effect is that the Regulators' clumsiness is far from the Klan's pomposity: in *The Birth of a Nation*, "[t]he former enemies of North and South are united again in defense of their Aryan birthright;" in *Django Unchained*, the night riders are blown away by Django and Schultz's dynamite (Brody 2013). This is the sequence in the script:

> We Cut Back to Spencer Bennett […] Where about TWENTY-FOUR REGULATORS are waiting for them ON HORSEBACK, all of the riders heads are covered by FLOUR SACKS with eyes and mouth holes cut out. Some carry TORCHES, all carry RIFLES or SHOTGUNS. […]
> SPENCER BENNETT […] We're gonna whip that nigger lover to death. And I'm gonna personally, strip and clip that garboon myself. Having said his blood thirsty words, he puts the flour sack over his head. He tussles with the sack for a bit, then from inside the sack; Damn, I can't see fuckin' shit outta this thing. He sticks his fingers in the eye holes, and rips, trying to make the holes bigger, he only succeeds in making-visibility more obscured. […]
> ROBERT […] if I don't move my head, I can see you pretty good...more or less. But when I start ridin' the bag starts moving all over, and I'm riding blind. Randy tears at his bag. […]
> REDFISH I can't see in this fucking thing! I can't breathe in this fucking thing! And I can't ride in this fucking thing!
> WILLARD Fuck all y'all! I'm going home. I watched my wife work all day gettin' thirty bags ready for you ungrateful sonsabitches! And all I hear is criticize, criticize, criticize. […]
> SPENCER Goddamit, this is a raid! I can't see, you can't see, so what? All that matters is can the fuckin horse see! That's a raid. Spencer puts on his sack, everyone else, reluctantly, does as well.
> EXT - LAKE – NIGHT The THIRTY RIDERS, all with SACKS OVER THEIR HEADS, come riding over the hill, hooting and hollering. Since nobody can see they ride haphazard into each other. […] They surround the camp, and when the sleeping Schultz and Django don't react, they know something's up. But since nobody can see, everybody and everybody's horse is confused. (Tarantino 2012, 37-40)

The extended quotation exemplifies how the reference to *The Birth of a Nation* allows *Django Unchained* to outline a historical reconstruction wherein the pre- and post-Civil War contexts overlap. According to several critics, Tarantino has not only created a naïve revenge plot that is as much one-dimensional as Griffith's depiction, but contributed to generating his own return of the Ku Klux Klan: "Tarantino offers nothing of Griffith's polysemy, nothing of his sense of being in the actual presence of history; the cartoonishness of Griffith's worst scenes is *Django*'s basic mode" (Brody 2013). On the other hand, Tarantino's picture of slavery criticizes the spectacularization of history which Griffith employs to promote emotional identification and

exalt nationalist, sexist, and racist values in the audience (Colón Semenza 2014, 75).[21] Stefano Bosco argues that the KKK sequence is the most explicitly comic moment in the film: it parodies the typical adventurous suspense of an ambush and ridicules the epic and celebratory tones of the Klan's actions in *The Birth of a Nation*. "In doing so"—Bosco explains—"the racist ideological framework of Griffith's film is thus recovered to be then demolished through the ironic overthrow" (2013, 5).

Tarantino's critique concerns the core itself of the white supremacist movement as he mocks the proto-Klan members' attempt to wear the hoods that both define and hide their own identity. The use of white sheets demonstrates—according to Walter Benn Michaels—how racial identity prevails over individual identity by making the members of the Klan identical to each other; furthermore, the sheets prove how the whiteness that should identify and distinguish the group has to be objectified in an artifact because the color of the skin is not sufficient for the purpose: "far from making their [individual clansmen's] visible identities invisible"—Michaels asserts—"the sheets make their invisible identities visible" (1988, 190). Thus, when some members of the gang in *Django Unchained* criticize Jenny Willard, the character who has sewed the hoods, they unknowingly refer to the crucial role women had in disseminating supremacist doctrines in the South of the country. Rather than a simple domestic task, sewing was a metaphorical process that contributed to defining the Confederacy's white identity during the Civil War. As Thomas Dixon writes in *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), the novel which inspired *The Birth of a Nation*: "Over four thousand [Klan] disguises for men and horses were made by the women of the South, and not one secret ever passed their lips" (2018, 170).

The problems with the eyeholes in the hoods symbolize the Regulators' ethical blindness as hate towards black men has obscured their vision of the world: "when I start ridin'"—one of the members of the gang says—"the bag starts movin' all over, and I'm riding blind." In the script, the hoods are referred to as "Flour sacks," generic bags that cover the supremacist ideology still in an embryonic form in 1858; when the hoods are materially produced and introduced into the movie, they become a sort of historical fantasy which contextualizes a typical KKK outfit in a pre-Civil War Era ("Is *Django Unchained* Historically Accurate and Does It Matter?" 2015): the hoods and the proto-Klan members become an objectification of the past whose narration is less accurate but more useful to manipulate its main events and characters.

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[21] Joseph Winters compares the two films and sums up their relationship in these terms: "If *Birth of a Nation* explains away the violence of slavery and anti-blackness for the sake of rescuing and protecting white sovereignty, *Django Unchained* uses a romantic rescue narrative to direct our attention to the violence and horror of white supremacy" (2018, 2).

If—as Melvyn Stokes asserts—*The Birth of a Nation* suggests that the KKK came up with the idea of wearing white sheets after observing white children dressing up as ghosts to scare black children (2007, 22), then narrating history in Tarantino's work actually becomes playing with the past. The decision of combining the western genre and the slavery theme seems to be the first rule of the game: as underlined by Elisa Bordin, the two cores of *Django Unchained* tend to clash as the former has usually aimed at representing white heroes engaged in a mythical nation-building process while the latter has embodied one of the darkest sides of this legendary construction (2013, 2).[22]

4. American archeology, or looking for a new national past close to Minnie's haberdashery

Similarly to *Django Unchained, The Hateful Eight* is a western wherein eight characters trapped in a Wyoming haberdashery during a blizzard epitomize the Reconstruction Era's multilayered context. By comparing the screenplay and the movie, one can notice an ekphrastic section which does not have a precise cinematographic adaptation, even if it is one of the main elements Tarantino employs to excavate the American archaeological past: an ancient graying wooden crucifix almost entirely covered with snow planted in the Wyoming wilderness.[23]

In the film, Christ's cracked and wrecked life-sized carving appears in the opening sequence and stays in the foreground for about three minutes during the opening credits; then the camera widens the frame and reveals a carriage passing by and proceeding further, thus allowing the plot to start.[24] In the screenplay, on the other hand, the crucifix is described at the beginning of the third chapter, when a diligence with some of the main characters onboard arrives at Minnie's haberdashery. In the script, Tarantino explains that the displayed Jesus Christ has Slavic origins and that the crucifix, made of wood and rock, seems to have been planted there by Viking explorers during one of their expeditions in the New World. This is the description of the scene in the script:

> CUT FROM BLACK TO:
> SERGIO LEONE CU
> JESUS FACE

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[22] See also Corrizzato 2013.
[23] On the ideological function of the crucifix, see Botta 2020, 172-187. On the relationship between the crucifix and the spaghetti western movies, see Walsh 2017 and Morsiani 2016, 176.
[24] The fact that the extended version of the movie available on Netflix is split into four episodes starting with the crucifix close-up remarks its importance for the narrative and thematic unity of *The Hateful Eight*.

> An extreme close up of a HANDCARVED WOOD FACE OF JESUS CHRIST. We start on Jesus' Face and SLOWLY ZOOM OUT [. . .] to reveal a very old statue. It's a handcarved wood Jesus on a HAND CHISELED STONE CROSS stuck in the snow. The statue looks like it was there hundreds of years before the pilgrims. It's as if The Vikings marched up a mountain in Wyoming, chiseled a cross out of stone, carved a figure of the saviour out of a log, planted it in the snow, then sailed back to Norway. The aesthetics of the statue reveal a Slavic origin. The Jesus figure with its skinny, pointy physique looks more like a crucifixion of Eisenstein's Ivan The Terrible than the hippy saviour of catholicism. But the number one thing the audience will notice about the statue, is an entire snowbank has built up on the longways section of the cross. As well as two snow piles. One, sitting on top of the cross. And the other sitting on top of Jesus' head. O.B. and the six horse team come whizzing by kicking up dirt and snow as it whooshes by the cross and the 70mm CAMERAS. (Tarantino 2015, 41)[25]

On a cinematographic level, Tarantino compares the religious image of the Crucifixion of Christ to the secular image of the Tsar's execution in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan The Terrible* (1944). Moreover, the opening sequence recalls the long close-up of a crucifix in World War I France in Samuel Fuller's *The Big Red One* ("The Passion of the West" 2016).

From an ideological point of view, the detailed portrayal in the screenplay and the close-up in the film emphasize how the main symbol of Christianity marks the border between wilderness and civilization: Wyoming's nature is the sign of a West that is a more modern and unrestricted territory than the Bible belt South where the crucifix is generally found; Minnie's haberdashery, instead, is a place where men and women, northern and southern, as well as black and white, can find an open and pacific shelter from the violence of nature and the Secession aftermath.[26]

On a historical level, the crucifix not only symbolizes the crucified Christ of the Civil War, President Lincoln, but projects the Reconstruction back into a period preceding the Pilgrim Fathers' and Christianity's conventional arrival in North America: "hundreds of years before the pilgrims," northern European populations arrived in the new continent before Christopher Columbus as explorers but also as colonizers. Here Tarantino is alluding to Leif Eriksson and his crew who—according to the legend—sailed up the Charles River at the beginning of the 11th Century and established a settlement in what would become Cambridge, Massachusetts, and surroundings.[27]

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[25] It is quite interesting that the description of the crucifix does not appear in the first draft of the screenplay.

[26] For a Christian interpretation of the film and the crucifix, see Larsen 2016 and Kinney 2016.

[27] On the history of early Viking contact with the North American continent and the debate over whether Leif Erikson or Christopher Columbus should be considered as the first discoverer of the New World, see Kolodny 2012. For wide-ranging considerations on Viking exploration in the New World, see Fitzhugh and Ward 2000 and Barnes 2001.

After having reached the Wyoming mountains, the Vikings chiseled and planted the crucifix as a symbol of their presence and then returned to Norway. The allusion in the script allows Tarantino to draw a parallel between Northmen and Americans that intermingles temporal and spatial elements: the Vikings' expansion rewrites American history by anticipating the 'official' conquest of the continent, authorizing a past which eludes any Native American habitation of the land, and centering the European presence in America not in the West Indies reached by Columbus but in the future territory of the United States. For its part, the United States rewrites its national history by postponing its foundation back to the Reconstruction Era (Roylance 2007, 440-441).

The fact that the link between America and Europe is introduced into the screenplay, but is absent in the film, defines a subtle interplay between history as a narration of the past and history as a testimony of the past: the description of the crucifix produces a mental artifact that concretizes a historical reconsideration of the origin of the American continent; on the other hand, the crucifix's material production in its film adaptation objectifies an archaeological relic that does not exist in reality. The interaction between what is described by words and what is crafted by concrete elements produces a clash between what really happened and what could have happened. In other words, in *The Hateful Eight*—just like in *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*—Tarantino delineates a sort of factual and counterfactual history that matches history as it is known by official sources and the past as it is described on the pages of a screenplay or on the screen in a movie theater.

5. Fictionalizing history by historicizing fiction

According to Linda Hutcheon, the passage "from the telling to the showing mode" is not only a shift concerning the medium but also a way to convey meaning to the object originally described (2006, 38). When the movie-within-the-movie in *Inglourious Basterds*, the Regulators' hoods in *Django Unchained*, and the crucifix in *The Hateful Eight* are transcoded from textual narration into visual representation, they are composed of several concrete elements (such as the choice of materials, colors, and dimensions) the director provides to make them tangible.[28] Tarantino takes to extremes the inter-artistic dynamics between the words of the script and the images of the movie, and uses the ekphrastic process—that is the passage from mental image to text and then to filmic image—to redefine the relationship between reality and fiction. Historical

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[28] Visual studies enhance the hybrid and mixed character of media, and the close interweaving of the verbal and visual dimension. See Dikovitskaya 2006 and Mirzoeff 2009.

reconstruction is thus defined through a practice of coding and transcoding that intertwines different narrative forms (screenplay and movie) and makes them interdependent to mark the border between what has happened and what has been invented.

From this perspective Tarantino's reinterpretation of the past in his historical movies seems to match Wu Ming 2's definition of postmodern historical novels: "I think that the characteristic of literary truths is precisely that of dividing, like thought always does. Historical novels that seek consensus, agreement, national pacification, the removal of conflicts, are destined to fail. One cannot write literature inconsequentially" (2014, 18-19). Tarantino does not seek consensus or pacifications; he divides opinions and exacerbates conflicts when reassessing both historiographical and literary traditions. He manipulates the past no longer considering "the useful as purpose, the truth as subject and the interesting as means"—the three elements Alessandro Manzoni identified as characterizing historical narratives. Instead, he selects "the testimony as purpose, the archive as subject and the fiction as means"—in line with Wu Ming 2's reformulation of Manzoni's theory. Tarantino digs in the archives to recreate history, imagining what could have happened at a given moment, and defining a more composite reproduction of the past. In particular, his historical films provide new cognitive maps allowing the audience to reconsider the various forms of opposition to Hitler and Nazism, to recontextualize the KKK's background before the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era, and to replace the 15th century European and Christian colonization of the New World with a very similar but much older form of occupation.

In his reformulation of the past, Tarantino challenges the relationship between history and ideology and reactivates a "state fantasy" that is, according to Donald Pease, "the dominant structure of desire out of which US citizens imagined their national identity" (2009, 1-2). By doing so, he shows how different establishments can manipulate reality for their political aims in a national post-truth narration which is—in Lee McIntyre's words—"a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not" (2018, 13). In the post-truth era, alternative facts replace actual facts so that feelings have more weight than evidence and governments have more power than people as—in line with Hutcheon—"the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts'" (2003, 89). If Tarantino's characters "can't do anything good or bad, they can only do something that's true or not" (Razi 2019), the rewriting of a national narrative so deeply engrained in the American past cannot but start with the fairy-tale formula his first historical film opens with: "Once upon a time (in Nazi-Occupied France)."

However, this is the same formula Tarantino uses in the title of his latest movie and homonymous novel *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood* (Singer 2020). He closes the loop: after transcoding the screenplay into a film, he adapts it back into a novel. After all, his fascination with the novelization of movies of his youth is well established:

> In the seventies movie novelizations were the first adult books I grew up reading. And to this day I have a tremendous amount of affection for the genre. So as a movie-novelization aficionado, I'm proud to announce *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood*, my contribution to this often marginalized, yet beloved sub-genre in literature. I'm also thrilled to further explore my characters and their world in a literary endeavor that can (hopefully) sit alongside its cinematic counterpart. (Quoted in Tucker 2020)

In addition to the release of the novel *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood*, HarperCollins has recently announced that Tarantino will publish *Cinema Speculation,* "a rich mix of essays, reviews, personal writing, and tantalizing 'what ifs'" about 1970s movies (Fleming 2020). History, reality, and fiction are intermingled again in a combination of novel, screenplay, and movie which, just like the three historical films discussed, contributes to the formation of meaning. Through a process of "medial transposition"—by which the original text is the source of the new artistic object (Rajewsky 2005, 51)—Tarantino's production widens and deepens along different narrative structures, genres, and modes which construct a more large-scale plot. Noah Eaker—Vice President and Executive Editor at HarperCollins Publishers—synthesizes this multidimensional composition process: "Quentin Tarantino's literary talents have been in plain sight since his first scripts, but to see how skillfully he endows his characters with life on the page and how he constantly takes a reader by surprise, even one who knows the movie by heart, is to see a master storyteller trying on a new form and making it his own" (quoted in Fleming 2020).

However, making a new form his own means relying on a further tool to manipulate reality and history, and mix them with fiction; at the same time, the intertwining of words and images in his oeuvre provides a helpful key to rereading and rewriting American history and reconnecting the links between tradition and contemporaneity. Broadly speaking, the interdependence of novel, script, and film could outline a theoretical framework through which other texts can be described and analyzed. It could be considered a larger-scale interpretative model that allows one not only to compare the three narrative modalities, but also to look at them as intermingled aspects of artistic creativity. In particular, this speculative method could shed new light on compositional processes, thematic interests, stylistic choices, and adaptations of media and genres by various authors.

Enrico Botta *teaches Anglo-American languages and literatures at the University of Verona. His main research interests include the narrative of the American Empire during the Reconstruction Era. His volume* Fate in His Eye and Empire on His Arm. La nascita e lo sviluppo della letteratura epica statunitense *(La scuola di Pitagora) was released in 2017; his second monograph* Desiderai un nuovo mondo. La letteratura dell'impero americano sulla Ricostruzione *(Ombre corte) was published in 2020.*

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