

3. Producing the Corpse: Quentin Tarantino's Revenge Narratives

Tarantino put desire back into the process of movie making.

Fred Botting & Scott Wilson, The Tarantinian Ethics

Marian looked back at her platter. The woman lay there, still smiling, glassily, her legs gone. 'Nonsense,' she said. It's only a cake.' She plunged her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head.

Margaret Atwood, The Edible Woman

What has become evident in the previous two chapters is that aestheticizations of death in the American cultural imaginary emerge as inherently tied to the dynamism of a repetition compulsion. It is this repetition that marks America as insatiable for figurations of death. The American gothic repeats aestheticizations of death to the point re-establishing them as living and is nourished by the *death paradox*, resting on fertile American ground,^{1,2} while the figure of the zombie surfaces as the undead corpse which craves the living.³ And while the figure of the zombie is hungry for the living body, it is here that a further element must be brought into play in the context of this volume; this element is the artistic figuration of a living body that *actively* produces the corpse. Manifesting as a form of flipside of the zombie, the living body that is metaphorically hungry for the dead can be seen in the figure of the avenger. Rather than simply productive, the concept of revenge also emerges as a repetition itself and is, in fact, re-productive of murderous agency. Etymologically rooted in

1 See Introduction for in-depth discussion of this dynamic.

2 See chapter 1 for a detailed analysis of the way in which the mode of the American gothic reinstates the corpse as living, thereby ultimately eliminating the narrative retroactively.

3 See chapter 2 for a discussion of the figure of the zombie.

the French word *revanche*, the act of *revenge* is specifically defined as “the action of hurting, harming, or otherwise obtaining satisfaction from someone *in return* for an injury or wrong suffered at his or her hands” (OED, my emphasis). As is apparent from this definition, the act of *revenge* produces two separate things; it produces either a wrong or injury based on a previous wrong (which, in the context of this volume, will circle around the production of death) and it allows the avenger to obtain (emotional) satisfaction from this murderous act. This illustrates the way in which the repetition of murderous agency, which is tied to the vengeful act, produces emotional gratification and aestheticizes murderous agency through emotional coloring.

It is this element of emotional gratification that also conjoins the act of *revenge* with the politics of food. Not only is the participation in a dinner ritual pleasurable because it caters to an appetite, it also follows a distinct formula in which participants are complicit, a formula geared towards gratification or catharsis which is also present in the execution of *revenge*. It comes as no surprise, then, that common phrases outlined on the etymology of the word ‘*revenge*’ liken the vengeful act to the consumption of food, such as for instance in the phrases “*revenge is sweet*”, “*thirst for revenge*”, as well as the notorious “*revenge is a dish best served cold*” (OED). In “*Tragedy and Revenge*”, Tanya Pollard asserts that *revenge* tragedy’s cathartic quality is rooted in the satisfaction obtained by the rightful repetition of a wrong, stating that “[t]he genre’s popularity, then, speaks to the attraction of seeing frustrated victims satisfy their demand for justice” because “[r]evenge redresses injustice caused by abuses of power” (59). A vengeance that reproduces a previous murderous act, deemed an “*injustice*”, provides emotional justification for the active production of death at the wronged party’s hands. It is desire for murder that manifests itself as an appetite for the dead in the *living* that also reifies the hunger metaphor more explicitly than the previous two chapters; this is an aspect which will be further cemented in the figure of the cannibal.⁴

When René Girard raises the question: “[w]hy does the spirit of *revenge*, wherever it breaks out, constitute of [...] intolerable menace?” (14), he implicitly aligns *revenge* with an expansive quality through the use of the term “*break out*”.⁵ When he then answers his own question, by stating that “[p]erhaps because the only satisfactory *revenge* for spilt blood is spilling the blood of the killer” (14), he emphasizes the repetitive dynamism which is at play in the concept of *revenge*. Girard concludes his argumentation with the assertion that:

4 See chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the configuration of the cannibal.

5 He expands on this terminology throughout the development of his argument which also isolates the concept of *revenge* as a contagious “*disease*” (22).

[v]engeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal. The crime to which the act of vengeance addresses itself is [...] never an unprecedented offence; [...] it has been committed in revenge for some prior crime. (14)

What becomes evident is that “vengeance is an interminable, *infinitely repetitive* process” (Girard, 14, my emphasis) which means that the concept of revenge itself emerges as structurally serial. Murderous agency, conducted as a vengeful act, must always be preceded by a previous wrong and it manifests as reactive. This means that the revenge plot, like the serial narrative, is endowed with self-perpetuity and it is always already in motion; the vengeful act emerges only as the logical conclusion and consequence of a previous wrong in an expansive chain.

When read alongside the fruition of the *death paradox* in the context of the American cultural imaginary, the revenge narrative manifests itself as a structural serial that is geared towards emotional gratification and, thus, caters to an appetite for murder. The revenge plot unfolds as a narrative that has already begun, hinging on a preceding act which the avenger is avenging, and is endowed with that transcendentalist circularity that Emerson isolates in his essay “Circles” and with which Bronfen describes the dynamism of seriality.⁶ Based on this logic, the way in which revenge becomes circular and expansive, as elaborated upon by Girard, becomes apparent; the avenger’s murderous act comes to form the preceding act for another’s revenge in an endless chain of “reprisal” (Girard, 14). The emotional gratification that is written into the cathartic action of avenging, then, renders an aestheticized murderous agency pleasurable and this caters to the metaphorical hunger for death that haunts the American cultural imaginary. Based on this trajectory, this chapter focuses explicitly on the living agent of death that actively produces the corpse which ties to an emotional legitimization of murderous agency through the dynamism of revenge. It is here that we see a reconceptualization of the previous American gothic; vengeful desire, rather than overwriting the dead in order to reproduce them as living, re-actively produces more dead based on a previous action that is to be avenged.

It is significant that vengeance is based on emotional, rather than legal, justification and employs codification outside the symbolic order, outside the law even. This means that vengeance – be it personal or collective – is governed more by emotion than by rationale and implements an aesthetic of the emotionally just, rather than the lawfully right. By means of the previously outlined *death paradox* – the dynamic that a reality of abject death renders language linguistically mute for an instant, only to revert back to a compensatory productivity, a plethora of aesthetic renditions of

6 See chapter 3 for an in-depth discussion of the way in which seriality builds upon Emerson’s “Circles”.

death in an attempt to overcome – the revenge narrative can be seen as actively writing death, rather than rewriting the dead. Hence, the ensuing narratological productivity not only remains with the dead, as was the case in the previously outlined chapters on the American gothic and the figure of the zombie respectively, but further spans over the living who come to inflict death and desire to produce a corpse. Rather than rewriting the dead in an attempt to overcome it, a revenge narrative actively produces a corpse.

As Terry Eagleton claims, in a manner similar to Michel Foucault, “[d]eath is the limit of discourse, not a product of it” (87). In the context of vengeful desires, revenge becomes the active production of a perceived limitation. The vengeful agent of death codifies a just framework for becoming another’s abject – “being opposed to I” (Kristeva, 230) – in the sense that they are threatening another’s subjectivity through their vengeful agency. The murderous avenger is opposed to another’s subjectivity and, harboring murderous intention, becomes another’s abject as Julia Kristeva outlines:

The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is the savior. Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. [...] Abjection [...] is [...] a friend who stabs you... (232)

The vengeful murderer, then, employs the structure of justification or legitimization by means of another’s abject deeds; vengeful agency becomes the result of a previous wrong. Both eventually become oppositions to a subject and, therefore, abject entities in the reactive chain that the revenge plot sets into motion. Conceived of as a serial machinery, the revenge narrative produces aestheticized renditions of death by juxtaposing designated abject entities against one another. Geared towards a cathartic moment, vengeance hinges upon the lawless pursuit of emotional gratification which produces the corpse as a reaction. As a progression of the trajectory of this book, the dynamism of revenge does not overwrite the corpse, but instead, produces and thus writes the serialization of the corpse into the present based on a previously undertaken act.

Contemporary American filmmaker Quentin Tarantino in particular employs the structure of the revenge narrative in many of his films and will serve as a case study for the examination of the emotional aestheticization of murderous agency. Governed by the repetitive dynamism of vengeance, his texts infer a morality that aims at an emotional gratification, rather than a juridical justification. Personal codification of right and wrong allow for a legitimization of murderous agency through its emotional aestheticization. Playing to spectatorial sentimentality, vengeful desires rely on a culturally acknowledged ethical framework of just and unjust, in which acting as an agent of death in the context of reprisal is regarded

as acceptable, if not even outright encouraged. Cementing the pleasurable quality of gratification towards which the revenge narrative progresses, Tarantino's 2003 *Kill Bill Vol 1* opens with the following, notorious 'old Klingon' proverb: "Revenge is a dish best served cold." Alluding to the preparation of a meal, this proverb aligns the concept of revenge with the completion of a dish which is to be devoured. Reading the revenge narrative alongside an analogy of food, as a governing *denkfigur*, alludes to the seductive undercurrent that vengeance seems to carry within itself. Catering to an American hunger for death, the proverbial "thirst" for revenge satiates the appetite for aestheticized renditions of death.

In its purest form, a vengeful act is a simple repetition, the repayment of a wrong which is geared towards the implementation of ideologically codified justice. On a narratological level, though, the revenge narrative as text is in itself a reaction rather than an action because it merely mirrors an action as a reaction to a previous wrong. The vengeful desire's simplicity, therefore, also becomes a promising formula for satisfaction in which the repetition of a codified injustice is seen as a legitimate means by which to settle the score. I propose a reading of Tarantino's revenge narratives as a series of mirror images of each other, each proposing a different formula or recipe for murderous revenge, governed by an insatiable hunger for a codified, rightful death that hinges on Foucault's trope of the mirror, in which the confrontation with abject death becomes a limitless representation of aestheticized mirror images. In *Film Theory*, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener examine the ways in which cinema implements and works as (a) mirror, in particular with regard to its self-reflexivity, through what they term "nested narration (a film within a film) or pictorial framing which highlight[s] the constructedness of the *mise-en-scène*" (84); this results in "[...] various *mise en abyme* constructions resembl[ing] looks into the mirror [...]" (83). Read through the lens of the *death paradox*, in which the impossibility of a linguistic confrontation with death splits into the aforementioned plethora of mirror images, film may be regarded as a prevalent platform for the productive aestheticization of abject death. The medium of film, thus, reshapes or *tames* death towards tangibility,⁷ in terms of kinetic visualization in particular:

Yet it is precisely this feeling of having the ground pulled from under one that turns the mirror into a privileged place of ontological uncertainty by virtue of the fact that the mirror absorbs the lack of groundedness of the cinematographic image and turns it into a double reflection. (Elsaesser & Hagener, 85)

The way in which Elsaesser and Hagener describe the effect of the motion picture as mirror ties into David Lynch's (previously outlined) image of a haunted Dale

7 See introduction, passage on Wood, *America in the Movies*.

Cooper;⁸ the gaze into the mirror of death can be read as unleashing a desire to produce a corpse. As Lacanian theory suggests, “[...] desire is not only based on a (perceived) lack within the self, but also finds itself always mediated by someone else’s (imagined) desire” (74). Read alongside Lacan’s mirror stage, one could further propose that a confrontation with an abject momentarily destroys the fantasy of unity and what results is an anti-subjectivity, a self that is shattered by its own mortality, removed from its ideal and that is, therefore, forced to experience cracks in selfhood; this exposes the subject’s repressed abject mortality which is then visualized in film as a doubled mirror trope.

Manifesting as subtle mirror images of one another, Tarantino’s revenge films also strongly align the consumption of food and the execution of vengeful murderous agency both of which hinge on the gratification of an appetite. Tarantino’s oeuvre becomes an anthology of vengeful desires in which trauma becomes a moral currency. Echoing the tradition of the English Renaissance revenge tragedy, a “drama based on a quest for revenge [...] typically featuring scenes of carnage and mutilation” (OED), Tarantino’s revenge fantasies cater to gluttonous satisfaction, rather than lawful punishment, and are geared towards a more carnal lust that dismisses the symbolic order in its need for instant, emotional gratification. Employing the structure of the revenge tragedy, the openings of his films generally outline a wrong that has occurred, thereby creating an appetite, for which the larger part of the main feature extensively caters. The revenge narrative allows for an oversimplification of good and evil or right and wrong and taps into libidinal desires; its simplicity allows for spectatorial identification with the revenge fantasy. One-dimensional characters are drawn as fragmented yearnings which, by means of simplification, are able to blindly follow their thirst for revenge. Dictated by the revenge plot, by catering to this murderous appetite, these characters expand upon the serial structure of revenge, thereby ‘spreading the disease’ in Girard’s conceptualization through the reactive production of the corpse.

In *The Tarantinian Ethics*, Fred Botting and Scott Wilson assert that:

[c]haracter, or ‘personality’ is an effect of an assemblage of samples, references and productions that sustain desire” and therefore, “[...] Tarantino’s characters draw attention to both their fictionality and this conventional process of character-identification which they literalise and fragment. (13–14)

These fragmented characters become almost hollowed out by their desires and, not unlike the zombie, become consumed by their desires in Tarantino’s revenge narratives in particular. Similarly, spectatorial satisfaction is achieved by means of emotional gratification, rather than factualization of the narrative, playing into senti-

8 See chapter 1 for a visualization of Cooper’s fragmentation when possessed by Bob as he gazes into the mirror.

mental insatiability rather than sober rationality. A conscious lack of depth and realism is replaced by the fulfillment of a desire that is created by the filmmaker; as Lisa Coulthard states in “Torture Tunes”, Tarantino’s films are “loaded with libidinal energy, nostalgia, and the promise of fantasmatic satisfaction” (3). The serially expansive revenge then feeds on the aforementioned libidinal energy and, in turn, feeds the desire that craves “fantasmatic satisfaction” in the form of personally codified, vengeful murder. This chapter explores the way in which the cyclical concept of revenge negotiates an American repetition compulsion for an aestheticized death in the revenge narrative. Nourished by an emotional encoding catering to satisfaction, this chapter joins the Tarantinian revenge film with a libidinal hunger for death. These films can thus be read as mirror images or of each other against the backdrop of the *death paradox*; expanding on this proposition, rather than simple mirror images of an aestheticized death, this chapter reads these films as stunt doubles of one another, proposing an analysis which picks up on the indeterminable dynamism of revenge by means of highlighting its structural seriality. Governed by a lust for vengeance, these films also illustrate the way in which the politics of death align with the politics of food and showcase the American cultural imaginary’s insatiability for the production of the corpse .

3.1 The Personal Vendetta: Riding the Pussy Wagon – *Kill(ing) Bill* and *Death Proof*

As I lay in the back of Buck’s truck, trying to will my limbs out of entropy, I could see the faces of the cunts that did this to me and the dicks responsible. Members all of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. When fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, it seems proof like no other, that not only does God exist, you’re doing His will.

The Bride, Kill Bill

There is a distinction to be made between individual vengeance and collective revenge. While both of these concepts are fueled by the same desire to murder the unjust in an attempt to reinstate emotionally classified justice, the personal vendetta hinges on strong personal codification, as the quote above illustrates; “violent and ugly” revenge turns murderous desire into pseudo-moralistic proof of a larger, divine notion of right and wrong. The collective revenge fantasy expands upon this dy-

dynamic even further and employs the structure of collective trauma or wrong, broadening vengeance to a communally perceived wrongdoing of much larger proportions. Purity and simplicity motivate the personal vendetta in which an almost biblical “an eye for an eye” justification of a personal, and primarily emotionally driven, desire consumes both the avenger as well as the avenged. Hinging on this paradigm of emotion, the dynamic of a personal codification of a hunger and emotional charge aligns itself more closely with biological, natural law and situates itself outside of either the law or of any symbolic order. This claim may even be stretched as far as having a compensatory purpose in instances in which the law fails. As is stated in Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence”: “From this maxim follows that law sees violence in the hand of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system” (238). Individual, personal violence then often employs the structure of vengeance as a means to right a wrong that has slipped through the cracks of the law, as: “the individual [...] has *de jure* the right to use at will the violence that is *de facto* at his disposal” (Benjamin, 237) in order to correct or re-pay a perceived wrong.

In its purest form, revenge serves as a form of repetition compulsion; a perceived unjust is avenged by a potential injustice which is legitimized by means of its repetition. This simplification of justice dictates that a wrong may be avenged by another wrong, a dynamic which feeds on human desire and plays to the emotion not only of the avenger, but also of the onlooker. As Benjamin further states: “[...] for one reflects how often the figure of the “great” criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, has aroused the secret admiration of the public” (239). The revenge fantasy becomes liminal, almost carnivalesque, as it transgresses the limits of the law; violence conducted in the name of revenge caters to a personal need to level the playing field and, more often than not based on this dynamic, is secretly celebrated, rather than condemned according to Benjamin; the particular choice of the word ‘arouse’ also hints at the libidinal quality inherent in vengeful desire. What needs to be emphasized here is that revenge is fueled by emotional desire and satisfies a craving, an appetite which succumbs to temptation and that rights a wrong, or where the law has failed, by repeating said wrong.

Looking at the personal vendetta in the first instance, Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* saga as well as his double feature Grindhouse production *Death Proof* (alongside Robert Rodriguez’s *Planet Terror*) will serve as illustrations, since both implement a female murderous agency, thereby adding a layer of untraditionally gendered violence to these narratives. This female gendering of avengers can be read alongside Gillian Flynn’s essay “I Was not a Nice Little Girl”, written as a partial justification of the violent women that can be found throughout her novel *Sharp Objects*. The essay is concerned with the domestication of female violence which, in contrast to male violence, is neither celebrated nor spoken about, but has been traditionally omitted as a pretence of its non-existence. Flynn elaborates on this violent femininity stating that:

I was not a nice little girl. My favourite summertime hobby was stunning ants and feeding them to spiders. [...] if one of my dolls started getting an attitude, I'd cut off her hair. [...] these childhood rites of passage [...] really don't make it into the oral history of most women. [...] I think women like to read about murderous mothers and lost little girls because it's our only mainstream outlet to even begin discussing female violence on a personal level. Female violence is a specific brand of ferocity. It's invasive. A girlfight is all teeth and hair, spit and nails – a much more fearsome thing to watch than two dudes clobbering each other. [...] watching women go to work on each other is a horrific bit of pageantry that can stretch on for years. (1)

According to Flynn, then, female violence is gruesome, emotional, and vengeful, “a fearsome thing to watch” and is mostly absent from traditional narratives. The feminine is silenced and neglected as an agency of violent acts, more often than not, as becomes evident in the necessity of her ode to female violence. We find female violence mainly confined to the domestic space, namely in the form of cutting, beating, broiling, and whipping as part of the nurturing act of cooking.

Expanding on the analogy between vengeance and the preparation of a dish outlined previously, I would like to consider television chef Julia Child's *The French Chef*, which premiered in 1963 and was an immediate success and at least partially brought female violence into the domesticated, sheltered American household of the 1960s. Throughout her serial program Child notoriously emphasized the necessity for violence in the kitchen, stating, for example: “You can be very rough, I think a lot of people think that you have to be delicate in cooking but you don't” or, more blatantly, chopping off turkey leg: “just whack it off” (*The French Chef*). Traditionally, female violence, then, is limited to the spatiality of the kitchen, if it is represented at all, where it is executed by means of wielding knives and forceful wooden rolling pins. With *The French Chef*, Julia Child was able to bring at least one form of female violence into the American home and did it so successfully that her cooking programs continued airing into the 1990s. It is this domestication of female violence that is renegotiated through the female revenge narrative, in which the violence of food preparation is displaced onto the production of a corpse. However it is re-encoded, the aim remains the same and is motivated by gratification.

It appears that the violent nurture of knife-wielding women certainly has a wide appeal, a notion which we find skilfully reconfigured in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* saga. The two films, presented in double feature tradition, translate the visual documentation of the preparation of a meal into a revenge narrative. Metaphorically reformatting the cooking show as a revenge narrative, *Kill Bill* offers highly aestheticized images; the film is a self-referential and conscious pastiche, a reinterpretation of numerous other films and their respective genres, as Anneke Smelik elaborates: “*Kill Bill* is a typical action film, hybridized with many violent genres such as the

spaghetti western, the Japanese samurai, yakuza and anime, the Chinese kung fu, the American blaxploitation, the gangster film, and ‘rape revenge’ film” (187). The two films isolate vengeance as the proverbial dish⁹ that the protagonist is preparing and hoping to serve up, satirically adhering to the domesticized female chef. This reconceptualization domesticizes female violence within revenge-driven action films. As Coulthard states:

The Bride’s violence is exceptional, personally motivated, and purposefully aimed at the reestablishment of family unity . . . The end of the film offers a family devoid of its patriarch, but the emotive and narrational force of the film transforms this absence into positive presence. The absence of patriarchy is an absence of violence and threat, and the female violence of the film is configured retroactively as temporary, aberrant, obligatory, and curative. (70)

Throughout both films, *The Bride* works her way through her Kill List, which can be analogously read as a list of ingredients that are required in order to satisfy her appetite; the killing of Bill is, after all, an act of revenge. The film implicitly highlights *The Bride*’s singular desire as avenger through the way in which fight sequences are presented, as meticulously choreographed, and settings are intentionally staged in a hyper-artificial manner. Culminating in the visualization of the way in which she conducts her revenge, *Kill Bill* not only invites attention to be paid to surfaces, but actively forces its audience to engage with the exaggerated artifice of the female violence that is being executed. In an article written for *The New York Times*, John Leland observes that “in *Kill Bill* [...] women rise to a level of brutality previously reserved for men [...]” They do so by transgressing their (previously domesticized) violence, by claiming that masculine space by means of the emotionally charged revenge fantasy.

The film opens with a flashback during which we learn about the mistreatment of *The Bride* at the hands of Bill and his deadly assassination squad, who leave her for dead at a wedding chapel, pregnant with Bill’s child at the time. The narrative jumps ahead four years, having provided rightful ground for *The Bride*’s (re)actions, her repayment of a wrong unfolds as a series of vengeful actions. The flashback is necessary in order to provide the audience with the overarching structure, as well as the ideological foundation, for the murderous, female violence being staged as a repetition compulsion. The opening epigraph “Revenge is a dish best served cold” becomes particularly resonant of an alignment of the politics of death and food, based on the previously outlined analogy, between the television cooking show and a narrative of vengeful retribution, and this bridges the narrational justification and drive for the protagonist’s revenge with the inherently domestic activity of cooking. In this

9 We are reminded of the ‘old Klingon’ proverb which states that “Revenge is a dish best served cold”.

sense, Tarantino places the revenge narrative within the domestic framework of the kitchen. That which is metaphorically cooked is vengeance and that which is being observed by the audience is the meticulous planning and execution of the recipe, except that instead of Julia Child, we are following The Bride who becomes our figurative chef du jour.

The first fight sequence of *Kill Bill* in particular illustrates this analogy between a woman's traditional domesticized role as chef within the home and The Bride's extended and deadly version thereof. The sequence opens in suburbia par excellence, Pasadena California,¹⁰ in the idyllic family home of "Pasadena homemaker Genie Bell (former Vernita Green of the deadly assassination squad), [whose] husband is doctor Laurence Bell", something that is referenced by The Bride. The setting is suburban, residential, and exaggeratedly sheltered. It offers the contrasting frame for the brutality with which The Bride follows her vengeful desires. Female violence is executed within the safety of the domesticated female space and cathartically ends in the kitchen.

Illustration 9: The Bride and Vernita Green battle; Kill Bill: Vol. 1



Extensively duelling each other, the weapon of choice fittingly becomes a kitchen utensil, the deadly blade of a knife. We also find a reconfiguration of a rolling pin in the form of a wooden table leg, pans serve as shields, tables are set. The femininely gendered domestic space is turned into a piece of weaponry, something reminiscent of *The French Chef's* call for brutality in the kitchen. This first fight sequence translates the revenge narrative into a highly aestheticized domestic space that is weaponized by the exact same femininity that it traditionally confines and stifles, while simulta-

10 Coincidentally, Pasadena, California is also the place of birth of *The French Chef* Julia Child.

neously hinting at the libidinal quality of vengeful desire through its alignment with the preparation of a meal.

The duel is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of Vernita Green's daughter, Nicki, who becomes the reason for a temporary truce. Shared experiences of motherhood allow for female bonding between the duelling women, as Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens also point out:

The gender-subversive context of violet vengeance parodies the gender inversion with sprinkles of feminine moments such as female assassins' desire for domesticity and motherhood. An androgynous *nouvelle femme* (and *enfant terrible*), the Bride is portrayed having both masculine and feminine qualities. (216)

What follows this literal and symbolic interruption of the duel is the reversal of the weaponized domestic space into its traditional form. Green makes coffee for The Bride who has become a fellow mother and is no longer a vengeful opponent. The looming resolution of the duel nevertheless finds its subsequent and eventual retribution in the death of Green. Placing this resolution in the domestic space of the kitchen is symbolically necessary as a set up for the other dishes that are being stirred up through the analogous vengeance at the hands of The Bride far beyond the domestic space of the kitchen. The battle between The Bride and Green finds an abrupt ending; in a conniving attempt to shoot The Bride, in complete disregard of the previously set plans for a 'fair' duel, Green misses the shot and is stabbed in the heart by a knife thrown with masterful precision by The Bride, illustrative of her proficiency in the craft. Death resolves the duel, and the entrée is served symbolically by means of the cold blade of a knife. What is highlighted by means of setting is the domestic notion of the serving of a dish – preferably cold – and in the form of emotionally cathartic vengeance; based on The Bride's previously outlined past, Green's death becomes pleasurable because it is what the audience, as well as The Bride, *craves*. The fact that Green's daughter accidentally becomes an observer of The Bride's metaphorical concoction of revenge, then, spins the analogy further. Suddenly bereft of a mother, The Bride temporarily becomes her substitute and in a maternal act passes her recipe for revenge on to Nicki by telling her that she will await her own revenge for The Bride's own conducted wrong. While this assertion employs the trope of cooking as a gesture of motherhood, it also highlights the expansive quality inherent in the revenge plot which spirals into a potentially limitless seriality.

The revenge narrative of *Kill(ing) Bill* continues to follow The Bride in the painstaking preparation of her revenge, which must find its cathartic ending in the killing of Bill. The Bride, confronted with the rectification of the false assumption that her daughter has died, eventually becomes the daughter's rightful guardian and can step into her role of motherhood. As the story draws to a close so does the analogy of the cooking show, in which the preparation and meticulous cooking

of vengeance has become a domestic act of reinstatement and preservation of the rightful family order. As Coulthard observes, “[r]eiterating this redemptive function of retributive violence, the final scene of *Kill Bill* offers a utopic and intensely feminized image of a naturalized and conventional maternal wholeness. This melodramatic ending is in keeping with the drive towards increasing domesticity that carries the final acts of the film” (“Killing Bill”, 165). The deliciously violent preparation of vengeance, analogized in the manner of an extravagant meal, becomes a benevolent maternal act in which the patriarch is eliminated. The Bride’s motivation does not remain selfishly redemptive. First and foremost, The Bride is avenging the assumed death of her daughter; ultimately, she is avenging and killing Bill as an act of motherhood.

With narrational justification as its formulaic recipe, Tarantino skilfully reconceptualises the specifically female cooking narrative, which he translates into a revenge narrative, further exposing vengeful desire as a figure for the failed relationship between The Bride and Bill. Essentially, The Bride, upon her resurrection, rewrites her death as part of the patriarchal order into her own, matriarchal order. As she states in the opening of *Kill Bill, Vol. 2*:

I looked dead, didn't I? Well, I wasn't. But it wasn't from lack of trying, I can tell you that. Actually, Bill's last bullet put me in a coma – a coma I was to lie in for four years. When I woke up, I went on what the movie advertisements refer to as “a roaring rampage of revenge.” I roared. And I rampaged. And I got bloody satisfaction...

I've killed a hell of a lot of people to get to this point, but I have only one more. The last one. The one I'm driving to right now. The only one left. And when I arrive at my destination, I am gonna kill Bill.

Her opening monologue aligns the desire to kill with physical “bloody satisfaction” which, hinging on a vengeful hunger, draws the audience in and invites the onlooker’s secret admiration, in terms of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence”. The monologue further highlights the personal codification of revenge, alongside its emotional charge, by means of desire. Dawson states that:

From this perspective, Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1* and *Kill Bill: Volume 2* offer a unique representation of revenge in that between them they contain a literal enactment of what is normally a fantasy in the mind of the revenger. In *Kill Bill*, the murdered victim is also the triumphant revenger, who seemingly comes back to life to rewrite the past and resurrect the dead. (Dawson, 122)

The saga of *Kill Bill*, thus, visualizes the aestheticization of the production of the corpse as fulfilling the fantasy of the revenger. The revenge narrative rewrites the past by means of changing the present and future rather than extinguishing the past completely, as was the case with the American Gothic, or manifesting a past

trauma of being killed as a ghostly resurrection which comes back to haunt us, as was the case with the figure of the zombie. While gothic tradition is quoted with a dead bride who re-emerges as a haunting, so is the figure of the zombie when The Bride, who was literally buried alive, resurrects herself. However, the narrative is geared towards a repetition of death, rather than towards an extinction thereof. While she may have “looked dead”, she “wasn’t”. While she may have been momentarily rendered silent, had been penetrated by Bill’s bullet, and lay in a coma for four years, she came back as a producer of death, an avenger who roars and rampages with a clear intention: “I am gonna kill Bill”. Read in the context of the *death paradox*, the *Kill Bill* saga can be seen as becoming one of the many mirror images of death that produces its aestheticization in emotional form. Embedded in the structure of the revenge narrative, The Bride actively produces the corpse and writes it into the American cultural imaginary. By means of character identification and through the implementation of the concept of revenge, the aestheticized production of the corpse, thus, comes to cater to a desire for emotional gratification.

The fact that the opening monologue is spoken while driving a car, then, picks up on *Kill Bill Vol. 1*’s Pussy Wagon, with regard to which it is significant to emphasize that The Bride re-appropriates her former rapist “Buck’s” sexist vehicle as her own deadly machine. In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed, elaborating on female monstrosity, states that “[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (1). As an example of this she highlights the trope of the *vagina dentata*, which “[...] is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as ‘the toothed vagina’ – the vagina that castrates” (Campbell, 73). While The Bride herself remains largely uneroticized in the film, the Pussy Wagon certainly hints at a misogynistic eroticization and objectification of the female body. The Bride reappropriates its purpose by means of making it her own, however. The Pussy Wagon rather than being a metaphor for misogyny, becomes a trope for a *vagina dentata* in which Tarantino’s female gendering of the personal vendetta aligns it with the emotionality of a vengeance that is tied to its libidinal desires by alluding to a hungry mouth. Gendering the spatiality of vengeance as such allows us to spin this analogy further into a claim for the *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina, female genitalia that is paralleled with a mouth and wants to consume, for which the Pussy Wagon becomes a fitting synecdoche. Reappropriating murderous female craving as the *vagina dentata*, in the form of a vehicle, adds an additional layer to this figuration of revenge, as the car, or monster truck in this case, may be regarded as a specifically American trope of the road. The Pussy Wagon becomes a *machina dentata* roaming the streets of Pasadena, California. Read alongside the *death paradox*, the *machina dentata* emerges as an ultimate, productive response to linguistic stagnation. This trope of a feminized American machine as a vehicle for revenge is further

extended in Tarantino's *Death Proof*, which will be read as a further aestheticized rendition of death within the framework of this chapter; it is an additional mirror image which is produced by the exact incapability of retelling death which serves as a metaphorical stunt double of the *Kill Bill* saga.

In 2007, Tarantino launched the Grindhouse Production Double Feature *Death Proof* and *Planet Terror* together with Robert Rodriguez; this was a double feature which was advertised as "Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez are back! But this time they're back to back, 2 ½ hours of pure dynamite! Together in one smash explosive show!"

Illustration 10: Grindhouse Double Feature Poster, 2007



While *Death Proof* employs the same repetitive structuring as the narrative of *Kill Bill*, its edges are visibly rougher and the conceptualization of the revenge narrative in *Death Proof* hinges on instant emotional gratification, as opposed to the meticulous planning and deferment of revenge which spans over the *Kill Bill* saga. While an overt self-reflexivity may be said to characterize all of Tarantino's films, the artifice of film is particularly present in *Death Proof* and emphasizes the kinetic energy of cinema in an allusion to the tangibility of instantaneous emotional gratification of murderous agency governed by the revenge plot.

On the level of form, the kinetic materiality of film is explicitly emphasized as there are repetitious inconsistencies written into the film, which is supposed to look old and ragged, so as to adhere to grindhouse tradition. Continuity suffers from bro-

ken film strips and highlights its physicality as film. The film's impression of materiality offers a nostalgic mosaic of cinema history, quoting grindhouse, exploitation movie, b-grade roadmovies such as *Vanishing Point*, *Convoy*, or *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* Traditionally, grindhouse movies are “films shown as cheap double features in less-than-savory theatres decades ago” (“Double Trouble”, Donahue, 128). Picking up on the repetitive nature of revenge, *Death Proof* is haunted by the excessive doubling of form and content throughout. The film is presented as a doubled narrative told in two parts and bridged by “one diabolical man” whom, according to the poster: “[t]hese 8 Women are about to meet”. This diabolical man is the one-dimensional character stuntman Mike, his occupation as stuntman further hinting at the corporeality of film material, who is characterized simply by his desire to randomly choose women whom he kills by means of his death proof car, a leftover prop from one of his stunts. The inherent double entendre does not remain subtle, but becomes explicit as Stuntman Mike explains to the first victim we observe: “this car is 100% death proof. Only to be getting the benefit of it, honey, you really need to be sitting in my seat”, reinforcing the incessant doubling which is written into the fabric of the film.

His diabolical actions will ultimately come to be avenged by the rightful repetition of diabolicalness as a vengeful reaction, which renders them just in the hands of the avengers. Rodriguez classifies the grindhouse film as a caterer to spectatorial desire, as a picture that is hungry for sensation: “In those days, the exploitation films couldn't afford stars, they didn't have big budgets so they had to have ‘exploitable elements’ – things the other movies didn't have [...] the subject matter, the sex, or the action” (qtd in “Double Trouble”, 128). The emphasis lies on speed, action, and immediate characters and, by extension, spectatorial satisfaction. Compared to *Kill Bill*, vengeance in *Death Proof* is drawn as less orchestrated and more immediate, but similarly concludes with the death of the patriarch at the hands of the avenger, as a punishment for an unjust act. The corpse that is produced (Stuntman Mike) rests on a plethora of previous corpses (the deceased girls) produced at his hands and, thus, emerges as a result of a repetition compulsion which, in the context of revenge, becomes expansive in the serial repetition of a previous wrong. With a strong emphasis on immediate gratification, the desire to avenge in *Death Proof* becomes predominantly carnal, which is reinforced through its staging of the trope of the devouring *machina dentata*.

The dynamics of a repetition compulsion that produces the corpse is written into the very fabric of *Death Proof* from the very beginning of the (double) feature. Designed as one part of a double feature, the story is also told in two parts. While Stuntman Mike manages to feed his desire to kill by means of his car – his phallic extension, which is overtly quoted as such throughout the film – he rams his death proof car into the girls in the first part, murdering all of them which is visualized as a grotesque fragmentation of the female body. It is this murderous act that comes to serve as the emotional legitimization of the second part, outlining the pre-

vious wrong to which the ensuing revenge fantasy becomes a (cyclically expanding) reaction. Aligning the consumption of food with the production of death, Stuntman Mike is initially introduced devouring a plate of nachos with distinct pleasure. Again, Tarantino emphasizes the notion of desire by means of paralleling a desire to kill with a desire to eat, as an entire minute is spent on Mike eating. Corporeality, plasticity, and physicality characterize not only the kinetic tangibility of the rugged grindhouse film, but also find their way into the film's overtly self-reflexive tone which adds an additional doubling of vengeful desires where, "corporeal and acoustic amputation become one in the prematurely terminated song that scores the dismemberment and deaths of the girls" (Coulthard, 4). The audible as a double of the visual emphasizes cinema as a material, kinetic experience, thereby highlighting the sensual reception of film, the content of which is simultaneously geared toward all of the senses.

As the second part of the narrative is introduced – "Lebanon, Tennessee – 14 months later" we are once again introduced to a new girl gang that Stuntman Mike has his sadistic eye on. A different state and a different girl gang, the repetitive doubling not only poses repetition, but implements the uncanniness of the doppelganger as a harbinger of death.¹¹ As the girl gang is presented, we learn that two women out of this new gang of four are stunt women. Stuntman Mike unknowingly not only comes to face with his own kind, but he will also come to be defeated by them in a heroic act as "[i]n the *Kill Bill* films and *Death Proof*, homicidal vengeance is heroism, and deliberate infliction of pain part of the package" (Walters, 21). It is not insignificant that it takes his own kind to defeat him as the motif of the stunt double as a trope carries further implications. The stunt double is the doppelganger of an 'original' actor who, rather than being an uncanny threat, is the more disposable copy of the original. Stunt doubles become a *mise-en-abyme*, taking on a danger themselves so that the original does not have to; they are the potentially expendable lesser original and simultaneous reminder of mortality. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term "stuntman" as: "A person employed to take an actor's place in performing dangerous stunts". The stuntman does so in order to render the final product (i.e., the cinematic representation of a dangerous act) more believable in spite of its artificial nature. The commonality of the more ambiguous stunt *double* adds an additional layer of uncanniness to the term as the double, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, can be defined as "[a] person who looks exactly like another" but also as "[a] person who stands in for an actor in a film." While Kurt Russel is the actor in the film *Death Proof* who is being doubled, he also assumes the role of stuntman Mike; he becomes a mirror image of himself in himself, thereby simultaneously highlighting the plasticity or corporeality of the revenge fantasy as film as well as its stance as a mirrored illusion, as a mere aesthetic.

11 See Freud, "The Uncanny", 1916.

It is also in this second part of the picture in which the references to *Kill Bill* become almost farcically overt; a ringtone, a reference to the literal stunt double of Daryl Hannah, the color of the car which is reminiscent of The Bride's suit and which is decorated with a sticker that reads "Lil' Pussy Wagon" all foreshadow the looming female vengeance which is about to be catered to: a misconduct and ensuing revenge executed by women in the name of all of his presumed victims. While *Kill Bill* offered the meticulous planning of each step in the avenger's revenge, *Death Proof* highlights immediacy over perfection and, hence, instantaneous emotional gratification over reason. As Benjamin critiques: "[a]s regards man, he is impelled by anger, for example, to the most visible outbursts of a violence that is not related as a means to a preconceived end. It is not a means but a manifestation" (Benjamin, 248). *Death Proof* aligns itself more closely with the corporeal and physical, becoming a manifestation of said anger as desire which is hungry for quenching gratification. While *Death Proof*'s Zoë Bell was the stuntwoman for Uma Thurman's The Bride, it is also the yellow "lil Pussy Wagon" which then specifically quotes The Bride's iconic suit during her murderous avenging of O-Ren Ishii. The excessive referencing of *Kill Bill*, as well as the film's material placing of *Death Proof* in a position of a metaphorical stunt double of the *Kill Bill* saga, makes it feel like a more disposable copy of the original. This aspect further picks up on the grindhouse genre, operating with a smaller budget and, therefore, working with doppelgangers or stunt doubles in a leading role of an original feature. What is emphasized, by means of this mirroring, is the plasticity of kinetic corporeality in the form of vengeful desires, thereby adding tangibility to the aestheticization of death that in itself caters to murderous desire. The revenge narrative's seriality continuously produces the corpse while a focus on kinematic plasticity renders it seemingly tangible with the trope of the *vagina dentata* as *machina dentata* echoing a specific appetite for revenge.

Expanding on this dynamic, while *Kill Bill* legitimized female violence by means of a reappropriation of the feminine and domesticized space of the kitchen, *Death Proof* employs a reverse structure, claiming the traditionally male gendered machine as a female tool of weaponry. Both films employ the trope of the *machina dentata* as a carrier of vengeful desires. Before being attacked by Stuntman Mike, the stunt girls, hungry for adrenaline, play a stunt termed "Ship's Mast". As Joshua Clover elaborates:

[...] the '69 Dodge Charger and '70 Dodge Challenger should have gotten points on the gross. Several human characters are (and are played by) professional stunt artists, a craft which highlights the objectizing of bodies; the cars are obviously their next of kin. Though the film's lesson is brutal, the central stunt, known as "Ship's Mast" (wherein Zoë Bell straps herself to the windshield by means of Prada belts), seems to involve actually trying to have the same experience a car has [...] (6)

By conducting this stunt, they write themselves into the fabric of the machine, and expanding on the metaphorical ship, not only become captains of the vehicle but an extension thereof. The hood ornament, a little duck on top of Stuntman Mike's car, which is aligned with his phallic power, is then mirrored and re-conceptualized with the girls' car while the two race each other in a life or death battle.

Illustrations 11 & 12: Car ornament doubling, *Death Proof*



Not only are they gendering the original car from *Vanishing Point* into a *machina dentata*, one driven and ridden by a woman, it is also Zoë Bell, the real life stunt-woman who is portraying herself in the film, who becomes the girls' literal hood ornament. The girl gang, in conducting their revenge, literally double Stuntman Mike's masculine space to then overcome or overwrite it by means of killing him. Performing vengeance, they repeat his wrong and, in so doing, produce him as a corpse.

Their respective vehicles become synecdoches of their physical potency,¹² which doubles the plasticity of the grindhouse film itself, thereby also rendering the girls' car as a literal pussy wagon, or *machina dentata*, on which Zoë herself becomes the ornament. This dynamic of gendering the machine is mirrored by Stuntman Mike's car which is drawn as his phallic desire throughout the film:

Illustrations 13 & 14: Ornament alignment with genitalia, *Death Proof*



12 The conflation of man and machine also hints at the technological reproductivity that is inherent in the structure of the revenge plot.

Upon recovering from his first attack, the unnamed Sheriff suspects Stuntman Mike of being a diabolical man, calling his urge to kill women by means of his death proof car “a sex thing”. This is a suspicion that is confirmed in the second part, when Stuntman Mike chases the girl gang in a euphoric haze, yelling: “Wanna get hot?” The sexual innuendo is further continued in the role reversal in which the girls come to chase Stuntman Mike. During the extensive car chase, their immediate revenge, a spontaneous decision, is motivated by emotional gratification; Zoë asks: “wanna go get him?” to which Kim replies: “oh hell yes,” which Abby concludes with “fuck that shit. Let’s kill this bastard”. The immediacy with which they follow their desire is rendered even more libidinal when Kim comments on hitting Stuntman Mike’s car with: “Oh you know I can’t let you go without tapping that ass”. In a gruesome and cathartic fist fight, the girls murder and symbolically overkill the object of their vengeful desires; this serves to emphasize the emotionally driven nature of revenge and its direct connection to gratification.

In the manner of what has been termed Hollywood’s *new brutality* or *ultraviolence* which, according to Coulthard, proposes that “[...] the postmodern detachment, the lack of affect, and the ironic distance that are seen to characterize contemporary cinematic ultraviolence” (“Torture Tunes”, 1). She further isolates Tarantino as an icon and the arguable “principal originator” of the aforementioned *new brutality* which results in the “uncomfortable mixing of violence with humor” (“Torture Tunes”, 1–2). This also places violence within the realm of the carnivalesque, which is governed by a transcendent exchange of the rational for either the irrational or for the libidinal. Elaborating further on *new brutality*, Coulthard explains: “this kind of ironic representation of on-screen graphic film violence in the last two decades of American cinema has been characterized as evincing a new atmospheric and aesthetic cinematic trend toward cynical, dystopic, extreme, and explicit violence” (“Torture Tunes”, 1). The staging of the production of the corpse as such highlights the film’s materiality and, by extension, the revenge carried out as a more graspable aesthetic. Read as a metaphorical stunt double of *Kill Bill*, *Death Proof* performs a dangerous act in lieu of the original, adding plasticity to that same dangerous act which caters to a more instantaneous gratification of vengeful desires, thereby highlighting its libidinal quality.

As Coulthard further elaborates, in terms of torture tunes, the score in Tarantino is often designed to break with any remaining debris of a cinematic illusion of reality, instead highlighting the kinetic, physical materiality of film itself:

As a result of all of these factors, music works to frame extreme violence in Tarantino films in a way that recognizes and emphasizes its highly libidinal, affective nature and effect while simultaneously derealizing that violence, defusing its threat, and controlling its impact. (“Torture Tunes”, 3)

It is then also the proverbial tunes that accompany the end credits of *Death Proof* – Aprilmarch's “chick habit” – which draws on the image of gluttonous desire, urging “Daddy” to “hang up the chick habit,” aligning the presumably female victims of this habit with chickens, placing the desire to kill within a framework of food. The analogy between victim and consumption is further drawn on as the tune elaborates: “A girl's not a tonic or a pill [...] No candy in your till, No cutie left to thrill”. The song further expands this notion with regards to the avenger when it states that: “I'm telling you it's not a trick, Pay attention, don't be thick, Or you're liable to get *licked*”, the liability to “get licked” pointing towards the desire to devour vengeance as well as aligning violence with the consumption of food. The final tune meta-cinematically brings the film, as well as its carnal portrayal of revenge, to a close by consolidating the brutal and instant revenge that the girls executed, thereby placing it within a realm of deserved gratification which: “[...] give[s] the spectator a permission to enjoy – an authorization that domesticates the audiovisual violence, renders it isolated, controllable, and slightly unreal” (Coulthard, “Torture Tunes”, 4). When read alongside the more meticulous orchestration of revenge formulated as the preparation of a meal that we find in *Kill Bill*, then, the reading of *Death Proof* as its stunt double highlights the plasticity or carnality of vengeful desire, which is allowed to roam more overtly in the “disposable” and lesser original. Both *Death Proof* as well as the *Kill Bill* saga draw revenge as a physical, carnal desire, one that is aligned with the preparation and consumption of a meal and this taps into its overt simplicity as a personally codified repetition. The characters themselves remain overtly one-dimensional, consumed by their desire to kill, because:

Tarantino's characters are drawn as blatant caricatures and often remain largely one dimensional. This lack of depth, however, allows them to become exclusive hunters of their desires. They often have but one appetite which they incessantly follow until it can be quenched. (Botting & Wilson, 13)

In both *Death Proof* and the *Kill Bill* saga, the one-dimensionality of the characters underlines the way in which the revenge narrative allows for these characters to be consumed by their desire to avenge. Becoming pure avengers, it is through these one-dimensional characters that the concept of revenge is epitomized as a powerful repetition compulsion of murderous agency that actively produces the corpse in order to achieve gratification. Making use of the revenge narrative's cathartic dynamism, Tarantino also positions the specifically female avenger as a murderous agent, thereby challenging gender conventions regarding violent behavior. Reading the *Kill Bill* saga in adherence to the serial television cooking program and *Death Proof* as its metaphorical stunt double not only highlights the way in which the revenge narrative allows for a rehabilitation of female violence, but also the way in which the cyclical machinery of revenge becomes serially expansive. The revenge narrative is dominated by the reactive and exponential production of the corpse and is always

preceded by a violent act. It is these corpses, in the form of an aestheticized abject death, that come to satisfy the avengers' desire in a serial spiral that caters to the American cultural imaginary's insatiability.

3.2 Reimaginings of History as Collective Vengeance: *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS and Django UNCHAINED*

To write something down doesn't
make it true. But the history of truth
is lashed to the history of writing like
a mast to a sail.

Jill Lepore, These Truths

Tarantino's *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS* as well as *Django UNCHAINED* both tackle a collective wrong which is to be avenged by means of a reimagination of its history, thereby expanding on the individual revenge narrative, the personal vendetta. In "Debating *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS*", Ben Walters observes that: "[...] without much thought for the reality of war, [Tarantino] saw here an opportunity to map his pet plot of female revenge onto an interesting genre" (19). A film which was received with ambivalent tonality, Tarantino's "cavalier revisionism" (Walters, 19) in *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS* offers the alternative execution of Adolf Hitler and the implied destruction of the Third Reich, a reimagination which feeds into a real communal desire and which mirrors the subsequent *Django UNCHAINED*, which produces the African American body as a Western hero. Both purely fictional re-tellings of history, I propose a reading of *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS* as a mirrored version and metaphorical stunt double of *Django UNCHAINED*. Not just a remapping and expansion of the female revenge plot, these two films seem to employ a similar relationship as *Death Proof* does with the *Kill Bill* saga, in which one becomes the stunt double of the other, thereby performing a dangerous act in order to hone in on the subsequent original to perfection, adding a tangible plasticity to the repetitively expansive act of vengeance.

IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS spatially distances itself from the United States, but simultaneously problematizes the Holocaust as a screen memory for American trauma; in "Bastardized History: How *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS* Breaks through American Screen Memory", Stella Setka discusses this notion, outlining that "[...] the Holocaust has been transformed in the United States from a specifically Jewish trauma into a broadly defined mainstream American experience" (142). This is a reading which is confirmed by Peter Novick who observes that "[...] the Holocaust has come to be presented – come to be thought of – as not just a Jewish memory but an American memory" (207). While the personal vendetta remains tied to the individual, vengeance that hinges on the collective bears the question of ownership regarding

trauma; this is something which is inherently tied to the question of who is allowed to avenge this trauma. The titular 'Inglourious Basterds', according to Setka, "call [...] attention to American culture's appropriation of Holocaust memory through its conflation of Jewish and American identities in the elite fighting unit that gives the film its title" (142). A blatant Americanization of the Holocaust, therefore, calls the legitimization of vengeful desire into question by questioning the traumatized collective and its execution of righting a wrong. I say blatant here because my proposition of reading *Inglourious Basterds*, as a literal bastardization of the Holocaust as an American trauma, allows the film to become the metaphorical stunt double for *Django Unchained*, which addresses the specifically American trauma of slavery. In this sense, the "[...] sadistic bloodlust of his Jewish avengers [which] is as unsettling as his revisionist chutzpah is disarming" (Walters, 19) in *Inglourious Basterds* performs an initial dangerous act without harming the "original" trauma. Reading these films as fragmented mirror images further illustrates the way in which they both employ the same narratological structure, one governed by a vengefully motivated repetition compulsion that produces the corpse as an act of gratification. Emphasizing the expansive dynamism of revenge, both films also diegetically double the revenge narrative, interweaving the personal vendetta with the collective avenging of a trauma. Positioned as chronological mirror images of one another, the films become a logical continuation of the cathartic collective revenge fantasy that is played through.

In *Inglourious Basterds*, Shoshanna Dreyfuss becomes the nexus of vengeful desire as she combines the personal vendetta and the collective trauma at stake. Her direct opponent and the primary object of her individual vengeful desire is Colonel Hans Landa with whose introduction the film opens. He is "[...] the film's arch villain, the murderous "Jew Hunter" [...], an SS officer whose sole responsibility, as his nickname indicates, is to hunt down Jews and ensure their destruction" (Setka, 155). Describing himself to Aldo "the Apache" Raine, leader of the Basterds, Landa euphemistically compares himself to "a damn good detective. Finding people is my specialty." However, while the detective traditionally seeks a murderer, a quest which is only triggered by a corpse, Landa finds those who (according to his ideology) deserve to be killed and in his quest, he produces the corpse rather than the corpse's retribution. Similar to *Death Proof's* stuntman Mike, Landa's desire to produce death is immediately associated with the consumption of food in the opening scene. As he asks for a second glass of "this delicious milk" during the opening at LaPadite farm, it becomes evident that Landa is thirsty, thirsty to kill. This element is reinforced by his repeated request for a second glass of milk right before killing the hidden Dreyfuss family and before allowing Shoshanna to escape.

This analogy between eating and killing is highlighted throughout the film, where Landa is prominently drawn as a *foodie*, "[a] person with a particular interest in food; a gourmet" (OED), his gluttonous desires usually appearing alongside a

subsequent murderous rampage. The scene that follows his apparent insatiable thirst for milk is the elimination of the Dreyfuss' family members, who have been hiding beneath the floorboards, a murderous act from which Shoshanna Dreyfuss will come to be the sole survivor. It is this act that provides the film with the underlying evil or wrong that will be made just through an act of revenge. Transforming the previous wrong into an ongoing quest for vengeance, the visualization of this brutal act serves as the legitimization of Shoshanna's eventual destruction of her cinema, filled with Nazis at the time, an act which history renders satisfactory to the spectatorial gaze, as:

[...] *Inglourious Basterds* reminds us through its postmodern self-reflexivity, Holocaust films, like any other commodity, are created to fulfil a market demand; their content is often tailored to meet the desires of a majority of the viewing public and thus may not always be shaped by a sense of fidelity to verifiable historical knowledge. (Setka, 148)

Collective trauma, then, is incorporated by murderous SS officer Landa who is prominently shown as being quite insatiable. Years later, Landa unwittingly meets Shoshanna again, who has taken on a new identity as Emmanuelle Mimieux adding significance to his previous departing words "Au Revoir". During a scene that is built on tangible dramatic irony, he orders her "un verre de lait" an immediate reminder of her personal trauma, the murder of her family which was framed by his unquenchable thirst for milk. When he urges her to "attendez la crème" to perfect her experience when eating the apple strudel, he is again aligned with the consumption of food, onto which her trauma is superimposed; his hunger for death is to be avenged by means of her own desire to repay his wrong which emerges as a just act in the face of his unjust behavior.

Read as an expansion on the female revenge plot, as well as a displaced screen memory for American traumata, the image of *machina dentata* crafted as a specifically American trope for the previously outlined *death paradox* is not missing in *Inglourious Basterds*, but is instead adapted to the spatial displacement of American trauma. The *machina dentata* as a carrier of narrative becomes a linguistic expansion into the realm of the living, its productive potency catering to an appetite for the production of the aestheticized corpse. The machine, as an extension of vengeful desires within the European setting of *Inglourious Basterds*, does not manifest as a car but is instead reconceptualized as a displaced lens within Shoshanna's film projector. Implemented as screen image, it becomes the literal projection of American trauma onto a geographical displacement as the diegetic film projector is framed as the machinic extension of (female) vengeful desires. On European soil, cinema itself as a powerful tool for displacement becomes the *machina dentata* in the form of Shohsanna's film, which itself is a reimagination of the Nazi picture "Der Stolz der Nation," the ending of which she literally changes. Upon planning her murderous re-

venge, she decides with determination that “[n]ous allons faire un film”, mirroring Tarantino's own filmmaking in which kinetic materiality is used in order to exhaust trauma.

While the framing parallels 35mm film and its flammability with ammunition, it is also the literal film material which becomes the ammunition of Shoshanna's revenge. This doubling of cinematic materiality continues the cooking metaphor; as Walters outlines, “[...] cinema provides not only incidental references: it is also the meat of the plot” (20). In *Inglourious Basterds*, then, it is the materiality of film itself that is used to execute vengeful desires which, in turn, also emphasizes a collective striving for vengeance, one mirrored in spectatorial desire:

When it comes, the story's climax is as blunt an assertion of the phantasmagorical power of cinema as the medium has ever delivered. Shosanna and Zoller kill each other but are resurrected as filmic images – themselves agents of death – before flames consume the screen and then the audience.

What remains is a weird form of film as fatal dominatrix, a close-up of Shosanna projected onto smoke – the giant face of the chapter's title – laughing as her viewers burn. (Walters, 22)

Illustration 15: Shoshanna engulfing screen, Inglourious Basterds



While Shoshanna has died, and the picture rests on her abject corpse, she also continues to live on screen as a pure image in the alternate ending of “Stolz der Nation” which she has made and which begins to roll. “I have a message for Germany” she says as a close-up of her determined gaze captures the audience and she continues, “[t]hat you are all going to die.” Locked inside the movie theater, the audience is unable to escape the flames which slowly engulf the screen and begin to transgress the screen burning through the entire auditorium. Engulfing Shoshanna's face, the flames wrap her victorious laughter and literally devour the picture; an image be-

comes a fitting metaphor for the motif in which the trauma of the Holocaust is consciously instrumentalized as screen memory for another, displaced traumata:

[...] in the Freudian sense, covering up a traumatic event – another traumatic event – that cannot be approached directly. More than just an ideological displacement (which it is no doubt as well), the fascination with the Holocaust could be read as a kind of screen allegory behind/through which the nation is struggling to find a proper mode of memorializing a trauma closer to home. (Hansen, 113)

A domestic trauma is tackled in *Django Unchained* in which, according to Tarantino, spatial displacement is substituted for a specifically American traumata:

I want to explore something that really hasn't been done. I want to do movies that deal with America's horrible past with slavery and stuff but do them like spaghetti westerns, not like big issue movies. I want to do them like genre films, but they deal with everything that America has never dealt with because it's ashamed of it, and other countries don't really deal with because they don't feel they have the right to. (Interview with John Hiscock)

There are numerous allusions to traumata in American history throughout *Inglourious Basterds*, such as Raine's native American roots, exemplified in his nickname "the Apache" about whose historical background Tarantino has stated: "Aldo has been fighting racism in the South; he was fighting the Klan before he ever got into World War II. And the fact that Aldo is part Indian is a very important part of my whole conception [...]" (Interview with Ella Taylor), or Goebbels' extensive rant on American Olympic superiority exclusively by means of the athletic black body. This discourse is epitomized in the Basterd's "name game" during which a small band of Basterds, disguised as Nazi officers alongside German actress and double agent Bridget von Hammersmark, are roped into conversation with German Major Hellstrom. During the game, Hellstrom specifically addresses the American trauma of slavery. He has to find out whom the identity written on the card taped to his head belongs to – it reads King Kong – by means of asking a series of questions. After establishing that 'his' origins are exotic he inquires: "When I went from the jungle to America, did I go by boat? [...] Did I go against my will? [...] On this boat ride, was I in chains? [...] When I arrived in America, was I displayed in chains? [...] Am I the story of the Negro in America?" which Bridget von Hammersmark dismisses as wrong and to which Hellstrom then replies: "Well then I must be King Kong." Implementing these strong citations of specifically American history, or rather traumata, underlines the status of *Inglourious Basterds* as a metaphorical stunt double of the subsequent *Django Unchained*.

It becomes evident that just as *Death Proof* may be read as *Kill Bill's* stunt double, this dynamism of a visual repetition compulsion emerges again when comparing

Inglourious Basterds to *Django Unchained*. As the metaphorical stunt double, *Inglourious Basterds* is rougher in the sense that it displays a spatial detachment, one which allows the performance of a dangerous act that is then honed to perfection in *Django Unchained*. Once again crafted in Tarantino's signature revisionism, the film refigures the specifically American collective trauma of slavery as a revenge narrative. Tarantino himself stated: "I think America is one of the only countries that has not been forced . . . to look [its] own past sins in the face. And it's only by looking them in the face that you can possibly work past them" (Interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr, 194). The film's opening gaze focuses on the mutilated black body as we see the scarred backs of a row of slaves, among whom wanders Django, exposed. What is front and center is the American trauma of slavery, but also an immediate visualization of the wrong, the injustice which creates an appetite for the avenging thereof. Both films, *Inglourious Basterds* as well as *Django Unchained*, remain formulaic in that they employ the structure of the revenge narrative which, as we know, leans heavily on the previously outlined food analogy in its visualization. Both films tackle a collective hunger for setting a wrong right by means of executing ideologically codified and serially expansive productions of the corpse towards a sense of gratification that is inherently tied to the dynamism of revenge.

From the very beginning, the film hints at a traumatizing past that exercises a firm grip over Django's future revenge. The film rolls its opening credits in thick red letters on a beige canvas, making an immediate reference to the Western genre as "[t]he red letters of the opening sequence quote classic Westerns of the 1950s like John Ford's *The Searchers*; the accompanying zooms are lifted right out of a 70s Western" (Bronfen & Daub, 2). In making a clear statement that this film adheres to a Western genre, one conventionally dominated by a white male hero, Tarantino immediately opens the debate of African-American writer Toni Morrison's "critical project", initially raised in *Playing in the Dark*, which aims at challenging the conventions of the white male hero via inclusion of the marginalized Africanist perspective: "I intend to outline an attractive, fruitful, and provocative critical project, unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls" (3). Tarantino does so by subverting the genre and by choosing an African American hero, called Django no less, named after Sergio Corbucci's 1966 Spaghetti Western *Django*. Within the frameset of the opening credits of *Django Unchained*, we not only learn that the year is 1858 but also the (now yellow) letters on a black canvas inform us that the film is taking us to a time "Two years before the Civil War". This framing places a particular emphasis on the Civil War as a historical landmark as well as the re-imaginary nature of the film that explores an impossible past through the lens of the future as an attempt to process the trauma caused, in much the same way as *Inglourious Basterds* reimagined Second World War era Germany. In the same manner as *Inglourious Basterds*, *Django Unchained* hinges on a twofold structuring of vengeful desires. While it sets up a basis for Django's personal vendetta, and quest for

his wife Broomhilda, it also addresses the collective trauma of slavery in the United States. With regard to Morrison's previously mentioned claim in *Playing in the Dark*, Tarantino's *Django Unchained* may be regarded as such a reimagination of white male literature. The manifestation of Django's trauma is then, arguably, brought to life by Calvin Candie's master slave Stephen, who embodies everything Django despises, but that he is unable to overcome. The fact that he cannot escape Stephen, but is instead pushed to his limits by this character, reinforces the notion that Stephen not only serves as the story's villain story, but that he more importantly becomes Django's uncanny double; the personified trauma that Django has yet to overcome and in overcoming is also avenging for himself as well as for the community more generally.

After Django is *unchained* by Dr. King Schultz, at the very beginning of the film, the pair become bounty hunters which foreshadows Django's eventual revenge. Their ensuing partnership as bounty hunters is based on a commodification of the dead as Schultz himself states that he: "deals in corpses", elaborating on his occupation which "like slavery [is] a flesh for cash business". Against the backdrop of the American South in 1858, the bounty hunter business is further woven into a dynamic of revenge when Django inquires: "You kill people, and they give you a reward? [...] bad people?" to which Schultz replies: "[the] badder they are the bigger the reward," the obvious implication here is that these bad people deserve to be killed as punishment for their bad deeds and this feeds into Benjamin's aforementioned secret admiration of the criminal. This glorification of murderous agency is possible because it is built upon the grounds of collective trauma and the resulting collective vengeful desire generates gratification through the production of the corpse. For Schultz, and by extension for Django, it becomes possible to (ab)use the symbolic order to achieve vengeance as he acts as a killer in the form of "legal representative of the criminal justice system of the United States of America".

Illustration 16: Alignment with tooth on carriage, Django Unchained



Killing becomes their literal occupation as they roam the Southern wasteland in Schultz's carriage, crowned by a tooth, a remnant of his previous occupation as a dentist. Schultz's carriage is also reminiscent of the previously proposed *machina dentata*, the American reappropriation of gluttonous (specifically female in previous films) hunger for death, a physical manifestation of the internal desire to kill or, read against the hunger analogy, to devour as literalized by the synecdochical mouth; it is also the dynamite in the tooth that eventually destroys a large part of the followers of plantation owner "Big Daddy". This notion is further epitomized in the framing of Django alongside the carriage. A metaphor for Django's individual as well as America's collective trauma, the tooth overshadows Big Daddy's farm; it is guided by King Schultz, Christoph Waltz's celebrity image is not only being reminiscent of Hans Landa but further also becomes a transcendent carrier of World War II trauma. While in *Inglourious Basterds*, Landa claimed that he "wouldn't want the success or failure of [Hitler's] illustrious evening dependent on the prowess of a Negro", Waltz returns as Schultz in order to aid the avenging of African American slavery. The carriage then, read as *machina dentata*, similar to *Kill Bill's* Pussy Wagon, *Death Proof's* 70s Dodge Challenger, as well as Shoshanna's movie projector becomes a manifestation of lethal desire which is drawn along by a notion of food consumption. The pair's bounty hunting is conducted in concordance with Hollywood *ultraviolence*; killing becomes a source of money and a quencher of a murderous appetite, as Django finds himself intrigued with the proposed partnership by Schultz, stating: "kill white folks and they pay you for it? What's not to like?" Paralleling lethal desires with the consumption of food becomes even more explicit at the proverbial farm 'Candyland', where Calvin Candie orders hounds to be let loose on a runaway slave. Both Django and Schultz are bystanders as the starved dogs rip the accused runaway slave apart and eat away at his flesh. To Candie's query with regards to Schultz's obvious discomfort at the scene, Django replies: "he just ain't used to see dogs ripping a human apart [...] I'm just a little more used to Americans than he is", placing a hunger for death within a specifically American framework, marking the European as other. This notion is further reinforced as it will be flickering images from this scene that will later come to haunt Schultz in a number of flashbacks that eventually trigger him to kill – or to eat a piece of – Candie, admitting that he too, eventually fell to gluttonous temptation as he states: "I couldn't resist".

With Calvin Candie avenged at Schultz's hands, it is the character of Stephen that becomes a catalyst for Django's final revenge, in which the mere reconciliation with his wife does not suffice to feed his desires; instead, Candyland and anyone who is associated with it has to die. His vengeance is conducted for both himself and the community, given that it is based on both personally and collectively perceived wrongdoings. Django mirrors *Inglourious Basterds'* Shoshanna in his final vengeance and weaves together the personal vendetta with collective vengeance. While collective trauma haunts both films, the personal vendetta feeds more deeply into the

avenger's desires and audience's appetite. The sparingly, but crucially, embedded flashbacks remind us of the avenger's mistreatment and, therefore, keep the emotional charge tense; this in turn seems to legitimize the ensuing vengeance that is screened in the fashion of Hollywood's *new brutality*. We want to see the evildoers bleed, and in re-visioning the past, *Django Unchained* is a conscious staging of physical, carnal anger and the resulting bloody revenge from a conscious contemporary perspective. The film overtly states that it is looking back and, while *repeating* is simultaneously staging a past that is taking the present into consideration. This is indicated by means of formal aspects such as the obvious references to the Western genre as well as the captivity narrative and further, the inclusion of a contemporary rap song "100 Black Coffins" by Rick Ross, who lends a tune to a crucial occurrence within the film all of which turn the film into a postmodern collage by marking its contemporary revisionist perspective.

With regard to the manifestation of the object of revenge, in this case epitomized by Stephen, Tarantino again establishes a further proximity to food. Stephen may not only be seen as an embodiment of Django's trauma, but also as a generic embodiment of slavery itself. Taking the view that Tarantino makes use of various post-modern references throughout his oeuvre into account, it can hardly be denied that Stephen shares a striking similarity to the iconic rice brand icon "Uncle Ben's":

Illustration 17 & 18: *Uncle Ben's* reference, *Django Unchained*



While the reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is certainly prevalent, his blatant similarity to Uncle Ben also highlights the notion of food and, by extension, gluttonous desire. This is a motif that is extended to Stephen's female counterpart, female master slave Cora, who resembles Uncle Ben's female counterpart Aunt Jemima. While Uncle Ben provides rice, Stephen will come to feed Django's appetite for murder as a vengeful act. This notion is taken even further by means of former master slave "Ben", whose skull Candie presents at the dinner table in order to illustrate pseudoscientific evidence for African American predisposed submissiveness. As Candie ponders the question of why there is no uprising amongst the slaves, he simultaneously aligns Ben with the blade of a knife

– something that epitomizes both eating and killing: “old Ben would shave my Daddy with a razor [...] if I was Ben I have cut my Daddy’s throat”. If we accept the reference to Uncle Ben, the death (or rather the desire to kill) is once again aligned with the consumption of food. This highlights the libidinal character of both; eating and killing become corporeal desires when governed by temptation.

Django Unchained, which celebrates Django as a Western hero, instrumentalizes contemporary cinema in order to revisit and to reimagine the Civil War and the repressed collective trauma that it caused. Its revisionist character elevates the film from action-filled entertainment to emotionally charged political questioning. As Bronfen and Daub state:

More so than in any of his previous films, Tarantino seems vexed by the tropes he is repeating and by the very fact that he is repeating them. He outlines the terms of repetition, and he uses some of the itinerant – yet – static characters that guide Django’s odyssey to do it in a quest narrative that refuses all conciliation. (3)

Tarantino seems to follow in Morrison’s footsteps in her quest for recognition, as outlined in *Playing in the Dark*: “[...] such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular “Americanness” that is separate from and unaccountable to this [African American] presence.” (5) With *Django Unchained*, Tarantino challenges the established notion of the literarily established white male that Morrison observes. The film skillfully produces an African American Western hero and both recounts his captivity narrative and executes his personal revenge which is fueled by collective trauma. As Morrison sharpens her argument in *Playing in the Dark*, so too does Tarantino’s probable intention to create a hero like Django:

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. [...] The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of literary imagination. (5)

American literature has been governed by white male characters for an excessive amount of time, allowing only marginal space for any character that is not part of this demographic group. This convention is challenged in Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*, which casts an African American hero in a Spaghetti Western that follows the guidelines of the archetypal captivity narrative. These narratives are commonly geared toward a final, cathartic purging by means of revenge. Tarantino revisits pre-civil war America and offers a strong African American hero protagonist who opposes a strong African American antagonist, thereby marginalizing the flat white

characters who, for once, are crammed into a corner and left there to vegetate and eventually cease to exist. Tarantino incorporates the Wagnerian reference of Broomhilda in order for this narrative to unravel which raises a damsel in distress notion, thereby allowing for our hero to become the savior. Challenging the more conservative literary history of white men in shining armor with the character of Django, Tarantino elevates the African American hero to the realm of Prince Charming, a role previously only occupied by white male characters. As stated in Bronfen and Daub, “[t]he question is of course who gets to strive and who wallows, and the answer is: usually white men strive, everybody gets to help, impede or inspire them” (1). Django’s heroism transcends these archaic traditions since it is exclusively Django who is drawn as a rounded character, while both Dr. King Schulz and Calvin Candie remain flat: “They are harem eunuchs in the place of narrative: they keep things running smoothly, and there’s no danger they’ll develop any appetites or goals of their own that might inconvenience the man of the house” (Bronfen & Daub, 1). What remains central to the film is Django’s appetite for revenge and the emotional gratification thereof through the production of the corpse.

In Stephen, Django finds his ultimate antagonist, a manifestation of that vengeful trauma which he has yet to overcome. Django Freeman is living the future of a free man; however, he remains metaphorically chained by his own trauma that keeps him from accepting his given freedom prior to facing his antagonist and, by murdering him, extinguishes the source of his suffering; he is facing a past that demands a re-memory as well as a reconfiguration of what happened. Despite Django’s unlikely rise to freedom, it is, in the first instance, the spectral hallucination of Broomhilda that haunts his glorious ride into Candyland in which he assumes a position of (white) power uttering, for example, the following:

[playing his role as a black slaver to the hilt] You niggas go’ understand something about me! I’m worse than any of these white men here! You get the molasses out your ass, and you keep your goddamn eyeballs off me!

In this instant, Django is forced to play the role of that which he despises. He is not merely remembering his past, but reliving it from a different perspective in this particular scene, which then causes a re-memory and allows him to eventually exorcise the ghost of his traumatic past. In another moment, as a result of Django’s immediate encounter with the manifestation and object of his vengeful hunger, Stephen, Django is put in a position which demands him to memorize the past, while not reliving the experience of slavery, in order to overcome his individual trauma. In his quest to save his princess, Django is forced to remember his condemned past in order to avenge it and to find murderous redemption. Consequently, the fact that “Tarantino’s film tells the story of a black man’s quest in which every white face serves a simple narrative function” (Bronfen & Daub, 1) is established early on in the film, demanding the consideration of Django’s trauma rather than a white man’s trauma,

which is reinforced by Django's final showdown with the specifically African American personification of his haunting, Calvin Candie's master servant Stephen.

This implies that the core issue is centered on an African American trauma in which the white characters, Calvin Candie, Dr. King Schultz, and the washed-out Southern Bell Lara Lee Candie-Fitzwilly, become peripheral. As participants in Django's personal vendetta, they merely serve as one-dimensional supporting characters. As Bronfen and Daub state:

Wandering, rootless, devoid of motivation beyond a general and unwavering beneficence, King Schultz is likely intended as a parody of those (frequently non-white) mentor characters that drift into and eventually out of the narratives of white folk, who offer them advice and encouragement, only to die when no longer necessary. [...] Convention, not inner need, propels him in his support of Django's quest, and convention compels him to end his life. (2)

As becomes evident, *Django Unchained* is concerned with the African American characters rather than the typical white male characters who have switched places in this particular narrative. Crafted as a complex carrier of the (African) American trauma of slavery, Calvin Candie's most loyal servant Stephen's mindset appears to have become that of a plantation owner, rather than that of the not free or, in other words, that of being Candie's commodified property. The ensuing mutual contempt between Django and Stephen show how two characters are established as antagonizing doubles right from the beginning, as Calvin Candie states: "Let me at least introduce the two of you. Django, this is another cheeky black bugger like yourself, Stephen. Stephen, this here is Django. You two oughta hate each other." The immediate protagonist versus antagonist frame that is established here is necessary not only for the figuration of Django as Siegfried, but further elevates Django's final revenge into a quest of biblical proportions. On the one hand, Tarantino explores the violent acts that African Americans were subjected to by white Americans; on the other hand, the film explores the violence executed by African Americans on African Americans. As Bronfen and Daub observe:

Tarantino now distinguishes between the cruelty, which white folk impose on their slaves simply as a matter of course and the violence with which these sadistic tormentors are justly punished. Violence visited upon blacks is treated altogether differently. (6)

Tarantino raises the complex issue of violence within Afro-Americanism by establishing an antagonizing doppelganger relation between Django and Stephen which becomes the nexus of the revenge plot. With Candie and Schultz marginalized and devoured by the narrative itself, Stephen and Django's death-match illustrates the epitome of the American Civil war finding a cathartic ending to the African American Siegfried's quest to save Broomhilda, thereby extinguishing his psychological

trauma, conducting gratifying revenge on both the level of personal as well as collective retribution.

This aspect is emphasized in the film's final minutes, during which Django urges the 'black folks' to leave, but asks Stephen to remain where he is: "Now, all you black folks, I suggest you get away from all these white folks. Not you Stephen – you are right where you belong". Stephen embodies that which Django loathes; however, he is also an embodiment of that which our African American hero finds within himself, especially in his quest which demands that he pose as a slave trader, a position that is traditionally occupied by a white male figure. The whiteness that Django sees and despises in Stephen is the whiteness that Django is forced to portray vis-à-vis Calvin Candie in order to avenge a collective wrong and to save his princess. Django comes to classify Stephen as 'white folk' based on his behavior during the film, given that Stephen is the one who not only exposes Django and Dr. Schultz's true intentions to Candie but who also intends to force him back into slavery once Django is captured, thereby taking pleasure in the idea that everything will be back where it belongs. Consequently, Stephen, despite being Candie's property, does not oppose the system but rather agrees with it after having achieved the status of confidant. Having climbed the hierarchical ladder, he desires to maintain the given rules in order to keep his position. Stephen, then, appears to value his position as house slave deeply, and betraying his kin, does not hold contempt for his master; rather, he feels only pure loyalty. It is this that marks misconduct vis-à-vis Django, which is to say that which serves as the justification of the revenge plot.

As Django's vengeance comes to a close, Tarantino leaves his audience with nothing more than utter darkness. The force of destruction is aligned with the quenching of a thirst for vengeance in which Candyland is completely extinguished:

In Tarantino's world, the burning of Candyland, the destruction of all its assembled tropes and film-historical references enables Django and Broomhilda to ride off into the darkness of a night at the end of which a new dawn awaits them. and into a new film, one that would not have to repeat anything that came before it. They can leave the stage of this twilight world. For them there will be a tomorrow. (Bronfen & Daub, 5)

Django has fed his appetite and the narrative has metaphorically eaten away any remnants of vengeful desire as the hero rides into the unknown with his princess; what follows is a tabula rasa. Tarantino's *Django Unchained* attempts to remap a repressed past through the re-imagining of a traumata that has been endured. Tarantino chooses a path of destruction that adheres to the impossibility of his re-figuration of a historical past by making reference to the fact that *Django Unchained* is fiction after all and, in the manner of historiographic metafiction, "situate[s] itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction" (Hutcheon, 194). With *Django Unchained*, Tarantino uses cinematic visual-

ization in order to create a hyperreality that challenges previous conventions and positions a transgressive hero at its center as the film obtains a pre-Civil War position which is reimagined from a contemporary standpoint. This particular dynamic allows for the film to not only gaze, but to become an active (albeit fictitious) agent within a reimagined history.

It becomes evident that the Tarantinian revenge narrative generally caters to a libidinal murderous appetite. The playful uncanniness of the mirror – or stunt double – which is written into these Tarantino films, portrays a plethora of aestheticized figurations of death, thereby further positioning each individual piece in relation to his other films. Inscribed throughout his oeuvre by means of overt doubling of character, set, cameo and score, the play with mirrors and the doppelganger within the framework of the *death paradox* highlights the fragmentation of the aestheticized figuration of death in its abject form which, in Kristeva's terms, remains opposed to the subjectivity of the I and hence threatens the boundary of the self's subjectivity. Embedded in the revenge narrative's structural repetition compulsion, the production of the corpse becomes emotionally codified and geared towards gratification. Resting on a previous wrong, the revenge narrative is inherently serial and develops as expansive, rather than conclusive, with vengeful murderous agency emerging as reactive. Catering to the avenger's appetite of as well as the audience, vengeance develops as a serial repetition compulsion to produce the corpse as a means for emotional gratification.

It is this quest for gratification that then manifests in the form of insatiability in these films. This aspect is visualized through an overt alignment of food metaphors alongside murderous desire. The proposed 'toothed machinery', the *machina dentata*, a variation of which is present in each of these films, becomes a fitting image for this libidinal and gluttonous vengeful desire. Vengeance is literally *driven* by emotion and manifests as an appetite or hunger to produce the corpse against the backdrop of the *death paradox*. The plethora of revenge narratives presented by Tarantino feature the concept of revenge as structurally serial and in which the aestheticizations of death it produces become plentiful; the revenge narrative writing an aestheticized corpse into the American cultural imaginary serves as a compensation for the absence created by abject death. The revenge plot is bound to continually double because it is structurally governed by the serial nature inherent in the concept of revenge, which is to say that it tends to *repeat* itself based on the fact that no matter how many corpses it produces, it simultaneously continuously produces another wrong that needs to be repaid. Like an appetite, the revenge narrative is marked by insatiability; it can never be conclusively satisfied. Instead, it constantly expands.

