Certain Tendencies in Criticism of Shakespeare on Film

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Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.
—Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*

The more precisely the empirical is investigated as extreme, the more profoundly it will be penetrated. The concept takes its point of departure [Ausgehen] in the extreme.
—Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*

I. Specters of Shakespeare and Film Histories

"I am rewriting Shakespeare . . . The wretched fellow has left out the most marvelous things"
—Early French filmmaker Ferdinand Zecca

WHILE THE OCCASION HERE is to contemplate "After Shakespeare on Film," we are perhaps not yet done with "Shakespeare on Film." In addition to the resurgence of film adaptations that began with Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* in 1989, subsequent Shakespearean film criticism managed to gain much wider currency in part because of the convergence of New Historicism and cultural studies in the 1980s and '90s. The analysis of Shakespeare and film as a legitimate field of study under the umbrella of Shakespeare studies has had many advantages. Yet a longer view of the history of Shakespeare studies and film studies reveals a forgetting of their mutually constitutive origins. As a professional field in US academia, film studies itself in the 1960s and '70s often found its advent in English departments, an institutional fact residually manifested
today by the presence of film studies professors in such departments, or by film studies programs that first emerged from literature programs. More specifically, it was often Shakespeare professors who launched such courses. Indeed, a number of scholars who have since published widely in film studies were trained during graduate school in medieval or early modern literature (Michael Anderegg, Leo Braudy, Timothy Murray, Kaja Silverman, and Linda Williams, to name a few). It is telling that the first edition of Mast and Cohen’s influential anthology of *Film Theory and Criticism* (1974) included a section devoted to “Shakespeare and Film”; it is further symptomatic that these essays were dropped from subsequent editions.

By calling up this twinned, spectral history of Shakespeare and film, we call attention to certain tendencies for Shakespeare to disappear in film studies and for film studies to disappear in Shakespeare film criticism. Shakespeare studies might thereby advance beyond reading films the *same* way we read texts, with little attention to cinematic form or to film theory. An impasse arises because Shakespeare on film criticism too often amounts to a series of flourishes, entrapped by the transcriptional impulse. Lacking a stronger theory *across* films, it instead isolates itself to momentary scenes, often only adding up to predictably thematic attacks that argue by coincidence and associative implication.

Of course, this intertwined disciplinary genesis recapitulates the earlier reflections on the status of film in the relation to theater (among other arts) that so preoccupied European classical film theory. Here, Shakespeare tended to stand as a kind of touchstone, even if a disjunctive one, for those seeking to articulate the parameters of an emergent medium in tension with prior performance practices. Consider Rudolf Arnheim’s 1932 aspirations not only for film but for film criticism itself:

The contemporary film critic must, since he deals with such new things, operate in just the opposite manner from the paleontologist, who deals with the ancient. He must preconstruct film art from occasional fossilizations, from impressions of sometimes not very noble parts; the laws of construction with which the films of the future will perhaps, in happy moments, completely comply must also be applied to contemporary film. The “Shakespeare of film” is yet to come, but the laws of his work already apply today. Without exception. Even to good films.
Or, even earlier, Hugo Münsterberg’s 1916 yearning for an original literature of real power and significance, in which every thought is generated by the idea of the screen. As long as the photoplays are fed by the literature of the stage, the new art can never come to its own and can never reach its real goal. It is surely no fault of Shakespeare that *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are very poor photoplays. If ever a Shakespeare arises for the screen, his work would be equally unsatisfactory if it were dragged to the stage.6

One need only to gesture toward Bazin’s essays on the status of theater in *What is Cinema?* many of which were drawn into relief specifically by Shakespearean adaptations of Olivier and Welles, or toward Cavell’s lifelong meditations on film and Shakespeare (which have been almost studiously avoided by those working in this field, with Rhu as an exception).7 There is a need for a study of how film criticism itself was shaped from within by its engagement with Shakespeare, which would in turn help complicate our belated struggles with some of the same issues from the Shakespearean side of things.8

What follows is a reading of Quentin Tarantino’s anti-Nazi exploitation film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) in order to pursue this spectral history of Shakespeare on film: its uncanny interruptions, doublings, and returns that cannot be reduced to chronological linear history. Tarantino’s figuration of the film frame in *Inglourious Basterds* transforms reading into a question of characterological (letteral), narrative, and generic framing. Understanding the frame as figure is to understand that the film demands a double reading, both of its infrastructure and of its sometimes furtive allusions to films, film actors, film criticism, film theaters, film posters, and film directors; these in turn furtively force open metaphorical window frames through which one may read Tarantino’s film as an account of the spectral history of film as history. While *Inglorious Basterds* makes but one passing citation of Hamlet (the character), such a film proves itself the extreme case of where the critical action really is, as opposed to the routine or normal “Shakespeare film.”9 The study of Shakespeare (barely) in film may shed high-contrast lighting not only on Shakespeare (fully) in film but on Shakespeare across media. (Shakespeare textual studies and Shakespeare media studies might engage in dialogue, for example, to produce a mode of film philology.) The spectral history of the medium of film invites a broad rethinking about aesthetics and politics in Shake-
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speare criticism tout court, by conceiving politics in the context of a resistance to reading generated through framing and irony that dissolves seemingly obvious distinctions between Allies and Nazis. The now-dominant material culture studies seems to imagine (howsoever unreflectively) that positivism and empiricism have triumphed in such a way as to negate philological reflection on the practice of reading and the philosophical considerations of reading as resistance to comprehension. Yet perhaps the Geist of History has not been fully exorcised and haunts us still.

II. The (Anti)-Nazi Film(ed) Frame

We cannot assume, try as we may, an Elizabethan seriousness. Yet we shall err grievously if we do not take that seriousness into account or if we imagine that the Elizabethan habit of mind is done with once and for all. If we are sincere with ourselves we must know that we have that habit in our own bosoms somewhere, queer as it may seem. And, if we reflect on that habit, we may see that (in queerness though not in viciousness) it resembles certain trends of thought in central Europe, the ignoring of which by our scientifically minded intellectuals has helped not a little to bring the world into its present conflicts and distresses.

—E. M. W. Tillyard, Epilogue to The Elizabethan World Picture

From the perspective of some anti-Nazi Germans before the United States entered World War II, Hollywood film posed a problem even as it began to turn out propaganda films. Used by both Allied and Germans, Shakespeare predictably made an appearance. In 1941, Klaus Mann published a scathing review of Hollywood’s inadequacies in an essay entitled “What’s Wrong with Anti-Nazi Films?” which begins with the film business’s trashy use of Shakespeare:

We have to accept the fact that among hundreds of moving pictures there are hardly two or three worth any serious consideration. The rest—the overwhelming majority—is glaring trash: pretty legs and idiotic faces. Ziegfeld girls in techni-color, tough guys and Merry Melodies, angels with dirty faces. Marlene Dietrich with sunken cheeks and no talent, Mickey Rooney as Romeo, Mickey Mouse as Hamlet, Shirley Temple as Polonius, Stokowsky as prima ballerina, Silly Symphonies by Bach and Beethoven, the board of directors in their fascinating act as Last Gangsters, the writers’ department as Dead End Kids, Mae West and Norma Shearer as Blossoms in the Dust. Dust . . . dust . . . Gone
with the Wind . . . box office dust. . . . So far so good. The trick works
tall right. People in Shanghai, Rio and Kansas City get a kick out of it,
Sammy runs and Hollywood makes money. Everybody is pleased. But
then comes Hitler.11

Films in which Allies mimed the Nazis in order to resist them in-
clude Ernest Lubitsch’s To Be or Not to Be (1942) and Nick Grinde’s
low-budget film Hitler—Dead or Alive (1942). Whereas the latter
film’s serious and “patriotic” narrative frame segregates its Three
Stooges–like plot about criminals actually killing Hitler (but to no
avail as a Hitler double takes his place more audaciously), To Be or
Not to Be’s tricky use of multiple frames within frames risks turn-
ing humor into “friendly fire.” Yet neither film in any way ques-
tions the political differences between the Nazis and their resisters
when it comes to violence, as does Tarantino’s film by drawing par-
allels between American and German history. In Inglourious Bast-
erds, the failed British plot to blow up the theater by having Allied
soldiers dress as Nazi officers echoes the plot of To Be or Not to Be
(in which there are two actors playing Hitler, one impersonating
him, one the “real” thing, and two almost identical photographs of
Hitler and his impersonator; neither Hitler nor his impersonator is
confused with the other by the audience).12

III. Irony and the Character of Inglourious Basterds

Laertes: Know you the hand?
Claudius: ’Tis Hamlet’s character.

Hamlet makes a brief appearance in Quentin Tarantino’s Inglour-
iouss Basterds, a kind of verbal cameo.13 A film actress and several
Nazi soldiers on leave in Occupied Paris are getting drunk in a bar.
They are playing a game that involves guessing the names of char-
acters written on cards they have each stuck on their own fore-
heads. When one Nazi soldier fears that his character may be
controversial because the character is American, the German film
actress Bridget von Hammersmark (Diane Kruger), who is secretly
working as a double agent for the Allies, declares that “it’s not con-
troversial. The nationality of the author has nothing to do with the
nationality of the character. The Character is the character. Ham-
let’s not British, he’s Danish.” Although Inglourious Basterds
makes no other overt references to Hamlet or Shakespeare,14 the
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way that the film references Hamlet in the context of literary character criticism has productive implications for Shakespeare film criticism. For some time, Shakespeare on film criticism has been trying to leave behind considerations of Shakespeare and effectively read a given film as a film. In practice, however, this apparently film-centered criticism has meant that a given film related to Shakespeare is read as if it were a text, and thereby historicized the same way New Historicists might historicize the text of Hamlet. More recently, the tendency to historicize Shakespeare films as discrete ideological reproductions inadvertently coincides with a tendency in Shakespeare textual criticism and “New New Historicism” (or material culture criticism) to divorce the Shakespeare text (considered as physical, not metaphysical) from its performance history.¹⁵

The Hamlet reference in Inglourious Basterds implicitly calls into question an ontological distinction that historicism requires in order to situate its object of study in a narrative sequence and map: seemingly transparent paratexual distinctions between title and character, and author and character, author and title are subject in Tarantino’s film to a medium-specific spectralization that divides sound from script and demands a careful attention to Tarantino’s allegorization of film in relation to its (re)projection and its shooting script. Consider Bridget von Hammersmark’s statement “Character is character.” Two interpretations arise from an inaudible but scripted difference between lower-case-[c] “character” and capital-[C] “Character” when the line is delivered in the film and when it is printed in the screenplay. In the former, inaudible case, the statement may be understood as merely tautological [“c” is “c”]; in the other, scripted case the “Character” is only the character (independent from the other). In either case (lower or upper), the repetition of the word character calls attention, for it is spoken by a character in the film who is herself an actress playing a role in order to help the other side in a film. By extension, the difference between a letter “c” in character also calls up the meaning of “character” as letter in a film that deliberately misspells its own title, perhaps in order to call attention to its own inaudible but scripted difference from Enzo G. Castellari’s earlier film of the same name, Inglorious Bastards (1978).¹⁶

By putting the “character of ‘character’” in play through a reference to Hamlet, Inglourious Basterds systematically unfolds oppositions between Allies and Nazis, and between Nazis and Jews, in
ways that bear similarity to Jean-Luc Godard’s retrospective montage, in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, of Hollywood films and stills, and World War II documentaries of the Nazis at war. That is, like Godard’s a-chronological film about history, the cinematic self-consciousness of *Inglourious Basterds* implies that history since the twentieth century cannot be understood apart from the history of film. In addition to linking war and cinema (as Godard, Paul Virilio, Friedrich Kittler, and others have previously done), by literalizing silver nitrate film as an explosive device to be burned at a film premiere attended by Hitler, Tarantino metaphorizes film as a spectral medium that both precedes and follows “real” history.

Loosely parallel to *Hamlet*’s inscription of Senecan tragedy and Elizabethan tragedy through the play-within-the-play, *Inglourious Basterds* uses a series of film-within-the-film references that invoke a history of cinema and film media. Beyond the nitrate footage, overtly metacinematic aspects include the shooting, development, and splicing of a 35 mm film print with a soundtrack into the final reel of *Stoltz der Nation* (*Pride of the Nation*); and the character of British Lieutenant Hicox, who is recruited for a sabotage plot not only because he is fluent in German but also because he’s a film critic with a bimonthly column and two published studies (*Art of the Eyes, The Heart, and The Mind: A Study of German Cinema in the Twenties* and *Twenty-Four Frame Da Vinci*, described as “a subtextual film criticism study of the work of German director G. W. Pabst”). Additional cinematic citations abound: the German actor Emil Jannings attends the premiere of *Stoltz der Nation*; references are made to UFA (the German film studio taken over by propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in 1933); at the Parisian theater, marquees are shown for *Le Corbeau* (*The Crow*, dir. Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1943—filmed during the Occupation, giving rise to contentious critiques about the degree to which it ought to be considered pro- or anti-Nazi), and the German “Berg” film starring Leni Riefenstahl, *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Pitz Palü*, 1929), is to be shown for “German Night.”

In Tarantino’s self-conscious hands, film history becomes a principle of divisibility and misdirection, tearing and taking down the political differences between characters on opposing sides. In some cases, the divisibility is literal, or letteral. For example, Shosanna Dreyfus (Melaine Laurent) is the solitary Jewish survivor from the massacre of her family in the film’s opening sequence, who turns revenger. Years later, in Paris, she takes down letters from the mar-
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que in a cinema she owns when she first meets the Nazi-turned-film-star, private Frederick Zoller (Daniel Brühl); in a subsequent scene, she is in the process of putting up letters on the same marquee for a new film when she is picked up by Frederick’s adjutant and taken by force out to lunch.

The division between political sides unfolds through a vertiginous, ironically corrosive series of references to films that link both sides. For example, Frederick Zoller compares his role as a sniper in Pride of the Nation to Sargeant York (1941), which is to say both the World War I American soldier of the same name and the title of a Hollywood film based on his life, made by Howard Hawks during World War II as propaganda. Similarly, Frederick says he will become the equivalent of the Hollywood actor Van Johnson after Pride of the Nation is released. In other words, a Nazi character in the diegesis stars in a film in the diegesis based on a historical event outside the diegesis that resembles an American film. Yet this reversibility follows from asymmetrical relations between sides rather than from a straightforward mirroring. Whereas Frederick plays himself, Sargeant York is played by film star Gary Cooper (near the end Senator Hull tells York about ten job offers—the first to be in a Hollywood film about himself, the second to be in the Ziegfeld Follies, but he turns them all down and returns to his rural home); and whereas the anachronistically edited Pride of the Nation focuses entirely on the soldiers killed by the sniper, Sargeant York is mostly a romantic melodrama about the rakish Quaker Alvin York finding his religious faith (a comparable scene with York in a machine-gun nest fighting off Germans takes place near the end of the film). Tarantino’s double flip on fiction and history, American and German, is echoed by an internal split in the characterization of Frederick, who at times seems very charming: when watching Pride of the Nation, he reacts like an ethically conflicted soldier out of All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), while the rest of the audience laughs and cheers wildly as American G.I.s get quickly and brutally shot down. Yet Frederick also turns out to be a sadistic would-be rapist and murderer.

These divisions are corrosively ironic in that they open up frames that double back on the film’s audiences. Heroic Sargeant York morphs into the demented killer Charles Whitman. Ethan (John Wayne) in The Searchers (1956) morphs into the part-Apache leader Lieutenant Aldo, who demands soldiers meet a scalp count (taken from Nazi corpses), echoed in turn by the Nazis referring to
German novelist Karl May's character, Winnetou Chief of the Apaches. Goebbels is compared to Hollywood producer David O. Selznick. The story of King Kong, in chains in New York, opens up the story of “the negro in America.” Shosanna’s projected film image in the movie theater, after *Pride of the Nation* ends, recalls less Big Brother in *1984* (as the screenplay says it will) or even the Great Oz, than the end of Stephen Spielberg’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) when the face of a feminine-looking ghost released from the ark by a Nazi archaeologist turns into a skull and then kills (by cremation) all the Nazis. In each case, the framing opens up a seeming exception, authorizing paralegal violence in the name of justice that turns out to be (or always already to have been) the norm.

The most controversial irony concerns Jews and Nazis. Unlike Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be*, *Inglourious Basterds* does present explicitly Jewish characters, and they too are divided. On the one hand, we have the G.I. “Jews,” as it were, some of whom are first-generation European immigrants, and all of whom act in Germany as terrorist guerrilla fighters; these are the characters promoted by the trailers for audiences expecting an “action” film. Yet on the other hand we have the French Shosanna, who is excepted from the mass murder of her Jewish family by Hans Landa, who laughs as he decides not to shoot her after aiming his pistol at her as she flees. The failed British plot to blow up the theater, which echoes *To Be or Not to Be*, is called Operation “Kino,” which means “movie theater” in German.

The least obvious parallel in the film (between a child and Shosanna) is also the most destructive of political oppositions between normal, lawful violence and the exceptional violence authorized in wartime. When Shosanna explains to her lover and projectionist how the nitrate films in the theater will serve as the explosive, the screen splits in half and on the right appears a sequence from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Sabotage* (1936), based on Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*. The sequence involves the child Stevie getting on a bus with a film canister that contains a bomb. Stevie, unaware that he is carrying a bomb, is delayed several times, and the rest of the people are killed when the bomb explodes. The survivor Shosanna at this point in the film appears to be an exception since, unlike Stevie, she was spared being murdered by Landa as a child. Yet the scene cancels her exceptionalism in that we see that she has become a “sui-decider,” so to speak, as an adult, a kind of “no Sho-ah.”
IV. Hamlet (Out of Film) and the Irony of the Political

The so-called immortal works just flash briefly through every present time. *Hamlet* is one of the very fastest, the hardest to grasp.

—Walter Benjamin, “Notes (II)” (285)

A reading of the film frame as ironic bombshell opening up spectral history in Tarantino’s film may be productively deployed by turning to the unexpected, even embarrassing dialogue between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt about the state of exception as it bears on political theology, tragedy, and temporality. From our perspective, the main interest of Schmitt’s *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of Time in Play* is Schmitt’s spectralization of history: Schmitt says he doesn’t expect the audience to see James I onstage. James I (carrying the baggage of his beheaded mother, Mary Queen of Scots) intrudes, but only as a ghost, in other words. Schmitt is not doing a conventional old historicist Henry Paul reading, since his is a notion of intrusion and formal imperfection. Instead, he is writing a spectral historicism avant Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* by implying that sovereignty is always already weak sovereignty (that is, Schmitt’s own reading self-deconstructs and becomes a Benjaminian *Trauerspiel*). Schmitt’s book is not a detour away from his political writings (into aesthetics), but rather reveals the spectral, uncanny relation between theology and politics that haunts *Political Theology*.

Apart from the Appendix written to Walter Benjamin, by then long dead, who in 1928 had sent a kind letter to Schmitt along with a copy of his *Trauerspiel* book, *Hamlet or Hecuba* is a spectral book that haunts the history of political thought in which Schmitt engaged (Locke vs. Hobbes). Schmitt’s book is gaining new attention from Shakespeareans now that an authorized translation has been published, but may best be read within the wider context of the relation between force and justice that concerned Benjamin and Schmitt. With the exception of Derrida’s explosive essay “The Force of Law,” critics have tried to salvage Benjamin’s conception of violence and dismiss Schmitt. Yet perhaps Schmitt’s value lies in his repetition in the Hamlet book in a more extreme manner: the implicitly paradoxical discussion of sovereignty and the state of exception he had made explicitly paradoxical in his political writings. To put it another way, to what extent is Schmitt’s book on
Hamlet overtaken by irony? Whether Hamlet is a tragedy and Trauerspiel matters to Schmitt because he wants to separate politics from play: politics is what interrupts play. To demonstrate this point, Schmitt returns to Hamlet, a play Benjamin classified as a Trauerspiel about indecision. Schmitt ironically demonstrates, however, that the state of exception is everywhere in Hamlet, leaving Schmitt unable to make his argument and necessitating an Appendix in which he returns to Benjamin’s Trauerspiel book. But that is a matter to be taken up some other time.

Notes


3. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 302–52. The five entries were Geoffrey Reeves’s interview with Peter Brook, Frank Kermode’s essay on “Shakespeare at the Movies,” James Agee’s extended review of Olivier’s Henry V, selections from André Bazin on Welles’s Othello, and John Blumenthal’s article on Kurosawa’s Throne of Blood.

4. Or worse, an overreliance on a hyper-canonized essay, such as the reiterated invocation of Laura Mulvey’s 1975 piece on visual pleasure, from which Mulvey has long since distanced herself. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Screen 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18; and Mulvey, Death 24 × a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).


8. As an analogue, see the first half of Richard Wilson’s Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows (New York: Routledge, 2007), which explores how the intellectual careers of figures such as Bourdieu, Cixous, Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault were formed in part by their engagement with Shakespeare. For such a project, we might first require an anthology of Shakespeare-within-film-theory along the lines of Paul Kottman’s recent edition of Philosophers on Shakespeare (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). Filmmakers themselves have, of course, often produced critical reflections on Shakespeare; it remains instructive to read, for instance, Kozintsev on Lear and Hamlet (see Grigori Kozintsev, Shakespeare: Time and Conscience, trans. Joyce Vining [New York: Hill & Wang, 1966] and King Lear: The Space of Tragedy, The Diary of a Film Director, trans. Mary Mackintosh [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977]), or Hitchcock’s 1936 debate with Granville-Barker regarding realistic locations (see Anthony Davies, “Shakespeare and the Media of Film, Radio and Television: A Retrospect,” Shakespeare Survey 39 [1987]: 2). But have we yet begun to consider more oblique engagements? How do we account, for instance, of an Eisenstein who was himself a close interpreter of Shakespeare, as is discussed in Turi Tsivian, Ivan the Terrible (London: British Film Institute, 2008)? See also N. M. Lary, “Eisenstein and Shakespeare,” in Eisenstein Rediscovered, ed. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1993), 140–50.

9. Practically speaking, the Shakespeare film remains a “phantom genre,” weaker even than film noir since it is never used as a generic marker. Barbara Hodgdon uses the phrase in her Editor’s introduction to the first (and thus far only) Shakespeare Quarterly special issue on “Screen Shakespeare” (“From the Editor,” Shakespeare Quarterly 53, no. 2 [2002]: iii–x), following Rick Altman’s 1999 reflections on “the woman’s film” (see Film/Genre [London: British Film Institute, 1999]; Altman, in turn, deploys a chapter heading (“Postmortem for a Phantom Genre”) that Russell Merritt applied to melodrama in 1983 (see Russell Merritt, “Melodrama: Postmortem for a Phantom Genre,” Wide Angle 5, no. 3 [1983]: 25–31), and two years before that Jeffrey Sammons skeptically postulated that only a handful of works could rightfully be considered a Bildungsroman, which hence for him ought to be considered a “phantom genre” (Jeffrey L. Sammons, “The Mystery of the Missing Bildungsroman, or: What Happened to Wilhelm Meister’s Legacy?” Genre 14, no. 2 [1981]: 229–46).

10. By invoking irony in relation to aesthetics and politics, recall Paul de Man’s provocative assertion that “nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory is itself this resistance” (Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” in The Resistance to Theory [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], 19) and to de Man’s corrosively ironic essay “The Concept of Irony” in the posthumously published Aesthetic Ideology (de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in Aesthetic Ideol-
ogy, ed. Andrzej Warminski [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], 163–84). Attempts to recuperate de Man after his collaborationist Belgian journalism came to light have tended to bypass de Man’s resistance to being read and to reading in favor of preserving a seemingly more palatable and accessible Derridean form of deconstruction (as if Derrida himself were not interested in spectrality and the uncanny of the political). However, both Derrida and de Man are engaged in similar kinds of textual self-ruination; note, for instance, de Man’s deferral of actually reading Kierkegaard on irony in an essay putatively about Kierkegaard on irony, instead declaring that the reader will learn nothing from de Man’s essay. One cannot decide whether de Man is giving his reader indirect directions (stop reading me, don’t bother with Schlegel, just go to Kierkegaard) or is just playing out the logic of the buffoon he (through Schlegel) identifies with the ironist to the end.

11. Klaus Mann was the son of Thomas Mann and author of the 1936 novel *Mephisto: Roman einer Karriere*, a thinly veiled account of the Nazi actor Gustaf Gründgens, including Gründgens’s interpretation of Hamlet, which characteristically rejected the version of this play as one troubled by delay and inaction, instead enacting Nazi scholars’ “various odd ways of bringing the obvious contradictions in Hamlet’s character into line with the requirements of a heroic and Nordic ideal figure” (Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, volume 2, *The Twentieth Century* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 157). See an interview with the Gründgens-like actor in *Mephisto*: “‘Hamlet wasn’t a weak man,’ he said to journalists when interviewed. ‘There was nothing weak about him. Generations of actors have made the mistake of viewing him as a feminine character. His melancholy wasn’t hollow but came from real motives. The prince wants to avenge his father. He is a Renaissance man—a real aristocrat and something of a cynic. I want to strip him of all the melancholy traits with which he has been burdened by conventional portrayals’” (Klaus Mann, *Mephisto*, trans. Robin Smyth [New York: Penguin, 1977], 255). (See also Mann, “What’s Wrong with Anti-Nazi Films?” [1941], *New German Critique* 89 (2003): 173.


13. The Hamlet cameo echoes the uncredited audio cameos of prior Tarantino stars Samuel L. Jackson and Harvey Keitel.

14. It does, however, self-consciously divide itself into five “chapters,” which we might consider a displacement of the more conventional five-act structure of a play. The Austrian actor who plays S.S. officer Hans Landa, Christoph Waltz, has, when interviewed, taken to likening *Inglourious Basterds* to “Shakespearean” drama (see Fred Topel, “Equal Time for All in *Inglourious Basterds,*” *EDGE Boston*, http://www.edgeboston.com/index.php?ch = entertainment&sc = movie & sc3 = &id = 95204&pf = 1), as did David Carradine before him when speaking of
Kill Bill, and Bruce Willis when talking about Pulp Fiction. In a 2007 GQ interview, Tarantino gamely suggested that he’s always had a thought maybe that I might have been Shakespeare in another life. I don’t really believe that 100 percent, and I don’t really care about Shakespeare, I’ve never been into Shakespeare, but then people are constantly bringing up all of these qualities in my work that mirror Shakespearean tragedies and moments and themes. People have written lots of pieces about the parallels of my work and Shakespeare. I remember in the case of Reservoir Dogs, writing this scene where the undercover cop is teaching Tim Roth how to be an undercover cop, and when the actors came in to rehearse it, Harvey Keitel read it, and he thought I had just taken Hamlet’s speech to the players and broke it down into modern words. I’d never read Hamlet’s speech to the players.

(Chris Heath, Interview with Quentin Tarantino, GQ, April 2007, 212–17 and 259).


16. Indeed, one is tempted to speculate further that such a wayward spelling (or, to use the language of the First Folio Macbeth, “weyward” [see Ayanna Thompson, “What is a ‘Weyward’ Macbeth?” in Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance, ed. Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 3–10]) additionally evokes the erratic precedent of “Renaissance” (or, as our students often imagine, “Old English”)-style orthography. While “inglorious” is not an extant orthographic alternative from the early modern period, “basterd” certainly is—in Shakespeare alone, the Quarto Henry V has Burgundy cursing “Normanes, basterd Normanes,” and the First Folio version of the same play has MacMorris’s “What is a ‘Weyward’ Macbeth?” speech read: “Ish a Villaine, and a Basterd, and a Knaue, and a Rascall”; likewise, line 2 of Sonnet 124 speaks of “fortunes basterds” in the 1609 Quarto. (For bastardy in early modern drama, see Michael Neill, “‘In Everything Illegitimate’: Imagining the Bastard in Renaissance Drama,” Yearbook of English Studies 23 [1993]: 270–92; and Nicholas Crawford, “Language, Duality, and Bastardy in English Renaissance Drama,” English Literary Renaissance 34 [2004]: 243–62.) Note that the only instance of “inglorious” in Shakespeare’s works is uttered by the Bastard in King John in reply to the King’s peace treaty with the Pope’s legate:

Oh inglorious league!
Shall we, upon the footing of our land,
Send fair-play orders, and make compromise,
Insinuation, parley, and base truce
To arms invasive?

(5.1.65–69)

Underscoring a need to read film history recursively with the history of Shakespearean performance, Enzo G. Castellari directed Romeo and Juliet, as well as a Western version of Hamlet, entitled Johnny Hamlet (1968); furthermore, Castellari’s Inglorious Bastards itself mentions Elsinore. Castellari and original Inglorious Bastards lead actor Bo Svenson both appear in Tarantino’s film, in a characterological nod to the earlier version.

18. For Tarantino’s biographical analogue to Godard’s a-chronology, note that as a struggling young actor, Tarantino chose to put films on his resume that he had never acted in, but he chose obscure films by great directors, figuring casting agents would never have the time to confirm his claim while being impressed by the famous director. One of Tarantino’s favorite directors is Jean-Luc Godard (Tarantino’s production company, A Band Apart, is named after Godard’s film *Bande À Part*). He credited himself for playing a part that he never played in the film Godard made in 1987. That film was *King Lear*.


20. Along with many other orthographic irregularities, Tarantino drops the second “h” from the conventional Jewish spelling of Shoshanna.

21. That is to say, the plot of *Pride of the Nation* resembles *Sargeant York* less than it does *Targets* (1968), based on the University of Texas student-turned-sniper Charles Whitman.

22. In Lubitsch’s film, the character named Greenberg wants to play Shylock, and twice recites the “Hath not a Jew” speech; yet the speech is carefully revised to omit references to Jews, and is instead delivered as “Have we not eyes?” Mel Brooks gave the Jewish characters yellow stars in his 1983 remake of Lubitsch’s film. On the non-representation of Jews in 1940s Hollywood films, see Ruth Karpf, “Are Jewish Themes ‘Verboten’?” *New German Critique* 89 (2003): 183–84.

23. As Ryback has demonstrated, Hitler “owned the collected works of William Shakespeare, published in German translation in 1925 by Georg Müller . . . He appears to have imbibed his *Hamlet*. ‘To be or not to be’ was a favorite phrase, as was ‘It is Hecuba to me’” (Timothy W. Ryback, *Hitler’s Private Library: The Books that Shaped His Life* [New York: Random House, 2009], xi–xii).


27. Kahn criticizes Schmitt for not being able to tell the difference between a decision to declare a true state of emergency from a decision to declare a fake state of emergency but she the more important point that the truth of any state of exception can never be determined; indeed, any decision will immediately be attacked by enemies of the state as a fraud, and no one will in turn be able to decide whether the critics are provocateurs, paranoid, or correct (or all of the above). Aesthetics and politics cannot rightly be separated out and reduced to truth and fraud, if only because fraud is part of history.
This approach to film criticism has the potential to lead non-astute viewers astray, however. One should be careful not to discredit a film on grounds of one’s own prejudices rather than on the film’s self-contained merits. Let me use the most popular film of recent memory, Titanic, as an example. Simply put, I as a viewer cannot discredit that film on the basis of, “This is a film about the Titanic, which I know going in is a luxurious ship that will sink in the mid-Atlantic Ocean by film’s end. Therefore, I expected the film to be supremely suspenseful. However, even though the film had some” By calling up this twinned, spectral history of Shakespeare and film, we call attention to certain tendencies for Shakespeare to disappear in film studies and for film studies to disappear in Shakespeare film criticism. Shakespeare studies might thereby advance beyond reading films the same way we read texts, with little attention to cinematic form or to film theory. (4) An impasse arises because Shakespeare on film criticism too often amounts to a series of flourishes, entrapped by the transcriptional impulse. Lacking a stronger theory across films, it instead isolates itself to momentary sce