

Return to the Grindhouse: Tarantino and the modernization of 1970s Exploitation

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Abstract

Exploitation films from the 1970s and early 80s such as *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974) and *Switchblade Sisters* (Jack Hill, 1975) were the first films to allow women to actively control the narrative and course of events in a film. Men become secondary characters who had no or little control over the course of events in these films. Because the films were made during the rapidly changing social climate of the 1970s, the films also became a barometer in their treatment of female characters of social mores. Director Quentin Tarantino's films *Death Proof* (2007), *Kill Bill I and II* (2003 and 2004), *Jackie Brown* (1997), and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) attempt to modernize the active women from exploitation films of the 1970s, reworking the female characters' mobilization against typical gender roles, and attributing her with the abilities to compete, and even challenge men in a patriarchic society.

However, Tarantino's films mostly fail to progress beyond the trappings of the classic exploitation films of the 1970s, still relying heavily on the excessive display of female bodies, and subjugating women to the male camera and spectator gaze. In Tarantino's attempt to remove female characters from the gender restraints of most Hollywood films, he creates the female action star, and inadvertently reverses the work of classic exploitation films by limiting the traits strong women are able to possess. By contrast, the female leads of 1970s exploitation films, although still heavily sexualized, are able to be physically powerful while retaining their feminine identifications as a wives, mothers, lovers, and beauty queens. Tarantino's portrayal of strong women is more limited, however when strong sexuality and typical feminine traits are not connected to the powerful female characters. Instead female sexuality and feminine appearances are shown as weaknesses that contribute to the female characters' deaths or lack of individuality. Tarantino allows one other female character, a strong warrior who takes on an action star role and becomes powerful through her rejection of feminine traits.

Key words

Exploitation films, blaxploitation, Tarantino, sexualization, Pam Grier, female warriors, fetishism, the gaze

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Exploitation films from the 1970s and early 80s such as *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974) and *Switchblade Sisters* (Jack Hill, 1975) were the first films to allow women to actively control the narrative and course of events in a film. Unlike previous films, where women were given agency only when it had to do with gaining a husband or maternal powers, in the exploitation films women took on "masculine" qualities of being physically strong and able to outsmart the male characters. Men become secondary characters who had no or little control over the course of events in these films. Because the films were made during the rapidly changing social climate of the 1970s, the films also became a barometer in their treatment of female characters of social mores. Director Quentin Tarantino's films *Death Proof* (2007), *Kill Bill I and II* (2003 and 2004), *Jackie Brown* (1997),

and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) attempt to modernize the active women from exploitation films of the 1970s, reworking the female characters' mobilization against typical gender roles, and attributing her with the abilities to compete, and even challenge men in a patriarchic society. However, Tarantino's films mostly fail to progress beyond the trappings of the classic exploitation films of the 1970s, still relying heavily on the excessive display of female bodies, and subjugating women to the male camera and spectator gaze. In Tarantino's attempt to remove female characters from the gender restraints of most Hollywood films, he creates the female action star, and inadvertently reverses the work of classic exploitation films by limiting the traits strong women are able to possess. By contrast, the female leads of 1970s exploitation films, although still heavily sexualized, are able to be physically powerful while retaining their feminine identifications as a wives, mothers, lovers, and beauty queens. Tarantino's portrayal of strong women is more limited however, and confident sexuality and typical feminine traits are not connected to the powerful female characters. Instead female sexuality and feminine appearances are shown as weaknesses that contribute to the female characters' deaths or lack of individuality. Tarantino's films depict one other female character, the character of a strong warrior who takes on an action star role and becomes powerful through her rejection of feminine traits.

In the beginning there was exploitation...

Much of the problematic representations of women in exploitation films can be traced back to the media's representation of second-wave feminism. Second-wave feminism arose during the 1960s, and continued into the 70s and 80s. During this movement feminists achieved multiple victories regarding discrimination against women in the workplace, laws involving punishing rape, the emergence of Women Studies programs, and female health and reproduction laws. At the same time however, the media went into a frenzy over the emergence of female empowerment. The media achieved this through portraying the women as hysteric creatures who were a threat to marriage and family (Douglas 166). The fear also translated into men's fear of women taking power from them in the workplace and homes, changing the established patriarchy where women were placed beneath men. Author Andi Zeisler discusses the fear that emerged because of the movement in her book *Feminism and Pop Culture*. «Liberated women, newsmakers worried, would abandon their children and refuse to cook or do laundry for their families, short-circuiting the accepted domestic machinery. They'd make a mockery of the armed forces and of traditionally male workplaces by displacing men who'd earned the right to be there» (Zeisler 63). Not only were the new liberated women endangering family life, but they were also invading male spaces and forcing men to the sidelines.

The less dangerous feminists inspired characters that were highly sexualized and often highly feminized in film and television. Although these women were usually stronger and more intelligent than men, much of their power is due to their extreme sexuality. In the book *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, Sherric A. Innes discusses the new television phenomenon of powerful women that emerged during second-wave feminism:

The representation of feminine toughness was in part a response to very real feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s and women's demands for personal and political power. During this time of profound social upheaval, television shows such as *The Avengers*, *The*

Bionic Woman, and *Charlie's Angels* present women as far more tough than did shows of the past. Yet, these new programs also emphasized the importance of femininity and sex appeal for women, thus diffusing the threat posed by second-wave feminism. (Inness 32)

Although strong women were represented in television shows of the time, they still had to be very feminine and sexualized in order to not challenge the male patriarchy. Strong women were still unthreatening to men because they were still portrayed as sex objects (69). Author Randal Clark describes the power of the women in the genre as a «compromise of excessive sex with power» (Clark 89). Although the women were allowed to be powerful, because of the largely male audience of exploitation films, excessive nudity was a prerequisite to achieve female agency. Further, the excessive nudity and femininity were also prerequisites to the genre to allow powerful women to appear less harmful to the male patriarchies.

This is also especially true the rape revenge sub genre of exploitation films such as Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1981) and Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). In these films women are initially gruesomely violated but empowered through their taking on of aggressive male behaviors (Read 52), while still remaining beautiful and feminine. Unfortunately the women only become powerful through their victimization, a narrative device that propels the women to agency. In these films women are again allowed to be powerful, but their onscreen sexual victimization initially allows for the sadistic pleasure of male spectators who fear the rise of strong second-wave feminists. The male fears are later lessened once more by the second half of the films, where although the women seek and justly have revenge against their male rapists, they are extremely sexualized and glamorized, again fitting the women into the visual ideal of what a woman should be. Because the films prove the women's violations are unacceptable, the earlier male sadistic pleasure must be replaced by a masochistic desire to witness the women's highly sexualized revenge acts. This is again achieved through the glamorous and alluring transformation of the women during the second half of the films. Furthermore, the avenging women are even less threatening to male patriarchies because they are only attacking the perverse. The rapists are presented as inadequate and often initially impotent men. These men are not part of the ideal patriarchy, so their disposal from the system by women is acceptable. The women's revenge only becomes unacceptable when they begin to target innocent men.

The rise of the strong female character can also be traced to blaxploitation films, where the stars Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson helped create the future female action star (Sims 8). Novonty Lawrence describes blaxploitation films as movies that originally exploited black film audiences in order to make money (Lawrence 18). *Cotton Goes to Harlem* (Ossie Davis, 1970) and *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971) are the first blaxploitation films, establishing the conventions of the genre. The films contained blaxploitation traits such as soundtracks from contemporary rhythm and blues musicians, urban settings, excessive sex and violence, and plots that addressed the experience of African Americans (18-20).

The films *Coffy* (Jack Hill 1973) and *Cleopatra Jones* (Jack Starrett, 1973) starring Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson, were the first blaxploitation films to feature female leads who were as tough as the male co-stars (81). These films were essential in creating the female action star, because they marked the first time women could control the course of the film and possess traits of power typically associated with men. These «male powers» can be seen multiple times in *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones* where Grier and Dobson engage in winning fist fights against men and are faster on the draw during gun fights. Yvonne

Sims comments on Grier's and Dobson's transformation of typical gender norms, and states that the women «brought a new character to the screen that was instrumental in reshaping gender roles, particularly those involving action-centered storylines, which have lasted for well over 30 years» (Sims 8). Grier's and Dobson's characters not only functioned as forms of entertainment, but broke new ground for female action stars, specifically African American female action stars, by breaking women into the male space of action star. After the success of Grier's and Dobson's films, many sequels and imitation films were made, until eventually the strong female character emerged in all forms of exploitation films, where all women, regardless of their race, had the potential to be an action star (*BaadAsssss Cinema*).

The Metatextual Films of Tarantino

Through Tarantino's metatextual films the director pays homage to these classic exploitation films, and satirizes the sexploitation and agency of women in the films. In the *Kill Bill* films alone, Tarantino makes references to at least 80 horror and exploitation films. The *Kill Bill* films even closely follows the basic plot of the 1973 Japanese film *Lady Snowblood*, where a female samurai takes revenge against a group of people who killed her mother and father while she was a child. Besides the almost identical plot, Tarantino further references this film through word-for-word chapter titles, freeze frames, score, and cinematography. Mise-en-scène and dialogue also act as advertising devices for Tarantino's favorite exploitation films, seen through characters' debates over what the best car chase films are, T-shirts that reference classic films, and posters of exploitation films in characters' apartments. Through the recycled and referenced plots to these exploitation films, Tarantino attempts to appropriate the authentic markers of the exploitation films of the 1970s, even going as far in his film *Death Proof*, to make the film physically resemble the vintage films by adding film scratches, un-synched sound, and missing reels to the finished product.

Tarantino further alludes to classic exploitation films of the 1970s and early 80s through his female protagonists. Just as in the original films, in Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*, *Death Proof*, the *Kill Bill* films, and *Inglourious Basterds*, the women either play the main character, or central roles in an ensemble piece. Again, the women are also extremely strong and cunning. The Bride in the *Kill Bill* films is able to kill almost 100 people in order to seek her revenge, whereas the final girls in *Death Proof* are able to easily kill serial killer Stunt Man Mike. The women further possess great intelligence where Jackie Brown outsmarts both the police as well as drug dealers, and Shosanna in *Inglourious Basterds* is able to destroy the entire Third Reich, when the hyper masculine Basterds mostly fail.

Although Tarantino is able to create strong women identical to the female warriors of classic exploitation films, he fails in totally removing the women from the degrading elements of those films. In interviews regarding the negative feminist reaction to *Death Proof* Tarantino remarked, «the protests blew my mind, because everywhere else on planet Earth people have been talking about how I made a movie that empowered women» (Wood). According to him, the director strived while making his film *Death Proof* to successfully depict empowered women. Tarantino's goal of female empowerment also connects to the *Kill Bill* films, where in interviews the director discusses his desire for young girls to look up to the Bride and O'Ren as role models (Tarantino 167). Although many of the problems associated with the exploitation films of director Tarantino can be attributable to his both paying homage and satirizing the exploitation films he is referencing (as with the excessive display of the female body and

victimization of women through plots), most of the female characters in his films, especially *Death Proof*, are far from empowering. Instead, Tarantino mostly allows his strong women to exist in two categories: as a strong hyper-masculine female warrior, and as a hypersexualized female whose sexuality is her only source of power.

Fetishism and the Hyper-Sexualized Female Body

The weaker portrayal of the hyper-sexualized and feminine women exists in Tarantino's characters Vernita Green from *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, the Bride during specific stages in *Kill Bill Vol. I and II*, Melanie from *Jackie Brown*, and the first group of girls in *Death Proof*. In the first *Kill Bill*, the character Vernita Green, played by Vivica A. Fox, is weakened due to her feminine role as a mother. In the film Vernita is a former member of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad led by Bill, who was present during the attack on the Bride. When the Bride arrives at Vernita's house looking for revenge, the two engage in a brutal fight, and are only interrupted when Vernita's young daughter Nikki arrives home. When the daughter is walking towards the front door of the house, Vernita's weakness is made clear when she pleads with her eyes to stop the fight. The plea is Vernita's first sign of maternal weakness, in that the two former assassins are equally matched, and by preventing the attack from escalating further, Vernita gives power to the Bride. Later in the scene after Vernita begs for her life due to the presence of her daughter, she reaches for a box of cereal and pulls out a gun to shoot the Bride. Vernita misses however, and the Bride kills her with a dagger. Vernita's choice of weapon is tied with her role as a mother by being placed within a box of cereal that is for her child, and in her death she remains linked to her motherly role by still having her hand inside the cereal box. Vernita also suffers from being domesticated. She is no longer a ruthless assassin, but now is a housewife who has clearly lost her edge. The same maternal and feminine weakness is sometimes associated with the Bride, such as the sequence where she temporally refrains from killing Bill after seeing her daughter, and whenever a man momentarily defeats her. This happens when Buck rapes her, when Bill shoots her in the church, and when Budd has her tied up. Interestingly, whenever the Bride is weakened, the men reference her femininity and call her a cute little blonde (Coulthard 160).

The feminine and sexualized women in Tarantino's films are also killed or reduced to meaningless roles. In *Death Proof*, the women Butterfly (Vanessa Ferlito), Jungle Julie (Sydney Tamiia Poitier), Shanna (Jordan Ladd), Abernathy (Rosario Dawson), and Lee (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) are highly feminized and sexualized. Many of the women are feminized through their professions. Lee is an actress and model, Abernathy is a cosmetic artist, and although Jungle Julie is a radio DJ, her job requires her to be displayed on ubiquitous billboards, where her face and legs are highlighted. The girls are also constantly associated with typical feminine tastes and conversations. The girls often discuss relationship problems, worry about their hair, and Abernathy and Lee become enthralled when they come across a copy of *Italian Vogue*. Besides Abernathy, who is able to survive due to her taking on of masculine traits near the end of the film, and Lee who is reduced to an absent background character, the women who exhibit conventional feminine traits die. The women are weak because they possess feminine traits of materialism and appearance, so therefore they cannot survive in a man's world.

Melanie, played by Bridget Fonda in *Jackie Brown*, is also a representation of the typical woman in an exploitation film. Her body is constantly on display through her wardrobe of tiny shorts, bikini tops, and bare feet. Her body is even her profession or source of livelihood in the film, in that she is Ordell's mistress and lives in the apartment

he provides for her. Of course her sexuality is what leads to her life with Ordell, and it is also what complicates her relationship with Louis, Ordell's friend and collaborator in the smuggling operation. Melanie also uses her body to manipulate Louis and work her way into Ordell's business. Melanie is the one who initiates the sexual relationship between herself and Louis, constantly trying to seduce him through the display of her body, touching him and his drinks, showing pictures of herself, and eventually just asking if he «wants to fuck» (*Jackie Brown*)?

The active pursuit and use of sex as a source of manipulation is apparent in many exploitation films. Unlike the classic exploitation films however, where hyper sexuality is only punished if it is used to betray a fellow female, Melanie is punished for her sexuality. In the film Louis kills Melanie during the money exchange in the mall. Her death is off-screen, illustrating the film's lack of respect for her, and her lack of agency. During the scene Louis shoots Melanie, causing her to fall out frame. Once out of frame Louis shoots her again and then walks away. Melanie's body is never seen or acknowledged; her death is meaningless. The senseless and unseen death of Melanie is contrasted by the violent on screen deaths of other main characters such as Louis and Ordell. Beaumont, a minor character, is the only other person killed off screen. Melanie has to be destroyed in the film because she is weak and does not possess male traits to make her successful, but also because her sexuality is threatening. Her sexuality is dangerous because it leads to Louis' death, where after she seduces him, he continues to fail, both through his public killing of her, as well as his mistake during the money exchange. His frustration over Melanie is what causes him to fail, which causes Ordell to kill him.

Melanie's body (specifically her feet) are also a heavily sexualized and fetishized object for Louis in *Jackie Brown*. In Melanie's first appearance in the film, her face is not in frame – only her stretched out legs, feet, and arms. When Melanie gets up, her face again remains out of frame as the camera remains on her legs, and then her back when she returns to her seat. Later in the sequence, Melanie's feet and mouth become Louis' fetish, as they are shown through a series of close ups from his point of view. Melanie becomes repeatedly broken into body parts through a series of close-ups on her feet and legs. Louis' fetish continues after he knowingly takes a drink from his glass after Melanie's feet touch the rim. During the sequence Melanie is reduced to two forms of a fetish, her feet, and the glass that she touches with her feet. Fetishism is also associated with the act of looking and watching. Looking at a sexual object can become a fetish for people when again it replaces the sexual goal of genitals, and serves in itself as a sexual goal (Freud 133). The pleasure and fetish of looking is apparent through Louis as he stares at Melanie's legs, feet, and mouth. In the sequence Tarantino frames Melanie so her legs or feet are always distorted into a larger image on the right side of the frame, or at the center of the frame, the center of Louis' attention.

The first group of girls in *Death Proof* also represent threatening and grotesque fetishized versions of hyper-sexuality. In the first half of the film devices such as editing, clothes, plot, and framing allow the women to become mere body parts. The opening image is a fragmented image of a woman's body part, her feet. The character Butterfly has feet on the dashboard, with only her ankles and feet in frame. In the next scene the fetish of feet continues with Jungle Julia, where the camera begins on her feet, and then tilts up her near naked body as she puts a shirt on. Jungle Julia then continues to walk to the couch, lying down with her legs stretched out, filling the screen with her own legs, along with the identical positioning of Brigitte Bardot's legs in an oversized poster above her head. The next series of shots isolates Jungle Julia into an image of feet, and then

images of legs, and then her backside when she leans out the window and the camera follows behind her. The sequence finally ends with a close-up of Butterfly's crotch. Notably, during the sequence the women's faces are not seen until almost three minutes into the film. Therefore, the women's identities are linked to their sexuality, and they do not exist outside of this realm.

The fragmentation that occurs to the women's bodies, allows them to become fetishes to Stunt Man Mike through the use of POV shots and editing. In Sigmund Freud's essays on fetishism and sexuality, he describes the process of over-valuation of the body, where body parts become the sexual goal when they take on excessive desires (129). Freud further explains what the fetishized object is, and states «the substitute for the sexual object is a body part (foot, hair) which is generally unsuited to sexual purposes, or an inanimate object demonstrably connected to the sexual person, or best of all with that person's sexuality» (131). Objects or body parts such as feet, legs, and clothes often become fetishized objects because they are the final stop before reaching the female genitals. Further, fetishism also occurs as an aversion to female genitals and the threat of castration. A fetish is created to distance the male from the female genitals and fear of castration (200-201).

The scopophilia, or pleasure of looking also occurs for Stunt Man Mike. Stunt Man Mike's pleasure of looking becomes apparent during the climax of the first half of *Death Proof*, where the audience learns that Stunt Man Mike stalks his female victims and takes photographs of them. During the second half of *Death Proof*, the spectators witness Stunt Man Mike photographing the women, where we see through his eyes and witness the women's fragmentation. While taking photos of the women, the camera pauses on each image, creating an isolated image, trapping the women's bodies within the camera's frame. By taking photographs of the girls, he possesses and controls them. Jeremi Szaniawski discusses this in "Laisse Tomber Les Filles: (Post) Feminism in Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof*", «He is the active bearer of the male gaze as he objectifies and photographs the women he will eventually kill. These women are not only passive objects of his gaze, but soon also will become his passive victims, since they have no chance to defend themselves when he crushes their car and butchers them» (Szaniawski 174). Through Stunt Man Mike's photographing the women, he transforms them into passive objects at his disposal.

Stunt Man Mike is even introduced in the film through a series of gazes. Before Stunt Man Mike is visually introduced, the spectators see through his perspective as he is driving his car during the opening credits of the film. Later the film associates the unseen Stunt Man Mike and his car with voyeurism, after Butterfly repeatedly witnesses him watching and following her. Once Stunt Man Mike is physically displayed on the screen, the spectators see him through a mirror, where his reflection comes from his car's side view mirror. Stunt Man Mike also uses multiple mirrors to spy on the women later in the film. The inversion of gazes achieved by the mirrors, and even the other reflections in the film such as Stunt Man Mike's sunglasses and binoculars, connect to his visual perversion of photographing. The images captured in photographs are also inversions of the genuine image of the women, just like the mirror, illustrating that Stunt Man Mike's voyeurism is beyond a simple pleasure of looking, but is twisted and deviates from what is normal. Stunt Man Mike's scopophilia and photographing is his initial sexual pleasure, before he reaches his sexual goal of murdering the women with his car.

The fetishized women in *Death Proof* are not only connected to the sexual pleasure of fetishism, but are also presented as disgusting. This is graphically seen during the climax

of the first half of the film. During Butterfly's, Shanna's, Jungle Julie's, and Lanna's death sequence, the girls' murders parallel the opening sequence. In the sequence, again the women are broken up into body parts through fragmentation, where Jungle Julie's famous legs are ripped from her body, Butterfly's face is wiped away by the wheels of the car, and Shanna's and Lanna's bodies are completely destroyed. The women's body parts thus transform into representations of death, rather than alluring sexualities. They also become disgusting. Jungle Julie's leg is severed and Butterfly loses her face. Although they were earlier symbols of the women's beauty and sexuality, after the car crash they become symbols of death and disgusting mutilations of the female body.

Besides the problem of fetishism, the fragmentation and destruction of the female bodies is problematic because the women are unable to escape from their bodies, and are only identified through their sexuality. Much like Melanie whose presence and identity is only linked to her sexuality, the first group of girls are murdered because the women possess none of the masculine traits required to defeat men. The women are sexually dangerous and weak, and therefore must be destroyed.

The Female Action Hero

The other group Tarantino allows women to fit into, is the role of the masculine warrior, as seen through the Bride in the *Kill Bill* films and the final girls in *Death Proof*. The women are only able to overpower the male characters through their possession of traits normally associated with men, as well as their rejection of weak feminine traits. During the second half of *Death Proof*, the women who are able to defeat serial killer Stunt Man Mike take on masculine roles in order to survive. The leading women in the second half of the film sharply contrast the women in the first half of the film. The strongest characters in the film, Kim (Tracie Thoms) and Zoë (Zoë Bell), are heavily masculinized through their dialogue, clothes, and comparison to the other female characters. In the film the characters Kim and Zoë wear long jean pants and t-shirts, clothes that are considerably less revealing than other female characters that wear cheerleading costumes and short skirts. The two women are also masculinized through their professions as stuntwomen. Again, the professions are in antithesis of the other more feminized professions of the other characters, actress and cosmetic artist.

The possession of feminine traits as weaknesses are not a factor in the original exploitation films of the 1970s. Instead the women, again although heavily sexualized, were able to retain their femininity while possessing male traits of power. Sims discusses this aspect when she compares the posters for *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. «On posters, Coffy was presented as a muscular, curvaceous woman highly adept at handling a gun. The posters for the movie show Grier as a bell-bottom-wearing, belly-displaying woman who appeared secure in her femininity while using weapons traditionally associated with masculinity. In contrast, Foxy Brown wore evening gowns, and the movie posters showed her with a gun, long flowing hair and in evening attire, which suggested she felt comfortable both wearing formal frocks and carrying a gun» (Sims 84). In both *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*, although Grier's character in *Coffy* is less glamorized, Grier's characters were able to appear highly feminized through the use of evening gowns and belly shirts, but were also able to be depicted as strong action stars on equal ground with men. Grier's characters did not have to lose their femininity in order to gain power like the women in Tarantino's films.

When Zoë and Kim become aggressive towards Stunt Man Mike, again the women take on male roles. In Lorraine Gamman's article, "Watching the Detectives: Enigma of

Female Gaze”, she comments on women becoming masculinized through their possession of male traits such as revenge (Gamman 41). The revenge story is typically associated with men, and therefore viewed as a male trait and desire. After Stunt Man Mike attacks Zoë, Kim, and Abernathy, Kim takes on both the male role of revenge seeker, as well as the male role of a rapist. Stunt Man Mike initially attacks the three girls while playing the game Ship’s Mast, while Zoë is riding on the hood of the car. After the first car chase sequence ends, Kim shoots Stunt Man Mike, and the women then begin a car chase with reverse positions. In one scene, Kim gets directly behind Stunt Man Mike’s car and repeatedly rams into him, while saying «oh, you know I can't let you go without tapping that ass... one... more... time» (*Death Proof*). In the scene through Kim’s dialogue and actions, she becomes the male sexual aggressor, a rapist. Once, Kim and the other girls destroy his car, their overt aggression continues as they savagely beat the man to death. The castration and demasculinization of Stunt Man Mike continues when Kim shoots him. In the scene directly after Stunt Man Mike is shot he breaks down into tears, whining like a baby over the gunshot wound (Szaniawski 178). Stunt Man Mike’s whining continues during the film’s finale when he begs for mercy as the girls pull him out of his car. The feminization of Stunt Man Mike during the end of the film counters the overly masculine traits he possesses during the first half of the film. Earlier in the film Stunt Man Mike is able to easily and affectively handle his car, he reveals his former trade of being a stunt driver, and he shows off the huge scar on his face, a typical symbol of manhood.

Similar to the revenge Zoë, Kim, and Abernathy seek, the Bride also seeks revenge for the destruction of her future family. Again, the plot of revenge is a story often associated with male characters. The Bride further becomes masculinized through the constant references to male figures from classic westerns and exploitation films. Through these references the Bride is mostly linked to male characters. This is shown through her linkage to Blondie from *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966), the title male character in *Navajo Joe* (Sergio Corbucci, 1966), Bill from *Death Rides a Horse* (Giulio Petroni, 1967), and Bruce Lee’s character Billy Lo in *Game of Death* (Robert Clouse, 1978). Tarantino comments on the Bride’s connection to classic male figures in the film, as well as the use of the revenge genre. «It is coming from in its basic form all these different revenge genre movies that I was jumping off from. The Bride could easily be this cowboy character from this spaghetti western» (Topel 182). Through his writing, Tarantino created the Bride as an almost identical figure to a cowboy and male avenger.

The Bride, Kim, Zoë, and Abernathy suffer consequences due to their masculinities however. In *Death Proof* the final girls become monsters, and in the *Kill Bill* films the Bride’s role as a warrior is at the price of her role as a mother. In order for the Bride to have a relationship with her daughter, she has to reject her warrior masculine side, and become feminine and weak again. She no longer has multiple identities of warrior, samurai, vigilante, but only has one role, Mommy. Author Leon Hunt discusses Hollywood’s handling of violent women in his article “Asiaphilia, Asianisation and the Gatekeeper Auteur: Quentin Tarantino and Luc Besson”, where he states the Bride, «may cast her woman-hood aside... slaughtering Vernita Green in front of her daughter, but she ultimately reclaims it via Hollywood’s favorite troupe for recuperating violent women – motherhood» (Hunt 225). Like other violent women in Hollywood films, the Bride must be redeemed for her violent behavior, and the best way to do that is have her become a mother, rejecting her previous life of violence.

Turning Over a New Leaf: Shosanna and Jackie

Although Tarantino has multiple problems through his treatment of women in his films, through the characters Jackie Brown and Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) in *Inglourious Basterds*, the director allows the women to become empowered without being sexualized or masculine gendered, and the women are able to retain both their femininity and patriarchy power without becoming monsters. In *Jackie Brown*, Pam Grier plays the title character, and through her presence, Tarantino treats the character with respect, respecting both the actress as well as the genre. By casting Grier, Tarantino immediately links his film to the genuine blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Right away Grier's presence is made apparent, when during the opening sequence Grier's name appears across the screen, and the actress instantly rolls into frame in sync with her credit. Grier is not just playing a character in the film, but is also playing on her persona and status as exploitation queen.

Grier's body is also never on display, and she is always very covered and respectfully dressed. In Isaac Julien's documentary on blaxploitation films, *BaadAsssss Cinema*, the director interviews author bell hooks, who comments on Jackie Brown's relation to the earlier films of 1970s blaxploitation films. «I think that it is one of the more meaningful images, resisting images of a black female... and it is important that, that resisting image beings with *Coffy*, it doesn't begin in the Quentin Tarantino imagination. He has the capacity and ability, through love I think, through love of the image itself, through love of the character, to take that image of the strong and powerful woman, and bring it into a new generation. In sense, he erases the earlier pornography of *Coffy*» (*BaadAsssss Cinema*). Through Tarantino's reimagining of Grier's earlier character of Coffy in his character of Jackie, the director is able to extract the original power that Coffy possessed and remove it from the exploits of the original film.

Grier's character Jackie is further treated with respect through her ability to compete, and then outsmart all the male characters, while retaining her female identity. Unlike the victorious women of *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof*, Jackie does not have to reject her feminine traits in order to be successful. Jackie instead remains feminine as she physically challenges and overpowers the male characters. Further, whereas the successful women in his other films rely almost solely on physical strengths to succeed, Jackie is almost able to survive solely based on her intelligence, not her body. Through her intelligence Jackie is able to outsmart both Ordell, as well as the police force. The men in the film are unable to compete with her intelligence. In *BaadAsssss Cinema*, African American political activist and businesswoman Afeni Shakur comments on Grier's role as Jackie, and states «she was brilliant you know, she was gutsy, and she was gorgeous you know, but... she didn't think the most important thing in her life was her looks» (*BaadAsssss Cinema*). Instead of only having power associated with her sexuality, Jackie has intellectual powers, and never exploits her body. Jackie's identity is not linked to her body, and her body and persona do not become monsters when she challenges the patriarchy and typical narratives of cinema.

The ability to be a strong woman without being sexualized or turning into a monster is also apparent through the character of Shosanna from *Inglourious Basterds*. In the film Shosanna is also treated with respect by the camera. She is never overtly sexualized the way Melanie or Butterfly are, and like Jackie always dresses respectfully and covered up. Also similar to Jackie, Shosanna is able to retain her femininity while being powerful. Shosanna is able to dress very feminine in a red evening gown, but also is able to wear pants without becoming masculine or disgusting. She even uses her femininity as a

weapon as seen during the sequence where she is getting ready for the première of *Nations Pride*, putting on makeup like it is war paint. Although she is a strong, sexual woman, she never turns into a monster or reduced to a disgusting display of female sexuality.

What Shosanna does that Jackie is unable to do however, is manipulate the gaze of the camera, claiming it for herself, and turning the gaze onto the male characters in the film. *Inglourious Basterds* is a drastic revision of Enzo G. Castellari's 1978 Italian film *The Inglorious Bastards*, which centers around a group of renegade soldiers trapped in Nazi occupied Europe. In the film cinema is the key to all the characters' powers, both for the Allied and Axis forces. Cinema is at the center of the plot: it is where Operation Kino will take place to kill Hitler; it is Shosanna's livelihood and security; it provides the platform for the power of propaganda through the film *Nation's Pride*; allows Bridget Von Hammersmark to function as a double agent for the Allies; it is at the center of tension during the card game in the French bar, the material of film itself functions as an explosive device for Shosanna; and finally, it serves as a pre-Third Reich history of German cinema that Goebbels recognizes as a potentially dangerous force.

Shosanna is the source of almost all the power of cinema in the film through her possession of the theater where the premiere for *Nation's Pride* will take place. Shosanna's power of cinema is more than just her livelihood and hobby, but also allows her to control the narrative of the film, and eventually physically take control of the camera's gaze. Although the film does have narrative strings associated with the male Basterds, the film revolves around Shosanna. This is a contrast to films such as *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof*, while although women are the main characters, all their goals and the narratives are focused on a man.

Shosanna's control of film is more apparent during the end of the film, where she is able to possess the gaze of the film, both by controlling the projector of her theater, as well as starring in her own film, which notably is cut into *Nation's Pride*. By controlling the projector, and editing Goebbels's *Nation's Pride*, she is able to manipulate and control Third Reich Cinema by physically alternating it and aiding in the killing of Goebbels, the center of Third Reich Cinema. Through her power, *Nation's Pride* becomes her own film, a film that is linked to her identity when her projected image yells, «my name is Shosanna Dreyfus and THIS is the face... of Jewish vengeance» (*Inglourious Basterds*)! *Nation's Pride* is no longer a Nazi propaganda film, but is a film of Jewish revenge. The cinema is her source of identity both through her ownership of the theater, as well its ability to carry out Jewish revenge.

Further, in her homemade film Shosanna flips the gaze of the camera onto the fictional spectators. Shosanna achieves this through addressing and facing the camera in her own film. She is no longer being watched and hunted as earlier in the film, but instead towers over the spectators in a ghostly God-like presence. Her cinematic control of the gaze is what then leads to the fictional audience's deaths, when her partner sets fire to the 300 prints of nitrate film. Although the real Shosanna is killed shortly before her film begins, the cinematic Shosanna is undefeatable, where her image still remains clear, even after the screen burns down and the explosions begin. The control of cinema Shosanna experiences in *Inglourious Basterds*, lifts her above the women from other Tarantino films, in that she is able to remove herself from the exploitation of the camera's gaze, and turn it onto a mostly male audience, using it as a weapon to change cinema history.

Conclusion

Through Tarantino's revisiting of conventions and themes from classic exploitation films of the 1970s, he attempts to propel the treatment of women forward and allow his female stars to defy conventions of gender, and become empowered representations of women. However, he typically fails, and his treatment of women becomes just as degrading as the original exploitive films. He succeeds in his treatments of Jackie and Shosanna, however, by preventing the camera from sexualizing the women, and allowing the characters to possess powers outside of their sexuality and bodies. They are not just fragmented fetish objects of a male fantasy, but more nuanced portraits of women with exceptional powers. If Tarantino continues to mature through his treatment of women, and allow the female characters to shape the gaze of cinema, he will progress and lift his work above the degradation of exploitation cinema, while still incorporating all the fun of the genre.

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