



EXPLOIT ME

Inglorious Basterds is the return of the always controversial director Quentin Tarantino. In the past his films have been equally embraced by his followers, as they have been panned by those who criticise his use of violence, sex and profanity. But Tarantino's style has been directly influenced by the Exploitation films he grew up watching. **Brogen Hayes** investigates these influences.

This summer sees the release of Quentin Tarantino's long awaited latest film, *Inglorious Basterds*. The film's title and partial premise are inspired by Enzo Castellari's 1978 movie *Inglorious Bastards*, but this is not a remake (notice Tarantino's spellcheck unfriendly title). Tarantino is noted for his revival of the exploitation style of filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s, and from first looks *Inglorious Basterds* contains some of these elements.

Inglorious Basterds is Quentin Tarantino's latest cinematic offering, due for release in Ireland on August 21st. The film centres on Lieutenant Aldo Raine, a fast-talking, thickly accented, Tennessee hillbilly bent on vengeance. Lt Raine puts together a team of eight Jewish American soldiers to take down as many Nazi soldiers as they can get, stating "Each and every man under my command owes me one hundred Nazi scalps... And I want my scalps". At the same time another story line follows a young Jewish woman who seeks to avenge the death of her family at the hands of an SS Colonel known as The Jew Hunter.

The trailer promises "You have not seen war until you have seen

it through the eyes of Quentin Tarantino". The film is being hailed as the most dialogue heavy of Tarantino's films to date. Dialogue, of course, being what Tarantino is famed for, apart from violence and his incredible use of music, of course.

The film has been highly anticipated, Tarantino has been working on *Inglorious Basterds* since before *Kill Bill*. The film has been given several release dates, all of which have passed by with no sign of the finished film. In September 2007 The Irish Times predicted the film would be released the following year, saying "*Inglorious Bastards* [sic], a war movie that may eventually resemble *The Dirty Dozen* merged with *Cross of Iron*, has been predicted more often than the second coming of the Lord".

Inglorious Basterds is shaping up to be one of the films to watch for 2009 with Brad Pitt's performance as Lt Aldo Raine is already being compared with Jules from *Pulp Fiction*. Tarantino himself says *Inglorious Basterds* is the closest thing to *Pulp Fiction* he's ever done. High praise, coming from the man who, in his own words became "too precious about the page" and held onto his Nazisploitation epic for almost ten

years.

There are certainly nods here to the nazisploitation genre. Sure, there are no werewolf women and no tortured lesbian prisoners of war. It's not quite *Death Proof*; Tarantino's most recent film and his most obvious acknowledgement of the exploitation films he absorbed in his youth.

The birth of cinema also saw the birth of genre films – westerns, romances and dramas were all born from the technology that allowed full length films with integrated sound and images to be shown on a big screen to a large audience. Along with the film genre came the exploitation film. While the earliest examples emerged in the 1920s, the 1960s and 1970s saw the height of their popularity. The name of the film making style comes from the fact that these films were seen to literally "exploit" their main star, or more commonly, sex, violence and special effects. All right, it can be argued that all films exploit something, but true examples of the genre relied heavily on sensationalist advertising which overstated the issues dealt with in order



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to draw in a bigger audience. Posters and advertisements for exploitation films have given us such unforgettable taglines as “Murder... At 120 miles per hour” for *Dragstrip Riot* (1958) “Never a dude like this one! He’s got a plan to stick it to The Man!” for *Super Fly* (1972).

Exploitation films transcend their genres. They aren’t defined by a collection of stock characters,

themes or situations such as Westerns, Rom-Coms or Horror films are. Instead, exploitation films ranged from being about childbirth and venereal disease in the 1930s to drug abuse, drag racing and crime sprees in the 1960s and 1970s. They were mostly made for a small budget and looked as such. In fact, many of the films that were made during the height of the exploitation

craze in Hollywood, would not be shown in cinemas today due to their low production values and focus on sex and violence for the sake of sex and violence. Morality was absent. The characters had no fear of the law, simply because most of the law enforcement officers in the films were as corrupt as the drug pushers, high speed racers or avenging angels. Nudity was frequent

and expected, violence was a given and sex was all part of the package. These films were not designed to show sophisticated film making at its best, the films were designed to shock, exploit their subject matter and audiences were simply expected to strap themselves in and go along for the ride.

Tarantino helped bring the exploitation film back to mainstream public consciousness with the 2007 double bill of *Planet Terror*, written and directed by Robert Rodriguez and Tarantino's own *Death Proof*, released in America under the collective title *Grindhouse*. The project came to being in 2003. The two directors were watching double bills in Tarantino's house when Rodriguez noticed that he owned the same double feature movie poster as his friend, of the 1957 films *Dragstrip Girl* and *Rock All Night*. From this, they decided to create a double feature together, in the style of exploitation films of the 1970s they loved so much.

The name *Grindhouse* is derived from now defunct burlesque theatres that were based on 42nd street in New York City. These theatres provided bump and grind shows as well as stripteases. The name was first used in the 1943 film *Lady of Burlesque*. In it, a character refers to a burlesque theatre as a grindhouse and the name stuck. The term then transferred to cinemas in the US that would play exploitation films, usually in double bills (as *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* were originally intended).

Grindhouses began to die out at the end of the 1970s. There were several different reasons for this. The cinemas that were built in the boom of the 1930s were generally single screens, which simply could not compete with the growth of television which allowed people, for the first time, to experience broadcast, moving image entertainment in their own homes. A US Supreme Court ruling in 1948 prevented the "Big Five" Hollywood film studios – Fox, Loew's Incorporated, Paramount, RKO and Warner Brothers from selling their films to cinemas in blocks. This, as well as the global economic crisis after World War II, led to a downturn in all cinema production, not just in exploitation films. Also, the United States was changing. People were moving out of the cities in favour of the suburbs, which meant that they had further to travel to go to the cinema. And why travel when you had a television at home showing classical films and original programming, which, at the time, was new and exciting?

By the 1980s, when home video threatened to render cinema obsolete, the grindhouse was the first to go. At the beginning of the 1990s, they had disappeared from Los Angeles's Broadway and Hollywood Boulevard, New York City's Times Square and San Francisco's Market Street. By the mid-1990s, the grindhouse had all but disappeared from the United States. However, exploitation films remained a part of the public consciousness. There have been

many references to them in recent years, especially Blaxploitation films which focus on African American culture and characters.

For instance in *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002) Beyoncé Knowles' character, Foxy Cleopatra is a combination of two famous blaxploitation film's title characters – *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973). Both of these characters were avenging angels within the blaxploitation era of film making and were noted for their feisty attitude. Foxy Brown seeks revenge for her boyfriend's death, and Cleopatra Jones is a US Secret Agent, much like Knowles' character in *Goldmember*. The name, and Foxy Cleopatra's famous afro and hooped earrings, are a nod to these films. Not inappropriate, seeing as all three of the Austin Powers films, at some point, are set in the 1970s – the height of blaxploitation film making.

Although the exploitation style of film making had died with the loss of the grindhouse cinema the films have remained a part of popular culture, and gained a cult following. Cult films spring up all the time, from exploitation films to the *Star Wars* franchise. A film's definition as "cult" depends on several elements, but the strongest element is arguably cultural status. In other words, the way in which a film fits a time or region and comments on its surroundings by exploiting, critiquing or offending. Exploitation films fit into this definition due to their frankness surrounding issues such

as sex and drug taking and their promises to reveal shocking truths about society. The films presented a heightened version of reality and transformed characters from true and accurate depictions of society to larger than life characters who dominated the screen and who, for the most part, sought out revenge and retribution without a second thought for the consequences of their actions.

Tarantino has a tendency to lean towards exploitation-esque themes in his films. He has been frequently criticised for the heightened, stylised use of graphic violence in his films. From the very beginning of Tarantino's directorial life – *Reservoir Dogs* – violence was lauded and often went above and beyond what the story called for. The now infamous ear slicing scene from *Reservoir Dogs* was given the soundtrack of Stealers Wheel Stuck in the Middle with You. The song, first released in 1973, fits the theme of the music in the film and accentuates Tarantino's pastiche of the exploitation style

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of film making. Mr Blonde slices off the ear of a police officer as revenge for a bank job that has gone wrong. Sound familiar?

Q T has attempted to delve further into the world of exploitation films with his 1997 film *Jackie Brown*. The screenplay is based on a novel by Elmore Leonard, although Tarantino made significant changes to the story. Pam Grier plays the title character, a middle-aged airline flight attendant who is pressured by ATF agent Ray Nicolette (Michael Keaton) to help bring down arms smuggler Ordell Robbie (Jackson) and his accomplices: ex-con bank robber Louis Gara (Robert De Niro), and unemployed good-time girl Melanie Ralston (Bridget Fonda). The film's poster a blatant pastiche of blaxploitation films, with the tagline “She's brown sugar and spice, but if you don't treat her nice she'll put you on ice” on a poster comprised of drawn images rather than photographs. As well as this, the casting of Pam Grier as Jackie Brown was a major indication of Tarantino's intentions with the film. Grier was a staple of the blaxploitation genre of films and played such notable avenging angels as Coffy and Foxy Brown. The film revived Grier's career and she earned a Golden Globe nomination for her portrayal of Jackie Brown. The film does not contain the high levels of violence as some of Tarantino's work, but the story arc – an African American woman working to

bring down a ring of drug dealers – could have been lifted from any blaxploitation film of the 1970s.

Tarantino returned to the exploitation school with the *Kill Bill* films, released in 2003 and 2004. The theme of the films is revenge. The Bride (Uma Thurman) seeks revenge on her former lover and employer, Bill, for his revenge attack on her for leaving his hit squad and, she believes, killing her unborn child. The franchise is a double bill of films released almost a year apart. The first film, Volume 1, is predominantly set in Asia. Tarantino has called this his “Eastern”. Volume 2 is set in the US; Tarantino has dubbed this his “Western”. During the course of the films, The Bride wakes up from a four year coma, teaches herself to walk again, then slices her way through what she has dubbed her “Death List Five” and their henchmen in search of Bill.

Kill Bill is filled with heightened violence for the sake of violence. There is really no need for The Bride to have to kill 88 henchmen in order to get to O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu), but she does with aplomb. The dialogue is suitably Tarantino-esque, with women calling each other mother fuckers at regular intervals and quoting popular culture as in jokes to one another. In jokes that the audience is in on.

Unlike conventional exploitation films, the posters for both *Kill Bill* films did not promise the violence that the films were filled with, but the image of The Bride holding a blood stained Hatturi Hanso

samurai sword with the words “Kill Bill” underneath were more than enough to invoke the image of a woman bent on revenge at any cost. Like exploitation films, however, there is no fear of consequences in the film. The Bride drives fast, flies with a samurai sword as hand luggage and kills anyone who threatens to stop her roaring rampage of revenge.

Thus far, Tarantino has covered revenge, violence and drugs. With splatter and slasher

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films being done by many directors, including Rob Zombie and Tobe Hooper, it seemed only logical that he turn toward the exploitation film staple – carsploitation. This genre’s focus on car racing and crashing with sports and muscle cars that were popular during the exploitation era. *Death Proof*, Tarantino’s half of the Grindhouse double bill, focuses on Stuntman Mike who drives a ‘death proof’ car with murderous intent. The film is typical Tarantino, dialogue heavy with violence for the sake of violence. It is never really fully revealed why Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell) decides to crash into cars full of girls with the intent of killing them, but it does not matter, the film is about the cars.

The second group of girls test drive a 1970 Dodge Challenger, and as a stuntwoman, Zoe (Zoe Bell) wants to do a ‘ships mast’ stunt, where she climbs out of the window of the car and lies on the bonnet as they drive along at breakneck speed. The 1970 Dodge Challenger is the focus of dialogue for several minutes as the girls decide whether or not to test drive it. Once Stuntman Mike turns up, the chase begins. Stuntman Mike killed the first group of girls in the film in a

spectacular head on collision, but he meets his match with this second group who take him on with a dramatic car chase between the white Dodge Challenger and Stuntman Mike’s black car, which has a skull and crossbones painted on the hood.

The chase lasts for the final half hour of the film and pastiches Ozploitation films. Ozploitation films originate from Australia and many of them focussed on car chases through the outback. These films did not have licence to film these chases, but they did them anyway. Tarantino leaves Zoe on the hood of the car for the majority of the chase, which culminates in the cars being smashed up girls catching Stuntman Mike and taking their revenge on him.

So what can be expected from Tarantino as he turns toward nazisploitation? From first looks and trailers, *Inglorious Basterds* is not going to be a nazisploitation in the true sense of the word. Nazisploitation is a subgenre of exploitation film which focuses on villainous Nazis committing criminal acts of a sexual nature as prison overseers in World War II settings. Most follow the standard women in prison formula, only relocated to a death camp or Nazi brothel, with an added emphasis on sadism, gore, and degradation. *Inglorious Basterds* doesn’t appear to follow this plot line, rather two story lines come together: One (based on a true story) follows a group

of Jewish-American soldiers whose mission is to take down a group of Nazis, and the other follows a young Jewish woman who seeks to avenge the death of her parents by this Nazi group. Nazisploitation seems to be out of the window and revenge movie back in.

Until *Inglorious Basterds* is released, we shall just have to speculate. The film has already been criticised for having too much dialogue and not enough action, but knowing Tarantino, and we do by this stage, the action will be violent and gory enough to keep us going throughout the film.

***Inglorious Basterds* is released on August 21st.**