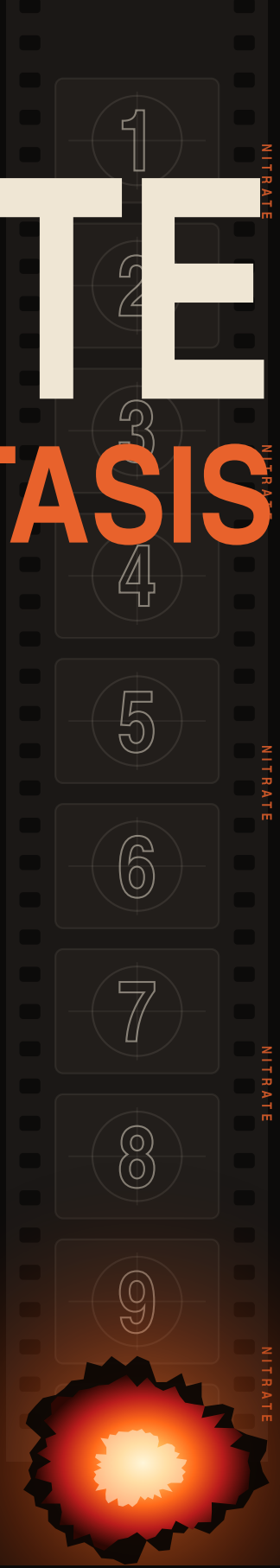
A DISSERTATION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF FILM

NITRATE APOKATASTASIS

Wild Justice, Archive Fever, and the Revenge against "It Was" in the Works of Quentin Tarantino



THREE PARTS · NINE CHAPTERS · ONE FIRE

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SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that the works of Quentin Tarantino — nine directorial features (1992–2019), the screenplays realised by other hands, the 2021 novelisation of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, and the critical memoir *Cinema Speculation* (2022) — articulate a coherent if unsystematic philosophy whose organising drive is what Nietzsche's Zarathustra calls the will's revulsion (*Widerwille*) against time and its "It was." Against the two paradigms that have governed the critical literature — the Jamesonian diagnosis of "blank" pastiche, and the moralist diagnosis of an aestheticised, nihilistic violence — it contends that the oeuvre's citationality, its logorrhoeic dialogue, its choreographed brutality, and its late turn to counterfactual history are homologous expressions of a single operation, here named **nitrate apokatastasis**: the restoration of everything that has been discarded (degraded genres, abandoned careers, unredeemed historical victims) through an act of cinematic expenditure in which the image's own material support is sacrificed so that the image may do justice. The term fuses the patristic doctrine of the *apokatastasis pantōn* (Acts 3:21; Origen), Walter Benjamin's "historical apocatastasis" and "weak messianic power," and the conflagration of nitrate film that consumes the Nazi high command at the climax of *Inglourious Basterds* (2009).

Part I reconstructs the oeuvre's genealogies: an aesthetics of the discarded descending from Pauline Kael, Manny Farber, Susan Sontag, Aby Warburg, and Ernst Bloch's theory of *Kolportage*; a practice-internal ethics of the samurai, the gunslinger, and the hardboiled professional, read through Alasdair MacIntyre, Nietzsche's genealogy of debt, and the theory of moral luck; and a doctrine of the sovereignty of speech,

read through J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Hannah Arendt. Part II analyses violence through René Girard's theory of mimetic crisis — for which the Mexican standoff is proposed as the oeuvre's formal primal scene — and through Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben; it then reads the counterfactual triptych (*Inglourious Basterds*, *Django Unchained*, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*) against Nietzsche's doctrine of redemption, Benjamin's theses on history, Bloch's utopian fairy tale, Hayden White's theory of emplotment, and the post-Holocaust prohibition on images. A chapter on ontology finds in the forged Lincoln letter of *The Hateful Eight* (2015) an emblem of the whole: a fiction avowed as false yet efficacious, formalised here as the **Lincoln Letter Principle** and related to Plato's noble lie, Ernest Renan's theory of national forgetting, Octave Mannoni's formula of fetishistic disavowal, and Gilles Deleuze's "powers of the false." A chapter on race and gender tests the argument against bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Laura Mulvey, and Carol Clover. Part III situates the oeuvre among works of speculative and philosophical fiction, from Kyd, Middleton, Cervantes, Kleist, and Dumas to Borges, Eco, Philip K. Dick, Vonnegut, Octavia Butler, Pynchon, Ballard, and Alan Moore.

The original contribution is a theory in four propositions (the Archive, the Tongue, the Counterfactual, the Lincoln Letter) and two corollaries: the **Asymmetry Principle**, by which the oeuvre grants victims an "It was not" while branding perpetrators with an indelible "It was"; and the **Theodicy of Trash**, by which cinema redeems its own historical complicity by turning its apparatus against those who abused it. The dissertation concludes that Tarantino's revenge against time is transfigured, at its most accomplished, into an elegiac *amor fati* — revenge in content, mourning in form — because the spectator's retained knowledge of what was converts each counterfactual triumph into an act of remembrance; and that the oeuvre fails precisely where this double consciousness collapses into consolation.

NITRATE APOKATASTASIS

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PRELIMINARIES

NOTE ON CORPUS, CITATION, AND METHOD

The corpus is arranged in three concentric rings. The inner ring comprises the nine features that Tarantino himself counts as his directorial oeuvre, *Kill Bill* being reckoned a single film in two volumes. The middle ring comprises screenplays realised by other directors and minor directorial work: *True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994, from a story Tarantino later disowned in its realised form), *From Dusk Till Dawn* (Robert Rodriguez, 1996), the segment "The Man from Hollywood" in *Four Rooms* (1995), and the unfinished amateur feature *My Best Friend's Birthday* (1987), much of which is reported to have been lost to a laboratory fire — a detail that will acquire unexpected significance, since the oeuvre thus begins, as it will climax, with the combustion of its own archive. The outer ring comprises the prose works (the 2021 novelisation of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and the critical memoir *Cinema Speculation*, 2022), the published interviews, and the *Django/Zorro* comic co-written with Matt Wagner (2014).

A Tarantino-scripted sequel directed by David Fincher, *The Further Misadventures of Cliff Booth* (announced under the working title *The Adventures of Cliff Booth*), is set in 1977 Los Angeles and scheduled for an IMAX release on 25 November 2026, followed by global streaming on Netflix on 23 December 2026 (source). It lies beyond the analytical corpus. It is nonetheless a horizon of the argument: the oeuvre's continuation has passed, before the announced tenth directorial feature has been made, into the keeping of the stunt double — the figure Chapter 6 identifies as the ontological hinge of the late work. The tenth feature, which Tarantino has repeatedly declared will be his last, had not entered production at the time of writing, *The Movie Critic* having been abandoned in 2024.

YEAR	WORK	TARANTINO'S ROLE	PRINCIPAL INTERTEXTS
1987	*My Best Friend's Birthday*	Co-writer, director (unfinished)	Screwball and romantic comedy
1992	*Reservoir Dogs*	Writer-director	*The Killing* (1956); *City on Fire* (1987); *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974)
1993	*True Romance*	Writer (dir. Tony Scott)	*Badlands* (1973); Sonny Chiba's *The Street Fighter* (1974)
1994	*Natural Born Killers*	Story (dir. Oliver Stone)	*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); tabloid television
1994	*Pulp Fiction*	Writer-director (story with Roger Avary)	*Black Mask* pulp; *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955); *Bande à part* (1964); *The Bodyguard* (1976)
1995	"The Man from Hollywood" (*Four Rooms*)	Writer-director	Roald Dahl, "Man from the South" (1948)
1996	*From Dusk Till Dawn*	Writer (dir. Robert Rodriguez)	Heist film; vampire film; the Mexican border western
1997	*Jackie Brown*	Writer-director	Elmore Leonard, *Rum Punch* (1992); *Coffy* (1973); *Foxy Brown* (1974)
2003–04	*Kill Bill*, Vols. 1–2	Writer-director	*Lady Snowblood* (1973); *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978); *The Bride Wore Black* (1968); *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968)
2007	*Death Proof*	Writer-director	*Vanishing Point* (1971); the slasher film; the car-chase exploitation cycle
2009	*Inglourious Basterds*	Writer-director	*The Inglorious Bastards* (1978); *The Dirty Dozen* (1967); the Leone western
2012	*Django Unchained*	Writer-director	*Django* (1966); *Mandingo* (1975); the Nibelung saga
2015	*The Hateful Eight*	Writer-director	*The Great Silence* (1968); *The Thing* (1982); the closed-room mystery

YEAR	WORK	TARANTINO'S ROLE	PRINCIPAL INTERTEXTS
2019	*Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*	Writer-director	Leone's *Once Upon a Time* films; *Lancer* (1968–70); *The Wrecking Crew* (1968)
2021	*Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (novel)	Author	The paperback movie tie-in; the Hollywood novel
2022	*Cinema Speculation*	Author	Pauline Kael; the New Hollywood and exploitation cinema of the 1970s

Three conventions govern citation. First, films are cited by title and year, and scenes by the chapter titles the films themselves supply wherever they do so. Second, dialogue is paraphrased rather than transcribed, save for phrases of a few words; this is a matter of method as much as of propriety, since the argument concerns the pragmatics of speech — what utterances do — rather than their letter. Third, philosophical and literary texts are cited by edition-independent locators (Stephanus and Bekker numbers, aphorism and section numbers, Benjamin's thesis numbers, act and scene); translations from German and French, where given, are the author's own.

The method may be called philosophical formalism. Its premise, shared with Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed* (1971), Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema* volumes (1983, 1985), and Jacques Rancière's *Film Fables* (2001), is that films think in and through their forms, so that the proper unit of analysis is the recurrent formal figure — the standoff, the chapter title, the trunk shot, the forged text, the double, the needle-dropped song — read as a philosopheme. Two further procedures supplement it. The first is genealogical in the Nietzschean and Foucauldian sense: an idea is traced not to a pure origin but to the scattered descents, borrowings, and misprisions through which it arrived. The second is constellational in Benjamin's sense, from the epistemo-critical prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book (1928): comparison does not establish influence but arranges disparate works so that an idea becomes legible in the configuration they form, as a figure appears only when stars are read together. Throughout, "Tarantino" names

what Foucault called an author-function — the principle of unity of a body of texts — rather than a biographical person, except where the biography has itself been made into text: the video-store clerkship, the repertory cinema, the pledge of ten films.



INTRODUCTION

“The Little Differences”

Prolegomena to a Tarantinian Philosophy

> *The archive is, by its chemistry, an incendiary.*

I

A hamburger in Paris

Before the hitmen of *Pulp Fiction* (1994) have killed anyone, they have argued about a hamburger. Returning from Amsterdam, Vincent Vega reports that in Paris the Quarter Pounder with Cheese has been renamed on account of the metric system, and that what strikes him about Europe is not its difference but its little differences. Criticism has treated the exchange as the emblem of a manner — the digressive, pop-literate "cool" that became the most imitated idiom of 1990s American cinema. This dissertation reads it instead as a methodological allegory, a miniature into which the whole of Tarantino's philosophy is folded.

Five features of the exchange deserve notice. First, the object is identical and only its name has changed: the scene stages repetition with difference, the structure that Gilles Deleuze placed at the centre of a post-representational metaphysics in *Difference and Repetition* (1968), and which Tarantino's cinema adopts as its mode of production, since every film re-serves an existing genre under a new name. Second, the renaming is effected by a system of measurement. Genre, too, is a metric — a convention by which experience is portioned — and translation between genres (the samurai film into the western, the blaxploitation film into the crime novel, the men-on-a-mission picture into the Holocaust fable) is a conversion of units. Third, Vincent's knowledge is hearsay: he reports what *they* call things. The anonymous "they" is Heidegger's *das Man* (*Being and Time*, 1927, §27), the impersonal authority of convention, and the talk in which it circulates is Heidegger's *Gerede*, idle talk (§35). In Heidegger both mark the fallenness of inauthentic existence; in Tarantino they are revalued as the element in which fellowship, loyalty, and even salvation are negotiated.

Fourth, the conversation takes place en route to a killing and defers it. It is the anteroom of violence, and its mode of deferral — attention lavished upon the incidental — recalls the method that Kierkegaard's aesthete recommends in "The Rotation of Crops" (*Either/Or*, 1843), where

boredom is escaped by fixing upon an arbitrary detail until it yields an unexpected world. Fifth, the sequence culminates in a ritual meal and a counterfeit scripture. Jules eats his victim's hamburger and drinks his victim's soda, then recites a version of Ezekiel 25:17 whose opening sentences appear nowhere in the Bible, and kills him. Meal, sacrifice, and forged scripture: within minutes the film has assembled the archive (repetition with difference), the code (the authority of the "they"), the tongue (talk as deferral), the sacrifice (violence as rite), and the forgery that is nonetheless efficacious. Each subsequent chapter unfolds one of these folds.

II

Against two paradigms

The first paradigm is that of pastiche. Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984) distinguished parody, which retains a satirical impulse and a norm against which deviation is measured, from pastiche, a "blank parody" that imitates dead styles without ulterior motive; and it diagnosed the "nostalgia film" as the symptom of a culture that can no longer represent its own historical present. The early reception of Tarantino was conducted largely in these terms, whether celebratory (the "Tarantinoesque" as detached cool) or diagnostic (Jeffrey Sconce's account of the ironic, nihilistic "smart film," 2002; Dana Polan's reading of *Pulp Fiction* as a cinema of surfaces, 2000).

The objection pressed here is not that Jameson's categories are inapplicable but that the oeuvre inverts them. Its citations are never blank. Benjamin's fourteenth thesis "On the Concept of History" (1940) supplies the corrective concept: fashion's *Tigersprung ins Vergangene*, the tiger's leap into the past, by which the French Revolution cited Rome, blasting a past charged with the time of the now (*Jetztzeit*) out of the continuum of history. For Benjamin citation is the form of revolutionary time and the antithesis of nostalgia, which accepts the continuum and merely mourns what it has lost. Tarantino's citations are tiger's leaps: they do not mourn exploitation cinema; they seize it as unfinished business. Linda Hutcheon's "parody without ridicule" (*A Theory of Parody*, 1985), Umberto Eco's lover

who can declare his passion only by crediting Barbara Cartland with the words (*Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, 1983), and the "metamodern" oscillation between irony and sincerity described by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010) are partial correctives. What each misses is the redemptive, and finally juridical, ambition of the citation: to do justice to what was discarded.

The second paradigm is that of nihilistic violence. Its moralist version holds that the films aestheticise brutality and sever it from consequence; its emblem became Tarantino's refusal, in a 2013 British television interview, to discuss any relation between screen and street violence. Its philosophical version, exemplified by Mark T. Conard's Nietzschean reading of *Pulp Fiction* (2006), takes the films to depict a post-theistic world from which individual characters escape by choosing meaning. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson's *The Tarantinian Ethics* (2001) comes nearest to the present argument, uncovering beneath the cool surface, by way of Bataille and Lacan, an ethics of sovereignty and expenditure. This dissertation retains their Bataillean vocabulary but reorients it. The axis of the Tarantinian ethics is not sovereignty over the moment but a struggle with time — specifically, with the irreversibility of what has been done and suffered.

III

The state of the field

The scholarship falls into four strata. The first, contemporaneous with the films of the 1990s, is biographical and interview-based (Gerald Peary's edited *Interviews*, 1998, revised 2013; the monographs of Jeff Dawson and Jami Bernard, both 1995) or devoted to single films (Polan). The second is theoretical and ethical: Botting and Wilson's Lacanian-Bataillean study; Kent L. Brintnall's reading of the suffering male body in *Reservoir Dogs* as an "incarnational theology" of crucifixion (2004); the analytic essays gathered by Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad in *Quentin Tarantino and Philosophy* (2007). The third is the critique of race and gender, from bell hooks's "Cool Tool" (1995) and Sharon Willis's *High Contrast* (1997) to Lisa Coulthard's reconsideration of feminism and viol-

ence in *Kill Bill* (2007) and Adilifu Nama's *Race on the QT* (2015), the most sustained and qualifiedly appreciative account of blackness in the oeuvre. The fourth, provoked by the counterfactual turn, concerns metacinema and history: Robert von Dassanowsky's collection on *Inglourious Basterds* (2012), Oliver C. Speck's on *Django Unchained* (2014), and David Roche's *Quentin Tarantino: Poetics and Politics of Cinematic Metafiction* (2018).

Three lacunae follow from this stratification. The literature is organised film by film or theme by theme — violence, race, intertextuality, metacinema — and has not shown that the ethics of speech, the aesthetics of the archive, and the counterfactual historiography express a single drive. It has not read the late counterfactuals back into the early films: the resurrection of Vincent Vega by *Pulp Fiction*'s achronological structure is a proto-counterfactual, and Jules's forged Ezekiel is a proto-Lincoln letter. And it has treated the oeuvre's literary and philosophical kin — Jacobean revenge tragedy, the counterfactual novel, the neo-slave narrative, the Borgesian fiction of the archive — as sources to be identified rather than interlocutors whose arguments the films answer.

IV
Thesis and terms

The thesis may be stated in one sentence. Tarantino's oeuvre is organised by the will's revenge against the irreversibility of time, which it pursues through three homologous operations — the aesthetic restoration of discarded forms and persons, the performative sovereignty of speech, and the counterfactual redemption of historical victims — converging upon a single figure, the fiction avowed as false yet efficacious; and this figure both licenses the oeuvre's redemptive ambitions and marks their constitutive limit. Five terms require preliminary definition.

"It was." In the chapter "On Redemption" in the second part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), Nietzsche locates the origin of revenge in the will's impotence before the past: *Dies, ja dies allein ist Rache selber: des Willens Widerwille gegen die Zeit und ihr „Es war"* — "This, yes, this alone is revenge itself: the will's revulsion against time and its 'It was.'" Redemption is not the undoing of the past, which is impossible, but its re-

creation in the will: to transform every "It was" into a "Thus I willed it." The oeuvre traverses the whole of this passage, from the vendetta of *Kill Bill*, through counterfactuals that appear to will backwards — the paradigm case, in Nietzsche's terms, of the spirit of revenge — to a transfiguration of revenge that Chapters 5 and 9 locate in the spectator's double consciousness.

Apokatastasis. The Greek term denotes restoration to an original condition. Acts 3:21 speaks of "the times of restitution of all things" (*apokatastaseōs pantōn*), and Origen's *On First Principles* developed the doctrine of a universal restoration in which every rational creature returns to God — a doctrine condemned in the sixth century. Benjamin, who in "The Storyteller" (1936) detected in Leskov a sympathy with Origen, transposed the concept in the Arcades convolute on the theory of knowledge into a "historical apocatastasis," the entry of the whole past into the present. Tarantino's apokatastasis is at once narrower and more violent: it restores victims and discarded images while damning perpetrators, so that it resembles less Origen's universal return than a Last Judgement staged in a cinema.

Nitrate. Cellulose nitrate was the standard base of 35mm film stock until the early 1950s. It is chemically cognate with guncotton and smokeless powder, and because it supplies its own oxygen its fires cannot be smothered. Film and firearm therefore share a chemistry — a material confirmation of Paul Virilio's thesis, in *War and Cinema* (1984), that cinema and war share a logistics of perception, anticipated by Étienne-Jules Marey's photographic rifle of 1882. In *Inglourious Basterds* the three hundred and fifty nitrate prints of a Parisian cinema become the bomb that incinerates the Nazi leadership. The archive is, by its chemistry, an incendiary. Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995) argued that the drive to archive is inhabited by a drive to destroy; nitrate apokatastasis names the restoration that proceeds through the archive's self-consumption.

The Lincoln Letter Principle. In *The Hateful Eight* (2015), Major Marquis Warren carries a letter from Abraham Lincoln that he admits to having forged, because its possession disarms the white men he must travel among. In the film's final minutes a Confederate and a Black Union veteran, both dying, read it aloud together and pronounce it a nice touch. The principle holds that a fiction known to be false can found efficacy and

community; that its truth is pragmatic and affective rather than referential; and that it requires a subject who knows and nevertheless believes — the structure Octave Mannoni formalised as *je sais bien, mais quand même*.

The Asymmetry Principle and the Theodicy of Trash. The first names the oeuvre's distribution of time: to victims it grants an "It was not," to perpetrators an indelible "It was," branded, in the final shot of *Inglourious Basterds*, into the flesh. The second names its wager about the medium. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872, §5) Nietzsche held that only as an aesthetic phenomenon are existence and the world eternally justified. Tarantino's films make a narrower and stranger claim: cinema, the art most compromised by the twentieth century's catastrophes — by Goebbels's studios, Riefenstahl's rallies, and Griffith's Klan — is justified only as the instrument of justice against those who abused it.

V
Plan of the work

Part I, "Genealogies," reconstructs the three sources of the Tarantinian philosophy. Chapter 1 traces the aesthetics of the discarded from Kael, Farber, and Sontag through Bloch's theory of *Kolportage*, Benjamin's ragpicker, and Warburg's *Nachleben* to the oeuvre's resurrection of genres, soundtracks, and careers. Chapter 2 reconstructs the morality of practice — codes, vows, debts, and luck — through Bushidō and the hardboiled ethic, MacIntyre, Nietzsche's genealogy of guilt, and the theory of moral luck. Chapter 3 develops a theory of Tarantinian speech from Austin, Derrida, Butler, Wittgenstein, Bakhtin, and Arendt, culminating in the concept of the lethal performative.

Part II, "Violence, Time, History," turns to the oeuvre's most contested terrain. Chapter 4 proposes the Mexican standoff as the formal primal scene of the oeuvre and reads it through Girard, Hobbes, Schmitt, and Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." Chapter 5, the hinge of the dissertation, reads the counterfactual triptych against Nietzsche, Benjamin, Bloch, Hayden White, and the post-Holocaust prohibition on images. Chapter 6

develops an ontology of the Tarantinian image: its two universes, its stunt doubles, its fidelity to celluloid, and its forged documents. Chapter 7 submits the argument to the critiques of race and gender.

Part III, "Comparisons and Synthesis," situates the oeuvre among works of speculative and philosophical fiction (Chapter 8) and then states the theory of nitrate apokatastasis in four propositions and two corollaries, with its limits (Chapter 9). The conclusion reads the ten-film pledge as an eschatology of the oeuvre.

PART ONE

GENEALOGIES

Methode dieser Arbeit: literarische Montage. Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen. ("Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only to show.")

— WALTER BENJAMIN, DAS PASSAGEN-WERK, CONVOLUTE N

01 THE RAGPICKER'S CANON

02 THE MORALITY OF PRACTICE

03 TONGUES



CHAPTER ONE

The Ragpicker's Canon

Trash, Kolportage, and the Afterlife of the Discarded Image

> *The readymade is an act of disenchantment; the needle drop is an act of re-enchantment.*

The first proposition of the Tarantinian philosophy is that nothing discarded is lost. It is an aesthetic proposition before it becomes a historical one, and its genealogy runs through a counter-tradition of criticism that defended the low against the consecrated — Kael, Farber, Sontag — and through a second, philosophical counter-tradition that found in the refuse of mass culture a utopian and even messianic charge: Bloch, Benjamin, Warburg. This chapter reconstructs both lines and argues that their convergence in Tarantino transforms the cinephile's love of trash into an ethics of restitution.

1.1
The clerk as curator

The biographical datum that has become text is the video store. Tarantino spent the latter half of the 1980s as a clerk at Video Archives in Manhattan Beach, California, an institution whose philosophical significance lies in its flattening of hierarchy. On the shelves of a video store the art film and the grindhouse picture are shelved by genre and rented at the same price; VHS dissolved the spatial and economic distinction between the repertory house and the drive-in. The clerk is the functionary of this levelled archive and, by vocation, its critic. The trajectory from clerk to curator is completed in the later acquisition of Los Angeles's New Beverly Cinema (the property in 2007, its programming in 2014), a repertory house devoted to projection from 35mm prints, and anticipated in the 1990s by Rolling Thunder Pictures, the distribution label through which Tarantino brought Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* and Takeshi Kitano's *Sonatine* to American audiences and returned the exploitation film *Switchblade Sisters* to circulation. The oeuvre is best understood as the most ambitious exhibit of this curatorial practice, each film a vitrine in which discarded forms are displayed and, by display, revalued.

The often-repeated boast that he steals from every film ever made should therefore be read less as a confession of pastiche than as a curatorial programme. Theft, in the video-store economy, is circulation.

1.2

Great trash: Kael, Farber, Sontag

The critical ancestor is Pauline Kael, whose "Trash, Art, and the Movies" (*Harper's*, 1969) argued that the movies are so seldom great art that a spectator who cannot enjoy great trash has little reason to care about them at all. Kael's essay did three things that Tarantino's cinema would do again. It relocated value from the prestige object to the visceral encounter; it treated pleasure as a cognitive rather than a merely hedonic event; and it identified the pretensions of the "art film" as a species of bad faith. *Cinema Speculation* is written in Kael's key, and the abandoned tenth feature, *The Movie Critic*, took criticism itself as its premise.

Manny Farber's "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art" (1962) supplies the second coordinate. Termite art burrows through its material, heedless of the masterpiece, forever eating its own boundaries; white-elephant art aspires to the swollen, self-conscious completeness of the monument. The distinction illuminates Tarantino's career as a paradox. He began as a termite — *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) is a low-budget genre piece that burrows into the heist film by omitting the heist — and became, by the roadshow presentation of *The Hateful Eight* in Ultra Panavision 70, with overture, intermission, and souvenir programme, a builder of white elephants. But these are white elephants made of termite matter: monuments whose every block is scavenged from the lowest strata of the archive. The late oeuvre attempts what may be called a termite monumentality, the elevation of trash to the scale of the masterpiece without renouncing its trashiness. This is the aesthetic form of apokatastasis: the discarded restored to the throne without being cleansed of the gutter.

Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1964), which demanded that hermeneutics give way to an erotics of art, provides the third coordinate, and her "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964) a crucial contrast. Tarantino's cinema is an erotics in Sontag's sense: its attention to textures, surfaces, brands, and fetishes — feet, cars, swords, cereal boxes, invented cigarettes — is an attention of the senses before it is an attention of the intellect. But it is not camp. Camp loves the artificial and the failed with an irony that preserves the lover's superiority; Tarantino's love for the kung fu film, the spaghetti western, and the women-in-prison picture is unironic, the devotion of the

acolyte rather than the connoisseur of failure. Where camp enjoys a work because it is bad, Tarantino restores a work because it was wrongly judged. The distinction between ironic and restitutive love is the first mark of the oeuvre's juridical ambition.

Jeffrey Sconce's account of "paracinema" (1995) — an oppositional reading protocol that valorises badfilm and exploitation against the academic canon, accruing what Sarah Thornton called subcultural capital — describes the milieu from which Tarantino emerged. The Palme d'Or awarded to *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 converted that subcultural capital into consecrated cultural capital in Pierre Bourdieu's sense (*Distinction*, 1979). The Situationist objection is immediate: consecration is recuperation, and the oppositional value of trash is destroyed at the moment it enters the museum. The answer this dissertation proposes is that Tarantino's gesture is less recuperation than restitution. The value does not merely accrue to the curator; it flows back to the sources, which are revived, redistributed, re-scored, and re-cast. The distinction will prove decisive, because restitution is a juridical category, and it is by way of restitution that the aesthetics of the archive becomes a philosophy of history.

1.3
Kolportage and the happy end seen through

The philosophical ancestor who most exactly anticipates this ambition is Ernst Bloch. In *Heritage of Our Times* (1935) and in essays on fairy tale, circus, and colportage later collected in English as *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, Bloch defended the penny dreadful, the adventure serial, and the fairy tale against bourgeois taste. His claim was that these despised forms preserve a utopian surplus (*Überschuss*), the wish-landscapes of the dominated: the fairy tale in which the weak outwit the strong, the colportage novel in which danger is followed by rescue and the poor boy finds the treasure. The educated sneer at such wishes; Bloch treats them as anticipatory consciousness, a presentiment of a world not yet become.

One section of *The Principle of Hope* (1954–59) bears a title that could serve as the motto of the late oeuvre: the happy end, seen through and yet defended. Bloch concedes that the happy end of mass culture is a lie

about the present, a narcotic that reconciles the reader to the world as it is. Yet he defends it as a truth about the future, the form in which the demand that things end otherwise survives. The happy end seen through and yet defended is precisely the structure this dissertation calls the Lincoln Letter Principle. Bloch is its unacknowledged originator, and the counterfactual triptych is its fullest cinematic realisation: the spectator of *Inglourious Basterds* knows that Hitler did not die in a Parisian cinema, sees through the happy end, and defends it nonetheless.

Bloch supplies a second concept, *Ungleichzeitigkeit* or nonsynchronism, the coexistence within a single present of strata belonging to different historical times. Tarantino's anachronistic soundtracks are nonsynchronism made audible. David Bowie's "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" accompanies a Jewish woman's war paint in 1944; contemporary hip-hop accompanies a freedman's ride through 1858 Mississippi. These are not errors of period but deliberate fractures in historical time, lending the rage of a later present to the victims of an earlier one. In Bloch's terms the anachronism is the audible index of the not-yet within the has-been. It prepares, at the level of sound, the counterfactual that the image will later perform.

1.4
The ragpicker and the collector

Benjamin's version of the same insight is gathered in the figure of the ragpicker. In his work on Baudelaire, Benjamin read the *chiffonnier* of "Le Vin des chiffonniers" as the double of the poet and the historian: the one who gathers what the city has discarded and sorts it for a second life. The theory-of-knowledge convolute of the *Arcades Project* makes this a method, declaring that the rags and the refuse are not to be inventoried but allowed to come into their own by being used. No sentence better describes the Tarantinian needle drop. Dick Dale's 1962 surf instrumental "Misirlou," Stealers Wheel's minor hit "Stuck in the Middle with You," Urge Overkill's cover of a Neil Diamond ballad, the cues Ennio Morricone

composed for John Carpenter's *The Thing* that went unused until *The Hateful Eight* — each is rag and refuse, and each comes into its own by being used.

The needle drop resembles Marcel Duchamp's readymade in that a found object is relocated into a new frame, but it reverses the readymade's logic. Duchamp's gesture neutralised its object: the urinal became art through the artist's declared indifference. Tarantino's gesture charges its object, so that the song is thereafter inseparable from the scene into which it was dropped. The readymade is an act of disenchantment; the needle drop is an act of re-enchantment. Benjamin's "Unpacking My Library" (1931) names the desire behind it: the collector's deepest wish is to renew the old world. Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay (1935–39) diagnosed the decay of aura under technological reproducibility; the collector, and Tarantino as the collector-filmmaker, re-auratises the reproduction. The print becomes a relic, the song a ghost, the genre a liturgy.

1.5
Nachleben: the Tarantinian Mnemosyne

Aby Warburg's unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29) arranged on black panels the migrations of what he called *Pathosformeln*, pathos formulae: gestures of extreme emotion that survive from antiquity into Renaissance painting and, in the last panels, into postage stamps and press photographs. Warburg's key term was *Nachleben*, afterlife or survival, which Georges Didi-Huberman's *L'image survivante* (2002) reconstructed as a theory of the image as symptom, ghost, and anachronism.

The oeuvre is a Mnemosyne Atlas of cinematic pathos formulae. Bruce Lee's yellow jumpsuit from *Game of Death* (1978), the arterial fountain of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* films, the snowbound duel of *Lady Snowblood* (1973), the Leonean extreme close-up of eyes, the crash zoom, the split diopter, the shot from inside a car trunk, and above all the Mexican standoff are gestures that migrate across the corpus as Warburg's maenads migrated across the Quattrocento. Tarantino's contribution is not their invention but their survival. The Warburgian frame also explains why these for-

mulae are violent: Warburg's pathos formulae were formulae of extremity — frenzy, mourning, triumph, sacrifice — and the image that survives longest is the image that carries the most charge.

1.6

Apophrades: the precursor made to imitate his heir

Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) named its sixth revisionary ratio *apophrades*, after the Athenian days of ill omen on which the dead returned to the houses they had once inhabited. In apophrades the strong poet so holds his work open to the precursor that the effect is uncanny: the precursor's characteristic work now seems to have been written by the successor. Tarantino's cinema produces this effect with unusual regularity. After *Kill Bill*, *Lady Snowblood* looks like a Tarantino film; after *Pulp Fiction*, "Misirlou" sounds like one. Jorge Luis Borges had formulated the same paradox in "Kafka and His Precursors" (1951): every writer creates his own precursors, modifying our conception of the past as surely as of the future.

The oeuvre literalises apophrades through casting. In the epilogue of *Pulp Fiction*, Jules announces his intention to walk the earth like Caine, David Carradine's wandering monk in the television series *Kung Fu*. A decade later Carradine is Bill. The precursor to whom the converted killer aspired returns as the patriarch of assassins in the later work, so that *Kung Fu* now seems to anticipate *Kill Bill*. The dead return to the houses they inhabited; the house, retroactively, becomes theirs.

Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (1939) completes the picture. Menard's verbatim re-creation of Cervantes means something other than its original because it is written in another time, and Borges's narrator judges it almost infinitely richer. Luis Bacalov's theme for Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966), replayed note for note over the credits of *Django Unchained* (2012), is a Menardian text: identical in letter, it now scores the liberation of a Black man, which Corbucci's film did not imagine. Gérard Genette's *Palimpsests* (1982) offers the typology — parody, travesty, transposition, pastiche, caricature, and *forgerie*, the serious imitation that continues its model — and it is significant that the category in which the

oeuvre is most at home is the last. Its films are forgeries in Genette's technical sense before they contain forgeries in the literal one. Noël Carroll's account of New Hollywood "allusionism" (1982), which addressed a knowing and a naive audience at once, marks the distance travelled. In Tarantino allusion is no longer a wink over the heads of the audience; it has become the ontology of the diegesis, the air the characters breathe.

1.7

The apokatastasis of persons

The restitution extends from images to bodies. The oeuvre's casting is a record of resurrections: John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*; Pam Grier and Robert Forster, whose performance earned an Academy Award nomination, in *Jackie Brown* (1997); David Carradine, Sonny Chiba, and Gordon Liu in *Kill Bill*; Kurt Russell in *Death Proof* (2007) and *The Hateful Eight*; Bruce Dern and Michael Parks across the later films; Franco Nero in a cameo that confronts the original Django with his heir; and the stuntwoman Zoë Bell, who in *Death Proof* steps from behind the star she had doubled to play herself. Casting, here, is a moral act. It refuses the verdict by which the industry discards bodies that have aged, failed, or fallen out of fashion.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood (2019) is the self-portrait of this practice. Rick Dalton is precisely the has-been Tarantino would cast, and the film's plot is the rescue of a has-been by a counterfactual. It ends by admitting him through the gate of the house on Cielo Drive into the society of the living stars — the admission of the discarded into paradise. The gold watch of *Pulp Fiction* shows the same logic from another side. Captain Koons's monologue traces an heirloom through three American wars and the bodies that concealed it in a prison camp, so that Butch's near-suicidal return to recover it becomes a return for the archive itself: the patrilineal record of American violence, transmitted through abjection, redeemed by the son who will die for it if necessary.

1.8

The ethics of the archive and its danger

Benjamin's third thesis on history holds that the chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing great from small honours the truth that nothing which has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. Tarantino's aesthetics is the cinematic form of this axiom, and it is already an ethics: fidelity to the discarded, a refusal of the verdict by which cultural history consigned exploitation cinema to the refuse heap.

But the archive is not innocent, and its restoration is not neutral. The genres Tarantino restores carry their sins with them: the Orientalism of the kung fu import, the racial fantasies of blaxploitation as consumed by white audiences, the misogyny that structures the rape-revenge film, the colonial violence of the western. Origen's universal restoration notoriously included the devil; Tarantino's restoration of the archive restores its demons too. The archive, as the next chapters show, is nitrate: a medium that preserves only by being capable of fire. Its apokatastasis will be as dangerous as it is generous, and the question of Chapter 7 — whether the restored archive re-enacts the injuries it inscribes — is already implicit here.



CHAPTER TWO

The Morality of Practice

Codes, Promises, Debts, and Moral Luck

> *The ledger presumes a line; the world is a forest.*

The second genealogy is ethical, and its thesis is that the Tarantinian world has no morality but a great many codes. Its hitmen, samurai, bounty hunters, and thieves are not amoral but hypermoral: bound by vows, rules of trade, points of honour, and debts more exacting than any civil law, and prepared to die for them. What distinguishes these codes is that every one of them is known to be an invention — a composite of film, pulp, and counterfeit scripture — and binds nonetheless. This chapter reconstructs the morality of practice from three sources: the invented traditions of Bushidō, the western, and the hard-boiled novel; Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of practices and their internal goods; and Nietzsche's genealogy of the promise and the debt. It then exposes the codes to moral luck and argues that the oeuvre's decisive ethical acts are not acts of rule-keeping but gifts that break the ledger.

2.1
Invented traditions

Bushidō is the oeuvre's most conspicuous code and its most instructive fiction. The *Hagakure*, compiled in the early eighteenth century from the sayings of Yamamoto Tsunetomo, teaches that the way of the samurai is to be found in dying. It was addressed to a warrior class that had not fought a war in generations, by a retainer who, forbidden to follow his lord in death, had taken the tonsure instead: the code of death was from the first a code of nostalgia, articulated by a man denied the death it prescribed. Nitobe Inazō's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1900), written in English for Western readers, then codified as national essence what had been a scattered body of practices — a paradigm case of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger would call the invention of tradition (1983). Cinema completed the process. Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1967) opens with an epigraph attributed to a "Book of Bushidō" that Melville composed himself. The Tarantinian samurai inherits Bushidō in this third-hand and avowedly cinematic form, as the code of film samurai rather than historical ones, and is bound by it absolutely.

Kill Bill stages the code at three moments of strain. Hattori Hanzō — whose name the film borrows from the historical ninja and from Sonny Chiba's own television role in *Kage no Gundan* — has retired to run a sushi bar in Okinawa, having vowed decades earlier never again to make an instrument of death. He breaks the vow when he learns that the Bride's quarry is his former pupil. The breach is made for the sake of the code it violates: a master answers for his pupil, and the sword is a restitution. O-Ren Ishii, in the snow garden, apologises for having mocked her opponent before the duel resumes, so that honour between enemies survives their enmity. And Budd, the fallen samurai reduced to a bouncer's job and a trailer, who tells his brother that he has pawned his Hanzō sword, is nonetheless the one Viper who states the moral arithmetic plainly: the Bride deserves her revenge, and they deserve to die — but so, he adds, does she. The three clauses contain the whole economy of revenge that Part II will analyse. Hanzō supplies its correction in advance, in his counsel that revenge is never a straight line but a forest in which it is easy to lose one's way. The ledger presumes a line; the world is a forest.

The western and the hardboiled novel supply the code's other strands. Robin Wood's *Howard Hawks* (1968) found in *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and *Rio Bravo* (1959) an ethic of professional competence, in which membership of the group is earned by doing the job well and self-respect is inseparable from craft. The hardboiled lineage that runs from Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), through Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961), whose debt to Hammett is often remarked, to Sergio Leone's unlicensed remake *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), transmits the figure of the lone operator who plays gangs against each other while keeping a private rule. Raymond Chandler's "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944) cast the detective as a knight errant who walks the city's mean streets without becoming mean. Elmore Leonard and Chester Himes, whose criminals and policemen have no ethics but the rules of their trades, taught Tarantino that such rules can be rendered almost entirely as talk. The Tarantinian code is a composite of all these, and knows itself to be one. Its authority derives not from nature, God, or reason, but from citation.

FIGURE (FILM)	PRACTICE	CODE	WHERE THE CODE BREAKS
Hattori Hanzō (*Kill Bill*)	Swordsmith	Never again to make an instrument of death	Broken to arm the Bride against his former pupil
Winston Wolf (*Pulp Fiction*)	The cleaner	Speed, exactness, calibrated courtesy	Nowhere: its object is time, not persons
Joe Cabot's crew (*Reservoir Dogs*)	The heist	Anonymity; no personal information	Mr. White tells Mr. Orange his first name
John Ruth (*The Hateful Eight*)	Bounty hunting	Bring the bounty alive to the hangman	His scruple keeps Daisy Domergue alive; her gang poisons his coffee
Aldo Raine (*Inglourious Basterds*)	The unit	Each man owes a hundred Nazi scalps	Landa's surrender deal kept to the letter, broken on the flesh
King Schultz (*Django Unchained*)	Bounty hunting	The law's paper: warrants, contracts, receipts	The handshake that would seal the sale of a person
Butch Coolidge (*Pulp Fiction*)	Prizefighting	The fix: take the fall in the fifth round	Broken for a bet; the debt cancelled by a rescue

2.2
Practices and their internal goods

MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) defines a practice as a coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that activity are realised in the course of pursuing its standards of excellence. Internal goods can be had only by participating in the practice and recognised only by those who have learnt it; external goods — money, status, power — attach to it contingently and can be had in other ways. MacIntyre's example is a child bribed with sweets to play chess, who has every reason to cheat until he comes to care for the goods of chess itself. The virtues are the acquired qualities that make internal goods achievable, and MacIntyre names justice, courage, and honesty as those without which no practice can survive. Whether a practice could it-

self be evil was a question he raised and did not close. The oeuvre turns it into a laboratory. Its crews are Platonic bands of robbers: in the first book of the *Republic* (351c–352a) Socrates observes that not even a gang of thieves can accomplish anything if its members wrong one another, so that injustice presupposes justice among the unjust.

Winston Wolf is the oeuvre's *phronimos*, the practically wise man of *Nicomachean Ethics* VI. He introduces himself by his function — he solves problems — and his first act is to set the clock: the corpse in the car in Jimmie's garage must be disposed of before Jimmie's wife comes home from work. His curtness, he explains, is a function of time rather than of temper, and his courtesy is calibrated to the minimum that compliance requires. The Wolf is the one practitioner whose code never breaks, because its object is not a person to whom one may be loyal or disloyal but time itself, the medium in which every other code decays. He is, in miniature, the oeuvre's wish-image: a virtuoso who restores order before the catastrophe can be registered. That he is played by Harvey Keitel, whose Mr. White in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) is destroyed by partiality, makes the two roles a diptych of professional virtue and its failure.

Reservoir Dogs is the oeuvre's treatise on practice. Joe Cabot's rule of anonymity — colour-coded names, no personal information — is the institution that protects the practice from the attachments that would corrupt it. Mr. Pink, who styles himself the only professional among first-year thieves, embodies the ethic of the rule. Mr. Blonde embodies its loyalty: he served four years in prison without betraying Joe, and his reward is a job. Mr. White breaks the rule by telling the wounded Mr. Orange his first name, and the film's final catastrophe follows from the loyalty that this breach expresses. White's loyalty is friendship in Aristotle's highest sense (*Nicomachean Ethics* VIII), offered to a man who can return only its counterfeit, since Orange is an undercover policeman. Orange's dying confession is an anagnorisis that coincides, as the *Poetics* (ch. 11) recommends, with a reversal of fortune. The tragic flaw is not a vice but a misplaced virtue, and the film's cruelty consists in making loyalty the cause of the final massacre.

The Hateful Eight (2015) restages the structure in the register of law. John Ruth brings his bounties to the hangman alive, where Major Warren is content to deliver them dead. Ruth's scruple is MacIntyrean: the good

internal to his practice is lawful execution, the good external to it is the bounty, and Ruth forgoes safety for the first. Oswaldo Mobray, who is not the hangman he claims to be, glosses the scruple in a set speech: frontier justice is revenge, and only the dispassion of the executioner makes a killing just. It is Francis Bacon's distinction between the law and the "wild justice" of revenge, delivered by an impostor. Ruth's scruple keeps Daisy Domergue alive and chained to his wrist, and her gang poisons his coffee. The internal good is purchased at the price of the practitioner.

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) derived the modern vocational subject from the Calvinist *Beruf*, the calling pursued as worldly asceticism. The Tarantinian professional is the calling's caricature and its last refuge. Weber's "Politics as a Vocation" (1919) supplies a further distinction, between an ethic of responsibility, which answers for the foreseeable consequences of action, and an ethic of conviction, which does what is right and leaves the outcome to God. Jules's conversion in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is a passage from the first to the second.

MacIntyre's account does not stop at practices. A human life acquires unity as a narrative quest, and narratives acquire intelligibility within a tradition. Here the oeuvre parts company with him. Its practitioners have traditions, but forged ones: a Bushidō composed by a filmmaker, a scripture Jules has taken from the prologue of a Sonny Chiba karate film. The Tarantinian ethics is thus a virtue ethics without tradition — or rather with a tradition known to be counterfeit that binds nonetheless. It is the ethical form of the Lincoln Letter Principle, and Chapter 6 will argue that it is also the key to the oeuvre's ontology.

2.3
The ledger: promise, debt, and cruelty

The economic structure of the codes is Nietzschean. The second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) opens with the paradoxical task that nature set itself in the case of man: *Ein Thier heranzüchten, das versprechen darf* — "to breed an animal that is permitted to promise" (§1). The promise requires a memory of the will, and its product is the sovereign indi-

vidual, the one whose word binds because he can answer for himself as future (§2). The Bride is the oeuvre's sovereign individual. Her vendetta is a promise made to the dead — she believes her unborn child to have died in the chapel — and Death List Five is its written form: a ledger in her own hand from which each name is struck as its debt is collected.

Nietzsche asks how memory was burned into the forgetful animal, and answers with a mnemotechnics of pain: *nur was nicht aufhört, weh zu thun, bleibt im Gedächtniss* — "only what does not cease to hurt remains in memory" (§3). He then derives the moral concept of guilt (*Schuld*) from the material concept of debt (*Schulden*) (§4), and the oldest relation between persons from that of creditor and debtor. Where the debtor could not pay, the creditor was compensated by the right to inflict suffering on his body, even to cut from it as much as seemed commensurate with the debt (§5), and the compensation was a pleasure: *Leiden-sehn thut wohl, Leiden-machen noch wohler* — "to see suffering does one good; to make suffer, still more" (§6). Shakespeare's Shylock, who claims a pound of flesh as the forfeit of his bond, is the literary emblem of this archaic right, and Portia, who defeats the bond by its own letter, is its juridical undoing.

Three Tarantinian ledgers follow the pattern. Aldo Raine tells his men that each of them owes him a hundred Nazi scalps. The debt is denominated in bodies, and the scalp is the receipt. His treatment of Landa at the close of *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) inverts Portia. Where she honoured the letter of the bond in order to deny Shylock his flesh, Aldo honours the letter of Landa's surrender agreement — the man is spared, as the deal requires — and takes his payment on the flesh regardless, cutting a mark that cannot be removed. Chapter 5 reads the mark as the oeuvre's Asymmetry Principle; here it is enough to note its legal form. The promise is kept, and the debt is collected on the body.

King Schultz concedes that his trade, like slavery, is an exchange of flesh for cash, and *Django Unchained* (2012) makes the concession its structure. His ethic is the law's paper — warrants, bills of sale, receipts — which absolves him when he shoots the sheriff of a Texas town and produces a warrant for the outlaw the sheriff really is. The warrant's formula, dead or alive, converts a corpse into currency. The state's cruelty as creditor is here privatised, and Schultz's legalism is the discipline that keeps it

from becoming mere murder. The ledger breaks only at the handshake with which Calvin Candie would seal the sale of a person, a refusal whose logic Chapter 3 analyses.

Pulp Fiction supplies the purest case. Marsellus Wallace pays Butch Coolidge to lose a fight, counselling him that pride only hurts and never helps. Butch takes the money, bets on himself, wins, and kills his opponent in the ring; the contract becomes a debt, and the debt a death sentence. The debt is never paid. It is cancelled by a rescue, and Marsellus's release of Butch is conditional on his silence about the rape and his exile from Los Angeles, so that the debt is converted into a secret. The oeuvre's opening scene had already prepared this economy. Mr. Pink's refusal to tip in *Reservoir Dogs* is a refusal of the gift in the name of the contract: he will pay for service rendered, not for a custom. Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1925) showed that the gift is governed by a threefold obligation — to give, to receive, and to reciprocate — which is stronger for being unwritten. Joe overrules Pink with a boss's authority, and the film proceeds to test, in blood, which kind of obligation holds a crew together.

2.4
Moral luck

The codes presume that the agent controls what he is judged for. The oeuvre denies it. Bernard Williams's "Moral Luck" and Thomas Nagel's paper of the same title (both 1976; Nagel's collected in *Mortal Questions*, 1979) showed that ordinary moral judgement depends on factors beyond the agent's control: the way his acts turn out (resultant luck), the circumstances that test him (circumstantial luck), and the temperament he did not choose (constitutive luck). The Tarantinian plot is a machine for manufacturing each kind.

Resultant luck is the death of Marvin, whom Vincent shoots in the face by accident in the back seat of the car, a shot Vincent blames on a bump in the road that Jules insists was no bump at all, so that the attribution of luck is itself contested. Williams's lorry driver, who kills without fault, feels what Williams called agent-regret; Vincent feels only annoyance at the mess, and the absence of agent-regret is his moral characterisation.

Circumstantial luck makes Mr. Orange, an undercover officer, into the killer of a civilian who shot him as he and Mr. White commandeered her car. It places Marsellus in a crosswalk as Butch drives past with his father's watch, and delivers both men into a pawnshop whose owner, Maynard, holds them captive in his basement so that he and his associate Zed can rape them; they take Marsellus first. Resultant luck governs Mia Wallace's overdose as well. Had she died, Vincent's evening would have been a capital offence before the jurisprudence of Marsellus, whose severity the film establishes through the rumour of a man thrown from a window over a foot massage; because an injection of adrenaline revives her, it becomes a loyalty kept. Nothing in Vincent's conduct differs between the two outcomes. Only luck does.

The oeuvre's deepest treatment of luck is hermeneutic. When a hidden gunman empties his revolver at Jules and Vincent from a few feet away and every shot misses, Vincent holds that such things simply happen and Jules that they do not. Jules does not claim that the event satisfies the criteria of a miracle; what matters, he insists, is that he has felt the touch of God. His resolution to leave the life is a leap in Kierkegaard's sense, a decision that no evidence could compel. The film then judges the interpretations by their outcomes. Because its chronology is scrambled, the spectator has already watched Vincent die — shot by Butch, with Vincent's own gun, as he leaves Butch's bathroom with a copy of *Modesty Blaise* — before seeing him dismiss the miracle; Jules walks out of the diner alive. The achronological structure converts luck into fate retrospectively. The reading of the event as luck is punished by the plot and the reading of it as grace rewarded, and the film thereby constructs its own small theodicy.

Williams's other exemplar, the painter Gauguin, who abandons his family for Tahiti and can be justified, if at all, only by the success of the work, names the wager of the oeuvre itself. Its transgressions — the violence, the appropriations, the ventriloquism examined in Chapter 7 — are justified, if at all, only retrospectively, by the achievement of the films. No code secures that justification. It is the Theodicy of Trash in the idiom of moral luck, and Chapter 9 puts it to the test.

2.5

The gift beyond the ledger

Where the codes fail, the oeuvre's decisive ethical acts are gifts. Having freed himself in the pawnshop, Butch reaches the door and turns back for Marsellus, the creditor who has sworn to kill him and whom Zed is raping in the back room. He chooses his weapon from what the shop offers — a hammer, a baseball bat, a chainsaw, a katana — and takes the samurai's sword. The choice is an entry into a code by an act of will: the code as avowedly chosen fiction. The act itself exceeds every ledger. Albert Camus's *The Rebel* (1951) argued that revolt, beginning in a solitary refusal, discovers a value held in common and thereby founds a first solidarity, moving from "I" to "we." Butch's return has this structure. Shared captivity makes enemies into fellows, and the rescue is answered by a counter-gift, Marsellus's release, which closes the Maussian circle outside the economy of contract. Jules's gift of fifteen hundred dollars to the robber in the diner, analysed in Chapter 4, has the same form: a payment that purchases nothing except the possibility of not killing.

Hanzō's broken vow is a gift of the same kind, and so, tragically, is Mr. White's loyalty. White gives Orange everything a code forbids — his name, his trust, finally his life — and receives in return the only truthful sentence of Orange's performance, the confession that destroys them both. The gift, unlike the contract, cannot be secured against its recipient. That is why it is the one Tarantinian act that is not already the citation of a code.

The chapter's findings may be gathered in four claims. The Tarantinian codes are invented traditions, known as such and binding nonetheless. They are practices in MacIntyre's sense, cultivating real virtues in the service of killing. Their economy is the Nietzschean ledger of promise, debt, and cruelty. And they are exposed to a luck that no code governs, so that moral transformation occurs only where the ledger is broken by a gift. The last claim prepares Part II. Revenge is the attempt to collect a debt that the past has incurred, and the past cannot pay; when the ledger is presented to history itself, the oeuvre turns from vendetta to counterfactual. Before that turn can be followed, however, one must attend to the medium in which every code, vow, and debt is contracted: speech.

03

CHAPTER THREE

Tongues

Speech, Performance, and the Sovereignty of Dialogue

Each one of us
Must act his part in unknown languages,
That it may breed the more variety.

— THOMAS KYD, THE SPANISH TRAGEDY (C. 1587), IV.I

> *The tongue can be trained to lie, but the body keeps the truth of the form of life.*

No body of cinema talks as much as this one, and none makes talk so dangerous. Tarantinian dialogue is not the lubricant of plot but its principal action. Conversations are games, tests, interrogations, and executions, and the decisive events of the films are speech acts: a verse recited before a killing, a drink ordered with the wrong fingers, a story told to provoke a draw. This chapter argues that speech is the sovereign medium of the oeuvre — the medium in which its codes are contracted, its identities performed, its violence deferred and, at the limit, its violence performed. It reads the talk through the theory of the performative in Austin, Derrida, and Butler; through Wittgenstein's language-games, Bakhtin's chronotopes, Diderot's paradox of the actor, and Arendt's account of speech as the disclosure of the agent; and it closes on the question that Part II inherits: what happens when talk is exhausted.

3.1
Ezekiel 25:17: the performative and its citation

The oeuvre's most famous speech act is a forgery. Before executing Brett in *Pulp Fiction*, Jules recites what he presents as Ezekiel 25:17. The King James text reads: "And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them." Jules keeps the verse's close but prefaces it with a homily on the path of the righteous man, the shepherd who guides the weak through the valley of darkness, and the keeper of his brother — sentences found nowhere in Ezekiel, adapted from the opening text of the Sonny Chiba vehicle released in the United States as *The Bodyguard* (1976). The scripture that precedes the killing is a citation of a citation: a karate film's pseudo-Bible, recited by a hitman as liturgy.

J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) distinguished constatives, which describe and are true or false, from performatives, which do what they say — promise, bet, marry, sentence — and succeed or fail according to felicity conditions: an accepted procedure, appropriate persons and circumstances, complete execution, and, for many acts, the sincerity of the speaker. Austin set aside utterances made by an actor on a stage, introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy as hollow or void, parasitic

"etiolations" of language. Jacques Derrida's "Signature Event Context" (1972) turned the exclusion against him. Every mark is iterable, repeatable in contexts its first speaker never intended, and a performative succeeds only because it cites a coded formula, so that the "parasitic" citation is the condition of the "serious" act. Jules's recitation is Derrida's argument in the form of a killing. It is a stage utterance inside a stage utterance, a quotation of a film quoting a Bible it misquotes, and it is lethally felicitous. The verse does not describe the execution; it is the execution's first act, the formula that converts a killing into a sentence, and its force derives entirely from its iterability. Jules has said it many times before, and its repetition is its authority.

The oeuvre then does what Austin's theory cannot: it interprets the formula. In the diner Jules confesses that for years he recited the verse without considering its meaning, as a cold thing to say before a killing. He then tries out readings — that he is the righteous man and his pistol the shepherd; that the robber before him is the righteous man and he the shepherd — before settling on a third: that the robber is the weak, that he himself is the tyranny of evil men, and that he is trying, hard, to become the shepherd. Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy* (1965) distinguished a hermeneutics of suspicion, which demystifies a text by exposing the interests it conceals, from a hermeneutics of faith, which lets a text address its reader and change him. Vincent is the morning's suspicious reader, for whom such things simply happen; Jules is its believing one. The forged scripture becomes true in Jules's third reading, not because its source is authentic but because its reader has been altered by it. This is the Lincoln Letter Principle in hermeneutic form: a text known to be counterfeit that nonetheless binds.

3.2

Games, forms of life, and the body that keeps the truth

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) replaced the picture of language as a system of names with a multiplicity of language-games — giving orders, reporting an event, guessing riddles, play-acting, making a joke — each woven into a form of life, and held that to imagine a language

is to imagine a form of life (§§19, 23). The tavern sequence of *Inglourious Basterds* is the oeuvre's most elaborate language-game, and a game within a game. Archie Hicox, a British officer who was a film critic before the war, meets his contact in a basement tavern disguised as a German officer, among soldiers celebrating the birth of a comrade's son with a guessing game in which each player wears a card naming a figure he must identify by questions. The Gestapo major Hellstrom, whose card reads King Kong, arrives at the answer by asking whether he came to America by boat, in chains, and whether he is the story of Black Americans, which the players deny: at a parlour game, an officer of the Reich rehearses the allegory that critics have long read in *King Kong* (1933), and hears it denied. Hicox explains his accent by claiming to come from the mountains near Piz Palü, and Hellstrom recalls the mountain film of that name, *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (1929), co-directed by Arnold Fanck and G. W. Pabst and starring Leni Riefenstahl; the archive of Weimar cinema serves as an alibi. What betrays Hicox is not his language but his hand. Ordering three glasses, he raises his index, middle, and ring fingers, where a German would raise the thumb and first two fingers. He knows the language but not the form of life. Meaning, for Wittgenstein, is use, and use includes the hand.

Django Unchained turns the same insight into an ethics. Schultz lies fluently through the whole of the Candyland deception, posing as a buyer of fighters in order to purchase Django's wife. What he cannot do is take the hand that would seal the sale. Candie insists on the handshake as the custom that completes a bargain — the bodily signature of the performative — and Schultz, having paid, refuses it; pressed, he offers his hand only to fire the derringer concealed in his sleeve into Candie's heart, and, apologising that he could not resist, is shot dead by Candie's bodyguard. Kant's essay "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy" (1797) forbade even the lie told to a murderer at the door. Schultz, who lies to the murderer at every door, draws the line not at the proposition but at the gesture, locating the sincerity condition of the contract in the body. His refusal honours the Kantian formula of humanity — that persons may never be treated merely as means — in the act of a man who has broken every rule of truthfulness.

The body testifies again when Landa unmasks Bridget von Hammersmark at the premiere. Her speech is flawless, but the shoe she left behind in the tavern fits her foot. Landa's Cinderella test is an epistemology of the body in which the foot confesses what the tongue conceals, and it ends with Landa strangling her. The rule common to the three scenes is exact: the tongue can be trained to lie, but the body keeps the truth of the form of life — in a gesture that cannot be faked, a hand that will not be given, a foot that fits.

3.3

The paradox of the actor

Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (written in the 1770s, published in 1830) held that the great actor feels nothing: sensibility makes for mediocre actors, and the art consists in the studied reproduction of the external signs of feeling. Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) extended the stage to social existence, describing the self as a performance managed for audiences, with front regions where it is staged and back regions where it is rehearsed. The oeuvre is populated by performers in both senses. Mr. Orange is Diderot's actor. His handler tells him that an undercover officer must be as great an actor as Brando, gives him an anecdote about carrying drugs past policemen in a men's room, and makes him rehearse its details until they are his. When Orange tells the story to Joe, Eddie, and Mr. White, the film shows him inside it, as though it were remembered rather than rehearsed. The performance has become memory; the counterfeit has acquired an index.

Hans Landa is the oeuvre's virtuoso of the front region. At LaPadite's farmhouse he asks, with elaborate courtesy, to continue the interview in English, pleading the limits of his French; the real purpose is to exclude the listeners hidden beneath the floor, who, the film implies, cannot follow English. Landa's multilingualism is a weapon, and the film's heteroglossia — German, French, English, and Italian — makes translation its principal field of combat. At the premiere the Basterds pose as Italians, and even their aliases are drawn from the archive: Donowitz's is the name of the Italian genre director Antonio Margheriti. Landa answers them in fluent

Italian, and the masquerade collapses. Kyd's Hieronimo, staging his revenge as a play in which each actor speaks an unknown language, had already made the multilingual performance a vehicle of murder before a sovereign; Chapter 8 follows that precedent.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood (2019) reverses Diderot's paradox. Rick Dalton, forgetting his lines on the set of a western pilot, rages at himself in his trailer, then plays his next scene with a ferocity that the child actor opposite him, a method performer who refuses to break character, tells him is the best acting she has ever seen. Earlier he had wept while describing a paperback western about a horse-breaker growing useless with age. Rick's sensibility, his self-disgust at his own obsolescence, is not the enemy of his craft but its fuel. The film corrects Diderot in the direction of its own ethics: the performance that redeems a career is the one in which the performer's real humiliation passes into the fiction.

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) held that in speech and action a person discloses not what she is — qualities, gifts, talents — but who she is, and that this disclosure appears more clearly to others than to the agent herself. *Kill Bill* organises its revenge around exactly this distinction. For the whole of the first volume the heroine is a what: the Bride, the Black Mamba, a code name within an assassination squad; whenever her name is spoken, the soundtrack bleeps it. Only in the second volume is it heard: Beatrix Kiddo, a name that recalls Dante's Beatrice. The revenge plot is, among other things, the recovery of a who from a what — the progress from code name to proper name, from function to person.

3.4

Chronotopes and the suspense of the tongue

Mikhail Bakhtin's essays of the 1930s supply two further terms. Heteroglossia, the novel's orchestration of the social languages of its world, names the oeuvre's method of composition: each film is a polyphony of idioms — gangster, pulp, scriptural, cinephile, legal, Southern, military — whose collisions constitute the drama. The chronotope, the fused unity of time and space in which a genre's events can occur, names its architecture. Bakhtin singled out the road, the salon, and the threshold,

the last the site of crisis and decision. The Tarantinian chronotopes are the diner, where *Reservoir Dogs* begins and *Pulp Fiction* begins and ends; the car and the corridor, where talk of hamburgers and foot massages carries killers to their work; the basement tavern; the Southern dining room, where Candie delivers a lecture in phrenology over the skull of an old enslaved man; and the snowbound haberdashery of *The Hateful Eight*, whose broken door must be nailed shut every time someone enters, a threshold literalised into a ritual. Each is a closed space of enforced conversation, and each is a stage.

In his conversations with François Truffaut (published 1966), Hitchcock distinguished surprise from suspense by the parable of the bomb beneath the table: if it explodes without warning, the audience has a few seconds of surprise; if the audience has been shown it, the most banal conversation becomes unbearable. Tarantino's great scenes of talk replace the bomb with a word. At the farmhouse the spectator sees the family beneath the floor, and the danger is what LaPadite will say. In the restaurant where Landa orders strudel for Shosanna, waits for the cream, and orders her a glass of milk that recalls the farmhouse, the danger is what he knows and what her face will betray. In the tavern the spectator knows that Hicox is a spy, and the fuse is his accent, then his hand. At Candyland the fuse is Stephen, the enslaved head of Candie's household, whose attention detects what the performers conceal. This is the suspense of the tongue: the duration of talk replaces the bomb's timer, and the explosion, when it comes, is the end of talk.

3.5
Deferral and the lethal performative

Talk defers violence. Hamlet, who answers Polonius's question about what he is reading with "Words, words, words," is the archetype of the talkative revenger, and his delay is the dramatic space in which revenge becomes a question rather than an act. The Tarantinian revenger talks too. Before the Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique ends the vendetta of *Kill Bill*, the Bride and Bill converse at length while their daughter sleeps, and Bill delivers a disquisition on Superman: unlike other heroes,

Superman was born what he is, and his disguise, Clark Kent, is his judgement on humanity — weak, unsure of itself, cowardly. Bill's point is that the Bride is a born killer whose attempt at an ordinary life was a Clark Kent. Zarathustra had announced the overman as that which man must overcome — *Ich lehre euch den Übermenschen. Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll* ("I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome"). Bill converts the doctrine into a theory of natural kinds, and the Bride's answer is not an argument but the fact of her daughter. The speech defers the killing it justifies, and the killing, when it comes, is almost tender.

But talk also kills. The oeuvre's most original contribution to the theory of the performative is what may be called the lethal performative: speech designed to trigger the violence that ends it. In the Sicilian scene of *True Romance* (1993), written by Tarantino and directed by Tony Scott, Clifford Worley, facing torture that would force him to betray his son, delivers a racist taunt calculated to enrage his interrogator, the mobster Vincenzo Coccotti, into killing him at once: Sicilians, he tells him, descend from the children of the Moors, Black North African conquerors, and Sicilian women, and he makes the point with racial slurs, the n-word among them. Coccotti shoots him dead. The taunt works because it relies on the racism of the man it insults. The speech act's felicity is the speaker's death, and its perlocutionary object is the son's safety: it is a sacrifice performed in words. In *The Hateful Eight* Major Warren places a pistol within reach of General Smithers and tells him how his son died. The young man, who had come west to collect a bounty the Confederacy had placed on Warren, was, Warren says, made to strip and walk naked through the snow and then, for the promise of a blanket, to perform oral sex on Warren, and he died there. The story inverts the racial and sexual order the general fought for, and it is told to make the old man reach for the gun; when he does, Warren shoots him, and the killing counts as self-defence. Whether the story is true the film declines to say; the letter Warren carries is revealed to be a forgery, and his narration shares its status. Truth is not among the felicity conditions of the lethal performative. What matters is its effect. Ordell Robbie's sales pitch for an assault rifle in *Jackie Brown* (1997), which parodies a courier company's advertising slogan, shows the same form in the idiom of the commodity: advert-

ising is the performative of consumer capitalism, and Ordell's parody reveals the weapon as a commodity whose use-value is a speech act carried out on bodies.

3.6

Excitable speech and the ventriloquist's voice

Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech* (1997) argued that injurious speech draws its force not from the sovereign will of a speaker but from the sedimented history of its prior uses, and that the same citationality which gives a slur its power makes its resignification possible, though never guaranteed. The oeuvre places this argument under maximal strain through its repeated use of the n-word, the anti-Black slur whose frequency Spike Lee condemned on the release of *Jackie Brown*. Butler's framework clarifies what is at stake without settling it. The word spoken by a Black character within a Black idiom, the word spoken by a white racist in order to be condemned, and the word spoken by the author himself in a cameo (Tarantino, playing Jimmie, uses it repeatedly, including in a joke about his garage becoming storage for the dead Black man in Jules and Vincent's car) in *Pulp Fiction*, are three different citations carrying three different histories. Whether a white author can orchestrate them without appropriating the injury is the question of ventriloquism that Chapter 7 addresses.

The oeuvre's most sovereign speech is, with remarkable consistency, spoken by Samuel L. Jackson: Jules's Ezekiel, Ordell's sales pitch, Stephen's surveillance at Candyland, Warren's story and letter. Jackson is also the uncredited narrator of *Inglourious Basterds* who explains, midway through the film, the extreme flammability of nitrate film, and the organist at the wedding rehearsal in *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*. The philosophy of the oeuvre is voiced by a Black actor and composed by a white author, and the arrangement is at once its most productive and its most troubling feature. Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) described the Africanist presence through which white American writing thought its own freedom, and bell hooks's 1995 essay on *Pulp Fiction* challenged the film's racial and sexual politics. Both critiques bear on the arrangement, and the thesis takes them up in Chapter 7.

The chapter's argument may be gathered in four propositions. Speech in the oeuvre is performative before it is expressive: its central utterances are acts, and their authority derives from citation rather than sincerity. Speech is a game whose rules are forms of life, so that the body, not the tongue, is where performances fail. Speech defers violence, generating the suspense of the tongue that is the oeuvre's signature form. And speech can kill, in a lethal performative whose felicity is indifferent to truth. Kyd's Hieronimo, having staged his revenge as a play in unknown languages, bites out his own tongue rather than explain it, and so marks the limit of the sovereignty of speech. The oeuvre marks the same limit in the standoff, where every speaker holds a gun and no word can alter the outcome. Part II begins there.

PART TWO

VIOLENCE, TIME, HISTORY

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.

— FRANCIS BACON, "OF REVENGE," ESSAYS (1625)

04 THE STANDOFF

05 THE REVENGE AGAINST "IT WAS"

06 ONTOLOGIES OF THE IMAGE

07 BODIES, GAZES, OTHERS



CHAPTER FOUR

The Standoff

Mimesis, Sacrifice, and the Grammar of Violence

> *Sovereignty has been dispersed into as many decisions as there are guns.*

Every Tarantino feature contains, or turns upon, a standoff: two or more armed parties, each holding another at gunpoint, none able to fire without being fired upon. The figure is so constant that it deserves to be called the formal primal scene of the oeuvre — the image in which its theory of violence is condensed and from which its plots unfold. This chapter reads the standoff as the point at which speech, the medium analysed in Chapter 3, reaches its limit, and at which violence appears in its structural nakedness. Hobbes and Schmitt supply its political reading, René Girard its anthropology, and Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" a key to its exits. The chapter then turns from the combatants to the spectator — the one party to every standoff who holds no gun — and argues, with Nietzsche and against the moralist paradigm, that the oeuvre's violence is addressed to a festival whose spectator it courts, implicates, and finally exposes.

4.1 The state of nature in a tableau

The standoff has a cinematic genealogy before it has a philosophical one. Its canonical form is the three-way duel in the cemetery at the close of Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), in which the apparent symmetry of three gunmen conceals an asymmetry known only to one: Blondie has secretly emptied Tuco's revolver. John Woo's Hong Kong thrillers multiplied the figure, pistols held at arm's length to each other's faces, and Ringo Lam's *City on Fire* (1987), whose final standoff among thieves and an undercover policeman *Reservoir Dogs* restages, delivered it to Tarantino. What the oeuvre adds is duration, talk, and a theory.

Thomas Hobbes described the natural condition of mankind as an equality in the capacity to kill: "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others" (*Leviathan*, 1651, ch. 13). From that equality arises diffidence, the mutual distrust that makes anticipation — striking first — the most reasonable course, and from diffidence the war of every man against every man. The standoff is the state of nature compressed into a tableau. Each party is exactly as vulnerable as the others; each has the strongest reason to strike

first and the strongest reason not to, since to fire is to be fired upon. It is a war of all against all that has not yet begun because it has begun everywhere at once. What is absent is the sovereign whose sword alone, for Hobbes, can end the war. In *Reservoir Dogs* the would-be sovereign is a party to the standoff: Joe Cabot, who has named the traitor, is held at gunpoint by Mr. White, who will not accept the decision, while Nice Guy Eddie holds White. Carl Schmitt defined the sovereign as the one who decides on the exception, and the political as the distinction between friend and enemy (*Political Theology*, 1922; *The Concept of the Political*, 1932). The warehouse standoff is a crisis of both. The enemy is among the friends, no one can establish who he is, and every decision is contested at gunpoint. Sovereignty has been dispersed into as many decisions as there are guns.

4.2
Mimetic crisis and monstrous doubles

Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) gives the standoff its anthropology. Desire, for Girard, is mimetic: we desire what our model desires, and the model becomes a rival. When mimetic rivalry spreads, the differences that order a community — ranks, roles, kinship — dissolve into the symmetrical reciprocity of violence, a sacrificial crisis in which antagonists become one another's monstrous doubles. The crisis ends only when the violence of all against all converges on a single victim, whose unanimous expulsion restores difference and founds order; ritual sacrifice repeats that founding murder in a controlled form. The standoff is the sacrificial crisis frozen at the moment of perfect symmetry. Its participants mirror one another gesture for gesture, and the object that set them in rivalry recedes into insignificance. The diamonds of *Reservoir Dogs* are barely seen; the briefcase of *Pulp Fiction* is never opened for the spectator, its contents present only as a golden glow. Hitchcock called such objects MacGuffins. Girard would call them the pretext of a rivalry whose true object is the rival.

Reservoir Dogs stages undifferentiation with programmatic clarity. Its thieves wear identical black suits and receive colour names, borrowed from the hijackers of *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974), that erase

their histories. The rule of anonymity analysed in Chapter 2 is, in Girardian terms, the production of doubles, and Mr. White's breach of it is the reintroduction of a difference — a name — into a system built to exclude it. The crisis that follows has no scapegoat. Every gun fires, the violence of all against all simply runs its course, and the film ends in the silence of reciprocal extinction. This is the first of the oeuvre's exits from the standoff and the bleakest: mimetic violence without sacrificial resolution, which is to say without a culture.

4.3

Three exits

The oeuvre's standoffs can be classified by the way they end.

FILM	STANDOFF	RESOLUTION	OUTCOME
Reservoir Dogs (1992)	Joe, Eddie, White, and Orange in the warehouse	Every gun fires; recognition follows	Reciprocal violence runs its course; no scapegoat
True Romance (1993)	Police, mobsters, and bodyguards in a hotel suite	Massacre; the lovers escape	Extinction, softened by a happy ending the screenplay had not written
Pulp Fiction (1994)	Jules, Vincent, Pumpkin, and Honey Bunny in the diner	A reinterpreted verse; a payment	The mechanism suspended by speech and gift
Kill Bill: Vol. 1 (2003)	The Bride and Vernita Green, interrupted by Nikki	A thrown knife; a promise to the child	The chain acknowledged and extended
Inglourious Basterds (2009)	Hicox, Stiglitz, and Hellstrom beneath the tavern table	Massacre; the negotiated survivor is shot	Reciprocal violence; negotiation fails
Django Unchained (2012)	Schultz and Candie over the handshake	Schultz fires; general slaughter	Refusal of the sacrificial contract

FILM	STANDOFF	RESOLUTION	OUTCOME
***The Hateful Eight* (2015)**	Warren and Mannix over Daisy Domergue	The hanging	Scapegoat: a community of two founded on a victim and a forged letter

True Romance adds a footnote to the first exit. Tony Scott reversed the ending of Tarantino's screenplay, in which Clarence dies, so that the lovers walk out of the massacre into a beach at sunset — a happy end imposed on extinction, which Bloch would have recognised as seen through and yet defended.

The second exit is the diner of *Pulp Fiction*. Pumpkin and Honey Bunny, whose robbery of the coffee shop frames the film, find themselves in a standoff with Jules, whose converted reading of Ezekiel was traced in Chapter 3. Jules does not fire. He talks, and then he pays: he gives the robber the fifteen hundred dollars in his own wallet, specifying that he is not handing it over but buying something with it — the robber's life, which he would otherwise have to take. Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1921) holds that law is founded and preserved by violence, but that there is a sphere of human agreement wholly inaccessible to violence, the sphere of understanding, whose proper medium is language and whose technique is conversation. The diner is that sphere improvised at gunpoint. Jules's speech suspends the mimetic mechanism rather than completing it, and his gift, which Pumpkin can never reciprocate, has the structure Derrida assigned to the gift in *Given Time* (1991): it interrupts the economy of exchange, of which revenge is the purest form. Girard came to read the Gospels as the revelation that exposes the scapegoat mechanism and so disables it (*Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 1978). Jules's conversion is a pulp version of that revelation. It is the one exit the oeuvre offers from violence altogether, and it is taken by the one character who renounces his profession and walks out of the world of the films.

The third exit is sacrifice. *The Hateful Eight* (2015) confines eight strangers in a snowbound haberdashery after the Civil War and dissolves them into a crisis in which every allegiance — Union and Confederacy, law and outlaw, Black and white — proves unstable. The last standoff

leaves two wounded men, Major Marquis Warren, a Black Union veteran, and Chris Mannix, a Confederate raider's son who claims to be the new sheriff of Red Rock, facing their prisoner, Daisy Domergue. Mannix proposes that they hang her in honour of John Ruth rather than shoot her, and the two men, enemies until that hour, carry it out together. Girard's mechanism operates here with textbook exactness. Violence that has consumed everyone converges on a single victim; her death reconciles the doubles; and the reconciliation founds a community — of two, lying in blood — whose first act is to read aloud a sacred text, the letter from Lincoln that Warren carries, which Mannix has heard him admit is a forgery and which he now reads with admiration. The founding murder and the founding fiction are simultaneous. Chapter 6 analyses the letter. Here what matters is that the oeuvre's most thoroughgoing sacrificial resolution is performed by the outcasts of two armies upon a woman, which is the ground of the gendered critique considered in Chapter 7.

4.4
The chain of vengeance

If sacrifice ends the crisis, revenge propagates it. Girard held that vengeance is the paradigm of mimetic violence, since every act of revenge calls for another, and that the judicial system exists to break the chain by claiming the last word. Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (458 BCE) dramatises that passage: the curse on the house of Atreus runs from murder to murder until Athena founds the court of the Areopagus and turns the Furies into guardians of the city. The oeuvre has no Athena. Its vendettas are ended not by law but by death, by exile, or — in the works that Chapter 5 examines — by the counterfactual image.

Kill Bill is its study of the chain. The Bride's first killing, of Vernita Green, is interrupted by the return from school of Vernita's daughter; the two women hide their knives and talk over coffee; and when the Bride has killed her with a thrown kitchen knife and the child has seen it, she tells the girl that her mother had it coming, and that if she still feels raw about it when she is grown, the Bride will be waiting. The line acknowledges the chain and extends it. O-Ren Ishii's history, told in animation, shows where

it leads: as a child she watched from beneath a bed as the yakuza boss Matsumoto and his men murdered her parents, and at eleven she killed him, getting close to him through the sexual predation on children that the film attributes to him; she became the killer the Bride now hunts. Nikki is O-Ren's future, and the Bride's. Against Euripides' Medea, who kills her children to punish their father, the Bride kills the father to recover her child, and the saga ends with mother and daughter reunited. She is the anti-Medea, the revenger whose vendetta is redeemed by the child it was believed to avenge. Yet the reunion is purchased by the orphaning of Nikki and by the death of B.B.'s father at her mother's hand, and the film keeps the chain in view even as it celebrates.

4.5
The spectator's festival

Every standoff has one party who holds no gun: the spectator, who sees all the barrels at once and is endangered by none. The oeuvre's theory of violence is finally a theory of this position. Nietzsche located the origin of punishment in the festival — *Ohne Grausamkeit kein Fest*, "without cruelty, no festival" (*Genealogy* II §6) — and explained the gods as spectators invented so that suffering would never go unwitnessed and therefore never be senseless: *Jedes Übel ist gerechtfertigt, an dessen Anblick ein Gott sich erbaut* — "every evil is justified at the sight of which a god takes delight" (§7). The cinema audience occupies the place Nietzsche assigned to the gods. Violence is staged for it, and its pleasure justifies what it sees. This is the anthropological core of what the Introduction called the Theodicy of Trash, and it poses the question the moralist paradigm asks badly: not whether screen violence causes real violence, but what it means that suffering is staged for our delight.

The oeuvre answers with a grammar in three moods. The first is comic, governed by what Henri Bergson called the momentary anaesthesia of the heart, *une anesthésie momentanée du cœur*, that laughter requires (*Le Rire*, 1900): Marvin shot by accident, the mess in the car, the flamethrower of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. The second is choreographic — violence as dance, kabuki, and ritual — in the massacre at the House of Blue Leaves,

which Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty (*The Theatre and Its Double*, 1938), with its demand for a spectacle that acts directly on the nerves, anticipates more exactly than any film. The third is pathetic, violence registered as loss, and here the camera grows discreet. In *Reservoir Dogs* it turns away as Mr. Blonde cuts off the ear of a captured police officer, whose face he has already slashed and whom he will then douse in petrol, and rests instead on a doorway marked "Watch your head"; in *Inglourious Basterds* the massacre of the Dreyfus family, shot through the floorboards by Landa's soldiers on his order, is rendered as gunfire and a girl running across a field. The ethical sting of the oeuvre lies in the switch between moods. The spectator laughing in the first is abruptly moved into the third, and the reflex of pleasure is caught in the act.

Two strands of film theory sharpen the point. Linda Williams's "Film Bodies" (1991) grouped horror, melodrama, and pornography as body genres, in which the spectator's body is seized by an involuntary mimicry of the body on screen: the flinch, the sob, the shudder. Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992) showed that the slasher and the rape-revenge film solicit the male spectator's identification with a female victim who becomes an avenger, the final girl. *Death Proof* (2007) is built as a diptych on Clover's thesis. In its first half Stuntman Mike kills five women with his car: one by braking so hard that she is thrown about the passenger compartment, four in a deliberate head-on collision that his reinforced driver's seat lets him survive. In its second a second group, among them the stuntwoman Zoë Bell playing herself, turns the chase against him, runs him off the road, and beats him to death, the final girl multiplied into a collective, and the film freezes on the last blow. *Kill Bill*'s hospital sequence places the Bride within the rape-revenge structure from its first chapter: during the four years she lay in a coma, a hospital orderly, Buck, raped her and sold other men access to her body, and she wakes as one of them is about to rape her; she kills him, and then Buck. Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), whose Alex sings "Singin' in the Rain" while he and his gang beat a writer and rape his wife in their home, supplies both the precedent for Mr. Blonde's dance to "Stuck in the Middle with You" and the oeuvre's nightmare of the spectator: the Ludovico technique, in which a man is cured of violence by being forced to watch violent films. Tarantino's wager is the opposite of Ludovico's. The spectator is

not conditioned into aversion but invited into pleasure and then shown the pleasure — most pointedly in the Nazi audience laughing at *Nation's Pride*, the mirror that Chapter 5 examines.

The climaxes of the oeuvre are expenditures in Georges Bataille's sense (*The Accursed Share*, 1949): festivals of useless consumption in which accumulated energy — of plot, of resentment, of film stock — is spent without return. The House of Blue Leaves, the destruction of Candyland's great house, and the burning cinema of *Inglourious Basterds* are potlatches. Michel Foucault opened *Discipline and Punish* (1975) with the public execution of Damiens in 1757 to mark the spectacle that modern discipline would replace; the hanging of Daisy Domergue returns the scaffold to the screen without its sovereign, performed by two outcasts before no crowd but us. Slavoj Žižek's distinction in *Violence* (2008), between the subjective violence of visible agents and the objective violence of systems, names the oeuvre's most ambitious turn. Its spectacular subjective violence is increasingly aimed at systems whose violence was objective — slavery, genocide — and which no individual act could answer. Frantz Fanon's "Concerning Violence" (1961), which ascribed to the violence of the colonised a restorative force, is the obvious reference for the climax of *Django Unchained*, and Chapter 5 weighs it. But the aim cannot be accomplished within the story. It requires a violence against time itself.

The standoff thus condenses the oeuvre's theory of violence into three findings. Violence is structurally mimetic: its participants become doubles, its objects pretexts, its chains unending. Its exits are three — mutual extinction, conversion by speech and gift, and sacrifice — and its remainder is the chain of vengeance that passes to the next generation; only the second exit escapes the mechanism, at the price of the converted man's departure from the world of the films. And its final addressee is the spectator, whose pleasure the violence both courts and exposes. Revenge, the oeuvre's master plot, is mimetic violence directed at a debt that cannot be paid. When the debtor is history itself, the standoff takes place between the spectator and the past, and Chapter 5 follows the oeuvre into it.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Revenge against “It Was”

Counterfactual History and Messianic Time

> *Revenge in content, they are mourning in form.*

This chapter is the hinge of the dissertation. In *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Django Unchained* (2012), and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019), the revenge plot that the earlier films directed at persons is turned against history itself. Hitler dies in a burning Paris cinema; a freedman destroys a Mississippi plantation two years before the Civil War; Sharon Tate survives the night of 8–9 August 1969. The chapter argues that these films are the literal fulfilment of what Nietzsche identified as the essence of revenge — the will's revulsion against time and its "It was" — and that they are saved from the ressentiment Nietzsche would have diagnosed in them by a formal feature: they depend, for their meaning and their pleasure, on the spectator's retained knowledge of what actually happened. Revenge in content, they are mourning in form. The argument proceeds through Nietzsche, Benjamin, Freud, Barthes, and Hayden White, and then through each film in turn.

5.1
"It was": Zarathustra's redemption and the imaginary revenge

In "On Redemption," in the second part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), Nietzsche names the will's deepest affliction: it cannot will backwards. It can create the future but cannot break time; the past stands before it as a stone it cannot roll away, and its impotence before that stone is the origin of revenge, which the Introduction defined, in Nietzsche's words, as the will's ill-will against time and its "It was." Zarathustra's remedy is not to undo the past but to redeem it: *Die Vergangenen zu erlösen und alles „Es war" umzuschaffen in ein „So wollte ich es!" – das hieße mir erst Erlösung!* — "To redeem what has passed, and to re-create every 'It was' into a 'Thus I willed it!' — that alone would I call redemption." In *Ecce Homo* (written 1888) the thought receives its most famous name: *Meine Formel für die Grösse am Menschen ist amor fati: dass man Nichts anders haben will, vorwärts nicht, rückwärts nicht, in alle Ewigkeit nicht* — "My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity."

By this standard the counterfactual film is revenge in its purest form. It wants the past to have been different, backwards, in full view of everyone. The first essay of the *Genealogy* (I §10) supplies the diagnosis: the slave revolt in morality begins when ressentiment becomes creative — the ressentiment of beings denied the true reaction, that of the deed, who compensate themselves *durch eine imaginäre Rache*, "through an imaginary revenge." No phrase describes the counterfactual triptych more exactly. Cinema is the art of the imaginary made visible, and these films are imaginary revenges on a colossal scale, taken on behalf of the dead against perpetrators beyond the reach of any real reaction. A consistent Nietzschean reading would conclude that the oeuvre's late period is its most resentful. The rest of this chapter argues that the conclusion does not follow, because the films do not ask to be believed.

5.2
Remembrance as theology: Benjamin's weak messianic power

The strongest philosophical warrant for the counterfactual comes from the thinker who took Nietzsche's problem most seriously in the twentieth century. In 1937 Max Horkheimer wrote to Benjamin that past injustice has happened and is completed — *die Erschlagenen sind wirklich erschlagen*, the slain are really slain — and that to hold history open was idealism. Benjamin's reply, recorded in the *Arcades Project* (N8,1), is the charter of this chapter. History, he wrote, is not only a science but also a form of remembrance (*Eingedenken*): *Was die Wissenschaft „festgestellt" hat, kann das Eingedenken modifizieren* — "what science has 'established,' remembrance can modify." Remembrance can make the incomplete, happiness, complete, and the complete, suffering, incomplete. That, Benjamin conceded, is theology; but remembrance gives us an experience that forbids us to conceive history as fundamentally atheological, however little we may be permitted to write it in theological concepts.

The theses "On the Concept of History" (1940) give the thought its final form. Every generation, the second thesis holds, has been endowed with a weak messianic power to which the past has a claim. The sixth

warns that *auch die Toten werden vor dem Feind, wenn er siegt, nicht sicher sein. Und dieser Feind hat zu siegen nicht aufgehört* — "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious." The seventh charges the historian to brush history against the grain, since *es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein* — "there is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism." And the ninth describes the angel of history, who sees the past as one single catastrophe and *möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen* — "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" — but is driven into the future by the storm called progress.

The counterfactual triptych is the angel's wish performed by a machine. It awakens the dead — Shosanna's family in her face, Sharon Tate in her ordinary afternoon — and makes whole what was smashed, but only as image, while the storm continues to blow in the spectator's knowledge. It is Benjamin's remembrance secularised into spectacle: a theology whose sacrament is film stock. Whether that secularisation is legitimate is the chapter's question, and it must be answered film by film.

5.3
Inglourious Basterds: the burning archive

Inglourious Basterds announces its genre in its first chapter title: "Once Upon a Time... in Nazi-Occupied France." Its five chapters move from fairy tale to cinema — the last two are called "Operation Kino" and "Revenge of the Giant Face" — and its climax takes place in a Paris cinema where the leadership of the Reich has gathered for the premiere of *Nation's Pride*, a Goebbels production in which the sniper Fredrick Zoller plays himself killing Allied soldiers from a tower. Two plots converge there. The Basterds, a unit of Jewish-American soldiers led by a Tennessean, have infiltrated the premiere with explosives. Shosanna Dreyfus, the cinema's owner and the sole survivor of her family, whom Landa's soldiers shot dead in the first chapter, has spliced into the reel a film of her own face announcing to the audience that they are about to die and that this is the face of Jewish vengeance, while behind the screen her

projectionist and lover Marcel sets fire to her collection of three hundred and fifty nitrate prints. Her image, projected onto the smoke of the burning screen, laughs as the cinema burns, and two of the Basterds, Donowitz and Omar, machine-gun Hitler and Goebbels in their box, Donowitz firing into Hitler's body long after he is dead, before both turn their guns on the audience trapped in the locked, burning auditorium.

Three features make the climax philosophically precise. The first is the mirror of spectatorship. The Nazi audience, Hitler among them, laughs at the killings in *Nation's Pride*, and Zoller alone leaves the auditorium, unable to watch himself kill. Benjamin ended "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" with the warning that mankind's self-alienation had reached the point at which it could experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order — the aestheticisation of politics that fascism practises. The spectator of *Inglourious Basterds*, laughing at the Basterds' killings, is seated exactly where the audience of *Nation's Pride* sits. The film does not flatter its spectator; it shows him his reflection in the enemy's pleasure and dares him to continue. The second is the weapon. Nitrate film, as the uncredited narrator explains, burns faster than paper, and the archive of cinema, the Reich's chosen medium of propaganda, becomes the means of its destruction. Heinrich Heine's *Almansor* (1821) had warned that *dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen* — "where they burn books, they will in the end burn human beings" — and the line was fulfilled after the book burnings of 1933, in which Heine's own works were thrown into the fire. The film inverts the prophecy: here the archive burns and consumes the burners. The third is the face. Shosanna's face on the smoke is Emmanuel Levinas's face inverted: not the face whose first word is "thou shalt not kill" (*Totality and Infinity*, 1961) but the face of the murdered, returned to pronounce sentence — the revenger of *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), now generally attributed to Middleton, holding up the skull of his poisoned beloved, rendered in light.

The film's most important restraint is what it does not show. It contains no camp. Its Jewish victims appear as a family beneath a floor and a girl running across a field; the Holocaust is present as the absence around which the fantasy is built. Theodor Adorno's dictum that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, qualified in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), and

Claude Lanzmann's refusal, in *Shoah* (1985), of archival images and fictional reconstruction formulated a prohibition on images of the catastrophe; Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98) accused cinema of having failed to film the camps. *Inglourious Basterds* keeps the prohibition by omission and answers the accusation by substitution: it does not show the camps, and it lets cinema kill the man who built them. Hayden White, in "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth" (in Saul Friedländer's *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 1992), granted that a comic or pastoral emplotment of the Third Reich could justly be dismissed by appeal to the facts. The film is precisely such an emplotment, a romance in Northrop Frye's sense, and it escapes dismissal only because it does not compete with the facts. It presupposes them. Its "once upon a time" is a confession of fictionality, which makes it, in Linda Hutcheon's terms, a historiographic metafiction that thematises its own relation to the past (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 1988).

Daniel Mendelsohn's review in *Newsweek* (2009) objected that the film makes its Jewish avengers mirror their persecutors, locking a crowd in a building and setting it on fire. The objection is serious, and the film anticipates it without refuting it. The Basterds are presented as terrifying and their methods as atrocities: they scalp the German dead; Donowitz beats a captured German sergeant to death with a baseball bat when he refuses to give information; survivors are released with swastikas carved into their foreheads; and at the premiere two of them fire into a trapped crowd. Giorgio Agamben's figure of homo sacer, in the book of that name (1995), the one who may be killed without the killing counting as homicide or as sacrifice, names the status the Basterds assign to German soldiers, the status the Reich had imposed on its victims; that inversion is the substance of Mendelsohn's objection. Hans Landa, the "Jew Hunter" who unmasks Bridget and brokers his own defection, is a virtuoso rather than a functionary — an explicit refusal of the banality Hannah Arendt found in Eichmann (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1963) — and he is not killed. Aldo carves a swastika into his forehead and calls it his masterpiece, so that the film ends on a mark rather than a death. This is the Asymmetry Principle. The mark recalls the sign set upon Cain — "And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him" (Genesis 4:15) — which both protects and brands; it recalls Kafka's penal apparatus, which writes

the sentence into the condemned man's body ("In the Penal Colony," 1919); and it enacts the mnemotechnics of pain discussed in Chapter 2. It is also the film's concession to history. Many of the war's perpetrators in fact survived it and prospered, and the fantasy that kills Hitler keeps one of them alive, carrying into the postwar world a sign he cannot remove. The counterfactual contains its own counter-counterfactual: an image of the "It was" that the fantasy refuses to annul.

5.4
Django Unchained: the fairy tale of emancipation

Django Unchained moves the counterfactual from a single event to a system. It is set, its title card announces, in 1858, two years before the Civil War, and its revenge is directed not at a dictator but at slavery as an institution of property, law, science, and taste. Its narrative is again a fairy tale, told within the film by a German. Around a campfire King Schultz tells Django the legend of Brünnhilde, imprisoned on a mountain ringed by fire and guarded by a dragon, and of Siegfried, who conquers his fear to scale the mountain, slay the dragon, and walk through the fire to free her. Django's wife, named Broomhilda von Shaft by German owners, speaks German, and Django becomes Siegfried. The national myth that Wagner set to music and the Reich appropriated is handed, by a German, to a freedman as the form of his liberation. Ernst Bloch's essay "The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own in Time" (1930) argued that the fairy tale, in which the small and weak outwit the powerful through courage and cunning, carries a revolutionary charge that no period exhausts. *Django* is that argument made into a western.

The film anatomises slavery's forms of power with unusual precision. Law appears in Schultz's paper, which can free a man only by buying him. Science appears in Calvin Candie's lecture in phrenology, delivered over the skull of Ben, a man the Candie family had enslaved for generations, which he saws open at the dinner table — an illustration of what Michel Foucault, in his lecture of 17 March 1976, called state racism, the biopolitical caesura that divides a population into those who must live and those who may be made to die. Taste appears in Candie's Francophilia. He in-

sists on being addressed as Monsieur Candie though he speaks no French, and Schultz, haunted by the death of an enslaved man Candie named D'Artagnan, whom Candie had torn apart by dogs for trying to run from the fights, informs him that Alexandre Dumas was Black. The culture the master cherishes is a document of barbarism, as the seventh thesis holds, and also a document of the very people he enslaves. Entertainment appears in the "Mandingo fights," in which enslaved men fight to the death for their owners' wagers and pleasure (the fight the film shows ends when Candie hands the winner a hammer to finish his opponent), a practice for which historians have found little evidence, drawn from the exploitation film *Mandingo* (1975); their truth lies elsewhere, in the battle royal of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), where Black youths are made to fight blindfolded for the pleasure of white men. And the self-reproduction of slavery appears in Stephen, the enslaved head of Candie's household, more vigilant in the master's interest than the master. Hegel's dialectic of lord and bondsman (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807) promised the bondsman a self-consciousness won through labour; Frantz Fanon replied in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that the master wants from the slave not recognition but work. Stephen is Fanon's objection made flesh — the bondsman in whom the master's consciousness has taken up residence, and the only character who sees through the performance at Candyland.

The body is the film's archive. Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987) read the wounds of the enslaved body as the hieroglyphics of the flesh, marks that inscribe a grammar of captivity. Django's back is scarred by the whip; Broomhilda's cheek bears the brand R, for runaway. Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) opens by declining to reproduce the whipping of Aunt Hester from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, asking whether the spectacle of Black suffering can be displayed without repeating the violence it depicts. *Django* does not share Hartman's scruple. It shows Broomhilda whipped and shut in a metal box sunk in the ground under the sun as punishment for running away, D'Artagnan torn apart by the dogs, and Django hung naked by his feet while an overseer prepares to castrate him, and then it takes revenge. Whether the revenge redeems the spectacle, or the spectacle is the price the revenge exacts from its own victims, is pressed in Chapter 7. What the film unmistakably redeems is an image. Its night riders in white hoods,

bickering about the eye-holes in their badly cut bags, answer D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which founded the grammar of American narrative cinema and glorified the Klan, with ridicule: a Benjaminian brushing of the medium's founding document against its grain.

The climax invites Fanon's account of the violence of the colonised as the restoration of the colonised to himself ("Concerning Violence," 1961). Django returns to Candyland, kills Candie's sister and his remaining men, shoots Stephen through both knees, leaves him inside the great house as he detonates it, and rides away with Broomhilda as it burns. Yet the film marks the limits of its own fairy tale. Its hero is, in Candie's phrase, one in ten thousand — an exception whose liberation is individual, while the institution remains intact around him. The revenge that the institution deserved is taken by one man on one house. That asymmetry between the scale of the crime and the scale of the redress is the film's truthful residue, the counterpart of Landa's mark.

5.5

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood: the redemption of an afternoon

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood reduces the counterfactual to its most intimate scale and gives it its most complex form. Its historical subject is not a war or an institution but a single night: the murders committed at 10050 Cielo Drive on the night of 8–9 August 1969 by Charles "Tex" Watson, Susan Atkins, and Patricia Krenwinkel, members of Charles Manson's "family" acting on his instructions, who killed the actress Sharon Tate, eight and a half months pregnant, together with Jay Sebring, Abigail Folger, Wojciech Frykowski, and Steven Parent. The next night members of the group killed Leno and Rosemary LaBianca in their home across the city. Joan Didion, in *The White Album* (1979), recorded that many people she knew in Los Angeles believed the sixties ended abruptly on that date. The film spends most of its length not on the murders but on a day and a half in the lives of a fading television actor, Rick Dalton, his stunt double, Cliff Booth, and his neighbour, Sharon Tate, and it reaches the fatal night

only to divert it. The killers, provoked by Rick's shouting about their noisy car, resolve to kill not the people next door but the television star who, one of them argues, taught their generation to kill. They enter his house instead of Tate's. Cliff and his dog kill the film's versions of Watson and Krenwinkel, Cliff beating the woman to death, and Rick burns Atkins's counterpart alive in his swimming pool with the flamethrower he kept from a war picture in which he incinerated a room of Nazi officers.

The climax allegorises the debate about screen violence that framed the oeuvre's reception. The killers state the media-effects thesis in its crudest form, as a justification for murder, and the film answers them with the archive itself: a prop from a violent film, preserved in a shed, burns the last of them in the swimming pool. The answer is a joke with a sting. Its excess is so cartoonish that the spectator's laughter — the comic mood of Chapter 4 — is itself put on display, and the film's final minutes withdraw the laughter entirely.

The deeper counterfactual is not the killers' deaths but Sharon Tate's afternoon. Benjamin's third thesis praised the chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing the great from the small, because nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. History remembers Sharon Tate by her death; the film restores to her the insignificant, the undocumented, the minor. On this afternoon she buys a copy of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a gift for her husband, the novel Roman Polanski would film in 1979 with a dedication to her. Hardy ended it with his most famous sentence of cosmic irony: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Æschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess." The film refuses the President of the Immortals his sport. She then goes to the Bruin Theatre in Westwood and, having talked her way in by explaining that she is in the picture, watches *The Wrecking Crew* (1968). The footage on the screen is not of Margot Robbie but of Sharon Tate herself.

That insertion is the philosophical centre of the film. Roland Barthes named the noeme of photography *ça-a-été*, "that-has-been" (*La Chambre claire*, 1980), and described the vertigo of the old photograph whose subject is dead and is going to die: *il est mort et il va mourir*. Barthes's "that-has-been" is Zarathustra's "It was" in photographic form. The real Tate on the screen is the index of a past that the fiction cannot absorb, embedded

at the heart of the fiction that denies her death. The spectator watching Robbie watch Tate lives both temporalities at once — in the film she will not die, in the world she did — and the image of her delight in her own performance is charged with both. The counterfactual does not replace the index. It frames it.

The final sequence completes the construction. After the killers are dead, Jay Sebring comes down the drive to ask what has happened, and Sharon's voice on the intercom at her gate invites Rick up for a drink. The gate opens, Rick walks through, the camera rises overhead, and the title appears: *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood*. Benjamin wrote that for the Jews every second was *die kleine Pforte*, "the small gateway," through which the Messiah might enter ("On the Concept of History," Appendix B). The gate at Cielo Drive is that gateway, and what passes through it is not a messiah but a has-been actor, admitted to the company of the living whom history murdered. The title, arriving last, retroactively converts the whole film into a fairy tale and, in doing so, pronounces its elegy. For the spectator who knows what happened in that house, the overhead shot is not a triumph but a lament: this is the evening that did not occur.

5.6

Revenge in content, mourning in form

The three films share a structure that answers the Nietzschean objection of §5.1. Their pleasure depends on knowledge they do not contain. The death of Hitler in the cinema moves the spectator only because he knows of the bunker; Django's triumph is measured against the persistence of the institution it cannot abolish; the gate at Cielo Drive devastates only those who know what happened behind it. Freud's essay on negation ("Die Verneinung," 1925) holds that a repressed content can enter consciousness on condition that it is negated: *Die Verneinung ist eine Art, das Verdrängte zur Kenntnis zu nehmen* — "negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed." The counterfactual is a negation of history in exactly this sense. The "It was" enters the film in the form of its denial, and the denial is the form in which it is remembered. This is the double consciousness named by Octave Mannoni's formula of disavowal — I

know very well, but all the same — and by Bloch's happy end, seen through and yet defended, discussed in Chapter 1. Paul Ricoeur called the historian's obligation to the dead a debt (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, 2000); the counterfactual pays it in a currency that cannot be mistaken for truth, and Michel Foucault's counter-memory ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 1971) names the practice it adopts.

The double consciousness transfigures the revenge. What the image wills, the spectator knows to be impossible, and the distance between the two is mourning. The films are revenge in content and elegy in form, and their true object is not the perpetrators, whom they destroy, but the victims, whom they briefly restore: a daughter whose face outlives the fire, a wife carried down from a mountain of flame, an actress granted an evening. This is as close as the oeuvre comes to Zarathustra's redemption. It does not say of the catastrophe "Thus I willed it"; it says of the lives the catastrophe ended, "Thus they were, and thus they might have gone on," and in saying so loves them as they were. The spectator leaves the counterfactual not consoled but returned to the "It was" with a sharpened sense of what it cost. It is the amor fati of mourning rather than of affirmation.

The transfiguration is fragile, and the chapter closes by naming the conditions of its failure. It fails when the double consciousness collapses into consolation — when the image is taken as redress rather than lament, and the pleasure of revenge displaces the knowledge on which it depends. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) states the strongest literary objection: its time-travelling heroine must preserve the life of her enslaving ancestor, because the past that produced her cannot be undone without undoing her. Hartman's refusal of the spectacle, Mendelsohn's charge of mirroring, and Lanzmann's prohibition name the others, and Chapters 7 through 9 weigh them. What this chapter has established is the legitimacy of the counterfactual on one condition: that it remain an avowed fiction whose force derives from the truth it negates. That condition is the Lincoln Letter Principle, and Chapter 6 derives it from the ontology of the Tarantinian image.

06

CHAPTER SIX

Ontologies of the Image

Two Universes, the Stunt Double, and the Lincoln Letter

> *Images that are false in content, true in trace, and honest in form.*

The counterfactual films raise a question that is ontological before it is ethical: what kind of being do Tarantinian images have, such that they can annul history without claiming to? This chapter answers in three steps. It first describes the oeuvre's world as a stipulated archive, assembled from films and populated by recurring figures, in which history appears as one film among others. It then argues, against the Baudrillardian reading that has dominated the reception, that this archive rests on a Bazinian ontology of the trace, and names the resulting practice indexical fabulation: fictions of the false built from the physical traces of the real — film stock, bodies, fire. Finally it derives, from the forged letter at the centre of *The Hateful Eight*, the principle that governs the oeuvre's relation to truth and that every preceding chapter has invoked: the Lincoln Letter Principle.

6.1
Two universes and a stipulated world

Tarantino has described his films as occupying two universes: a "realer than real" universe, to which *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Jackie Brown* belong, and a "movie movie" universe, to which *Kill Bill* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* belong — the films, as he put it, that the characters of the first universe would go to see. The hinge between them appears inside *Pulp Fiction*, when Mia Wallace describes the failed television pilot in which she played one of a team of female assassins, *Fox Force Five*: a sketch of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad nearly a decade before *Kill Bill*. A fiction within one universe becomes the substance of the other. The oeuvre is therefore not one world but a nested pair, related as audience to screen, and that relation is its first ontological fact: in this world, films are part of what there is, and what there is may be a film.

Saul Kripke insisted that possible worlds are stipulated, not discovered by powerful telescopes (*Naming and Necessity*, 1980). David Lewis's "Truth in Fiction" (1978) proposed that what is true in a fiction is what would be true were the story told as known fact, in the worlds that otherwise differ least from ours. Lewis's analysis explains why the counterfactual films work. Everything true in history remains true in them unless

they say otherwise. The Holocaust, the institution of slavery, and the Manson family are imported by default, and only the explicit divergence — Hitler's death in a cinema, the killers' mistake of address — is stipulated. The spectator's knowledge of the actual past is thus not external to the fiction but part of its content, and this is the ontological condition of the double consciousness described in Chapter 5.

The stipulated world has its own material culture. Red Apple cigarettes and Big Kahuna Burger, fictional brands, recur across films that otherwise share nothing, and in the closing credits of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* Rick Dalton films a commercial for Red Apples. Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940) imagined a fictional world, invented by a secret society, whose objects begin to appear in ours — the *hrönir*, things produced by expectation. The Tarantinian brands are the oeuvre's hrönir: objects whose only provenance is the fiction and which acquire, through repetition, a quasi-historical density.

The same density attaches to persons. Balzac's *retour des personnages*, inaugurated with *Le Père Goriot* (1835), Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, and J. D. Salinger's Glass family established the recurring character as the means by which separate fictions compose a society. Tarantino's version is genealogical. Vic Vega of *Reservoir Dogs* and Vincent Vega of *Pulp Fiction* are brothers. The Texas Ranger Earl McGraw, played by Michael Parks, passes from *From Dusk Till Dawn* into *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof*, with his son. Tarantino has made Donny Donowitz of *Inglourious Basterds* the father of the film producer Lee Donowitz in *True Romance*. The impostor of *The Hateful Eight* bears the surname Hicox, which links him to the British officer of *Inglourious Basterds*. And Ray Nicolette, the federal agent of *Jackie Brown*, reappears, played by the same actor, in Steven Soderbergh's adaptation of another Elmore Leonard novel, *Out of Sight* (1998). The oeuvre is a stipulated archive with a kinship system, in which the Second World War is an episode in the prehistory of a Hollywood producer. History is not excluded from it; it is filed within it.

6.2

Against Baudrillard: indexical fabulation

The reception has tended to read this archive through Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) described the precession of simulacra, the condition in which signs no longer refer to a reality but to other signs, and Tarantino's citations, pastiches, and branded fictions seem to exemplify it. *Pulp Fiction* supplies the emblem: Jack Rabbit Slim's, a restaurant in which waiters impersonate stars of the 1950s and vintage cars serve as booths, which Vincent calls a wax museum with a pulse. Yet the phrase contains the refutation of the Baudrillardian reading. A wax museum is an institution of embalming, and embalming is the origin of the image in André Bazin's "Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945), which traced the plastic arts to a mummy complex, the impulse to preserve life against time through a representation of life. Photography, for Bazin, fulfils that impulse because its image is produced by the object itself, through light, and so shares by a kind of transfer the being of its model. His footnote on the Holy Shroud of Turin, which he read as a synthesis of relic and photograph, is the key to his realism. And in Jack Rabbit Slim's the simulacrum contains a relic: the dancing body of John Travolta, whose twist with Mia summons, as a trace, the body that danced in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977).

Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* (1960) bore the subtitle *The Redemption of Physical Reality*, and it closed on the myth of Medusa. We cannot look at real horrors without being paralysed, but we can look at their reflection in the polished shield Athena gave to Perseus, which Kracauer identified with the cinema screen, citing the films made of the Nazi camps. Tarantino's screen is also a shield, but it reflects what did not happen. The ontology this requires is neither Baudrillard's nor Bazin's alone. It may be called indexical fabulation: fictions of the false, in the sense of the fabulating function that Henri Bergson placed at the root of myth (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 1932), built from indexical traces of the real. The counterfactual is not a simulacrum floating free of reality. It is a stipulated divergence recorded on a medium that bears the physical imprint of real bodies, real fire, and real light.

The practice has a material programme. Tarantino has shot his films on celluloid and projected them on it where he could. *The Hateful Eight* was photographed in Ultra Panavision 70, a format unused for a feature since

1966, and released in a roadshow edition with overture and intermission; the New Beverly Cinema, which he owns, projects film prints; and at Cannes in 2014 he called digital projection the death of cinema. The position is usually treated as nostalgia. It is better understood as a theology of real presence. The Council of Trent held that the consecrated bread is not a sign of the body but its substance, where Zwingli held the sacrament a memorial; Tarantino's celluloid stands to the digital file as Trent to Zwingli. The photochemical image is not a representation of the body but its trace, and Bazin, a Catholic critic who wrote for *Esprit*, supplied the doctrine. The nitrate prints that burn in *Inglourious Basterds* are consecrated matter, and their burning is a sacrifice in the strict sense.

6.3
The stunt double and the star's two bodies

Bazin drew the practical consequence of his ontology in "Montage interdit" (1953): when the essence of a scene depends on the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, montage is forbidden, and the event must be shown within a single frame. The stunt is montage interdit in its purest form. In the second half of *Death Proof*, the stuntwoman Zoë Bell, playing herself, rides on the hood of a white 1970 Dodge Challenger — the model of *Vanishing Point* (1971) — while Stuntman Mike rams it at speed. The sequence keeps the woman, the car, and the attacker within the frame, and its power derives from the spectator's knowledge that the danger was real. This is indexical fabulation as ethics: the fiction is false, but the risk is not.

The index has a price, and it is paid in bodies. In 2018 Uma Thurman described how, at Tarantino's urging, she drove a car herself for a shot in *Kill Bill* rather than use a stunt driver, and was injured, with a concussion and lasting damage to her neck and knees, when it crashed into a tree; Tarantino has called it one of the greatest regrets of his life. In the same account she said that Tarantino himself spat in her face and choked her with a chain for two shots, standing in for the actors, and Tarantino has confirmed that he did both. The demand for real presence reached the actor's body through the director's own hands. The episode is the ethical

underside of the ontology this chapter describes. The demand for real presence that gives the image its authority transfers risk onto the body in front of the camera, and the history of the stunt — a profession of anonymous injury — is the hidden history of cinematic realism.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood makes the stunt double its hero. Rick Dalton and Cliff Booth are the two bodies of a single star, in the sense Ernst Kantorowicz gave the medieval doctrine of the king's two bodies (*The King's Two Bodies*, 1957): Rick is the body politic, the name and image that survive on film, and Cliff the body natural, which falls, fights, and bleeds so that the image need not. The double drives, repairs, and protects, and in the climax it is the double who does the killing. Otto Rank's study of the *Doppelgänger* (1914) and Freud's "The Uncanny" (1919) described the double as originally an insurance against the destruction of the self, which later becomes *zum unheimlichen Vorboten des Todes*, "the uncanny harbinger of death." Cliff is both. He preserves Rick, and he carries a death the film leaves unresolved — the suspicion, planted in a flashback on a boat, that he killed his wife with a spear gun and was never charged — which Tarantino's novelisation (2021) confirms while extending his history of violence. *Death Proof* had already staged the malign double. Stuntman Mike, whose car is death-proof only in the driver's seat, turns the stuntman's craft into a means of killing, and he is destroyed by a stuntwoman. The double is avenged by the double.

The author himself is subject to this logic. Tarantino has repeatedly cast himself in order to be killed: Mr. Brown dies in the getaway car of *Reservoir Dogs*, Richie Gecko dies in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, and an Australian employee of a mining company is blown up by Django. In *The Hateful Eight* he returns as the narrator, a voice without a body. Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) proclaimed the author's disappearance into the text; the oeuvre literalises the proclamation and then reverses it, killing the author's body within the fiction so that his voice can preside over it.

6.4

The Lincoln Letter Principle

At the centre of *The Hateful Eight* is a document. Major Warren carries a letter from Abraham Lincoln addressed to him personally, which he shows to John Ruth in the stagecoach and which moves Ruth deeply; its domestic close, in which the President remarks that his wife is calling him to bed, is the detail that persuades. Midway through the film Warren admits that he wrote it himself, and explains why: a Black man in that country is safe only when white men are disarmed, and the letter disarms them. At the end, after the hanging, the wounded Mannix, who knows it to be a forgery, asks to read it, reads it aloud, and praises the closing line as a nice touch. A community of two, founded on a victim, now shares a text that both know to be false and both find true in some other sense.

Three classical theories frame the scene, and it exceeds each of them. Plato's *Republic* (414b–415d) proposes a noble lie, the myth of the metals, to bind the citizens of the just city; but the noble lie requires that the ruled not know it to be a lie. Ernest Renan's lecture "What Is a Nation?" (1882) held that *l'oubli, et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation* — "forgetting, and I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation." But Renan's error must be forgotten. Girard's founding murder, analysed in Chapter 4, must be misrecognised to be effective. In the Lincoln letter nothing is hidden, forgotten, or misrecognised. Both readers know that the text is forged and the victim hanged, and the text binds them anyway. That is the difference between the noble lie and the avowed fiction.

The psychoanalytic name for this structure is disavowal. Octave Mannoni's formula, *je sais bien, mais quand même* — I know very well, but all the same — describes belief that survives its own refutation, and Christian Metz made it the structure of cinematic spectatorship (*The Imaginary Signifier*, 1977): the spectator knows the film is a film and believes in it all the same. Gilles Deleuze's chapter on "The Powers of the False" (*Cinema 2*, 1985), with its reading of Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1973), made the forger the hero of the modern image, the figure who replaces the form of the true with the power of the false. Two works of speculative fiction mark the principle's limits. In Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) an industrialist shows two identical lighters and

claims that one was in Roosevelt's pocket when he was assassinated; its value lies wholly in an invisible historicity that may be forged. The Lincoln letter has no historicity at all, and its value is undiminished, because it lies in its effect. In Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986–87), Ozymandias stages a fictional alien attack that kills millions in order to unite the world in peace: a founding fiction with its scapegoat, but unavowed and paid for by innocents. *Watchmen* is the Lincoln Letter Principle's dark twin, and it defines the principle by contrast.

The principle may now be stated. An avowed fiction can found a provisional community among those who know it to be fiction, on two conditions: that its fictionality is shared rather than concealed, and that the price of the community — its victim — remains visible rather than forgotten. Under these conditions the fiction does not deceive; it binds. The counterfactual films are Lincoln letters addressed to their audiences. They are forgeries of history whose forgery is announced in their titles, and they found, for their duration, a community of spectators who know what happened and consent to watch what did not. It is fitting that the oeuvre's two great forged texts, the Ezekiel of *Pulp Fiction* and the Lincoln letter of *The Hateful Eight*, are both entrusted to Samuel L. Jackson, the voice identified in Chapter 3 as the oeuvre's philosophical organon. The first converts its reader; the second founds a community. Between them lies the oeuvre's ontology: images that are false in content, true in trace, and honest in form.

This ontology legitimates the counterfactual of Chapter 5, but it also sharpens the questions the next chapter must face. If the index has a price, who pays it? If the fiction is avowed, who avows it, and on whose behalf? The Lincoln letter is written by a Black man to disarm white men, but it is written in turn by a white author for a Black actor to speak. The ethics of that ventriloquism, and of the bodies — female, Black, injured — on which the oeuvre's images are made, is the subject of Chapter 7.

07



CHAPTER SEVEN

Bodies, Gazes, Others

Race, Gender, and the Ethics of Ventriloquism

> *Apokatastasis for one body is paid for with the image of another.*

NITRATE NITRATE NITRATE NITRATE

The argument so far has credited the oeuvre with a coherent philosophy: a restitutive archive, a sovereign tongue, a theory of mimetic violence, a counterfactual that mourns in the form of revenge, and an ontology of avowed fiction. This chapter submits that philosophy to the critiques of race and gender that have accompanied the oeuvre from its beginning, and argues that they are not external objections but consequences of its method. An archive restored carries its economies of race and sex with it, as Chapter 1 warned; a tongue lent to others raises the question of who is speaking; a fiction founded on a victim raises the question of who is made to pay. The chapter names the structure that joins these questions ventriloquism — the white male author's speech through Black voices and female bodies — and ends by proposing a criterion, derived from the Lincoln Letter Principle, for distinguishing its legitimate from its illegitimate forms.

7.1

The archive's sins

The genres the oeuvre restores were contested at their birth. Blaxploitation, whose stars and idioms pervade *Jackie Brown* and *Django Unchained*, was attacked in 1972 by a Coalition Against Blaxploitation formed by civil-rights organisations including the NAACP, the SCLC, and CORE, which objected that the films traded in images of Black criminality and sexuality for profits that returned little to Black communities; others defended the same films as the first mass cinema to show Black protagonists who won. The Hong Kong and Japanese genre films that *Kill Bill* restores carry the Orientalist framings of their American distribution; the spaghetti western carries the history of the frontier; the rape-revenge film carries its sexual spectacle. To restore the archive, in the sense of Chapter 1, is to restore these economies along with the energies they contained. Origen's apokatastasis, which extended salvation even to the devil, has its critical analogue here: the restitution of everything discarded includes the restitution of what deserved to be discarded.

The scholarship divides accordingly. bell hooks's 1995 essay on *Pulp Fiction* and Sharon Willis's *High Contrast* (1997) situated the early films within Hollywood's traffic in racial and sexual difference and asked whom their transgressions served. Adilifu Nama's *Race on the QT* (2015) read the oeuvre as a sustained, if provocative, meditation on American race. Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992), which is not about Tarantino, supplies the framework both positions presuppose: the Africanist presence through which white American art has imagined its own freedom, power, and transgression. The question is not whether that presence structures the oeuvre, which it plainly does, but whether the oeuvre ever returns what it borrows.

7.2
Jackie Brown: the control group

Jackie Brown (1997) is the oeuvre's control group, the film in which its methods operate without a miracle. Adapted from Elmore Leonard's *Rum Punch* (1992), whose heroine, Jackie Burke, is white, it recasts her as a Black woman and gives the role to Pam Grier, the star of *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). Jackie is a flight attendant in middle age, working for a small airline at a wage that has left her with nothing, who smuggles cash for the gun dealer Ordell Robbie and is caught by federal agents. The film has no counterfactual, no conversion, no act of divine violence. Its resolution is a con: Jackie plays Ordell against the police and walks away with half a million dollars, with the help of a bail bondsman, Max Cherry, played by Robert Forster, an actor the industry had long since stopped calling.

The con turns on a scene in a shopping mall, where a bag of money changes hands in a department-store dressing room and the exchange is shown three times, from the positions of Jackie, of Ordell's associates, and of Max. Marx's general formula of capital, M–C–M′, money that passes through commodities in order to return as more money (*Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 4), finds its comic literalisation here: the circulation of shopping bags in a temple of commodities converts a criminal's capital into a worker's pension. The triple viewpoint makes the exchange a problem of the gaze, and

the film awards the decisive gaze to its heroine, who alone sees the whole. It is also the oeuvre's most sustained attention to time as ageing. Jackie and Max are middle-aged; Max buys a tape of the Delfonics because she played them for him; and at the end he declines to go to Spain with her. The final shot holds on Jackie's face as she drives away. The film grants its Black heroine intelligence, labour, desire, and a future, and grants the white man who loves her only the dignity of renunciation. If the oeuvre has a humane centre, it is here, and it is significant that this is the film in which Bloch's fairy tale is played out in a mall rather than in history.

7.3
The ventriloquist's voice

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), reading Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, distinguished two senses of representation: *Vertretung*, speaking for, as a proxy speaks for a constituency, and *Darstellung*, portrayal, as a stage or a text re-presents. Ventriloquism is the fusion of the two. The oeuvre portrays Black speech with a virtuosity that critics of every persuasion acknowledge, and in the counterfactual films it claims to speak for Black and Jewish vengeance. Chapter 3 observed that its most sovereign speech is voiced by Samuel L. Jackson. The critique holds that this sovereignty is borrowed: the white author's philosophy acquires authority, danger, and cool by passing through a Black voice.

The n-word is the sharpest instance, because it is the point at which *Darstellung* becomes an act. Spike Lee objected to its frequency in *Jackie Brown* in 1997, and on the release of *Django Unchained* declared that American slavery had been a holocaust, not a spaghetti western, and declined to see the film. Ishmael Reed, whose satirical neo-slave narrative *Flight to Canada* (1976) had anticipated the film's anachronisms, was among its sharpest critics. Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) defined slavery as the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonoured persons, and *Django* is a fairy tale of social resurrection: its plot restores a marriage that slavery annulled by sale. Yet the film's spectacle of subjection, discussed in Chapter 5 in the light of Hartman's scruple, is the price of that resurrection, and the price

is paid in images of Black suffering composed for an audience of whom the film asks no comparable cost. Broomhilda, the Brünnhilde of the fairy tale, is given, as critics noted, little to do but suffer and wait (whipped, shut in the box, sent by Candie to a white guest's room for the night), so that the film's restoration of Black manhood is achieved partly at the expense of Black womanhood.

The oeuvre also contains its own counter-examples. The fire that kills Hitler in *Inglourious Basterds* is set by Marcel, Shosanna's projectionist, a Black Frenchman whom no one in the Nazi audience thinks to notice: Ralph Ellison's invisibility converted into a weapon. The letter that founds the community of *The Hateful Eight* is written by its Black protagonist, who explains its purpose as the disarming of white men; the film stages a Black character's authorship of a fiction and gives that fiction the last word. Stephen, at Candyland, is the one character who sees through every performance. These figures do not answer the critique, but they show that the oeuvre knows it. Its Black characters are not only voiced by the author; within the fiction, they are authors.

7.4
The gaze and the female body

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) argued that classical cinema divides looking along the line of sex: man as the bearer of the look, woman as image, coded for to-be-looked-at-ness and contained by voyeuristic investigation or fetishistic overvaluation. The oeuvre is at once a textbook of Mulvey's categories and a partial revision of them. Its fetishism is literal — the camera's attention to women's feet is a signature — and the first half of *Death Proof* is structured as voyeurism, a man watching women before he kills them. The second half reverses the terms. A second group of women, including Zoë Bell, takes over the car, the chase, and the ending, and their conversation at a diner table is filmed in a circling long take that deliberately repeats the opening of *Reservoir Dogs* with the sex of the talkers inverted. Carol Clover's final girl, discussed in Chapter 4, becomes a collective and the author of the ending.

Kill Bill complicates the reversal. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) described woman as constituted as the Other; Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) described gender as performance, a repetition of citations without an original. The Bride fights at the House of Blue Leaves in the yellow jumpsuit Bruce Lee wore in *Game of Death* (1978), so that her heroism is literally the citation of a male hero's costume. Lisa Coulthard, in "Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence" (2007), argued that the violent heroine of postfeminist cinema, the Bride included, is empowered as an individual in ways that leave the structures of gender intact, and the saga's final motive — the recovery of a daughter — returns its killer to maternity. The reading of Chapter 4, in which the Bride is the anti-Medea, is compatible with Coulthard's: the film redeems a mother, not a woman.

Two later cases define the problem's limits. Daisy Domergue in *The Hateful Eight*, played by Jennifer Jason Leigh in a performance nominated for an Academy Award, is repeatedly punched and elbowed in the face by John Ruth and left bloodied for most of the film, in scenes often played for laughs, and she is the victim whose hanging founds the film's final community. The film's defenders, Tarantino among them, have argued that its violence is indifferent to her sex: she is a murderer bound for the gallows in a film violent toward everyone. The defence is partly accurate and beside the point, since the comic mood of Chapter 4 anaesthetises the spectator to precisely the price that the Lincoln Letter Principle requires to remain visible. Sharon Tate in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* raises the opposite difficulty. At Cannes in 2019, asked why Margot Robbie had so few lines, Tarantino replied that he rejected the question's hypothesis. Chapter 5 defended the film's treatment of Tate as a restoration of the ordinary life that history erased. The critique holds that the restoration is achieved by making her an image to be looked at — Mulvey's to-be-looked-at-ness rendered as elegy — while the men speak. Both readings are available because the film's ventriloquism is of a peculiar kind: it lends Tate not a voice but a life, and the question is whether a life without speech is restored or merely displayed. The film's climax poses the converse problem: its most prolonged violence falls on two young women, one beaten to death by Cliff and one burned alive by Rick, and it is staged for laughter.

Some critics objected on exactly these grounds, and the comic mood of Chapter 4 again anaesthetises a price that the counterfactual's own logic requires to remain visible.

7.5
Men among men

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) described male homosocial desire, the continuum of bonds among men that runs from friendship and rivalry to the erotic, typically triangulated through women and policed by homophobia. The oeuvre is overwhelmingly a world of men among men. *Reservoir Dogs* gives no woman more than a moment on screen, and its emotional climax is Mr. White cradling the bleeding Mr. Orange, an image Kent Brintnall read through the iconography of crucifixion and pietà (*CrossCurrents*, 2004). *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* describes Cliff as a little more than a brother and a little less than a wife to Rick, and its structure is a marriage of image and body. The policing appears in the pawnshop basement of *Pulp Fiction*, where Zed rapes Marsellus Wallace while Maynard watches, in a scene that recalls *Deliverance* (1972). The most powerful Black man in the film is degraded by white sadists and rescued by a white boxer, and the silence he then imposes on Butch as a condition of release makes the injury literally unspeakable.

The Bruce Lee sequence of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* shows the archive's restitutions at their most selective. *Kill Bill* had dressed its heroine in Lee's costume as homage; the later film stages a fight in which Cliff throws a boastful Lee into the side of a car. Shannon Lee objected that the film made her father a caricature, and Tarantino defended the portrayal. Whatever the historical merits, the structure is clear: the image of a real Asian-American icon is diminished so that a fictional white stuntman may be restored. Apokatastasis for one body is paid for with the image of another.

The bodies of the production belong to the same analysis. Chapter 6 recorded Uma Thurman's account of her injury on *Kill Bill*. Every Tarantino feature from *Reservoir Dogs* to *The Hateful Eight* was distributed by Miramax or The Weinstein Company, the companies of Harvey and Bob

Weinstein, and after reports in 2017 that Harvey Weinstein had sexually harassed and assaulted women over decades, allegations that came to include rape and led to his conviction for rape in Los Angeles in 2022, Tarantino acknowledged that he had known enough to have done more than he did. Uma Thurman's 2018 account included her own allegation that Weinstein had attempted to sexually assault her in a London hotel room. The oeuvre's theory of the discarded, its ethics of the stunt, and its sovereign talk were produced within an industry whose own discarding of women's testimony is part of the archive it inherits.

7.6

A criterion for ventriloquism

The Lincoln Letter Principle held that an avowed fiction may found a provisional community if its fictionality is shared and its price visible. Ventriloquism is a fiction of voice, and it can be judged by the same conditions, with a third that the borrowing of a voice requires: that the borrowed voice return something to those from whom it is borrowed. By this criterion the oeuvre's ventriloquism is legitimate where it restores — where it gives Pam Grier and Robert Forster the roles of their careers, cedes the decisive gaze to Jackie Brown, credits Zoë Bell's body under her own name, and grants Warren the authorship of the text that founds his community. It is illegitimate where it only borrows — where the author speaks the n-word in his own cameo without paying its price, where laughter conceals Daisy Domergue's status as scapegoat, where a real man's image is spent to restore a fictional one, and where suffering is displayed to an audience from which nothing is asked. Between these poles lie the contested cases, Django's fairy tale and Sharon Tate's silence, in which the same image can be read as restitution or as spectacle, and in which the verdict depends on whether the spectator retains the double consciousness that the counterfactual requires.

The chapter's conclusion is therefore neither acquittal nor condemnation. The oeuvre's politics are the politics of its archive: restitutive where it returns what the archive took, reproductive where it re-enacts the archive's appropriations for pleasure. This is the limit Chapter 1 anticip-

ated when it recalled that Origen's restoration of all things extended even to the devil. It is also the limit Part III must keep in view as it compares the oeuvre with the speculative and philosophical fictions that have attempted similar redemptions, and as it states the theory of nitrate apokatastasis in its final form.

PART THREE

III

COMPARISONS AND SYNTHESIS

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, HAMLET (C. 1600), II.II

08 SPECULATIVE KIN
09 TOWARD A THEORY OF NITRATE APOKATASTASIS



CHAPTER EIGHT

Speculative Kin

Counterfactualists, Revengers, and Archivists

> *Its dead are not permanently alive in another moment; they are briefly alive in a film.*

No oeuvre is intelligible in isolation, and this one, composed of citations, least of all. Yet the comparisons that matter most are not with the films it cites but with the literature it does not: the speculative and philosophical fictions that have undertaken its central operations by other means — rewriting history, staging revenge, burning and restoring archives, and imagining the violence on which communities are founded. This chapter assembles six such constellations, in Benjamin's sense of a configuration in which each element illuminates the others, and asks of each what it shares with the oeuvre and where the oeuvre departs from it. The method is differential. The Tarantinian philosophy is defined less by any single source than by the pattern of its departures.

CONSTELLATION	KIN	SHARED STRUCTURE	THE TARANTINIAN DIFFERENCE
Counterfactual history	Dick, Roth, Harris, Chabon, Vonnegut, King, Bradbury	Divergence from the historical record	No alternate world: the divergence ends at the moment of revenge
Revenge tragedy	Kyd, Middleton, Shakespeare, Kleist, Doctorow, Dumas	Private justice staged as spectacle	The revenger survives; mourning replaces damnation
Neo-slave narrative	Reed, Butler, Morrison, Whitehead, Ellison	The past of slavery reopened in the present	Revenge where they choose preservation, haunting, or satire; authorship from outside the descent
Archive metafiction	Borges, Eco, Bradbury, Cervantes, Sterne, Calvino	The library as world and as fire	The archive is a public repertory; its burning is a gift, not a loss
Hollywood apocalypse	West, Pynchon, Ballard, Erickson, Roszak	The audience at the end of the world	The audience is judge, not victim; Hollywood saved rather than burned
Metaphysical violence	McCarthy, Le Guin, Perec, Coover, Dostoevsky	Violence and the founding victim	Ludic rather than metaphysical violence; restoration rather than annihilation; a guilty scapegoat

8.1

Counterfactual history: the world and the moment

The classic counterfactual novel builds a world. Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) imagines an America divided between victorious Germany and Japan, and places within it a banned novel, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, in which the Allies won; when the *I Ching* is consulted about the novel, its answer is Inner Truth, so that the fiction within the fiction turns out to be truer than the world containing it. The same novel populates its occupied America with Japanese collectors of American antiques, many of them forgeries, whose value rests on a historicity no one can see. Tarantino inverts the fetish: his is the American collector of Japanese and Italian genre cinema. Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) makes history worse — Lindbergh wins the election of 1940 and American Jews live in dread — before returning it to its actual course. Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992) sets a detective story in a victorious Reich of 1964, and the crime he uncovers is the concealed genocide: the counterfactual as a mystery whose solution is the actual. Stephen King's *11/22/63* (2011) lets its time traveller prevent the assassination of Kennedy only to find that the past is obdurate and its alteration catastrophic, and Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" (1952) had already shown a crushed butterfly in the Jurassic changing an election in the present.

All of these works trace consequences, and Tarantino traces none. *Inglourious Basterds* ends on the night of the fire, *Django Unchained* as Candyland burns, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* at the gate. There is no postwar Europe without Hitler, no altered Reconstruction, no 1970s without the murders. The Tarantinian counterfactual is a moment rather than a world — *kairos* rather than *chronos* — and this is why it can mourn. A world would compete with history, incurring Hayden White's objection and King's obdurate consequences; a moment can only negate, and grieve.

The oeuvre's nearest kin in this constellation are therefore not novels but pulp. The cover of *Captain America Comics* #1 (1941), drawn by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, showed its hero punching Hitler months before the United States entered the war, and Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) makes the same gesture the first cover

of its heroes' comic, drawn by a Jewish refugee whose family remains trapped in Prague: an imaginary revenge conceived in real time, at a moment when the real one was impossible. *Inglourious Basterds* is the Golden Age cover belatedly realised. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) supplies the most exact literary image of cinema's revenge against "It was": Billy Pilgrim watches a war film backwards, the fires shrinking, the bombs rising into the bellies of the planes, the explosives dismantled in factories and their minerals returned to the earth. Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians, for whom every moment exists forever, offer the consolation that the oeuvre refuses. Its dead are not permanently alive in another moment; they are briefly alive in a film.

8.2

Revenge tragedy: the revenger who survives

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1587) ends with a play within the play. Hieronimo, the father whose son has been murdered, stages a tragedy before the King of Spain in which each actor speaks a different language, and the deaths it depicts are real; when the court demands an explanation, he bites out his own tongue. The premiere of *Inglourious Basterds* is Kyd's scene reinstated: a spectacle before the sovereign, a masquerade in foreign tongues, and deaths that are real within the fiction. *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) climaxes in a masque of disguised revengers, a lineage that runs through the masked killers of the House of Blue Leaves, whose black domino masks recall those of Kato, Bruce Lee's role in *The Green Hornet*. And Hamlet's Mousetrap, the play devised to catch the conscience of a king, is the theatrical weapon that *Inglourious Basterds* converts from a trap into an execution.

Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810) tells of a horse dealer who, denied legal redress for an injustice done to his horses, wages a private war that burns cities; at his execution he swallows the paper bearing a prophecy his enemy longs to read — a withholding as absolute as Hieronimo's tongue. E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) rewrote Kohlhaas as Coalhouse Walker Jr., a Black ragtime pianist whose car is vandalised by white firemen and who, denied justice, seizes the Morgan Library with

dynamite, holding the archive hostage. The line from Kohlhaas through Coalhouse to Django is direct. Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844–46) supplied the genre's long con of patience, disguise, and wealth, and ended in doubt: its final counsel is *attendre et espérer*, to wait and to hope. Dumas, the grandson of an enslaved woman of Saint-Domingue, is the author whose descent Schultz restores to Calvin Candie.

The decisive difference concerns the genre's moral law. The revenger of the tradition must die, because vengeance belongs to God — "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19) — and the revenger who takes it usurps a divine prerogative. Hieronimo, Vindice, Hamlet, Kohlhaas, and Coalhouse die; Monte Cristo repents his excess. Tarantino's revengers survive and are rewarded: the Bride recovers her daughter, Django rides away, Aldo contemplates his masterpiece, Rick Dalton is admitted through the gate. Shosanna dies, but her image triumphs over the fire. The oeuvre suspends the theodicy of the revenge tragedy, and what replaces the damnation of the revenger is not approval but the elegiac form of Chapter 5. The revenger is not punished; the spectator mourns.

8.3
Neo-slave narratives: preservation, haunting, satire

Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) filled the antebellum South with anachronisms, broadcasting Lincoln's assassination on television and sending fugitives north by jet; Django's sunglasses and its soundtrack have Reed's precedent, and Reed's criticism of the film, recorded in Chapter 7, is a quarrel within a genre he helped found. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) sends a Black woman of 1976 back to a Maryland plantation, where she must repeatedly save the life of her enslaving ancestor, since the past that produced her cannot be undone without undoing her; she returns to her own time without her arm, the past having taken its price from her body. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) brings the past back as a ghost: the daughter whom Sethe, having escaped slavery, killed as a baby rather than let her be taken back into it returns grown, and demands love rather than vengeance, and names *rememory* the persistence of memories as places outside the mind, into which others may walk; the

novel closes by insisting that its story is not one to pass on, in the double sense of repeating it and passing it by. Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) literalises a metaphor, building an actual railway beneath the South and making each state it reaches a different regime of racial terror.

These works reopen the past of slavery in order to remember, preserve, haunt, or satirise it; none takes revenge on it. *Django Unchained* alone does, and its closest kin are Reed's satire and Whitehead's literalisation, its antithesis *Kindred*, and its judge *Beloved*, whose dead ask to be loved rather than avenged. The comparison also gives the question of ventriloquism its sharpest form. Every author in this constellation writes from within the descent the genre remembers; Tarantino writes from within the archive of its representations.

8.4

Archive metafictions: the library and the fire

Borges's "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" (1944) is the oeuvre's most exact literary anticipation. An Irish conspirator of the nineteenth century, discovered to be a traitor, is executed by his comrades in a staged assassination in a theatre, scripted with borrowings from Shakespeare, so that he dies a martyr and the rebellion is served; the narrator remarks the parallels with the deaths of Caesar and Lincoln. History is forged as drama, a nation is founded on a fiction known to its authors, and the theatre is the place where a leader is killed and a legend made. Seven decades before *The Hateful Eight*, Borges had stated the Lincoln Letter Principle, and before *Inglourious Basterds* he had placed the decisive death of a political drama in an auditorium. His "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941) imagined a novel in which every possible outcome occurs, the literary model for an oeuvre that divides into two universes and several histories.

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) ends with a monastery library in flames, burned to protect the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, on comedy, from readers, because its guardian fears the power of laughter. *Inglourious Basterds* inverts the scene: the archive burns while a woman's face laughs on the smoke, and laughter is released by the fire

rather than suppressed by it. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) imagined firemen who burn books and exiles who preserve them by memorising them whole; the video-store clerk who could recite a thousand films is Bradbury's book-person, and *Inglourious Basterds* turns the fire against the burners. In the first part of *Don Quixote* (1605), the priest and the barber conduct a scrutiny of the knight's library and burn most of the romances that have driven him mad — the first auto-da-fé of pulp. Tarantino is the anti-priest who saves the romances, and Rick Dalton, living the westerns he plays, is a Quixote of Hollywood. Cervantes attributed his story to an invented Moorish historian, Cide Hamete Benengeli, a forged source, and when an impostor published a spurious sequel in 1614, he let his hero die at the end of the authentic second part of 1615 so that no one else could continue him; the Conclusion returns to that gesture. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), with its digressions and disordered chronology, and Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979), composed of ten beginnings in ten genres, are the formal ancestors of *Pulp Fiction*'s achronology and *Kill Bill*'s genre chapters.

The difference is the status of the archive. In Borges it is a labyrinth, in Eco a secret, in Bradbury a proscription, in Cervantes a madness. In Tarantino it is a public repertory — the video store, the revival house — and its fire is a gift: the prints in Shosanna's cinema burn in order to be seen. The archive is spent, in Bataille's sense, rather than hoarded.

8.5
Hollywood apocalypse: the audience and the end

Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939) is the founding novel of Hollywood's discarded: extras, has-beens, and the bored who came to California to die. Its painter, Tod Hackett, works on a canvas called *The Burning of Los Angeles*, and the novel ends with a premiere crowd turning into a riot. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* takes place in West's Hollywood of has-beens, and its killers are West's locusts, the rage of a cheated audience turned against the industry that fed it images; the film redirects the rage and replaces the burning city with a burning swimming pool. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) ends in a Los Angeles cinema

whose audience waits in the dark as a rocket descends toward the theatre, and his *Inherent Vice* (2009) sets its detective in the paranoid Los Angeles of 1970, after the murders. J. G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973), which eroticises the collision of bodies and cars, is the unacknowledged theory of *Death Proof*. Steve Erickson's *Zeroville* (2007) brings a cinephile savant to Hollywood in August 1969, and Theodore Roszak's *Flicker* (1991) makes cinephilia a gnosis, as a film scholar discovers heretical messages concealed in the films of a forgotten director.

In West and Pynchon the audience is the victim of the apocalypse or its mob; in Ballard it is technology's erotic accomplice; in Roszak it is the initiate. In Tarantino it is the judge and god of Chapter 4, and in *Inglourious Basterds* also the target. His Hollywood is redemptive where West's is apocalyptic. It saves the city West burned.

8.6

Metaphysical violence: the judge, the coin, the child

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) is the great counter-image of the oeuvre. Its Judge Holden sketches objects in his ledger and then destroys them, so that the record becomes their only trace: an archive of annihilation, the exact inverse of apokatastasis. For the Judge war is the ultimate game, and its violence is metaphysical, the truth of the world. In *No Country for Old Men* (2005) Anton Chigurh decides his victims' fates by a coin toss, embodying the moral luck of Chapter 2 as an executioner, while Sheriff Bell mourns the codes that no longer hold. Tarantino's violence is ludic rather than metaphysical, his archive restores what the Judge destroys, and his codes, however forged, still bind.

Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973) describes a city whose happiness depends on the misery of a single child, a fact every citizen knows; most accept it, and some walk away. Omelas is the most terrible test of the Lincoln Letter Principle, because its scapegoat is avowed and its price visible, and the arrangement remains monstrous: avowal does not suffice when the victim is innocent. *The Hateful Eight* escapes Omelas's verdict only because its victim is guilty, which exposes the film's dependence on her guilt. Jules, who leaves the life after the miracle,

is the one who walks away. Georges Perec's *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (1975) alternates a memoir of a childhood in which his mother was deported to Auschwitz and murdered there with the fiction of an athletic island society that gradually reveals itself as a camp, and his *La Disparition* (1969), a novel written without the letter *e*, has been read as a work of mourning for *eux*, them. Omission as mourning is the literary form of the absent camps of *Inglourious Basterds*. Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), which stages the execution of the Rosenbergs as a spectacle in Times Square, narrated in part by Richard Nixon, is the scaffold of Foucault reborn as entertainment, and the kin of Daisy Domergue's hanging.

Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) supplies the two objections Chapter 9 must answer. In the chapter called "Rebellion," Ivan refuses any harmony bought with the suffering of children: "I hasten to give back my entrance ticket." No aesthetic achievement, on Ivan's terms, could justify the suffering it depicts, and his refusal is the strongest objection to the Theodicy of Trash. In the Grand Inquisitor's legend, the Church rules by miracle, mystery, and authority, keeping from its flock the secret that its ruler does not believe. The Inquisitor's secret defines by contrast the avowed fiction: the Lincoln letter is the Inquisitor's lie confessed.

8.7

The differences gathered

Gathered, the six differences define the oeuvre more exactly than any list of influences. Its counterfactual is a moment, not a world. Its revenger survives, and mourning replaces damnation. It takes revenge where the neo-slave narrative chooses preservation, haunting, or satire, and it writes from outside the descent that grants that genre its authority. Its archive is a public repertory spent in fire rather than a labyrinth, a secret, or a madness. Its audience is judge rather than victim. And its violence is ludic rather than metaphysical, founded on a guilty rather than an innocent victim, and confessed rather than concealed. These are not six theses but one, seen from six sides. The next chapter states it.



CHAPTER NINE

Toward a Theory of Nitrate Apokatastasis

A digital file cannot burn; it can only be deleted, and deletion leaves no smoke.

The preceding chapters established their findings one at a time. This chapter states them together, as a theory. It defines the master concept of the dissertation, formulates it as four propositions and two corollaries, submits it to the strongest objections gathered in Chapters 7 and 8, and closes on the image in which the theory is condensed: a face that survives, for a moment, the burning of the film that carried it.

9.1
The concept

Nitrate apokatastasis names the operation by which the oeuvre restores what history and taste have discarded — genres, performers, and the dead — by spending, in a cinematic act at once vengeful and sacrificial, the material that carries the image. Each term carries a paradox that the other resolves. *Apokatastasis*, the "restitution of all things" of Acts 3:21, became in Origen's *On First Principles* the doctrine that all rational creatures will be restored at the end of time — a doctrine its critics understood to extend even to the devil, condemned in the sixth century, and revived by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project* (Convolute N) as the task of bringing the whole past into the present. It names a totality of restoration that orthodoxy found scandalous because it included what should have been left out. *Nitrate* names the material: cellulose nitrate, the base of cinema's first half-century, chemically cognate with guncotton and so flammable that its archives have repeatedly burned. The conjunction says that in this oeuvre restoration and destruction are the same act. What is restored is spent, and what is spent is restored. The prints in Shosanna's cinema are the archive in its most literal form, and they are restored to their full power at the moment they burn.

Georges Bataille described sovereignty as the moment at which a being ceases to subordinate itself to future use, and located it in expenditure — sacrifice, festival, gift — rather than accumulation (*The Accursed Share*, 1949). Nitrate apokatastasis is sovereign in this sense. It does not preserve the archive as capital, as the museum does; it spends the archive as the festival spends, so that restoration is inseparable from loss.

9.2

Four propositions and two corollaries

	STATEMENT	PRINCIPAL ORIGINATORS	DEMONSTRATIONS
I. Archive	Nothing discarded is lost; it returns with its energies and its sins	Benjamin, Bloch, Warburg, Kael, Origen	Video Archives; the casting of Travolta, Grier, Forster, Carradine; the needle drop
II. Tongue	Speech contracts, performs, defers, and kills; the standoff is its zero-point	Austin, Derrida, Butler, Wittgenstein, Girard, Hobbes	Ezekiel 25:17; the tavern game; the diner
III. Counterfactual	The revenge against "It was" is legitimate only through the spectator's retained knowledge; it is elegy in the form of triumph	Nietzsche, Benjamin, Freud, Barthes, Lewis	*Inglourious Basterds*; *Django Unchained*; *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*
IV. Lincoln Letter	An avowed fiction founds a provisional community if its fictionality is shared and its price visible	Plato (by contrast), Renan, Girard, Mannoni, Borges	*The Hateful Eight*; the counterfactual films as a genre
Corollary A. Asymmetry	Redemption spares and marks; the mark keeps the "It was" inside the fiction	Genesis, Nietzsche, Kafka	Landa's forehead; Nikki's promise; one house saved on Cielo Drive
Corollary B. Theodicy of Trash	The discarded genre is appointed judge of the historical crime, and justifies images, never suffering	Nietzsche, Leibniz (by contrast), Kael	*Nation's Pride* burned; Griffith's riders ridiculed; the Manson thesis answered by a prop

Proposition I, the archive, holds that nothing discarded is lost. It is Benjamin's third thesis translated into a practice of programming, casting, and citation, and it grounds every other proposition. Its critical clause,

drawn from Origen and developed in Chapter 7, is that the discarded returns with its sins as well as its energies, so that every restoration is also a reckoning.

Proposition II, the tongue, holds that speech is the oeuvre's sovereign medium. Speech contracts the codes of Chapter 2, performs the identities of Chapter 3, and defers violence through the suspense of the tongue; at its limit it kills, in the lethal performative. The standoff of Chapter 4 is its zero-point, the tableau in which every speaker holds a gun and no word can alter the outcome. The proposition explains why the oeuvre's violence arrives as the end of talk, and why its one exit from violence altogether — the diner — is a conversation.

Proposition III, the counterfactual, holds that the oeuvre enacts in the image the revenge against "It was" that Nietzsche identified as the essence of revenge, and that the enactment is legitimate only through the spectator's retained knowledge of what was. Lewis's analysis of truth in fiction explains the mechanism: the actual past is imported into the fiction by default, and only the divergence is stipulated. Freud's negation explains the effect: the "It was" enters the film in the form of its denial. Benjamin's remembrance explains the aim: to make the completed incomplete. The result is elegy in the form of triumph.

Proposition IV, the Lincoln Letter, holds that an avowed fiction can found a provisional community among those who know it to be fiction, provided that its fictionality is shared and its price visible. It distinguishes the oeuvre's forgeries from Plato's noble lie, which requires deception, from Renan's historical error, which requires forgetting, and from Girard's founding murder, which requires misrecognition. It is the legitimacy condition of Proposition III, and it applies reflexively: the films are Lincoln letters addressed to their audiences.

The first corollary, the Asymmetry Principle, follows from the conjunction of the third and fourth propositions. Because the counterfactual must keep the "It was" visible, its redemptions are never symmetrical with the crimes they answer. The oeuvre spares as well as kills, and it marks what it spares. Landa lives with a swastika cut into his forehead; Nikki lives with a promise; on Cielo Drive one house is saved, and no other house in

history is. The mark is the witness the counterfactual keeps within itself, the sign of Cain that protects and brands, and it prevents the fantasy from closing over the fact.

The second corollary, the Theodicy of Trash, follows from the conjunction of the first and third. Nietzsche held that existence and the world are justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon: *nur als aesthetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt* (*The Birth of Tragedy*, §5). The oeuvre's version is narrower and more pointed. It appoints the discarded genre as judge of the historical crime, and it justifies not the world but images. *Inglourious Basterds* answers the cinema of Goebbels with a Goebbels production burned by its own medium; *Django Unchained* answers Griffith's riders with ridicule; *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* answers the Manson family's claim that screen violence taught them to kill with a prop from a violent film. In each case the low answers the high crime in the currency of images, and the answer claims no more than that.

The four propositions compose a single operation. The archive supplies the material, the tongue the medium, the counterfactual the act, and the Lincoln letter its legitimacy. Nitrate names the operation's cost and apokatastasis its aim, and the corollaries are its two safeguards: the mark that keeps the fact visible, and the modesty that confines the justification to images.

9.3
Objections and limits

The strongest objection is Ivan Karamazov's: no harmony justifies the suffering on which it is built, and a theory that speaks of redemption invites the charge of aestheticising catastrophe. The Theodicy of Trash is framed to meet it. It does not justify historical suffering, which remains, in the oeuvre as in Ivan's argument, unredeemed; it justifies only the depiction of violence, and only where the depiction answers an earlier image that served the perpetrators. Ivan returns his ticket to the harmony. The oeuvre sells no ticket to harmony. It sells a ticket to a film that ends in mourning, and the spectator who leaves the cinema has been returned, not reconciled, to the world Ivan refuses.

Leibniz's *Theodicy* (1710) ends with a myth that sharpens the difference. In the palace of the Fates, Pallas Athena shows the priest Theodorus a pyramid of apartments, each containing a possible world in which the same man, Sextus Tarquinius, lives a different life, displayed as in a theatrical performance. At the summit is the actual world, in which Sextus commits the crime that leads to the founding of the Roman Republic, and which Jupiter chose because it is the best. The counterfactual films are rooms in such a palace. But the oeuvre's spectator, returned from them to the summit, does not find the actual world the best. He finds it the only one, and mourns it. This is the amor fati of mourning described in Chapter 5, and it is the precise opposite of Leibniz's optimism.

Octavia Butler's objection is not answered but acknowledged. *Kindred* holds that the descendants of the enslaved are constituted by the past's violence, so that to undo it would be to undo them. The counterfactual preserves the past by negating it, as Proposition III shows, but it addresses spectators, not descendants, and where Butler's heroine pays for her journey with her arm, the spectator pays nothing. The theory is limited by this objection to the ethics of spectatorship; it makes no claim about the ethics of descent. Saidiya Hartman's scruple exposes a tension within Proposition IV itself. The principle requires that the price of a fiction remain visible, but visibility can itself be an injury, and the spectacle of subjection in *Django Unchained* is where the two requirements collide. Daniel Mendelsohn's charge of mirroring is met in part by the Asymmetry Principle and by the deliberate mirror of *Nation's Pride*, but the risk that the mirror becomes identification remains. And the case of Daisy Domergue shows that the oeuvre's practice of the Lincoln Letter Principle depends on a guilty victim whose punishment is played for laughter, so that the condition of a visible price is least met precisely where the victim is a woman.

These objections converge on a single failure condition, which Adorno named. Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1947) condemned the culture industry for supplying false reconciliation, the happy ending that consoles the spectator for a world it leaves unchanged; Adorno's aesthetics preserved Stendhal's definition of beauty as *la promesse du bonheur*, the promise of happiness, only on condition that the promise remain visibly unkept. Nitrate apokatastasis fails exactly where

the counterfactual becomes consolation: when the double consciousness collapses and the image is taken as redress; when laughter anaesthetises the price; when a borrowed voice returns nothing to its owner. It succeeds where the promise of happiness is shown as a promise and the spectator leaves mourning. The theory does not certify the oeuvre. It states the conditions under which the oeuvre's wager is won or lost, and Chapter 7 has shown that it is sometimes lost.

9.4
The spiritual body of the image

The theory is condensed in a single image. At the climax of *Inglourious Basterds*, the film Shosanna has spliced into the reel shows her face announcing the audience's death; behind the screen the nitrate prints are burning; the screen itself burns away; and her face, projected onto the rising smoke, continues to laugh. For a moment the image survives the destruction of every material support, the print and the screen, and appears on nothing but smoke. Saint Paul described the resurrection in exactly these terms: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44). The natural body of the image is the film stock, which must burn. Its spiritual body is the face on the smoke, which exists only in the instant of that burning and in the memory of those who saw it.

Every term of the theory is present in the image. The archive is spent, in Bataille's sense, and in being spent it achieves its greatest power: this is apokatastasis through expenditure rather than preservation, the reverse of Bazin's mummy, which saves being by embalming it. The face is Levinas's face returned as judge, and it laughs with the laughter that Eco's burning library was meant to suppress. The revenge is real within the fiction and impossible in history, and the spectator knows both, so that the triumph is also an elegy: the woman who laughs on the smoke is dead, in the film as in the history it negates. And the image is framed by a Lincoln letter — not the spliced reel, which tells its audience the truth, but the film that contains it, a forgery of history whose forgery every spectator of *Inglourious Basterds* knows and which binds them all the same.

The image also dates the theory. Nitrate apokatastasis belongs to the photochemical age, in which the image had a body that could be sacrificed. A digital file cannot burn; it can only be deleted, and deletion leaves no smoke. The oeuvre's insistence on film, read in Chapter 6 as a theology of real presence, is an insistence on a medium in which restoration can still take the form of sacrifice. That is why this oeuvre, more than any other of its generation, has the character of a last rite, and why its end, which its author announced in advance, belongs to its meaning.

9.5 The thesis restated

The dissertation's thesis can now be stated in full. The oeuvre of Quentin Tarantino is organised by the will's revulsion against time and its "It was." It answers that revulsion through nitrate apokatastasis: the restoration of everything discarded — genres, careers, the historical dead — through a cinematic expenditure that consumes the image's material support. The operation proceeds by four propositions, archive, tongue, counterfactual, and Lincoln letter, and is guarded by two corollaries, the asymmetry that marks what it spares and the modesty that confines its theodicy to images. Its revenge is real in content and mourning in form, and its redemption, where it succeeds, is Zarathustra's formula transfigured: not "Thus I willed it," spoken of the catastrophe, but "Thus they were," spoken of its victims, with a love that knows the image cannot bring them back. It fails where the double consciousness collapses into consolation. The Conclusion turns to the one "It was" the oeuvre has promised to accept: its own end.

10

CONCLUSION

“Thus I Willed It”

The Tenth Film and the Eschatology of the Oeuvre

> *What the oeuvre did for the discarded films of others, others will now do for it.*

This dissertation began with a hamburger and has ended with a face on smoke. Between the two it has argued that the oeuvre of Quentin Tarantino possesses a philosophy, that the philosophy is organised around time rather than violence, and that its master operation, nitrate apokatastasis, restores the discarded by spending the medium that carries it. It remains to consider the oeuvre's relation to its own end, which its author announced in advance, and to state what the argument contributes and where it leaves off.

The end as form

Tarantino has said for many years that he will stop after ten features, counting *Kill Bill* as one; *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* was the ninth. Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) argued that fictions of the end — apocalyptic, tragic, or merely narrative — confer meaning on the interval they close, as the "tock" we hear after a "tick" turns a clock's indifferent succession into a plot. Kermode took from theology the distinction between *chronos*, time that merely passes, and *kairos*, time charged with significance by its relation to an end, which Chapter 8 used to describe the Tarantinian counterfactual. The ten-film pledge makes the oeuvre itself a *kairos*. It converts a career, which could continue indefinitely, into a canon, which is closed, and a canon with an announced end is an eschatology. Every film since the pledge has been watched as a step toward the last, and the oeuvre has acquired the retrospective unity this dissertation has tried to describe.

The tenth film has so far been deferred. *The Movie Critic*, announced in 2023 as the last feature and set in the Los Angeles of 1977, was abandoned in 2024, and at the time of writing no successor has entered production. Early Christianity knew this condition as the delay of the Parousia, the postponement of an end that had been promised as imminent, and Benjamin's messianism made such postponement productive: every second is the small gate through which the Messiah might enter, precisely because he has not yet come. The unmade tenth film functions in the

oeuvre as that gate. It holds the canon open while declaring it closed, and it leaves undecided how the oeuvre will end — in revenge, in mourning, or in something neither.

The double's sequel

Meanwhile the oeuvre has begun to continue without its author's direction. *The Further Mis-Adventures of Cliff Booth*, written by Tarantino and directed by David Fincher, is set in the Los Angeles of 1977 — the city and year of the abandoned tenth film — and is scheduled for release in IMAX in November 2026 and on Netflix in December (see the Note on Corpus). In April 2026 Sony was reported to have hired Brian Helgeland to write a film continuing the *Django/Zorro* comic that Tarantino co-wrote with Matt Wagner. The logic of Chapter 6 governs both developments. The continuation passes to the double: the stuntman who bore the star's risks inherits the star's film, as if the unmade last feature had been handed to him, and the author — who killed his own body in several of his fictions and returned as a narrating voice in *The Hateful Eight* — now presides over a sequel as its writer while another hand directs. Cervantes, confronted with an unauthorised continuation, let his hero die so that no one else could take him up. Tarantino's gesture is the opposite: an authorised continuation, the double of the double, which extends the logic of apokatastasis to the oeuvre itself. What the oeuvre did for the discarded films of others, others will now do for it.

Contributions

The dissertation makes four claims it hopes will outlast its object. First, it has argued that Tarantino's cinema, long read through the paradigms of pastiche and nihilism, possesses a philosophy organised around time, and that its violence is the surface of a deeper argument with the past. Second, it has proposed the concept of nitrate apokatastasis, a form of cultural restoration that proceeds through expenditure rather than preservation, and which may describe other practices of cinephilia, archival art, and coun-

terfactual fiction. Third, it has formulated the Lincoln Letter Principle, the condition under which avowed fictions can found communities without deceiving them, and distinguished it from the noble lie, the historical error, and the founding murder; the principle belongs to the theory of fiction and to political philosophy as much as to film studies. Fourth, it has derived from the oeuvre two criteria for judging counterfactual art — the Asymmetry Principle, which requires the fantasy to keep a witness to the fact, and the Theodicy of Trash, which confines the justification of depicted violence to images — together with a criterion for ventriloquism, which requires a borrowed voice to return something to those from whom it is borrowed.

Further research

Four lines of inquiry remain open. The oeuvre's prose turn — the novelisation of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2021) and *Cinema Speculation* (2022), whose chapters repeatedly imagine the films that might have been made — suggests that Tarantino's criticism is itself a counterfactual practice and deserves study as such. The oeuvre's migration to streaming, beginning with the Cliff Booth sequel, raises the question whether nitrate apokatastasis can survive the loss of an image that can burn, or whether the theory is, as Chapter 9 suggested, historically indexed to the photochemical age. The double consciousness on which Proposition III depends is an empirical claim about spectators, and reception studies could test whether audiences in fact watch the counterfactual films as elegies or as consolations. And the comparative project of Chapter 8 could be extended to the counterfactual and revenge cinemas of other national traditions, to establish whether the Tarantinian differences are singular or generic.

Coda

Like every constellation, the one this dissertation has drawn is an avowed fiction of coherence, imposed on an oeuvre made of fragments. Its reader, like the reader of the Lincoln letter, knows this and has read on.

Zarathustra asked of the will that it learn to say of every "It was": "Thus I willed it." This dissertation has argued that the oeuvre of Quentin Tarantino cannot say this of history, and should not; that it says instead, of the lives history ended, "Thus they were"; and that it says so in the form of a revenge that knows itself to be an image. There is one "It was" to which the oeuvre has promised to consent: its own completion. A body of work that has spent itself taking revenge on the past will, when it ends, become a past in its turn — an archive of nitrate, to be restored by others, spent by others, and mourned. If it achieves the redemption it has sought for others, it will be able to look back on everything it restored, burned, and grieved, and say of it, at last without revenge: thus I willed it.

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INDEX TERMS

KEYWORDS

QUENTIN TARANTINO · NITRATE APOKATASTASIS · FILM PHILOSOPHY · COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY · ALTERNATE HISTORY · REVENGE · REVENGE TRAGEDY · FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE · RESSENTIMENT · AMOR FATI · WALTER BENJAMIN · MESSIANIC TIME · REMEMBRANCE (*EINGEDENKEN*) · ERNST BLOCH · *KOLPORTAGE* · ARCHIVE · ARCHIVE FEVER · CINEPHILIA · EXPLOITATION CINEMA · NITRATE FILM · CELLULOID · ANDRÉ BAZIN · INDEXICALITY · INDEXICAL FABULATION · INTERTEXTUALITY · PASTICHE · POSTMODERNISM · METAMODERNISM · PERFORMATIVITY · SPEECH ACT THEORY · MEXICAN STANDOFF · MIMETIC VIOLENCE · RENÉ GIRARD · SCAPEGOAT · SOVEREIGNTY · SPECTATORSHIP · LINCOLN LETTER PRINCIPLE · AVOWED FICTION · NOBLE LIE · FETISHISTIC DISAVOWAL · STUNT DOUBLE · MORAL LUCK · VIRTUE ETHICS · THE GIFT · THEODICY · THEODICY OF TRASH · ASYMMETRY PRINCIPLE · RACE AND REPRESENTATION · VENTRILOQUISM · GENDER AND THE GAZE · NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE · HOLOCAUST REPRESENTATION · HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION · SPECULATIVE FICTION · ESCHATOLOGY



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