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Violence and Gendered/Racialized Identity in Popular American Cinema



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Cynthia Baron

The articles in the summer 2017 issue of *The Projector* avoid debates about violence in mainstream films, and whether or how depictions of violence affect audiences. Instead, they examine widely seen filmic representations of violence – in *Kill Bill* (Tarantino, 2003, 2004), *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999), and *The Hateful Eight* (Tarantino, 2015) – to analyze a constellation of fictional but culturally recognizable occasions when issues of identity and violence become intertwined.

The first essay, “Bride of Tarantino: *Kill Bill*’s Hyper-Violent Postfeminist Family Romance,” by Zachary Snider analyzes “the film as a Greek tragedy-inspired Freudian Family Romance, one in which a female ‘son’ seeks Oedipal revenge on her primary patriarch for attempting to kill her and her unborn daughter.” The essay traces the complex gender-identity journey that Beatrix Kiddo (Uma Thurman) makes over the course of the story. In particular, it considers ways in which the process of eluding gender constraints and a fixed racial identity, together with the successful execution of violence, position Beatrix as a “postfeminist antihero.” Snider proposes that throughout the two films, audiences withhold normative judgement and “permit Beatrix to achieve her revenge because, rather ironically, she becomes a woman and a mother *by* enacting physical violence with phallic weapons, two traits associated in Greek tragedy (*and* in contemporary cinema) with angry, vengeful male heroes.”

The second article, “Evangelicals and the Film *Fight Club*: A Cultural Comparison of Masculine Ideology,” by Rebecca W. Poe Hays and Nicholas R. Wense explores reasons that *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999) has appealed to some conservative male evangelicals. The essay considers why “various evangelical men’s ministries across the country” have used the film as a way to articulate their ideas about true Christian masculinity and as a model for “faith-based mixed martial arts competitions and other forms of physical combat as part of their discipleship and outreach programs.” Analyzing *Fight Club*’s vision of hyper-masculinity as a way to escape “the dehumanizing effects of consumerist culture,” the article illustrates how the film essentially

captures “one response of the conservative evangelical community to what it perceives as the growing ‘feminization’ of the church” and the corrupting influences in contemporary society.

The third article, “Auteurist Socio-Cultural Critique: Quentin Tarantino’s *The Hateful Eight* as Historical Present,” by Justin Greene analyzes the film in light of “Tarantino’s public persona [which] has shifted in recent years to focus on more racial issues, especially since the success of *Django Unchained*.” It recognizes that some audiences see “Tarantino’s racialized, gendered, and violent themes as pulp and mere schlock entertainment.” Yet the article proposes that the violent scenes in *The Hateful Eight* are “parodies of Tarantino’s earlier films, especially *Pulp Fiction* and *Death Proof*” because the post-*Django* scenes are not used for “comic effect.” It argues that by “bringing the racial and gendered violence to the forefront of *The Hateful Eight*, Tarantino forces white [male] American audiences to look” at contemporary structures of power.

The winter 2018 issue of *The Projector*, guest edited by Sarah Sinwell at the University of Utah, will focus on “Art House Exhibition in the Age of Convergence.” The CFP for that issue is posted on the submissions page on our website. The deadline for submissions is September 1, 2017.

Bride of Tarantino: *Kill Bill*'s Hyper-Violent Postfeminist Family Romance



image source: <https://draffthouse.com/show/kill-bill-vol-1-kill-bill-vol-2>

Zachary Snider

The extreme violence and bloodshed of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill—Volumes 1 and 2* (2003, 2004) makes it a *Medea*-level Greek tragedy with dramatic familial motifs that parallel the themes of Euripides' and Sophocles' classical Theban plays. To consider if or why *Kill Bill*'s antihero Beatrix Kiddo (Uma Thurman) is justified in her murderous revenge rampage, I analyze the film as a Freudian Family Romance inspired by Greek tragedy. In this case, a female "son" seeks Oedipal-revenge on her primary patriarch for attempting to kill her and her unborn daughter, and for turning the rest of her Deadly Viper Squad "family" against her. In this Family Romance, the prodigal "son" (Beatrix) also undergoes a complete identity transformation. She divests herself of her girlishness to come of age as her dueling fathers' (Bill and Pai Mei) warrior son, and this grants her gender fluidity that ultimately yet ironically allows her to become a mother. In addition, she masters the superior Asian training methods of Pai Mei, her preferred father figure, and thus "becomes Asian" herself. Further, she engages in an incredible amount of violence to acquire bloody revenge on her entire Viper family who tried to massacre her. This results in her successful Oedipal-revenge against Bill. Beatrix's ability to transcend her gender constraints and her racial identity, and to enact such gory violence—an act typically considered to be a masculine power and privilege, dating back to Greek mythology yet still a twenty-first century cinematic standard—makes her the ultimate postfeminist antihero.

Most classic Greek tragedies begin with a gravely wronged and often wounded protagonist, who then embarks on an epic journey to rectify his plight through battle and revenge. Claire Henry highlights the film's connection to that tradition in her essay about postfeminist film revenge fantasies. She explains: "The issue is perhaps that *Kill Bill* is not just a revenge story, or even a narrative of resurrection and transformation—Tarantino also seeks to make it a narrative of *redemption*," meaning that Tarantino *needs* his viewers to *approve* of Beatrix's blood-splattered warpath (107). If Beatrix has set out to "redeem" something, it is compensation for the child she believes has been murdered, and to right all of wrongs done to her. Yet, the definition of "righting these wrongs" is the most challenging aspect of Beatrix's redemptive process for viewers, because this means she must kill everyone who has attempted to murder her and, especially, those who (she thinks) have murdered her daughter.

Samantha Lindop's research about femme fatales supports this view of Beatrix's quest. Lindop sees parallels between Beatrix and the scorned women of ancient Greek mythology, most if not all of whom evoke instant yet melodramatic audience empathy for the suffering they endure at the hands of their male counterparts. She points out: "The fabled deadly woman [like Beatrix] has appeared under many guises throughout history, dating back to Pandora—the first woman of ancient Greek mythology—and the biblical character Jezebel" (2). Just as God created Pandora from the earth, God-like Bill created Beatrix; her conception has no backstory other than Bill's creation of her. The film asks audiences to believe that Beatrix was identity-less before Bill met her, since she has no other narrative past. Thus, as with Dr. Frankenstein's irresponsibility with his monster, it is Bill who is *responsible* for Beatrix's violent actions. As Beatrix consistently reminds Bill, he "brought this upon [him]self."

Similarly, just as members of Jezebel's court murder her by throwing her out a window, Beatrix is the victim of gang violence inflicted by her own "family." She is pregnant when she leaves Bill, and involved with another man (simpleton Tommy Plympton of El Paso, TX, who thinks the baby is his and that Bill, Beatrix's "daddy," is in Australia). As a result, Bill and his Vipers can consider Beatrix's unmarried, two-timing state as Jezebel-like. These mythological connections to *Kill Bill* seem ample allowance for viewers to understand Beatrix's hyper-violent revenge enactments.

In her analysis of *Kill Bill*'s family drama, Lesel Dawson suggests that Tarantino's references to Greek tragedies are intentional. Dawson explains:

while Tarantino's explicit sources are films, the ideas and narratives he alludes to place *Kill Bill* in a tradition which goes back through early modern drama to the writings of Seneca and ancient Greece. This dynamic is playfully highlighted in the opening title card of *Kill Bill: Volume 1*, on which the well-known proverb, "revenge is a dish best served cold," is referred to as "an old Klingon proverb" and referenced to *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, rather than given a literary attribution. (121)

By making his vengeful warrior female, a character type who is canonically male, Tarantino subverts the traditional tragic Greek hero (an archetype that exists today in mainstream cinema and elsewhere), thereby upgrading this archetype with his usual pop culture pastiche. By avenging the life of her child (actually *protecting* her daughter since the girl is alive) in this family drama, Beatrix is able to legitimately slaughter hundreds of male samurais, male cowboys, and Bill himself. Under a postfeminist lens, viewers can permit Beatrix to achieve her revenge because, rather ironically, she becomes a woman and a mother *by* enacting physical violence with phallic weapons, two traits associated in Greek tragedy (*and* in contemporary cinema) with angry, vengeful male heroes.

Daddy Issues of (Tragic Greek) Epic Proportions

Freud's "Family Romances" concept states that a "child's most intense and most momentous wish during [his] early years is to be like his parents (that is, the parent of his own sex) and to be big like his father" (236). However, Beatrix has no parent of her own sex, so her only choice is to

emulate and have an Oedipal/Elektal (for her, it is one in the same) infatuation with Bill. Although she is a dangerous killer, she maintains the mentality of a young girl slighted by her family, especially her father, thus causing her gender identity to remain in crisis. Since viewers receive no backstory about a family from Beatrix's past, this lacuna provides even more license for Bill to shape her as her sole and primary caretaker.

In one scene when Bill is talking about Beatrix on the phone, his point of view cuts to an adult Beatrix sitting in an elementary school classroom during roll call. This is the first time viewers hear her surname, Kiddo. Beatrix is amongst other young children, wearing kiddy clothes and with ribbons tying up her pigtails. Importantly, Bill refers to her by this surname until the end of the film, suggesting that a kiddo—particularly a malleable, daddy-worshipping one—is how he has always seen and prefers to continue seeing her.

During another flashback, Bill tells Beatrix campfire legends about his former mentor Pai Mei, who “teaches no one the five-point-palm-exploding-heart-technique,” suggesting that he alone is special enough to know about this technique. Soon after this scene, Bill drives Beatrix to Pai Mei's home to leave her with him, knowing that Pai Mei's training process is impossible for anyone to endure. As Bill leaves Beatrix off, she says, “When will I see you again?” Still acting like a flirtatious young girl, Beatrix seems confused as to whether Bill is her father figure or her lover, a confusion that Bill himself selfishly cannot or will not clarify.

At this point, Beatrix is incapable of viewing Bill as a negative influence. In the Freudian Family Romance, “a boy is far more inclined to feel hostile impulses towards his father than towards his mother and has a far more intense desire to get free from him than from her. In this respect the imagination of girls is apt to show itself much weaker” (Freud 237). Bill treats all of his Viper girls as his killer-sons-in-training, except when he wants to take one of them as his lover. As Freud might suggest, Beatrix cannot or will not feel hostile towards Bill *because of* her gender. Yet the film presents their relationship as more of an incestuous father-son pairing rather than as an older man-younger woman romance. Beatrix eventually frees herself from the constrictions of being a female child, since typically only sons get to war against their fathers—especially in Greek tragedies. Thus, it is more accurate to say that the father is pawning off his “son,” with whom he has a sexual relationship, to a different father (Pai Mei), whom he has failed and with whom he still violently argues—much like a divorced couple.

Bill nor Pai Mei can find Beatrix a suitable “mother” of the same gender, and this prevents her from having a female role model of any sort. The Family Romance suggests that Beatrix (as a warrior son who raised by her fathers to be violent and without remorse, and therefore masculine), could be seen as asexual. Freud proposes:

This second (sexual) stage of the family romance is actuated by another motive as well, which is absent in the first (asexual) stage. The child, having learnt about sexual processes, tends to picture to himself in erotic situations and relations, the motive force behind this being his desire to bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense sexual curiosity) into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs. In this way the child's phantasies, which started by being, as it were, asexual, are brought up to the level of his later knowledge. (Freud 238)

Bill has engaged in a sexual relationship with a young woman whom he views and talks to as if she were a small child, a move that makes him an even more permissible target for revenge. Freud's ideas about male children wanting to engage in Oedipal "secret love-affairs" with their mothers is also applicable to Beatrix during her evolution as Bill's youngest "son" (238). While Beatrix's view of Bill is originally one of adoration and idolization, once he takes her as his sexual object, she develops a fantasy that he loves her, rather than just loves having sex with her. Moreover, Beatrix convinces herself that Bill is the ultimate if not only lover for her.

Yet Bill abuses Beatrix's adoration for him early on, by making their relationship sexual, then he abandons her at Pai Mei's, and, worse, tries to kill her. Freud indicates how natural it would be for Beatrix to seek revenge on Bill by focusing on children who are taken advantage of and "punished by their parents for sexual naughtiness [regardless of the fact that Bill instigated this "sexual naughtiness"] and who now revenge themselves on their parents by means of phantasies of this kind" (239). Beatrix's revenge against Bill is indeed fantastical—as is much of Freudian Oedipal theory. Beatrix's fantasies about Daddy serve as the catalyst for why she becomes a deadly assassin in the first place—she wants to impress Daddy Bill, and wants him to love her, so she trains impeccably with Daddy Pai Mei to be the best possible assassin. Later, once she begins her rampage, Beatrix's fantasies about being a fully developed parent herself are the catalyst for her epic journey of murder and revenge.

In his analysis of *Kill Bill*, Edward Gallefent notes that Beatrix is doubly affected by the combination of father figures who shape her identity as an assassin. He explains: Beatrix "looks (or chooses to act) like a young girl and who is placed, or places herself, in an intense relationship to older, patriarchal figures (Beatrix to Bill and Pai Mei)" (106-107). Beatrix has no concept of womanhood or femininity, particularly considering that her older Viper siblings are more like Bill's army of assassin sons, ones who have also trained with his "ex" Pai Mei. When Bill leaves Beatrix at Pai Mei's for an indefinite amount of time, it is equivalent to a father dropping off a child at his ex-spouse's home. Before Bill departs, he says that Pai Mei "hates Caucasians. Despises Americans. And has nothing but contempt for women"—not exactly supportive words for Beatrix as she is abandoned here by Bill. Thus, Beatrix becomes confused and negatively affected by the conflict of her two dads who, as per divorced parent stereotypes, hate each other's guts.

Bill and Pai Mei's relationship has a direct effect on Beatrix's evolving identity composition. At first, she misses Bill, her first father, and wants to emulate him, but she knows she must follow through with Pai Mei's training because Bill instructed her to do so. Freud says that "[s]mall events in the child's life which make him feel dissatisfied afford him provocation for beginning to criticize his parents...a feeling of being slighted is obviously what constitutes the subject-matter of such provocations" (237). This point has implications that emerge slowly throughout the course of the film. Although Beatrix has indeed been slighted early on in her relationship with Bill (much earlier than before he tries to kill her, at least), her romanticized adoration for him prevents her from seeing how helpful Pai Mei actually is for her. Bill teaches Beatrix to be corrupt, violent, selfish, and, mostly, to praise him. Conversely, although Pai Mei's dismissive parenting withholds any emotion and praise for Beatrix, he teaches her many things. They include meditative methods of fighting, mind control for having a high pain threshold, how to use her phallic sword, how to successfully karate chop through thick wooden boards (a technique

that later saves her life when Bill's brother, Budd, buries her alive), and, ultimately, how to kill her other father (Bill). Killing Bill is something Pai Mei would love to do himself and the final act is symbolic, because Beatrix kills Bill with Pai Mei's trademark five-point-palm-heart-exploding technique.

Bill allows no one to leave him, especially his female sons. Consider Beatrix's attempt to run away from Bill and reinvent her life as a small-town Texas housewife. The Family Romance concept clarifies her desire to avoid being an international killer; as Freud explains: "The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development. It is quite essential that that liberation should occur" (236). In this instance, Beatrix's need to abandon her family is inevitable for her character growth and personal development from childhood to adulthood (and eventual motherhood). Bill's attempt to assassinate her because of her departure is also inevitable.

Family Murder #1: O-Ren Ishi, Viper "Brother"

Beatrix organizes her warpath on a childish handwritten-in-marker sheet of paper with which she travels around, titled "Death List Five." This short list reveals Beatrix's objective mental state; she is conducting emotionless business transactions as the result of a very emotional situation. In addition, Tarantino's narrative is wholly fragmented; chapters are not in chronological order, so audiences gradually construct Beatrix's character and her relationship with Bill and the other Vipers through flashbacks. Similarly, as with other well-constructed character arc and plot progressions, audience empathy for Beatrix builds as her journey continues. The more *reasoning* audiences get through flashbacks for Beatrix's response to the attempted murder(s), most of which actually happens in *Vol. 2*, the more they support her deadly revenge.

For example, when Beatrix tracks down O-Ren Ishi (Lucy Liu) and faces off with her at the House of Blue Leaves in the fifth chapter of *Vol. 1*, because of *Kill Bill*'s disordered chronology, this is actually the sixth chapter in Tarantino's story. The chapter entitled "The Origin of O-Ren," which is presented to viewers as Chapter 3, is actually the first chapter of the film. This segment jumps back in time the farthest of all the chapters to illustrate—literally, with a hand-drawn animation sequence—how O-Ren was affected by abusive men.

This background information creates empathy for O-Ren, who is now a notoriously angry yet calmly cool dictator (a retro-cool trait that many of Tarantino's villains possess) who has a band of merry samurai boys, none of whom would ever dream of messing with their female master. In this section, viewers see that O-Ren was forced to watch a mob boss murder her parents when she was just a young girl; that she was repeatedly beaten and raped by mob members; and that she spent much of her early childhood in tears and trauma. Viewers then see O-Ren's quickly change into a deadly child warrior, with her killing evil Asian men who are murderers and pedophiles, and thereby finding revenge against her abusers and her parents' killers. This background chapter also likens O-Ren to Beatrix, illustrating that both young women were taken

advantage of but then “saved” by Bill (who ironically messed them up even more, by turning them into his warriors), meaning that both “sons” deserve to get their revenge.

Beatrix and O-Ren have the most in common among Bill’s Vipers, which initially parallels them as equals to viewers. The key difference between them, though, is the fact that O-Ren “did her part in the killing of nine innocent people, including [Beatrix’s] unborn daughter, in a small chapel in El Paso, Texas” but that she also “made one big mistake—she should have killed ten [Beatrix].” O-Ren’s involvement in the attempted murder of Beatrix and her daughter means that, for viewers, Beatrix’s one-time revenge journey trumps O-Ren’s lifelong revenge journey. Unlike early feminism’s tenet of women supporting each other against all imposing forces (namely politics and other forms of social oppression), the postfeminist focus on individual identity wins out in *Kill Bill*, with every female Viper fighting for herself; especially Beatrix, since she has been threatened by everyone.

A Freudian sibling rivalry between O-Ren and Beatrix is highlighted in DVD Chapter 5: “Showdown at House of Blue Leaves.” In this chapter, while Beatrix is hell bent on killing O-Ren out of revenge and justice, O-Ren is equally determined to prove that she is a better, deadlier warrior than Beatrix. Just before O-Ren’s death, she chastises Beatrix with comments like “Silly Caucasian girl likes to play with samurai swords.” Throughout her scenes with Beatrix, O-Ren seems particularly bothered that Beatrix has the most-prized Hattori Hanzo sword, that Beatrix was Pai Mei’s most successfully trained pupil, and, especially, that this tall blonde white girl might be better at “being Asian” than O-Ren herself is. By “being Asian,” I mean Tarantino’s representation of Asians in *Kill Bill*. In this context, it refers to one’s ability to engage in deadly swordplay with samurai weapons and to speak fluent Japanese *and* Cantonese (not even Chinese O-Ren can do this). It also means defeating dozens if not hundreds of O-Ren’s submissive samurai boys (they race at Beatrix so fast and cartoonishly it is impossible to count how many there actually are). In his examination of race in *Kill Bill*, Sean Tierney observes:

At midpoint in their duel, O Ren, realizing the Bride’s mastery of the samurai sword, acknowledges the Bride as her equal and consequent superior, this time in Japanese. O Ren’s Japanese apology functions as a concession of the White practitioner’s superior ability and cultural facility with things Asian. (614)

By being better at swordplay than O-Ren, Beatrix is also a better Asian, which is the ultimate sibling rivalry threat for O-Ren. Locating the film’s mainstream status, Tierney also observes that Beatrix is “a White protagonist whose exemplary skill in Asian martial arts is proved through the defeat of Asians in Asia. It is a foregone conclusion that the White person will be seen defeating the inferior Asian when both are using an Asian skill” (614). O-Ren is also an inferior and even dishonorable Asian warrior because she had attempted to take the life of her Viper “brother,” a fact that further enables viewers to root for Beatrix and feel empathy with the character.

Beatrix is both white and Asian in skill here, yet is also male and female in this scene. However, she is also not Bill’s son anymore, whereas O-Ren still is. Moreover, Beatrix is now acting as the successful, stoic son of her more moralistic Asian father, Pai Mei—something else about which O-Ren feels jealousy. In this scene, O-Ren wears her pretty kimono in the snow, with chopsticks

tying her hair up into a bun, and with her porcelain doll makeup perfectly applied. Beatrix, in contrast, wears a heroic superhero costume with man-pants and lets her shaggy hair fly about in the most unladylike fashion. Beatrix must act like a boy here—the family’s prodigal yet vengeful son—in order to outdo “his” feminine “brother” who still sides with their father. Although a vicious killer, O-Ren still follows the demands of her daddy Bill, whereas Beatrix as the vengeful “son” does not; this ultimately results in Beatrix slicing off O-Ren’s scalp. Beatrix literally exposes O-Ren’s weak female brain while also splattering her Viper sister’s blood across the beautiful, delicate new-fallen white snowflakes.

The fact that Bill still dominates O-Ren is inescapable. O-Ren remains controlled by a man—a white man, specifically—as her fellow Viper sisters are, excepting Beatrix. The film suggests that without Bill around the Viper sisters cannot survive on their own against Beatrix; they must be physically with Bill to invoke violence upon her, and act as a group. Lisa Coulthard suggests that the “absence of patriarchy [in *Kill Bill*] is an absence of violence and threat, and the female violence of the film is configured retroactively as temporary, aberrant, obligatory, and curative” (170). In other words, without Bill around to directly control his Viper “sons,” they do not know how to be *successfully* violent towards Beatrix. Without their father around, they fail.

Family Murder #2: Vernita Green, Viper “Brother”

Beatrix’s domestic battle with Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox) takes place in Green’s cutesy suburban home towards the beginning of *Vol. 1*. It is the first scene of extended violence in the film; chronologically Beatrix hunts down Green after killing O-Ren in Okinawa. Beatrix’s battle with Green represents something far more important than mere violence: Now that Green lives as a suburban wife and mother, she has the life that Bill and the other Viper sisters stole from Beatrix. Angela Dancey states: “It speaks to the film’s interest in violence and family that the first extended fight sequence of the film is a face-off between two warrior moms” (89). Dancey’s observation suggests that they are not fighting for their own lives here, but instead for the lives of their daughters. However, because Beatrix at this point in the film still believes that her child is dead, not only is she able to fight without concern for her own life, but viewers empathize with her far more than with Green. Dancey points out: “The fight sequence between Vernita and Beatrix juxtaposes sunny, heteronormative domesticity with subversive, masculinized violence as the women punch, kick, and beat each other without mercy” (89). However, because Green has gotten her chance to be a suburban mother—a chance that was ruthlessly confiscated from Beatrix—her violence is not as forgivable as Beatrix’s violence. While Green is bound by the limitations of being a wife and mother, Beatrix is neither (or so she thinks); this status allows her to escape the gender limitations that entrap Green in her suburban dollhouse, “playing” a socially confined housewife and mommy while desperately attempting to hide her hyper-violent past.

Like many feminist critics of *Kill Bill*, Angela Dawson discusses why audiences should forgive Beatrix for killing another woman in front of the woman’s daughter. She writes:

Unlike the DiVAs, who kill everyone at the Massacre at Two Pines, the Bride never gratuitously directs her anger against anyone except those directly responsible for her baby’s death and so wishes to punish Vernita alone. She initially respects Vernita’s wish

not to fight in front of her daughter, only killing her after dodging an unexpected bullet. (121)

Beatrix tells Green that she has no intent to harm her daughter; if Beatrix did harm the daughter Nikki, then she would be no better than Green. She would be a killer of mothers and children, like Green, Bill, and the other Vipers. Thus, audience loyalty remains with Beatrix, who is operating out of moral revenge rather than Green's eye-for-an-eye punishment. When Green asks about Beatrix's revenge motives, Beatrix responds with ironically with the silly, sing-songy dialog: "Get even? Even Steven? No. I would have to kill you, go up to Nikki's room, kill her, then wait for your husband, the good Dr. Bell [Vernita Green now goes by Mrs. Bell], to show up, and kill him. *That* would be even. *That'd* be about square." It is also important to note that Beatrix acts out of self-defense. Only after Green misfires a gun at Beatrix while attempting to hide it beneath a cereal box (called Kaboom, no less), Beatrix throws a knife across the room into Green's heart. The actual mother here dies, rightfully so, as per viewer allowance, while the grieving would-have-been mother gets her revenge.

In her article about postfeminist revenge films, Claire Henry suggests that Beatrix's trauma serves as the catalyst for the other Vipers' deaths and represents Beatrix's metaphoric castration (106). Henry also argues that Beatrix is indeed on an Oedipal-journey to kill her father, but as a stereotypical male character who possesses a penis. Her Oedipal rage directed at Bill parallels Sophocles *Oedipus the King*, but the Oedipal-mother figure with whom Beatrix has an Oedipal-complex is herself, or, rather, the idealized version of a mother that she should have been. While Oedipus fought his father to prove himself to his mother and to win his mother, Beatrix is fighting to prove herself *to herself*; she is fighting to prove herself to her daughter. In order to become a mother, and in order to prove to herself that she could have been a good mother, Beatrix *must* kill Bill and these other Viper assassins—including Vernita Green's fellow mother character. Only by killing her attackers, and ultimately by killing Bill, can Beatrix prove to herself that she was worthy of motherhood.

Henry goes so far as to suggest that in the fight scene with Green, Beatrix is the Oedipal-male character who is fighting a female mother who possesses what she herself deserved. She explains:

Beatrix's maternal transformation can be summarized by looking at the contrasting first and last scenes of the epic. Chapter 1 establishes Beatrix as pre-maternal warrior, trashing a domestic space in her fight with redeemed warrior and mother to Nikki, Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox). With postmodern irony, a primal scene plays out. Vernita is the Mother, penetrated by Beatrix's knife; Beatrix in the Father, in obvious phallic imagery she withdraws her knife from Vernita's chest and returns it to the sheath at her hip (emphasized by a close-up)... the opening primal scene has induced sexual arousal, castration anxiety, and laid the foundation for an Oedipal drama to play out as the film continues. This scene establishes Beatrix as the masculine hero. In the role of the Father, she separates mother and child. (106)

Here Henry proposes that in order to become a mother, Beatrix must first act as a father, because that is who—as per Greek tragedy—violently spars with the mother. Thus, this is another reason

why this particular scene is difficult for viewers to allow Beatrix to enact revenge on Green; as a postfeminist phallic-shaped weapon wielder, Beatrix is killing the only *actual* mother in the scene.

Family Battles #3: Elle Driver and #4: Budd, Viper ‘Brothers’

Although Bill and Elle Driver (Daryl Hannah) never have a scene together—except flashbacks of the Massacre at Two Pines—their conversations and Elle’s dutiful attitude to Bill suggest that the two became lovers after Beatrix’s presumed death. When Beatrix “comes back from the dead” to haunt Bill and the other Vipers, Elle’s motivation to enact further violence on Beatrix is out of jealousy. Subservient Elle stereotypically wants to keep her man, while postfeminist Beatrix does not want a man. Elle is older than Beatrix but just as blonde and beautiful, and she has waited a long time for Daddy to label her as the favorite, which means being Daddy’s/Bill’s lover. Beatrix’s return means that her prized label is threatened. As warrior “sons,” Elle is more of a torturous elder “brother” to Beatrix, albeit one who is fraught with sibling rivalry and wants to prevent his little “brother” from having any success or receiving any paternal affection.

In one flashback, we see Elle kill Pai Mei, Beatrix’s preferred parent, which estranges them as siblings. During their violent yet balletically choreographed fight scene in Budd’s trailer, Elle tells Beatrix that Pai Mei was “a miserable old fool,” and then confesses: “I killed your master, and now I’m going to kill you too—with your very own sword,” a phallic symbol of Beatrix’s identity that Elle has obtained by killing Budd. The film once again evokes empathy for Beatrix, as viewers can see Beatrix as avenging a death—but, this time, she is avenging not only the death of her daughter, but also the death of her more helpful father Pai Mei. While Elle runs about maniacally screaming, “I’m gonna kill you, you fucking bitch!,” Beatrix remains calm and collected—like Pai Mei. When Elle yells terrible things about Pai Mei, Beatrix rips out Elle’s only seeing eyeball, with a careful Asian-inspired technique she learned during her training with Pai Mei. Although Elle’s agenda with Beatrix can be reduced to her instigating a stereotypical “catfight”—a pejorative for two women fighting each other—Beatrix remains on her pan-gender journey to murder her father Greek-tragedy style, which is why she defeats Elle’s limited femininity. Beatrix has the powers of both genders, while Elle is “just” Bill’s woman.

Although not a direct correlation between Beatrix and Oedipus, this scene recalls moments in *Oedipus the King*, for example, when Oedipus stabs himself in the eyes as self-punishment for failing his mother. In Sophocles’ play, Oedipus has spotted his mother’s dead body and realizes instantly he is doomed—much like Elle, though her realization is far less noble, as she writhes around on the floor, cursing Beatrix’s name. Beatrix has avenged Pai Mei here, while Elle has failed to avenge Bill, because Bill is not worth avenging and Elle’s violence is unmerited. Importantly, Beatrix does not kill Elle, which also allows viewers to grant her forgiveness. As Patrick McGee explains:

The Bride’s blinding of Elle is the final deconstruction of her own feminine identity before she meets Bill... As the woman who supposedly has taken the Bride’s place with Bill, Elle combines a girlish selfishness...with the qualities of a femme fatale. Implicitly,

through [Beatrix blinding Elle], the Bride is destroying her own blindness and the “drive” to be a “girl” for Bill. (241)

Beatrix becomes the dominant warrior in this scene, as she does with all of her female-against-female character fight scenes. She is the man in control in all of her fight scenes, acting like a better version of Bill, rather than serving him, like the other Vipers still do. Dancey similarly states, “Beatrix is in some way *becoming* Bill, rendering him obsolete as her mentor,” something she must do before she kills him in the final chapter (85).

Bill’s brother Budd is the only one of the Vipers who recognizes that they have unfairly done harm to Beatrix. In Chapter 6 of the DVD, Budd tells Bill, “That woman deserves her revenge. And we deserve to die,” and this is followed by uncomfortable laughter. Because Budd is somewhat remorseful about Beatrix, their “battle” is simply Budd dragging Beatrix across a dusty field and then burying her alive. His motivation for doing so, he tells her, is “for breaking my brother’s heart.” Dawson sees this act as Budd accidentally doing Beatrix a favor, because he has no clue she could use her Pai Mei-taught meditative mind control to karate chop her way out of her coffin and burst through the surface of Mother Earth. As Dawson explains: “Indeed, Beatrix returns from the dead not once but twice: not only does she awaken from a coma after being shot at close range, but she also manages to break out of a coffin after being buried alive.” This rebirth for Beatrix begins her transition from little girl into maternal figure, but one who can simultaneously “act like Bill,” that is, as the paternal master to all. She will no longer be Kiddo, but Mother.

Completing the Death List: Killing the Father

Not until Beatrix arrives at Bill’s home at the film’s conclusion does she find out that her daughter, B.B. (Beatrix and Bill combined), is still alive. In this scene, Beatrix wears makeup and a long, flowing, floral skirt; she appears far more feminine and maternal than she has ever looked. When she arrives, Bill is lovingly making B.B. a sandwich yet simultaneously playing toy guns with her, illustrating that he is both Mommy and Daddy to her—two roles that Beatrix will soon fill instead. Through her journey, Beatrix has become pan-racial, pan-gendered, and, now, pan-parental. McGee states of Beatrix’s final, desired, and rewarded identity transformation: “Beatrix is...in mourning for the social identity she has given up. [The Man] must die so that Mommy, the Bride’s last and final identity, can be born” (242-243). After killing Bill, Beatrix’s rebirth—her third and final one, after first awakening from the dead and secondly bursting out of her coffin—completes her revenge.

Bill must *actually* die, too; for Beatrix’s revenge to be successful there can be no happy-ending for both parents. Gallafent calls this inevitability “a kind of deadlock, a family that cannot possibly be made right: they cannot agree to be monsters” (117). Although Bill fights for his life at the last second, even he acknowledges that Beatrix deserves her revenge, which is further license for the viewer to do so as well. Bill and Beatrix begin sword fighting in the backyard. Bill knocks Beatrix’s sword from her hand, attempting to reassert his paternal dominance and skill over her. Immediately, though, Beatrix performs Pai Mei’s five-point-palm-exploding-heart-

technique. Her ability to perform this technique makes her more intimate with her other father, her Asian one, than she ever was with Bill, despite the fact that she has born Bill's child.

Bill's last words to Beatrix are, "You're not a bad person, you're a terrific person, my favorite person. But every once in a while, you can be a real cunt." This is precisely *why* Beatrix wins, why she must kill everyone in her family, and why she obtains her legitimate revenge. Towards the end of her epic journey, she stops acting like her fathers' warrior son and begins to embrace her womanhood and, in this moment, her motherhood, too. She successfully learns to "acts like a cunt," an anatomical gift that can be regarded as both male and female. Barlow eloquently explains that Beatrix is now "a full woman... She doesn't need to be judged by the standards of men or of women, but encompasses both, discarding the limiting trappings their culture has provided for both. In other words, she doesn't have to use her sex to defeat him" (120). As a pan-parental, pan-gendered superhero, Beatrix defeats her metaphoric Daddy and the Daddy of her daughter. Dawson concurs with this assertion, stating, "For Beatrix, in the end, revenge is...a deadly family romance, where the blissful return to mother-child oneness is achieved through the broken-hearted death of the father."

Beatrix cries after killing Bill—but only for a moment. Killing her entire Viper family has freed Beatrix, so she victoriously rushes off to embrace her daughter. The film's final onscreen narration states: "The lioness has returned to her cub, and all is right in the jungle," meaning that Beatrix has successfully and *permissibly* become a mother *by* obtaining revenge on her entire family. She is the queen *and* the king of the jungle, with no husband, father, or meddlesome siblings in her way.

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Evangelicals and the film *Fight Club*: A Cultural Comparison of Masculine Ideology



image source: <https://www.counter-currents.com/2016/05/fight-club-as-holy-writ-2/>

Rebecca W. Poe Hays and Nicholas R. Werse

Since its release, *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) has resonated with viewers because of its subject matter and the experiences of Brad Pitt's Tyler Durden and Edward Norton's Narrator, whose unnamed status allows him to become the "everyman" for viewers. In 2000, a middle-aged software engineer living in Menlo Park, California, began issuing invitations to his high-tech industry friends to join him in a "Gentlemen's Fight Club" that would involve biweekly gatherings for no-holds-barred brawl sessions (Associated Press). That same year, students at Princeton University decided that a "fight club" was exactly what the school needed to help relieve the stress of the Ivy League environment (Rawlings 2000). While both groups limited their emulation of the film *Fight Club* to fights between consenting members, the homage of other copycats was not so innocuous. Men and boys as young as twelve have become wrapped up in the *Fight Club* masculinity myth to the point of violently assaulting unwilling participants and detonating bombs after the fashion of Tyler Durden's Project Mayhem (Roepert 2012; McCarthy 2006; Washington Times 2009).

One unexpected sector of American society that has identified with the film has been conservative evangelicals.ⁱ In 2009, a *New York Times* article reported that members of the Mars Hill mega church, one of the most high-profile conservative evangelical congregations in the United States, identified *Fight Club* as their favorite movie (Worthen). Beyond mere admiration, various evangelical men's ministries across the country adopt the name "Fight Club" and draw both images and slogans from the film (the image of "soap," and the slogan: "the first rule of [Christian] fight club is ..."). Occasionally, these Christian ministries have even initiated faith-based mixed martial arts competitions and other forms of physical combat as part of their discipleship and outreach programs.ⁱⁱ

The embrace of *Fight Club* by a subset of Christians is representative of one response of the conservative evangelical community to what it perceives as the growing "feminization" of the church.ⁱⁱⁱ Many representatives of this demographic believe that in order for the church to remain healthy and strong, its men must conform to particular standards of masculinity that, they argue, stem directly from biblical revelation. Within this sector of the church, upholding what we will

call “masculine Christianity” has become a key aspect of the faith (Lively 2011; Piper 2012; Mathis 2014). As a recent evangelical church start-up in this tradition declared in its founding mission statement, the conviction is that “to grow the church, we must grow the man” (Storyline Fellowship). Their view of masculinity, which has a striking correspondence with the representation of masculinity in the film *Fight Club*, is key to their strategy of church growth.

The use of the *Fight Club* as a source for metaphors employed by several evangelical men’s ministries is a curious phenomenon in light of the numerous ideological discrepancies between the evangelical subculture and the film (Hays, Parker, Werse 2015). There exists, however, one intriguing area of ideological correspondence that may contribute to the ease with which the film *Fight Club* can provide metaphors for these evangelical men’s ministries: the advocacy for what some have called “hyper-masculinity.”^{iv} Both the film *Fight Club* and the proponents of masculine Christianity, which include the evangelical “Fight Clubs,” create a culture around what it means to be masculine. The following article will employ cultural semiotics to compare the representation of masculinity as a cultural symbol in *Fight Club* and the evangelical subculture that draws metaphors from this film. This article will argue that both the film *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity employ similar strategies to define masculinity by associating it with images of physicality, power, and control and contrasting it with a caricature of a “man fail.” Additionally, both the film and the subculture understand their definition of masculinity to be under threat by the conflicting claims from broader American society.

Three preliminary issues require consideration prior to engaging in the cultural analysis. First, diverse nomenclature and definitions have been employed for the religious movement we designate as “masculine Christianity.” The following study defines “masculine Christianity” as the Christian movement, which has spread predominantly among American evangelicals, that seeks to reinforce what they perceive as “traditional” masculine characteristics. This movement is more broadly related to “traditional” gender roles, which members of this movement derive from literal interpretations of the Bible that they understand as the divine will for societal relations. Throughout this study, however, it should be remembered that diversity exists throughout this movement. One common characteristic that should not be neglected in such an analysis is the positive spiritual experience reported by many men who take part in evangelical “Fight Clubs” and other men’s ministries advocating for masculine Christianity. Participants often benefit from intentionally gathering with other members of their churches to grow as fathers, husbands, and members of the broader community. Second, it is important to recognize that within this diversity, not all proponents of masculine Christianity support the use of the “Fight Club” metaphor. Furthermore, even among those actively participating in evangelical “Fight Club” ministries, some do not officially recognize a connection between the film and the ministry titles, and others even openly recognize the possible miscommunication of their ideological intentions through the use of this metaphor.^v Finally, we approach this cultural comparison as a reader response, recognizing that the proponents of masculine Christianity as well as *Fight Club* author Chuck Palahniuk and the creators of the film *Fight Club* situate their representation of masculinity within a broader ideological agenda governed by additional political (and theological) convictions that the present study does not survey.

The primary challenge for the present study is that *Fight Club* as cinematic art and evangelicalism as a religious subculture are two different subjects that employ symbols in

different ways. The semiotic theory of Yuri Lotman observes, however, that cultures and art often construct symbols using similar means by positioning them in relation to existing systems of signification.^{vi} Culture communicates information, memories, and values through constructing symbols in much the same way as literature.^{vii} A single cultural symbol is not simply defined according to a communal consensus but is rather nuanced by its relationship with other symbols and subsystems. When considering the meaning of a cultural symbol, therefore, the analyst should not only seek a definition but rather how that definition is constructed through systemic relationships. The semiotic assessment of a cultural symbol, therefore, considers the ways in which it is compared and contrasted to other signs and values in order to nuance its meaning.

Although the film *Fight Club* and the evangelical subculture are two different communicative mediums, both employ similar strategies to construct “masculinity” as a central ideological symbol. They each nuance this symbol within their respective cultural systems by organizing its syntagmatic placement in relation to other cultural symbols. Through the establishment of these relationships, both *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity create a presentation of masculinity over and against perceived extra-systemic claims. The following study, therefore, compares the utilization of masculinity as a cultural symbol in the respective semiotic systems in order to understand not simply the definitions provided in both the film and masculine Christianity but also how each system constructs those definitions by the syntagmatic placement of the symbol within the larger semiotic system.

Masculinity as a Cultural Symbol

An emphasis on masculinity is not new to the church, nor is the motivation behind this emphasis. During the nineteenth century, concern for the health of the church and the spread of the gospel fueled a movement known as “muscular Christianity,” which emphasized the importance of physical fitness and “manly men.”^{viii} Similar concerns for the church fuel the masculine Christianity of the twenty-first century. Within this stream of conservative evangelicalism, a particular definition of masculinity rests at the heart of a healthy individual, home, hermeneutics, and church (Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “Mission and Values”). As with other cultural symbols, masculine Christianity configures a definition of masculinity as a cultural symbol by drawing on intra-systemic relationships with other cultural signs to form a system of signification. Masculine Christianity bears striking resemblance to the film *Fight Club* in this process of configuration.

Evangelical Christians who look to biblical texts for a blueprint for masculinity generally highlight a few key passages that appear to thematize gender roles. Their interpretation of such passages then informs their reading of the rest of the Bible. The most foundational biblical passages for masculine Christianity include the creation account in Genesis 2 and the New Testament household codes (Ephesians 5:22–33; Colossians 3:18–24; 1 Peter 3:1–7).^{ix} Within the hermeneutical system of masculine Christianity, these passages define men as those whom God has created specifically to rule, to lead, and to provide—within the context of the home, the church, and broader society.^x

Both *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity employ a common set of cultural associations to nuance their representation of masculinity. Both systems of signification, for example, define masculinity as inherently physical. The film *Fight Club* portrays true men as those who fulfill their primal masculine urges through full contact physical fights, which occasionally lead to hospital treatment and disfigurement. Masculine Christianity represents a similar take on the physical nature of masculinity through its common assertion that boys need to take part in physical sports like football and that inherent to men is the need to overcome physical challenges.^{xi} Both systems extend the inherently masculine physicality beyond mere sports: they each commonly assert that real men fight. The film *Fight Club* provides endless examples of this view. Similarly, evangelical Christian and *New York Times* bestselling author John Eldredge writes about the value of boys playing inherently aggressive war games. He explains: “Little boys yearn to know they are powerful, they are dangerous, [and] they are someone to be reckoned with.... Aggression is part of the masculine *design*, we are hardwired for it” (10–11; italics in original). Related to this association is the additional ideological relationship between men, power, and control. In both systems, men do not get pushed around. True men do not collapse under the weight of obstacles but rather step up and take control. Books on masculine Christianity frequently encourage character traits such as assertiveness, boldness, and being proactive. Men do not remain passive in the face of conflict (Coughlin 2005, 161–67). Both *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity, therefore, employ a common set of cultural associations to nuance their presentation of masculinity.

In addition to employing these associations to define masculinity, both masculine Christianity and *Fight Club* likewise employ a common set of cultural disassociations. Proponents of masculine Christianity rely as much upon a negative example to delineate the boundaries of masculinity as they do upon the positive teachings of the Bible. What it means to be a man becomes most obvious when contrasted with what a man is *not*.^{xii} The contrasting image, however, is principally created and defined within the same semiotic system rather than existing as a conflicting claim of an alternative or opposing system. While defining masculinity over and against femininity would seem to be the most obvious means of conceptualizing what it means to be a man, proponents of masculine Christianity tend to use the feminized man, or what Christian leader Mark Driscoll has affectionately termed the “man fail” or—more graphically—the “pussified man,” as the primary source of contrast (2010).

According to masculine Christianity, the “man fail” is a growing phenomenon in which men are unwilling or unable to adopt the characteristics and responsibilities of true masculinity, as this interpretive tradition understands it. This phenomenon arises largely from the dominant role women play in the formation of young men, both in the home and in the church:

... today’s problem with true manliness arises in large part from a broader problem in the secular culture. So many young men grow up today without a father—or with a father who is inadequately connected with his sons—that there is bound to be confusion about masculinity.... Meanwhile, in growing numbers of evangelical churches, the presence of strong and godly men seems to have receded in the face of a feminized spirituality. (Philips 2010, xiii)

In this stream of evangelicalism, the threat to true masculinity is not women but rather men who have been feminized by women who were forced to adopt roles that properly “belong” to men. The agenda of masculine Christianity is, in large part, to recall true men to these roles so that feminized men can reclaim their masculinity. Because the problem is somewhat cyclical, however (mother raises feminized son, feminized son becomes a father who raises a similarly feminized son, etc.), the target of masculine Christianity’s attack necessarily becomes the feminized man who stands as the antithesis of true masculinity.

Books, articles, lectures, and sermons about masculine Christianity therefore articulate the problem they seek to address by describing the feminized man. Eldredge discusses the problem in this way:

Having spent the last thirty years redefining masculinity into something more sensitive, safe, manageable and, well, feminine, [society] now berates men for not being men. Boys will be boys, they sigh. As though if a man were to truly grow up he would forsake wilderness and wanderlust and settle down, be at home forever in Aunt Polly’s parlor. “Where are the *real* men?” is regular fare for talk shows and new books. *You asked them to be women*, I want to say. The result is a gender confusion never experienced at such a wide level in the history of the world. How can a man know he is one when his highest aim is minding his manners? (7)

Leon Podles provides this anecdote as illustration of the problem Eldredge identifies:

I was at a Baptist school to discuss a former teacher with the headmaster. The headmaster observed that the teacher was a decent person, but a bit soft. The headmaster had to teach him how to comport himself in a masculine fashion, to adopt an assertive body language. The teacher had come from a family in which the mother was the dominant religious force; she was the one who had chosen the church and made sure her son went to religious school and college. He was undoubtedly heterosexual, but had trouble breaking away from the feminine milieu and establishing himself as a man. (xv)

Paul Coughlin describes what he calls “Christian Nice Guys” or “CGNs” as men whose mommas raised them to have “impeccable manners,” to be “*always* approachable,” and “*endlessly* patient” (2005, 14).^{xiii} Coughlin argues that men believe adopting these characteristics makes one a good Christian because they have accepted a “banal portrayal of Jesus the Bearded Woman,” a clear image of a feminized man (33). The “man fail,” though occasionally based on perceptions of conflicting extra-systemic claims, exists within the cultural code of masculine Christianity as an internally constructed symbol. The definition of true masculinity therefore emerges from the contrast with this idea of the “man fail.”

The film *Fight Club* similarly utilizes contrast with the “man fail” as a means of indirectly defining true masculinity. As within masculine Christianity, the threat to masculinity is not women but men who are not “manly.” The entire opening of the film depicts the feminized “man fail”: everything the Narrator does is a failure of true masculinity when compared to the empowering experience of *Fight Club* later in the film. He seeks comfort through support groups that involve meditation, sharing feelings, and a group for men with testicular cancer where the

members hold one another while they weep. Ironically, the name of this support group is “Remaining Men Together,” and the participants repeatedly remind each other “We’re still men.... Men is what we are.” Within the film, however, the point of the scene is that crying together is not the truth path to masculinity. The Narrator is passive in his workplace, and he succumbs to a feminine nesting instinct whereby he strives to discover and define his identity through his IKEA purchases. A graphic reference to how these patterns of behavior represent a failure of masculinity comes with the Narrator’s admission: “We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow Collection.”

Fight Club’s primary definition of masculinity arises out of the contrast between the Narrator, the depiction of whose “man fail” largely constitutes the introduction of the film, and Tyler Durden. Tyler’s unique brand of hyper-masculinity, expressed most explicitly through his instigation of the fight clubs, stands in direct opposition to the passivity of the Narrator. In a parallel to the logic of masculine Christianity, Tyler at one point cites the lack of strong father figures as the reason for the “man fail” epidemic: “We’re a generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.” In *Fight Club*, as in masculine Christianity, the threat is not femininity *per se* but rather feminized men, who are identified according to an internally constructed cultural code.

These basic similarities in the ways that masculine Christianity and the film *Fight Club* depict the problem facing men and define true masculinity perhaps explain the reason that many advocates of masculine Christianity have adopted the “fight club” metaphor as a means of advancing their cause. Just as Tyler Durden’s fight clubs are the means by which the Narrator reclaims his masculinity, many within the evangelical community call for men to “fight back” against the status quo of American culture and reclaim their masculinity. The evangelical men’s ministries sporting the title “Fight Club” frequently place a heavy emphasis on helping men become better fathers and husbands.^{xiv} Both *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity therefore construct the emerging picture of what it means to be a “man” through a common set of intra-systemic associations and disassociations.

Masculinity: Claims and Counter Claims

Not only do the film *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity employ similar intra-systemic relationships with other cultural symbols for the generation of meaning around the concept of masculinity, but they also situate their conception of masculinity in relation to opposing systems of competing claims holding power in American society. Such contrasts differ from the previously explored intra-systemic disassociations in that they nuance their claims on masculinity as a cultural symbol not only in relation to internally constructed cultural categories but additionally over and against competing cultural systems laying claim to the same unit of natural language. Thus, in both *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity, opposing systems of signification dominant in broader American society pose a threat to the realization and manifestation of masculinity. Thus, both systems believe they must engage in what evangelical Christianity terms a “culture war” between conflicting ideologies.^{xv} Numerous examples of such inter-systemic conflicts are perceivable; one common conflict that both *Fight Club* and

masculine Christianity emphasize emerges, however, in the competing claim made by consumerist culture.

Fight Club strongly critiques many aspects of consumerism as perceived in American society (Giroux 2006, 205-225; Skees 2012, 17-22). Consumerist culture is perceived as a vicious cycle in which people work jobs they do not like to buy stuff they do not need in a desperate attempt to define themselves. Although the threat of consumerism encroaches upon both genders, masculine Christianity and the film *Fight Club* especially attack the influence of consumerist culture on masculine self-definition. The opening minutes of the film show the Narrator flipping through an IKEA catalog while on the phone placing an order for the “Erika Pekkari slip covers.” The Narrator’s voice-over monologue confesses, “Like everyone else, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. If I saw something like a clever coffee table in the shape of a yin and yang, I had to have it.” Referring to this behavior as a “nesting instinct” actually connects the enemy of consumerism with the enemy of feminized man since the term metaphorically associates the behavior with mother birds, which subtly emasculates the instinct.

For the unnamed Narrator, however, this participation in consumer culture is not simply the obtaining of objects but is rather a desperate attempt at self-definition. He continues, “I would flip through catalogs and wonder, ‘What kind of dining set defines me as a person?’” These early scenes feature brief images of the Narrator assembling furniture, placing an order by phone, and watching the home shopping network when he is not touring his assemblage of support groups. The Narrator’s self-definition around his material possessions is further evident in his complaint to the airport security officer over the loss of the possessions in his suitcase, as well as his subsequent complaint to Tyler Durden after the explosion in his apartment.

The Narrator loses his identity working a vocation he dislikes to support his consumerist quest for self-definition. Throughout the initial presentations of the Narrator’s vocational status, he operates as nothing more than an arm of the company. He takes orders and exerts no individual identity. The Narrator explains that he is a recall coordinator. The film shows the Narrator’s responsibilities for a major car company, as he compares the potential cost of out of court settlements for accidents caused by faulty merchandise to the cost of a recall. He reduces the process to a formula to determine which course of action will save the company the most money. The seemingly impersonal and automatic nature of the process is striking. As the Narrator converts the tragic loss of human life into a series of cost assessment points, the technicians say, “Here’s where the infant went through the windshield. Three points.” “The teenager’s braces around the backseat ashtray would make a good ‘anti-smoking’ ad.” “The father must have been huge. See how the fat burnt into the driver’s seat with his polyester shirt? Very ‘modern art.’” As the Narrator’s monologue explains the formula, the scene quickly cuts to him explaining the process to a businesswoman on the airplane next to him. She is horrified and asks if there are a lot of these accidents to which he responds “you wouldn’t believe.”

One of Tyler Durden’s speeches to the fight club further emphasizes this point: “I see in fight club the strongest and the smartest men who have ever lived, an entire generation pumping gas and waiting tables; or they’re slaves with white collars.” He goes on to declare that they are slaves caught chasing the dreams of advertisements and empty promises of television. In regards to this lie, which keeps them in their societal places, Tyler declares, “And we’re learning that

fact. And we're very, very pissed-off." A central theme in the film is breaking free from this enslaving economic system. As the communal vandalism increases across the city leading to Project Mayhem, the film repeats the refrain "you are not your job" on several occasions. Tyler utters the phrase while raking the lawn. The phrase is repeated on the Narrator's lips during his hotel room flashback when he comes to realize Tyler's true identity. It also appears in the police interrogation when the Narrator tries to turn himself in. Ricky says it and his comrades repeat it before watching their most recent act of vandalism on the news.

As the Narrator sits at the tavern with Tyler Durden early in the film and laments the loss of all of his worldly possessions, Tyler suggests that the Narrator has in fact been delivered. As the Narrator vocally contemplates filing the insurance claim, Tyler declares, "The things you own, they end up owning you." Tyler makes similar comments throughout the movie. When the Narrator is on the phone with the police investigator, who is informing him of possible foul play involved in the destruction of his condominium, Tyler enters and prods the Narrator to tell the police "the liberator who destroyed my property has re-aligned my paradigm of perception." In a monologue to the fight club, Tyler asserts that advertisements and media promote the empty consumerist promise that they could all have great millionaire lives to keep them working jobs they hate to buy more unnecessary, unwanted stuff. Because the film has associated the accumulation of stuff with the aforementioned feminine "nesting" instinct, this type of consumerism stands in direct opposition to the masculine ideal the film constructs.

As the unnamed Narrator begins breaking free from the claims of consumerist culture on his method of self-definition, he undergoes a change in relation to his work environment. Although he asserts that "who you were in fight club is not who you were in the rest of the world," the change in his work place demeanor is evident. The more the Narrator redefines himself around the fight club, the more disengaged he becomes with his job. The film shows him playing solitaire, only marginally paying attention at meetings, and no longer jumping at his boss's demands. In fact, the Narrator begins exerting himself over his work environment. He begins calling the shots and giving the orders. This change is not just evident in the Narrator. Consider Ricky, the supply clerk in the Narrator's office: the Narrator laments that he could not remember whether he ordered blue or black pens, but he "was a god for ten minutes last week when he trounced an actuary twice his size."

This resistance to self-definition according to material possessions begins manifesting itself in stronger forms in the Narrator as his character undergoes development under the influence of Tyler Durden and the fight club. Between intermittent scenes depicting the growth of the fight club, the Narrator admits that he should have been haggling with the insurance company and upset concerning the loss of his possessions, but he was not. While boarding a bus, the Narrator and Tyler notice a Calvin Klein advertisement. The Narrator says that he feels sorry for the people trying to emulate that image. Instead of surrounding himself with carefully coordinated IKEA furnishings, he takes up residence with Tyler in a derelict, abandoned building. He has escaped the consumerist culture that once governed his life.

The film *Fight Club* does not merely define masculinity as a cultural symbol but recognizes that opposing claims are made upon the symbol by alternative systems of signification (in this case, consumerism), which threaten the claims of the working cultural system of the film. These

threatening claims are presented as pervasive in a surrounding cultural system that must be overcome. The manifestation of true masculinity in the lives of men, therefore, necessitates that the men overcome the ideological influences of broader society that direct them to identify themselves according to the guidelines of consumerism.

Masculine Christianity locates the cultural symbol of masculinity in a similar intersection between conflicting systems of signification. The resulting conflict often assumes the title “culture war” in masculine Christianity. The very designation “culture war” demonstrates that certain subsets of evangelicals understand their cultural claims to be actually “at war” with competing cultural systems (Mohler 2004, 2005, 2009). Central to these “culture wars” are what they consider traditional gender distinctions (Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “Gender Issues”). Masculine Christianity, therefore, perceives itself in conflict with forces such as feminism and egalitarianism that propose an alternative system of gender roles and distinctions (Eldredge 2001, 7; Coughlin 2005, 116–37).

Not only does masculine Christianity resemble the film *Fight Club* in its engagement in a culture war with broader American society, but it also identifies the same American consumerist culture as *Fight Club* as a potential threat to its definition of masculinity when that economic system lays claim to the self-identification of individuals. Corporate America, which reduces human identity to a unit of production, receives criticism from advocates for masculine Christianity just as it does from the characters in *Fight Club*. Eldredge, for example, writes, “Corporate policies and procedures are designed with one aim: to harness a man to the plow and make him produce. But the soul refuses to be harnessed; it knows nothing of Day Timers and deadlines and P&L statements” (6–7).

Evangelicals further warn against the dangers of consumerism in broader American society (Turner 2013). The problem is not necessarily purchasing nice things but rather comes when these possessions gain power over their owners. Mark Driscoll writes, “I don’t care if you buy a truck, and you can play some video games and rock out on your guitar. I don’t really care. But the issue is when those are prevalent, predominant, and preeminent in your life” (2010). Consumerism becomes a threat when people in general, and men in particular, seek to define themselves according to the broader consumer culture perceived as dominating American society. Driscoll again says

... consumerism is now a religion and stores are now pagan temples. Right now there are people walking through the mall, trying to figure out what their identity is. “What will I wear? ... How will this reflect on me as a person?” They are purchasing an identity, trying to present themselves, and that’s what consumerism does. (2013)

True masculinity, therefore, is only possible when a man overcomes the cultural influences inclining him to self-define according to consumer culture. As Driscoll exhorts, “Men, you are to be creators and cultivators.... You’re a producer, not a consumer” (2010).

The systems of signification unfolding in the film *Fight Club* and in masculine Christianity perceive their representation of masculinity as a cultural symbol under threat from opposing systems of signification dominant in broader American society. In both *Fight Club* and

masculine Christianity, a cultural battle is necessary for the manifestation of true masculinity. This battle takes the form of men conquering the claims that orient them toward self-definition according to alternative systems of signification. Both *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity spiritualize this battle into an internal struggle. In a monologue to the fight club in which Tyler Durden surveys the ways in which materialism keeps them as slaves in their jobs, he spiritualizes the struggle, declaring: “We are the middle children of history, with no purpose or place. We have no great war, or great depression. The great war is a spiritual war. The great depression is our lives.”^{xvi} Building upon biblical texts such as 1 Timothy 6:12, Romans 8:13, and Colossians 3:5, many evangelical “Fight Clubs” spiritualize their battle as one against sin, Satan, and the corrupt desires of the flesh. *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity both perceive themselves in a culture war with the broader American society but internalize the struggle into spiritual battles.

Conclusion

The film *Fight Club* depicts the appeal of hyper-masculinity as a means of escape from the dehumanizing effects of consumerist culture, but it also follows the quest for this ideological purity to its problematic ends. The journey toward realizing the ideals of hyper-masculinity leads the Narrator not only down a path of societal chaos but also manifests greater conflict between the Narrator and Marla Singer and even with his fight club comrades. Ultimately, the quest for ideological purity leads the Narrator to personal psychological instability, which prompts him to seek an immediate escape from the ideological embodiment he found in Tyler Durden.

The masculine Christianity drawn to the images and symbols of *Fight Club*, however, employs a selective reading of the film’s symbols, which creates the potential to overlook the adverse communicative implications of drawing metaphors from the film to represent their brand of masculine ideology. In the months during which we conducted the research for this article, the media carried stories about Mark Driscoll and his controversial philosophy of ministry, which derives partly from his embrace of masculine Christianity (Paulson 2014). Other ministers are following and even developing his aggressive footsteps. Stories circulate through news outlets of pastors giving away assault rifles at church and preaching sermon series entitled “Grow a Pair,” “Spartan,” and, of course, “Fight Club,” all in an effort to reach men with the gospel (Kavanaugh 2014). A recent documentary entitled *Fight Church* has explored the rising blend of Christianity and MMA cage fighting (Storkel 2014, Johnson 2014). While this desire to minister to men is commendable, the ways in which select segments of evangelicals have wed their masculine ideology and Christian theology could have potentially troubling consequences. Not only does their hyper-masculine approach alienate women at best and outright degrade them at worst,^{xvii} it self-propagates by indoctrinating young boys into a similarly skewed way of understanding gender and what it means to “fight the good fight of the [Christian] faith” (1 Timothy 6:12). The rising use of “Fight Club” metaphors for evangelical men’s ministries evinces this growing form of masculine Christianity.

This article is part of a larger project exploring the communicative power of metaphors and images within the church, specifically metaphors and images associated with the film *Fight Club*. Our previous work highlighted the ideological *discrepancies* between *Fight Club* and the brand of masculine Christianity that adopts it as a metaphor for evangelical men’s ministries; the

discordance is significant and has rightfully raised concerns (Hays, Parker, Werse 2015). By employing cultural semiotics, this article explores one area of *congruence* that allows the metaphor to work so effectively within the context of masculine Christianity. Both systems associate masculinity with physicality, power, and control and contrast it with an internally constructed representation of a “man fail.” Furthermore, both *Fight Club* and masculine Christianity perceive themselves as engaged in a culture war with the conflicting claims of broader American culture that threatens their determination of what is and is not masculine. This aspect of *Fight Club* resonates deeply with facets of the masculine Christian message, and it has inspired Christian men across the country to take the task of Christian living more seriously.

End Notes

ⁱ The authors recognize the complexity of the designation “evangelical,” which has been used inconsistently to designate religious movements in North America, Britain and Germany. Furthermore the differing definitions for the term “evangelical” often result in the inclusion of different ranges and spectrums of religious thought and practice. For the sake of the present essay, we use “evangelical” to designate the American religious demographic which adhere to David Bebbington’s four distinctives: conversionism, Biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism (Bebbington 1992, 3). For further discussion on the diversity of Evangelicalism, see: Naselli and Hansen 2011.

ⁱⁱ The “fight club” metaphor has also been used for gender inclusive discipleship ministries, with the focus on fighting together for the faith (City Life Church n.d.). For a recent documentary on the rise of church based MMA “fight club” like gyms, see: Storkel 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Driscoll famously quipped: “The problem with the church today, it's just a bunch of nice, soft, tender, ‘chickified’ church boys. Sixty percent of Christians are chicks, and the forty percent that are dudes are still sort of chicks and it’s just sad... The whole architecture [of church], the whole aesthetic is real feminine, the preacher is kind of feminine, the music is kind of emotional and feminine.” (Driscoll 2006). See also: Podles 1999, 3-26; Grudem 2004, 2006; Coughlin 2005, 61-64; Strachan 2010, 19-22; Murrow 2011.

^{iv} The term “hyper-masculinity” has frequently been applied to the representation of masculinity in the film *Fight Club* (e.g. Ta 2006, 265-277; Ruddell 2007, 293-503). The same term has been applied (rightly or wrongly) to gendered teachings of the evangelical right (E.g. Worthen 2009). Of course not all advocates for gender distinctions among the evangelical right would choose to identify with this term.

^v “Fight Club 414,” for example, attributes the title to Nehemiah 4:14 which reads, “After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, ‘Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.’” NRSV (<http://www.fightclub414.com/#/about>, accessed July 29, 2014). As discussed in our previous research, however, the frequent use of not only the title, but also images (such as the soap logo), homework assignments, and phrases (such as “the first rule of fight club is...”) frequently employed by these ministries draws a strong connection with the film. Participants in the “Fight Club” ministries, however, do at times recognize the ideological conflict between the title “Fight Club” and the evangelical ideology of the ministry. It is important to remember that despite the ideological challenges posed by the metaphor, participation in the ministry is still considered by many members to be a valuable spiritual experience that leads to valued personal growth and development. Other ministries, however, openly acknowledge their dependence upon the film *Fight Club* (e.g. Dodson 2008).

^{vi} In an admittedly non-exhaustive statement, Lotman defined culture as “[t]he collected non-hereditary information accumulated, preserved and handed on by the various groups of human society” (Lotman 1973, 1213).

^{vii} Lotman writes, “[c]ulture may generally be regarded as a text. It is extremely important, however, to stress that this is a complexly constructed text, which breaks down into a hierarchy of ‘texts within texts’ and forms complex textual intertwining of texts” (Lotman 1988, 50).

^{viii} For further discussion of the emergence of nineteenth-century “Muscular Christianity,” see: Vance 1985; Hall 1994; Watson 2005.

^{ix} Not every advocate of masculine Christianity interprets these passages in the same way. For example, while the two men share many of the same convictions about true masculinity, Richard D. Phillips strongly critiques the way John Eldredge, the author of the *New York Times* Bestseller *Wild at Heart* (2001), interprets Genesis 2: “We encounter major errors in *Wild at Heart* right at the beginning, where Eldredge discusses Genesis 2:8: ‘Eve was created within the lush beauty of Eden’s garden. But Adam, if you’ll remember, was created *outside* the garden, in the wilderness.’ Eldredge reasons here that if God ‘put the man’ into the garden, he must have been made outside the garden. While the Bible does not actually say this, it’s plausible. But even assuming it’s true, what are we to make of it? Eldredge makes an unnecessary and most unhelpful leap of logic, concluding that the ‘core of a man’s heart is undomesticated,’ and because we are ‘wild at heart,’ our souls must belong in the wilderness and not in the cultivated garden. That is, Eldredge assumes and then teaches as a point of doctrine a view of manhood that Scripture simply does not support” (Phillips 2010, 7).

^x For treatments of these passages from the perspective of masculine Christianity, see: Piper and Grudem 2006; Stinson and Dumas 2011.

^{xi} *Fight Club 414*, for example, intentionally works “physical” challenges into its men’s discipleship ministry, recognizing a need to grow men not simply spiritually and intellectually but also physically (Brown n.d.).

^{xii}Paul Coughlin, for example, writes: “Ask Christian men what it means to be masculine... and they’re quicker to tell you what it isn’t... guys in church know more about masculinity’s antonyms than its synonyms.” (Coughlin 2005, 156).

^{xiii} Coughlin does not necessarily argue *against* good manners, approachability, and patience; rather, his primary concern is that these characteristics are overshadowing passion, boldness, and honesty in Christian men. Nevertheless, the implication of his study is that these characteristics are the result of a feminization of men and the church.

^{xiv} Church websites sponsoring Fight Club ministries frequently include a heavy emphasis on strengthening family values in their training. E.g. Fight Club 414 (www.fightclub414.com), Grace Community Church n.d.

^{xv} Jim Brown, founder of Fight Club 414, writes, “It’s no secret that the disappearance of the Man is a cultural epidemic, affecting our homes, schools, workplaces, churches, and communities” (Brown n.d.). Grace Community Church, in advertising their fight club, states, “Fight Club is about men fighting for their families, their children, and their integrity. Today’s culture makes faithfulness, purity and family values a challenge” (Grace Community Church n.d.)

^{xvi} Jonathan Dodson cites this very speech as the motivation behind the formation of his collection of church sponsored evangelical “Fight Clubs” (Dodson 2008).

^{xvii} Mooneyham, for example, has explained what his church offers women in this way: “What do we have around here for the ladies? Hopefully a godly man with a pair between his legs to take care of you one of these days” (Kavanaugh 2014). Driscoll has stated that he does not “answer to women” and so will ignore their questions and has even gone so far as to say that God created women to be “a home” for men’s penises (cf. Kulze 2014).

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**Auteurist Socio-Cultural Critique:
Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* as Historical Present**



image source: <https://wrongreel.com/the-hateful-eight-review/>

Justin Greene

Twenty-four years and eight films into his career, differing arrays of people are still drawn to Quentin Tarantino and his films. When viewers encounter “written and directed by Quentin Tarantino,” there are certain expectations that accompany these words. In his classic essay “What Is an Author?,” Michel Foucault claims “that an author’s name is not simply an element in a discourse (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun and the like); it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function” (107). Following Foucault’s thinking, I associate Tarantino’s name with a particular style or mode of filmmaking, because audiences, no matter the racial or gendered dynamics, have granted Tarantino the opportunity to explore his representation of America. Most recently, by immersing a predominantly white male American audience in his depictions of United States society and culture, Tarantino’s films confront white America’s perceptions and epistemologies of American history.

Tarantino’s America is violent, seedy, and vulgar. His films take mainstream, white mainstream audiences into a world vastly different from their own comfortable spaces, through his use of traditionally unrelatable characters such as gangsters or other criminals traditionally as protagonists. Philip DiMare positions Tarantino as “the only American filmmaker (so far) who has devoted himself exclusively to the nature of American violence as filtered through America’s media” (821). Though I believe other filmmakers’ oeuvres have taken up a similar critique and fascination with American violence, I interpret Tarantino’s use of violence as discursive. Using Foucault as a framework, I read the discourses of race and violence as performing power over Tarantino’s films. These discourses manifest in every aspect of the films, but are highly visible in the characters, dialogue, and visuals. The discursive nature of violence and race in his films generates the “divisiveness” surrounding Tarantino’s art and persona in popular American culture (Hess) and his continued pushback against the ways in which mass-market films are located within popular culture.

These two discourses permeate Tarantino's oeuvre, but especially his later films including *The Hateful Eight* (December 2015). In a highly critical review of the film for *The Guardian*, Alex Hess distinguishes between Tarantino's early and later phases. He states, "Whereas his early films were set in something resembling reality, his recent stuff takes place in a self-referential schlock-world governed by the conventions of long-extinct genres." I am not concerned here about Tarantino's use of film genres to construct his art. Instead, I find the "self-referential" nature of *The Hateful Eight* highly important. Since most film scholars and critics would agree with the identity of auteur being applied to Tarantino at this point in his career, I read *The Hateful Eight* as an auteuristic parody of Tarantino's self and films.

By utilizing self-parody, Tarantino sets up a socio-cultural critique of contemporary America via the intersections of violence, race, and history in his art. Viewing *The Hateful Eight* as a representation of his mind, the film populates Tarantino's thoughts with reinterpretations of his stock characters and themes across his oeuvre. These reinterpretations function satirically because they mock not only Tarantino's previous films but also elements of American society and culture, especially race and gender relations. The blind self-parody Tarantino exhibits in this film works as a form of socio-cultural critique that highlights the contemporary parodic nature of American socio-political ideologies. The comic extravagances and exaggerations used in the film disrupt white America's sense of reality and comfort, allowing the discursive elements of Tarantino's name, persona, and art to force a reconceptualization of historical and contemporary knowledge, situating white American audiences within the larger conversations of racial and gender oppression.

Detesting the 8

The Hateful Eight focuses on a group of societal degenerates—bounty hunters, criminals, and racists—typical characters in Tarantino's films. Many film critics have taken issue with these "characters" because they lack identifiable traits and seem to function as "cartoonish caricatures" (Hess). In his review in *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane calls the film "a beastly brew," and that "[b]y the end...its status as a tale of mystery and its deference to classic Westerns have all but disappeared, worn down by the grind of its sadistic vision." Lane concludes by commenting on Tarantino's use of violence to shock rather than using violence as socio-cultural commentary: "by blowing out folks' brains, he wants to blow our minds." These same points can be argued about many of Tarantino's characters and films. Many "normal" white American audience members have a difficult time identifying with the criminality and viciousness of many of Tarantino's characters and the intense violence that exacerbates from their interactions in these fictional worlds. However, Tarantino constructs highly exaggerated caricatures to display the underlying discourses that govern much of mainstream white America's socio-cultural power structures and epistemologies. This is one of the first notions of self-parody that Tarantino establishes in the film.

In "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History," Linda Hutcheon defines parody as an "introverted formalism—that paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, to a discursive world of socially defined meaning systems (past and present)—in other words, to ideology and history"

(179-80). Hutcheon goes on to claim that this use of parody is intended to spawn “public discourse” (181). So when many white American audiences encounter the despicable characters in *The Hateful Eight*, it is not to create a form of identification; their stereotypes rupture and disconnect representation. By lacing *The Hateful Eight* and the characters with violent and racist tendencies, Tarantino wants white America to understand the historical remnants still at work in contemporary American society and many people’s identities today, and one of the easiest ways to highlight this is through parody and caricature.

Parody seeks to “play” with styles, genres, discourses, and ideologies. Hutcheon believes that this “play is *never* necessarily to exclude seriousness and purpose” (186, italics in original), and in this way Tarantino’s characters establish a self-referential parody, while at the same time displaying a “possibl[ity] [of] an ideological and social intervention” (Hutcheon 199). In a similar vein as Hutcheon, Julia Kristeva locates parody within Mikhail Bakhtin’s *carnavalesque*¹:

In contemporary society, it [*carnival*] generally connotes parody, hence a strengthening of the law. There is a tendency to blot out the carnival’s dramatic (murderous, cynical and revolutionary in the sense of dialectical transformation) aspects.... The laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is serious. This is the only way that it can avoid becoming either the scene of law or the scene of its parody, in order to become the scene of its other.

Kristeva highlights the power of the carnival and its danger to forms of control, especially the law. The sovereign and/or law allow one of parody’s basic functions: the jester in the king’s court cliché. On the other hand, parody functions as a form of rupture, though only for a set amount of time, to discursive powers. Bakhtin claims, “In the atmosphere of carnivalesque freedom and familiarity, impropriety also has its place” (247). The standards of socio-cultural morals are overturned by the excessive racial dialogue and grotesque violence in the film. These aspects represent the duality present in the carnivalesque. Through this utilization of carnivalesque caricatures and stereotypes, the film provides a strong socio-cultural commentary on contemporary American discourses of race and violence.

The Hateful Eight’s characters become participants in the carnival as voices of disruption, focusing white Americans’ attentions toward the socio-cultural commentary their performances evoke. Bakhtin argues that the carnival is a tripartite of “life-death-birth” (149) and that the cycle can only be achieved through “carnavalesque images” that “intentionally upset proportions” (410). The characters are immoral criminals, yet they are also ethical in some respects. Through this mixing of immorality and ethics, the characters represent carnivalesque *homini sacri*, like many of Tarantino’s characters.² Giorgio Agamben defines “*homo sacer* (sacred man) [as a person] *who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (12, italics in original).

Because all of the characters are dead at the end of the film, *The Hateful Eight* plays on the ending of *Reservoir Dogs*, but this parodic play diverges in a significant way (see fig. 1).³ Warren (Samuel L. Jackson) and Daisy (Jennifer Jason Leigh) are threatened constantly throughout *The Hateful Eight* with punishment for killing or voicing dissent. These threats

emerge from white men, the characters in power, Sheriff Chris Mannix (Walter Goggins), John Ruth (Kurt Russell), and Oswaldo (Tim Roth) especially. After Warren's monologue about sexually abusing and killing General Smithers's son, Mannix asks, "You gonna ignore the nigger that killed your boy?" (Tarantino). This line creates a link to Agamben's view that "the sovereign decides not the licit and illicit but the originary inclusion of the living in the sphere of law" (22). During this scene, Warren takes the role of the sovereign away from Smithers (Bruce Dern), Mannix, and the other white characters. Warren's ability to kill Smithers and set in motion the events of the latter half of the film stem from this usurpation of sovereign white power to dictate lawfulness and morality.

However, Warren's immoral side complicates his sovereignty. Early in the film, Mannix explicates that in order to escape a Confederate prison Warren killed not only white Southerners, but also black men. In order to survive, Warren commits an immoral act. It is this immorality that provides the disruption that Bakhtin claims is present in the carnivalesque, and complicates Warren's representation as a *homo sacer*.⁴ Because he dies at the end of the film, Warren can be killed but not sacrificed. Instead, having his head blown apart for providing the mortal wound to Warren sovereignly punishes Jody Domergue (Channing Tatum). The complications presented by Warren's dual function as *homo sacer* and sovereign stem from parody and its carnivalesque aspects.



Fig. 1. *The Hateful Eight*. Final shot from behind Daisy's hanged body toward dying Warren and Mannix. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. The Weinstein Company, 2015. DVD.

The white male characters function as parodic representatives of the law. Agamben associates the law with violence and sovereign power: "the sovereign is the point of indistinction between violence and law, the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence" (25). The threat of punishment to minority characters—black man and white woman—represents what Henry A. Giroux believes is "social distance" between "white [male] society" and "the web of violence and social responsibility" (Giroux). In Tarantino's late-postbellum America, contemporary mainstream white America must confront the violent power dynamics and racial discourses that still manifest inside contemporary socio-cultural institutions and epistemologies.

Paradoxically, the socio-cultural critique the film offers can be lost through its carnivalesque imagery. Bakhtin mentions how “the point of view of another ideology” causes carnivalesque images to “become coarse and cynical” (149-50). Mainstream white American audiences can overlook the embedded critique Tarantino weaves into the film for the escapism popular films offer their viewers. Segments of this audience could interpret Tarantino’s racialized, gendered, and violent themes as pulp and mere schlock entertainment, when what lies beneath the carnivalesque imagery is a deconstruction of socio-cultural ideologies. The carnival can be located at “the center of all popular forms of amusement,” according to Bakhtin, and it is “tolerated” by the power structures of “Church and State” (220). By allowing carnival to exist and perform socio-cultural functions for the people, the hegemony grants time for dissent.

This can be seen in the film when Warren kills Smithers or when Daisy is allowed to sing and play guitar momentarily. In these scenes, “Differences between superiors and inferiors disappear for a short time” (Bakhtin 246). Once these scenes end though, order is restored and the dominant ideologies and discourses exert their power. When John Ruth smashes Daisy’s guitar after she offends him with an ad-lib in her song, the function of the carnival as a safety valve and protective of the existing social order becomes evident. For a few verses, the men admire Daisy’s song and allow her the ability to move about within space freely, but once she sings, “And you’ll be dead behind me, John, when I get to Mexico,” John Ruth, as a representative of the hegemony, reclaims the proffered freedom from Daisy by forcing her back into her handcuffs. Once Daisy is returned to her subservient position as prisoner, the power structure is restored and resumed as normal.

The carnivalesque imagery proliferates throughout the film and becomes entwined with Agamben’s notions of sovereignty, allowing for certain characters to function as in-betweens of racial and gendered violence. Tarantino utilizes his auteurism to present a socio-cultural critique of the racial and gendered violence present in contemporary American society through the carnivalesque grotesquerie of postbellum American culture and ideologies.

The Auteur’s (Re)Presentation of Historical Racial Violence

Quentin Tarantino’s identity as an auteur has firmly been established by popular and academic culture alike, but I would like to present some traits of auteur theory and his identity in general to build an understanding of how Tarantino uses *The Hateful Eight* as a form of self-reflexivity and socio-cultural parody.

Auteur theory develops around the idea that a director has certain traits, which establish him as the “author” or creative vision of a film. Film theorist, Peter Wollen describes the auteur through Romanticism:

The director does not subordinate himself to another author; his source is only a pretext, which provides catalysts, scenes which fuse with his own preoccupations to produce a radically new work. Thus the manifest

process of performance, the treatment of a subject, conceals the latent production of a quite new text, the production of the director as an auteur. (374)

Wollen also casts the director/auteur as a form of “shifting relations,” of “singularity” and “uniformity” (373). Extending Wollen’s idea of auteurism is Robert Conley. In “The Auteur Theory: Tarantino’s Blood,” he establishes “three qualifications for someone to be considered an auteur: (1) Technical Competence; (2) A Stylistic Stamp; (3) Soulfulness” (77).⁵ Equally important to my reading of Tarantino’s auteur identity is auteur theorist Andrew Sarris’s declaration that “Auteurism has less to do with the way movies are made than with the way they are elucidated and evaluated. It is more a critical instrument than a creative inspiration” (28). Two marks of Tarantino’s auteurism are violence and race, and the ways in which he uses these aspects as artistic tropes consistently across his oeuvre establishes Tarantino as a prime example of contemporary auteurism. His “[s]tylistic [s]tamp” and “[s]oulfulness” operate as ways to distinguish his operation and execution of larger socio-cultural discourses.



Fig. 2. *The Hateful Eight*. Opening credit billing as Tarantino’s eighth film. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. The Weinstein Company, 2015. DVD.

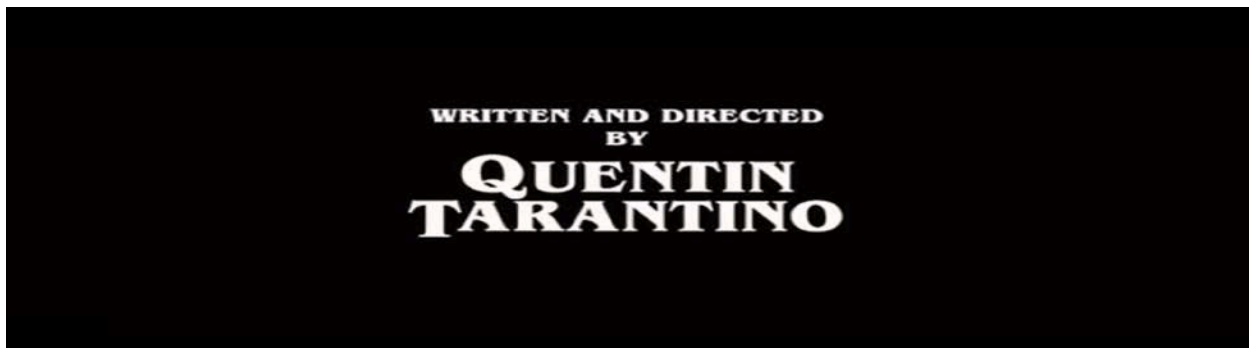


Fig. 3. *The Hateful Eight*. Closing credit billing to Tarantino. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. The Weinstein Company, 2015. DVD.

Anyone who has viewed a Tarantino film knows that violence will be on display. Establishing this synonymous connection between his name, art, and violence works similarly to Foucault’s “author function.” Foucault claims, “The author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture” (107). In essence, “Written and Directed by Quentin Tarantino” (see fig. 2-3) connotes race and violence. Tarantino’s constant use of violence and racial discourse are part of his expressions through art,

and *The Hateful Eight* works to distort and parody these trademarks of his auteurism, while linking them to larger contemporary socio-cultural issues in America.

In an interview with Bret Easton Ellis for *The New York Times Magazine*, Tarantino refers to the upcoming distribution of *The Hateful Eight* as “the best time to get out there because there actually is a genuine platform. Now it’s [racial violence] being talked about.” Tarantino’s public persona has shifted in recent years to focus on more racial issues, especially since the success of *Django Unchained*. Recently, Tarantino has participated in protests against police brutality and other acts of injustice against African-Americans in the United States (Collin; “Quentin Tarantino”). Robbie Collin believes Tarantino intentionally inserts critiques of America’s historical racial violence into *The Hateful Eight*, and that Tarantino views this as a way to draw America’s attention toward its own failures and stigmas. It is through these recent public performances that I read Tarantino as further situating his name with the discourses of race and violence in American society and culture, and it is this discursive function of his name and art that bleeds into the self-parody of *The Hateful Eight*.



Fig. 4. *The Hateful Eight*. Close-up of crucifix. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. The Weinstein Company, 2015. DVD.

Besides encountering the title cards displaying Tarantino’s role as author and director, another grounding in historical violence is established with the slow pan of the crucifix during the opening scenes and during the flashback to the Domergue Gang’s arrival at Minnie’s Haberdashery (see fig. 4). Tarantino’s use of the crucifix at these points in the narrative functions as “iconographic depictions of violence” (DiMare 821). The image of the crucifix can also be read to represent a form of what Henry A. Giroux calls “symbolic violence.” According to Giroux, “Symbolic violence attempts to connect the visceral and the reflective.” This religious image carries many meanings for people in America and around the world, and Tarantino is playing on those strong feelings through his visual representations. Yet according to Hutcheon, parody “of history is neither nostalgia nor aesthetic ‘cannibalization’” (182); actually it produces new meanings for old objects (182). Tarantino’s use of the crucifix mocks conservative white America’s ideals, while at the same time casting the film and Tarantino as iconographic representations. For the majority of his career he has, in a sense, been crucified for his depictions of violence and race within his films.⁶ This external meaning of the crucifix is a subconscious play on Tarantino’s feelings about his place as a writer and artist in contemporary American society.

The use of “symbolic violence” expands in the latter half of the film into what I would like to call hyper-real symbolic violence. This term is a merging of Giroux’s “symbolic violence” and “hyper-real violence,” which he describes as “a form of ultra-violence marked by technological

over-stimulation, gritty dialogue, dramatic storytelling, parody, and an appeal to gutsy naturalism.” What Tarantino displays in the latter portions of the film are overblown examples of violence. blood, another auteuristic trait of Tarantino (Conley 77), gushes like geysers from characters. Some of the most ridiculous images of violence are represented as the film draws to a conclusion: characters’ heads explode, bits of skull and brain matter splatter into mouths, and characters puke blood on other characters’ faces (see fig. 5-8). All of these visuals of violence are parodies of Tarantino’s earlier films, especially *Pulp Fiction* and *Death Proof*.

The scene in *Pulp Fiction* where Vincent (John Travolta) shoots Marvin (Phil LaMarr) in the head is recast two times within *The Hateful Eight* (fig. 5-6). In both films, blood splatters in all directions and covers characters. Unlike *Pulp Fiction*, *The Hateful Eight* does not use these scenes for comic effect; they establish aspects of dominance and morality. Warren’s killing of Bob (Demian Bichir) displays the struggle for inclusion that takes place within and between minority groups in American society. The black body of Warren enacts violence against the Hispanic body of Bob in order to establish claim to a position with the social order. Parallel to this, Mannix’s killing of Jody establishes righteousness over immorality within a racial group. By shooting Jody, Mannix lays claim to the higher moral ground. Even though he has committed criminal acts in the past, Mannix’s crimes were during “war,” which distances his acts from the common criminal acts Jody perpetrates. However, Tarantino recasts the grotesquerie of *Death Proof* with the vomiting of blood onto character’s faces in an oppressive frame in *The Hateful Eight*. In the final scenes of *Death Proof*, the girls (Zoë Bell, Rosario Dawson, and Vanessa Ferlito) enact revenge on Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell), beating him violently. During this beating, Tarantino highlights the blood Mike spews. In a reversal of the power given to the female characters in *Death Proof*, *The Hateful Eight* makes Daisy the recipient of extreme violence. Unlike the claims for power and inclusion Warren and Mannix exhibit in the film, Daisy is continually oppressed by violent and disgusting acts. These two uses of blood and grotesquerie allow Tarantino to comment on his own work but also more importantly on the socio-cultural ideologies present in America.

Besides being mere repeats of his hallmarks as an auteur, Tarantino is using these images of violence to critique his mainstream white American audience and the larger aspects of American cultural history. Giroux claims Tarantino’s use of violence is empty, and one can say that his use of it in *The Hateful Eight* is more akin to Fredric Jameson’s concept pastiche.⁷ I, on the other hand, interpret these exaggerations of violence as Tarantino’s way of pushing the threshold of tolerance. Tarantino challenges mainstream white America to confront its views of violence and how much is too much in the overblown representations of violence. By bringing the racial and gendered violence to the forefront of *The Hateful Eight*, Tarantino forces white American audiences to look. This is made easier through the caricature of his previous films, themes, and tropes, which obscure the direct commentary and satirical nature of the film’s images and themes.

These images of violence can be linked to Barthes “*reality effect*.” Until the violence emerges in the second half of the film, Tarantino saturates the film with realism—the setting, blizzard, and historical knowledge of the American west during the nineteenth-century. Using realistic representations grounds mainstream white Americans in their comfortable knowledge of the American west during the late-nineteenth century. Barthes understands the use of realism in

narrative as “*referential illusion*”, meaning images can only “*signify*” not “*denote*” meaning (148, italics in original). For Barthes, the *reality effect* is meant “to challenge, in a radical fashion, the age-old aesthetic of ‘representation’” (148). The visual images presented by the film work to bring white America into an unfamiliar place through illusionary familiarity.

Tarantino’s use of film technology serves to create this illusion of realism and familiarity. The film is shot in 70mm, and Tarantino highlights this aspect during the opening credits of the film. Scott Tobias believes using this type of film is Tarantino’s “way of raging against the dying of the Xenon light. But applied to such an intimate setting, the richness and depth of 70mm serve to heighten the tension considerably.” The technology allows Tarantino to represent hyper-real symbolic violence in a close manner and exploit the capabilities of film technology to shape the construction of meaning around representations of violence. Each moment of violence is rendered with extreme care and vividness in and on the faces of the characters. The wide angled, high-resolution film and tense, intimate cinematography allows these images of violence to be extremely vivid and over-saturated on the screen, rupturing mainstream white America’s familiarity with this world.





Fig. 5-8. Scenes of exaggerated violence and blood splatter. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. The Weinstein Company, 2015. DVD.

One of the strongest representations of death in the film is the image of Warren and Mannix hanging Daisy (see fig. 9). Out of all the deaths in the film, this one is the most realistic and the most symbolic; it is a signifier of meaning—the overcoming of racial difference and questions of morality to punish evil. Although they come together in this manner, Warren and Mannix’s unification represents the overcoming of racial differences to maintain patriarchal order. In “Tarantino’s Films: What Are They About and What Can We Learn from Them?,” Bruce Russell contends that characters with questionable morality can still exhibit ethical qualities (5). In the case of this scene, Warren and Mannix come together to perform Daisy’s punishment for being a murdering criminal. Though both Warren and Mannix have questionable morals and ideological views, they put aside their differences to punish Daisy’s immoral nature, but they also enact a gendered punishment. Daisy is non-normative—she is not submissive, unless beaten, nor does she withhold her opinions on stereotypically masculine topics such as race, law, and politics. In this way, Daisy threatens not only the lives of individual characters, but she also threatens the patriarchal order of American society. Because she is not a stereotypically submissive woman, Daisy must suffer, and the verbal and physical violence perpetrated against her is a way of maintaining socio-cultural normativity. The overcoming of racial differences by Warren and Mannix allows Tarantino to construct a dual critique of socio-cultural ideologies. Morality and righteousness are powerful tools in the hands of males, whether white or black, and must be used to keep women submissive. The hanging of Daisy and the final images of her limp body display the continuation of patriarchal dominance over the female body and strips the dying male bodies of Warren and Mannix of their racial markers in a moment of consolidation.



Fig. 9. *The Hateful Eight*. Warren and Mannix hang Daisy. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. The Weinstein Company, 2015. DVD.

Though Warren and Mannix unite to punish Daisy, both characters are controlled by and represent the conflicted racial discourse of American society of the nineteenth-century and today. It is this paradox that Tarantino parodies in his own work and contemporary socio-cultural American race relations. Giroux declares that “representations of violence can no longer be separated from representations of race,” and it is this linkage that Tarantino exploits in *The Hateful Eight*. The film is chock-full of racial epithets, threats of racial violence, and monologues on black/white relations. Through this parodic historicizing of race, Tarantino displays a historical present, not only between his films and auteurism, but also in American culture. Hutcheon explains that parody is way to highlight and critique the past from a privileged or marginalized position:

Parody has perhaps come to be a privileged mode of formal self-reflexivity because its paradoxical incorporation of the past into its very structures often points to these ideological contexts somewhat more obviously, more didactically, than other forms. Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak TO a discourse from WITHIN it, but without being totally recuperated by it. Parody appears to have become, for this reason, the mode of the marginalized, or of those who are fighting marginalization by a dominant ideology. (206, italics in original)

Tarantino’s oeuvre, especially his last three films, and his recent participation in protests against police brutality towards African-Americans, illuminates the intersection between history, race, violence, and art.

By using *The Hateful Eight* to parody his auteuristic traits and function as a representative of violence and racial discourse, Tarantino authorizes a way for mainstream white America to question its understanding of how racial violence is a historical present of American socio-cultural discourses and epistemologies. The two characters I read as Tarantino’s prime examples of racialized ideologies are Mannix and Warren though all the characters in some way become racial caricatures. Tarantino grants these two men monologues that depict their ideologies, and it is through the ways in which these ideologies are performed that the use of parody establishes direct criticism on the ways in which Americans govern their lives.



Fig. 10. *The Hateful Eight*. Close shot of Warren and Mannix in stagecoach. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. The Weinstein Company, 2015. DVD.

The character of Chris Mannix, who is supposedly the new sheriff of Red Rock and is the son of a notorious Confederate, represents the white supremacist ideologies present after the Civil War and in contemporary American society. Mannix is directly contrasted with Major Marquis Warren, a black bounty hunter and former Union Cavalry soldier. When these two men meet in the stagecoach at the beginning of the film, Tarantino establishes the tension between their ideologies with a scene featuring them facing off with their words (see fig. 10). It is at this point in the film's narrative that Tarantino utilizes racialized rhetoric on the racial tension in contemporary American society and culture to critique the ideologies of segments of white America. After Warren asks Mannix how many African-Americans his group killed, Mannix accuses Warren of killing his own men and Native Americans, which he believes is viewed by the government as beneficial. Mannix expresses that his father and other Confederates fought for "dignity," and it is this notion of "dignity" that preserves the supremacist ideology Mannix holds throughout the film and in segments of contemporary white America.

Mannix's monologue develops into a comment on how he views the role of white power in American society and the terrorism of their communities and ways of life. He states, "When niggers are scared, that's when white folks are safe."⁸ Mannix's words cause Warren to threaten violence for talking "hateful," and Mannix recants and blames his speech on political tensions: "No. No, no, no, . . . You done got me talkin' politics. I didn't wanta. Like I said y'all, I'm just happy to be alive." Mannix's feelings of being forced into "talkin' politics" mirrors itself in the current feelings of many American citizens. Hutcheon claims parody generates "a public discourse that will articulate the present in terms of the 'presentness of the past' and of the social placement of art in cultural discourse" (203). I understand the film functioning in this manner. Mannix represents those members of white America who shy away when confronted with by the oppressiveness within their discourse and ideologies.

Tarantino does not only present a one-sided critique of historical racial discourse; he uses Warren as the counterpart to Mannix's white supremacist ideology. In a similar speech later in the film, Warren explains to John Ruth why he lied about having corresponded with Abraham Lincoln:

What's the matter John Ruth? I hurt your feelings? . . . Now, I know I'm the only black son bitch you ever conversed with, so I'm gonna cut you

some slack. But you got no idea what it's like being a black man facing down America. *The only time black folks is safe is when white folks is disarmed. And this letter had the desired effect of disarming white folks.* (emphasis mine)

Warren expresses his ideological views on the racial discourse and oppression that dominates American society and culture. In an oblique response to Mannix's comments earlier in the film, Warren understands the power whites have in this society and knows that removing some of that power provides him, as well as other African-Americans, an illusion of safety.

Tarantino's dialogue has always been an indication of his auteurism, and he uses this in *The Hateful Eight* to destabilize expectations and make mainstream white Americans consider the social and cultural impacts of racialized discourses. Hutcheon indicates that parody utilizes language as a "social contract," and that this contract "is already loaded with meaning inherent in the conceptual patterns of the speaker's culture" (183). In a similar fashion, Foucault contends the author function, which I understand Tarantino as representing, can illuminate how discourses spread within societies and cultures (117). These monologues by Mannix and Warren show how racial discourse is entwined with violence, and it is the threat or promise of violence that forces people adhering to these ideologies to act upon and to disseminate their views to segregate society.

The end of the film overturns the separation of black and white through racial discourse. As mentioned above, Tarantino has Mannix and Warren unite to punish Daisy for her crimes. Their unification against Daisy's immorality establishes both men as sovereign, but this unification warps the boundaries between race, violence, and history. Agamben asserts, "Sovereign violence opens a zone of indistinction between law and nature, outside and inside, violence and law" (41). The constant verbal battles these two men have during the film makes it hard to believe that they can easily put aside their ideological differences to punish Daisy. During the entire film, Warren is viewed as an Other, an outsider, a blithe on American society by the white characters. Warren and Mannix's reconciliation in the threat of death stems from Tarantino's parodying of his own work and the discourses that dominate most of his films.

Just like in *Pulp Fiction* when Butch (Bruce Willis) returns to rescue Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames) from Zed (Peter Greene), Tarantino builds a sense of racial unity in the face of violence or immoral behavior. This unification is driven home in *The Hateful Eight* when Mannix reads the fake Lincoln letter Warren carries with him. The tone of the letter parodies Lincoln's conversational style of writing, yet it features the same eloquence and deft use of language. For me, the main function of the letter is to provide meta-commentary on Tarantino's auteurism and the contemporary socio-cultural discourse around racial violence. Several lines stick out in the letter, highlighting its meta-commentary: "Times are changing, slowly but surely. And it's men like you that will make the difference. Your military success is a credit not only to you but your race as well. ... We still have a long way to go, but hand-in-hand I know we'll get there." According to Hutcheon, "parody marks both continuity and change, both authority and transgression" (204). By carrying the letter and presenting it as a historical artifact, Warren becomes a member of American society, and he is accepted as part of the collective body politic. This is another feature of Bakhtin's carnivalesque: "The individual feels that he is an

indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself" (255). For Warren, the letter "gets [him] on that stagecoach." This symbolizes a chance to become something in American culture, but the ironic aspect is that Warren's ability to move within this socio-cultural space is predicated on the sovereign power of a white man.

On the meta-level of the film and socio-cultural commentary, the letter provides Tarantino a chance to address white America directly and situate his function within the discourse of social change. While the letter references his own journey as a writer and filmmaker, it parodies the language used to promote racial harmony and compassion within contemporary America, and it is here that the unification of Warren and Mannix under similar ideologies seems to be justified, though it takes death to create understanding. It comments on the shifting perception of African Americans during that time period, but also comments on the power an individual can have in affecting change. Here the meta-commentary links with Tarantino's current public persona against police brutality and how he has used his art to provoke conversation around the socio-cultural discourses of race and violence.

Fin De Siècle. Not Quite

Even though it is not Tarantino's best film, *The Hateful Eight* offers some audiences visual pleasure and philosophical play. Russell argues, "Like most fictional films, Tarantino's at most raise philosophical questions and so can do a useful job, even if they do not provide support for any philosophical position" (12). Whereas his earlier films perhaps did not offer a firm position as Russell claims, I believe Tarantino's later films, especially *The Hateful Eight*, present audiences of all races and genders with an auteuristic commentary on his own oeuvre and the socio-cultural discourses dominating his films and contemporary America. Tarantino accomplishes these feats through self-parody, disrupting expectations and forcing mainstream white Americans to focus on the violence and racialized representations as a historical present.

Framing my analysis of the film, Hutcheon offers a view of parody that I believe illustrates the discourses affecting Tarantino and *The Hateful Eight*: "For both artists and their audiences, parody sets up a dialectical relation between identification and distance. . . . [P]arody works to distance and, at the same time, to involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity" (206). Through parodying his oeuvre and historical racialized violence, Tarantino and the film destabilize American historical knowledge. No longer can white America ignore the contemporary nature of racialized violence because through art the historical present is thrust into plain view. In a review of *The Hateful Eight* for NPR, Scott Tobias argues, "This is America as he [Tarantino] understands it," and that this film might possibly reveal to Americans "their own fractious nation." My interpretation of the film stems from the remnants of the past continuing in the present. It is this historical present that Tarantino brings to life and requires mainstream white America to acknowledge in *The Hateful Eight*. Tarantino's auteurism does not innovate in this particular film, but it does generate a new component for his discursive identity—that of an artist using art to criticize and illuminate America's continued denial of its history of racialized violence.

End Notes

1. Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, develops the concept of carnivalesque to refer to the polyphonic nature of carnival and similar gatherings and their ability to be sites of rupture to normal socio-cultural powers, especially those of the church and State. He traces the development of carnivalesque to the carnival and its “unification in a single concept...the development of life itself” (218). These forms of life are closely related to the people and folklore/folk-culture (274).
2. Only a few of the many characters in Tarantino’s films do not fall into the category of *homo sacer*. Jules in *Pulp Fiction*, Jackie Brown in *Jackie Brown*, Beatrix Kiddo in the *Kill Bill* volumes, and Django in *Django Unchained* are possibly the only characters that skirt the label of *homo sacer* in Tarantino’s oeuvre.
3. At the end of *Reservoir Dogs*, Mr. Pink escapes death, but it is unclear of his position after the events of the film. I assume, like many others, that he gets caught by the police or gets away. This is the most obvious divergence between the endings of the two films. However, Tim Roth functions intertextually. In both films, he is shot in a similar fashion in the stomach, and bleeds profusely before finally dying.
4. Warren’s profession as a bounty hunter complicates his ethical and social nature. He declares that killing men is better than keeping them alive because at least then he does not have to worry about being killed in return and that it makes his job easier when they are dead (Tarantino). Though the people he hunts are criminals, Warren’s character is problematic because he moves as an agent within a system of oppression that devalues his body. Being an African-American man in this society casts Warren as disposable. Yet, he is also given opportunities to “survive” in opposition to typical social morals. Though Warren and John Ruth are bounty hunters, Warren must be subservient to Ruth in social spaces, but Warren is also cast in a position of power. His role as enforcer of United States laws distances him from other people of color and his maleness casts him above Daisy. The dichotomy Tarantino establishes critiques contemporary United States race and gender relations and it puts Warren at the intersection of power and oppression.
5. Conley’s use of “Soulfulness” is highly problematic. Soulfulness is an essence and something that cannot be measured. Though many auteurs express extreme emotion and feeling about their art, Conley does not clarify how he interprets soulfulness in auteurs and their films. My intention for including Conley’s “three qualifications” is to show the diverse and sometimes puzzling analytical frames of auteur theory.
6. In the Ellis interview Tarantino remarks on the racial criticism he received after *Django Unchained*: “‘You wouldn’t think the color of a writer’s skin should have any effect on the words themselves. In a lot of the more ugly pieces my motives were really brought to bear in the most negative way. It’s like I’m some supervillain coming up with this stuff.’”
7. Jameson claims in “Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” that *pastiche* stems from “[t]he disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the

increasing unavailability of the personal *style*” (64, emphasis in original). He goes on to state that *pastiche* has no meaning and that it is a form of “reified media speech” (65).

8. The contemporary nature of American racial discourse affected the final version of the film. Collin describes how Tarantino altered Mannix’s monologue on white safety because of current events in American society: “Originally referencing his own killing of blacks during the Civil War, Goggins’s character [Chris Mannix] concluded: ‘You ask the white folks in South Carolina if they feel safe.’” Tarantino changed this line after the church shooting by a white supremacist in Charleston, South Carolina. It is this act of violent terrorism that makes its way into other places in the film in a masked fashion through the use of parody.

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