

Trash Cinema and Oscar Gold: Quentin Tarantino, Intertextuality, and Industry Prestige

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Quentin Tarantino's multiple Oscar nominations and wins for *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (2012) raise questions about the place and status of intertextuality in Hollywood. By appropriating and adapting snippets of other films, by absorbing, cataloguing, and reflecting a broad range of cinematic history, Tarantino makes cinema itself the centre of attention. While his earlier films celebrate low-prestige genres – notably, kung fu films in the two-part *Kill Bill* (2003–04) and B-movie thrillers in *Death Proof* (2007) – *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained* interweave paracinematic material with the prestigious period film, taking on, respectively, World War II and slavery in the antebellum South. Both were nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars, and Tarantino was nominated for Best Director for *Basterds*, marking a sharp uptick in industry attention at this stage of his career.¹

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The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter AMPAS or the Academy) also nominated both films for Best Original Screenplay – which *Django Unchained* won – despite the fact that intertextual strategies ranging from the obliquely allusive to the overtly adaptive permeate both of these films and challenge their ostensible “originality.” Two tendencies in the film industry seem to have enabled this recognition for original screenwriting: the disavowal of the “adaptation” label in the case of multi-sourced, cinematic intertextuality; and the pre-emptive dismissal of certain categories of films as unworthy of prestige. Tarantino’s work draws precisely on these lacunae, a tactic that allows him to adapt “unworthy” and therefore largely invisible material into something “original” through, in the case of *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*, the conventionally prestigious framework of the historical film. Examining Tarantino’s Oscar nominations and wins for both films – and situating them particularly within the history of the AMPAS writing awards – reveals much about how contemporary awards culture defines “originality” and converts it into cinematic prestige.²

DEFINING ORIGINALITY AT THE ACADEMY

Although the popular imagination may view Tarantino primarily as a director, in terms of awards he is an even more successful screenwriter. While he has only directed his own screenplays (occasionally in collaboration with others, as with *Grindhouse* in 2007), Tarantino has written significantly more than he has directed, both in terms of number of films and the length of each screenplay. His prolixity on the page means that his finished work often leaves behind significant portions of a script, as Tarantino himself admits:

There’s a lot of stuff that doesn’t make it into the movies because they are just too f-ing [*sic*] big. If I were to do everything that’s in the scripts, they would be four-hour movies. So there’s always this aspect that the script is a big literary piece, and I’m always changing it and conforming it to fit it into a movie. And that’s the process. I’m always stuck with having to adapt my movies every day. (2013, n.p.)

This conception of filmmaking as an inherently adaptive process – a written screenplay given visual form – is not new (Hutcheon 2006, 33–35). It is nevertheless significant that Tarantino situates the key moment of adaptation

in the transition from his own written page to the screen, suggesting that a writer-director is, *de facto*, a self-adapter across distinct media. In contrast, the Academy, along with a great deal of adaptation scholarship, defines cinematic adaptation as taking a text that is not already a screenplay and turning it into one, with the resulting film seen as an adaptation of its screenplay's source rather than of the screenplay itself (e.g. Boozer 2008; Murray 2012). In this model, the shift from screenplay to screen is a matter of course rather than a recognizably adaptive process.

Since 2002, the Oscars for writing have been awarded in two categories: Original Screenplay and Adapted Screenplay. What counts as "original" versus "adapted" seems to be either taken for granted or left open to debate among the voting members, but the Academy's apparent confidence in the self-evidence of these terms belies decades of fluctuation in the writing categories. As Table 10.1 illustrates, over time, the variation in these categories – which have most recently returned to almost exactly the distinctions made at the first Academy Awards in 1928 – reveals a persistent ambivalence surrounding whether, and how, to recognize pre-existing material when a new film is made, and what kinds of pre-existing material are excluded from the category of adaptation.

Two distinctions shape the evolution of the writing award categories: one between *story* and *screenplay*; the other between *original* and *adaptation* – and the former seems at least partially rooted in the latter. Some of the very earliest Oscars had only one writing category, until in 1931 "Original Story" was distinguished from "Adaptation," but these names alone did not clarify what belonged in each category. Then in 1935, "Adaptation" gave way to "Screenplay," and for the next two decades, the Academy's writing awards made no explicit reference to adaptation, nor to scripts "based on" any pre-existing work. But while adaptation was elided, the qualifier "original" came to the fore, variously attached to both *story* and *screenplay*. The "Original Screenplay" category thus implied by comparison that the *other* "Screenplay" category would recognize adapted scripts, and with a few notable exceptions, including *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) and *All About Eve* (1950), adaptations indeed dominated "Screenplay" winners from 1935–55.

The overt Adapted/Original distinction was reintroduced in 1956, when "Story and Screenplay" and "Screenplay" were replaced with "Screenplay – Original" and "Screenplay – Adapted." Further revisions the following year merged the "Motion Picture Story" and "Original Screenplay" categories to create "Story and Screenplay – written directly for the screen," in contrast with

Table. 10.1 Academy awards for writing

1927/28	1928/29–29/30	1931–34	1935–39	1940–41	1942–46	1947	1948	1949–55	1956	1957–68	1969	1970–73	1974–75	1976–77	1978–90	1991–2001	2002–
Original Story	Writing (no split categories)	Original Story	Original Story	Original Story	Original Motion Picture Story	Motion Picture Story	Motion Picture Story	Motion Picture Story	Motion Picture Story	Story and Screenplay – written directly for the screen	Story and Screenplay based on material not previously published or produced	Story and Screenplay based on material not previously published or produced	Original Screenplay	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen	Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen	Original Screenplay
				Original Screenplay	Original Screenplay	Original Screenplay	Original Screenplay	Story and Screenplay	Screenplay – Original	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Adapted from Other Material	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Adapted Screenplay
				Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay								
Adaptation	Writing (no split categories)	Adaptation	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium	Adapted Screenplay
This Writing																	

The first Academy Awards were given in 1928. Name changes for categories are indicated in boldface italics. Shading indicates a new name that persists through subsequent changes in other categories, with this continuity indicated by shading along the top border. Time periods are not shown to scale. Source: http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas_awards/BasicSearchInput.jsp Category Search: Writing

“Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium.” This marks the Academy’s first evident attempt both to define adaptation (while not using the word *adapted*), and to pinpoint what kind of story should be fully credited to a screenwriter (while not using the word *original*). This also explicitly introduces the transmedial criterion for adaptation; while “original” work could still derive from existing stories – be they historical, canonical, or traditional – “original” could mean anything, really, *except* transmedial adaptation. Setting aside a brief resurgence of *original* and *adapted* in 1974–75, Table 10.1 shows that the Academy spent nearly a half-century clarifying what each of these terms should mean without using the terms themselves.

On the whole, the “adapted” category has undergone fewer and less drastic changes than the “original,” yet the persistence of “material from another medium” under its purview forecloses the possibility that cinema itself might inspire new, award-worthy films. Taken alongside the other category’s requirement that a screenplay *not* be drawn on anything “previously published or produced,” this configuration technically excludes remakes and other film-based adaptations from any writing award. At least in theory, either category could recognize screenplays crafted out of an existing historical, fictional, or biographical story, although the categories draw a discursive line between stories (apparently) conjured out of the ether, and those whose clearly textual antecedent has an identifiable author.

Meanwhile, under the Academy’s rules, actual events, whether contemporary or historical, are simply not textual enough to count as adaptations. In 1970, “Story and Screenplay” was amended to cover work “based on *factual material* or material not previously published or produced” (emphasis added) – the first time a writing category explicitly raised the question of fact.³ However, during the brief period in the mid-1970s when the categories were simplified as “Original Screenplay” and “Screenplay Adapted from Other Material,” one implication of this shift was that “factual material” might also be considered a source text for an adapted screenplay (although the 1975 winner for Original Screenplay, Sidney Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon*, was based on actual events). Perhaps sensing the collapse of the tendentious distinction between the categories, in 1976 the descriptions were revised yet again: “Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium” and “Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen – based on factual material or on *story material* not previously published or produced” (emphasis added), a reference to *story* that hearkens back to the Academy’s earlier iterations of its writing categories. This was shortened and the word

story eliminated in 1978, after which the two categories remained constant until 1991, the second longest period of stability in the history of the awards. The next shift in the adapted category – from “Material from Another Medium” to “Material Previously Produced or Published” – tentatively acknowledged, though still only implicitly, that cinematic intertextuality could be as legitimately award-worthy as the dominant transmedial, literature-to-film paradigm.

While the return to brevity in 2002 is welcome after this prolonged effort to define “adapted” and “original,” these terms still leave much to the discretion of the Academy’s voters. Yet the cyclical insistence on “another medium” and “other material” in these categories suggests that the film industry generally subscribes to the same limitations that have defined the novel-to-film (or, more generously, the non-screenwriting-to-film) paradigm in adaptation studies. Nonetheless, studying intramedial adaptation (which is also the focus of [Chapter 11](#) in this volume) allows us to recognize the manifold ways that cinema cites itself, from costumes, casting, and dialogue to cinematography and sequencing – all of which go beyond the Academy’s narrow focus on “story material.” Still, the “previously produced” designation of 1991–01 does gesture toward screen-based texts, and academic studies of intramedial adaptation do exist, focusing on remakes, reboots, sequels, pastiche, and even parody.⁴ However, these forms languish at the periphery of adaptation studies, as if they fail to clear an unarticulated threshold for what “counts” as adaptation. From the perspective of cultural economy, the disadvantages of an intramedial frame seem clear: tracing copyright and other transactions as discussed by Simone Murray ([2012](#)) and Thomas Leitch ([2002](#)) is not always possible, nor strictly necessary, when intertextuality is built multimodally from a variety of sources both canonical and contemporary. But from the standpoint of media literacy – which has emerged as a *raison d’être* and rallying cry for adaptation studies – understanding how each medium remakes and adapts itself is just as important as understanding how a medium incorporates material from other forms (Leitch [2007](#); Constandinides [2012](#)).

The notion of cinema begetting cinema has been the locus of Tarantino’s work from the beginning of his career. In the wake of his second feature, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), biographical accounts already

reveal an underlying conflict between what is, on the one hand, a portrait of Tarantino as a new and original American talent, a creator-*auteur* close to the

real matter of life, and on the other, an account of a film geek-*metteur-en-scène*, a rip-off artist steeped in trash culture and second-hand material. (Verevis 2006, 174)

The refrain that Tarantino's films are always *about* other films has been repeated over two decades (sometimes using less pejorative terms than "rip-off artist"). But the recent change in critical tone toward his work stems from his turn towards history, a shift in his focus as a screenwriter-director – that is, as an *auteur* – that turns a critical eye toward the prestige-laden realm of historical films. It is to Tarantino's two most successful historical films, their intertextual critique, and their impact on the Academy that we now turn.

CINEMATIC HOMAGE AND THE *BASTERDS* WHO KILLED THE WWII FILM

Much of the negative reception that met both *Basterds* and *Django Unchained* centres on Tarantino's approach to history.⁵ In adaptation studies, the status of history as source "text" has only recently come into focus. Define Ersin Tutan and Laurence Raw (2013) have proposed that *all* historical narratives be considered adaptations, asserting that writers, film-makers, and audiences who engage with an "adaptive mode" of historical presentation

are not so much concerned with veracity and accuracy; what matters to them is the desire to make sense of the past in terms of the present. They are thus more likely to create imaginative approaches, involving the kind of speculation that might be dismissed as 'inaccurate' by the professional historian. (9)

All historical films endeavour to interpret the past for new audiences, and some manage to find innovative ways to do so; but Tarantino takes this adaptive liberty beyond speculation into outright invention, most provocatively in *Inglourious Basterds*. The story shows a band of Allied soldiers on a mission, Operation Kino, which coincides with the carefully plotted revenge of a young Jewish woman who happens to own the *kino* (cinema theatre) in question. The casualties incurred during this fictional operation – a substantial chunk of the Nazi high command – would have changed the course of the war. But alternate histories that hinge on Hitler's early death are hardly Tarantino's invention (Richardson 2012, 97).

What *Basterds* brings to historical fiction – which, by Ersin Tutan and Raw’s logic, can already be seen as adaptation – is a type of genre criticism not unlike the pastiche practised by fellow Oscar honourees Joel and Ethan Coen, whose most recent film *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) takes viewers on a wide-ranging and bitingly funny tour of classic Hollywood genres.⁶ As Gérard Genette (1997) reminds us, quoting Proust, pastiche is “criticism in action,” and in *Basterds*, the critical target is the Hollywood World War II film (8). As a subgenre with a long history and too many awards to list here, Jeanine Basinger (1986) argues that the WWII film combines a predictable setting and subject – Europe, where Allied forces are fighting the Nazis – to produce an easily recognizable framework. The WWII film thus offers *Basterds* a clear backdrop against which to deploy other genres. Srikanth Srinivasan (2012) argues that Tarantino’s characters “don’t simply absorb from genres, they *are* the genres . . . What Tarantino does here is pick stereotypes from every genre of popular cinema and cook them up in his WWII broth” (5). Similarly, Greg M. Colón Semenza (2014) notes that, “rather than positioning itself as an alternate history representation of reality, *Inglourious Basterds* celebrates its situatedness in a massive *textual* tradition which nonetheless has contributed directly to the ways the atrocities of the 1940s are understood and narrated today” (78). Tarantino’s film, in other words, can only make sense as an intertext, a palimpsest of disparate and specifically cinematic tropes; as such, its goal is less to rewrite history than to critique history’s representation through cinema.

Indeed, in *Basterds* more than in any other Tarantino film, the cinema *as* cinema forms the core of the action: after surviving the massacre of her family, Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) runs a Parisian cinema under a pseudonym; a German soldier-turned-film-star (Daniel Brühl) attempts to woo her by arranging for his propaganda film to be screened there for the Nazi elite; Shosanna cuts her own new segment into the film as part of her revenge plot, which also involves the literal destruction of film stock during the Nazi film’s gala screening. The narrative of *Basterds* thus transcends genre-specific intertexts to present a startlingly comprehensive portrait of cinema as a cultural institution. Tarantino embeds references to WWII-era European cinema throughout the film, including period-authentic posters featuring French and German films of the 1930s and 1940s and marquee lettering advertising Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *Le Corbeau* (1943), an Occupation-era classic that, not unlike *Basterds* itself, sustained heated critical fire for its controversial ethical position.

Tarantino's cinematic homage also appears to have kicked off a cycle of prestige in which the Academy has awarded films that represent filmmaking. Echoing the genre cycle as described by Rick Altman (1999) and Amanda Ann Klein (2011), a cycle of prestige aims to repeat the success of a recent film by replicating those characteristics that producers and studios believe have attracted award voters' attention. In this context, *Basterds* stands as an early entry in a series of reflexively intertextual films, including Best Picture nominee *Hugo* (Martin Scorsese, 2011) and Best Picture winners *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011), *Argo* (Ben Affleck, 2012), and *Birdman* (Alejandro Iñárritu, 2014), all of which also won multiple Oscars in other categories.⁷

But if *Basterds* indeed launched a cycle of prestige for films centred on cinematic navel-gazing, it also seems to have destabilized the war film as a prestige genre in Hollywood. As Imke Meyer (2012) argues, "what Tarantino's film [*Basterds*] indicts is both Hollywood's time-honoured pretense of offering narratives that help us 'understand' history, and our eagerness to believe in this pretense when we watch realist films such as Spielberg's *Schindler's List* [1993] or *Saving Private Ryan* [1998]" (23). Post-*Basterds*, no Best Picture nominees have represented World War II in the manner of *Schindler's List*, or Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* (2002), or Stephen Daldry's *The Reader* (2008) – all of which were Academy contenders and/or winners in multiple major categories. Since 2009, Best Picture contenders that *do* represent WWII do so obliquely and without focusing on combat. After five years without a WWII-related nominee, the Best Picture contest of 2014 set Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* – which abstracted Nazi Germany into the fictional Republic of Zubrowka – against Best Adapted Screenplay winner *The Imitation Game*, a biopic that relies far more on its central figure, Alan Turing, than on the ground operations of the war.⁸ Not insignificantly, both films lost the Best Picture statuette to *Birdman*, a critique of Hollywood stardom that adheres to the topical agenda of an industry-centred cycle of prestige.

Of course, other wars have inspired Best Picture nominees since *Basterds* broke the mould, and the WWII combat film is not entirely dead.⁹ In 2014, the Brad Pitt vehicle *Fury* drew on a familiar combat narrative, but flopped critically and commercially. (One might wonder whether Pitt's turn as Aldo Raine in *Basterds* undermined his credibility as an anchor for a conventional WWII film.) More surprisingly, also in 2014 *The Monuments Men* boasted a WWII setting, previous Oscar winner George Clooney behind the camera, a bevy of A-list Academy

favourites in front of it, and a “Based on a True Story” imprimatur of authentication via adaptation – but, like *Fury*, it fizzled completely and failed to secure any major nominations.¹⁰ However, looking outside the rarefied Oscar races, Robert von Dassanowsky (2012) finds one post-*Basterds* war fantasy that has obtained an unquestionably popular success: *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston 2011), which pits a costumed superhero against a cartoonish Nazi villain (xvii). Never aspiring for the awards circuit, *Captain America* met with far less controversy than *Basterds*, a situation that suggests heightened tolerance for historical in(ter)ventions in effects-heavy, tentpole fare; as long as the fantasy comes first, apparently, the history can be imaginary, too. That a comic book adaptation can reimagine WWII yet never face the critical vitriol directed at Tarantino indicates that “historical accuracy” (or at least the impression thereof) was, and perhaps remains, an implicit prerequisite for industry prestige.

AMERICA’S ORIGINAL SIN: THE ORIGINS OF *DJANGO UNCHAINED*

Unlike *Basterds*, which dismantles the film’s central genre while aiming to innovate within it, *Django* borrows liberally from a variety of genres and historically important films to approach the underserved subject of slavery in the USA. While the setting-and-subject combination of the WWII film has a determinative effect on *Basterds*, the representation of slavery in the antebellum American South lacks a similar plug-and-play framework. Generally, this subject falls under the broad category of historical film, a high-prestige but vaguely defined genre whose semantic signals include period costumes, meticulously designed sets, and an emphasis on realism for technical concerns such as lighting and continuity editing. This would describe a film like Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln*, which shares with *Django Unchained* its year of release, an Oscar nomination for Best Picture, and a slavery-era setting. However, unlike *Django*, its narrative focuses on the legislative process of abolition, giving Spielberg’s film the dubious distinction of being ostensibly *about* slavery without featuring slaves as protagonists. It is difficult to avoid speculating how (in)visible *Lincoln*’s whitewashing might have been during awards season without *Django*’s brash, Tarantinian brio in the running alongside it.

This is not to suggest that realist historical films cannot deal effectively with race and racism – Amma Asante’s *Belle* (2013), for instance, stands in strong counterpoint to this idea – but rather to point out that this genre, like the WWII film, underscores both the unbearable whiteness of Hollywood’s representation of history and the industry’s reluctance to honour any strong challengers to this pattern. Indeed, the Academy has recognized very few films that depict the history of race relations from a non-white standpoint, and even Tarantino’s film has been criticized both for relying too heavily on an enlightened white man to spur the action, and for being made by a white writer-director in the first place.¹¹

In *Django*, Tarantino exposes the longstanding racism of the American film industry through intertextual allusions, often using sharp humour to draw attention to their racist undercurrents. Taking Tarantino himself as an intertext, one might even perceive a hint of knowing self-deprecation in his decision to cast himself in a minor and rather dim-witted role, and then kill himself off. But one of *Django*’s most pointed intertexts reimagines a highly problematic source: D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a landmark film whose stylistic innovations are almost as breathtaking as its racism. Adapted from a novel more forthrightly titled *The Clansman*, Griffith’s film exhibits such blatant race hatred that the Ku Klux Klan used it as a recruitment tool (McEwan 2007, 99). Over a century’s time, its legacy has shifted “from popular blockbuster to what Griffith scholar Scott Simmon has called ‘one of the ugliest artifacts of American popular art,’” but Tarantino’s appropriation manages to underscore both points of view (McEwan 2007, 100). Griffith’s imagery is simple, but makes compelling cinema: a band of hooded Klansmen gallop forth on horseback to subdue a rioting town run by recently freed slaves; they then storm an isolated cabin where a small group of terrified whites are being held hostage by a band of armed black men. In Griffith’s film, the Klan represents the forces of good, and the former slaves (white actors in blackface, for the most part) represent a violent threat that must be quelled. Tarantino neatly reverses this dynamic in a parody of Griffith’s cabin raid that shows the Klansmen – who still see themselves as the heroes – easily outwitted by their targets.

After causing a major stir in town, Django (Jamie Foxx) and his mentor Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) set up camp in a clearing.¹² We hear Schultz humming a tune, his plan clearly in place, and see his gloved hand loading dynamite into the sign affixed to his dentistry wagon. Meanwhile, the local Klansmen, led by local power broker Big Daddy (Don Johnson), have scouted the wagon’s location, and a few dozen hooded riders

descend over the hillside, with the diegetic thunder of hollering and hoofbeats amplified by the extradiegetic addition of Verdi's "Requiem," a dramatic yet arguably conventional musical choice for a scene like this one.¹³ Yet the sequence that follows emphasizes the irony of this over-determined scoring. A whip pan introduces a flashback that shows Big Daddy presenting the plan of attack to the assembled Klansmen, then encountering some trouble as he puts on his hood:

<i>Big Daddy:</i>	Damn! I can't see fuckin' shit out of this thing.
<i>Bag Head:</i>	Are we ready, or what?
<i>Big Daddy:</i>	Hold on, I'm fuckin' with my eyeholes. Shit. I just made it worse.
<i>Bag Head:</i>	Who made this goddamn shit?
<i>Other Bag Head:</i>	Willard's wife.
<i>Willard:</i>	Well, make your own goddamn masks!
<i>Big Daddy:</i>	Look, nobody's sayin' they don't appreciate what Jenny did.
<i>Bag Head:</i>	Well if all I hadda do was cut a hole in a bag, I coulda cut it better than this! ¹⁴

The argument escalates – and the performances aim for laughs, with comic line readings and exaggerated gesticulation – until Big Daddy finally declares, “Goddammit, this is a raid! I can’t see, you can’t see, so what? All that matters is *can the fuckin’ horse see!* That’s a raid!” Cut back to the raid itself, this time without the bombast of the extradiegetic music, with the bumbling Klansmen trying to surround the wagon without crashing into one another. Just as they realize that the wagon is empty, a cutaway shows Schultz taking aim from the surrounding woods. “Auf wiedersehen,” he trills as he pulls the trigger to blow up the wagon, to Django’s incredulous delight.

The tone and execution of this extended sequence offers a catharsis not unlike the denouement of *Basterds*, in which the historical bad guys get their ahistorical comeuppance. However, the key difference in *Django* is that, unlike the Nazis, white racists in the antebellum South were not widely considered villains in their own time; and unlike the time-limited reign of the Nazis in Germany, racism in American culture – and much of its symbolic lexicon, including the Confederate flag – has stubbornly persisted into the twenty-first century. So *Django* must take care to establish as incontrovertibly as possible the evil of white racists, since Hollywood has failed to configure them as a failsafe model of the

eternal villain, as they have long done with the Nazis. As Heather Ashley Hayes and Gilbert B. Rodman (2014) argue:

What *Django* underscores—brutally so, at times—is the degree to which Hollywood has spent the past century producing outrageously dishonest versions of Dixie. *Django* doesn't do this, however, by presenting us with a painstakingly researched quasi-documentary account of what southern life in the 1850s was really like. Instead, it takes those old stereotypes, places them on the screen before us, and systematically shows us the social and political horrors that hide beneath their surfaces. (196–197)

By eschewing realist historical cinema, *Django* interrogates its stereotypes using intertexts like the parody of Griffith's raid, and a pastiche of decidedly non-realist and resolutely popular genres – most visibly the Western, with Blaxploitation a strong second.¹⁵ Suggesting a more contemporary analogue, Kerry Washington, who plays Django's wife Hildy, has likened the film to a superhero story (Hayes and Rodman 2014, 187). Like the WWII film, both Westerns and superhero narratives come with a built-in moral compass; audiences familiar with these genres (meaning pretty much everyone) would be primed to recognize who deserves support, and who must be defeated. This clear polarization invites the audience to take sides, and the genre tropes Tarantino uses to elevate his hero – separation from and explosive reunion with a beloved woman, a superhuman talent for combat, even a brightly coloured costume – are anathema to cinematic realism.

In contrast, the villains in *Django* – that is, every white person except Schultz – are presented as all too real, entirely lacking the allure of comic book villains like the Joker or even the *Basterds*' suave Nazi adversary Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz). In *Django*, any cinematic hyperbole that exaggerates villainy, like the music and dialogue in the botched raid, works to undermine rather than bolster these characters' claims to power, which they wield without a shred of dignity. Even the would-be "Southern gentleman" Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio) is skewered for his lack of sophistication and perceptiveness: infatuated with the French language, he cannot actually speak it; blind to Schulz and Django's motives, his trusted slave Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson) must reveal them to him. Indeed, with no single antagonist, "*Django's* real villain is . . . racism. And not racism as a scattered problem produced by isolated, individual bigots, but racism as a pervasive, unrelenting *structural* phenomenon—and this is a large part of

what makes *Django* such an unusual and important film” (Hayes and Rodman 2014, 189). The evil that is racism, Tarantino emphasizes, actually manifested itself in this way at this time; but this particular hero, all too unfortunately, exists as a purely cinematic invention, so Tarantino articulates his existence in anti-realist, purely cinematic terms. Django is a fantasy superhero who finds himself in a bitterly realistic world, and his un-reality underscores the very real brutality of slavery and its continuing legacy of racism in America.

Narrating a historically serious subject like slavery using genres ranging from the arguably frivolous (superheroes) to the industrially undervalued (Blaxploitation) may suggest disrespect for the subject itself, but Tarantino takes genre cinema too seriously to ignore its discursive potential. The received Hollywood wisdom of the already nebulous prestige/popular divide has no place in the Tarantinoverse, and his use of popular genre to narrate a “prestigious” subject forms a large part of *Django*’s appeal. Unlike *Basterds*, which uses pastiche to critique a prestigious genre, *Django* draws on multiple generic forms of cinematic fantasy to tell a historically important story with contemporary resonance. In taking this approach, and in being taken seriously for doing so, Tarantino’s auteur status is crucial to his success; his auteur brand has been built on two decades of award-winning writing and several nominations for directing, all of which show his signature penchant for wide-ranging intertextual pastiche. If we set aside the justifiable critique that, prior to 2012, a black director would have faced extreme difficulty in finding support for a film about slavery, it is nonetheless equally probable that no other director could have collected statuettes for a historical film on *any* topic by disregarding the usual genre playbook. Tarantino’s whiteness matters to the industry, and has no doubt helped secure his position within it; still, with *Django* he leveraged his clout to make a film that values the perspective of a black hero and makes a strong statement against American racism.

It is also significant that *Django*’s Oscar success appears to have sparked another cycle of prestige, one that has (finally) recognized black filmmakers for films about race from a non-white perspective. The year after *Django* (and *Lincoln*, to be fair), Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* won Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay at the Oscars, with McQueen also nominated for Best Director; in 2014 Ava DuVernay’s *Selma* was nominated for Best Picture, and fared even better at the Golden Globes, where DuVernay was also nominated for Best Director. Although, like *Lincoln*, both *12 Years* and *Selma* are examples of realist historical drama, it was *Django* that had proven

that films about racism with a black protagonist could attract both audiences and major industry awards. The lack of recognition for blacks and minorities in the 2015 Oscar cycle – with *Straight Outta Compton*’s lone nomination recognizing its white screenwriters – provoked a flood of criticism that included #OscarsSoWhite on Twitter. This persistent backlash, which follows a wave of popular and critical success for films about blackness in America, indicates that Hollywood can no longer blithely sidestep issues of race and representation, either in the films that are nominated or in the nominees themselves. Although as a white writer-director, Tarantino can be seen as part of the problem, *Django* serves as a meaningful counterbalance to the kinds of films that had previously been recognized despite their highly problematic portrayals of black culture and history (Hayes and Rodman 2014, 193).

Tarantino’s current mode of filmmaking may not have produced any credible imitations – how could it, since any attempt to copy his style would surely (though ironically) be condemned as derivative – but his turn toward historical representation has shifted the circulation of prestige in Hollywood. The *Basterds-Django* diptych heralds a decline in the history film as the Academy has recognized it. Yet both of these films encourage new cinematic interpretations of difficult moments in the historical past that integrate the history of film into history writ large. Although the Academy has considered Tarantino’s efforts as original work, it is precisely these films’ indebtedness to their predecessors that makes them such potent cultural commentary. In both *Basterds* and *Django*, allusions to and adaptations of their cinematic forebears serve three key functions: as an homage to films of the past, as an elegy for outdated notions of prestige, and as a tool for expanding the cinematic canon beyond the boundaries of Hollywood’s prevailing taste culture.

NOTES

1. In 1994, *Pulp Fiction* tied *Inglourious Basterds*’s seven Oscar nominations, with a win for Original Screenplay, but none of Tarantino’s intervening films garnered even a single nomination from the Academy. AMPAS technical nominations for *Basterds* include Cinematography, Editing, Sound Mixing, and Sound Editing; *Django* was also nominated for Cinematography and Sound Editing. Christoph Waltz also took home Best Supporting Actor statuettes for both *Basterds* and *Django*. See note 12.
2. This chapter considers the Academy Awards as the standard-bearer for prestige in Hollywood; while the Golden Globes and the BAFTAs (British

Academy of Film and Television Arts) are also significant and influential, accounting for them would not be feasible here.

3. This disqualification of “factual material” as source text would confound contemporary efforts to bring historical and ripped-from-the-headlines narratives into the fold of adaptation studies (e.g. Leitch 2007; Ersin Tutan, and Raw 2013), discussed below.
4. It should be noted that intramedial adaptations are not limited to screen media. A recent example of a novel that adapts another novel to stinging critical effect is Kamel Daoud’s *Meursault, contre-enquête/The Meursault Investigation* (2013, English translation 2015), which offers a direct riposte to Nobel laureate Albert Camus’ *L’Etranger/The Stranger* (1942).
5. Todd Herzog (2012) summarizes the dissenting line of critique for *Basterds* and offers a compelling comparative study of the film’s reception in the USA and Germany.
6. It should be noted that the Coens’ most gleeful pastiches, including *The Big Lebowski* (1997) and more recently *Hail, Caesar!* (2016), have not fared as well as their “straight” adaptations at the Academy. *No Country for Old Men* (2007) was based on a novel and won Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Director, and Best Picture. *True Grit* (2011), based on a novel and a 1969 film starring John Wayne, was nominated for a whopping 10 Oscars, including Adapted Screenplay, but won none.
7. A wistful ode to silent film, *The Artist* also boasts a number of intertextual references, including – perhaps most notoriously – a direct musical citation of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). Taking a more traditionally adaptation-friendly route, *Argo*’s Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay recognized Chris Terrio’s reworking of a memoir by Tony Mendez.
8. For *Budapest*, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig got an “inspired by” credit despite the film’s Oscar categorization as Original Screenplay. Anderson also has experience with novel-to-film adaptation: *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), co-written and directed by Anderson, was adapted from a children’s book by Roald Dahl and nominated for Best Animated Feature and Best Music the same year *Basterds* was recognized by the Academy.
9. Combat films nominated for Best Picture since 2009 include *War Horse* (Spielberg, 2011), set during World War I, as well as *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) and *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014), both set during the contemporary War on Terror, whose style of warfare requires depictions of combat that depart from earlier war films’ conventions. See Yüksel (2015).
10. The cheeky, though hardly completist Tumblr *This Had Oscar Buzz* eulogizes *The Monuments Men*: <http://thishadoscarsbuzz.tumblr.com/post/132147722215/honestly-forgot-matt-damon-was-in-this-oscar-buzz>.

11. The Academy *has* nominated and awarded films that deal with race relations from a primarily white standpoint, e.g. *Driving Miss Daisy* (Best Picture winner, 1989), *Dances with Wolves* (Best Picture winner, 1990), *The Blind Side* (Best Picture nominee and Best Actress win for Sandra Bullock, 2009), *The Help* (Best Picture nominee, 2011). The notorious 2004 Best Picture winner *Crash*, which features a multiracial cast and deals explicitly with racism, was nominated for six Oscars, but all the nominees are white.
12. Amidst the densely layered intertexts of *Basterds* and *Django*, it is worth noting Waltz's *sui generis* success as the films' shared star – although Speck (2012) discusses fictional predecessors for Hans Landa, Waltz's character in *Basterds*. Tarantino's usual strategy for star casting has been to select actors with a chequered history: e.g. John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) was nominated for Best Actor for his work in the film, which turned around his languishing career; and *Jackie Brown* (1997), an Elmore Leonard adaptation, earned Blaxploitation star Pam Grier a number of nominations outside the Academy. In contrast, Waltz had zero Hollywood baggage until Tarantino cast him, yet to date, he is the only actor to win an Oscar for work with Tarantino, winning Best Supporting Actor for both *Basterds* and *Django*.
13. See Coulthard (2012) for a discussion of Tarantino's music, particularly his reuse of Ennio Morricone's previous work in *Basterds*. Likewise, *Django* features Morricone's earlier music, and for Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015) Morricone composed an original score that won an Academy Award, the film's only win out of three nominations (a notable decline after *Basterds* and *Django*).
14. Several actors – including comedy star Jonah Hill, whose cameo further underscores the sequence's comedic intent – are credited as “Bag Head” on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). As the graphic novel adaptation is the only officially published version of the script, this transcription reflects IMDb's terminology.
15. The goal of this chapter is not to enumerate the intertexts in Tarantino's films, but as regards the Western component of *Django Unchained*, one frequently referenced source is Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966); as for Blaxploitation, *Mandingo* (1975) is a particularly evident intertext.

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