Jewish Revenge Fantasies
in Contemporary Film

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TURNING JEWS INTO NAZIS?
Dustin Hoffman almost turned down the role of Thomas Babington, aka “Babe,” Levy, the Jewish graduate student and long-distance runner in John Schlesinger’s 1976 thriller Marathon Man, because he objected to the original script’s ending. As the narrative unfolds, Levy unwittingly becomes ensnared in an international intrigue involving Nazi war criminals and diamonds stolen from Jews imprisoned at Auschwitz, and, in one memorable scene, Nazi dentist Dr. Christian Szell (villainously played to the hilt by Laurence Olivier) tortures him by extracting his teeth without anesthesia. The original script had Hofmann’s character avenging this torture and shooting Szell at the film’s end, but Hoffman said he would not take the part if it demanded that his Jewish character kill a Nazi. In Hoffman’s words, “I won’t become a Nazi to kill a Nazi. I won’t demean myself.” Screenwriter William Goldman eventually rewrote the script so that Szell dies when he accidentally stabs himself during the final climactic scene (Pogrebin 16).

This anecdote is a reminder that the notion of post-Holocaust Jewish vengeance has long sparked criticism for “turning Jews into Nazis.” This objection has recently come into the spotlight anew because of a recent spike in the appearance of Jewish revenge fantasies that have appeared over the last dozen years. Jewish revenge fantasies are films or scenes within films in which avenging Jews enact stylized, spectacular, and typically graphic violence upon their clichéd cinematic enemies, usually Nazis but sometimes Arabs or others. These post-Holocaust wish-fulfillments have appeared in genres as diverse as comic book adaptations (X-Men: First Class, 2011), spy thrillers (Munich, 2005 and
As much as any revenge fantasy, *Inglourious Basterds*, filmmaker Quentin Tarantino’s 2009 homage to World War II and the “platoon” films made about it, has polarized critics for graphically and violently “turning Jews into Nazis.” In one scene, a member of the eponymous all-Jewish platoon called the “Basterds” clubs a German prisoner to death. This he-man (or to use the appropriate Yiddish term, *shtarker*), known as “The Bear Jew,” points his baseball bat at the German’s Iron Cross and asks “Did you get that for murdering Jews?” When the German officer smugly responds “for bravery,” The Bear Jew bludgeons him to death while playfully pretending to be the Boston Red Sox great Ted Williams, slugging a home run at Fenway Park. Near the film’s conclusion, the Basterds machine-gun Hitler, Goebbels, and other top Nazis during the premier of a propaganda film in occupied Paris. The theater has also been locked shut and set aflame, and as the Nazis burn alive, an avenging Jewess addresses the audience from a film-within-a-film onscreen and proclaims, “This is the face of Jewish vengeance.” *Inglourious Basterds* ends as one of the Basterds carves a swastika into a Nazi’s forehead as a kind of permanent mark of Cain (cf. Gen 4:15) (fig. 1; Pl. XII). “I think this just might be my masterpiece,” he states with a distinct air of self-satisfaction.

Unlike *Marathon Man*, which avoided representing Jewish vengeance and relied instead on its protagonist’s ability figuratively and literally to run away, Tarantino’s counterfactual take on the history of World War II and the Holocaust marks a significant change from stereotypical cinematic images of
Jews as helpless victims of Nazi violence. Some critics, such as Roger Ebert, have applauded *Inglourious Basterds* for rejecting realism as the only legitimate idiom through which to engage traumatic history and for instead providing “World War II with a much-needed alternative ending.” Yet others find its Jew-on-Nazi violence offensive. They see it as one of many recent films that purportedly trivialize or profane the Shoah or, worse, are tantamount to Holocaust-denial, because they establish moral equivalency between violence by Jews and Nazis. These objections resemble those cited by Dustin Hoffman in 1976. Writing in *The New Yorker*, David Denby stresses that, “In a Tarantino war, everyone commits atrocities.” The scholar and critic Daniel Mendelsohn shares this objection and faults *Inglourious Basterds* for inverting perpetrator and victim roles. “In history,” he writes: “Jews were repeatedly herded into buildings and burned alive . . . ; in *Inglourious Basterds*, it’s the Jews who orchestrate this horror. In history, the Nazis and their local collaborators made sport of human suffering; here, it is the Jews who take whacks at Nazi skulls with baseball bats, complete with mock sports-announcer commentary, turning murder into a parodic ‘game’. And in reality, Nazis carved Stars of David into the chests of rabbis before killing them; here, the ‘basterds’ carve swastikas into the foreheads of those victims whom they leave alive.” For Mendelsohn, the problem with the film is the same as it was for Hoffman: it turns Jews into Nazis and thus by implication, Nazis into Jews.

This critical outrage merits further examination because such disgust for *Inglourious Basterds* arises from the view that the film is “the latest, if most extreme, example of a trend that shows just how fragile memory can be—a series of popular World War II films that disproportionately emphasize armed Jewish heroism . . . and German resistance, . . . or elicit sympathy for German moral confusion . . . ” (Mendelsohn). The greater issue around revenge fantasies is that critics tie them to Holocaust inversion, the ahistorical rhetorical trick that equates Jews (usually Israelis) with Nazis, often to advance anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist agendas. In a 2010 interview with the Scottish university newspaper *The Student*, Nazi hunter Efraim Zuroff called Holocaust inversion “far more dangerous” than outright Holocaust-denial and cited *Inglourious Basterds* as an example (McGloin). Writing in *Commentary* in February 2006, Gabriel Schonfeld called Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* (about a team of Mossad agents, who avenge the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre) “treacherous,” “hypocritical,” and “a phony balance sheet.”

In this essay, however, it is my aim to refute the notion that Jewish revenge fantasies “turn Jews into Nazis” and suggest instead that implicit political
considerations undergird hostility to them of the sort noted above. Critics of revenge fantasies regularly point to these films’ lack of historical authenticity and suffuse their attacks with exaggerated fears about the loss of the Holocaust’s lessons and legacies. Yet behind this putative lament about historical inauthenticity as the main objection lurks a demand for politically acceptable Holocaust representations, which is to say, representations that help perpetuate an aura of uniqueness around the Holocaust such that it might be employed as a critical tool for diverse political and social agendas. These agendas do not break down into simple left/right areas of political interest. Rather, they run the gamut from the views of arch-Zionists, who might use the Holocaust as a visceral means to justify Israeli policies, all the way to the claims of anti-Semites and anti-Zionists, who also “need” the Holocaust in order to accuse Zionists of recreating it. Such extreme positions often rely on a quasi-sacred notion of the Holocaust that aims to set it above and beyond the inevitably politicized realm of cultural representation. In contradistinction to this understanding, I argue that revenge fantasies articulate an aspiration to break free of the constraints that filmic representations of Holocaust victimhood have placed on Jewish identity.

Criticizing Jewish revenge fantasies for “turning Jews into Nazis” ignores this trend’s critical potential to reflect what I take to be a significant shift in the attitude of both the producers of contemporary films and their audience. What has become clear, upon examining these films closely, is that they endeavor to transcend the well established reluctance to act out Jewish rage, along the lines noted above. Rather, they show how the very parameters of socially acceptable Holocaust representation are changing as living links to the Shoah grow scarcer and traumatic memory becomes further dislocated from its historical bases. In the following pages, I will first examine how entrenched aesthetic demands placed on Holocaust representations have effectively proscribed representations of Jewish rage. Then, through close readings of the revenge fantasies in *X-Men: First Class* and *Inglourious Basterds*, I will make the case that we miss the point if we read them simply as historically inaccurate, voyeuristic spectacles or callous examples of Holocaust inversion.

The value of Jewish revenge fantasies lies instead in their status as meta-commentaries. One might say that, with malice aforethought, they calculatingly distance themselves from the usual defining goal of Holocaust films, which film historian Annette Insdorf distils as that of “finding an appropriate language for that which is mute or defies visualization” (xv). Rather, their value arises from the ways in which they satirically or at least self-consciously cite, invert, and overstate conventional cinematic representations of Jews. In
so doing, to use scholar Eric Kligerman’s phrasing, they “dismantle . . . the reified modes of representing catastrophic history and Jews themselves, and provoke . . . the spectator to think anew questions pertaining to these representations” (139). This, then, becomes a means of contesting the stereotypes of Jewish identity and historical experience by endowing Jewish characters with exaggerated violent behavior that—while typical, normal, and expected from the onscreen gentile enemies of the Jews—had previously been cinematically construed as quintessentially un-Jewish. Rather than simply dismiss revenge fantasies as morally relativistic films in which Jews become equated with Nazis and which therefore blur the historical record, we would do better to read their foregrounded mode of antirealism as a critical gesture meant to reveal the overly simplistic double-standard portrayed by clichéd images of Jews as inherently peaceful or passive versus their enemies, who are portrayed as naturally, even inherently, violent.¹

PROHIBITIONS ON REPRESENTING JEWISH RAGE

To explain the absence until recently of Jewish revenge fantasies and their recent recrudescence, it is necessary to consider two related factors that have effectively stigmatized this kind of film. The first is a broader social proscription against representing Jewish rage after the Holocaust and the second a more medium-specific set of unwritten rules around Holocaust films that have long discouraged filmmakers from addressing rage and revenge and stigmatized those who have.

To the first point: narratives of Jewish vengeance do not mesh well with broader tendencies to Americanize Holocaust representations, to tell the history of Jewish victimhood through redemptive Christological narratives that emphasize “turning the other cheek,” and transform an ethnically specific genocide into a drama where there is a clear-cut, moral dichotomy of wholly good victims versus utterly evil perpetrators (Flanzbaum; Roskies). To the contrary, they frustrate the desire, so often reflected in Holocaust films, to redeem the Shoah by casting it as a universalized morality tale about the dangers of intolerance. If a film appears to blur moral distinctions between “evil Nazi perpetrators” and “good Jewish victims,” it threatens the Holocaust’s status as what Jeffrey Shandler characterizes as the “master moral paradigm” of American life (xvii). Because of this tendency to memorialize the Holocaust in ways that
allow posterity to instrumentalize it for contemporary political and social agendas, a stigma has become attached to representations of Jewish rage, even historically accurate ones.

One finds a characteristic instance of the taboo around representations of Jewish rage in the memoirs of Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel. The story behind Wiesel’s international bestseller *Night* (1960) typifies the history of downplaying Jewish sentiments for vengeance in art and literature and concurrently establishing a more passive, martyr-like figure as the archetypical survivor. In “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage,” Naomi Seidman has shown how Wiesel replaced the ethnic specificity and angry tone of his 1954 Yiddish-language memoir *Un di velt hot geshvign* (in English, *And the World Remained Silent*) with the more gentile-friendly French-language version, *La Nuit* (1958), the basis of the English translation *Night*. Seidman points to a controversial passage at the book’s end describing how liberated Jewish prisoners from Buchenwald behaved after liberation. In *Un di velt hot geshvign*, Wiesel writes, “Early the next day Jewish boys ran off to Weimar to steal clothing and potatoes. And to rape gentile girls [un tsu fargvaldikn daytsh shikses]. The historical commandment of revenge was not fulfilled” (Vizel, [Wiesel] *Un di velt* 244, cited in Seidman 6). The French and English versions render the passage as “dormir avec des femmes” and “to sleep with local girls” phrasings that imply consent, not rape, rage, and revenge. Seidman reads this editing as symptomatic of a broader attempt to soft-peddle Jewish history to the conservative postwar social and political norms of an overwhelmingly gentile readership. The anger, desire for vengeance, and tone of historic specificity in the Yiddish version takes on a more passive, metaphysical feel in translation. Wiesel and other Jews may have publicly muted sentiments for vengeance, but these feelings clearly persisted, even if they were confined to Jewish circles. They permeated literature created within wartime ghettos, most famously Hirsh Glik’s *Partizaner Lid*, and persisted in Holocaust memorial (*yizker*) books. For instance, the *yizker* book commemorating Brzezany, Poland includes an anecdote about “The Avenging Jew—Yankel (Yankale) Fenger,” who was “a mysterious figure who took revenge of the *goyim* for every act of hurting Jews” (Zlatkes 452). Similarly, the *Yizker-bukh Chelm* includes a Yiddish-language poem simply entitled “Nekome, nekome!” (Revenge, revenge!) (Bakalczuk 585–86).

The atypical nature of episodes of revenge does not by itself account for the absence of cinematic Jewish revenge fantasies. Indeed, popular Holocaust films disproportionately focus on atypical stories, particularly exceptional stories of survival by Jews such as *Europa Europa* (1990), *Schindler’s List* (1993),
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The Pianist (2002), The Counterfeiters (2007) or, in the case of Germans, valiant anti-Nazi resistance, as in Sophie Scholl: die letzten Tage (2005) or Valkyrie (2008). One must instead consider a second major impediment to the widespread depiction of Jewish rage and the concurrent tendency to downplay Jewish anger and emphasize Jewish passivity. This impediment has been codified in unwritten rules for representing the Shoah.

The scholar Terence Des Pres identified “three basic commandments” that artists, writers, and especially filmmakers have felt the need to follow if they wanted to be taken seriously. According to Des Pres, a Holocaust representation’s legitimacy has long depended on how successfully it approaches the genocide 1) as historically unique, 2) with historical accuracy, and 3) in a solemn and serious way. Film historian Aaron Kerner argues that these protocols have significantly limited what sorts of cultural artifacts are even considered Holocaust films. Following Millicent Marcus and Imre Kertész, Kerner suggests that such rules have promoted a form of “Holocaust fundamentalism” or “Holocaust conformism” (Kerner 1–2). Holocaust films can easily become formulaic exercises that foreclose genuinely critical investigations of history and memory in favor of a lazy reliance on aesthetic orthodoxies that fetishize historical authenticity yet fail to render it in a truly realistic manner. These unwritten but reified standards condition how filmmakers address the Holocaust if they desire respectability or even acknowledgment. The criticisms around Inglourious Basterds are typical for those films that take liberties with Holocaust history or that approach it irreverently. They are quickly dismissed and subsumed under a critical discourse that labels them as irresponsible, historically inaccurate, tasteless, insensitive, and fodder for Holocaust deniers.

Recent Jewish revenge fantasies regularly run afoul of Des Pres’s rules, particularly in their demand for fidelity to the historical record. Revenge fantasies are in part “historically inauthentic” because of the scarcity of episodes of post-Holocaust Jewish vengeance. Anecdotes exist about armed Jewish Nokmim (“avengers”), unrealized revenge plots to poison Munich’s water supply, and former Nazis found murdered in roadside ditches or hanging from nooses in staged suicides (see, e.g., Elkins; Cohen). But such episodes were exceptions to the rule. Elie Wiesel explained this absence of widespread revenge in his 1996 memoir All Rivers Run to the Sea:

Jewish avengers were few in number, their thirst for vengeance brief. . . . Jewish survivors had every reason in the world to seize weapons and go from city to city, village to village, punishing the guilty and terrorizing their accomplices. The world would have said
nothing, everyone would have understood. But with the exception of a few units of the Palestinian Jewish Brigade who swept through Germany tracking down and punishing the murderers of our people, the Jews, for metaphysical and ethical reasons rooted in their history, chose another path . . . (142).

While Wiesel credits Jewish morality for stemming violent reprisals, historian David Cesarini attributes it to the more banal matter of logistics. More of the guilty were not punished, Cesarini notes, “because it would have been a never-ending task” (Freedland). But whether metaphysics or pragmatics account for the lack of episodes of Jewish revenge, we are left with a syllogism that would seem to explain the absence of cinematic revenge fantasies when matched with the tendency to represent Jewish victims as passive martyrs: if a Holocaust film’s aesthetic legitimacy depends on its willingness to tell the truth, and if one truth of the Holocaust is that Jews were overwhelmingly victims rather than avengers, then Holocaust films must first and foremost narrate the story of the Holocaust as a story of Jewish victimhood.

THE RETURN OF THE JEWISH REVENGE FANTASY—X-MEN: FIRST CLASS AND INGLORIOUS BASTERDS

The absence of post-Holocaust films in which the Nazis get their comeuppance has never been absolute. For instance, Lawrence Baron points to films between 1944–59 that subjected Nazi war criminals to “trial by audience.” Aaron Kerner points to films with more explicit violence, notably pulp thrillers such as Zbyněk Brynych’s 1967 film Já, spravedlnost (I, Justice, about a group of Czechs who kidnap and torture Hitler after discovering that the Führer faked his suicide), The Odessa File (1974, in which a freelance journalist infiltrates and unravels an organization of unrepentant Nazis after the war) and The Boys from Brazil (1978, about the cloning of Hitler) (75). But where these films were sporadic exceptions, in which the avengers were also not necessarily Jewish, the last decade or so has seen a steadier flow of revenge fantasies with Jewish protagonists. In The New Jew in Film, in fact, Nathan Abrams argues that, “films in which Jews fight back during the Shoah, setting out to reverse the representation of European Jews as simply helpless passive victims of the Nazis, proliferate in contemporary cinema” (117). Consider some examples that, to greater and lesser extents, thematize muscular Judaism and Jewish vengeance:
• Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* (2005) tells a story of Mossad agents who systematically hunt down and assassinate the Palestinians responsible for the murder of the Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics;

• Paul Verhoeven’s *Black Book* (2006) concerns a Dutch Jewess cabaret singer who joins the resistance, infiltrates the Nazi occupation government in wartime Netherlands, and uses her feminine wiles to avenge her family’s murder by the Nazis;

• *Defiance* (2008) dramatizes the story of Jewish partisans in Belorussia. Director Edward Zwick based the film on Holocaust scholar Nechama Tec’s true story of the Bielski brothers and stated that he made the film to correct the misimpression engendered by the past sixty years of Holocaust movies that “all Jews went meekly to the ovens” (Arnold);

• Director John Madden’s *The Debt* (2010), an adaptation of Assaf Bernstein’s 2007 Israeli film of the same name, follows a team of Mossad agents in 1965 that infiltrates East Germany to kidnap a Nazi doctor, who used Jews in horrific medical experiments;

• In Jonathan Kesselman’s farce *The Hebrew Hammer* (2003), comically stylized hard-boiled Jewish private investigator—“a certified circumcised private dick”—named Mordechai Jefferson Carver fights to prevent Santa Claus’s evil son Damian from destroying Hanukkah and monopolizing the Christmas season exclusively for Christians.

What emerges from this cursory list is not only the variety of genres (war films, spy thrillers, comedy), but also the variety of the representational modes. Where films such as *Defiance, Munich* and both versions of *The Debt* operate in distinctly realist idioms, *X-Men: First Class* and *Inglourious Basterds* make few claims to mimesis. For this reason, conservative critics are quick to read the latter types as evidence of Holocaust-denial, inversion, or trivialization—since these films brazenly violate the unwritten rules. The criticism is not entirely
fair, because even putatively “realistic” films regularly take their own liberties with history in order to maintain the aura of uniqueness around the Holocaust that makes it amenable to instrumentalization for political ends. *Defiance*, for instance, utterly sidesteps the issue of the Bielski partisans’ potential complicity in the Naliboki massacre of Poles in 1943 in favor of a more black-and-white depiction of Jewish victimhood transformed into vengeance (cf. Brostoff). The “antirealist” revenge fantasies in particular demand analysis because they suggest that as the memory of the genocide becomes increasingly available only through mediated forms rather than memory of direct historical experience, attitudes that demand strict realism and all due reverence are changing.

In the remainder of this essay I will examine how two “antirealist” Jewish revenge fantasies, in particular—*X-Men: First Class* and *Inglourious Basterds*—suggest that this broadening of approaches to Holocaust representations corresponds to widespread fatigue with familiar depictions of Jews as victims. In a recent essay, Jackson Katz notes that audiences’ positive responses to two recent Jewish revenge fantasies, *Defiance* (2008) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), “suggests that a generational shift may be underway in how Jewish-American men (and women) approach the topic of historic Jewish victimization: by constructing and nourishing a counter-narrative of violent Jewish resistance to Gentile (including Arab and Muslim) violence” (71). Central to this shift is the rejection of stereotypical notions of Jewish masculinity as frequently represented in the past in popular Holocaust cinema, which is to say, men who are weak and victimized. In addition to Ben Kingsley’s accountant character in *Schindler’s List*, for instance, whom critic Ilene Rosenzweig dubbed “the king of the Jewish wimps,” other examples include Roberto Benigni’s clever neurotic in 1997’s *Life is Beautiful*; Adrian Brody’s Academy Award-winning portrayal of Władysław Szpilman, the sensitive artist and title character of Roman Polanski’s 2002 *The Pianist*; and Jack Scanlon as Shmuel, the “Boy in the Striped Pajamas” from the 2008 film of the same name, who is quick to forgive a betrayal by his gentile counterpart Bruno even when it causes an SS-man to beat him brutally (Rich). The violent Jews in *X-Men: First Class* and *Inglourious Basterds* invert these images, not in a revisionist spirit whose aim is to violate the truth of Jewish victimhood, but rather more as calculated departures that play off films that have long depicted Jews as the “ultimate victims,” thus developing a competitive model of memory (Rothberg 3).
**X-MEN: FIRST CLASS—A COMIC BOOK REVENGE FANTASY**

In explaining his use of comics as the medium for his genre defying work *Maus* (1986, 1991), Art Spiegelman points to Holocaust cinema’s propensity for realism: “Most dramatic films have a hard time with the Holocaust as a subject because of the medium’s tendency toward verisimilitude and reproduction of reality through moving photographic images. Holocaust movies usually look like they’re populated by fairly well-fed inmates, for example” (*Metamaus* 166).

While director Michael Vaughn’s *X-Men: First Class* (2011) is obviously not a cartoon, at least in a literal sense, this comic book adaptation’s utilization of “comic book like” exaggerations create a useful medium through which to cite iconic tropes, settings, and dialogue of Holocaust films as a way to draw attention to their reified character. Just as Spiegelman uses animals to represent ethnicities and nationalities, *X-Men: First Class* distills characters into types, notably superheroes and villains who further serve as proxies for moral positions.

*X-Men: First Class* begins in the clichéd cinematic space that metonymically embodies the Holocaust: Auschwitz. Conforming to the conventions of superhero comics, it opens with the origin story of the mutant super-villain Magneto (Michael Fassbender). In this opening scene, a Josef Mengele-like Nazi doctor, Klaus Schmidt (Kevin Bacon) murders the mother of the young Jewish boy Erik Lensherr, when Erik fails to demonstrate his mutant powers of telekinesis. The casting of the prolific actor Kevin Bacon as Schmidt elicits an effect of disassociation because Bacon has appeared in so many different genres. Popular audiences recognize Bacon from films such as *Footloose*, *Wild Things*, or *JFK*, and thus his role as a hyperbolically evil Nazi doctor strips away the gravitas from *X-Men: First Class* by acknowledging its status as a filmic commodity. Where Schmidt is exaggeratedly evil, Lensherr and his mother are also stock Holocaust characters, both weak and effeminate.

In the rest of the film, Lensherr, now known as Magneto and in full command of his ability to manipulate metals from a distance, seeks out Schmidt (now known by the alias Sebastian Shaw), who has escaped to South America after the war. The film features two notable revenge fantasy scenes that exaggerate and invert both Jewish stereotypes and the trite tropes of Holocaust cinema. In one early scene, Magneto travels to Switzerland to find out information about Shaw’s whereabouts. When the Nazi-accommodating Swiss banker plays dumb and refuses to reveal any information, Magneto uses his mutant power to extract the banker’s tooth-filling. This dental torture mimetically reenacts Nazi violence against Jews and the desecration of Jewish corpses by scavenging...
their teeth for dental gold. Even more to the point, it conspicuously inverts the most infamous scene of *Marathon Man*. There, Laurence Olivier’s character, the Nazi dentist Christian Szell repeatedly asks Dustin Hoffman’s character Babe Levy “Is it safe?” a code phrase that Levy does not understand. Levy is the height of Jewish passivity—he does not physically resist as a Nazi tortures him and can only try to end the pain through his cleverness, as when he states “yes, it’s safe” in the hope that this response will appease the Nazi doctor. *X-Men: First Class* radically turns inside-out the passivity of the earlier film. Although Magneto could use his mutant power in any number of ways to torture the dentist, he chooses to reenact the specific form of Nazi violence against a Jew from *Marathon Man*. This cinematic citation invites critical viewers to understand *X-Men: First Class* not simply as a voyeuristic fantasy, but as an active challenge to reified images of Jewish victimhood in Holocaust films. The film is not re-writing the Holocaust—mutant heroes and villains with comic book superpower make it clear that authenticity and historical revisionism are not the point. Rather, *X-Men: First Class* is one of many films that challenges the virtual monopoly that Holocaust films have long maintained on the way Jewish identity is represented to mass audiences and, by implication, the use and even abuse of that image for various political ends.

In a second revenge fantasy scene, Magneto travels to South America in the early 1960s in search of Sebastian Shaw, much as Israeli agents did in order to capture Adolf Eichmann. While Magneto does not find Shaw, he does find some of the war criminal’s accomplices in a bar in a small village. The scene exaggerates and parodies the *mise-en-scène* and iconography of other cinematic genres. As one would expect in a “saloon brawl,” evocative of westerns and spy thrillers, the tense dialogue within a cramped space slowly builds suspense before the inevitable explosion of violence. In a nod to the visual tropes of Holocaust cinema, Magneto exposes the concentration camp prisoner tattoo on his forearm to reveal his identity right before the violence begins. Magneto then uses his telekinesis to murder Shaw’s accomplices in a manner that symbolically reenacts anti-Semitic stereotypes. He makes them aim and shoot their (metal) guns at each other and manipulates a knife to nail an unrepentant Nazi’s hand to a wooden table before killing him. Through this protracted, symbolic crucifixion, Magneto would seem to reenact and even embrace the stereotype of the Christ-killing Jew. The scene recycles the reified cinematic iconography of Nazism: the Germans drink beer from large steins, and the dagger used in the symbolic crucifixion bears the SS motto “Meine Ehre heißt Treue” (“my honor is loyalty”) to reinforce the Nazis’ standing as villains. The
Nazis are exaggerated, comic book types—at once cold, unrepentant, and superhumanly evil.

These scenes show how X-Men: First Class does not simply “take liberties with history.” Understanding its comic book form is critical for understanding its content, because the exaggerations, to which comic books give license, expose the film’s political dimensions. By underscoring the novelty of portraying Jewish vengeance, the scene invites viewers to reflect critically on it. And many have. Writing in Haaretz, Doron Fishler reads Magneto’s trauma—his use of the clichéd phrase “Never Again!” his statement that he is Frankenstein’s monster in search of his creator, and his ultimate failure to end a cycle of violence and retribution—as a critical meditation on the history of the state of Israel (Fishler).

**INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS—THE BEAR JEW AS A CINEMATIC PASTICHE**

As with the comic book science fiction thriller X-Men: First Class, the form of Inglourious Basterds activates a critical dialogue with the history of World War II and Holocaust films. The Bear Jew scene cited at the beginning of this essay typifies Tarantino’s *modus operandi*, which is to reconstitute popular film genres in a pastiche. Just as Tarantino recycled the motifs and narrative conceits of Hong Kong kung fu and Japanese sword fighting (*chanbara*) films in his Kill Bill series (2003, 2004) and paid homage to the Blaxploitation genre in Jackie Brown (1997), Inglourious Basterds teems with citations from Holocaust and World War II films, Spaghetti westerns, and Nazisploitation movies. Its title deliberately misspells Enzo Castellari’s 1978 mission film Quel maledetto treno blindato, released in English as the correctly spelled The Inglorious Bastards. Because he peppers his films with B-movie references, Tarantino has invited criticism for privileging film historical references over history itself.³

However, this self-referential focus on cinematic history is the space of the film’s critical politics. Like other Jewish revenge fantasies, Inglourious Basterds rejects the demand for verisimilar representation. The liberties it takes with history are central to its ability to produce alienation effects in audiences and encourage them to rethink their image of Jewish identities. The ways the setting, music, and dialogue of The Bear Jew episode invert film history and recode Jewish masculinity epitomize how revenge fantasies violate the taboo
on representing Jewish rage. Tarantino creates a Jewish male who is less stereotypical than the victimized Jewish males in other recent Holocaust films when his pathological and psychopathic behavior disrupts audience expectations. This disruption of expectations creates an opportunity to reflect on them.

From the outset, the scene’s setting draws attention to itself as spectacle. Brad Pitt’s character Sgt. Raine, the gentile leader of the otherwise Jewish unit known as the “Basterds,” welcomes a captured German officer’s refusal to divulge enemy positions. Raine knows the only recourse will be to call in The Bear Jew to execute the German. This possibility pleases him because “[W]atchin’ Donny [Donny Donowitz, aka, “The Bear Jew”] beat Nazis to death is the closest we ever get to goin’ to the movies.” With such dialogue, the film points to the status of World War II and Holocaust films as entertainment, whatever pretensions they may harbor as historical documentation or vehicles of witness-bearing.

As The Bear Jew enters the scene to execute the German (fig. 2; Pl. XII), dramatic and suspenseful but historically dislocated music produces an alienation effect. Composed by Ennio Morricone and entitled “La Resa,” Italian for “the Surrender,” this soundtrack was featured in Sergio Sollima’s 1966 Spaghetti Western La Resa dei conti, meaning “the settling of accounts” but released in English as The Big Gundown. Visually, The Bear Jew scene directly mimics the shots of La Resa dei conti, even though Sollima’s film is a western about a vigilante lawman who tracks down a Mexican peasant accused of raping and murdering a young girl—seemingly, a far cry from a Holocaust film. Through Morricone’s music, however, the scene draws attention to the way that films about the Shoah, like pulp westerns, are fundamentally commodities, whatever
their pretentions as serious artworks or social commentaries. The ominous music begins to play after Sgt. Raine has called in The Bear Jew from his cave (the tunnel) to kill the German officer. Tarantino builds tension by extending the scene of the avenger emerging from the cave. One expects to see a monster, a bear, or other creature worthy of the low-pitched, powerful brass music, but when The Bear Jew is revealed as the conspicuously Semitic-featured actor and horror film director Eli Roth, viewers are again invited to reflect on the genre they are seeing and on their expectations of what Jews should look like. Quite simply, The Bear Jew would appear to be not the monster that the music sets him up to be, at least not at first glance.

Like the setting and the music, the scene’s stock characters and well-worn dialogue parody the staples of World War II and Holocaust films. The Bear Jew scene draws attention to the fossilized nature of dialogue in World War II and Holocaust films by exaggerating it and by inverting the power relationships in which characters manifest clichés. The captured German officer repeatedly switches generic types. When asked to reveal German positions, he first performs as the honorable officer and platitudinously states, with hand on heart, “I respectfully refuse.” After refusing demands to tell the Americans where the Germans have set up snipers nests, he morphs into another cliché of Holocaust films: the zealous anti-Semite who screams “fuck you and your Jew dogs!” in a frothing rage. Such dialogue draws attention to screenwriting conventions by inverting the power dynamics in which such familiar dialogue is spoken. In revenge fantasies, Jews use these ready-made phrases to ritually humiliate Germans just as Germans have been humiliating Jews in decades of Holocaust films. For his part, The Bear Jew also shifts roles. Just before he becomes the psychopathic embodiment of Jewish rage, he stops to remind us that this is not how we usually see him. Seconds before he clubs the German to death, he cocks his head slightly to the side and we see not the face of a violent killer, but a tender look characteristic of the “gentle Jew” stereotypes. But just as quickly, he switches roles. Holocaust films have long presented Germans as utterly indifferent to Jewish death, and here, The Bear Jew takes on this same blasé attitude. He callously shouts mock sports-announcer commentary as he clubs the German to death, coarsely screaming “Teddy Fucking Williams knocks it out of the park!” The callousness and casual disregard for human life is so gratuitously exaggerated that it loudly points to the possibility of other kinds of Jews than just victims.
JEWSH REVENGE FANTASIES AND JEWSH CULTURAL ASPIRATIONS

In the broadest sense, Jewish revenge fantasies like those depicted in the scenes from *Inglourious Basterds* and *X-Men: First Class* are nothing new. Indeed, Paul Wegener’s *The Golem* (1920), a canonical moment of early film, explicitly concerns the Golem as an avenging figure of Jewish myth. Nonetheless, the recent boom of Jewish revenge fantasies clearly speaks to a more recent history, specifically that of the post-Holocaust stigmatization of Jewish rage. It often seems as though there is no alternative to the vicious circle, in which Jewish characters are perpetually relegated to cinematic victimhood or, if they morph from victims into victimizers, they then garner criticism for “stooping to the level of the Nazis.”

As we have seen, this type of filmic gamesmanship, whose moves play with and against the clichés of cinematic history opens up a critical space that displaces the dichotomy between reality and revenge fantasy of the Shoah, even if ongoing controversies bespeak the entrenched status of social and aesthetic conventions about Holocaust representation. We can reasonably read this shift as embodying the desire that Jewish identity be represented on-screen in a manner that accords with the increasing diversity of Jewish experience and identity in the early-twenty-first century. Jewish revenge fantasies embody the cultural aspirations of this younger generation that Caryn Aviv and David Shneer have termed “The New Jews.” According to Aviv and Shneer, the “New Jews” no longer view themselves through the received identity categories of the past, especially the dichotomies of the rootless, effete, passive, Yiddish-speaking Jew of the diaspora contrasted to the rooted, masculine, active, and Hebrew-speaking Zionist. “The New Jews” perceive a sense of rootedness in diverse geographic and cultural settings and embrace more free-spirited interpretations of Jewish identity. One ultimate goal for these younger generations would seem to be that they want neither to be perpetrators nor victims, but to escape any such stereotypical categories that then tend to become the inflexible bases for political agendas. Jewish revenge fantasies simply represent one dazzling aspect of that cultural aspiration.
Notes

1. In that a broader discussion of the history of representations of Jewish masculinity exceeds the bounds of this essay, see also Boyarin; Breines; Rosenberg.

2. This image was recently buttressed in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), a film that has grossed over $600 million and been criticized for its anti-Semitic imagery. See Fredriksen; Garber.

3. Austin Fisher argues that Tarantino’s constant allusions to other films are divorced from their original socio-political contexts. Tarantino has “sealed them within the hermetic world of movie quotations inhabited most conspicuously by Tarantino” (200).
Works Cited


Garber, Z., ed. Mel Gibson’s Passion: The Film, the Controversy and Its Implications. West Lafayette: Purdue Univ., 2006.


